

21 March, 2004

BBC Charter Review Consultation

DCMS
2 – 4 Cockspur Street
London SW1Y 5DH

Dear Sir or Madam

My comments broadly follow the "Key Questions" (overlapping though they are) listed in the "Your BBC Your Say" leaflet.

What do I value most about the BBC?

I suppose that the BBC's famed historic independence is its essential value, if only because recent events have demonstrated how awkward that can be for the temporary occupants of No.10.

In terms of product, I value much of BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 very highly and overall certainly more than any of the BBC's television channels. Both these services seem to meet their public service obligations more fully and to be less obsessed with ratings than the TV channels. (These characteristics remain, notwithstanding some of the grosser innovations by the present R3 Controller and the fit of terror induced in a former Controller of R3 by the advent of Classic FM a few years ago). As a consequence, both R3 and R4 continue to exhibit a distinctiveness of programming range, ambition and tone unmatched by other radio services and, with some exceptions, by most of the BBC (and the commercial) TV output. Its TV output, again with exceptions, looks less distinctive and aspirational alongside that of other providers, a form of competitive cloning of programming having apparently taken hold.

A rich feast of live (serious) music, news, analysis and criticism, public affairs coverage, science and comedy – a cultural spread – is daily laid out by R3 and R4. It would be intolerable if the Charter review jeopardised all that. Will the review lead to a corresponding enrichment of the TV output?

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

No doubt the BBC would claim with justification that it has adapted and continues to adapt to the growth in Internet availability and the 24-hour on-line culture etc. The Corporation's web-site is, I understand, a world-leader (once it was just Miss World, now it's Miss World Web-site). These developments have for some time flavoured programme style and content, no doubt in an attempt to dispel the middle-class

Auntie image. While acknowledging the BBC's part in fostering this new culture, I wonder whether programmers (and their programmes) have gained much of substance as a result of the repeated, rather nerdy, citing of the web-site address and invitations for comments and requests. Beyond a certain point, these features are a switch-off.

"Changes in culture" is, I take it, a neutral proxy term for the fact that Britain is no longer, if it ever was, a homogeneous, Christian, imperialistically-minded nation state. The BBC has made substantial efforts to reflect the present circumstances and values of society and probably should do more. One could draw up a list of groups who would doubt whether they are generally well done by in terms of policy and programmes. But this is not to say that externally imposed targets and percentages aimed at enhancing the BBC's political correctness would be either desirable or effective (the officially inspired efforts to fill the Millennium Dome with expressions of national life and values suggest that a blueprint of inclusiveness prepared by the political Establishment is the last thing that is needed). I question whether the rather amorphous and dubious aim of providing something for everyone, recently voiced by the Acting DG, is a credible one; how can a truly creative organisation be driven by such a flabby purpose? Through various forms of taxation, I am obliged to pay for many activities and services that bring me no benefit (or pleasure). I do not see that an exact cultural quid pro quo should be expected or applied literally in the case of the licence fee.

What do I think of the TV, radio and on-line services the BBC provides?

As indicated above, those bits of the BBC output that I relish are of a high standard, particularly on radio. The TV output, by contrast is strangely prone to designer fads and fashions. Many programmes are overlaid with an increasingly loud, tabloidish and neurotic visual presentational style, even those of purportedly serious intent. This adoption of the tone of its commercial competitors (on both sides of the Atlantic) suggests to me a lack of self-confidence and of clear thinking at editorial (or DG) level. Likewise there has been a failure to give a distinctive identity to its mainstream TV channels (and for that matter, how can I tell that it's BBC3 that I'm watching, other than by the number of repeats?) While not doubting the significance and quality of the BBC's news output, I think that some suppression of the cult of personality among TV reporters and editors would be welcome. The tediously portentous fronting of the news programmes – all that heavy throbbing etc. - is also hard to bear nowadays. Likewise, even e.g. *Newsnight* has succumbed to a kind of misplaced Playschool visual literalness, no doubt on the assumption that the viewer will not understand what a computer is unless there's a mock-up of someone using one. Many such TV programmes should calm down – they do not need to shout, if the content is good.

