

*“Working for quality
and diversity in
British broadcasting”*



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Evidence to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee on the implications of the BBC World Service Cuts

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) is an independent, non-profit-making association, free from political, commercial and sectarian affiliations, working for quality and diversity in broadcasting. VLV represents the interests of listeners and viewers as citizens and consumers across the full range of broadcasting issues. VLV is concerned with the structures, regulation, funding and institutions that underpin the British Broadcasting system. The World Service is central to the BBC's mission and ethos and has therefore been a key interest and concern of VLV.

1. Introduction

VLV is alarmed at the scale of the cuts government proposes to make in the BBC World Service. VLV members have always regarded the World Service as a core part of the BBC, standing for the best of BBC, and British, values – almost universally applauded at home as well as abroad even when other aspects of BBC activity have come under severe and widespread criticism. The loss of nearly a quarter of the workforce will inflict inevitable damage on the English World Service and leave the BBC with a portfolio of language services barely half that of the Voice of America – and that leaves out of account the 37 services in the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty/Radio Free Asia 'stable' also at the disposal of the USA

2. Summary

VLV makes the following points to the Committee, substantiating our opposition to the proposed cuts.

- It is illogical and inconsistent in terms of stated government priorities in the area of foreign policy, international development and the UK's global 'soft power' influence - diplomatically, culturally and in the provision of credible information and analysis
- The 25% cut in jobs will damage the output and quality of the service well beyond the specific areas to be reduced or removed. VLV accepts, of course, the need for cost reductions, efficiency savings and internal re-prioritization. We question strongly, however, spending cuts on a scale which seem to represent a de-prioritization of the UK's international broadcasting effort generally and which send out to the world a 'downgrade' signal – contrary to our real and long-term national interest.
- Language services, which do a distinct and different job from the English World Service, have been cut or weakened to several target countries where we consider they are still needed.
- It is difficult to make secure medium/long term judgments about different countries' and societies' information and communications shortages and needs. Services once abandoned are difficult to restart quickly. New communications technology can be more quickly and comprehensively blocked than more traditional transmission methods..
- The long term implications of the new funding agreement between the government and the BBC raise some problematic issues as to precisely how and by whom output and funding decisions will be taken for the World Service, in a dispensation when World Service costs will be met by BBC's licence-payers themselves.

3. It is illogical in policy terms

The Coalition Government gave an early and welcome signal of its commitment to global citizenship obligations when it ring-fenced the budget of the Department for International Development. Maintaining this stance on that Department whilst cutting the World Service budget by at least 16%, involving a 25% staff cut, is hard to understand when the World Service itself has proved over many decades to be perhaps the most respected and cost-effective method of fulfilling the UK's international obligations. In many people's opinion it has been more penetrating, credit-accruing and economical than many of the aid programmes assembled by government, IGOs and NGOs to help countries in the developing world. Testimonies from the great and good, and from ordinary listeners, tell how the World Service exemplifies universal principles and cultural values flowing out from Britain.

VLV asks the Committee to review the present proposals against the government's stated policy priorities and BBC World Service's record over many years.

4. The output reductions and job losses

VLV accepts, as the Foreign Secretary and others have said – the BBC World Service cannot be immune from the general financial environment. Immunity or ring-fencing is one thing, disproportionate cuts are another. Rarely has a vital area of expenditure been as *un-ring-fenced* or *un-immune* as this; rarely has there been so glaring a contradiction inside a single area of policy. VLV does not have detailed statistical knowledge of Bush House operations. We have, though, been given to understand that language service closures and reductions account for only a small proportion (around one hundred) of the six hundred and fifty staff cuts, from the current workforce of two thousand four hundred. We wonder therefore what is the rationale behind the several hundred other job losses and what the implications will be for the quality and range of programming in the English schedules as well as in those retained foreign languages where investment is being reduced. The cuts also raise major issues around programme transmission and reception quality – not only its clarity and reach, but also its reliability, security and its immunity to government interference in target countries.

We hope that the Committee's enquiries will provide answers to these questions; and that the Committee's recommendations will reflect those answers and seek to mitigate or modify what is now proposed. We would like the Committee to examine the BBC's prediction of a thirty million, out of one hundred and eighty million, audience loss; and whether this might be an underestimate of the damage. We think the Committee needs to take account, where relevant, of the role played by BBC World Service Television. We think the Committee should probe what the BBC World Service Director has in mind when he says: "BBC World Service English schedules will become simpler and some programmes will be decommissioned".

5. Critical Mass is crucial if the service is to be able to continue to make a major contribution to international broadcasting

The Foreign Secretary has stated that the BBC World Service will still be able to make a major contribution. Maybe it will, but VLV questions what looks like a blithely optimistic assumption that BBC professionalism and the BBC brand will 'see us through' in a global media environment which grows ever more competitive on all platforms (radio, television, internet and mobile).

