

RISE AND BE A BROADCASTER AGAIN?

John MacInnes

In a small country like Scotland, our film and television industry is especially important to us because, as well as bringing the world to us, they provide us with the most powerful contemporary means for expressing our own identity to the world, whether in Scotland, the rest of the UK, or beyond. The image that we project of ourselves is important. By encouraging the growth and exposure of talent ... and by ensuring strong broadcasting and film institutions ... we are investing in Scotland's future excellence in broadcasting and film, and raising the image of Scotland around the world.

November the 8th 1993 saw over 100 broadcasters, marshalled by big names such as Gus Macdonald, Kirsty Wark, John MacCormack and Stuart Cosgrove, call for a stronger producer base for broadcasting in Scotland and in particular a commitment from the BBC to give BBC Scotland a larger share of resources and access to the networks. The occasion was the launching conference of a new organisation 'Broadcasting For Scotland' which set out its objectives in a statement declaring that broadcasting should 'function for and not just within its national constituency'. It takes as its objective the forthcoming White Paper on the BBC and argues that BBC Scotland should have a commitment to 'reflect the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of the nation' and 'the required financial, administrative and programming autonomy to become a fully effective partner in the UK broadcasting network'. It summarises this approach in terms of four key principles:

Participation	Both of people in Scotland with the BBC and of BBC in the UK network
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Transparency	To Scottish licence payers and employees
Accountability	Politically, culturally and financially to a 'fully empowered Broadcasting Council For Scotland'
Investment	'The control of the accumulated Scottish licence fee must be a Scottish responsibility'

The tone of the organisation is pragmatic and it takes many of the cues for its arguments from **Scotland in the Union: A Partnership for Good** (the Government's statement on the constitutional position of Scotland, issued last year). It boasts Lord Macfarlane, Bruce Pattullo, Governor of the Bank of Scotland, the Moderator of the General Assembly, the chief executive of the SCDI, Campbell Christie and Gus Macdonald amongst others as its patrons: an impressive list of senior figures in the Scottish industrial and cultural establishments.

On 17th December, Broadcasting for Scotland submitted to the Department of National Heritage its contribution to the BBC Charter debate, entitled 'The Case for a Stronger and less Centralist BBC'. One statistic, in an appendix to the document, illustrates the scale of the problem. Last year BBC Scotland contributed just 1 (yes one) hour of factual programmes to the UK national TV network. Its total national contribution was 80 hours: less than one per cent of programme time.

The submission supports the BBC's declared aim of 'correcting the imbalance of its network programmes away from their metropolitan and South East bias', but argues that without structures and policies to back this up, nothing will change. It suggests that strict upper limits be set for the amount of programmes made in London and in England. Boldly it proposes that England should be made a National Region, alongside the existing National Regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that the four National Governors should sit on the new board. It proposes that Broadcasting Councils should be given responsibility not only for opt-out programming, but for the network services in their National Regions.

The focus of the November conference was, as Alan Shiach put it, 'delivering a long, lingering affectionate kiss of life to BBC Scotland'. Currently BBC Scotland makes under 1% of peak network TV programmes and gets just over 3% of the licence fee, compared to its audience share (and Scottish

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licence fee contribution) of about 9%. It does better than other regions in the amount of opt-out local programmes it produces (around 12 hours per week or 4% of broadcasts), but these are done at low cost, and are concentrated in the areas of sport and news, rather than, say, drama. The result of all this is that although over £100m is collected in licence fees, less than £50m is spent by the BBC in Scotland making programmes.

The current stultifying concentration of media power and resources in the parish-come-black-hole surrounded by the M25 was roundly condemned. Conference speakers competed to top each other's anecdotes of flabbergasting metropolitan ignorance of events north of Watford. Winner of this competition was Donald MacKay who told of a TV producer on the phone who didn't know that North sea oil was found *under the North sea*. London produces three quarters of the programmes, gobbles up a similar share of the resources and makes the network decisions for everyone else. Like other areas outside London, Scotland employs many fewer people in the industry than it would do if resources were spread more evenly. The concentration of opportunity in London sucks Scottish talent there. Scottish material is judged by a metropolitan cultural bias ('the shadow of the Groucho Club') - the old problem identified by Annan of 'the marketable image' - and programming fails to reflect material differences between Scotland and England such as the timing of school holidays or viewing patterns related to work and commuting. Another dimension of the problem is the concentration of BBC Scotland resources on 'opt outs' from the network: although it does more of this than any other region, the results are constrained drastically by economies of scale (an average of £20K per hour is spent on opt outs compared to £200K an hour for network programmes) and gives the impression, as one speaker put it, that 'Scots sit whingeing to each other while England - or rather London - speaks for Britain'.

