

**Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom: Submission to the House of Commons' Select Committee for Culture Media and Sport's inquiry into 'The Future of the BBC' (December 2013)**

**Summary**

1. The purpose of public service broadcasting is to provide the widest possible variety in cultural and informational materials to the whole population of the United Kingdom.
2. The BBC should be distanced from the culture of power in the country, and should seek out and publicise a wider range of views.
3. The BBC should be charged with the purpose of seeking out, representing and analysing the widest possible range of informed opinion on matters of social, cultural and political importance, by systematically engaging with sources of news and opinion across the UK
4. The BBC should have a licence fee settlement that reflects its central importance to the communications landscape of the UK
5. The BBC should produce the majority of its programmes in-house.
6. The BBC's commercial activities should be confined to making production and distribution agreements for specified content, and to the selling or licensing of its output and spin offs.
7. The BBC's capacity to invest in research and development and to roll out new ways of reaching the public with public service content has to be nurtured and sustained into the future.
8. The BBC should continue to be funded by the licence fee.
9. There is no case for distributing licence fee funds to other organisations.
10. Commercial operators should be required to make public service content.
11. We should look to other countries for examples of excellence in technique, provision and structure, but should not look overseas for examples of commercial provision that can be used to erode public service broadcasting.
12. The BBC should be removed from Ofcom supervision, its Trust elected, and budgets and policies devolved to the nations and regions, similar to the way the devolution settlement has operated.
13. The BBC should be established by statute, and periodically reviewed by a public Commission based outside of Westminster.
14. The BBC should remain committed to impartiality but currently it needs to broaden the range of informed opinion it publicises.

**1. The CPBF**

2. The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) is a leading independent organisation dealing with questions of freedom, diversity and accountability in the UK media. It is membership-based, drawing its support from individuals, trade unions, and cultural and civil society organisations. The CPBF advocates policies designed to encourage a more pluralistic and democratically accountable media, and intervenes in public debates over the future of media across the United Kingdom.

**3. What should the BBC be for and what should be the purpose of public service broadcasting?**

4. The BBC is a public service broadcaster. The purpose of public service broadcasting is to provide the widest possible variety in cultural and informational materials to the whole of the population of the United Kingdom. Its editorial values should be based on issues of intrinsic importance and merit, and not on audience maximisation. It should strive to engage the range of communities that make up the United Kingdom, producing output which has both majority and minority appeal. The BBC should also be a centre of training and excellence in content production and set high standards in technical and creative innovation.

Although certain genres, such as impartial news and current affairs are essential to a public service remit, ‘public service’ should not be seen as confined to specific genres. The values of ‘intrinsic importance and merit’ apply across the board. The BBC’s non-commercial status has underpinned its leading role in a wide range of genres, including innovative comedy, popular drama and numerous entertaining factual formats. This competition with commercially funded channels has been essential to maintain a high standard across terrestrial broadcasting as a whole.

The Corporation’s role in pioneering technological developments in the public interest is central to its public service remit, as is its delivery of exceptional online content.

5. **How well has the BBC performed in the current Charter period in achieving its mission and public purposes?**

6. The BBC’s public purposes are: *Sustaining citizenship and civil society; promoting education and learning; stimulating creativity and cultural excellence; representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities; bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK; and promoting its other purposes, helping to deliver to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services and, in addition, taking a leading role in the switchover to digital television.*

7. Over the Charter period the BBC has been embroiled in controversies over the cuts in the licence fee, the payments to senior executives and the Jimmy Savile affair, to name just a few of the most high profile issues. It has however continued to develop ranges of services that address all its public purposes in one way or another. Its activities have been constrained by the pressure from governments of all three parties to conform to a cost-cutting agenda generated by their rigid adherence to neo-liberal economic policy over the last thirty years, and from the pressures exerted on it by competitors constantly attempting to undermine its services and to make money by limiting the areas that the BBC should operate in – most notably the forced closure of a range of BBC online services. Sadly, these entirely self-interested complaints have received a sympathetic hearing in government circles.

