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L.L.B. (Hons), Solicitor**

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

Dear Sirs,

BBC Charter Review Public Consultation

My first concern for the BBC is that it remains a publicly funded national broadcaster of distinction and quality. The BBC is known and respected the world over. It has become so through a long legacy of balanced and careful political observation and a perceived freedom from commercial dependence and sponsorship. In the past funding through the licence fee has enabled the BBC to concentrate on quality, public service broadcasting and apprenticeships. This is a funding method which has served the public well and should be retained.

There is no other broadcaster which comes close to the BBC and yet I believe that in the last few years it has compromised its position of pre-eminence in the pursuit of ratings and in the modern vernacular, by dumbing down. It is a sad legacy from those who have left it thus. The airwaves are full of mediocrity and in the past the BBC has stood apart from such; the rush to join the ratings war over the last 10 years has done the BBC no credit and the public are poorer for it.

The whole truth of the David Kelly affair will I believe never be known to the general public. However, I also believe that whilst it is the duty of the BBC to question and probe politicians, their policies and their public actions, I do not believe the BBC should become so closely connected with a particular opinion or argument that it is no longer able to be wholly dispassionate and objective in its reporting.

An example of the point I make can I believe be found in Orla Guerin's reports from the Israel/Palestine conflict. I choose this example because I have absolutely no personal experience of this part of the world and since I am an ethnic Scots have only an academic interest in the development of events in a historical context. I therefore rely heavily upon the eyewitness accounts of those who are there. If one scrutinises the reports from Orla Guerin the dispassionate objectivity has been lost and a sense of overwhelming sympathy for the Palestinian cause prevails. I do not comment upon her right to hold any view as a private individual, but as a BBC reporter it is her duty to give me a balanced account, not a tainted one. Evidence? When

Israeli tanks blow up a Palestinian village in Gaza, the report is personalised with pictures of and great emphasis upon injured children: when a Palestinian suicide bomber blows up a bus in Tel Aviv the report is sanitised with barely a passing mention of the injured women and children.

Both radio and television are incredibly powerful tools of persuasion, but perhaps television is in particular simply because it is principally a visual medium and requires dedicated attention. Indeed one of the great joys of the radio is that one can take it with one and listen to it whilst engaged in a variety of other pursuits. Television is not like that.

As the nation's broadcaster I believe that the BBC has a unique responsibility to set the standards of broadcasting and seek to shape the culture and standards of the society in which we live. So often on programmes such as "Feedback" and "Points of View" listeners and viewers have complained about gratuitous sex, violence, bad language et al in a programme or an episode only to be told by the Producer of that programme that "the programme reflected modern standards of behaviour". That is where the BBC is failing. The independent broadcasters can reflect the lowest common denominator in society all too well – the responsibility of the BBC is to help government set, shape and develop the acceptable standards of society.

I am saddened to observe that over recent years the BBC reporters and commentators have fallen into the disingenuous practice of referring to our own Prime Minister and the US President by surname only. Whatever one's personal politics, there should always be respect for the office which they hold. To hear the BBC refer to the Prime Minister as "Blair" and to the President of the United States of America as "Bush" is lamentably discourteous and an example of dumbing down. Whilst in office they remain the elected representatives of their countries and should be afforded that courtesy at all times. I do not recall the BBC ever referring to Sir Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan, Sir Alec Douglas Home, Harold Wilson, Edward Heath or Margaret Thatcher by surname only in a News report. Moreover, this unfortunate habit is not indulged in when referring to most or any other foreign democratically elected leader. It is another way in which the BBC has used its power of influence poorly and at best engenders further cynicism in the democratic process by the public and at worst demonstrates a bias which is beyond the remit of the BBC.

There can be few serious commentators who would try to argue that the overall standards of behaviour in our society today are as high as they were 25 years ago, let alone 50 years ago. Crime rates and their profiles, anti-social behaviour, attitudes to authority whether at the State or domestic level are plain examples of this proposition. The BBC should use its position to raise standards, not reflect their decline. At the Government's beckoning, teachers have spent an inordinate amount of effort seeking to raise standards of education in our schools – that is the standards in the children who attend them. Poor television and soap operas in particular spend just a few hours each night undoing so much of that effort.

I never watch soap operas as my life is already full, interesting and at times traumatic enough without having to fantasise about such things. The power, danger and I believe futility of these programmes was emphasised last Saturday night on "Parkinson" when he interviewed an actor from Eastenders who said he sometimes slept in his dressing room rather than travel home because he couldn't stand the abuse from people in the street who were unable to disconnect the actor from the character.

Similarly viewers campaigned a few years ago to secure the release of a "Coronation Street" character from a fictitious prison sentence. How sad. The point which I make though is much more serious. If such great numbers of the viewing public are so gullible, the burden of responsibility upon the BBC increases proportionately.