The current position which, in VLV's view, needs to be maintained and sustained is not one where the UK merely does well. It is one where the BBC is at the top – achieving through a combination of quality and scale a position of global influence through soft power which (unlike the USA) it could never attain in military hardware.

The critical mass underpinning the World Service's pre-eminence in international broadcasting rests on its integration into the BBC as national broadcaster (an asset almost unique among the major international broadcasters). It rests also on the World Service programming schedules in English in combination with a substantial portfolio of language services reflecting a concern for, and commitment to, a diverse range of countries and cultures. The English-literate middle-class professionals and cosmopolitans who can tune into the English World Service are crucial – along with expatriate communities and business travellers. But the language services which go out to meet people in their own tongues are equally important because they can reach where English programming cannot and they send a different, distinct and complementary message out from Britain to the world. So language service disinvestment – whether in the form of total closures, output reductions or transmission limitations – inevitably reduces raw audience numbers and, additionally, sends a downbeat mood message to the world at large. The portfolio of 23 language services, planned for retention, is more than most international broadcasters but it must be set against the 45 deployed by the Voice of America and the 30 at the disposal of Deutsche Welle.

VLV hopes the Committee will take a view on whether this is a satisfactory state of affairs from the standpoint of international broadcasting and British influence internationally.

6. Which language services? - Why it matters to the BBC and to Britain

VLV acknowledges the need for prioritization: and that, if cuts must be made, they should fall on services to countries which are becoming more democratic: benefiting from diversity and independence in the fields of information and culture: assisted by membership actual, or aspired to, in institutions like the European Union and the Council of Europe. There has been a reasonable compatibility – if not identity – of view between UK government priorities around governance, security and development and the BBC's own judgements of broadcasting need and effectiveness. During the Cold War, in a bi-polar world, wise heads - and not only inside the BBC - warned against the damage to the BBC's reputation for impartiality and independence if we were perceived as broadcasting only or mainly to the country's enemies. In the new world enemies are less easily definable; but there are identifiable problem areas and problem issues, predominantly focused in the Muslim world. The planned government cuts will hit Russia and China where high cost-per-listener broadcasting was sustained at government insistence; they will hit large portions of the Indian Sub-Continent (but not Pakistan) and of Africa whose mass audiences have traditionally provided the bulk of the BBC's global total. The Muslim world will meanwhile, from the East Mediterranean, through the Gulf, Iraq and Iran to Afghanistan and Pakistan will be the recipient of substantially more resources (although the costs of BBC Arabic Television are to be reduced). The overall message signals a broadcasting presence that seeks to be worldwide in English but which focuses its language investment on countries and regions rated as politically and culturally problematic for Britain and the West. The retention of life-line broadcasting in Burmese and Somali (and this latter is on the edge of the Islamic zone) does not really address the issues of over-concentration and narrow focus

VLV considers it would be instructive for the Committee to ascertain what percentage of BBC World Service total resources is being devoted to an area holding less than five percent of global population, and to make a judgment about whether this represents a balanced investment of resources, judged against broadcasting need and the national interest.

7. Risk and Reversibility

A key element of the traditional World Service mission is the assurance to audiences that it will be there when needed: BBC content prevailing over all attempts at obstruction. This Imperative has always been thought central to the choice of transmission and distribution methods. Whilst short-wave broadcasting has been vulnerable to jamming (but at great cost to the jammer, and with less than total success), recent experience shows that new media platforms can be quickly and easily blocked. What could be done by the authorities in Cairo could, in some respects at least, be replicated in Moscow, Beijing, or another local power centre, if certain circumstances arose.

The military takeover in Thailand, quite soon after the closure of the Thai Service, illustrated the difficulty of predicting events and reversing resource decisions.

Against this background we are concerned at the long list of services, covering huge swathes of highly populated territory, where direct radio broadcasting will cease completely or be diminished, and distribution confined to online. The list includes Russian and Mandarin, Hindi, Indonesian, Swahili and Spanish for Latin America

VLV considers that the Committee should probe the potential implications and consequences of such disinvestment decisions.

8. BBC World Service and the new funding dispensation

VLV were surprised – in view of the centrality of World Service to the BBC’s mission and ethos – by the apparent meekness of BBC senior management when such severe cuts were under discussion. We heard reports (not denied by the BBC) that the BBC itself was contemplating variant proposals whose impact in some respects (including on the language services) would have been even harsher; but that the BBC did not in the end submit them, having been told that they would not be acceptable to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

On a more positive note the BBC Director-General has since said he wishes to see increased investment in the World Service. VLV feels, however, that it is difficult to be confident about this knowing that World Service will in three years or so be integrated into the BBC’s comprehensive budgeting framework which will be subject to the cumulative impact of the cuts imposed by the Government in October 2010.

Submitted by Robert Clark Secretary to the VLV Board

Friday 11 February 2011

This evidence is not confidential