



Public Service Broadcasting: safe in whose hands?

Full House Expected for Top BBC and Ofcom Executives at VLV's Spring Conference in London on 29 April



Mark Byford, the BBC's Acting Director General, and Stephen Carter, Chief Executive of the communications regulator Ofcom, will be the speakers at VLV's 21st spring conference on Thursday, 29 April. It will be held at Hamilton House, London WC1. Mr Carter will speak at 11.am, Mr Byford at 3pm.

Mark Byford

Both speakers will be concerned with the focus this year on issues surrounding BBC Charter Review and Ofcom's consultation plans, including its review of public service broadcasting across all the terrestrial channels. Priority booking will be given to VLV members.

2003 VLV Awards for Excellence In Broadcasting

Andrew Marr, the BBC's Political Editor, who himself won an award two years ago, will present VLV's 2003 Awards for Excellence in Broadcasting at 1.45pm, before the afternoon session of VLV's spring conference on 29 April.

The Awards are organised by VLV Board member John Clark and sponsored by the Voice of the Listener Trust. Four of the presentations



will be for radio programmes and presenters, four for television. Each of the winners will receive a handsome engraved crystal glass trophy kindly donated by Dartington Crystal.

Andrew Marr

Broadcasting and Civil Society in the Digital Age

VLV's 9th International Conference, 26 and 27 April



Lord McIntosh

Andrew (Lord) McIntosh, UK Minister for Broadcasting and Heritage will open VLV's 9th International conference in April with a welcome to delegates on behalf of the British Government. Mark Thompson, Chief Executive of Channel 4, like VLV celebrating its 21st year, will give the keynote address.

The conference has already attracted participants from a wide range of backgrounds in four of the five continents. They will consider the future for public service broadcasting, and for viewers and listeners in

Europe and the rest of the world, as digital technology brings the convergence of broadcasting, telecommunications and the internet, and makes possible hundreds of new channels and services.

Among the confirmed speakers are Stephaan Depeyere, Directorate for State Aid, European Commission; Ashley Highfield, Director BBC New Media; Phil Laven Director of Technology, European Broadcasting Union; Huw Jones, Chief Executive, S4C; Stephen Coleman, Professor of e-democracy, Oxford; Elizabeth Smith, Secretary-General, The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association; Dr Damian Tambini, IPPR and Director, Programme in Comparative Media Law, Oxford; Vladimir Gai, Chief, Communications Development, UNESCO, Paris; Peter Grant, Canadian author of 'Blockbusters & Trade Wars'; Javad Mottaghi, Director, Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting.

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Your BBC - Your Say

Public Consultation on BBC Charter Review
Deadline: 31 March

The BBC's Royal Charter expires in two years time but you have only until 31 March to respond to the consultation on the future role, funding and governance of the BBC now being conducted by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport.

Every VLV member should send their views about this great institution to the Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell, and help to shape Government thinking on the role that the BBC and public service broadcasting in general plays in British life.



Leaflets are available in public libraries, from: www.bbccharterreview.org.uk or VLV.

This is a rare - possibly your only - chance to influence the future of the BBC and of British broadcasting. Make sure you use it!

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Voice of the Listener & Viewer

Working for Quality and Diversity in British Broadcasting

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VLV office hours:

9.00am - 5.00pm Mon-Thurs

Voice of the Listener & Viewer Ltd (VLV) represents the citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and works for quality and diversity in British broadcasting. VLV is free from political, sectarian and commercial affiliations. VLV is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions, and regulation that underpin the British broadcasting system and in particular to maintain the principles of public service in broadcasting. VLV does not handle complaints.

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VLV - Annual General Meeting

Notice is hereby given that the 2nd Annual General Meeting of Voice of the Listener & Viewer Ltd will be held at the British Academy, 10 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AH on Tuesday, 7th July 2004 at 4.00pm.

AGENDA

- 1 To approve the Minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting of Voice of the Listener & Viewer Ltd, held on 7th July 2003, at the British Academy, 10 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AH.
- 2 To receive the Reports of the Chairman, the Secretary and the Treasurer with the Annual Accounts for the financial year ending 31st March 2004.
- 3 To receive the Report of the Examiners, Messrs. King & Taylor, Chartered Accountants.
- 4 To appoint the Examiners for 2004/5 and fix the Examiners' remuneration.
- 5 As provided under Article 26 c, the Honorary Officers, Jocelyn Hay (Chairman), Bob Fletcher (Secretary), and Graeme Colin Thompson (Treasurer), will have served their statutory two years and are eligible for re-election.

- 6 Under Article 38, all current Board members remain in office this year. Subject to a maximum of 10 members, including the three Honorary Officers, (Article 26 c) further nominations may be submitted, to the Honorary Secretary, no fewer than three days and not more than twenty-one days before the AGM. (The closing date is thus Friday 3rd July). Nominations must be presented to the registered office, in writing signed by a member qualified to attend and vote at the meeting for which such a notice is given, of his or her intention to propose such person for election, and a notice in writing signed by another member qualified to attend and vote at the meeting for which such notice is given, of his or her intention to second the proposal of such person for election, and also notice in writing signed by that person of his or her willingness to be elected. The notice shall give particulars of that person which would, if he/she were to be appointed, be required to be included in the register of Board members.
- 7 To receive Resolutions, which must be seconded and submitted within the same time scale as nominations to be Company Director. (See (6) above.)

