

17th March, 2004.

Dear Sir,

BBC – CHARTER RENEWAL

I start from the premise that the BBC is quite possibly the greatest asset this country possesses, warts and all, surpassing the influence of any one government and political personality – these come and go! At base level, the BBC promotes the English language and culture worldwide, and it is a vital organ for the maintenance of political, cultural and economic influence, far beyond its weight.

I propose to deal with as many issues as possible under separate headings. Most of the direction will be towards television, since that is the greatest consumer of resources, and the most contentious (even allowing for the Kelly affair).

Programming:

Generally, I would wish to support all television broadcasters, and the mix that is generally labelled 'terrestrial'. In order to maintain the quality of these, a strong BBC is an important ingredient – a public service broadcaster, free to view (given the licence fee).

Broadly, I support the status quo, that given the advent of Channels 4 and 5, has remained much the same since the arrival of Independent Television. The essence of the UK terrestrial broadcaster, is the quality of its programmes – the 'software' within the broadcast medium. Without quality programme content a great void exists. All the different, modern adventures into television (mainly satellite), seem to me, to have done, is pay excessive prices for sport and film content, the 'software' catalogue is extremely small, and unimaginative, showing virtually no evidence of improvement. Predominantly, I could classify these satellite broadcasters as 'hardware' producers, with emphasis on costs and content tilted heavily towards capital costs. Very often, these broadcasters owe a substantial debt to the BBC, through being able to build-up a television sporting profile (on the cheap), and commandere it through the bidding process, because the BBC cannot afford to re-invest in its success.

Finance:

So far as the BBC is concerned, it seems to me that the issue swirls around the validity of the licence fee. Behind this there are many philosophical issues not in the least related to broadcasting or paying for it. For example, the political 'right' would want to see the demise of the licence fee, and produce a number of spurious arguments to gain that end, that might also (conveniently to their view), lead to the end of the BBC, or to a substantially contorted BBC.

I think one of the commentators on the recent 'Panorama' discussion, had it about right when the licence fee was likened to democracy – "it has its imperfections, but we still do not have anything better ...", or words to that effect.

By and large, it would be my view the BBC has entirely honoured its pledge as the premiere public broadcaster. Alternative sources of finance, would in my view immediately emasculate the BBC, and such should be seen as so doing.

It is worth noting that 'Sky', only survives on a high subscription fee, and a heavy schedule of advertisements (possibly heavier than ITV). Neither of which seems to be abating. From the point of view of comparison with 'Sky', the licence fee looks excellent value, even though it may only go to the BBC.

If anything the recent 'Kelly affair', has shown how important it is to have a BBC funded, at least one-step removed from Government. The licence fee provides this mechanism. Closer funding relationships with the Treasury, would be seen as damaging to the independence of the BBC, and could produce a host of difficult funding practicalities.

It might be seen as pertinent that other 'terrestrial' broadcasters receive some measure of public funding. In my view this is a broader remit than the BBC Charter, and is outside the issue of renewal, and maintenance of the current licence fee. It is to do with a broader remit where some new initiatives regarding funding including subscription could be tried.

Governance:

The Governor system, set up by the original Charter, has stood the test of time, even the tremors of the 'Thatcher' administration. I do concede, however, that there may need to be some changes here, to bring the BBC into line with the current unified, strengthened regime in place for other broadcasters (Ofcom).

The Governors could easily function more as a Board of Directors, and look more closely at matters internal to the Corporation, given the greatly expanded and successful content recently introduced, including television, radio, the internet and digital services. The Governors would still be composed in a way to represent the public interest, but without the handicap of a regulatory methodology.

Commerciality:

Given that I accept the current mode of finance, I see no reason to broach the issue the issue of carrying advertisements, save to say, that this would undoubtedly weaken other terrestrial broadcasters that rely completely on that form of finance, that will be struggling to assert a focus in amore competitive market place.

So far as commerciality of programme content is concerned, I think there is a balance that has been maintained pretty well by the BBC. Some populist programmes are, and will be necessary to justify the Licence Fee, but more importantly, to keep the BBC 'attached' to current broadcasting trends in the media. However, I would caution against over-indulgence. The Corporation could be a pathfinder in a number of areas, but not necessarily a proliferator. Excessive Quiz programmes, Reality TV, and 'junk air-time fillers', ought to be for other networks, extreme populism could damage the BBC in terms of its 'quality provision'.

Recognising its strength, in promoting drama, music; classic and modern is vital for a re-invigorated BBC. Furthermore, quality current affairs issues, are a feature that promotes the Corporation world-wide, and is responsible for its high international

status. Commissioning new work across the broad remit of programmes, should be an active consideration of the Corporation.

Drama:

I do think that this issue requires a separate consideration, especially in view of the current preponderance of 'Soaps', 'Cops and Docs' etc, as inferred from the above Section. There does seem to be a format developing here, tending to prohibit a broad range of new and different work, to the detriment of the Network. The BBC, of all broadcasters, should be taking risks with writing and creative talent. I accept that 'Soaps', 'Cops and Docs', produce a disciplined writer, of some quality, who may be in danger of becoming too 'stylised'. The trend towards more violence and 'low-life' etc, does not have to be self-perpetuating, but there is a tendency for it to appear so, with the preponderance of current writing formats.

Not to forget Radio!:

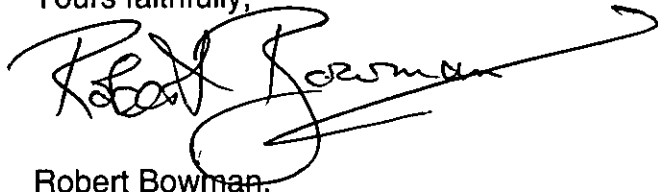
If anything, I find radio a more exciting and less restricting format than television. I find the content of radio across the BBC stations (one to five), more balanced. The segmentation of audiences is probably better established and more traditional. I applaud the work that has been done with Radio 1 and 2, by providing a more distinctive 'youth' product in Radio 1, and a mainstream content for Radio 2.

Other Countries:

Having travelled widely over a number of years, I note from practical observation, that radical interference with working established systems of public broadcasting has (in my opinion), produced a qualitative impoverishment from both Austral-Asia to the Continent of Europe (namely some form of privatisation). Changes that currently put the BBC 'head and shoulders' above its latter-day contemporaries. The changes have not necessarily been uniform, but have resulted in an emasculation of the services in various ways. In this respect, I sound a note of warning to potential meddlers.

In conclusion, given the conservative ('small c') premise, "if it ain't broke don't fix it", the motivation of meddlers should be queried. There may be a number of hidden agendas and hidden players, producing arguments for change in order to damage the BBC. Such intentions should be seen for what they are, and avoided at all costs.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Bowman', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Robert Bowman.

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