

# Debate No. 32

## Answers to Private Notice Questions - 12 August 2003

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#### MBC TV – RADIO & TELEVISION PROGRAMMES - CHANGES SINCE 01.10.2000

**The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam)** (*By Private Notice*) asked the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence and Home Affairs whether, in regard to the changes in radio and television programming since 01 October 2000, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain information as to –

(a) the number of times the programme schedules for radio and television have been modified and the reasons, if any, therefor and whether such changes have been approved by the Board of the MBC; and

(b) whether the number of films in Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu and Marathi have been reduced and, if so, the reasons, if any, therefor.

**The Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker Sir, as regards part (a), I am informed by the Director-General of the MBC that since 01 October 2000, the major changes in radio and TV programmes have been brought about on three occasions, the first one in June 2001, the second in January 2002 (for TV only) and the third in August 2003, the last one being on a trial basis. However, there have been, on several occasions, minor changes to accommodate mainly current events, for example, sports, cultural and religious events. All the changes were approved by the MBC Board.

The reasons provided to me for the latest changes in 2003 are as follows -

or changes have been brought to One-World FM only so far as radio is concerned;

an audience survey carried out by IBA had revealed that only an average of 3% to 4% of the population was listening to that channel, which was a mix of three foreign radios, namely Voice of America, Sunrise Radio and France Inter;

the changes brought about to this channel were designed to transform it into a musical radio with a mix of European and Oriental songs and music.

As regards TV, I am further informed that airtime allocation has remained more or less the same as it was before the change. There has, however, been a slight decrease in French and Hindustani, one reason being the wish of the Board to give an added impetus to the English language, and the other to reduce entertainment in favour of education and information programmes, in order to fulfil the three prime objectives of MBC/TV as laid out in the MBC Act, i.e education, information and entertainment.

The harmonisation, rationalisation and more judicious use of three channels of the MBC to meet its objectives for information, education and entertainment, optimising use of financial resources in the purchase of films and serials have also been taken into account in bringing about the changes.

At the time of the change, it was proposed subsequently to carry out a further survey to determine the acceptability and popularity of the revised programme.

As regards (b), I am informed that as the objective was to strike a balance between entertainment and education, there has been a reduction in the number of Hindustani films, but this has been compensated by documentaries, educational

programmes; and Zee TV programme, the airtime allocated to that language however, remaining more or less the same.

I wish to inform the House that, following the change in the programming at the MBC TV, I have received representations from several organisations. These representations are being looked into and the MBC TV has been requested to take corrective actions. I have, as Minister responsible, given directives that there should be no linguistic segregation and within the spirit of the MBC Act, there should be a fair balance in the allocation of airtime.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, first of all, I am glad that the Prime Minister said that there should be no linguistic segregation, which I stated in my press conference as well. This is very dangerous and wrong to do. But, when Mr Jacques Maunick introduced the changes on radio in June 2001, there was a bit of segregation there as well. Is he aware of that?

**The Prime Minister:** Sir, there was no complaint and I have not been made aware of that.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** We have had some complaints. People are saying that it should have been more thematic rather than a linguistic one. It seems this was cut, but as I don't listen to it myself I don't know. Can I ask the Prime Minister to confirm whether the representative of the PMO sits on the Board of the MBC? Was he there?

**The Prime Minister:** There is a member who sits on the Board. I suppose he must be present every time there is a Board meeting.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Therefore, if the PMO has a member on the Board of the MCB, as it should be, can the Prime Minister say whether he did not protest or say anything? He was part of the Board. So, there was nothing else that he could do?

**The Prime Minister:** I was not even consulted or informed on the change of the programme. I came to hear about it only after it was put into practice.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Does not the Prime Minister think that he should take this very seriously, namely that a member from the PMO, who sits on the Board, does not tell him that such dramatic changes are happening? What action does he intend to take against this member of the Board?

**The Prime Minister:** I asked the officer and he told me that he had no time to inform me yet, and that he was under the impression that the Director-General must have consulted me.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** The Prime Minister must surely know that the papers for the Board are circulated in advance; and if a Board member from the PMO says that he could find time to consult the Prime Minister, I think he should be sacked.

**The Prime Minister:** I did not say when he received the agenda, but when decision was taken for the new programme, he has had no time after that to revert to me, and it was implemented.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Therefore, the member of the Board from the PMO is just there to accept all decisions that are taken! Then, once the decisions are taken, it is a *fait accompli* for the Prime Minister. Is that what the Prime Minister is saying?

**The Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, Sir, the practice is that he does not come to report to me every time. Normally, it is minuted, and the file is sent to me; and this takes some time.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I agree with the Prime Minister when he says that he does not have to come and see him every time. But when there are such major and dangerous

changes or "cultural segregation" to use the words of the Prime Minister himself, which I also used in the press conference, does not the member of the Board realise that he should come and consult the Prime Minister? Does not the Prime Minister think that it is enough for him to sack him?