VLV Visits

Visit to BBC Southampton - 25 March 2004

On the evening of Wednesday the 25th of March, I joined a VLV group who were given a guided tour by Lisa Hardisty of the Headquarters of BBC South, which houses both the South Today and Radio Solent studios.

We were shown the inside workings of both and it was fascinating to see how it all functions. We were then taken into the main radio studio and given a demonstration of how one of the radio promos was created on a digital editing system. Moving on we were led through the BBC building to a studio where we were able to watch

the live telecast of South Today, with additional speakers allowing us to hear audio/visual gallery. Lisa Hardisty had produced the show for many years and therefore our questions were very knowledgeably answered. Finally we were taken to the main news and production offices where everything from Teletext to the local web pages are created. We discussed how bimedia production has worked and the increasing use of camera/journalists. A very enjoyable and informative evening.

Robert Hunt, Student, Southampton.

VLV visit to the British Library Sound Archive

A party of 20 VLV members thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to visit the magnificent British Library in March. There were so many gems in the talk.

Originally in 1955, the British Institute of Recorded Sound, today's British Library Sound Archive holds world-wide recordings - millions of discs, thousands of tapes, videos, fragile wax cylinders and gramophone records - and is currently grappling with digital sound. The life span of the recordings is debatable but gold CDs are in current use. All are housed in London with duplicates in Yorkshire.

Rod Hamilton's enlightening talk, with sample recordings, explained the Archive's six sections: a century of Classical Music, commercial and private. Drama and Literature (including all productions of

the Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal National Theatre). Popular Music (hopefully every recording), possibly the largest collection of World Traditional Music, Wildlife sounds (accessed by museums, zoos and for sound effects) and Oral History which includes Florence Nightingale (barely audible) and BBC's Millennium Memory Bank.

The Archive has every possible BBC recording. Many samples heard were of Beeb origin, for example, George V's 1932 Christmas broadcast and Bertrand Russell's 1962 anti-invasion views, which only needed Iraq substituted for Cuba to be topical!

The Sound Archive website is <http://www.bl.uk/soundarchive> and the online Cadensa catalogue: <http://www.cadensa.bl.uk>. The Newsletter 'Playback' is free on request. *Freda Basley, Sidcup, Kent.*

VLV Summer Conference

7 July 2004

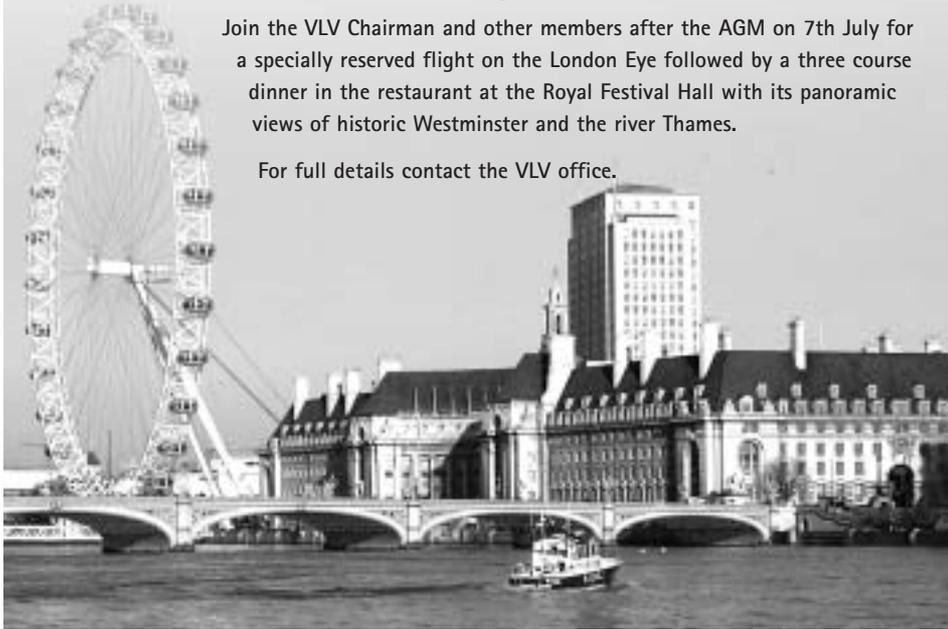
Speakers for VLV's Summer Conference, to be held on the afternoon of Tuesday, 7 July, were still being finalised as the Bulletin went to press. It will be held from 2 – 3.30pm at the British Academy, 10 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1, prior to the AGM.

With the BBC's Royal Charter under the spotlight this year, the conference will consider its relationship with the arts and science. The programme will be published on VLV's website as soon as it is confirmed and also be available from the VLV office.

VLV Summer Party after the AGM

Join the VLV Chairman and other members after the AGM on 7th July for a specially reserved flight on the London Eye followed by a three course dinner in the restaurant at the Royal Festival Hall with its panoramic views of historic Westminster and the river Thames.

For full details contact the VLV office.



