

Mary Whitehouse, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association and social movement campaigning

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Focus

'Clean-up TV' started with a public meeting, organised by school-teacher Mary Whitehouse and rector's wife Norah Buckland, at Birmingham Town Hall in May 1964, to promote a national petition. Whitehouse's motivation came from the BBC show *Meeting Point* (8 March 1963) in which the discussion between a headmistress, clergyman and bishop's wife had led her students to deduce pre-marital sex was acceptable. The petition won such attention – supportive and hostile – that her campaign established

the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA) in 1965. Launched in Fleet Street by Whitehouse, moral campaigners, MPs, police, military and clergy, it claimed to represent the broadcast media's consumers.

The NVALA was a product of multiple developments in the 1960s. The emergent permissive pop culture and openness about sexuality of the 1960s seemed to go hand-in-hand with what historian Callum Brown has termed 'the death of Christian Britain'. The publication of *Honest to God* (1963), by the Bishop of Woolwich, upset those seeking stricter moral teaching. A more affluent, consumerist society seemed to incubate the sort of hedonism and loss of self-control the NVALA abhorred. It was the pluralism of values that unnerved the NVALA, with the church reluctant to teach certain values. Nor was the Conservative Party under Edward Heath – having promoted consumerism under Harold Macmillan – willing to enter the fray of moral politics. Like other social movements, the NVALA was extra-parliamentary and enjoyed a fraught relationship with formal politics, questioning party authority. NVALA's focus on culture and values rather than material aims, meant its politics were characteristic of the 'post-materialism' Ronald Inglehart has attributed to this period. Like the peace, consumer, environmental, and nationalist movements, it called for widening public participation. Like other identity politics, notably feminism, its focus was the private sphere – although it saw this more as necessity than virtue, one caused by TV's entry (90% of households had a TV by 1970) into the domestic space.

From a single-issue campaign, Clean-up TV expanded to be more of a broadcasting non-governmental organisation (NGO) and by the later 1970s was censoriously policing all aspects of society. The initial goal was to induce the BBC to be true to its Reithian origins to inform, educate and to commission more christian programming and less violent, sexual content. As the petition put it, 'the propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt that the BBC pours into millions of homes... present promiscuity, infidelity and drinking as normal'; what was needed were programmes which 'encourage and sustain faith in God' as 'the heart

of our family and national life'. The focus was the BBC, a public body, not commercial ITV. If viewers could not exercise control over BBC content, NVALA charged this was taxation without representation. The aim was not, as with most 1960s single-issue campaigns, to repeal or enact legislation, but to enforce existing laws, especially the 1964 Television Act which prohibited broadcasting that 'offends against good taste or decency or is likely to encourage... disorder or to be offensive to public feelings'.

This evolved into the idea of a viewers' council that would consult with the BBC, informing programming decisions – to move, as Whitehouse's 1967 book *From Protest to Participation* put it. This participatory model was always tempered by the NVALA's vision of the appropriate values. It gained little traction with government ministers, who held to the principle of arm's length control over the BBC. And even less with the BBC, which regarded NVALA as cultural vigilantes (if privately fearing its audience might side with them). Whitehouse and the NVALA moved rapidly from specific instances to their global implications; action was everyone's responsibility in everyday life. By the 1970s, whilst broadcasting remained the focus, she had broadened her campaigning remit to include all forms of blasphemy entering the public sphere, from pornography to gay rights. Whitehouse's ultimate vision has been described as a 'theocratic state' and 'cultural fundamentalism'.

Contention

The NVALA principally challenged the new norm of permissiveness, as Britain progressively shed its Victorian cultural shackles and became a more secular, plural society. However, the NVALA also exhibited many of the values and practices of the permissive society: a focus on culture and media, DIY activism, female leadership, appeals to popular sovereignty; the personal as political. Indeed, the NVALA should be understood as anti-establishment protest since whilst its leaders respected authority, they were decidedly un-deferential. Conservatives shunned the Association because of its aggressive rhetoric as much as the awkwardness of

TV as a political issue. Like many other aspirant social movements, it operated by contrast with the emerging professionalisation of televised party politics – more amateurish and apparently authentic in voice. The NVALA was in a permanent moral panic about the media, but also apt to deploy a sensational soundbite to win publicity.