**The Prime Minister:** To sack somebody is not all that easy. I do not know whether the Leader of the Opposition has sacked many like that when he was Prime Minister!

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** If you look at the record you will see how many people I have sacked. Concerning article 4 of the IBA Act, the chairman is saying that - I do not know whether he is wrong....

*(Interruptions)*

I want to know what the Prime Minister has to say about this.

**The Prime Minister:** When I read it, I was shocked myself, but when I checked the law I understand that it is not correct.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Then, the chairman of the IBA too should be sacked. Of course, he should be sacked, because he is not doing his job properly.

*(Interruptions)*

He is misleading the institution. Does he not agree that it is a grave misleading of the institution to say so in the press?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not know whether he said it or the press has invented it or there has been a misunderstanding as it happens so many times.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I hope "*l'Express*" has noted that it might have invented it. As we know, he is not acting independently and we have said so before. We ourselves have complained to the IBA and the decision was changed. But this is not the main question and I am not going to ask it. He obviously takes instructions from some political masters and in that case he is trying to get out. I heard the hon. Prime Minister ...

*(Interruptions)*

**Mr Speaker:** Hon. Leader of the Opposition, we are not talking about the IBA; we are talking about the MBC and its programme schedules. We are not going to *faire un procès* of the Chairman of the IBA.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** With all due respect, Sir, the IBA has jurisdiction on it and that is why I asked the Prime Minister the question.

**Mr Speaker:** They have claimed to have jurisdiction, but it is not the main question.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Is it a fact that the IBA has a *droit de regard*? What is happening to this?

**The Prime Minister:** That is so, but from there to say that the MBC was bound to come and take orders and get their consent before doing the programming is wrong.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Is he in a position to say what kind of *regard* did the IBA take on this one?

**The Prime Minister:** This should be asked to the IBA.

**Mr Speaker:** I think this amounts to interpreting the sections of the IBA Act and this is not our job here.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Can I ask the Rt. hon. Prime Minister whether there was any kind of survey done? Because he mentions surveys were done for the other things - and this was right. But was there any survey done before test marketing this kind of thing on the whole population?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, I do not think there was a survey, but I have been told by the MBC and its Director-General that this was on a trial basis and after some time...

*(Interruptions)*

... there was going to be a survey to find out whether this was acceptable to the population.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Does the Rt. hon. Prime Minister think it right that the MBC should have this programme tried on a test basis on the whole population and create all this chaos? Does he think that this is the way to proceed?

**The Prime Minister:** We have always been told that MBC should be treated as an autonomous body, it should be given its independence. I have been trying to give them as much autonomy as possible.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** The hon. Prime Minister is talking about the autonomy, I ask him to see what kind of coverage the Opposition gets on the MBC! Is this autonomy or is he taking directions from his political masters? Does the Rt. hon. Prime Minister not think when something like this has happened, which is a threat to national unity, the political side has to come into it? Does he not agree?

**The Prime Minister:** That is why I have given certain directives.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Does he agree that this new programming is a threat to national unity?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, I won't exaggerate. There have been representations made; people are not happy and we are trying to correct.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I do not want to exaggerate as well, but there has been quite a *tollé* as he has seen and he is well aware of it. The Prime Minister was saying that there has been no reduction in time...

*(Interruptions)*

**The Prime Minister:** That is what they said!

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I am not challenging that, but what they said is that some French and Hindustani programmes have been reduced. Does he know that there was a total of 15 films in Oriental languages and this has been reduced to 10; and there are now three fewer Hindustani films per week. There is no more Hindustani film on Sundays, all this has happened; there are fewer films in Tamil, Telugu and Marathi and none on Sunday afternoons. This is the seriousness of the matter and this is why people are complaining. Is he aware of this?

**The Prime Minister:** I know there have been certain changes, readjustments and all that, but I can't say whether there has been a reduction

of so many hours. I have asked my officers to work this out and to let me have the exact figure of the reduction.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Is he aware that the reception of channel 2 is not as good as channel 1 for the whole island?

**The Prime Minister:** That's what many people are saying. I agree that we cannot have only one sort of programme for one section of the population on a particular channel. I have always resisted that before 1995, there were many attempts.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I congratulate the Prime Minister because he is in total agreement with us and with me, this is why I call it segregation...

*(Interruptions)*

... not the Deputy Prime Minister! I did not hear him say anything. Similarly for the music channel, can he explain why the Oriental music channels are not broadcast on MBC 3 as it was supposed to be a musical channel?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said, with the new programmes, MBC channel 3 is more for sports activities and all that.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Is the Prime Minister going to see to it that this should be changed as well?

