

VLV Response to the Green Paper on the future of the BBC

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV), the UK's campaign for public service broadcasting, has welcomed the Government's intention to renew the BBC's Royal Charter outlined in the Government Green Paper on the future of the BBC, published today, Wednesday, March 2nd 2005. VLV also fully supports the intention to retain the licence fee as the method of funding the BBC until 2016. However, VLV has expressed reservations about the proposal to replace the BBC Board of Governors with a new BBC Trust and reviews of BBC funding to take place before 2012 which will include an examination of possible sharing of the licence fee with other broadcasters after 2016.

Key VLV comments on the Green Paper

- **Renewal of the Royal Charter**

VLV welcomes the proposal to renew the Royal Charter for a full ten years from 2006 to 2016. This removes the uncertainty surrounding the future of the BBC as we enter the digital age. The recognition that the BBC has a key role to play in building a digital Britain is also a guarantee that viewers and listeners will have a trusted friend to help them navigate the digital future. However, we are concerned that the BBC – and therefore licence-fee payers - will be expected to meet the main costs of the company charged with managing transition to digital, together with a public information campaign and schemes to help the most vulnerable consumers to make the switch and buy new equipment.

- **Future of the Licence Fee**

VLV believes the Licence Fee is essential to maintaining the BBC 's editorial independence and freedom to put the interests of its listeners and viewers above all else. VLV is concerned at proposals to hold two reviews of BBC funding before digital switch-over in 2012. We are particularly concerned at the intention to look at the possibility of subscription funding and at the possibility that after 2016 the licence fee income might be shared with other broadcasters. Any possibility of 'top slicing' the licence fee or of adding a levy to it, would confuse the public and transfer funding from the BBC to commercial broadcasters.

- **BBC Governance**

VLV regrets that the significant changes to BBC Governance recently introduced by the chairman, Michael Grade CBE, have not been given time to prove their worth. The model proposed in the Green Paper seems more appropriate for a commercial company than for a unique public institution. VLV will examine the new mechanisms for governing the BBC to ensure that they ensure its independence from the government of the day – an issue on which the existing Board of Governors seems to have been remarkably successful to date. VLV would strongly oppose any one other than the Director General chairing the Executive Board.

VLV also welcomes the Green Paper's recognition of the unique role that the BBC plays in the broadcasting ecology, especially its contribution to innovation and technical research and development. In this respect VLV is concerned that the projected move of BBC Research and Development from its present base in Kingswood Warren, together with cutbacks in its funding, might jeopardize its future ability to continue to play this role.

Jocelyn Hay, Chairman of VLV commented:

"I am delighted that the Green Paper recognizes that the BBC is central to the cultural and democratic life of the nation and that a strong BBC must remain at the heart of UK broadcasting.

We welcome the continuation of the licence fee as the BBC's principal source of finance but are concerned at proposals to hold another review of BBC funding in five years time and that there is a suggestion that some of the licence fee income might be awarded to other broadcasters. The licence fee enables the BBC to avoid the need to compete for funding with commercial broadcasters and gives it the ability to put the needs of listeners and viewers above all else. As a public service broadcaster with public funding the BBC should continue to provide programmes that are popular with large audiences as well as

those that appeal to minorities. We do not believe that the BBC should be confined to a limited range of programmes and services – the 'Himalayan Heights' option as a former Director General put it. Any such a move would inevitably lead to the marginalization of the BBC, and to a reduction in choice, as has happened in some other countries.

On Governance, VLV will look very carefully at the proposals outlined in the Green Paper. We regret that the reforms now being introduced by the current BBC Chairman have not been given time to prove their worth before further, potentially destabilizing, change is introduced.

We welcome the recognition that the BBC should be moving into new media and services but are concerned that licence fee payers are being expected to pick up the costs of rolling-out the digital infrastructure and of helping the most vulnerable viewers to acquire the equipment and skills to use the new technology.

As always, the devil is in the detail. We shall be studying these proposals in depth in the coming months and reserve our right to react accordingly. We urge all who are concerned about the quality, independence and diversity of British broadcasting to read and respond to the Green Paper."

Ends

Note to Editors:

During the twelve week consultation VLV will be holding a series of public seminars all over the UK to encourage public debate and participation in the process. For details please visit the vlv website: www.vlv.org.uk/pages/campaigns-broadcasting.shtml

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