

30 January 2004

The Rt. Hon. Tessa Jowell, MP
House of Commons
London
Sw1A 0AA

Dear Tessa Jowell,

The birth year for my Wife and myself, 1921 and 1918 respectively means that we both grew up with the BBC, what a great institution to be nearly twinned with.

We have always appreciated the treasure that it is, in the early days when there were no other broadcasters possibly few people including us ever gave a thought about Charter renewal. From the introduction of ITV by Harold MacMillans Government to be funded by advertising is when we have had to start thinking more about issues, with the advent of Cable and Satellite even more so.

We became members of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer about the time that Margaret Thatcher's Government made the BBC transfer a lot of its programme production to outside companies and sell its transmitters to a US company, so much for BBC independence in that period. As this seemed the typical approach to privatisation we were very alarmed for the future of the BBC,, it could well have happened but for VLV and other like groups, but mainly the Charter, however, those actions forced on the BBC showed how it could be tinkered with.

We obtained copies of your recent speeches, Edinburgh Festival, August 23rd 2003 and September 18th 2003 which were perhaps the opening shots of the great debate to come. We believe we understand your reasons for starting this debate early with a conclusion signed and sealed as it were.

This letter is our response to your call for public opinion, the following is ours. Occasionally we will watch a programme on ITV, other than that all our viewing and listening is BBC because that is what we like best, for the same reason we do not subscribe to Cable or Satellite. We bought ourselves a Set-Top Box to take advantage of all the extra choice there is on Freeview, despite there being a Sky channel we could not be bothered to watch it.

Your opening speech stated that you had a random selection of clips, which shows just how much there is to be discussed, you have made it unnecessary for us to go into depth about the quality and diversity of BBC programmes because you have made these very points, suffice to write that we are delighted and very relieved to read that you acknowledge the BBC commitment to programmes that others would not risk, you mention David Attenborough, he is great, and there are others who are also very capable of producing wonderful documentaries, how great to be able to sit in your armchair and travel the world, the things we have learned this way has been invaluable, plus Freeview we have all the programmes we could wish for. It was satisfying to read what you said about the British people having paid for the BBC and it belongs to them, we find that very comforting, we have written that because there are some who would not appreciate that as well as belonging to us the BBC with its launch in 1922 as a company, then from 1927 as a Corporation it has had many years of pioneering long before other systems were invented, has a rightful place in our lives.

We in turn acknowledge that you have to take everyones interest into account, we are happy with that, as you said everything must be fair, we have confidence in you to be fair plus confidence in BBC quality and ability to move with change in time.

We support everything in your speeches, there is however one paragraph, page 5, your second speech which deals with the BBC share of television audience which you state has dropped to a quarter, statistically this may be so, however, we feel that statistics cannot in this instance tell the true story because we can and do switch channels through the range of PSB, we cannot switch to satellite or cable, but satellite and cable subscribers can and am sure they do switch to all the PSB's when and as often as they wish through the aerial they had before a dish, they are, of course, entitled to as we all pay the licence fee. Monitoring can give the numbers watching a particular programme but would be very surprised if monitoring was a constant on going practise, therefore surely it is not possible to always have an accurate figure of all audience numbers.

Another reason why we prefer the BBC is because of the licence fee, there are no breaks in programmes for advertising, we recognise that other PSB's only source of revenue is advertising but the breaks in programmes spoil the continuity for us, I doubt whether we would ever go to a theatre if there was a break for advertising every ten or fifteen minutes. One other great advantage of the licence fee means that the BBC have a guaranteed income therefore that must make planning of programmes and budgeting much less stressful than for the other PSB's who depend on sponsors for advertising.

We do not know how many subscribers cable has, certainly have not made the impact that was expected, that must surely be due to the capitol outlay digging up roads and pavements laying cables to connect houses and only then if enough applications are made in any street or area to warrant it, difficult to see that system surviving when they have to compete via aerial or dish.

Must admit we have little experience of Sky programmes, the experience did not impress particularly when we realised that as well as paying a subscription for every channel there is advertising as well, this has to be greedy. Do not know whether Cable has advertising, if so, both Cable and Sky in our view have an unfair advantage over the independent public service broadcasters being that advertising is their only form of revenue.

Somewhere around 15 years ago BBC funding was an issue raised on a BBC Question Time programme, inevitably revenue from advertising as an alternative was raised and after much discussion a member of the panel, who as we remember was big in advertising settled all discussion on the subject through his knowledge of the advertising industry by pointing out that there was not enough revenue available to support everybody, how this is managed now with Sky and possibly Cable as well as the independent PSB's we do not know, it must however be a constant concern for the PSB's and affect the scope of programmes.

By reason of our ages and Government policy we now have the benefit of fuel allowance and free TV licence both of which are much appreciated. We can truthfully say that not having to pay the licence fee anymore has not influenced our opinion, it has always been the case that the licence fee is not just value for money it must be the greatest bargain in the world, even with the latest increase to £116 for one whole year of Radio and Television with the total diversity and quality plus now all the extra through Freeview the licence fee is £4 cheaper than the cheapest channel on Sky at £120, this last amount based on one year ago.

£116 would perhaps pay for three or maybe four of the cheapest theatre tickets in London, as good as these show maybe and less then one channel on Sky must surely make the value for money argument in favour of the BBC beyond all doubt, to return to the theatre ticket that is the cost of one person, you can have a big family and friends watching a BBC programme.

We belong to a Theatre Club in our small country town patronised almost entirely by the elderly, the committee arrange coach outings for theatre shows which are well attended and very welcome plus good value. There are 5/6 shows a year, coach fare included comes to more than the licence fee, all our elderly people and most of them Widows are happy with the shows and price, though it would not

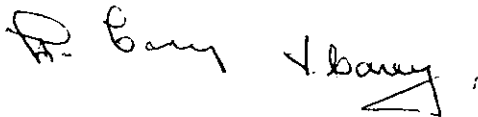
surprise us if there were not at least one on a coach who if asked would complain about the licence fee.

Despite the choice and price of channels on Sky and possibly Cable it is certain that many could be limited on how many channels they could subscribe to thereby supplementing their entertainment by switching to BBC and some at least would be most vocal in their argument as to why they should pay a licence fee for something they would deny they watch.

To conclude, we totally support the BBC and its method of funding, to repeat the greatest bargain this whole world, there must be many around it who envy what we have and would wonder why there could be anyone who do not appreciate it.

Please find enclosed relevant part of European News, Eryl McNally MEP, in relation to report titled "Science/fact or fiction?" in which the BBC is praised.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'A. Carey & Vera Carey', with a large flourish at the end.

Arthur and Vera Carey