

The Scottish Co-operative Party



Politics For People

Submission to the Education and Culture Committee on the future of the BBC from the Scottish Co-operative Party.

I am writing to you in response to the call for evidence about the future of the BBC.


I am writing on behalf of the Scottish Co-operative Party in response to your call for evidence around the issue of the BBC's Charter Renewal in 2016. Mutual and co-operative models have a long history in Scotland going back, at least, to the Fenwick Weavers' established in 1761 and the work of Robert Owen at New Lanark in the first half of the nineteenth century. Mutual organisations are found right across Scotland in the present day and allow service users and customers to have a say on how organisations are run and services delivered.

In an environment in which media technologies and patterns of media consumption are changing faster than ever, it is right that the BBC's role and remit should be regularly reviewed, and that the public should have the chance to input on its priorities for the coming decade.

In creating a more accountable BBC, its independence from political and commercial interests must remain paramount. For as long as the BBC's status is the subject of continual parliamentary and ministerial comment, it cannot truly be independent of the political institutions it is asked to scrutinise. And for as long as licence fee payers are required to provide the bulk of the Corporation's funding without commensurate rights and responsibilities, it can never be truly accountable to them (nor can the licence fee be truly defensible).

As an organisation that advocates for co-operative and mutual models, we have seen that services are most effective and responsive when they are governed directly by the people who pay for and are employed by them. We therefore believe that the BBC can only be both accountable and independent if it is directly responsible to its viewers and listeners. We believe that this goal can be best achieved by introducing mutual principles into its governance.

Given the widely acknowledged failure of the current arrangement to provide effective oversight, we believe that there is a clear opportunity to further wed the Corporation to the public it serves by



reforming the Trust with a majority-elected membership, in which all licence fee holders are given a stake in the Corporation.

A BBC Trust reformed on mutual principles would provide a mechanism for direct consultation and genuine engagement with the BBC's viewers and listeners. It would provide a medium through which licence holders can express their views on the services that the Corporation provides. Significantly, this solution would introduce the principle of reciprocity and stake holding to the license fee – crucial if this funding mechanism is to remain tenable in a multi-channel age.

The current appointed trustees should be replaced with a trust selected by licence fee payers, a process that could leverage the existing infrastructure used to collect the licence fee and run the Audience Councils. The reconstituted Trust could also include representation for BBC staff and other stakeholders. Given the Corporation's privileged position under Royal Charter, it is also appropriate that the Trust continue to include a limited number of government nominees to safeguard the taxpayer interest.

Such a mutual or people's BBC would have to reflect the diversity of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom and the Trustees would have to continue to have designated seats for the nations of the United Kingdom.

We also believe that there is a need for a full and open debate in Scotland led by licence-fee payers around the future of the BBC which will feed into the formal responses of the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to the BBC Charter Renewal Process. It would be wrong for the response from Scotland to merely reflect the views of politicians, we must be working towards a People's BBC which reflects the views and aspirations of the people of Scotland.

In a more democratic and open BBC, it is also right that strategic and executive decision making functions continue to be separated. The reconstituted Trust would retain its current remit of setting the overall strategy for the Corporation and scrutinising editorial, financial and regulatory issues, with the Executive Board retaining its current role of managing the BBC's day-to-day output.

The concept of a 'mutual' or 'people's BBC' is one which has been proposed on numerous occasions in recent years, including by former senior staff and a former Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport. I have enclosed copies of their statements with this letter. I have also included a petition which has attracted thousands of signatures online, which provides some indication of its popular support. I hope that these will be useful in informing the Committee's Inquiry in the months ahead, and that they will receive your full consideration.

The Britain in which the BBC was founded in 1922 is very different to the one we live in today. But in an increasingly fragmented and commercialised media landscape, its role in our national life has never been greater. By protecting the BBC's independence and providing licence fee payers the voice and value that they rightly demand, we can ensure it continues to play a vital role for decades to come.

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