

SUGGESTIONS RE THE FUTURE OF THE BBC

INTRODUCTION

To achieve brevity, this document concentrates on suggestions and assertions only.

The over-riding concept advocated is that the BBC should be Britain's public service broadcaster. The most controversial part of this concept is that the BBC should withdraw from programmes of entertainment and from coverage of sport.

A second concept, closely linked with the first, is that the BBC should be truly independent but responsible. I advocate an 'arms length' system of regulation and management, which would allow programme staff to get on with their jobs, but with systems in place to control abuse should it seem to occur.

I also attempt to draw attention to what may be an invidious temptation for politicians to argue in favour of the retention of the licence fee, since this serves their interests, regardless of party.

I am aware that there are serious gaps in my suggestions - for instance, no consideration is given to the balance between TV and sound broadcasting, or to the number and type of channels required by the BBC to achieve its objectives. I can also foresee problems arising from my suggestions - one instance is that I have suggested a high degree of independence should be afforded to the Governors, but I have not faced the subtler problem of how those who *appoint* the Governors might achieve the same degree of independence.

I believe however that if the concepts I advocate are endorsed, the matters of detail I have ignored will easily follow and can be set in place - at least on a 'for the time being' basis.

I have not tried to argue the case for my suggestions in detail in this document, but I am of course prepared to expand on any of the following views if invited to do so.

THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE BBC

There seems to be a clear need for a public broadcaster in contemporary Britain, a broadcaster that is independent of political or commercial pressure, that is soundly financed, and that is professionally run, with access to technological changes as they occur; and on which the nation, as well as people overseas, can rely for a reasonable presentation and interpretation of events that may affect us at any time.

The role of that broadcaster should be confined to news and current affairs, to education in a broad sense, and to providing a world-wide news service.

The BBC should not attempt to engage in the expensive areas of entertainment. In particular it must avoid the 'three S's' - sport, soaps and sitcoms; and, need it be said, quiz and 'reality' shows. It is accepted that the BBC has a good record in the three Ss, but this is not the point, since the Commercial stations are well placed to provide programmes of this and a related nature, and once the BBC abandons this area, would very likely 'carry on where the BBC has

left off'. Above all, the BBC should not have to compete for 'ratings', a concept that makes sense only in a commercial context, and when advertising revenues are involved.

This does not mean that the BBC should not have regard to entertainment values in producing its programmes.

It is difficult to say what 'education' is. 'Educative' may perhaps be loosely equated with informative. Science is clearly one area where the BBC has a useful role to pursue. Unglamourised history is another. Biology - which may be regarded as *the* science of the latter twentieth century - is notoriously neglected by broadcasters. There are innumerable grey areas - is eg Delia Smith's recipes or a history of Mick Jagger's music educative? There is considerable scope both in TV and radio for innovative educative broadcasting.

It should be clear that a 'public broadcaster' is not a Government broadcasting station. The BBC should be independent of the Government of the day and of all political parties. It should be free to criticise, within the law, both institutions and individuals, and to indulge in 'investigative journalism.' (It is recognised that with the advent of a *major* war or an *extreme* security alert, this freedom might have to be limited - but not abolished.)

REGULATION AND CONTROL OF THE BBC

If the suggestions made in my 'role' paragraphs were implemented, there seems little reason why the present system should not continue, but perhaps with clarification and a degree of strengthening.

A Board of Governors, which is independent of Government, of any political party, of the body which appoints them, and needless to say of any commercial interest, should be appointed. It might be helpful if individuals considered for appointment were to make a formal declaration that they are not, or no longer are, members of a political party, or hold commercial appointments that might result in a conflict of interest. Appointment should be for a limited period of years (renewable), and removal within that term should occur only by voluntary resignation or upon a three-quarters majority vote of their peers.

Their role is not to administer the BBC, much less to become involved in programme planning, but to act as a 'watch dog' which ensure the BBC adheres to its charter, to investigate any apparent beaches of that charter and to take remedial action where necessary, and to act as a channel of communication between the BBC and outside individuals and groups.

They will also appoint a Director General (DG), and, on his recommendation, interview the most senior administrative and production staff prior to appointment. They shall have power to remove staff at this level, but not at a day-to-day administrative or programme production level. In order to accomplish these functions, the Governors shall recruit and retain a small Secretariat, which shall include an investigative office staffed by experienced broadcasting personnel, whose role will be to investigate apparent breaches of the charter, and shall have power to bypass BBC staff, including the DG. This office shall produce reports but not recommendations, unless the Governors shall invite them to do so.

I am unsure who should appoint Governors, but it should not be the Government of the day.

An all party mixture of politicians, senior Civil servants, prominent professionals (including broadcasters), and a smattering of representative bodies eg Trade Unions, Consumer Groups etc. seems appropriate.

ADMINISTRATION AND PROGRAMME PLANNING

There should be as at present a Director General. The DG however should avoid being involved too directly in either administration or programme planning on a day to day basis (eg. he should not be allowed to suggest the timing of news broadcasts) although he may have a final vote on such matters. His role might be part-time, but of a 'days-per-week', not 'days-per-month' nature. His main role will be to co-ordinate two senior colleagues, whose status will be close to his own, a Director of Administration and a Director of Programmes. He will also act as the principal liaison officer with the Governors.

FINANCING OF THE BBC

The Licensing Fee is an extremely controversial area - possibly the most controversial problem facing the BBC. It is not a literal licence in any meaningful sense: it is a tax, but unlike most taxes, has a specific function. As such, it seems unfair to the consumer and to the BBC's competitors (who did not exist when it was introduced), and it may even encourage a spirit of complacency within the BBC. Additionally, with the growth of 'get-away-with-it' attitudes in society, its enforcement has become heavy-handed and costly.

There are other, more subtle, reasons to look hard at the licence fee. Firstly, by providing BBC revenue, it avoids the need for any Government to raise levels of taxation in other areas to finance the BBC. More importantly, since political parties now rely heavily on TV to communicate, it provides politicians with a 'free' platform. This suggests there is a strong in-built (and arguably improper) motive for politicians to continue the licence approach. This could be construed as abuse of the voter and tax payer.

This implies that any review panel considering the future of the licence fee should include only a minority of politicians, even though the future of the licence fee may require a Parliamentary vote

But if the BBC can be slimmed down along the lines suggested in this paper, and become a true public broadcaster, and thus lead to reductions in the size of the licence fee, a case for its retention might exist.

I feel a 'pay as you go' approach, which I understand will shortly become feasible, might lead to financial uncertainty, at least in the short term, and is only viable if the BBC ceases to be a public broadcaster and becomes fully commercial.

That a slimmed-down BBC should be financed from general revenue is not unreasonable. But this ultimately would lead to a higher taxes of one sort or another, and might lead to an attempt at Government censorship. On grounds of simplicity of administration and transparency of objective, I prefer a smaller licence fee.

The licence fee should however be supplemented with income raised from the BBC's commercial activities, which should continue, even if decreased without the three Ss.