In other ways it was at odds with this characteristic 1960s spirit. NVALA was decidedly non-metropolitan – pitched against the corruptions of ‘swinging London’. It claimed to be the ‘voice of the silent millions’ – a language resonant with President Nixon’s ‘silent majority’ and the US christian right’s ‘moral majority’. It was noisy, like youth culture, but aged in its membership: Whitehouse was 53 when she started the Clean-up. Few members had university degrees, compared with the younger (if equally middle-class, religious, moralist) cohorts of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Whitehouse saw the personal-domestic as best insulated from the public-political, but fused the two as TV invaded the home and challenged traditional notions of motherhood, housewifery and parenting. There was, she felt, a ‘chronic shortage [on TV] of those qualities of sensitivity, understanding and gentleness which are part of the female psyche’.

NVALA reinforced the widespread idea of a British nation in decline – its moral diagnosis was a remedy. Some wartime fortitude was in order – a leitmotiv of personal letters to Whitehouse – even its title was pronounced ‘national valour’. That the NVALA was formed as the destabilisation of sexual, racial and imperial identities threw Britishness into question was not coincidental – it added to that destabilisation.

Like the New Left, NVALA had no doubt that TV helped form opinions and behaviour. The orthodoxy was that it was a reflection of the world, a window on it, but the NVALA agreed with Raymond Williams that ‘culture teaches’. NVALA wanted broadcasting included in the 1968 Race Relations Act, arguing it could incite, where broadcasters held they were reporting. It was ‘common sense’ to the NVALA that ‘children (and the rest of us) copy what they see and hear’.

Like most social movements, NVALA cast itself as a grassroots movement of everyday citizens ignored, abused and exploited by un-accountable bastions of power – in its case, the liberal establishment, chiefly the professional broadcasters at the BBC. Whitehouse lived in the suburban West Midlands (a sometime neighbour of Enoch Powell) and viewed London, through provincial eyes. They lacked the material resources of their opponents – the campaign was run from a spartan office in Whitehouse's home and when she campaigned in the 1983 general election, she used a caravan to tour the nation. Being excluded and marginalised (censored by liberal intolerance, NVALA alleged) by the BBC for much of the 1960s, was self-fulfilling of NVALA's case that the BBC privileged certain voices and was not accountable to viewers. As much as NVALA took faith from the belief Britons were Christian, they were ultimately fighting the popularity of TV among Europe's most avid viewers. So *Til' Death us do part* – in one episode (27 February 1967) the fictional satirical sexist Alf Garnett praised Whitehouse's *Clean-up TV* book, before tossing it into the fire – was a real foe for NVALA. Its writer Johnny Speight charged that Whitehouse was a fascist, and she charged for libel (and won). So too the David Frost-fronted *That Was The Week That Was* (TW3) and the kitchen-sink dramas of the BBC's *Wednesday Play* (notably *Up The Junction* and *Cathy Come Home*).

Whitehouse's background was in Moral Re-Armament (MRA), a global organisation whose members committed directly to God (not via the church) to live purely. MRA had campaigned against the Edinburgh Festival, and its militant, clandestine cold war methods of fighting communism were apparent in NVALA. For Whitehouse, the enemies were the (lack of) values and moral relativism of the British Humanist Association; a church too irreligious to give moral guidance; and above all the complacency and indulgences of liberalism. All threatened to let communism and godlessness seep into Britons. The epitome of decadent, carefree liberalism was Hugh Carleton Greene's regime as BBC Director General (1961-69), which saw satire like TW3 and gritty plays prominent in BBC programming.

Artists, writers and performers were almost universally opposed to what they saw as Whitehouse's moral absolutism and censorship. Various pressure groups formed to counter the NVALA from within the cultural industries, with figures such as Richard Hoggart, Roy Shaw (later Chair of the Arts Council) and Ted Willis to the fore. Whitehouse relished the hostility she provoked. She recalls the heckling, jostling, and abuse on numerous University campuses in the 1970s as a rite of passage in tackling liberal culture. Equally, she forged some ironic, unholy alliances. Feminist anti-pornography campaigners chanted 'Right on, Mary' (others punned 'Carry on, Mrs Whitehouse'), as she debated with the head of *Playboy* UK, Victor Lownes. She was willing to confront the enemy head on, as much as its liberal indulgers.