8. If it has failed it has been in the area of properly representing the full range of informed perspectives on social, economic and political issues which exist in the UK, in its news and current affairs output. It is our view that the BBC as an institution should be distanced from the culture of power in the country – the networks and assumptions which dominate thinking in the centres of political and industrial power – and seek out and publicise a wider range of

views. Both in *From See-Saw to Wagon Wheel* and in its more recent review of breadth of opinion in its output, the BBC has argued that its programmes should represent a wider range of views, and include political views which are not necessarily represented at Westminster. This is a laudable aim, but, most unfortunately, it seems to have been interpreted in such a way as to privilege the view of right-wing, neo-liberal think tanks, and populist parties such as UKIP. It is not the presence of such views which is a problem, but the fact that, as recent research from Cardiff University has demonstrated, these are not routinely balanced by views from the left of the political spectrum, or, in the case of economists, by those who are not in thrall to neo-liberal dogma. In terms of climate change, the BBC made it clear that it had decided that it did not need to include the views of climate change deniers every time that the subject was discussed. In our view, this was entirely correct, but the Corporation should also apply this principle to all other areas of public debate. There is a world of difference between informed opinion, which is the proper province of broadcasting, and mere opinion, which one can encounter every day on public transport, in shops or at the pub. One doesn't pay the licence fee to be regaled by 'common sense' but, as the BBC's charter and licence make abundantly clear, to be educated and informed.

9. This is in part a question of structural re-orientation. The structures of editorial and commissioning procedures should be re-constructed to allow for this. It is also, in part, a product of that narrow educational and social background from which senior BBC personnel are recruited; with far too heavy a preponderance of people from upper middle-class, private school and elite backgrounds. The situation echoes the complaints made to the Beveridge Committee in the late 1940s by the TUC and, although much has changed since then, there is still too much continuity in this area. The narrowness of the social and cultural background of top BBC staff militates against that strata having enough people within it who are able to think outside the parameters of what one can still call the Establishment. Thus, for example, the beneficence of the market, the 'genius' of our parliamentary system, the indestructibility of the system of relations which form the UK, and so on, are largely taken for granted. Inability to think outside these particular boxes also contributes to the process noted above, in that when the views of so-called 'ordinary people' are actually represented, they tend simply to be the most raucous, or, which amounts to more or less the same thing, those amplified daily by the popular press.

**10. Are the public purposes in the current Charter the right ones? How might they change?**

11. The BBC should be charged with the purpose of seeking out, representing and analysing the widest possible range of informed opinion on matters of social, cultural and political importance, by systematically engaging with sources of news and opinion across the UK.

**12. What scope, scale and remit should the BBC have?**

13. The BBC should have a licence fee settlement that reflects the central importance of the BBC to the communications landscape of the UK. It should be allowed to develop new online services without fear of having to consider whether or not the market does or can provide

them. Its primary role is to deliver services to the public; it should challenge commercial organisations rather than second guess or play second-fiddle to them.

14. There needs to be a reversal of the thinking which assumes that the BBC has to justify its activities in market terms. It should not be seen as compensating for ‘market failure’. If the market cannot or will not provide services, that is not a problem for the BBC, but a problem for those organisations who wish to provide commercial services but which do not, for one reason or another, possess the will or the innovative capacity to match publicly funded content and services.

**15. Should the BBC’s output and services be provided to any greater or lesser degree for particular audiences?**

16. The BBC should provide services for as wide a range of audiences as possible. So, it should not be confined to providing programmes which the market cannot or will not supply; it should be allowed to produce mass appeal comedy, drama, music, news and entertainment programmes. Where it can, it should further develop niche services, such as Radio 3 or Radio 6, or BBC 3, which have particular cultural or demographic groups in mind, but within a framework of public service provision, purposes and values.

**17. What balance should be struck in what the BBC produces in-house, commissions externally and leaves entirely to others to create?**

18. The BBC should produce the majority of its programming in-house. This means a reversal of the policies of the last thirty years, which have seen the diversion of public resource, in the form of the licence fee, into the coffers of what has become an increasingly concentrated ‘independent’ production sector. This sector is plagued by insufficient training, poor working conditions, and, where companies are genuinely small and independent, economic uncertainty and pauperism. A democratically accountable BBC should be able to answer for the way our money is spent, should set the highest standards for the welfare of its employees, and set a standard for the media industries in general. It should also be a growing resource for technical and creative training and the provision of space and equipment. Thirty years of outsourcing in the BBC and other public services has undermined the nature of those public services, increased transaction costs, and channelled much needed funds away from public into private hands. This should not continue.

