

26 March 2004

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

Dear Sir

I would like to comment on the BBC Charter Review. First of all, I would say that I am just an ordinary licence fee payer with no agenda, no axe to grind. A supporter of the BBC who thinks it provides some terrific programmes and much needed information. I'm even a supporter of the licence fee system in general, but in one important aspect, I feel its performance is scandalous - the value of the licence fee. Not in an individual sense - more in a geographical sense. Wherever we live in the country, we all pay the same licence fee, but do we all get the same value for it? We can take it that Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland are subsidized to a certain extent to give them a degree of autonomy, but that is not my concern here. I would like to look at this purely from the point of view of the service in England and the much greater value for their licence fee given to the Londoner.

So, is this going to be another ill-informed tirade from some whingeing Northerner? It may well be - but it could just as easily be from a whingeing Midlander or whingeing West Countryman or whingeing East Anglian. This is a London versus the rest of us thing and, as the newspapers so delicately put it, 'the PERCEIVED metropolitan bias of the BBC'. and my contention that the word 'UNDOUBTED' should replace 'perceived'.

Now, obviously, you are not going to take my word for it - some convincing is necessary. So, here goes. First of all let me say what this is not about. It is not about BBC international coverage or about BBC local services, although, I do have a point to make there later. It is about the National Broadcaster's depiction of life in England as a whole and the extra benefits it gives to London. I would split this into three sections (1) On an economic basis (2) London sponsorship (3) The actual programmes the BBC makes or commissions.

If we first look at the economic argument, the BBC receives £2.6 billion per year from licence fees; of which London pays about 15%, roughly the same amount as, say, the North West of England. But how much of the 2.6 billion is spent in London? Shall we be generous and say a mere 50%. Not a bad return, is it? You pay 15% and you receive 50% back. Nice little earner.

Next, if we turn to BBC sponsorship and the way the BBC further boosts London's economy in its programmes. Not just with direct sponsorship, like the Proms, but with the millions of poundsworth of free advertising the BBC broadcasts annually to boost commercial events and businesses in London. Seems, if you have some project to plug in London, you just ring up a mate at the BBC, and you'll be offered anything from a two minute item on the News or ten minutes on Newsnight Review or fifteen minutes on Parkinson - all the way up to a whole dedicated programme or even a full six week series. Just as long as it's taking place in London.

To give an idea of the scale of this, let us have a look at how the BBC treated the opening of two arts projects - one in Salford, The Lowry Centre, and one in London, Tate Modern. The Lowry received a two minute item on the Six O'clock News - that was it. (In fact The Lowry had to publicize its opening by buying a number of thirty second commercials on their local ITV station.)

Whereas, Tate Modern received, courtesy of the BBC, four one hour dedicated programmes before the opening, plus items on Newsnight and magazine programmes. Then, on the great opening day, five or six hours of live coverage on both BBC 1 and BBC 2. Quite a difference between two minutes and, what, ten hours? Imagine if Tate Modern had had to buy ten hoursworth or thirty second commercials at ITV rates. It would have cost millions, but, thanks to their BBC, they got it all for free. An isolated example? Who knows. Maybe there are projects in other parts of the country that merit nationwide coverage, but I wouldn't get to know about those, would I?

Now, let us turn to the third aspect of this diatribe, probably the most important, the actual programmes the BBC broadcasts and see if any metropolitan bias can be perceived there. We are talking here of the programmes that purport to illustrate the lives of the people who live in England. You can split these into three groups: News, documentary and drama.

First news. How many journalists does the BBC have based in London and how many in the rest of the country? The figures should give us a rough idea of where BBC priorities lie. It shouldn't take long to tot up the number for the whole of the north of England - I would guess three. The London figure might be some hundreds of times greater.

Now, you may say, just because all these journalists are based in London, it doesn't mean they can't go out into the rest of the country to cover stories. Well, in theory, no, but we are dealing here with the character of the Londoner and his or her total conviction that, if something happens in London, it's of interest to everybody and, if it happens in Walsall, it's of interest to nobody - not even the people who live in Walsall. That is why we get so much B.I.L.J. (Because It's London Journalism) at the BBC. These are stories that if they were taking place anywhere else on Earth they wouldn't be considered newsworthy at all. The 'Heavy drizzle hits London' stories. So if part of London's electricity supply is cut off for twenty minutes, it's the end of civilization as we know it, with a drama-documentary commissioned on the spot. Whereas, when thousands of people are without electricity for three days in Norfolk, it just might get mentioned in passing. A headline only item to give the illusion of nationwide coverage without anyone having to actually go there and report. It's much easier to cover some London tittle-tattle.

This is not to say that BBC reporters are not working hard. If we take BBC specialist correspondents like Margaret Gilmore on Home Affairs. Quite a wide portfolio to cover. But Margaret is out there probing, hunting down, scouring the length and breadth of... well, London. Now, to be fair to Margaret, she did once cover a story in Doncaster, but I can only think, such was the traumatic effect it had on her, she was missing from our screens for the next six weeks, presumably recuperating. And since then, any north of Watford story she has covered from the safety of her London bunker.

