

5<sup>th</sup> March 2004

Dear Sirs,

In your leaflet *Your BBC Your Say* you ask a number of key questions. I should like to offer some thoughts.

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

I value most its independence and impartiality. On television I value the news and sport. I would also value arts, science, drama, documentaries and comedy if they were regularly available to a good standard (see below). On radio I value Radio 3 and Radio 4 which are both completely distinctive from any other broadcast channels.

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

The availability of digital technology offers the opportunity for the BBC to broadcast more channels and it should use this opportunity to diversify into areas of programming which are not well served either by the BBC or by other broadcasters. It is therefore very disappointing to find BBC3 offering more of the same and BBC4 so poorly funded that it cannot adequately fulfil what I assume to be its remit. It is vital that the BBC should press ahead with extending the coverage of its digital television and radio services to the whole of the country but even then I think that the problems of switching off the analogue services are being greatly underestimated. The number of television receivers and video recorders far exceeds the number of homes. As far as the internet is concerned I do not use it sufficiently often to be able to offer an opinion.

**What do you think of the television, radio and online services the BBC provides.**

BBC television news provides a very wide coverage of events with a good balance between home and foreign affairs. It also manages to be impartial between competing interests to an admirable extent. Unfortunately it has a habit of mixing news, comment and speculation quite indiscriminately so that it is often difficult to distinguish between the facts and the reporter's fancy (eg. 'This will embarrass the government'). Radio news is much better at making clear the separation between news and comment. News is a difficult subject to get right in a serial medium where the viewer or listener cannot do his own editing or go back to check something (unlike a newspaper) but on the whole I think the BBC does an excellent job.

Apart from sport, which the BBC does well, and apart from the very occasional high point, I find the general run of BBC television programmes very disappointing. They seem to me to lack ambition, imagination or originality, are afraid to venture outside well worn themes, resulting in formulaic programmes which only excite me to the extent of reaching for the off switch. Where are the great comedy programmes? Even the much garlanded *The Office* only managed to reach number 25 in the recent BBC2 poll and in my opinion scarcely deserved even that. The general quality of drama is so low that I no longer bother to switch on and thereby probably miss the few pearls. The arts have been banished to the absurdly underfunded BBC4 (has the recent occasional reappearance in the early and late evening schedules on BBC1 got anything to do with Charter Review?) and science and engineering have been reduced to the most superficial level. Along with the generally mediocre are programmes like *The Weakest Link* which are a downright disgrace.

Meanwhile, BBC Radio, through Radios 3 and 4, continues to offer a high standard. I could quibble about the sometimes patronising tone of the presenters on BBC3 but the opportunities it

offers to hear great and often unfamiliar music are superb. Likewise Radio 4; where else on radio or television is the chance to hear intelligent discussion?

**Should the BBC run commercial services?**

I see no problem with the BBC selling DVDs of its popular programmes on which it has spent the licence payers' money. I do not think it should compete with commercial firms when there is no such connection.

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

The licence fee is the least worst way of providing the BBC with the very large amount of money it needs, assuming that there is not enough advertising revenue to finance the BBC as well as ITV and Channels 4 and 5 (I personally am happy to pay the licence fee not to have the commercials but that may be a minority view). Subscription is not technically feasible as long as analogue transmission is still used and even with digital it would have to be all or nothing rather than pay per view. Subscription would perhaps have the advantage of compelling the BBC to satisfy everyone. On the other hand if not everyone paid the fee would have to be higher than it is at present which could create a vicious circle. To pay for it out of general taxation is attractive in that the rich would pay more than the poor but the danger of political interference is too great.

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

I do not have the information to be able to offer a view on this question.

**How should the BBC be run? How should it be regulated?**

The first job of the governors, who represent the public interest and should be answerable to Parliament (not the government), should be to decide what the BBC is for and then make sure that the organisation sticks to that brief. I make further comments on this question below. I do not believe that the governors should be replaced by Ofcom partly for fear that members of that organisation who may well feel that they could run the BBC better than the Director General would be unable to resist the temptation to interfere. The revelations of the Hutton Inquiry seemed to indicate that there should be a greater distance between the governors and the directors. The astonishing complacency of recent annual reports also reveal too cosy a relationship between the parties.

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

Provided that the governors do their job of representing the public interest properly I see no need for any further intervention by the public who in any case make their views known via audience research and a whole variety of other means.

I would like to address one further question which seems to me to be at the heart of the debate.

**What is the BBC for?**

I think that the familiar words to inform, educate and entertain sum it up as well as any. It should set the highest possible standards in everything it does. It should not simply hold a mirror up to society but should recognise that it has a major role to play in promoting the culture of this country, in all its diversity. It should not patronise its viewers with bland programming in the belief that this is the only way to win large audiences. Of course it must be popular in order to justify the universal licence fee but I am certain that popularity is compatible with a more ambitious approach. 40% of school leavers now go to university. There must surely be an audience for more demanding programmes than those currently on offer. The BBC should have the confidence to try. They may be surprised by the results.



David Kitson