

Ben Bradshaw MP,
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Department for Culture Media & Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
London SW1Y 5DH

21st September 2009

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: DCMS' Consultation on sustainable, independent and impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions

We are writing on behalf of the National Union of Journalists' Parliamentary Group in support of the NUJ submission to the DCMS Consultation on sustainable, independent and impartial news in the Nations, locally and in the regions. We believe the NUJ's submission contains key arguments on behalf of those that work within the industry and which we urge you to consider fully.

As we are sure that you are aware, the NUJ Parliamentary Group was established on a cross party basis, with over 27 MPs. We meet regularly, along with the union, to discuss areas of interest within the media industry.

Local News Provision

The Group has been concerned that the series of cutbacks across the local news providers has called into question the survival of quality local journalism. According to the NUJ, thousands of jobs have been lost in the regional press sector and hundreds of jobs have been lost in regional and local TV - as many local newspaper and broadcasting offices have been closed and journalists moved to large central locations well removed from the communities they serve. Estimates are that up to one-third of all local newspaper jobs could go by 2011.

The implications of these cutbacks for our communities are immense. Local councils and courts go uncovered and coverage of culture, sports and community issues is reduced and marginalised. Despite the best efforts of skeleton staffs, the quality of local journalism is deteriorating from a chronic lack of investment. This is extremely damaging to our democracy.

The NUJ Parliamentary Group has been campaigning for Government action to prevent this decline and secure plurality of news provision for the Nations, locally and in the regions. We have argued that maintenance of high quality journalism from a variety of sources is vital to our communities and were delighted at the previous Secretary of State's agreement to our suggestion to host the Local Media Summit (28th April 2009) which successfully brought together the key stakeholders in the industry to discuss how they could work together to assist journalism.

We accept that the media face real challenges from both the current economic climate and more fundamental structural changes, such as digital switchover and the move of advertising revenues online. It is these latter changes that need to be addressed by the Government.

We broadly welcome the Government's proposals for 'Local News Consortia' to provide plurality of news with scope for a cross-media basis and are very keen to take forward discussions about how such a proposal could work to benefit local journalism. Any funding must maximise investment in journalism, - with a minimal amount spent on administrative systems to distribute funds and systems in place to prevent public funds being swallowed up into shareholder dividends.

In particular, we hope that relevant unions are closely involved in any decisions in this area and that any move in this direction will not allow competition on price to drive down quality.

Funding

Whilst we accept extra funding is required to ensure the future of news provision, the NUJ Parliamentary Group categorically opposes the proposal to fill this funding gap by using money from the Licence Fee.

The BBC is recognised as setting a quality standard for broadcasting throughout the UK. It is a significant employer of those working in broadcasting and the main provider of education and training in the sector. Top-slicing or sharing the Licence Fee would undermine the BBC's capacity and dangerously threaten the corporation's unique and direct relationship with the Licence Fee payer.

The BBC is extremely popular with audiences and provides an unrivalled range of high quality public service content and therefore we believe that the BBC should continue to have exclusive use of Licence Fee funding.

We urge the Government to consider more creative funding suggestions for public service content in media other than the BBC, as laid out in 'Mind the Funding Gap: the potential of industry levies for continued funding of public service broadcasting' - the report commissioned by BECTU and NUJ, unions representing those working in the industry. Further research should be undertaken to properly examine alternative funding streams.

Underpinning all our concerns is the firm belief that the NUJ, as the representative of many of those working in broadcasting, should be central to future discussions and debates.

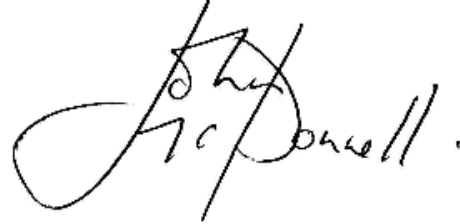
We hope that you find our comments useful and would welcome the opportunity to discuss plans after the consultation and the implementation of the Local News Consortia proposals. We would therefore like to invite you to attend a meeting of the NUJ Parliamentary Group.

We would be grateful if your office would liaise with our parliamentary co-ordinator, Simeon Andrews (details below) who will make whatever arrangements are necessary for such a meeting.

We look forward to hearing from you.



Austin Mitchell
Chair, NUJ Parliamentary Group



John McDonnell MP
Secretary NUJ Parliamentary Group