Broadcasting and Civil Society in the Digital Age

Continued from front cover

Among others attending are members of EURALVA, the European Association of Listeners' & Viewers' Associations from Denmark, Finland, Portugal and the UK, and representatives from linked associations in Australia, Canada and Norway. The conference will be held in the elegant and historic premises of the Royal Society, Carlton House Terrace, London SW1.

VLV is grateful to the BBC, Channel 4, ITV plc and S4C for supporting the conference. Without this support it would not have been possible to hold the event.



Mark Thompson

Book Reviews

OUR MEDIA NOT THEIRS: THE DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLE AGAINST CORPORATE MEDIA

Robert W. Chesney and John Nichols.
Publishers: Open Media Book,
Seven Stories Press, 140 Watts Street, New York.
www.sevenstories.com £7.99
P/B ISBN 1 583 22549 8

It is wrong and dangerous, argue the authors that a country that is both a super power and a democracy should not have a free and democratic media. This book focuses on US broadcasting, but the ethos is relevant to the current debate over the future of British Public Service Broadcasting.

BROADCASTING AND CONVERGENCE: NEW ARTICULATIONS OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE REMIT

Edited by Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Taisto Hujanen.
Published by Nordicom, Goteborg University,
Box 713, SE 405 30 Goteborg, Sweden.
P/B ISBN 91-89471-18-0

Will public service broadcasting survive convergence, and should it survive? If yes, why and in what form? These questions were key to the RIPE@2002 (Revisionary Interpretations of the Public Enterprise) conference held in Denmark in 2002 and will be revisited at the RIPE@2004 conference later this year. Countries covered include the UK, US, Russia, Denmark and Germany.

Who's Who in Broadcasting

NEW CHAIRMAN FOR CHANNEL 4

Luke Johnson has been appointed to succeed Vanni Treves as the next chairman of Channel 4. Aged 42, he is chairman of Signature Restaurants (formerly Belgo Group), a columnist with the Sunday Telegraph and a Governor of the London Institute which represents five of the capital's art and design colleges. Mr Johnson began his career with BMP Advertising Agency, later joined Kleinwort Benson as a media analyst and has held a number of directorships including Pizza Express, Whittards of Chelsea and Nightfreight. The part-time post is for three years with remuneration of £67,500 annually.

NEW CHAIRMAN FOR ITV PLC

Peter Burt has been appointed chairman of ITV plc, following the merger of Granada Television and Carlton Television. Mr Burt is a former chief executive of the Royal Bank of Scotland.

Dame Patricia Hodgson, former Chief Executive of the Independent Television Commission, has been appointed a director of the GWR Group, parent company of Classic FM.

Baroness Hogg resigned from her appointment as a BBC Governor at the end of February to pursue other interests.

Members of the Ofcom Consumer Panel

Colette Bowe, Chairman, is Deputy Chair of Thames Water Utilities, incoming Chair of the Council of Queen Mary College, University of London, board member of Yorkshire Building Society & the Statistics Commission.

Fiona Ballantyne, representative for Scotland, is managing director of a marketing development consultancy.

Roger Darlington, representative for England, is Chair of the Internet Watch Foundation and adviser at the Communication Workers Union.

Ruth Evans, a former Director of the National Consumer Council, is a lay member of the General Medical Council, Non-Executive Director of the Nationwide Building Society.

Simon Gibson OBE, representative for Wales, is a venture capitalist, member of the Welsh Development Agency Board and the Welsh Electronic Forum.

Graham Mather is President of the European Policy Forum & a member of the Competition Appeal Tribunal.

Kevin McLaughlin, representative for Northern Ireland, is a development worker for the Magherafelt Disability Forum.

Kate O'Rourke solicitor, is Deputy Chair of the London Regional Council of Arts Council England. Bob Twitchin has experience of telecommunications & issues affecting disabled and older people.

Nanish Bapna is Managing Director of Pharmacy Channel – digital point-of-sales advertising network in independent pharmacies.

Azeem Azhar writer, is Principal of OxMedia Ltd, management consultancy.

The salaries for the part-time panel are £50,000 Chairman; £25,000 Deputy Chairman; and £12,000 for each member.



We have brought forward the publication of this Bulletin in order to prompt anyone who has not yet done so, to respond to the DCMS consultation: Your BBC, Your Say. (see front page) The consultation

provides probably the last opportunity for individual listeners and viewers to affect the future of this great institution.

BBC

With a White Paper on Charter Renewal due in Spring 2005 it seems inevitable that the future of the BBC and of public service broadcasting will become a political issue. It is of great concern that Conservative Party policy still seems to be to privatise Channel 4. There is also the possibility that, if the recommendations of its recent Working Party led by David Elstein, the former chief executive of BSkyB and Five, are followed, the Party's policy could be to replace the BBC's licence fee by subscription television, and then to fund BBC Radio by direct Government grant. Either could mean the end of the BBC as we now know it.

Ofcom

At the same time, a review of public service broadcasting, including the BBC, is being undertaken by Ofcom, the new communications regulator, as required by the 2003 Communications Act. Ofcom, as an as yet untried body, appears to have followed a policy of bringing forward as few personnel as possible with experience of broadcasting or of working for a regulator. Yet Ofcom has responsibility for regulating some of the BBC's activities, and it will have to deal with a far more powerful ITV following the merger of Carlton and Granada, threats to the future of Channel 4, and the possibility of moves by foreign corporations to buy ITV, Channel 5 and UK radio companies.

