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From: David Benn

THE RENEWAL OF THE BBC CHARTER

As a former member of the BBC World Service, I naturally support the VIV campaign to preserve the BBC as a public service broadcasting organisation, free from both government and commercial pressure. We are, of course, going to see the proliferation of all kinds of broadcasting channels in the years ahead. But amidst this growing - and often confusing - diversity the listener will increasingly need at least one source which he or she can trust. This is where the BBC can play a unique role. It should also be remembered that the BBC World Service has, thanks to its reputation for reliability, done much to enhance this country's influence and prestige abroad.

It is sometimes argued that the BBC should be allowed to broadcast only the sort of programmes which commercial channels find unprofitable. This would spell the end of the BBC as we know it - because it would vastly reduce the size of the BBC audience. The distinctive role of the BBC does not lie in the fact that it produces good quality programmes: other channels can also do that. Indeed, the BBC is in many ways like some of its competitors - except for the fact that it has, or should have, different priorities. For a commercial broadcaster it might be unprofitable, for example, to report 'Today in Parliament' or to carry news bulletins at peak listening times in the evening. But in such cases the BBC should not be swayed just by the ratings.

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When the Charter comes up for renewal, it should include a more precise definition of the term 'public service broadcasting', even though most people pay lip service to this term. It naturally covers a wide range of programmes, including those of popular entertainment or high culture. But it should not be equated simply with the production of prestigious classics such as 'Pride and Prejudice'.

The crucial, make-or-break, test for the BBC is its handling of news (which commands large audiences) and current affairs. Provided that it is seen as accurate and impartial - both by the left and the right - it stands a good chance of survival. The BBC has every right, indeed duty, to broadcast material which may be unwelcome to the government of the day. There would have been no cause for complaint against Andrew Gilligan if he had quoted David Kelly accurately. And the BBC should not be timid about handling controversy. The key point, however, is that the BBC (unlike newspapers) has no editorial position of its own - on the Euro, the Iraq war or anything else. It is the *publisher* of opinions, not their author, with a responsibility to give fair coverage to the whole range of opinions in this country. Provided it is seen primarily as a 'publisher' it will probably be accepted as fair.

One final point relating to the Charter concerns the need for greater transparency and the rights of the listeners themselves. It has already been suggested that the candidates for Chairman and Director-General should be interviewed in public. There is also a need for a more rigorous procedure for public consultation before major programme changes are embarked on. Under the present Charter no such clear procedure is laid down. But there is a strong case for allowing judicial review by the Courts, at the request of recognised groups of licence-payer (such as VI V perhaps) if changes are

made which might antagonise audience or potentially undermine the BBC's public service mandate. Possible examples would be if the BBC decided to change the time of the evening news bulletin to an off-peak listening time; or if Radio 4 were to stop reporting 'Today in Parliament'. Two fairly recent examples were: the decision in 1998 to drop the 9am news bulletin on Radio 4; and, even more important, the decision in 1996 to abolish the autonomy of the BBC World Service. This led to widespread protests from both the right and the left of the political spectrum - which had no effect whatever.

This is a difficult time both for the BBC and for society as a whole. It is greatly to be hoped that the VLV campaign will meet with success.

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