

REVIEW OF THE BBC'S ROYAL CHARTER.

RESPONSE TO GREEN PAPER.

Name: Mr. Alan Read,

I am an ordinary user of BBC broadcasts representing no particular interest or organisation.

I have no objection to my personal details being disclosed in conjunction with this project.

I am 72 years old, married for 45 years, with 2 children and 3 grandchildren. I have been a practising Christian all my life and have been involved with local church work, including youth work. Professionally, I am a retired Chartered Mechanical Engineer, and have a Diploma in Management Studies.

My wife and I listen to Radio 4 and Classic FM. We watch all 4 terrestrial channels, and are able to receive transmissions from both Bristol and Plymouth. We have a digital top box, but only use it for CBeebies when the granddaughter is visiting. The picture quality is better on analogue, and channel selection not so tedious - one button instead of menu selection for digital.

My comments on this Green Paper are as follows:

Q1.a). Sustaining citizenship and civil society.

Whilst I agree with the all that is said in this section, I think that it should be made clear that the BBC presents these politically associated subjects free of any political bias.

I would have liked to suggest that it should be clear of religious bias, but as a Christian I am concerned at the anti-Christian attitude prevailing in the media at this time, and as this is a country based on Christian ethics, believe that there is a case for a positive Christian bias, but not to the exclusion of other faiths.

b). Promoting education and learning. Para.i on page 34 refers to trials of Learning Centres and Learning Buses. How many of these are required to cover the whole UK adequately, and at what cost? I think it would be prohibitively costly to provide and maintain these across the whole of the UK. I question what this has to do with broadcasting, except in partnership with education institutions.

d). Informal learning from general programming. One wonders what messages viewers, especially children and young people, pick up from the programmes shown at peak times. The characters represented in the 'soaps' do not give a good example for them to follow, and in my opinion do not represent real characters. Certainly they do not represent the whole spectrum of characters in the world at large. The top paragraph on page 35 '...given that so much learning is gained 'incidentally' through watching balanced, high-quality content delivered in an accessible manner': this also applies to the violence, verbal and physical abuse, obscenity and blasphemy seen in so many programmes - evidenced by the current concern over abuse of football referees at local league level following similar

behaviour by football idols at Premiership level and seen on TV. Please can we have correct use of English on News programmes - I am fed up with hearing that 'X was charged with murdering Y at the magistrates court this morning,' and other such misleading use of the language. The BBC is expected to know better, and this incorrect use of language is picked up by children. The recent showing of 'Jerry Springer-the Opera' included language unacceptable in most homes in the country - why should it be introduced by BBC TV?

e). Future Role. The third paragraph on page 33 . The BBC covers Central Government matters - in view of the later discussions on regional programming, I think that there is a great need for the system of local government to be understood, which these could disseminate.

f). Bringing the world to the UK and the UK to the world.

i). The same comments as in a). above re political and religious bias apply.

ii). The World Service. I am amazed to read that the World Service is Government funded and presumably the FCO has a say in the content of its programmes. Is it the FCO who decide what is '..high quality, impartial international news..'?

I am further astonished by the statement in the 4th. paragraph on p.45 that 'The aspiration towards democracy, respect for human rights, freedom of speech and association, which had been the BBC's rationale for developing Eastern European vernacular services, has now been shifted eastwards and southwards, and in particular to the Middle East, the Far East and parts of Africa and the sub-continent.' This sounds very much a political aspiration and could be seen as propaganda to create unrest in these parts of the world. I suspect that it could be seen to violate the UN Charter by interfering in the internal politics of those countries.

iii). Replacing radio broadcasts by TV will surely be more costly, and hence less can be broadcast for the same cost. If the target audience is clandestine listeners, then radio must be more efficient.

iv). Reducing the number of vernacular languages. This proposal seems to be a one-sided decision by the BBC (and FCO?). Surely it would not be difficult to hold a listener survey in each language to determine their views before making a decision?

Q2. a). These are the right purposes, but the balance and emphasis are equally important.

Q3. a). 'of high quality'. Quality is a relative term, and what may be high quality to one person may be low quality to another. I am sorry to have missed the previous consultation on programme quality. What I imagine passes for 'high quality' production - use of rapid zoom in-out with accompanying 'arrow' noises, aggravating background music to serious programmes, and unnatural camera angles of a speakers face with extreme close-up - count in my book as very low quality. There are many other little 'clever' foibles which add nothing to the presentation and just embarrass me for their inanity. But I imagine that these are what the TV industry avante-garde would see as 'high quality'. To me, 'High Quality' is when the viewer is not conscious of the presentation method.

The BBC Governors justification of the programme 'Jerry Springer - the Opera' as of 'artistic merit' demonstrates only too well the gulf that exists between the media and the viewing public. This was in no way a 'Quality' programme - it was of very, very low quality.

b).Challenging. - needs careful understanding of the target audience. Many programmes tend to 'talk down' to the viewer.

c). 'Original' - does this mean that the programme should not have been shown on any other channel? If so, it will cut out the many imported programmes. Or does it mean that the content presents a singular view of the subject - if so, we see many programmes on different channels using the same content. I am not sure what is meant by this.

e). I would like to add 'Impartial' as a characteristic. The BBC is seen as being impartial and this is a necessary characteristic of all its programmes.