Methods

If doctrinally rigid, the NVALA was tactically flexible. Any means were legitimate, in part because the group met considerable resistance and limited success. The petition was its strategic centerpiece – enabling it to seek and claim mass support beyond its members, and organise nationally. The clean-up petition, presented to Parliament in May 1965, had 366,655 signatures. A petition for public decency amassed 1.35 million signatures in 1973; another against child pornography led to the 1978 Protection of Children Act. Petitions were popular among people resisting liberalising legislation – for example by capital punishment retentionists – as they appeared to demonstrate public opinion pitted against expert opinion and modernising elites.

Letter and telegram writing was no less prolific. Members were supplied with templates and BBC contact details. This played to the demographic of its elderly, female membership – although were capable of heckling too. The aim was to have *The Viewer* available in newsagents, doctors' waiting rooms, schools and libraries. Local NVALA branches monitored TV output – research that relied on 'common sense' instincts to rival more protracted academic results. Whitehouse worked a stretch as the *Daily Sketch* TV critic in 1967 and, keen to deny it was only crit-

ical, the NVALA made TV awards – police drama *Dixon of Dock Green* was the first winner.

Alongside this popular grassroots approach it turned to litigation and the state (suggesting limits to its populist faith in Britons' Christianity). Whitehouse deluged the Prime Minister and Postmaster General (the minister responsible for the BBC) with missives. The Director of Public Prosecutions was likewise swamped with appeals to apply the Obscene Publications Act, which he invariably refused. She tried to ally with PM Harold Wilson's grievances with the BBC. In 1965 a note within No.10 concluded: 'Mrs Whitehouse is clearly a most tiresome woman'.

The NVALA submitted evidence to official committees: the Annan Committee on Broadcasting (1977); the Home Office Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship (1979); the Arts Council's working party on obscenity laws (1969). Private prosecutions were pursued, notably, in 1976 (successfully) against *Gay News* under the 17th-century blasphemy law, for publishing James Kirkup's poem 'The Love that Dares Speak its Name'; and against the National Theatre's 1982 production of *The Romans in Britain* under the Sexual Offences Act.

The NVALA's tone was militant, vitriolic even. There was no indulgence of turning the TV off or over. Whitehouse routinely cited Edmund Burke ('all it takes for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing') or Thomas More ('Silence means assent'). Its own slogans included 'Don't moan, phone!'. Civil disobedience was discussed – a women's march on London in 1964 and the non-payment of the licence fee (proposed by John Barnett, the Chief Constable of Lincolnshire). But generally it was law abiding, arguing for the law's more stringent enforcement.

Given its limited success in reforming the BBC, the NVALA increasingly spread campaigning to what it saw as the host of threats to Christian values: film, theatre, homosexuality, drugs, satire, abortion, soccer hooliganism, and paedophilia were now in its crosshairs. The commercial exploitation of sex, in films like *Deep Throat* and in local sex shops, increasingly occupied Whitehouse in the 1970s. Her interest extended beyond the UK

to Denmark which had de-criminalised pornography and to the United States, where she admired the efforts of the Atlanta Solicitor General in closing sex shops. *Mightier Than The Sword* (1985), which cast Whitehouse as the William Wilberforce and Elizabeth Fry 'of the television age', made a case to combat 'video nasties'. Its most remarkable chapter told how since 1978 school principal Charles Oxley, the Vice (sic) President of NVALA, had spied on the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) by joining it under the pseudonym Dave Charlton.

These wider aims echoed a global turn to religious zealotry in the 1970s. Whitehouse backed the evangelical Festival of Light. The Festival's demos-cum-rallies-pop festivals, attracted a younger crowd than NVALA. Its pamphlets detailed confiscations and prosecutions of retailers who sold porn. The church's organisational decline explained the festival's appeal – it was more pro-active, with some 150,000 UK members, including anti-apartheid campaigner Bishop Trevor Huddleston. But that Amy Whipple suggests the festival was 'too Christian' to generate popular political momentum on the scale of the Moral Majority in the United States in 1979, tells us much about Whitehouse's fortunes too.

