

31 January 2004

B.B.C. Charter Review Consultation  
Department of Culture, Media and Sport  
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Dear Sir/Madam,

Here is my response to your public consultation document.

1. general remarks I fully support the stated aim of the review, namely, to result in "a strong BBC, independent of government." The B.B.C. is the best institution that we have in this country. If I went to live abroad, it is one of the things that I would miss most. After the many changes that have taken place in this country over the last quarter of a century, the B.B.C. is the only institution left here that I still feel proud of.

2. What do I value most about the B.B.C.? In descending order of preference:

- a. news, especially the 'Today' programme
- b. discussions between experts on topics such as politics, science, social questions, history, philosophy, etc., especially 'Start the Week' and 'In Our Time'
- c. current affairs, e.g. 'Panorama'
- d. other factual and documentary programmes, especially on subjects such as history, science, social affairs, etc.
- e. political satire e.g. 'The News Quiz', 'Dead Ringers', Rory Bremner (Yes, I know he is not on the B.B.C., but he ought to be!)
- f. other comedy, e.g. 'Fawlty Towers', Billy Connolly (doing stand-up, not travel!), 'Have I Got News for You', etc.
- g. nature - whales, apes, big cats, etc. (especially on television)

3. How should the B.B.C. adapt to cope with changes in technology and culture? The B.B.C. should stay with what it does best, namely, normal radio and television broadcasting. New technology excludes many people and the B.B.C. should be, above all, inclusive. If, on the other hand, digital technology became the normal way of broadcasting, then the B.B.C. should adopt it.

4. What do I think of the television, radio and on-line services the B.B.C. provides? Many programmes on B.B.C. Radio 4 are of an extraordinarily high standard and represent broadcasting at its most excellent. B.B.C. television broadcasts some programmes that are very good, but the majority are mediocre or even poor. Too much time and prominence is given to light entertainment. For example, it is ridiculous that some programmes are delayed or even cancelled in order to cover a sporting event. The National Lottery should have no place on the B.B.C. As for 'on-line' services, they do not interest me at all.

5. Should the B.B.C. run commercial services? The B.B.C. should be essentially non-commercial and should not have to compete commercially with other broadcasters. Its only criterion of

success should be the excellence of its programmes. That does not exclude the possibility of the B.B.C. engaging in some commercial enterprises, such as the selling of recorded programmes to the public or the selling of programme ideas to other broadcasters. It should also continue to produce 'The Radio Times', which is the best of the programming magazines. However, any profits made from such enterprises should not form part of the basic budget of the B.B.C., but should be a bonus to be invested in additional new programme development.

6. How should we pay for the B.B.C.? The B.B.C. is a public service, from which everyone in this country benefits. An independent broadcaster disseminating news, information and opinions is good for our society and therefore good for everyone, whether they tune in to the B.B.C. or not. The fairest way to pay for a public service is an income tax, but this would only work for the B.B.C. if the rate of tax was set by a body independent of the Government and if the money raised was protected from any kind of Government interference. If this is not possible, then we have to stick with the licence fee, whatever its faults, because independence of the B.B.C.'s income is vital. Whatever method of funding is chosen, the rate should be set so as to give the B.B.C. an income sufficient to produce excellent programmes without it having to be subsidised by commercial enterprises.

7. Is the B.B.C. organised in the most effective and efficient way? I have not got the specialised knowledge necessary to answer this question. But, as I said before, the main criterion of the B.B.C.'s success should be the excellence of its programmes. I am not sure that efficiency is so important.

8. How should the B.B.C. be run and regulated? I used to think that the B.B.C. was well run and regulated, until the recent disgraceful forced resignations of the Chairman and the Director-General, which was an appalling waste of talent and was quite unnecessary for such a relatively minor mistake. I suspect that, if Government ministers had to resign whenever a member of their staff distorted the truth and got away with it, we would have no Government left. Now, in the light of this affair, I wonder if it might be necessary to reorganise the governing body of the B.B.C. in order to give the B.B.C. greater independence.

9. How do we ensure that the B.B.C. is properly accountable? The B.B.C. should not be accountable to Parliament, because Parliament has a political agenda and the B.B.C. should not be influenced by that. The B.B.C. should be accountable directly to the public. That could be perhaps achieved by having an independent body that could receive representations from the public, review them and, where appropriate, enforce their implementation by the B.B.C. The existing bodies, such as the Broadcasting Standards Authority and its successor OFCOM (or whatever it is called), cannot serve this purpose, as they only deal with negative representations (complaints and criticisms) and not positive ones such as suggestions and recommendations.

Yours faithfully,



Dave