



Response to the Consultation Review of the BBC's Royal Charter

Elizabeth Smith, Secretary-General, Commonwealth Broadcasting Association.

The quality of broadcasting in Britain is one of reasons to live in Britain. This is not all due to the BBC. But commercial broadcasting here is better than in most other parts of the world partly because the commercial channels have to compete with the range and diversity of BBC output.

The value of the BBC is that it reflects Britain to itself, in cultural and sociological ways, through its diverse range of programming designed to appeal to all age groups, all income levels and to the entire intellectual range. The BBC has introduced people to all aspects of the arts, the sciences and intellectual life. Proms and opera and historical dramatizations have made classical music widely understood. Plays, readings and discussions have widened the audience for literature. News and current affairs coverage has exposed the public to fair coverage of political issues and the realities of the changing international scene – a benefit sadly lacking in many other parts of the world.

The value of the BBC to the wider world has been immense, through the World Service, BBC World TV, and the World Service website. The perception of Britain as a country of major consequence, and as a major player in science and the arts, has been enhanced by the BBC. This has led to beneficial consequences in diplomacy and international organizations.

The regional organization of the BBC has proved very helpful to local communities. The network of local radios give a sense of identity to a community, and the regional output on TV is an essential aspect of local life. The BBC provision of programming in minority languages is good, and will need to develop further as the population alters through further immigration.

The BBC's publicly-funded services more than deliver its core purposes. Radio One, for example, includes some educational material for young people in amongst its pop music, so reaching listeners unreachable through other routes. Some argue that the BBC should be slimmed down to an up-market public service broadcaster, providing only what a free broadcasting market does not do. This would make it popular with the middle class but would lose the BBC its near-universal support. This in turn would undermine support

for the license fee. Such a system could essentially only be financed out of direct taxation. Even on this basis, however, it would soon run out of political support, with some MPs doubtless condemning it as like an NHS just for the well-off.

Some people feel that money for public service broadcasting should be open to all broadcasters, through a bidding process. This idea is superficially attractive, but other channels do not all have the reach of the BBC. Nor can all kinds of programming be funded on a short-term contract basis. The skilled people needed to run a Wildlife Unit or BBC Education have to be nurtured and developed over the years. Certain kinds of programming need long term commitment before excellence is established. Centres of talent and excellence cannot be turned on and off like a tap, and transferred from one part of the country to another when a contract is switched.

Is BBC Governance best left to the Chairman and Governors? Yes, they have proved their worth over the years, despite some ups and downs. The BBC has a record of both independence and excellence, and it is crucial that the Governance system that brought this about is not destroyed.

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