**19. How have the BBC’s commercial activities during the current Charter fitted with the BBC’s public purposes and have they achieved an adequate return for licence fee payers? What should be the aims, scope and scale of such activities beyond 2016?**

**20.** In 2012-2013 the BBC earned pre-tax, £155m from commercial activities, which, though important, does not really compare to the £3,656m from the licence fee in significance.<sup>1</sup>The BBC's commercial activities should be confined to making production and distribution agreements for specified content, and to the selling or licensing of its output and spin offs such as DVDs, publications and toys, to other distributors or to the public. The overlap between commercial approaches and a real commitment to a universal public space is becoming hazier. The Corporation has sold off or outsourced important facilities and services so that substantial parts of the BBC are run on commercial lines. The Corporation's non-commercial status has already been undermined and should not be undermined further.

**21. What role should the BBC play in developing technology and new ways of distributing content?**

**22.** This is a crucial part of the mix. The BBC has always played an extremely important role in developing new technologies. This capacity to invest in research and development and to roll out new ways of reaching the public with public service content has to be nurtured and sustained into the future. This cannot happen successfully if the Corporation has to look over its shoulder to Ofcom whenever it wants to introduce a new service.

**23. How should the BBC be funded beyond 2016?**

**24.** The licence fee has proven that it is fit for purpose. It provides tremendous value for money to the public, at 40p a day<sup>2</sup>, compared to the costs of commercial satellite and cable, internet access, and mobile phones. The centralised funding of the BBC through the licence fee is the bedrock of its public accountability and provides us with the rights to demand changes which we as citizens do not have over the press -witness the stubborn and determined resistance to public pressure over Leveson's proposals which has emanated from the industry – and the energy industries.

Funding by licence fee rather than direct taxation underpins the BBC's editorial independence from the Government -even though it remains vulnerable to Government pressure.

**25. Is there a case for distributing funding for public service content more widely beyond the BBC?**

**26.** No. This is another version, along with outsourcing, of privatising public provision by stealth. This is what has taken place in the NHS, where a gradual process of introducing structural changes and private provision in more and more ways has increased transaction costs for the public, constrained service provision, and delivered ever-increasing amounts of money into

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<sup>1</sup> *BBC Annual Report 2012-2013* (London, BBC, 2013) at: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/pdf/2012-13/bbc-annualreport-overview-2012-13.pdf> accessed 27 November 2013

<sup>2</sup> *BBC Annual Report 2012-2013*

private health companies, with the active connivance of civil servants and politicians. This is yet another iteration of that destructive proposal which is actually designed to break up the BBC, in the same way as outsourcing is eroding the quality of NHS care and ‘free schools’ have stripped the education system of local democratic accountability.

This proposal also assumes that a limited part of the broadcast output can be described as ‘public service content’ rather than recognising that broadcasting as a whole offers a service to the public.

27. If the Committee is concerned about the need to roll out public service values and content across broadcasting and the internet, then there is a perfectly simple mechanism available to them. Measure market share of providers in reach and income, and once a set threshold has been reached, impose obligations to provide public service broadcasting. We should not weaken the BBC by dissipating its resources and undermining the economies of scope and scale which a centralised funding system allows. Nor should we let off the hook the big commercial beasts which prowl the new media environment, or reward them for simply pocketing profits rather than investing them in programming that serves the public interest.

**28. What comparisons can be made with the provision of public service content in other countries?**

29. It has long been acknowledged (although not, of course, by the BBC’s powerful enemies in the UK) that the system of providing public service broadcasting through the BBC and, formerly, through ITV and ILR, was one of the most successful forms of broadcasting internationally. That is not to criticise excellent examples of public service broadcasting in other countries, but only to underline the fact that no other system broadcasting has yet been devised that makes that traditional model of insisting that public service values operate across the broadcasting industry seem no longer fit for purpose. We should look to other countries for examples of excellence in technique, provision and structure. But we should not seek overseas for examples of commercial provision that can be used to erode public service broadcasting. We should be looking for ways of rolling out, once again, public service obligations to the private sector and restoring some of the socially desirable impulses that drove commercial provision prior to the 1990 Broadcasting Act. It should also be noted that those from other countries find utterly incomprehensible the hostility to the BBC which is so frequently expressed by UK governments and corporate interests. Wherever one goes in the world, not only are television stations showing BBC programmes, but these are also extremely popular. The audiences of such programmes simply cannot understand why their originator is held in such low esteem by those in positions of state and corporate power in the UK.

