

I WAS at a couple of gatherings last week when the subject of censorship and Central America came up. The first was attended by about 4,000 people and took place at the Hammersmith Odeon. The second, drawing a crowd of about 100, was at the Metro cinema, in Soho, last Sunday afternoon.

Occasion number one was a Jackson Browne concert. In the '70s, Browne had a reputation for being a rather wimpish Californian dreamer who sang about fountains of sorrow. Now he is one of the most outspoken mainstream American artists in opposition to American policies in Central America. This was no political rally — indeed there were more people shouting 'Play "Take it easy", Jackson,' than 'Viva Sandino' — but he did deliver a brief run-down on what his country had been up to in Guatemala, Chile and Central America.

Occasion number two was a meeting to discuss Nicaragua, the war and the press, which was part of a 'Nicaragua Must Survive' Week event held in the snappy, post-GLC Metro. It was addressed by William Higsby, a Nicaraguan journalist; Jonathon Steele, of the *Guardian's* foreign staff; and Jake Ecclestone, the deputy general-secretary of the National Union of Journalists. Actress Charlotte Cornwell chaired the meeting.

Effectively, the reason for the debate was the recent decision by the Nicaraguan government to ban *La Prensa*, the anti-Sandinista paper. The banning was announced shortly after the American Congress decision to send a further \$100 million in aid to the contras. Higsby, a young Nordic-looking man who seemed more like a Swedish tennis star than someone who had spent his formative years as an underground anti-Somoza journalist, outlined the reasons for the ban. Nicaragua is at war: thousands of people have been killed in the last five years of fighting, many of them children, victims of contra shelling and land-mining attacks; the contras are financed by the CIA and seek to overthrow an elected government; *La Prensa* aids the contras by printing damaging information about war and ignoring the contra massacres; a country at war is entitled to fight for its survival and closure is therefore justified.

Higsby said we should see the banning in perspective: the main source of news for Nicaraguans was the radio and 17 of the 35 radio stations were in private hands. Papers like *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* are on sale in Managua. And the Sandinistas themselves

THE 'CHALLENGE' posed by Mr Peter Preston, editor of the *Guardian*, to the arrangements for Downing Street briefings for political reporters has generated a cascade of calamity at the lobby system as a whole.

Mr Preston has instructed his political reporters, from the resumption of Parliament after the Summer Recess, to identify Mr Bernard Ingham, the Prime Minister's Press Secretary, or whichever of his staff give the briefings as 'a Downing Street spokesman' and, where necessary, to quote his words in direct speech. This declaration by the *Guardian* follows a decision by the *Independent* that its political staff will not attend group lobby meetings.

Fair enough. If they have some high-minded moral objection to attending them, then that's their business. But to put yourself on collision course with the system, as the *Guardian* appears to be doing, presumably with the objective of destroying it, simply cannot work.

MEDIA

At the Odeon and Metro: Central American censorship

Duncan Campbell

recognise that the whole issue of a press in wartime has to be examined — indeed Carlos Chamorro, editor of the pro-Sandinista *Barricada*, who was the billed speaker for the debate, was staying in Managua to take part in discussions about working towards a more open press. Higsby pondered on how it was that the issue of censorship of *La Prensa* should receive more media attention in the West than the fact that the United States had been found guilty at the International Court in the Hague of waging an illegal war.

Jonathon Steele's points were: that the focus on Nicaragua was itself a distortion; that it was held up for scrutiny while little attention was paid to a far less open election in El Salvador; that the CIA backs *La Prensa* to the tune of \$100,000; and that a massive destabilisation campaign is being waged against Nicaragua and that *La Prensa* had to be seen in that context. Ecclestone made points that Britain had itself tampered with the press in wartime — through the Second World War, the Falklands war and, to an extent, in its treatment of press and television coverage of the IRA.

Ideally, there would have been a speaker from *La Prensa* there and indeed the cut-and-thrust of debate was missing. From the floor the main questioning of the views expressed came from Jimmy Burns, a *Financial Times* journalist recently returned from Argentina. He asked where you draw the line between an opposition paper and one that was 'outside' the revolution. And he

asked if there were 'only one truth' in wartime. He said that during the Falklands war, oppositional views were freely expressed in Britain.

Some background perhaps is necessary: *La Prensa* was a bravely anti-Somoza paper in the pre-revolution days. After 1979 it became gradually more critical of the Sandinistas. Many of its journalists disagreed with its stance and left to form another daily, *Neuro Diario*. *La Prensa* became increasingly pro-Reagan. It was censored (although censored articles were always freely available to any journalist who visited the paper's offices). Now it is banned. Nicaragua's enemies suggest that this is one further reason to topple the government, an indication that there is a basic lack of freedom in an increasingly totalitarian state.

Some of Nicaragua's friends are also opposed to the ban; while *La Prensa* came out it was evidence — along with the 1984 elections — of a pluralist, democratic country. The banning is unsupportable. Other friends of Nicaragua say that it is arrogant for western journalists to deliver lectures on censorship when they do not do enough to expose the real atrocities in Central America and the workings of the CIA's propaganda. They say the banning is justified and that Britain would never have tolerated a daily that regularly ran 'Get stuck into them, Adolf!' stories during the Second World War.

Although it might seem a bit esoteric to a peasant being shelled by the contras for a group of westerners to be discussing *La Prensa* in a Soho basement cinema, the debate is a crucial one. And it would seem that the Sandinistas recognise that when their own papers are widely enough read and trusted — rumours inevitably are rife in Nicaragua now — then *La Prensa's* ability to demoralise and destabilise will be drastically reduced.

Back in the Hammersmith Odeon, Jackson Browne sings a song about how 'everyone from the President on down' tries to keep the full truth about Central America from the American people. It would be nice to think that the American government and those American journalists engaged in what Noam Chomsky describes as 'Brainwashing under freedom' would be also prepared to engage in debate. □

Duncan Campbell will be writing on Home Affairs for the London Daily News, which is to be launched on 10 February. He covered the 1984 Nicaraguan elections for City Limits.

A lobby of one

CHRIS MONCRIEFF of the Press Association defends the 'off the record' lobby system

Those who attack the lobby system seem to assume that we sit there placidly assimilating government pap, regurgitating it into the newspapers at the earliest opportunity. Of course we get the government line — but that is what you would expect to hear from a government servant, whether speaking on or off the record.

The opponents of the lobby — many of whom, incidentally, regularly attend lobby meetings — would expect any reporter worth his salt to look a little, at least, beneath the surface.

I am sometimes asked why I take part in government 'conspiracies'. My answer is that I spend large tracts of my life involved in some

conspiracy or another if there is the prospect of a story at the end of it — like most reporters, whether pro-lobby, anti-lobby or plain indifferent.

Indeed, many of those who criticise the lobby cheerfully wine and dine Cabinet ministers as the price of a story. That is a perfectly blameless practice. But those who indulge in it would throw up their hands in horror at any suggestion that the leaking minister might be identified. So how can those who seek their stories in this way criticise the lobby system without being branded hypocrites?

Lobby meetings are never 'cosy' as is alleged: they are often stormy, with government spokesmen facing aggressive questioning. Personally, I find I get better political stories — which is what I am paid for — with an off-the-record system.

So, whatever detractors do or say, they won't beat me because I shall continue to operate the system even if I am reduced to a lobby of one. □