

BBC Charter Review Consultation  
Department for Culture, Media and Sport  
2-4, Cockspur Street  
London  
SW1Y 5DH

08 / 02 / 2004

Dear Sir

I have a copy of the leaflet inviting public comment on the renewal of the BBC Charter in front of me, and wish to express an opinion on many of the points raised. I will restate the questions on the leaflet and use them as headings to respond to the various points.

**What do you most value about the BBC?**

*News:* The BBC is the most important single source of impartial news coverage in Britain. Regardless of occasional errors of judgement, the BBC has no overt political or partisan agenda, unlike most newspapers.

I would like to see BBC News 24 develop to much reduce the dependence on the frequent repeating of a few key stories and headlines. This kind of coverage is easily provided by interactive TV and by the BBC internet services. Instead I would like more features giving in depth analysis and background information on issues related to the news, in order to give us all a greater understanding of the key issues which govern our lives. For example there is currently a strong debate between government and local councils as to who is responsible for large council tax rises. Instead of just asking the politicians, a well researched feature would be welcome.

*Sport:* The BBC should not be prepared to pay unlimited sums of money to the greedy sports such as football. It would be better value and also more interesting for many viewers if other little covered sports such as Badminton, Squash, Sailing and Rock Climbing were given better coverage.

*Arts:* Coverage of the arts is generally quite reasonable. Greater attention to regional events would be welcome.

*Education:* I regret the fact that educational programmes have been largely consigned to the middle of the night. Although video recorders are now normal equipment in most households, making a special effort to record something is not at all the same as being able to browse informative and educational programs at accessible times.

*Regions:* News coverage from the regions is reasonable. However, I would like to regional programme production centres built up to provide far more drama, entertainment and documentary material. More effort should also be made to ensure that minority communities and individual viewpoints are heard.

*Failings:* Good quality scientific programs are in short supply. There is also a lack of programs dealing with minority hobbies and interests.

## **How should the BBC adapt to cope with changes in technology and culture?**

It is essential that the BBC is fully engaged with any technological advances which are expected to become culturally important. With regard to digital TV, within a few years almost every household will have at least Freeview, probably built into the set. The BBC is therefore fully justified in investing in digital services. Those who say otherwise are mostly those with a vested interest in seeing the BBC fail. Likewise those who would like to keep the BBC away from internet services are the same people who regret the quality of service the BBC provides. It may be that over the next few years, technology will allow TV and internet services to become fully integrated.

## **What do you think of the television, radio and internet services the BBC provides?**

*Radio:* The quality of BBC national radio has gone from strength to strength in recent years. My personal favourite channel is Radio 4, but I recognise that even channels which I rarely listen to serve their target audience well. I believe that the main reason for the quality of output is the fact that radio has not been subjected to the same degree of commercial pressure as television. I have been very impressed by the new BBC 7 digital radio station.

The picture in local radio is not so good. Most of the output relies on chat, phone-ins and middle of the road music. I would like to see the local stations consolidated back into regional stations (for example Bournemouth would be served by a South West regional station, possibly based in somewhere like Exeter). In this way, hopefully each station would have enough finance to make some meaningful programs.

*Television:* The quality record in television is patchy. The BBC still proves itself capable of making high quality programmes on occasions, but too much of the output is irritating and trivial, driven by celebrity worship and ratings chasing. I believe that the BBC Charter should require it to prioritise quality, innovation, risk-taking and diversity. The most important point is not competing with the commercial world for ratings, but to ensure that everybody finds something to value the BBC for. After all, almost everybody can be defined as belonging to a minority sometimes. I greatly regret the extent to which most serious programming has currently been consigned to the margins of the schedules. I would like to see more regionally produced programmes, both from the BBC directly and by commissioning them from independent production companies

The new digital BBC 4 service is promising, but requires further development and funding to fulfil its potential. Perhaps there is scope for developing a deeper partnership with the Open University in order to provide a more extended range of factual and innovative programmes. BBC 3 provides occasional interest, but too much of the output is fairly similar to the lighter end of BBC 1. BBC Parliament, I believe should be extended to include coverage of all political issues including international politics, local politics, parties and pressure groups.