**The Prime Minister:** I am talking generally about all the three channels, Sir.

**Dr. Boolell:** Can I ask the Rt. hon. Prime Minister when was the audience survey carried out?

**The Prime Minister:** A survey was carried out, but not for this programme, it was for a previous one.

**Dr. Boolell:** In view of the sensitivity of the issue and as the Prime Minister rightly stated that we have to make sure that there is harmonious blending of the Mauritian community, did he not think it right that there should have been a survey carried out before it was decided by the Board that airtime allocation should be reduced for Hindustani and French films?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, whether a survey should have been carried out to find out whether people will accept a reduction of airtime, this has not been done and I suppose the MBC didn't find it necessary to do that.

**Dr. Boolell:** The Prime Minister said that the appropriate information was not relayed to him. Can he inform the House whether the Director-General of the MBC is not regularly in touch with any of the Ministers of his Government when it comes to major decisions that have to be taken?

**The Prime Minister:** No, I am not aware of that.

**Dr. Boolell:** Would the Prime Minister inform the House whether the Director-General had a meeting with the Minister of Tourism prior to the decision being taken?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not aware of that meeting.

**Dr. Boolell:** Can the Prime Minister find out whether there was any meeting with any of his Ministers before the decision was taken?

**The Prime Minister:** I think...

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I just want to make a point on this. When they said that airtime has not been reduced, some of the programmes are broadcast very late and people don't watch them. Can I ask the Prime Minister to look at this as well?

**The Prime Minister:** I have drawn the attention of the Director-General to that also. For example, there is a programme which is very popular; it is broadcast from 1.00 a.m. to 4.00 a.m. Who is going to listen to or watch that programme?

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** I am glad that the Rt. hon. Prime Minister has seen this also and I suppose this will be changed. Can I ask him also...

*(Interruptions)*

He is agreeing with me.

There was - I am talking for all languages, not for one only - a very popular programme on song competitions and all this has been scrapped. Can the Rt. hon. Prime Minister see to it that this could be brought back? Because a lot of people liked it and some artists were getting promotion out of it.

**The Prime Minister:** What we have asked the MBC to do is to review the whole thing.

**Mr Dulloo:** May I ask the Rt. hon. Prime Minister whether he is aware that the *samachar* that was broadcast on channel one has been shifted to channel 2 in such a way that it is now coinciding with programmes of interest for all the Mauritian communities, therefore damaging the idea of common viewing and exposure to various cultures of the country?

**The Prime Minister:** We'll convey that to the MBC.

**Mr Dulloo:** May I ask the Rt. hon. Prime Minister whether he is aware that certain programmes that are targetting various groups, especially students, are made to coincide with other popular programmes so much so that people find it difficult to choose between the three channels?

**The Prime Minister:** Well, at times it is very difficult, Mr Speaker, Sir, to please everybody. I don't know, there may be some conflicts in programming. This may happen, but I suppose, to a certain measure, this cannot be avoided hundred percent.

**Mr Dulloo:** Being given that this has got very serious implications as far as exposure to culture, education and various other matters are concerned, can I ask the Rt. hon. Prime Minister whether there should not have been consultations with the appropriate departments and Ministries concerned including the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, before bringing about such drastic changes?

**The Prime Minister:** I don't know with what and how many institutions they would have gone and consulted to make a programme. Ultimately, there would never have been any programme!

**Dr. Chady:** I did put a question about two or three months ago regarding the time allocated to oriental languages, especially the Urdu programme. The Deputy Prime Minister said, at that time,...

**The Prime Minister:** Which programme?

**Dr. Chady:** The Urdu programme and other oriental languages to which there has been a drastic cut. I was referred to the fact that these institutions should make a complaint to the Independent Broadcasting Authority. Section 4 of the Act stipulates that the objects of the Authority would be to ensure that broadcasting services are impartial and accurate, amongst other things, to give accurate coverage to information, education, culture, entertainment and recreation. In this context, I would like to know whether the Prime Minister would ask the Authority what action they intend to take for the future.

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said already, I have drawn the attention of the MBC to that.

**Mr Hurnam:** Can the Rt. hon. Prime Minister inform the House whether...

*(Interruptions)*

...there has been any ministerial committee appointed and the terms of reference, if any, for changes to be brought?

**The Prime Minister:** When I had representations from several organisations, I set up a committee in order to study the representations to see how much truth there was in the complaints that I was receiving and to make a report to me. And it was as a result of that report that I spoke to the representatives of the MBC.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** Mr Speaker, Sir, I object strongly that the hon. Member who has been condemned by Court be allowed to put a question to the Prime Minister. I object strongly to that!

*(Interruptions)*

**Mr Speaker:** Order! Order, please! Order!

The Member is still a Member of the House and he has all the rights and duties that any Member has.

*(Interruptions)*

I won't allow anybody to question it in this House, because this is in accordance with the Constitution.

**Dr. Ramgoolam:** We condemn that!

*(Interruptions)*

*At this stage Members of the Opposition left the Chamber.*

**Mr Speaker:** I have been advised that PQ B/584 will be replied by the Minister of Social Security, National Solidarity & Senior Citizens Welfare and Reform Institutions, whereas PQ B/598 will be replied by the Rt. hon. Prime Minister. Yes, hon. Hurnam!