

## THE FELLOWSHIP OF INDEPENDENT EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

### Submission to the DCMS Consultation on Media Ownership Rules

The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, founded in 1922, is an association of 470 independent evangelical churches in the UK. It wishes to make the following submission in response to the November 2001 Consultation Document on Media Ownership Rules.

We wish to submit that religious organisations should not be prohibited from owning a national digital sound programme service licence, a multiplex (local or national) licence, nor any other broadcasting licence for sound and visual broadcasting media, for the following reasons:

- 1.1 Prohibiting a section of the community from owning broadcasting media is a form of selective censorship, and amounts to a denial of freedom and equality of regard and treatment.
- 1.2 To ban religious organisations from owning broadcasting media implies an unjust mistrust of the ability and/or willingness of such organisations to run broadcasting media objectively. In most cases there are absolutely no grounds for such demonisation, and the denial of mainstream media ownership on the basis of such fears is at best discriminatory and at worst insulting. Some of the most objective people we have known have been people with religious commitment.
- 1.3 It is inappropriate for concerns over broadcasting content to be regulated on the basis of ownership. Issues arising from such concerns should be dealt with by codes of practice based on objective editorial criteria and monitored under the auspices of respected, impartial and competent regulators.
- 1.4 To ban religious organisations from owning broadcasting media makes the Government look as though it is admitting to an inability to control the standard of broadcasting output in a more acceptable and less draconian way. We feel sure that this is not the case in fact but wish the signals the Government is giving would carry stronger evidence of this.
- 1.5 It would be a monumental misjudgement to imagine that because a body is non-religious it will not therefore influence, through its broadcasting, the religious, philosophical and ideological elements within British society. Atheism and secularism are presuppositions and perspectives which do not command universal acceptance and which will influence the choices made in connection with programming. In those circumstances it is both logical and essential that the ownership of broadcasting media should be allowed to reflect the range of mindsets and world-views represented throughout society.
- 1.6 The question of whether viewers would be offended by "different views and opinions" or would have their susceptibilities "exploited" (these are concerns expressed in the Consultation Document *A New Future for Broadcasting*) is not a factor of whether the owner of a broadcasting medium is a religious organisation, but is entirely an effect of the balance and quality of the programming and presentation and of the management arrangements which the owner puts in place. We believe that these realities should be closely reflected in the framework which is put in place for the good and fair operation of broadcasting media by public and private organisations. Banning religious organisations from owning some of the broadcasting media does not achieve this.
- 1.7 Although the information was not included in the table published on page 13 of the November 2001 Consultation Document, we understand that none of the countries listed in the table has seen fit to ban religious organisations from owning broadcasting media. A united view independently arrived at by 17 significant countries is a powerful argument, and we cannot identify any reason in this instance to justify a different approach in the UK.

*Submitted by Rod Badams, FIEC Administrator, on behalf of the Citizenship Committee of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, 3 Church Road, Croydon CR0 1SG.*

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