

1st April, 2004

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

Dear Sirs,

Herewith my response to your request for views. I apologize for the delay in getting it to you but trust it will not arrive too late to be counted in.

What do you most value about the BBC?

The fact that, behind all the shrill, partisan lobbying, there exists an independent, impartial body able and willing to present us, the public, with factual news, first of all, and then enquire into that news with the help of protagonists of totally different viewpoints - in other words, to present a balanced picture on which the listener/viewer can base his/her own judgment. In a sense, therefore, the BBC is of more value than the press as the latter may be more partisan.

Above all, the BBC not only provides a lifeline for 'temporary' travellers and longterm expatriates but the World Service broadcasts are listened to - often at considerable personal risk - by countless millions of foreign nationals, who know them to be a reliable purveyor of news, when their own media, perhaps, are not or cannot be so objective.

2. The BBC is in a position to conduct investigative programmes on subjects of public interest and concern and the issues covered in such programmes have, on occasion, been taken up by Parliament, the Government, the Crown Prosecution Service or the police. In this way, the BBC can bring to the attention of those in positions of power loopholes in and abuses of the system.

3. The BBC not only informs through its news and current affairs programmes but, through its cultural programmes it educates and can be innovative and take risks where a commercial operator's criteria would always or largely be commercially based. It can thus act as a patron of the arts.

How should the BBC adapt to cope with changes in technology and culture?

The listener/viewer should not be 'penalized' by such changes but, rather, should be able to take advantage of them: in other words, both analogue and digital programmes should be universally available until digital switch-over, when digital broadcasts should be available, free, to all. Meantime, it is regrettable that the

type of 'serious' programme which once automatically went out on BBC 2 - and sometimes even on BBC 1 - is now 'reserved' for BBC 4, which is not yet available free to all viewers.

What do you think of the TV, radio and online services the BBC provides?

Generally speaking, these services are very highly valued at all levels in this country and at international level too - in fact, they are so highly valued that their continued existence is taken for granted. However, despite the BBC's best denials, we, the public, find that there has been an element of 'dumbing down' - in competition, perhaps, with what is provided by the commercial channels. BBC audience figures and ratings should be judged on their own terms - not compared with the ratings of the commercial operators, whose criteria are different.

Should the BBC run commercial services?

While I can understand the feelings expressed by the commercial operators on this point, I feel that, given very strict controls, the BBC should be entitled to ~~continue~~ running commercial services - in order to supplement its income from the licence fee. It also has an actual duty to inform the public of its (forthcoming) activities (Radio Times. programme trailers, etc.)

How should we pay for the BBC?

The licence fee is clearly the only option if the BBC is to continue to be able to estimate its approximate income in order to be able to plan in advance. This situation produces the financial stability without which, quite simply, it would presumably not be able to continue to provide the services it does at present. Just one example: knowing what funds will be allocated for newsgathering, it is able, at present, to ensure that there are always BBC correspondents in place in certain parts of the world and others ready to fly out elsewhere at a moment's notice.

The problem with the licence fee, however, is that it is clearly a burden for the poor and felt to be unjust by those who choose not to watch or listen to BBC programmes. A way must be found to help the former: the over seventy-fives certainly appreciate their free TV licence. Could some way not be found, in addition, to subsidize or pay for licences for those, for example, on income support and/or on housing benefit? If it is possible to make such provision, it would have to be done in such a way that it was not subject to the annual budgets of any particular government.

As regards the second group, maybe there could be some publicity comparing the output of the BBC to the services offered by central government departments and/or local government. For example, we all, indirectly, pay for hospitals, schools, public libraries, museums, art galleries, swimming baths, etc. but we do not all have to or choose to use these facilities - or, in the private sector, there is the principle of insurance: we are forced or choose to pay our premium but we may, in fact, never actually put in a claim.

If a subscription system were substituted for the licence fee,

I imagine the present financial stability would simply crumble - likewise the whole programme structure. As regards the advertising option, again the revenue would be 'unreliable' - with similar practical results - but I believe, in addition, the majority of BBC viewers and listeners would regard advertising as an unwelcome and irrelevant intrusion.

Is the BBC organized in the most effective and efficient way?

Only those who work - or have worked - in the organization can pronounce on the efficiency or otherwise of the BBC organization. However, to continue to be effective, I feel, very strongly, that the BBC must continue to be a single entity. It is not only vital that the organization is perceived, both in the UK and abroad, to be one entity out of the 'richness' of so many different 'facets' under one 'roof' has many practical advantages such as flexibility and cross-fertilisation - and, for all I know, efficiency and cost-saving too, perhaps?

How should the BBC be run? How do we ensure that the BBC is properly accountable to the public and Parliament?

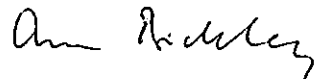
First and desperately important: it should continue to be totally independent of all governments, of whatever political hue and further, begging your pardon, it should not be answerable to a Secretary of State. It is already required to deliver its annual report to Parliament and, as things stand, its Chairman and Director General can be interrogated by the House of Commons Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport. This procedure should continue with the possible addition of some sort of monitoring function by the House of Lords.

However, I feel some changes would be welcomed by the public as regards the transparency or otherwise of appointments of governors and senior staff - as also of its accounting procedures. The make-up of the Board of Governors should also be reviewed to ensure a good balance between those members with previous broadcasting experience, who know the problems firsthand and 'lay' members representing the public. Further, there should perhaps be two separate bodies in future: in other words, the regulatory body should be quite separate from management, with separate offices (outside BBC premises?) and separate staff.

In conclusion, I feel it is absolutely vital that the BBC maintains its independence and, in order to enable it to achieve this, that the licence fee is continued. The BBC's *raison d'être* is different from that of the commercial operators (although the criteria may sometimes overlap) and therefore, the complaints and attacks of the commercial lobby are irrelevant - although the envy can well be understood. It follows from this that the BBC should not be broken up: a fragmented or depleted BBC would not be able to follow its public service remit. The complaints of the commercial sector should be disregarded but, at the same time, BBC producers should not feel they have to compete with the commercial sector either in type of programme (e.g; lifestyle programmes) or the ratings war.

The BBC is a different animal from the commercial px operators. Although the BBC is, emphatically, not a government department, it is a public body and the baying of the commercial sector for its blood suggests a scenario where, in medicine, the private sector were trying to destroy the NHS or, in education, the private sector were trying to eliminate state schools: there should be room for both creatures.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ann Bickley".

Ann Bickley