Q4.a). Building a digital Britain. I find an inconsistency in the first 3 paragraphs regarding the coverage of digital radio and TV. The first para. talks of '..maintaining universal access to high quality broadcasting...', and the second para. states '..promoting new technology so that all licence fee payers can benefit.' but then dilutes the 'universal' and 'all licence fee payers' to 90% of the UK population. The third para. says '...bring the benefits of digital TV to all.'

Just what is this referring to - everybody in the UK? - all licence fee payers in the UK? - or 90% of the UK population?: and is it universal, or 90%?

b). Technical sophistication is not appreciated by everyone. Many older people are baffled by video recorders, and do not see a need for the latest high-tech. gizmos. There are also a large proportion in the 50-70 years old age group who do not want to understand these. I have already stated that my wife and I do not use digital TV because it is more complicated than switching the set on and selecting the programme by pressing one button on the remote control. We don't want more channels, and we don't want more complication which high tech. involves. More channels surely means dilution of resources and hence poorer quality programmes - give us less, but good quality programmes any day. Why should we have this complication foisted upon us?

c). The scenario pictured in Para.2.7 on p.49 of infinite selection for viewers gives cause for concern. With hundreds of channels to chose from, how does the viewer know which programmes are worth watching - it will not bring new experiences to the viewers unless they positively seek them. This will result in channel managers competing for the most viewers, which usually means cheap, poor quality and unchallenging programmes. The programmes for the more serious viewer will go to the wall, and eventually the only choice will be a small number of poor quality programmes. This is a recipe for disaster. There must be some provision made to cater for minority interests, and this is the responsibility of the BBC as a public service provider.

Q5. Funding.

I support the proposal to continue with the licence fee for the time being. In the 10 years to the next Charter Review, many of the technical innovations will be in use, and, as mentioned in the report, will have a major effect on the preferred method of funding the BBC. To tamper with the existing method of payment when there is no obvious better method will only bring extra cost and confusion.

Q6.

I agree with the arguments against direct government funding and advertising.

Sponsorship would have to be very carefully controlled to prevent a sponsor controlling the content of the programmes. I do not see sponsors accepting this.

Q7. Governance and regulation.

i). I agree with the separation of the executive function and the oversight organisation.

ii). I would like to understand better the interaction between programme makers and the monitoring function of the Trust - will they have day-to-day contact to detect violations as early as possible, or will the monitors be remote and only comment in retrospect after programmes have been made and transmitted. I favour the day-to-day working as the most efficient method of maintaining standards. [I have many years experience in the Engineering industry of Quality Control which works alongside the production function to prevent poor quality products, but is managerially responsible to the Main Board.]

If the monitoring function is to be remote from the programme makers, it seems to me to be no better than Ofcom in maintaining standards. In this case one questions the benefit of the cost of such a service.

iii). The Governance Unit seems to be a bureaucrats heaven, easy prey for the big-fleas/little-fleas syndrome. Too often these advisory functions expand to address a particular concern, but do not reduce when that concern has been answered. It will need constant review and strong management to maintain it at an appropriate level. Some estimate of the expected cost of this unit would be appreciated.

iv). BBC Board plus PSBC. (Box 5.4 on p.70)

I am completely at a loss to reconcile the Chair of the BBC Board appointed by Government with the title of this Green Paper 'A Strong BBC, Independent of Government'. However can an organisation be independent of Government when its highest authority is appointed by Government?? This will be seen to be under Government control, and is not acceptable.

v). Para.5.28 on p.72. 'The Executive Board will be chaired by the Director General or, at the discretion of the Trust, a non-executive.'

If the DG is Chair of both the Trust and the Executive Board, he will be defendant and judge whenever any differences occur. The Chair of the Executive must be another member of the Trust, so that he/she is responsible to their fellow members, and can be judged by them. The DG has to be seen to be impartial in this.

vi). Appointments policy. Para.5.38, p.75. & para.5.54, p.78.

I suggest that members of the Trust should be elected by licence payers. I am a member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, and their Council is elected by postal ballot of members. Each candidate is nominated, and a copy of their CV together with their aspirations for the Institution is circulated to each member. This gives us information on which to decide our most favoured candidates. This is all conducted by an independent body, which I think is called the Electoral Society or similar title.

Q8. Upholding the public interest.

I agree with all the points made.

Q9. I agree with all the options stated, with the following comment:

i). Responsiveness. Para.5.56, p.78.

Elected forums, etc. attract only those who have an interest in media, or who have a particular principle to enforce. It is very difficult to get Joe Public to open meetings, etc. unless there is a particular issue at stake. These avenues do not result in an overall view of public opinion.