*Internet:* The development of high quality internet services has been one of the great success stories of recent years for the BBC. Quality definitions should probably be built in to any new charter, but otherwise it is a job well done.

### **Should the BBC run commercial services?**

The simple answer is yes. The driving force behind the BBC's activities should also be providing a quality service for the British public. Having spent the money, it is sensible to make every effort to obtain any commercial return possible on the products produced. The proviso must be that the enterprise must make a profit, and the profit must be used to subsidise the core service. It is also vital that trading is conducted on a highly ethical basis, because in many ways the BBC represents Britain.

### **How should we pay for the BBC?**

**Licence fee:** I believe that the licence fee continues to be the best method. Almost everybody in Britain owns a television set, making the collection of money by this method quite equitable. If some people claim that they do not use any BBC service at all, TV, radio or internet, I am afraid I do not believe them. If there are families who are so poor that affording a licence is an issue, the Government has other methods of subsidising them. The licence fee is superior to allocating money from general taxation, because it leaves the BBC less susceptible to political blackmail.

**Subscription:** This might be superficially attractive, but there is a danger that if too few people were to subscribe, shortage of finance would lead to cuts in programme quality, leading to a long term cycle of decline.

**Advertising:** I wish to avoid seeing advertisements on the BBC at all costs. It is not possible to avoid being influenced by the wishes of the advertisers in a commercial environment. Also being able to enjoy programmes free of interruption is one of the main advantages of watching BBC channels.

### **Is the BBC organised in the most effective and efficient way?**

I would like to see regional centres producing far more programmes than they do now, not only for local consumption but also to feed into the network. The BBC still feels like a very London centred service. For the sake of diversity I would also like to see more programmes commissioned from independent production companies and more programmes imported from Europe (with sub-titles if necessary).

### **How should the BBC be run and regulated?**

The primary role of the Governors of the BBC should be as guardians of the BBC charter: i.e. to ensure that the public objectives laid down by parliament are pursued and delivered. The day to day running of the BBC should be in the hands of professional broadcasters and managers. The Governors should only intervene if it is felt that policy in a general sense is going astray or not being properly implemented. The role of the Governors should be more clearly defined, as should the processes by which they are selected.

Issues regarding the content of individual programs, regarding fairness, accuracy or public taste should be resolved in the first instance by reference to a complaints body which is independent of both BBC management and of the Governors. Any matter

which cannot be resolved in this way can ultimately be taken to law, in the same way as any other public or personal issue.

**How do we ensure that the BBC is properly accountable to the public and to Parliament?**

The best method is by ensuring that the Charter is carefully written. It would be the job of the Governors to ensure that the charter is followed. If it is not, then Parliament can challenge the Governors, who must be in a position to robustly defend themselves. By this I mean that it should only be possible to sack a Governor under the most exceptional circumstances. It is important that the Government is *not* in a position to demand changes to the content of an individual program by putting pressure on the Governors. If there is an issue over content, the Government should have to refer to the complaints procedure or ultimately to law, in exactly the same way as any member of the public.

In general Parliament should be limited to consideration of the Charter, and should not seek to influence day to issues. There should be a general presumption that there is a freedom to broadcast, subject only to a requirement not to gratuitously offend public taste, present inaccurate information or break the law. In special cases such as questions of National Security, the onus should be on Government to prove its case, subject to scrutiny by the courts.

**Conclusion.**

In the age of digital communications there is almost unlimited competition to provide mass entertainment. The challenge is to provide a BBC service which does not compete with this commercial onslaught, but which complements it by providing the services which the commercial sector cannot. This is not to say that providing programmes nobody wants to watch is a desirable objective, but it is important that every minority is catered for. Of course there must be some popular entertainment, but not to the exclusion of everything else. It is important that everybody contributes to the costs of the BBC, even if they only use BBC services to a small extent, because it is the only way of providing a reasonable volume of quality programmes at an affordable cost.

The importance of the BBC goes way beyond being a provider of services to the British public. The BBC is the public face of Britain around the world: probably to a greater extent than the Government itself. In addition, in a country with strong traditions of tolerance, but a very weak constitution, it is probably vital to democracy itself.

Yours sincerely

*J. H. Johnstone*

J H Johnstone