Our greatest concern, however, is that despite hard-won amendments to the 2003 Communications Bill which added to Ofcom's duty to further the interest of consumers, in an extra, preceding clause, the duty to 'further the interest of citizens', its officials are now conflating the two under the single heading of 'citizen-consumers'. Such a conflation indicates a failure to understand the differences between the two which, if it persists, could undermine Ofcom's ability to carry out the will of Parliament as expressed in the Act.

VLV now faces some of its greatest challenges yet. We shall need all the help we can muster, intellectual, moral and financial, to overcome them but I know that members and supporters will help us. In particular I urge them to respond to the DCMS consultation on the future of the BBC.

Your BBC – Have Your Say

VLV Special Meeting on BBC Charter Review 4 March

Points from the Meeting and VLV's Response to the DCMS Consultation

More than eighty people, including observers from Canada, Finland and Japan, packed VLV's briefing on the DCMS consultation about BBC Charter Review on Ofcom's consultation on public service broadcasting on 4 March.

Main speakers were: Robert Beveridge, Napier University, Edinburgh; Professor Vincent Porter, University of Westminster; John Clark, VLV Board member and Professor Sylvia Harvey, University of Lincoln. They each addressed two of eight questions posed by the DCMS before VLV chairman, Jocelyn Hay, opened up a lively discussion lasting more than 90 minutes.

THE QUESTIONS:

What do you value most about the BBC?

The contribution it makes to British democracy and an informed citizenship through its news and current affairs and to British cultural life through its patronage of the arts, including popular and classical music, drama and comedy. Its role in setting standards and its unique contribution to research and technological development. The universal availability of the BBC's core programmes and services, free at the point of use and from the intrusion of commercials. The BBC's role in maintaining social cohesion and providing a common reference point for society, through its radio, web and online services in local communities, the nations and regions of the UK, together with the promotion of British values overseas through the BBC World Service.

How should the BBC adapt to cope with changes in technology and culture?

The BBC should broadcast its analogue and digital programmes on all delivery platforms until digital switch-over. It should then ensure its digital broadcasts are universally available to all UK households on a free-to-air basis. The BBC should provide interactive and Internet services which meet the democratic, social and cultural needs of all citizens. It should be allowed to take advantage of new technological developments.

What do you think of the television, radio and online services the BBC provides?

Despite the findings of the Hutton inquiry, all the BBC programmes and services, including its news and current affairs, are highly valued at local, regional, national and international level. While the BBC should provide popular entertainment, the tendency in recent years to schedule more demanding programmes out of peak time on BBC 1 and 2 or on BBC 4, should be reversed.

Should the BBC run commercial services?

The BBC has one of the strongest brands in the world, and produces many valuable products with support from the licence fee. It has a duty to exploit those products and to optimise the return it can make to licence fee payers. There are strict control systems in place to ensure that it trades fairly, subject to auditor, governor and OFT supervision. In return for the right to run commercial services, the BBC should support

innovative ideas and respect the rights of those who contribute to its creative resources.

How should we pay for the BBC?

All the evidence shows that the licence fee provides astonishing value for money. It is the most efficient and effective way to fund the BBC. Top-slicing to give a percentage of it to other broadcasters would mean the loss of valued BBC programmes or services. Subscription TV would cost more to administer and reduce the income available to the BBC, restricting its ability to provide a diverse range of high quality programmes and services. It would break the universal availability of BBC programmes and provide no funding for BBC radio or online. Direct Government grant would leave the BBC vulnerable to political pressure. Funding by advertising or sponsorship would risk compromising BBC editorial control and damage its rivals by attracting revenue away from them.

Is the BBC organised in the most effective and efficient way?

As a single entity the BBC presents a single face to the world. This brings many benefits, including critical mass, cross-fertilisation, flexibility, and the ability to set and maintain standards. Splitting the BBC into smaller units would remove those benefits and damage the UK creative industries.

How should the BBC be run? How should it be regulated? How do we ensure that the BBC is properly accountable to the public and Parliament?

The BBC should continue to be independently governed and regulated. It should not be brought any further under the control of the new communications regulator, Ofcom which is concerned with commercial operators.

BBC Governors have in the past generally done a remarkably good job of preserving its independence from Government and commercial pressure. In future that independence needs to be assured by greater transparency in the selection and appointment of governors, perhaps a third of whom could be elected. They should have their own secretariat, independent funding and separate offices. As regulators, the governors should also be clearly distanced from BBC management.

The BBC should be accountable to Parliament not the Government of the day via a Secretary of State. It is already required to deliver its annual report to Parliament and its Chairman and Director General are questioned by the House of Commons Select Committee for Culture, Media & Sport. A similar Select Committee, with a brief to monitor broadcasting and communications matters should be established in the House of Lords. All the appointments of governors and senior staff should be more transparent, as should its accounting procedures. The BBC Governors should make more efforts to consult and meet the public and should publish the minutes of their meetings.