Then there is the BBC Industry Correspondent, Rory Cellan-Jones. Now I think Rory is an honourable man and, when he took on the industry portfolio, he told his bosses he would only cover industry stories actually taking place in London and any outside would be rigorously ignored. Unlike his predecessor, who did, on the face of it, cover industry nationwide - but how was it covered? Two car maker stories, one in London and one in the Midlands, may show. When there was a dispute at Ford, Dagenham, he was there, speaking to management and workers, getting to the bottom of it, seeing for himself. But when it came to a similar, perhaps bigger, story at

Rover in the Midlands, did he go to see for himself? No, he just pasted together a bit of stock footage and then, for his piece to camera, he nipped across the road from the London News Centre to where there was a local car dealership with a big 'Rover' sign outside, stood in front of that and spoke with his usual authority. And as long as you don't actually say you're in the Midlands, it's not an actual lie, is it? Just a little televisual sleight of hand.

This is a variation on one of the chief methods used to prevent it being blindingly obvious this is very much a London orientated news service. This method is a simple, but wonderfully effective, device known as the 'just don't mention it' strategy, if you're reporting from London, coupled with the 'always emphasize it' for non-London items. Although, I would point out to the BBC think-tank who came up with this cunning plan, they should instruct correspondents to employ only head-and-shoulder shots in future, so as not to reveal, glinting in the background, the gold-plated streets of the mighty Metropolis.

And what of the stories that the BBC does cover from outside London. What kind of stories are they? Basically, tales of lawlessness and disaster. In a way, the rest of England is treated as if it is part of the third world. If it is floods in Africa or York, BBC News may cover it. If it is bird flu in Asia or foot and mouth in the Lake District, BBC News reports. Psychopaths, whether in South America or Greater Manchester, make good copy. But when it comes to national issues, like the Health Service or education, the BBC speaks to London doctors, London nurses, London patients or London teachers, pupils and parents for their experiences and opinions.

Just one other point on BBC news services which I think will show where the BBC is at. All over the country, the BBC supply local TV news output for different regions. One of which is South-East England, but the BBC didn't think it was good enough for London to be lumped in with the rest of the South-East. So they decided that resources would be made available to give London its own local news service. Now, if you had to pick an area of the country that needed more spending on its news coverage, I think any reasonable person would not have chosen London. After all, they had already been given BBC News 24. Surely 24 hours a day is enough for even the most avid London news junkie. And if London analogue viewers had to have their own local news programme after the Six O'clock News, weekdays, all you needed to do was snip out all the foreign stories from the aforementioned Six O'clock Show and rerun the rest. Nobody would have noticed.

Now, let us turn to BBC Drama's depiction of life in England. Forgive me if I put BBC 1 to one side. I just can't bring myself to use the all-pervading 'E' word. Perhaps you could do your own research there. and move on to BBC 2. Now, I know the BBC 2 Controller has a problem here, in that BBC 2 is a middle-class channel and we all know there are no middle-class in the North of England - it's all flat caps and shawls up there. But what about the rest of the country? Well, apparently, there are no middle-class people outside London at all, because, throughout the whole of last year, there was not a single BBC 2 drama that was not about Londoners. Which is a little surprising, because you normally do get at least one to enable you to play the 'Cynically-Highlight-Exception-As-Though-It's-Norm' game. This is a clever BBC ploy, when faced with charges of perceived London bias, in which you point to perhaps the only programme on a particular subject, in living memory, about non-Londoners as though it is an everyday occurrence. It can usually be countered by always insisting on bottom-line figures.

A fine opportunity to play the C.H.E.A.T.I.N. game can be found when we turn to documentary programmes. On the one hand you have programmes about London clammers, London airport workers, London estate agents, London grime-hunters, etc. and on the other hand you have Fred Dibnah, the Bolton steeplejack. Fred is a unique figure in presenting on the BBC because he's from the North and he lives in the North. And, in a way, he's the perfect stereotype of how the BBC sees Northerners. In that, he's a flat-capped, greasy-overalled, language-mangling, eccentric who lives in the past. If only he kept ferrets, he'd have the lot. Yet, incredibly, Fred's programmes are a hit. Could one reason be they cover the heritage of the whole country and not just you-know-where? Maybe people are interested in the lives and diversity of the rest of the country - even though London programme-makers are not.

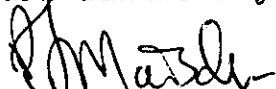
anyway, what can be done about this horrendous imbalance throughout BBC output? Well, nothing, probably. There can be no doubt London receives much greater value for the licence fee than the rest of us, but how could that wrong be righted? To give everyone the same level of service as London, would mean a massive increase in the licence fee. Perhaps things could stay as they are with some sort of reverse London weighting. So that London pays extra for the extra it receives. Or a banding system based on the number of miles you are away from London. The farther away - the less you pay. No, of course, I'm not being serious. Not even some simple Northern lad would be naive enough to think anything will change.

What would the BBC's response be to this criticism? To ignore? To deny? To prevaricate? At best, a touch of lip service? Then, when all this is over, back to business as usual? The BBC in London is in a very privileged position, in that it decides who who will be seen and heard nationwide, whose lives highlighted, whose opinions platformed. It will continue to exercise that privilege. And the rest of us - just licence-fee fodder?

Better stop now, all these chips are making me quite round shouldered.

Now, where's the address I send this to? Doh!

Yours faithfully



P J Marsden