**30. How should the BBC be governed, regulated and held accountable beyond 2016?**

31. The BBC should be removed from Ofcom supervision on matters of new developments and content control. Ofcom is primarily a regulator designed to promote markets in communications. Unless and until its remit is widened and its structures reformed, it is not fit for purpose in so far as the regulation of the BBC is concerned. It has presided over the very considerable diminution of public service obligations in ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5, and is more often the cheer leader for neo-liberal policies in communications, in spite of the fact that in the wider economy, and in the public services these have been proven to have failed (except, of course, to the proponents of these policies). The crises that we have witnessed in the wider economy, especially in the finance sector, and in the NHS, are all products of exactly the same kind of thinking that created Ofcom and that still, in spite of everything, dominates the limited world of policy making on communications.
32. The BBC Trust should be elected, not appointed. An electoral college should be established consisting of organisations from civil society, the industry and the trade unions; with civil society organisations predominating. This college would be subject to revision of membership at three year intervals, and charged with organising [a] elections for governors amongst its constituencies, and [b] the scrutiny of candidates prior to election. For reasons explained earlier, we need to break the hold of a very distinctive type of establishment-networked individual, formerly known as a member of ‘the great and the good’, who dominate the boards of public bodies.
33. Control over budgets and policy making should be devolved in significant measure to democratically elected national bodies, accountable to the national assemblies. This does not remove the overall power of the BBC to set policy and financial guidelines, but, in the same way that the National Assembly for Wales has significant powers devolved to it whilst remaining part of the UK polity, so national BBC services should have a similar structure.
34. Both of the above measures would strengthen the Corporation’s accountability to the public and to the nations of the United Kingdom, and weaken the suffocating hold of the centre on the BBC.
- 35. In a constantly evolving communications environment, does a 10-year Royal Charter and Agreement with the Secretary of State, together, provide the most appropriate constitutional framework for the BBC?**
36. The Campaign considers the Royal Charter an archaic and opaque system of governance. The BBC should be established by statute. Renewals of the statute should be preceded by an inquiry conducted by a publicly appointed Commission, which would conduct independent research and consult widely with the public before reporting to Parliament, prior to the drawing up of any legislation or the renewal of legislation. Statutes should run for a ten year minimum period.

37. While the scrutiny of Parliamentary Committees is important, these bodies have limited time and resources, compared to those which a properly constituted Commission would possess. In addition, the Commission would be able to engage systematically with opinion and civil society outside the limited parameters set by Westminster, the national press, Whitehall and Ofcom.

38. The BBC's commitment to impartiality should be retained and strengthened. In an age when previously separate kinds of media now appear in similar forms – for example, newspapers going online and carrying video services – this is more important than ever. As we pointed out in our Submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications in April 2013:

46. As newspapers, that are not subject to impartiality requirements, become 'broadcasters', with online audio-visual content, there are renewed threats to impartiality rules. .... The standards of public service broadcasting, and in particular the all-important requirements for impartiality and balance, could be seriously jeopardised by the effects of politically partisan broadcasting creeping in through the back door. In our view, online versions of newspapers should therefore come within the regulatory scope of Ofcom, but with a lighter regime than for conventional broadcasters<sup>3</sup>

39. The BBC's main news bulletins should have an obligation to reflect a wide range of informed views on matters of public interest which extend beyond the Westminster consensus. It is of course legitimate to represent the positions of the major parties, but they do not represent the range of informed opinion on key issues such as foreign policy, the welfare state and the economy. By aligning its sense of impartiality on matters of public interest with the perspectives dominant in Whitehall and the policy making elites of London, Europe and the USA, the perspectives reflected by the BBC are all too frequently based in narrow, limited, 'Establishment' thinking. This change cannot be undertaken simply or quickly, given the habits and practices of the institution and of the political elites in this country. But, if the BBC is to represent adequately the wide variety of informed opinion in this country it needs to establish mechanisms for regular reporting of issues from perspectives other than those the current dominant Whitehall/Westminster consensus.

## Ends

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<sup>3</sup> Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, *Submission to House of Lords Select Committee on Communications Consultation on Media Plurality (April 2013)* (London, CPBF) at: <http://www.cpbf.org.uk/body.php?doctype=policies&ref=0&section=0> accessed 27<sup>th</sup> November 2013