An audio cassette is available price £10

Parliamentary Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Report on Broadcasting in Transition

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee published its Third Report, *Broadcasting in transition* (HC 380) on 4 March. The Report may be purchased from The Stationery Office and bookshops but is also available free from the Parliamentary website: www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/culture_media_and_sport.cfm

The Committee's key conclusions include:

A welcome for the new single communications regulator, Ofcom, but a warning against any increase in its size. Ofcom needs to ensure it delivers good value for money and maximum transparency in its decisions. It should hold hearings and board meetings in public with full minutes published promptly.

The government's Review of the BBC's Royal Charter will provide an opportunity to adjust the relationship between the BBC and Ofcom. Lord Hutton's conclusions relating to the role of the BBC Governors should be examined in the context of the Review.

Ofcom needs to be robust in ensuring that the spirit as well as the letter of all existing public service commitments are maintained. Light touch regulation must not be allowed to result in denying citizens the option to watch high quality public service television.

The protection and maintenance of regional commitments by Channel 3 licensees will be the first major test for Ofcom. If it fails this test, trust in its decisions will be undermined.

Quotas for regional production for the ITV network are essential to conform with the spirit of the legislation, and sufficient investment in regional production centres of excellence.

The Committee deplores Ofcom's endorsement of the ITC decision to allow a down-grading of the news service offered by ITV during peak time, and urges Ofcom to reconsider the position during the forthcoming re-licensing of Channel 3 services.

It welcomes the provision of grants for Community Radio and the possibilities that new digital technologies offer broadcasters. Ofcom should attach priority to ensuring its regulatory decisions are consistent with the promotion of switchover but warns that broadcasting is about people communicating with people. This communication should be facilitated throughout the regions and reflect cultural diversity at regional and national level, and needs broadcasters and their supporting facilities to be in situ.

The Committee looks to Ofcom to promote the development of television services for deaf and visually impaired people, in particular, that BBC and ITV networked programmes are made available with audio description for the 500,000 Sky satellite subscribers who have impaired sight.

Contact: House of Commons Committee Office,
7 Millbank, SW1P 3JA
Tel: 020 7219 6188 (fax 2031)
E-mail: cmscom@parliament.uk

Meetings and Events attended by VLV in the past 4 months

VLV Board members and speakers have spoken at or attended meetings with the following organisations, BBC, BBC Governors, Ofcom, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Children 2000, Public Voice, Digital Stakeholders' Group, Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute, Digital Market Preparation Group, Consumer Expert Digital Group, DCMS/DTI Expert Consumer Advisory Panel on Digital Switch Over, Westminster Media Forum, the launch of the Finnish Pro Publica Citizen Group, Oxford Internet Institute, National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Sandford St Martin Awards, British Screen Advisory Council, Parliamentary All-party Satellite and Cable Group, Meopham Probos Club, Oxford Media Convention and the Northeast Humanists at Newcastle.

Press, Radio and TV coverage in the same period has also been extensive, including a 24 minute interview by Gavin Essler with VLV

chairman, Jocelyn Hay, on the BBC World TV programme 'Hard Talk' repeated on BBC 1 and BBC News 24. Coverage has included: BBC World Service, BBC 1 Television, BBC News 24, BBC Wales, BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio Leeds, London, Sheffield, Wales, Scotland, Berkshire, The Guardian, The Observer, Broadcast Magazine, and New Media markets.



Gavin Essler and Jocelyn Hay

VLV Responses and Consultations

VLV has responded to the following consultations:

- Ofcom's Annual Work Plan 2004-5, March 2004.

Copies are available price £5 each.

Consultations still Current:

- Ofcom's Consultation on Electronic Programme Guides
deadline 25 March
- DCMS: re BBC Charter Review
deadline 31 March 2004
Leaflets available in public libraries, or phone 0207 211 6418, or on the DCMS website: www.bbccharterreview.org.uk
- Ofcom: Review of Public Service Broadcasting
deadline 31 March
- Licensing Community Radio
deadline 20 April.

PANEL TO SCRUTINISE THE APPOINTMENT OF THE NEW BBC CHAIRMAN

The Cabinet Office has announced that Lord Steel of Aikwood (Lib Dem) and Jack Cunningham (Lab) are to join the Commissioner for Public Appointments on the four-member scrutiny panel for the appointment of a new Chair of the BBC. The fourth member has yet to be announced but will be a cross bench privy counsellor after the Conservative Party refused to submit a member for the panel.

Public Voice

The Public Voice Coalition, of which VLV is a steering group member, has produced a submission to the public consultation on the BBC. It argues for a new 'social contract' for the BBC, in which the BBC would have its Charter renewed, its scale and scope maintained, and the licence fee renewed, in return for being held more strictly to its public service mission.

Public Voice would like to see the sense of public ownership of 'Our BBC' increased, parliamentary accountability improved, and a greater range and depth of relevant expertise in the governing body.

More information is available at the website: www.bss.org/publicvoice

Letters to the Editor

Letters do not necessarily represent the views of the Association and may be shortened for publication.

A TRIBUTE TO R. A. LAWS MBE

A brief note to add my appreciation for the work of Alan Laws, and to express my sorrow at his passing. I met him in 1992 or 1993 when I was setting up your computer system, having gone to his home in Watford. I found him a most interesting person, with his house full of organs and other musical things. He was a great help to me in the work I was doing for you at that time and I lament his passing.