Whitehouse was NVALA's key asset – a heroine of the (new) right and 'an iron lady before Thatcher', as Beatrix Campbell dubbed her. Whitehouse was a charismatic leader who sacrificed her domestic idyll for the cause. Her status was also something of a liability, since the NVALA was very much a one-woman show and lacked strong internal governance.

Whitehouse's celebrity supporters were few. Pop star Cliff Richard won the NVALA's TV award and joined her in the Festival of Light. Malcolm Muggeridge (the 1967 convention keynote) and Lord Longford shared her call for moral revolt against the tyranny of TV and crusade against pornography, respectively. Both had rescinded on more left-wing pasts. Longford having helped decriminalise homosexuality, became a staunch opponent of it. NVALA patrons in 1966 included Tory MP Cyril Black (President of the London Baptist Association) a former Secretary of the World Methodist Council, three Lord Bishops and the Air

Chief Marshall. Amongst NVALA leaders, Major James Dance (Tory MP for Bromsgrove, 1955-71), and Chief Constable John Barnett were her enduring supporters. John Court, an Australian sexual psychologist involved in the Festival of Light (author of *In Defence of Censorship – A Christian View*, 1971) provided expert legal witness.

NVALA was sensitive about membership numbers. In 1968 there were 7,000 formal members, but they claimed the support of over 1 million through petition signatories. In 1975, with membership dues of 25 pence, Whitehouse claimed 15,000 members (one biographer puts the figure as high as 31,000) and 30 branches, of which the biggest was in the West Midlands. There was something to these claims judging by the volume of letters Whitehouse received. A sample of these from the NVALA archives reveals the writers to have similar sentiments and backgrounds to those who wrote to Powell in 1968: the elderly, retired military, nonconformist and Celtic fringes were mobilised – offering small donations and a sense that at last someone had spoken up. The Scottish Housewives Association was a consistent supporter. Rotary International, the Mothers' Union and Catholic Teachers Federation offered more contingent, brief support – wary of NVALA's critical, politicising tones.

Whitehouse emoted and appealed to a visceral conservatism. Her confrontational tone put her beyond the pale of official conservatism, but squarely among the grassroots middle class, small retailer, taxpayer revolts of 1970s' 'respectable rebels'. Here it is worth noting how the NVALA's mistrust of liberalism above all, identify it as part of the neo-conservative part of the emergent new right in the 1960s. Six Tory MPs were involved in discussions to form the NVALA. Some were characters like Neil Hamilton or Gerald Nabarro, but a good number of local Conservative Party members worked with the NVALA. Bill Deedes, who spoke at NVALA's first convention in 1966, was a consistent friend. Keith Joseph lauded Whitehouse in an infamous 1974 speech and Thatcher made her a CBE in 1980; yet, despite such recognition and affinities, differences remained.

Whitehouse and Margaret Thatcher were close, regularly corresponding on broadcasting appointments, pornography, the age of consent, video nasties, children's TV, football violence, Channel 4, the Albany Trust and PIE. Thatcher was no fan of the BBC establishment. Kindred spirits they might have been, but this did not prevent Whitehouse opining in 1983 for a 'moral Falklands – if only she would give the lead'. In 1984 Thatcher penned (and performed in) a sketch for the BBC comedy *Yes, Minister* on the occasion of it winning NVALA's TV award, and on NVALA's 20th anniversary. Thatcher spoke of how Whitehouse's campaign 'to halt the slide into what she believed was decadence... has forced broadcasters to think twice about what they offer the public. Let no-one ever again say "What can one person do?"'

Thatcherism was torn between market ideology and morality. Thatcher lamented the same demise of christian morality, but with less faith that it could be restored (certainly not by the state). The NVALA had blind faith that Britons were Christian, but its faith in the state was quite conventional. And the NVALA did not favour the commercial ITV model, since it was not subject to public control in the same way. NVALA members criticised pirate radio and in 1970 when the advertising journal *Campaign* asked what she thought of advertising Whitehouse found herself alongside paragons of the left like Raymond Williams, arguing it 'degraded women'.

