

Nicholas Johnson on TV

An Open Letter: Planks for the Platforms

Politics I conceive to be nothing more than the science of the ordered progress of Society along the lines of greatest usefulness and convenience to itself.

—Woodrow Wilson

One of the innovations in the drafting of platforms this year has been the public hearing, with the parties going to the people to solicit their views on important public issues.

I have been asked to participate in such hearings. As an FCC commissioner, however, I am caught up in the judicial machinery at the very heart of the election process—the rulings on “equal time” and “fairness”—and therefore felt it might be better to offer my views in this fashion for all parties’ consideration, rather than as a participant in hearings before one party or another.

This article is a presentation of my views. To keep it to manageable length, each recommendation carries only a very short explanation. There is no particular significance to the order. And, in most cases, present policies of those holding political power are inconsistent with my recommendations.

1) Public broadcasting should be funded on a permanent basis in a manner strictly divorced from political influence. The goal should be to make public broadcasting as important, as innovative, as competitive with commercial broadcasting, and as significant in the life of our society as it is in any of the other Western democracies. This requires a level of funding of no less than \$500 million a year (editor’s note: President Nixon just vetoed a bill authorizing \$65 million for this year and \$90 million next year of federal funds for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting).

2) An adequately funded independent consumer agency should be established

to intervene in any federal or state agency proceeding affecting consumers. The value of independent participation before regulatory agencies is well documented and no longer open to serious question.

3) Federal funding should be provided to public-interest groups, to encourage and sustain their activity. To begin with, 1 percent of all agencies’ budgets should be set aside to pay the reasonable costs of all such “private attorneys general.”

4) The criteria for selecting commissioners for regulatory commissions should be demonstrated commitment to the protection of the interests of consumers and the general public, ability for independent thinking, and no association in the past or future with the industries being regulated. Consumer groups should be accorded at least as much opportunity as industry spokesmen to be consulted, and to veto, such appointments.

5) Children’s programming on commercial broadcasting stations should be cleansed of attention-getting violence and hucksterism aimed at making children superacquisitive consumers.

6) There should be strict regulation of commercial product advertising in all media to eliminate false and misleading advertising, and provision for “counter-advertising” to offer consumers alternative lifestyles and products. When the demonstrable harm from a product outweighs any conceivable benefit from its Madison Avenue merchandising, advertising of it should be banned.

7) The FCC, and other regulatory agencies—which now receive, in total, about 1/10 of 1 percent of the federal budget—should be provided the financial resources necessary to give the public the full measure of protection it deserves. At a minimum, for example, the FCC’s policy formulation and evaluation capabilities should be on par with those of the private interests, and government agencies, that appear before it.

8) Access to network prime time should be shared by the President with opposition parties, and with the co-equal branch of government, the Congress. Networks should not be seized simultaneously by the President except in true national emergencies.

9) There must be an end to government officials’ criticism of the news coverage given an administration where that criticism is linked with veiled threats of coercive action.

10) All communications between the

executive branch and regulatory agencies should be on the public record, with an end to private executive branch interference in regulatory agency decision-making, interference normally manifested through policy papers, control over budgeting, secret industry meetings, personnel decisions, legislative recommendations, and clearance of reporting forms.

11) A pilot program should be funded to explore the full range of possibilities for the use of cable television to improve and enrich the lives of our citizens.

12) A permanent, nongovernmental national media review organization should be established to evaluate the performance of the press and broadcasting, with particular emphasis on the social effects of broadcast programming.

13) Antitrust and regulatory action should be undertaken to break up the local, regional and national media baronies that have a tight grip on the information flow to the American people.

14) A complete antitrust and regulatory reevaluation of the Bell vertical and horizontal monopoly in telephone communications should be undertaken—including an evaluation of the alternatives: both more competition and public ownership.

15) Improved procedural opportunities should be created for local public-interest groups contesting the granting of licenses to broadcasters by the FCC. Firm performance requirements should be established for licensees who are, under law, trustees of public property.

16) Improved opportunities should be created for access by private citizens to the “soapboxes” of broadcast station microphones and cameras, without the filtration and censorship of licensees.

17) Sufficient public funding of political campaigns should be provided to end the purchase of candidates and offices, with broadcasters required to provide free time to candidates.

18) New technologies, like cable television, should be encouraged in ways designed to provide the maximum public benefit.

19) The federal government should install a “government-800” inward WATS number which would permit any citizen to call his government at no charge, with his call being routed to the proper person in the appropriate agency.

These proposals are feasible. They are reasonable. In many cases they merely carry into effect existing law and policy—or common sense. They are the proposals I will be looking for from candidates and platforms in 1972.