As a populist medium, TV is generally (and unsurprisingly) incapable of giving the serious arts their due. The BBC's recent record is patchy at best, though BBC4 may improve it in due course. It has always been possible for the BBC to devote hours each week to professional sports coverage. Is there a peculiar difficulty, ratings aside, in offering e.g. a regular critics' forum or art news update comparable in quality to *Front Row* or *Night Waves*? (The poseurs' shouting match on a Friday night called I think *Newsnight Review* is a turn-off and the film review show is clearly in the grip of the big distributors). For all the éclat surrounding *The Big Read*, why are books not regularly (seriously) reviewed on TV? And isn't it curious – not to say grotesquely neglectful - that the Corporation, with its magnificent support for a clutch of excellent

orchestras and choirs and with a decent record of commissioning new music, so rarely displays them to TV audiences, the Proms apart?

Should the BBC run commercial services?

The commercial activities of the BBC have grown enormously and are brazenly trumpeted to the dismay of other providers. There may be a presentational problem here, but not of a fundamental kind. One approach, probably unfeasible, would be for the BBC to flag up the costs of each of its programmes and to show what proportions are borne by the licence fee and what by the commercial arm – or would that put those dire holiday programmes, little short of naked advertising, out of the window?

How should we pay for the BBC?

I am happy with the licence fee principle. However, greater transparency is needed as to the use to which the fee is put. What proportion of the BBC's output could unchallengeably be categorised as public service? Is the paying public ever told? The BBC generates its commercial revenue on the back of the licence fee, and it would seem logical – not to say fair – that where other commercial providers offer public service programmes, a proportion of the fee should go to them. This would – or might – be healthy all round – concentrating the BBC's mind wonderfully and stimulating commercial providers to more than fulfil their legal responsibilities.

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

Hard for an outsider to judge – politicians and civil servants will always say of other organisations that there is scope for efficiency savings. Whether the doctrine can be applied to a creative business that prides itself on its world-wide reach is questionable.

How should the BBC be run? How should it be regulated?

External regulation, a major UK growth industry, is of course fashionable if not popular. Superficially there is a case for putting the BBC under the same monitoring regime as other broadcasters. But the BBC is in a special position as the only publicly-funded comprehensive broadcaster and if it is destined to remain so, then its regulatory structures probably have to be special too. It's not the Government that funds the BBC and there is therefore no obvious case for the Government's calling the shots, either through the DCMS or via the official regulator. If the BBC's independence from Westminster and Whitehall is to be manifest, then a self-regulating set-up has much to commend it. The Governors are not perfect and have not performed perfectly in their latest major test. That however is not a reason for dismantling them or for the review to be over-prescriptive in its pronouncements on internal structures. What is needed is greater public awareness of the Governors, how they are appointed and why, and indeed who they are and what they get up to in their role (see below).

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

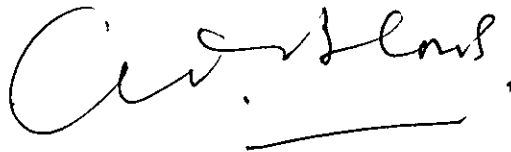
Accountability, another modish mantra. It could be said that the BBC accounts for itself with every programme it delivers and every action it takes. With its obsessive search for audience opinion it should know whether the public believes it is fulfilling its obligations or not. Does not the BBC report annually to Parliament? Whether a

formal session in front of the relevant Commons' Select Committee adds anything by way of accountability is seriously to be questioned, if recent performances are any measure.

That said, we are given curiously little in detail and on a regular basis about listener and viewer opinions on programmes and policy (a couple of minutes' worth a week of emails to the *Today* programme is mere tokenism). The *Feedback* (R4) programme, an uneven and not very serious affair, goes some way to offering a form of accountability but as far as I am aware nothing equivalent has been staged on TV for several years. Clearly there is a risk that axe-grinders and similar drones contrive to hog such occasions.

At a strategic level, there is a strong case for bringing the Governors and senior staff more clearly into public view and for their being regularly subject to public grilling (a format that is more civilised than a Select Committee and less glossy than the trumpeting of the annual report obviously needs to be devised).

Yours faithfully


Chris Blair