A. L. Minter, Sandwich, Kent.

CONGRATULATIONS

This is a rather dangerous time where the future of the BBC is concerned and I am thankful that your organisation is now well established and respected. However, I realise that VLV cannot effectively put forward its case for maintaining the independence of the BBC as a Public Service Broadcaster without help from its members. I am therefore enclosing the cheque to assist your funding so that you may use it in the way you think best at this time.

Alan Errock, Painswick, Gloucester

We thought the meeting on 4 March was excellent and covered an incredible amount of ground. I shall certainly send a submission and will encourage others to do so. So many people say they care about the BBC and Public Service Broadcasting, but no one seems to be capable of writing a few lines to express their views.
Jill Hyem, London, W14

Please accept the enclosed gift towards your appeal, as a supporter of your work for the retention of the charter and the high standards of the corporation.
Patrick Walker, London

A SELECTION OF BBC CHARTER REVIEW COMMENTS

Thank you for alerting me to the public meeting set-up by the DCMS with Lord McIntosh, the Broadcasting Minister, to discuss BBC Charter Review. As the meeting was not well publicised locally, I was one of only 15 people attending – three others of whom were VLV members. I hear that less than 20 people turned out in Belfast and Cardiff, again due to lack of publicity. Will Ministers claim they have consulted widely after such a disgraceful sham?

Robert Beveridge, Edinburgh.

We believe it is essential to finance the BBC via a licence fee. If it was supported by advertising the advertisers would control the type of programmes transmitted. Were it to be pay-per-view, many less well off members of society could not afford the fee. While we agree that the BBC should be independent of government, recent events show that there should be some body independent of both Government and the Board of Governors who can adjudicate when problems can't be solved at a lower level. We also think that an independent but official body, similar to VLV, would be useful to advise the BBC of what the public wants and think about it, rather than rely on its own ideas.

We think that the BBC should be allowed to carry on with its commercial activities as these must help to reduce the licence fee. It would be very wrong to stop the Corporation from capitalising on the investment it has put into making programmes...

L.L.Buck, Gloucester.

The thing I value about the BBC is something it does not have, i.e. commercial advertising. This absence of commercials must be maintained at all costs.

I consider the BBC's News and Educational programmes to be of great value. As a person who did not have a university education I have benefited greatly from this service. Arts programmes are another topic I much admire from the BBC.

The licence fee is the best method to finance the BBC. Any other method would be much more expensive to collect...

As to how the BBC is regulated I consider that a separation of the powers of the governors is desirable but the regulation on behalf of the public should certainly not be transferred to the same regulator as that for the Independent TV companies. The BBC is a unique organisation and as such needs entirely independent oversight.

I cannot see much need for change in how the BBC is made accountable to Parliament, the present method seems to work reasonably well and the BBC must retain its independence. There is no reason why the public should not be consulted before future Charter Reviews, just as now.

N B Yeadon, Kingston Upon Thames, Surrey.

It is vital to the Independence of the BBC that it is lifted out of the political arena. This would bring credit to the government and satisfy our need to be sure that it is, as you quote "Our BBC".

Thus it is most important for all connected with the BBC post Review to be immediately recognisable as people we trust and can have confidence in. Political appointments should be avoided at all costs.

Ofcom should not do the Regulation of the BBC. It is a regulator of commercial interests of the industry and thus must not regulate the public service and unique nature of the BBC.

Marie Jennings MBE, Stroud, Gloucestershire.

For us, the most valued feature of the BBC is its ability to aim at high quality in all fields without being skewed by outside pressure and the pursuit of ratings. Only an organisation with guaranteed funding not based on commercial factors could achieve this. The continuous decline in the quality of ITV output illustrates this. The BBC has also gone too far down this road because of the perceived need to show high ratings in its fear of losing the licence fee. The public service duties of the BBC should be spelled out and monitored by the Governors.

Some form of general taxation or licence fee paid by the whole community is the only way to preserve a good service of independent public broadcasting. The public wants this and must be prepared to pay for it, as with other public services. The BBC is too dependent on the government of the day for its funding and the appointment of key personnel (including governors): these should be in the hands of an independent body. The part time nature of the BBC governors does not reflect the important nature of their task. They should include more people experienced in the arts and journalism and fewer of the "good and the great".

Clive and Elisabeth Johnson, Leicester.

I value most the breadth and quality of the BBC's output. News is trustworthy and unbiased, drama is excellently produced, documentaries are informative and entertaining and in its coverage of sports it caters

for all tastes. The golf and snooker coverage is exemplary. It sets a standard of excellence to which other broadcasters can aspire.

This is only possible because of the way it is funded. It is imperative that the licence fee is retained. Without core funding of this nature, the BBC would be at the mercy of commercial interests and public apathy. Anyone who has lived abroad can testify to the dreadful results of relying on sponsorship or subscription. Quality, public service and interest quickly disappear. The BBC should continue to run commercial services. This is a good way to supplement income to enable it to continue to provide the wide range of programming to cater for minorities as well as the mass market.

The day to day running should be independent, run by the governors as present. It is essential that the BBC is not seen as the mouthpiece of the government or unduly influenced by it.

