

Public Service Broadcasting (Communications Committee Report)

Motion to Take Note

4.38 pm

Moved By Lord Fowler

That this House takes note of the report of the Communications Committee on Public Service Broadcasting: Short-term Crisis, Long-term Future? (2nd Report, HL Paper 61).

Lord Fowler: My Lords, first, I thank my committee for its exceptional, hard work on the report and, indeed, for its work on all the other inquiries that we have conducted. Secondly, I acknowledge receipt of the Government's response delivered this lunchtime, which shows Whitehall catching up with the transport concept of "just in time delivery". It responds, in several respects, very constructively to the points that the committee made. It is an extremely well written response, which I put down entirely to the new broadcasting Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Carter. Perhaps the first question is, "What exactly is public service broadcasting?". We could so easily spend the next two hours debating its scope and how it is expressed. For the purposes of the debate, however, I suggest that the working definition we give at paragraph 13 of the report—

"an approach that focuses on the provision of core elements including national and regional news, current affairs programmes, the arts, children's programming, programmes dealing with religion and other beliefs and UK content"—

roughly describes the area that we are in.

4 Jun 2009 : Column 380

In the provision of these kinds of programmes, there is no doubt that the BBC is, and has been for three-quarters of a century, the pre-eminent provider. It is something of a national pastime to hurl bricks at the BBC. Sometimes they are justified. For example, personally, I am on the side of the Public Accounts Committee, which was reported this morning to have said that the BBC should give information about the salaries and fees that are paid to its very expensive presenters. It should make that a term of the contracts that it provides.

However, it should also be recognised how important a national asset the BBC is. One of the lessons that the Communications Committee has learnt in its short career is just how valued the BBC is at home and how much

admired it is overseas. No other broadcaster is able to provide the promenade concerts or range of drama, for example, that are provided on Radio 4 and, indeed, on Radio 3. No other media organisation in this country is able to provide the range of home and overseas news that is broadcast by the BBC.

I am not one of those who believe that the future somehow belongs to citizen journalists. By their very nature they are part-time and issue-driven. They undoubtedly have a part to play, but the real need in an increasingly complex world is for professional journalists with the ability to dig beyond the press releases. Here, again, the BBC sets a standard of professionalism and objectivity that is difficult to match.

Having said that, it is always important to remember that the BBC is not the only public service broadcaster in this country. In the committee's view, it would be entirely unsatisfactory if it was ever to become so in Britain. The Government's response also makes that point clear. ITV, Channel 4 and Five make important contributions. With regional news, for example, ITV attracts four to five million viewers every evening and the research shows that audiences value the choice that this gives them.

Of course, however, as the committee points out, the commercial public service broadcasters currently share a common feature: they are all having to deal with the severest financial weather to hit broadcasters for over half a century. The transfer of analogue to digital has deprived them of the implied but very real subsidy that was being provided. The internet provides increasing competition for advertising revenue, and the world recession has meant company after company cutting back on spending. The impact is severe and undoubted.

My speech will concentrate on news provision, not least because, earlier in the day, the noble Lord, Lord Bragg, dealt with many of the issues surrounding the arts. We face the prospect that, unless action is taken, much broadcast news will simply disappear. ITV has already made it entirely clear that, under present arrangements, its regional news programmes—much valued but expensive to produce—will go. Equally, the much admired "Channel 4 News" programme has always relied on cross-subsidy from Channel 4 itself. In the present cold economic climate, the subsidy cannot continue indefinitely.

So the questions are those of what could be done and, of course, whether anything should be done. One argument is that it should all be left to the market. We

4 Jun 2009 : Column 381

rejected that argument, partly because some of the alternative programmes—good as they might be—could not be accessed free by the public but depend on subscription, but crucially because, if you take the area of news, going the market way would end up with a virtual BBC monopoly, which I think would be totally undesirable in a democracy.