

# Hurrah for Jowell as she puts brakes on big media

## On broadcast

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AT THE END of last month, protesters in America demonstrated in more than a dozen cities, urging federal regulators to reject changes in media ownership rules. In Los Angeles, people marched - actually marched - outside Clear Channel's radio station KFI with signs reading 'No Choice, No Voice: Reclaim Our Airwaves.'

This direct action accompanied the written, telephoned and emailed protests of 750,000 Americans, all bearing the same message to the Federal Communications Commission: allowing large media companies to own television and radio stations and newspapers in the same cities stifles diversity and is fundamentally anti-democratic.

We are sadly lacking in mass protests on media policy issues in Britain, ditto in Australia. But in all three countries there are uncanny similarities in the direction of media ownership policy. The general pattern seems to be that: 1) incumbent governments cuddle up to big media conglomerates by proposing to relax ownership restrictions; 2) public interest and consumer groups (plus a few smaller media interests) lobby against the proposals on the grounds that corporate greed is being put before democracy; and 3) independent legislators who are not dependent on 'big media' for re-election (or who are acting genuinely out of principled belief) force a government rethink.

In America, after the FCC's 3-2 vote to ignore the mass protest, the Senate is likely to pass a 'rollback bill' in the summer which, with bipartisan support, will reinstate the

restrictions. It is less clear whether this will get through the House of Representatives, but momentum is building.

It's interesting to see Left and Right fulminating together about the iniquity of what the FCC is doing. Opponents include the fiercely right-wing National Rifle Association as well as conservative columnists such as William Safire. In the *New York Times* on Thursday, Safire blasted the current affairs programmes of the main TV networks because they 'found the rip-off of the public interest by their parent companies too hot to handle'. He called on the Right, in particular, to rise up against the FCC's position.

In Australia, the Howard government wanted to scrap both the cross-media and foreign ownership restrictions. Sounds familiar? Under current Australian rules, a television licence-holder cannot own more than 15 per cent of a newspaper in a capital city. If government proposals were passed, it would allow Rupert Murdoch, who already owns more than 50 per cent of the Australian press, and Kerry Packer to snap up lucrative TV licences.

Last week the proposals were defeated with the help of votes from four independent senators. While Communications Minister Richard Alston bemoaned the loss of a chance to 'free up markets in such a way that you allow the industry to expand', the Tasmanian senator leading the opposition said he could not accept that cross-media growth was 'in the interests of the general public'.

And so to Britain where, in advance of this week's crucial

vote on ownership in the Lords, there have been some frantic behind-the-scenes moves to head off another Government defeat following its 179-74 humiliation last Monday. At stake is the now infamous 'Murdoch clause', which would allow major newspaper proprietors to take over Channel 5.

With the help of some vigorous lobbying by non-partisan groups such as Public Voice and Voice of the Listener, and led by Lords Puttnam, Bragg, Alli and other peers with good New Labour credentials, it now looks likely that the Government will make a very significant concession. Subject to agreement on the finer points of wording, the Communications Act will state that any merger or acquisition must pass a 'public interest plurality test' - it will have to show that the proposed consolidation will add to the plurality of voices.

This is significant not just because it effectively prohibits any major newspaper owner from snapping up Channel 5, but because it should actually lower the threshold at which cross-ownership is allowed. It is quite conceivable that even those

who own less than 20 per cent of the national press - such as the Mirror Group or Associated Newspapers - may struggle to pass a stringent plurality test.

Credit for the deal goes partly to the Conservative frontbencher Andrew Lansley, who was a key member of Puttnam's scrutiny committee and first spotted the linkages between the Competition Act, the Enterprise Act and Ofcom.

But, assuming it all goes to plan - and notwithstanding my tirade against government inadequacy last week - a large bouquet should also be thrown to Culture Minister Tessa Jowell for being prepared to acknowledge the profound concerns of those who genuinely fear for pluralism and free speech in the world of globalised media conglomerates. She has, by all accounts, moved quickly to help to broker a sensible compromise. The Government could have turned its back on public opinion and tried to tough it out.

By agreeing to a plurality test, she will be demonstrating a willingness to listen that has eluded her Australian and American counterparts.



Tessa Jowell: Brokering a compromise to protect free speech.

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