The BBC is one of the main reasons for heaving a huge sigh of relief on one's return to these shores. Of course it needs to move with the times and adapt to new technology and new commercial realities, but we should be all the poorer if the BBC were to be damaged or destroyed. We need to be informed, educated and entertained by a body that has public service in its remit and is run by persons who have that motivation.

Mrs B G L Jackson, Herne Bay, Kent.

I feel strongly that the BBC is a beacon of good and impartial broadcasting and should be helped to remain so, entirely independent of the Government. The Hutton report gave a very misleading view...

Several points:

- 1) I think that the licence fee is the best way to pay, as it is ring-fenced funding which the BBC can depend on from year to year and therefore plan ahead. It also ensures some independence from the government.
- 2) A lot of the best programmes are on radio and that this side of broadcasting should be adequately funded. It would be a very bad idea to make all radio digital as the reception is still dismal and the price of sets is high, which particularly affects older listeners.
- 3) The quality of programmes on BBC 1 and BBC 2 has deteriorated and Channel 4 is often better. In particular BBC 2 should be less popular and broadcast less snooker.
- 4) Training is an important part of the BBC's role. It should have good training schemes for production and technical staff, so that this can spread out into broadcasting generally.
- 5) The world service is of great importance to how Britain is seen around the world, and should continue to be adequately supported.
- 6) The BBC should definitely continue to run a commercial arm, as this can be fed back into the corporation and is an important export and showcase for British talent.

Harriet Burgato, Bristol.

How should we pay for the BBC? I have often regretted the abolition of the sound – only licence, which has made sound radio a 'poor relation' of television. I would gladly pay an annual fee or perhaps some 'pay-as-you-listen' system to finance independent sound broadcasting.

Richard W Bond, Liverpool.

Letters to the Editor

Letters do not necessarily represent the views of the Association and may be shortened for publication.

... The independence of the BBC is most valued with regards to general programme making and news coverage. Quality of all programmes covering sports, arts and education are essential. There has been a decrease in quality on all television channels over the past year but on BBC 1 in particular. Soaps and makeovers seem to have taken priority. However, radio maintains good quality, particularly Radio 4. The constant change in technology has made it difficult for all members of the public to keep in touch due either to cost or lack of education. It is not easy to learn new technology if you cannot afford the equipment that is constantly being updated. The licence fee is still the best way to finance the BBC but could this not include a method of helping the public in some way?

People should be encouraged to contact their MPs as well as the BBC if the latter's independence is threatened.

M.R. Anscombe, Woking, Surrey.

The BBC's output of superb arts, news, educational and entertainment programmes has added immeasurably to my quality of life. I am sure this benefit has been enjoyed universally wherever BBC broadcasts are received. The world would be a poorer place without this unique organisation.

At its best, the BBC output is excellent, however competition for audience ratings must be responsible for the disproportionate number of mentally undemanding TV programmes (e.g. make-overs, game shows, trivialised documentaries) the BBC must provide some popular easy programmes, but at present these are over-represented. To combat the lowering of standards and to maintain political independence I firmly support the licence fee. I think the majority of the public would continue to accept the licence fee if its value as opposed to subscription were publicised more often and BBC expenses were reduced. Moreover, if BBC TV offered a greater number of quality programmes.

The Corporation has become so vast that I would question whether the technology of commerce helps to finance quality programmes, or whether they drain resources from the BBC's principal function, accountable to all citizens, so all classes of society should be represented on regulatory bodies.

Jill Basey, Bristol.

HUTTON REPORT

I believe that, in spite of the recent failure in verification, the BBC presents news as accurately, objectively and undramatically as possible. The resignation of Greg Dyke and Gavyn Davies testifies to the honourable tradition of the organisation. If only all newspaper editors maintained as high a standard of integrity and judgement.

Let us continue to pay a licence fee for the privilege of unbiased broadcasting. If the BBC can acquire income through the sale of magazines, books and DVDs, well and good. But it must not be subject to pressures from commercial advertising or any other sources.

Sport, soaps and sitcoms are valued by many, but my personal preference is for natural history programmes, documentaries, archaeology, history and gardening. Radio 4 produces many programmes that are intellectually stimulating. Programmes form and about Europe would be welcome. Regional input is to be encouraged, but one values the BBC's role in unifying the whole country.

D L Richardson, Sunderland.

Granted that mistakes were made, full honours to the BBC's integrity and independence for probing and challenging what the powers that be are doing, regardless of party.

Back in 1956 the then Conservative government under Eden tried hard to interfere with the BBC's reporting and general stance on the Suez crisis. So last weeks spat is nothing new...

Enid and Robert Miller, Leatherhead, Surrey.

I think that the most important question is the Licence fee. If the BBC loses that, it will lose its independence and will cease to be the most important player in public service broadcasting. I hope the governors will put up a better fight to retain the Fee than they did over the Hutton report. I hope that both the Chairman of the governors and the Director General will be free from any political affiliations.

Anyone who has donated money to a political party should be ruled out. Independence is vital for the BBC and it should not be possible for any government to bring pressure or to influence the presentation of programmes of news or events... The first thing any dictator does is to control the media.

Margaret Evans, Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire.

The information contained in the recent mailing is most helpful, especially the DCMS leaflet *Your BBC, Your Say*. We can only agree with you that a priority must be to make sure that the mistakes of the BBC are never repeated...

