

23 March 2004

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

Dear Sirs,

The opportunity to comment on the BBC Charter Review is welcome.

Please, however the BBC is funded in the future, keep it free from commercial breaks interrupting programmes. The advertisements [with some classic exceptions!] on the commercial channels ruin anything worth watching and spin programmes out for too long.

I am fairly comfortable with the BBC funded by a Licence Fee – providing that fee can be maintained at some reasonable level. It assists the independence of the BBC and can, certainly should, enable the BBC to undertake, particularly serious, programmes which other channels would not deem 'commercial'.

The Licence Fee could perhaps be graduated to maintain affordability.

Radio audiences have, I believe, even been increasing recently. Thus, due recognition should be given to the wealth of material, much provided by the BBC, on the radio channels, all at no additional Licence Fee. Here, the importance of the BBC World Service must be duly recognised.

On the whole the BBC's range of output is good. It should be enabled to continue high standards and good coverage, particularly, of Drama, Music and Arts generally – on TV and Radio [Costume Dramas and the Proms being notable examples]. My own taste would be for rather less sport [particularly over-running football and rugby coverage!] but I accept that is a personal preference. Where sports coverage is concerned, one could, though, bring back such things as show jumping and ice skating which seem now to be given a very low profile.

As to the BBC's 'commercial services' such as Radio Times, books, videos, etc. – These seem pretty satisfactory at present, and must provide a considerable revenue. Radio Times is the more expensive 'listings magazine' but I think it does, and should continue to, hold its' own by providing the fullest coverage of both TV and Radio broadcasting. For example, in Drama it provides far fuller cast lists and information than its' competitors. I would prefer more space for the programme detail pages, particularly radio, rather than pages of advertisements and articles. However, I accept that the adverts help to keep the cost of Radio Times down. The output of videos, DVDs and Talking Books is good, and valuable.

I am not fully conversant with the structure of the BBC. However, recent suggestions that it might be broken up into several different, or regional organisations do not seem to be sensible [the state of our fragmented railways should serve as a warning !]. The programme output from the present BBC regions seems quite good, though this could possibly be enhanced without a fragmentation of the whole organisation.

The BBC obviously has to keep up with advances in technology. Nevertheless, the potentially high cost to consumers of, for example, the planned switch off/over from analogue to only digital transmissions should be carefully weighed when considering the timing of such changes.

The present 'dual role' of the BBC Governors should not necessarily conflict. The organisation has, ultimately, to be accountable to the public and Parliament. However, I must comment that the Governors, or others who oversee the BBC must be more robust in resisting Government pressures such as we witnessed recently – irrespective of which political party might happen to be the Government. Any political party, or other entity or individual is entitled to speak out if they feel broadcasting coverage has been biased, but not to try and stifle the objectivity and independence of broadcasters.

Above all, as in any organisation or situation, any change should be carefully thought out with a view to the best outcome/improvement, and not be merely 'change for change's sake'.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J W MacDonald". The signature is written in dark ink and is followed by a long, sweeping horizontal flourish that extends to the right.

J W MacDonald [Miss]