

Dr. W. G. Wood

5/4/05

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

Dear Coreen Brown

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to comment on the Green Paper reviewing the BBC's Royal Charter for the next ten years.

I have not confined my response to the particular questions which you nominate in the paper because, it seemed to me that the emphasis which you give to various aspects of the appraisal is wrong, that some principles are much more important than others, that some features claimed to be true are actually false and that the maximum contribution which your Department can make to achieve a great and healthy BBC (which we all want) needs a different approach.

With all good wishes

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gordon Wood". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Gordon Wood

COMMENT ON GREEN PAPER REVIEWING BBC CHARTER

First, a sense of perspective

I find the Green Paper almost wholly misses the point. It has the best intentions, it wants to help, but all it does is administrate and add complexity, constraints rather than freedoms, to the administration. It administrates the BBC to death.

The interest of the public is in the programmes that flow from the BBC and their wish is to preserve what is excellent about the BBC and help what is not excellent to become better. The way to achieve this is first to recognise that which is excellent, which the Paper fails to do, and then to examine what it is that produced that excellence, which the Paper again fails to do, and finally to replicate those conditions for the rest of the enterprise which, with the previous failures, is beyond the Paper at this stage.

The administrative structure should be as simple as possible so that the creative people within it have the freedom to create, which is what it is all about. You cannot get artistic creation by tying people, hand and foot in a complicated administrative structure. So the first principle should be KISS, (keep it simple stupid) and, from that point of view, the BBC's own suggestions seem the best (Retain a reformed Board of Governors) and the proposals of the Green Paper are the second best.

Other proposals have to be examined in the light of known paths to success. As I have noted, the Paper seems singularly blind in this regard, yet there, staring us in the eyes, is a crystal clear example of success to follow. So let's look at:-

Perfection.

In the last five years or so, quietly, but noted by the public, BBC radio has, by common consent, reached virtual perfection; at least Radio 2, Radio 3 and Radio 4 have done so; (I cannot speak for Radio 1 or Radio 5). There is no comparable service anywhere else in the world. So how have they done it? Well, it is actually more instructive to ask how they have not done it.

They have not done it by being tested by external competition. There are no competitors within a mile of them. So the repetitive lauding of external competition as healthy in page after page of the Paper is a complete red herring. In fact it would have been almost certainly destructive in these circumstances since it would have distracted the attention of the BBC from getting their own thing right.

They have not done it by going shopping outside the BBC. Practically the whole content of each channel has been produced internally. So the continual urging, throughout the paper to use external production companies for television production and to use some of the license fee for "venture capital" has not been a feature in the success of BBC radio. Their version of venture capital, which has had enormous success has been the sponsoring of things like the Promenade Concerts. There is a distinct pressure in the Green Paper, no doubt driven by commercial influences who are eager to get hold of part of the public purse handout, to blur the boundary between production within and without the BBC. This, in my view is a great danger and must be firmly resisted. Commercial radio has contributed nothing to the undoubted success of BBC radio.

So much for how not to do it. The success of BBC radio seems to have come entirely internally. It has come from a group of talented people who have been given space to re-group and rearrange themselves to work in sufficient harmony so that

they can collectively stand back and admire the result of their labours. We should all publicly applaud them for this.

It is important to mention here the BBC World Service. It, like Radio 2, 3 and 4 is unmatched in its class, and is probably the most valued single export which we make to developing countries and those which struggle under oppressive regimes, yet it was not so many years ago that various politicians were urging its disbandment to save a relatively small amount of money. What a mistake that would have been. The Charter should make such moves impossible without a referendum.

BBC Television

The problems facing BBC Television are similar to those of Radio, but they are greatly intensified because this medium is a potential source of huge political, social and economic clout and a lot of undesirable people are keen to get their hands on it, or at least, get their feet under the same table and feed from the public purse. In addition, due to a long succession of bad appointments leading to mis-directions, an evaluation system which drove producers to the worst forms of television, the uncertainties caused by attacks from government and commercial interests on the BBC, BBC Television is in a bad condition. All ready to be made better. But only if you regulators will stand back, give them room to move, release them from absurd commitments to commercial interests, or any responsibility for keeping those interests alive, and let them get on with the job of producing fine quality programmes.

If commercial television cannot survive within the bounds of its charter, without becoming a parasite on the BBC, then it must be allowed to die. Some commercial companies appear to think that, because they produce some good programmes which do a public service, in addition to pleasing their advertisers, they are allowed to line up for public handouts. They should be swiftly disabused of this idea. No one maintains that public service programmes need be in conflict with good television. They should be free to make as many as they can attract advertisers to pay for. But they remain commercial television and, as such, entirely separate from the BBC. This separation is the most important duty of the new Charter. It is vital to the survival of our BBC.

To summarize, the lessons which BBC Radio can teach us are

1. External competition makes no contribution to excellence, and only acts as a distraction.
2. It is far better to create a culture of excellence within the production staff of the BBC than shop around for programmes from outside producers, because pride of achievement is vital to creative people.
3. The ratings system has been unhelpful and inadequate.

In addition

4. Throughout the Paper, referring both to radio and television, the BBC is given unjustified warnings to make room for commercial radio and television. My feelings are quite the contrary. The BBC should be unfettered and free to make whatever programmes it feels will appeal to the public and commercial radio and television should be free to fill any gaps which they find profitable.
5. Your move to increase feedback from the public to the BBC is a good one. I have felt that BBC radio has benefitted by strong listener interest but that BBC television has ignored audience comment.

Gordon Wood