

John Salter

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

12 March 2004

Dear Sirs

Your BBC Your Say

I saw the recent Panorama 'debate' and was concerned about a number of potential changes projected by certain of the participants.

Whilst I have some specific concerns and suggestions which I set out below broadly my view is that the BBC is one of the few remaining institutions of which Britain can be truly proud - "it ain't broke so don't fix it".

Separation of powers

I do agree with the view expressed that there needs to be a clearer separation of the Governors and the management of the BBC. The Governors represent the owners - the general public - and need to ensure that the organisation maintains the high standards that the BBC has historically achieved and that these are improved and developed where necessary.

The Governors also, in active consultation with independent experts as appropriate, with other interested parties and with customers, as well as the management, need to set the strategic agenda for the BBC. It appears to me that this has not happened as effectively as it might have in the past.

Funding Arrangements

The future prospect of a 'subscription only' funded BBC I find extremely worrying. I have to recognise that many licence payers, including many surviving only on state benefits, subscribe to Sky and other commercial providers. The general content of such offerings however, does not, in my view, with the possible exception of Sky News, in any way attain the standards set by the terrestrial channels and certainly not the BBC. In any case the owners of such vehicles are quite clearly not independent and frequently serve their own interests.

We need our public service broadcaster to which everyone has access and which is independently controlled. We should not run the risk of becoming another Italy.

If, as has been argued, the licence fee is a tax on those who cannot afford it, and the current process involves unjustifiable cost in chasing none payment and other administrative burdens then the answer to me appears simple.

The BBC should by statute be guaranteed funding out of general taxation at the present level and with whatever inflation proofing is necessary for the future. I think the term used is hypothecation.

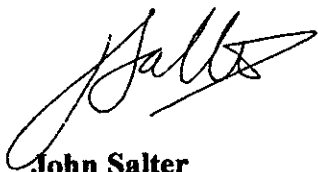
This would ensure that those that can afford to do so pay for an essential service through taxation but those who genuinely cannot afford to pay do not. The cost of the necessary bureaucracy to collect a separate licence fee and chase 'defaulters' would be saved. If the general tax rate has to increase to allow the abolition of the licence fee then so be it.

The future

As the media environment and circumstances and customer expectations change the BBC will need to respond positively and itself change. It should however continue to be an organisation that remains at the forefront of media innovation and one that wherever possible continues to lead and set standards for the rest.

It can only fulfil this role, and thereby the responsibility of any government in a democracy such as ours to safeguard the free flow of independently sourced information, if it's funding is guaranteed. It's independence into perpetuity should also be guaranteed, as far as anything can be, through appropriate constitutional amendment.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Salter', with a stylized flourish at the end.

John Salter