Andrew Gilligan was a new recruit to the BBC, a newspaper journalist not used to BBC procedure. When we read John Simpson's book 'Wars with Saddam' it was easy to understand how mistakes happened. Hopefully it will not be long before permanent replacements are appointed as Chairman and Director General.

There is a long and anxious road ahead, Mrs Hay, we hope all our members will do their best to support you and everyone else at VLV. We do not believe the BBC has anything to fear from this government in relation to what could be called the Gilligan affair.

Re Charter renewal: those who favour subscription need to understand that Sky can make that pay because they have so many channels, plus the UK is only one of their profit venues. If applied to the BBD it would bring its swift demise because the BBC and Sky are two entirely different organisations.

The BBC is successful because of its size and its licence fee which we all pay. This is the same principle as the NHS, National Insurance Benefits and Pensions as well as the insurance industry. Simply because we all pay guarantees its existence when we may need it. People who favour subscription must be selfish. There are programmes they would not wish to watch so why should they pay towards something they are not interested in? This completely misses the point that the BBC tries hard to cater for many interests.

Arthur and Veal Carey, Halstead Essex.

May I personally be among the many thousands in this region, millions in the UK and billions around the world to find the BBC not guilty? (In regard to Hutton)

In the so-called "third world" ... many do not have any independent media and would not know what it is

like to have one... the BBC is subject to criticism, is not infallible, is human and we all do try to put it right from time to time, but it must never lose its independence or be controlled by any government.

Anver Jeevanjee, Chair and National Co-ordinator, Cultural Diversity Advisory Group to the Media.

DIGITAL ISSUES

We live in sheltered accommodation with an old communal aerial and associated socket. They have installed an unofficial digital aerial for Channel 5 which has no teletext and is prone to bad reception under certain weather conditions.

There are 45 flats and many tenants want digital, but the Housing Association will not commit themselves. My wife is disabled and one of her few enjoyments is watching TV. I want to install a Set Top Box to get some of the digital channels, but I don't know that with these communal aerials, reception will be satisfactory. The Housing Association frowns on dishes, but won't address the need for communal digital television.

Gerald Davies, Winchester, Hants.

I fear that things to do with digital switchover are worse than writers in your winter edition say. One of the conditions to be met before switching off the present analogue TV transmitters is "95% of households having digital receivers". This is not an adequate criterion... most households have more than one receiver, besides VCRs... moreover analogue TVs and VCRs are still being sold in large numbers. Users are likely to be very resentful if most of this equipment is to be rendered unusable, save for considerable expenditure on their part. When the country changed over from coal to natural gas, every piece of domestic gas equipment was adapted or exchanged without any charge to the user.

If produced in sufficient numbers and distributed without retail mark-up, a basic Freeview adapter could cost very little. They should be distributed free of charge to TV licence payers.

Ian Leslie, Ludlow, Shropshire

I live in a bit of North London hidden from the main broadcasting aerials in Crystal Palace. We have a rooftop aerial with an amplifier plugged into the line before it reaches the analogue television set. This gives us a good picture on the four basic channels but, sadly, something rather fuzzy on Channel 5.

Looking ahead to digitalisation, we borrowed a set-top box. Unfortunately this showed us that none of the channels were coming through, we just got jumpy bits and pieces of pictures. This suggests that the broadcast power isn't sufficient for people in our kind of situation. Can we ask that before digitalisation is imposed upon us, the question of increasing the broadcast power be looked at? As a bonus, could the power for Channel 5 in analogue be raised? It seems sad that people are putting effort into broadcasting something that people like us can't receive.

Humphrey Evans, London, N19.

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10 June, 2004**

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Diary Dates

Saturday 17 April

Annual Concert in aid of Voice of the Listener Trust by BBC Elstree Concert Band BBC Maida Vale Studios, London W5 4pm

Monday & Tuesday, 26 & 27 April

VLV 9th International Conference The Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1 09.30am - 5.00pm

Thursday, 29 April

VLV 21st Spring Conference Hamilton House, London WC1 11.00-4.45pm

Monday, 10 May

VLV visit to Saga Radio, Nottingham 2pm

Thursday, 10 June

VLV visit to BBC Norfolk 2pm

Thursday, 24 June

VLV visit to BBC New Media London W8 2pm

Wednesday, 7 July

VLV Summer Conference, The British Academy, 10 Carlton House Terrace 2-3.30pm.

Wednesday, 7 July

2nd AGM VLV Ltd The British Academy 10 Carlton House Terrace London SW1 4.00pm.

Wednesday, 7 July

VLV Party with flight on the London Eye & dinner at the Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 6-9.30pm

November

VLV annual children's conference London SW1 Date to be confirmed

Tuesday, 30 November

VLV Autumn Conference Hamilton House, London WC1 11.00-4.30pm.

Commonwealth Short Story Competition

The aim is to promote the Commonwealth through broadcasting high quality short stories submitted by Commonwealth writers. The competition is for a short story of up to 4.5 minutes when read aloud (approx 600 words) on any subject. There is a first prize of £2,000 and the deadline for entries is 1st May.

The competition is administered by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association with funding from the Commonwealth Association. For full details, contact the Secretary, CBA, 17 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1AA, 020 7583 5550. www.cba.org.uk