The high-tech. future that you forecast is just around the corner could possibly give a better and instant response - 'press the blue button to give your comments on the programme you have just watched.' Until that time, I would suggest a questionnaire to all licence payers with some small reward for answering - such as £5 voucher towards next licence payment.

ii). Transparency. Para.5.57, p.78.

'To publish the voting records of each Trust member.' There is no point in this if the public cannot do anything about it. However, if Trust members are elected by licence payers, then this will be valuable information when the next election comes around.

Q10. i). Complaints. Para.5.59, p.79.

I do feel that broadcasters do not do enough to allow the public to make their complaints known. Daily broadcasting of a complaints telephone number would be very useful. At the times that I have been stirred enough to complain, I have been unable to find the right 'phone number. I don't know where to find it even now. I suggest it should be an 0800 number.

ii). Generally, the BBC has the ability to reach every one of its customers, so has no excuse not to keep them informed of what it is doing. I responded to this green paper because I happened to notice a small advertisement hidden away in the back pages of a newspaper, and not through the broadcast media. I did not see any of the publicity for the previous surveys included in this green paper.

It seems that the BBC does not go out of its way to invite comments, and doesn't use the ability it has to foster interest in the way it is run, and what it does with our money.

Q11. Without detailed knowledge of how this Trust will operate, it is difficult to make a considered judgement. I would guess at less than 20 members.

Q12. The skills and expertise must reflect the operational activities, (technical and artistic), the management systems required, the financial requirements, and public 'taste', and the legal requirements.

Q13. The media hold a responsible position in the country for its moral standards. It is normally said that these are the responsibility of the religious authorities - I disagree with this - it is the responsibility of every authority that has an influence on public opinion. There is a moral standard expected of individuals in this country, based on the religious and societal standards of our ancestors, which is an undefined norm of behaviour.

Trust members must reflect this standard, and not be biased towards the liberal views expressed by many in artistic and opinion-forming institutions, as one feels the present media management in general is at present. The BBC is quite content to use the World Service to promote a social philosophy in other countries, but seems to deny its responsibility to adhere to the social norms of this

country. The social ethics it is promoting in the UK are certainly below the high standards expected by society.
Racial representation must be considered.

- Q14. At one time British television programmes were the envy of the world, & mainly, I believe, because of the high standards of BBC training.
- Q15. This is no longer the case, but this country needs a strong training base, and if the only way that this can be maintained is through the BBC, then I support that.
I do not have much faith in quotas for anything, as those who fill them are under no obligation to maintain good standards. This results in falling standards.
I do not notice whether a programme has been made by the BBC or anyone else. What I want is good quality programmes, wherever they come from.
The only time I can think that this became an issue was when 'Gardeners Question Time' was privatised. The current team left because of threats of 'popularising' it, despite its large listener base, and now it is no different to what it ever was. This was a complete fiasco caused by managers who wanted change for changes sake.
- Q16. I agree with the sentiments of this section.
&
Q17.
- Q18. The problem of a publicly funded body entering the commercial markets is one of responsibility for financing losses. A private company can risk its own money however it wants to, (and I think that more enterprises lose money than make money), but using public funds in a risk taking market is exposing those funds to all the threats of a venture market. Such ventures should be restricted to very limited enterprises which require relatively small venture capital. They should all be stand-alone ventures and self-financing in the long term.
- Q19. I feel that I do not have enough knowledge or experience to make meaningful comments on this.
- Q20. It is hard not to agree with the case for constant review of this situation as presented in the green paper, because it is the blind leading the blind.
Digital TV is presenting nightmare scenarios, with the possible withdrawal of commercial support to other channels. Yet we were assured (Box 2.1, p.51) that it will '...result in significant savings...' How can this be reconciled with the suggestion that the level of the licence fee may be required to change - presumably upwards? Is it going to prove cheaper or more expensive?
All these proposals seem to require additional infrastructure organisations which will not contribute to better quality PSB, only spread it over other channels. I do not see any benefit in this.

General Comments.

1. This headlong rush into high-tech. broadcasting seems to be presenting more problems than it solves. I seem to remember that it was prompted by the Governments wish to re-allocate the analogue channels to other users. I have no desire to change from what for

me is a satisfactory transmission system. I wonder how many digital viewers use the interactive services after the initial novelty factor has worn off? How many other countries are committed to change over to digital in the same way as the UK? It looks like a white elephant to me.

2. I have read, and composed, many complicated specifications and contract documents, but this Green Paper I found very difficult to follow because it does not have a consistent reference system. The Index numbers are not referenced at the top of each page, and sometimes the paragraphs are numbered, sometimes not. The question numbers do not align with the Index numbers, and my first task was to work out the structure of the report in order to read it intelligently and to answer the questions.

3. The proposals are not costed, although it does state that this will be in the next phase of this Charter Review, but it does seem that a lot of work is being done which will be thrown out on cost, and alternative solutions then having to be found. It would have saved a lot of work if some cost estimates could have been given at this stage.

4. Overall, this seems to be a lot of fine words that give me no confidence that TV will improve in any way. Radio seems to have maintained the high standards it has always had.

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