

BBC Charter Review Consultation
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London
SW1Y 5DH

17.02.04

Dear Sirs,

Re: The BBC Charter Review Consultation

I should like to respond to your leaflet inviting public comments on this matter. I listen regularly to BBC Radio, and watch quite a lot of BBC TV programmes. I particularly enjoy the 'Today' Programme on BBC Radio 4, to which I listen most mornings, and I often listen to Radio 4, and occasionally Radio 3, throughout the day. I usually watch the BBC1 'Six o'clock News', and also enjoy BBC TV documentaries and dramas. I find I learn a lot from news programmes and documentaries. While I am perhaps too lazy to investigate and read up on subjects for myself, I appreciate the challenge to think further provided by many BBC programmes. However, I do not expect to rely solely on the BBC in respect of news and current affairs. I also read newspapers and magazines for background comment. So while I use the BBC as a source of information, I do not form my opinions on the basis of their reports alone; although I respect the Corporation's journalistic integrity and objectivity.

Living in Watford, and having worked in the City of London, I also find the coverage of local issues in London and the South East is excellent, and the regular reports on the weather and the travel situation are generally both helpful and reliable.

What does concern me somewhat, is what has been described as 'dumbing-down', with a view to attracting a wider audience. I realise that the BBC needs to maintain its position in an increasingly competitive broadcasting environment, but I feel that it already achieving this by responding to recent technological developments. For example, providing new digital channels, and the services it provides on its website. I feel that rather than chasing after ratings, the BBC would do better to continue in its unique role as a truly 'independent' broadcasting service.

I believe that this role would be compromised if the BBC were no longer to be funded by the Licence Fee, and had to rely on alternative sources of revenue, such as advertising. But I think that reliance upon the Licence Fee should not mean that the Corporation should feel unable to challenge current government policies when this is appropriate. Personally, I would rather to continue to pay my Licence Fee in the confidence that I was paying for an independent BBC, which continued to work for the best standards of broadcasting and journalism.

Having said that I believe the BBC should continue to be supported by the Licence Fee, I think it entirely appropriate that it should also continue its current commercial operations, such as publishing the 'Radio Times', and selling copies of its programmes in various formats, DVDs, videos and audio cassettes, through 'BBC Worldwide'. It seems very sensible that it should augment its revenues in this way, and perfectly reasonable that this also provides a means for publicising and advertising its services. I feel this is a completely different issue from the idea of it having to be reliant upon the income from advertising third parties in order to finance its broadcasting services.

As to the question about the organisation of the BBC, I have very little idea about its structure, and how exactly its functions. I can only say that I really appreciate the service it provides at the present, and I think it would be a mistake to change the current set-up, simply because the Charter is being reviewed. As to the regulation of the BBC, I appreciate that the Governors currently have a very difficult dual role in being responsible both for its internal organisation and policies, and also being the adjudicators for questions concerning the public interest. But I feel that the response of the governors after the report of Lord Hutton, have shown their concern both for the Corporation and to fulfil their responsibilities to the public.

I doubt if OFCOM, or indeed, the Office of Fair Trading are better placed to undertake a regulatory role. Both have an extremely wide remit already, while the Governors have very precise knowledge and insight into the role of the BBC. I also do not think that either organisation could have been any more objective, and determined to take the necessary measures to maintain the Corporation's reputation for accurate and impartial reporting than the present governors have shown themselves to be. Therefore, I would suggest that if the Charter Review concluded that the best way ahead, both for the BBC and its public was to maintain the status quo with regard to the role of the Governors. I think this would be the best option.

As to ensuring that the BBC is properly accountable to Parliament and the public, maybe there might be a separate panel of representatives from the listening and viewing public, who would have some sort of role in advising the regulators of public opinion. In order to be truly representative of this, they should perhaps both canvass for opinions and ideas, as well as providing a point of contact for anyone with comments or concerns to raise.

In conclusion, I am generally very happy with the service provided by the BBC, and feel that it plays a unique and very valuable public role. I am quite content to continue to pay the Licence Fee in order to fund its services. I believe that the Corporation's independence might be compromised if it had to rely on advertising for its revenue, or were to be over-regulated. I think that the response of the Corporation to the conclusions of Lord Hutton's report, have shown how concerned it is to improve and maintain its standards of professional broadcasting. Therefore I do not think it would be at all detrimental to the public interest if the conclusion of the Charter Review was to decide to maintain the status quo.

Yours faithfully,

P. J. Allen-Smith

Penny Allen-Smith