For example, the letter 't', when following a vowel, has all but disappeared from everyday language as the entire nation seems to try to emulate the dialect of an East End barrow boy. This is not the development of a living language but its desecration. Even radio, which in the past has remained something of a bastion of good taste [except Radio 1 which since its inception in 1967 has never pretended to be anything other than a station for brain dead teenagers] has dumbed down. "The News Quiz" was once very funny, clever and entertaining – it now seems to rely more upon a too liberal scattering of expletives to get the laughs. The BBC promotes these aberrations instead of denying them air time.

The responsibility of the BBC surely is to provide a higher standard to which people would subconsciously aspire rather than to follow the educational and social decline of Britain. Standards of speech, behaviour, social conscience and values which mark a successful nation at one with itself should be promoted and available to all, not left as the prerogative of a fully educated elite.

I was born in Gibraltar in 1949, lived my childhood abroad and in Glasgow in the 1950's and was a drug soaked student in the 1960's. I've been on marches and demonstrations in London and elsewhere; I lived the "Summer of Love" in 1967 to the full and have enjoyed things which I have no intention of repeating here. Every generation thinks that they invented sex – we did it because we were young and it was available – as did every generation before us. My grandparents and my parents did it as often as possible because they were at war and would probably be dead the next day but they didn't shove it down everyone else's throats in the process.

The most used switch on my television set is the off switch. I am not a prude nor am I narrow minded but when I watch television or listen to the radio, I do not want to be treated to graphic sex scenes and foul language. I see the 9o'clock watershed, which in itself is fairly meaningless, as the excuse of those programme producers who lack talent, material or both to indulge in institutional voyeurism. I do not want to share in it. It is not good drama; it is not entertaining; it is not cutting edge television to watch a couple rolling around the bed or to hear people swearing at one another as a substitute for a script. In my own home I want to be entertained in a way which does not cause me embarrassment or discomfort if in the presence of my 30 year old married daughter or my 81 year old widowed father-in-law.

Indeed one of the very best examples of good drama in the last 2 years is Foyle's War from ITV. Any underlying theme of sex or violence in an episode, remains just that, underlying. Showing it all in Technicolor detail does not add to the story but detracts from it. Perhaps producers should start to understand that they do not have a monopoly on brains or artistic perception and let the viewer or listener enjoy the story for its own merit and quality without the unnecessary detail. We all managed very well before their full frontal approach. Indeed I believe that television has a lot to learn from radio. The key to good radio is to give the listener the opportunity to use their imagination. If television took a few steps back to allow viewers the same opportunity, perhaps the quality would improve commensurately.

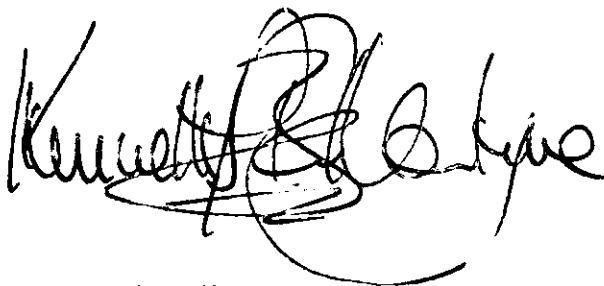
Turning now to the key question points raised in your consultation invitation.

1. quality and independence;
2. to produce a higher standard aimed at raising the nation's sights and aspirations, not dumbing down to the lowest common denominator;
3. please see above;
4. the commercial services, the business arm, is a welcome addition to the BBC funding regime. It should have a number of advantages to the public including;

- i) provide income to help hold down the licence fee;
 - ii) provide merchandise to be enjoyed long after the original screening;
 - iii) promote the BBC abroad;
 - iv) provide a measure of past achievements against which current proposals can be measured;
- 5 the licence fee, together with the exemptions, provide a fair and balanced funding mechanism. Many people forget that the provision of radio also comes from the licence fee. The detail may be adjusted, but the principle of public funding should be retained. The BBC must reciprocate though and recognise that the service is not just about ratings. One of the great joys of the BBC is the programme uninterrupted by advertisements;
- 6 the organisational structure should follow the criteria of provision. Providing the "very best services for the public" must mean the very best that can be provided, not simply the very best that there is in a poor market place;
- 7 surely the Governors should be responsible for setting the policies and the standards. It is for the Director General to ensure that those policies and standards are met. If the Governors meddle in day to day control there develops a lack of cohesion which produces a broken chain of command. ~~The Governors lead and monitor, let the director direct within~~ the criteria and guidance set by the Governors;
- 8 if the BBC is to continue to be funded by the public, then perhaps the public should have a greater voice on the direction and tone of the BBC as the nation's independent broadcaster. It would not be practical to generally elect 1 or 2 people to such a role, but they could be nominated from the population at large, as opposed to from within the interested institutions, by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for a given period of office.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to express my views about the BBC and I hope that you may find something of interest and help in this letter.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kenneth JS Ballantyne'. The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized script with some overlapping loops.

Kenneth JS Ballantyne