

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

31 March 2004

Dear Sirs

I write in response to the government's charter review public consultation. I welcome this opportunity to make my views known to government. It is encouraging to see in the preamble that nothing is ruled in or out, and in particular that "the only certain outcome is a strong BBC, independent of Government". I agree wholeheartedly with this aim, which is the point of departure for my responses to the questions, as set out below.

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

The BBC's independence, the quality of production, and the range and depth of its output is what makes the BBC unique and why it is valued throughout the world. Its independence means that it provides for areas and interests which – though important - would not be attractive to commercial providers since they do not have commercial potential. This means that the BBC can take risks and experiment in a way that a commercial provider could not. This allows for new ideas to emerge, and prevents the kind of intellectual and artistic staleness which characterises the media in many foreign countries. I would not change very much about the BBC as it currently stands, except perhaps to suggest that more programmes which are intellectually stimulating and which challenge stereotypes or prejudices would be welcome.

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

I strongly believe that the BBC should not invest in technology unless (a) it is what people want; and (b) it would bring significant improvements to a significant proportion of its audience. At present, I am unable to receive digital television, which is frustrating as I see many exciting programmes on the schedule for BBC4. This seems unfair.

The BBC needs to respond to changes in culture by keeping us informed of developments in a responsible fashion, and providing all shades of opinion. There is clearly a need for a better understanding of minorities, and the BBC has an important role to play in this regard.

The BBC also has a valuable role to play in support of British cultural output: for example, comedy, drama, news/current affairs, etc. It is disappointing, therefore, to see that programmes are increasingly being bought from the US and other English language countries, in a trend which appears to be at the expense of quality domestic production. The quality of drama, for example, does not appear to be as high as it was ten or more years ago. My suggestion is that the BBC should devote more resources to British cultural production, and less to English language foreign output – especially from the US.

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

Television: Most commonly, I watch BBC2. Whilst this has some very good programmes, many others are superficial and low quality. I would like to see a higher proportion of well-made programmes which are informative and challenging. I do not accept the oft-quoted excuse that many people have short attention spans and therefore find quality output offputting. If the BBC feels it needs to continue to produce poor quality programmes, there should be fewer of them and they should not appear on BBC2. Although I watch BBC1 infrequently, I have enjoyed some programmes, such as Robert Winston's series.

Radio: I spend far more time listening to radio than watching television, and my first choice is Radio 4. This is generally excellent, and its high standards should be protected. This is where I am able to obtain knowledge about a wide range of subjects with which I am unfamiliar: such as science. In this context, I would single out Melvyn Bragg's weekly programme, but suggest that more time should be allowed for programmes like this.

I am unhappy at the impact which the Hutton Enquiry has had on the BBC, and I hope that this will not lead to any significant changes being made, and certainly not an internal witchhunt. It should be remembered that the verdict of the Hutton Enquiry was somewhat at variance with the evidence presented, the latter having largely exonerated the BBC of any wrongdoing.

**Should the BBC run commercial services?**

Yes, but this should not be at the expense of its core business. I am impressed by the BBC website, which provides a mass of information in an accessible fashion. However, I am not happy that transcripts of programmes have been replaced by the sound archive: this is not nearly so convenient. Any commercial service provision should be on the same basis as mainstream provision: that is high-quality output which is accessible.

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

The licence fee is a fair way of funding the BBC which spreads the costs of a public good widely among the population. However, it is regressive, it is costly difficult to collect, and it has the further disadvantage that a minority will always feel resentful of paying the subscription. The same reasons for non-payment could be made against contributing to other public services such as education, although this argument is far less common, as the contribution is covered by general taxation.

It would be preferable, therefore, to pay for the BBC from direct taxation: this would achieve reductions in administration costs, and ensure that those best able to pay would make the largest contribution. However, were the BBC to be paid for out of general taxation, its revenue would be at the mercy of government which could make arbitrary cuts or transfer monies to other public services. The levels of funding must therefore be safeguarded within general taxation, with guarantees, and held in a ring-fenced area outside the remit of the Treasury's Spending Review. Evidence of the security of the funding would need to be produced by an independent body: for example, an auditor (see below).

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

Without undertaking a detailed assessment, this question is impossible to answer intelligently. With reference to the paragraph above, the funds used by the BBC should be adequate for the work undertaken, and the Corporation should not be placed under undue pressure to cut costs. However, taxpayers' money should be spent effectively. My suggestion is that the BBC is subjected to regular audit by an independent accredited body, such as the Audit Commission or the National Audit Office. The findings should be made publicly accessible.

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

The BBC must be run completely independently of any government interference. There is doubt in the minds of many from evidence to the Hutton Enquiry which revealed considerable intimidation by Alistair Campbell directed at the operation of the BBC's news service. Any evidence of the independence of the BBC – such as criticism of government – stands as proof of the democratic nature of the State, and as such should be welcomed by government.

The regulation of the BBC should ensure that it upholds its high standards and provides output for all – especially minority groups and interests. Again, this must be completely independent of government. The BBC Governors appear to handle the dual role of running and regulating the BBC very well, although their role could perhaps be strengthened through greater independence from

government. It would also be strengthened through the involvement of more ordinary people on the Board of Governors.

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

I have indicated above that the BBC, as a public service, has an obligation to serve the interests of the public at large, including minorities. This is what distinguishes the BBC from the commercial providers, and why the BBC should not be expected to compete, or compare itself, with these very different providers. Providing for all interests places an obligation on the BBC to be in constant touch with the range of people it serves, and provides a challenge in balancing what must often be competing interests. This process needs to be transparent and accessible, in order to win public acceptance. The website is one way that the BBC undertakes this responsibility, and I feel it works well.

As it spends taxpayers' money, the BBC must ultimately be accountable to Parliament for the way that money is spent. However, its editorial independence must be assured, and its accountability must only be through an intermediary, as an auditor.

In conclusion, the BBC is a remarkable and unique institution of which this country is justly proud. The high standards which characterise this institution should be safeguarded, and the BBC must be protected from any pressure to compromise. It is one of the most important pillars of our democracy and the government should guard the future of the BBC from the various attacks which it currently faces, including those within the commercial media sector. I trust that the government will give due consideration to the views I have expressed above. I hope to be able to attend one of the planned public meetings, and I look forward to the outcome of the review with great interest.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a trailing line, representing Caroline Welch.

Caroline Welch