



26 March 2004

Dear Sir/Madam,

## **BBC CHARTER REVIEW CONSULTATION**

The main point that I want to make is that I strongly support the BBC as an institution and see little need for change in it. There is, however, one aspect of the review where I think some change should occur and a couple of the other suggested topics that I will comment on. I also have one more general point about the media as a whole.

### **Paying for the BBC**

I understand that in the future alternative methods by which individuals can pay for programmes will become feasible (that is not via a general licence fee or via advertising). I do not in principle oppose this, but would be concerned if it meant that people of lesser means found it difficult to access the best broadcasting, and still more so if it meant that fewer high quality programmes were broadcast and that there were more programmes of poor quality.

I would be particularly reluctant to see the BBC financed by advertising because this would encourage it to cater even more than it does at present to the largest audiences and those with the greatest spending power. Clearly any broadcaster wants to show that its broadcasts can attract a sizeable audience, and in a competitive economy supplying market demand is a mark of success. However, in the media and the arts it is more important to produce good quality outputs. Quality should be measured in terms of depth of understanding and analysis together with adherence to a search for the truth in news and factual affairs, powerful, moving, sincere drama and film, and generally challenging, stimulating, interesting, relevant and well-made programmes (this includes programmes which fulfil the remit to provide entertainment). It is also important that programmes meet standards of taste, whatever their audience, although this is one of the most difficult areas to evaluate.

For the time being I assume that something like the licence fee will remain the main form of finance for the BBC as it gives it independence and a guarantee of a flow of funds with which to fulfil its remit without needing to lower its standards. However, the licence fee (which is a poll tax) has become a significant burden for some people, some of whom may not wish to watch or listen to many of its broadcasts.

My suggestion is therefore that the revenue to be raised by the licence fee be expressed as so many pence on income tax (although I do not have the figures I know that 'ready-reckoners' exist which say that 1p on income tax raises £x million). Then, given the revenue which it is believed that the BBC needs to raise from licence fees over, say five years, this figure can be expressed as so many pence in the pound each year on income tax. The government/Treasury would guarantee to hand over to the BBC the revenue raised by this income tax supplement.

The advantage of this over the licence fee is that it is not a poll tax and would be broadly related to income, with the poorest who pay no income tax not having to pay anything, but for the vast majority their payments would be related to their taxable incomes.

The BBC would not have quite the same certainty of the amount to be raised each year (since national income can rise more and less rapidly and even decline at times), but any commercial broadcaster or media supplier has to take account of market conditions, so this would not be an arduous burden. While it might be said that this would make the BBC too dependant on the government continuing to fulfil its agreement to pass this amount of revenue on, I do not see why a firm commitment could not be made, which should be enshrined in law.

### **Programmes**

You have asked what kinds of subjects one finds most valuable about the BBC. It seems to me that one's favourite subjects, programmes and stations are an individual matter, and the collective opinions must be known from audience research, so I am not sure of the point of this question.

However, for what it is worth I value Radio 3 and Radio 4 most highly, and indeed listen to hardly any other radio stations. The continual interruptions for advertisements and rather silly chatter make even Classic FM, the only other radio station I have found that even remotely interests me, rarely worth tuning in to.

I am somewhat less enthusiastic about the BBC television output, but it seems to be at least as good as anything on C3, C4 or C5. In recent years I have watched BB2 more than any other television channel, though there are still a fair number of good programmes on BBC1.

In terms of kind of programme I listen mainly to serious current and social affairs programmes such as Analysis, the Moral Maze, the Today programme, the World Tonight, Law in Action, some hobby programmes such as Gardeners Question Time and occasional fiction like the Sunday serial and Book at Bedtime. On Radio 3 the I listen to the evening concert, Composer of the Week and Nightwaves when the composers/subject appeal/look interesting.

In terms of topics I gain my news and current affairs almost entirely from the radio, although Panorama and Newsnight are good although rarely convenient for me. But broad analysis and discussion programmes such as some of those mentioned above seem to me to be what Radio 4 does best. I also listen to various religious broadcasts and especially discussion programmes like Beyond Belief (I strongly support Thought for the Day as a more reflective moment in the middle of the rather helter-skelter rush of Today).

I never watch television news (apart from the weather forecast), enjoy nature programmes, serious and classical dramas, archaeology, history and gardening programmes. I am probably very untypical as I never watch or listen to any 'soap',

light entertainment or detective/police/thriller dramas, and only the very occasional film.

### **Commercial services**

You ask if the BBC should continue to provide commercial services such as magazines. I cannot see any reason why it should not provided that it competes on fair terms with private sector providers. I am inclined to suggest that it should be encouraged to expand this aspect of its services.


### **Improving the commercial media**

I regard the BBC generally as representing the media at their best. It is vital to the well-being of the people of this country that the commercial media are improved. I make a few suggestions below for how this could be done.

Each broadcasting and publishing organisation should have a trust to run it, which would be expected to be financially self-sustaining, and no individual or corporation should be allowed to have exclusive control over any major broadcaster or newspaper. Each trust should have its own declared public purpose remit. Since each trust would be independent and not appointed by government, freedom and diversity of the media would be guaranteed. Each institution would be required to meet a code of journalistic and broadcasting standards covering the truth of news reporting, a right of reply, presentation of a diversity of views, serious treatment of all issues.

Finance would come from the cover price and advertising in the case of newspapers. In radio and television finance might in future come from subscription either by programme or by channel. Advertising should be allowed but should be much more limited than at present (it could be increasingly restricted as new means of subscription develop). This restriction should be because it is damaging to the quality of broadcasting and programmes (there is nothing more irritating than having programmes interrupted), because it encourages producing programmes for the largest audience rather than for their quality, and their contribution to the well-being of society, and finally because broadcast advertising encourages consumption rather than well-being which indirectly damages the environment and the longer term future of the planet.

Yours sincerely,



Roger Gibbs

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