

Broadcasting Committee

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A memorandum of evidence submitted to the National Assembly for Wales' Broadcasting Committee in advance of the Heritage Minister's appearance before the Committee on 2 June 2008.

Introduction

Public Service Broadcasting - on television, radio and on line, makes a very important contribution to the cultural, artistic, political and sporting life of Wales. It plays a crucial role in informing citizens about and promoting engagement with politics and government at both local and national level. The Welsh Assembly Government is, however, aware of the impact which technological change and digital switchover are having on television channels in particular. I therefore welcome the National Assembly's decision to establish a broadcasting committee to investigate these matters. The Welsh Assembly Government will be submitting evidence to Ofcom's review of public service broadcasting in due course. Ofcom has proposed four models for the future of PSB in the UK. We are considering all four carefully and we will prepare a response which will take full account of the particular needs of Wales.

Background

One Wales commits the Welsh Assembly Government to a citizen centred system of Government. We value active citizenship. But active citizens are dependent on a thriving news media. Traditionally the print media in Wales has been weaker than in other nations and regions of the UK. This has only served to underline the importance of broadcast news services and in particular the television news broadcast in English on ITV and BBC and in Welsh on S4C.

The Welsh Assembly Government has taken a close interest in developments relating to public service broadcasting. Even though citizens now have a greater choice of news media, the available evidence suggests that viewers continue to place considerable store on programmes about the communities where they live including the provision of impartial television news services. We are, therefore, anxious to ensure that public service broadcasters continue to deliver these crucial services in Wales.

Public service television also generates cultural and economic benefits. Wales is fortunate to have a strong independent production base. Welsh producers have not always, however, enjoyed ready access to network commissions. We believe that the success of Dr Who and associated series have underlined the depth of talent available in Wales. The challenge for the Assembly Government and the industry now is to build on this and look at future opportunities. We will, therefore, continue to support the creative industries sector more generally including targeted support aimed at rectifying market failure in the independent television production sector and generating a critical mass of production business for Welsh based companies.

The future development of public service broadcasting in Wales is inextricably linked with the systems available for transmitting television content. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to developing our communications infrastructure and to improving the availability of broadband services to rural areas. We are also committed to the development of an integrated communications strategy which recognises the crucial linkages between the development of broadcast content and the means available for transmitting that content.

This strategy will take account of the Assembly Government's interest in public service broadcasting policy. It is only right that the Assembly Government should have an input into UK PSB policy development. Consideration will be given to the fact that at the moment Wales does not have a formal representative on the Ofcom Board or on sub committees such as the Radio Committee. We will also want to consider broader accountability mechanisms give sufficient weight to UK aspects of policy making in this area.

Creative industries sector

In addition to their cultural impact, the creative industries are recognised by the Government as being of strategic importance to the Welsh economy in the long term. We are determined to help businesses within the sector achieve their growth potential, building on the wealth of indigenous talent across Wales as well as our ability - as a result of our landscape, tourism and leisure offer and quality of life - to attract inward investment.

Our approach to the creative industries has recently been reviewed by the Department for the Economy and Transport's Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG). The MAG concluded that the 2004 Creative Industries Strategy was still relevant and correct, but that changes were required in terms of delivery to ensure that the implementation of the strategy was sector led, strategically focused and better aligned with other key sectors. DE&T is implementing these changes as part of its restructuring process.

We are now working on new ways of ensuring that our activities are aligned and bring maximum benefit for the creative industries, to complement existing initiatives such as the IP Fund. This Fund is managed and delivered by Finance Wales; to date we have invested over £6m into 18 intellectual property ("IP") assets across film, TV and new media, leveraging in over £13m of direct industrial economic spend on Welsh crew, locations, technicians, post production services and talent.

Welsh Assembly Government Aims

The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to the development of an integrated communications strategy. Our strategy will be

evidence based and we have commissioned a media audit to underpin that evidence base. The strategy will reflect the growing convergence of digital media. It will aim to ensure that digital public service broadcasting post switchover continues to make the cultural, economic and political contribution which public service broadcasting has made in the analogue world. Our strategy will be developed over the coming months but the key components of that strategy are already clear. They include:

i. **a strong BBC** - a strong BBC funded by the licence fee remains the heart of UK public service broadcasting. At the UK level the BBC makes a crucial contribution towards ensuring that there is distinctive and compelling broadcast content available to viewers in the UK. The Welsh Assembly Government believes that the BBC needs to play an equally if not more important role in broadcasting in Wales. The Government support for a strong BBC funded by the licence fee extends across content broadcasting in English and Welsh.

ii. **plurality** - the Welsh Ministers would be very concerned if the BBC were the only provider of broadcast news and other content specific to Wales. For the time being, therefore, we believe that this points to a continuing role for ITV in Wales. We would like to see continuation of the requirement on ITV to broadcast Wales specific content and to accord this content due prominence. In the medium term it might be feasible to consider other means and other channels for communicating this content. At the moment, however, none offer the impact and reach of ITV One. For the time being, therefore, our policy is to press to ensure that this broadcast content should continue to be made available wherever possible during peak hours on the main commercial channel.

iii. **continued support for S4C** - vibrant and diverse Welsh language broadcasting will remain at the heart of our broader commitment to public service broadcasting in Wales. The launch of this new children's service is hugely exciting and important. S4C's public funding is secure but digital switchover and moving away from the bilingual analogue service represents significant challenges which need to be kept under review.

iv. **Channel 4** - following digital switchover Channel 4 would become available to all Welsh viewers for the first time. We look forward to Welsh based content and production talent making an even stronger contribution to this distinctive aspect of the UK PSB landscape.

v. **a strong production sector** - it has now been established that Wales has the production and technical talent to generate compelling world class television. We will continue to work with the broadcasters and skillset to offer support for the independent production centre. Our aim will be to ensure that between them the broadcasters and independent producers account for at least our population share of UK television commissioning.

vi. **Wales on screen** - Wales must be more than a place where great programmes get made. Public service broadcasters must also hold up a mirror to the lives of the people of Wales. Television needs to represent Wales - its sporting achievements and culture as well as news and politics. Gavin and Stacey needs to be just a beginning.

vii. **universal broadcast coverage** - even after switchover terrestrial broadcast coverage will not be available in the whole of Wales and a worrying number of homes will only have access to certain television services. There are similar difficulties with regard to digital radio. Viewers and listeners in Wales should have access to the same range of services as those elsewhere.

viii. **comprehensive broadband infrastructure** - an advanced communications infrastructure is a crucial ingredient in the distribution of public service broadcasting and of the interactive services which are an increasingly mainstream part of the public service offering. Welsh citizens will not be able to take advantage of all that public service broadcasting has to offer unless they also have access to high speed broadband links. We will continue with our efforts to ensure that the broadband infrastructure in Wales stands comparison with that available elsewhere in the UK.

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