

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

12 December 2003

Dear Sirs

I refer to the public consultation recently launched by the Secretary of State and set out below some comments around the questions posed in the review.

I take the view that, despite the special place in the affections of many occupied by the BBC, in the light of the rapid developments in the media in the period since the last charter review, the it is more and more difficult to justify the uniquely privileged position of the BBC. There are a huge multiplicity of new broadcasters, some of which offer services which are direct rivals to that offered by the BBC and it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a logical argument that the BBC should be funded by a compulsory licence backed by criminal sanction for failure to obtain one.

Similarly, the BBC does not appear to focus on those areas which could properly seen as "public service" in such a way which would justify this universal "taxation" and, certainly, much of the output does little to justify the position.

BBC1 is virtually indistinguishable from its commercial rivals and has followed its peers in its efforts to "chase ratings". The serious output covering current affairs, politics and, less obviously, news has diminished both in quantity and quality. The flagship news programme in the late evening was moved to make way for more popular programming and a serious of political programmes have either been relegated to very late night slots or have been abandoned altogether.

If BBC1 is, in fact, seen as a rival to ITV1 then let it compete on similar terms with that channel.

I would suggest that BBC1, along with equivalent radio channels, Radios 1,2 and 3 operate on a separate bases from other BBC output and be funded

through commercial activity. This could be in the form of carrying advertisements or through some of the trading activity of the BBC.

Certainly, there seems little excuse in the constant advertising, both on television and radio, for what are commercial products, Radio Times, other programming, DVDs and videos, books – the list seems to be endless and virtually every break in programmes seems to carry at least one item which should properly be regarded as advertising.

Undoubtedly, however, some of the BBC's output continues to be that which could properly be regarded as "public service" – the majority of the output of Radio 4, some of the output of BBC2 and, ironically, some of the output of the digital stations. Why cannot this be separated from the mainstream activity, recognised as genuinely public service and enjoy the privileges currently accorded to the entire corporation.

I would suggest that this "public service" element be separated and treated entirely differently to the other activity. The licence fee in itself seems to be anachronistic and outdated as a concept. This public service element should be funded from general taxation. This raises important questions of independence from government which is itself vital to the credibility of the BBC but which should not be beyond capability of settling in such a way as to maintain independence.

Certainly, these questions of independence are raised under current arrangements and are no more difficult than those which are currently applicable.

The remaining, mainstream, services should be "free at the point of use" and universal but funded in precisely the same manner as other commercial, universal, stations – ITV and Channel 4 – advertising.

The licence fee should be abolished and strong regulation should be imposed to ensure that activity funded through general taxation is properly identified and accountable. There should be no cross subsidies between publicly funded and commercial activity and strong controls will be required to ensure this is the case.

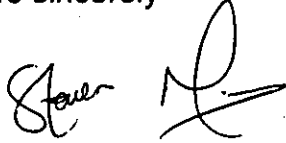
Governance arrangements raise difficult questions but the current arrangements have little to commend them. Appointments to a Board of Governors should not be within the gift of the government of the day although direct elections are unlikely to prove an effective means of appointment.

In summary, I do not believe the BBC can reasonably maintain the status quo. The prospect of imprisonment, which can and **does** happen for those failing to purchase a licence is simply not an acceptable proposition in the 21st Century and must be abolished. The changing face of the broadcast media which can only continue and indeed accelerate means that the BBC must take its place in this competitive environment. However, the special requirements of ensuring information is available to all mean that there is a baseline service

which should continue to be freely available to all and which is a "public good". The case for ensuring this continues to be available is so strong as to warrant funding it from general taxation. This will require a new structure to ensure maintenance of independence from government and to provide robust and credible governance arrangements.

I hope these comments are helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Mason', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Steve Mason