Outcome

There were legislative achievements which NVALA influenced or welcomed: the 1978 Protection of Children Act and under Thatcher the 1981 Indecent Displays Act and establishment in 1988 of a Broadcasting Standards Commission (OfCom after 2003). If weaker than the NVALA would have liked, the Commission put in place the structures NVALA wanted. The 1982 Local Government Act tightened the local authority licensing procedure for sex shops that was omitted from the 1981 Act. The 1984 Video Recordings Act controlled video nasties. The 1987 Conservative manifesto committed to remove broadcast-

ers' exemption from Obscene Publications Act. Clause 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act restricted the dissemination of information about homosexuality in schools. The tension within conservatism between freeing up markets (it licensed Britain's first cable and satellite TV, to further challenge the BBC's position) and its Victorian values, and urge to regulate, was apparent in media policy in this period.

Acknowledging Whitehouse and the NVALA's resonance with cultural and political contexts is not to overstate their significance or impact. But we can learn from their marginalisation, their campaigning difficulties and from why they failed. In their own time and terms, despite the 1980s legislation, the NVALA did fail: the liberalisation of culture continued, not unabated, but with little cheer for the group's successor, Mediawatch. NVALA's homophobia and Christianity left it in the cultural dust, whatever the potency of its questions about TV's role in society. Whitehouse's main cultural legacy was as a stereotype, Mrs Grundy, or in the ironic titles of a 1975 pornographic magazine or the 1990s alternative comedy show *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*. *The Goodies* mocked her as Desiree Carthorse in the 1970s, and in the 1960s a BBC radio play, *Mrs Smallgood*, parodied her family life. Whitehouse stepped down in 1994. She died in 2001, the same year that the NVALA morphed into Mediawatch.

Whilst its reactionary politics put it at odds with many other single-issue campaigns and social movements, in form and style it was recognisably one of these. Contemporaries explained the NVALA by comparison with Poujadism (populist, crypto-fascist, petit-bourgeois opposition to taxes), McCarthyism (communists ensconced in the BBC) and the US temperance movement. But the strongest parallel was Phyllis Schlafly, who emerged as a US public figure in 1964 with a critique of mainstream republicanism in *A Choice, Not an Echo*. Schlafly was more ostensibly political, in attacking the equal rights amendment, but her mid-West family tones and campaigns against abortion, porn and homosexuality, alongside Whitehouse, remind historians of a less male, less economic dimension to the burgeoning new right.

They also tell something of the NVALA's comparative failure: how Whitehouse would have loved the size of Christian audience US campaigners had.

The NVALA might feel its suspicion of the liberal biases in the establishment are confirmed by the fact that many historians have either ignored the NVALA or seen fit to regard it with amused disdain, rather than analysing it alongside Amnesty, the Consumers' Association or environmental groups. Like such groups the NVALA is best understood in terms of cultural politics, but unlike many social movement campaigns, it involves more than the young, educated and progressive politics. Thus it challenges some norms of social movement history and analysis. The US christian right is the firmest example; in the UK, the Countryside Alliance in the 1990s.

In a spirit of controversy, we might conclude with the awkward question – wasn't NVALA right to raise suspicions of BBC culture, given revelations of some of the activities of its leading radio and TV stars? Not that Whitehouse was wise to Jimmy Savile – indeed in 1977 *Jim'll Fix It* won the NVALA's TV award. David Cameron talks of regulating the internet to protect children from pornography. Ben Thompson has recently highlighted the modern and ancient parallels to NVALA techniques – how petitions were like internet campaigns, or Neighbourhood Watch. Even critics tended to at least wonder – Hoggart's obituary of Whitehouse in *The Guardian* is a case in point – against their long and hard-held instincts, whether there was something about Mary?

Further Reading:

Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2010), ch.5.

Ben Thompson, *Ban this Filth!* (London, 2012).

Michael Tracey, David Morrison, *Whitehouse* (Basingstoke, 1979).

Mary Whitehouse, *Cleaning-up TV* (London, 1967) and *Mightier than the Sword* (Eastbourne, 1985).