Gus Macdonald's favoured solution to this problem was an obligation in the BBC's charter to produce 'a due proportion' of its network output in the regions. One way of doing this would be to locate a major UK national department in Scotland, for example children's programmes. This would protect and develop a producer base in Scotland. David Hutchison raised a few eyebrows when he suggested that television should perhaps emulate Radio Scotland - not hitherto renowned for its conspicuous success. His argument was that rather than the current diet of network (i.e. London) programmes plus Scottish opt-out 'add ons', BBC TV Scotland should copy its radio twin and substitute its own news and current affairs coverage for the

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London versions using London originated material where appropriate, and combine this with autonomous control of network schedules in Scotland.

If the analysis was not new, the proposed solutions deliberately framed to offend as few as possible (especially the cabinet or Department of National Heritage), and the ideals espoused suitably lofty, the comradeship expressed between independents, ITV companies and Beeb stalwarts was remarkable. Even Allan Shiach's wry observation that the STV camera had departed once their leader had finished his speech didn't dispel the muskateerish air of all for one.

The strength of support for Broadcasting for Scotland is further proof of the tremendous commitment of both consumers and producers to a Scottish media. And this is something whose significance deserves more reflection. First, the development of an explicitly Scottish broadcasting media in any form given the virtual absence of any state protection or promotion of a national dimension is a conundrum. How is it that at a time when, for example, control of other industries has shifted inexorably southward, it could be argued that, to some extent, the opposite has been occurring in the media - *despite* the overwhelming power of metropolitan parochialism in all its form which conference contributors so ably described? How is it, for example, that industrialists who have been so sceptical of political devolution are willing to advocate devolution of the media? If there is a spectre haunting Broadcasting for Scotland it is that of the 9th April 1992. The general election result came as a great shock to those in the Scottish media, as Ian Macwhirter's piece in **Scottish Affairs** No. 1 illustrated. Is the renewed emphasis on media devolution some kind of sublimation of the failed efforts at constitutional change?

While the economics of the metropolitan domination of broadcasting in Scotland are fairly straightforward, the problems start once the connexion is made between markets and questions of culture and identity. Most conference contributors believed that more authentically Scots views of the world would address a British problem: the UK's (or rather London's) inability to represent its own diversity to itself. It was as if - in Christopher Harvie's famous distinction - the 'red' Scots wanted to take a leaf out of the 'black' Scots' books: broadcast to the world, but from an authentically Scottish viewpoint.

Lesley Riddoch had a couple of characteristically trenchant observations. She compared reporting of English news to the Scots, and vice versa, to news

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items lost somewhere in the gap between 'home' and 'foreign' news. Putting this question from another angle she defined the solution to the problem of broadcasting in Scotland to be a situation where people could watch or listen to radio or TV 'without the experience of being felt or perceived as "other"'. Behind this issue lay the assumption, hardly questioned in the day's proceedings, that broadcasting was or ought to be directed to either a homogeneous audience, or, at the very least, one sharing some central common features - an 'English' or 'Scottish' audience with corresponding experiences, outlooks, tastes and identities. In important ways this is true. If the Nine O'clock News gets preoccupied with the travails of English cricket or the adventures of Gazza most Scots get fed up. Conversely, Scottish-made programmes are more popular in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK. But there are important ways in which this is not true.

Audiences are differentiated by gender, age, income, lifestyle, sexual orientation: the list could be extended. And one of the great triumphs of Public Service Broadcasting, despite its metropolitan myopia, was to have the resources and scale to address specific audiences. Radio Scotland, for example may do a very good job on thin resources, but Scottish listeners often prefer its British competitor channels 1 to 5 because they address their more particular interests and have the resources, born of both economies of scale and some limited autonomy from the ratings battle, to do this well.

Good television and radio is expensive: a hard fact for small countries to swallow. Much Scandinavian television, for example, manages to make **Thingummyjig** and **The White Heather Club** look good; and it is supplemented by bland American drivel. It is too easy to forget that the output of Queen Margaret Drive and Cowcaddens has not always covered itself in glory, and has not always embraced the diversity of its national audience. For example I feel myself as 'other' when watching Peter McDougall's diet of Clydesidist misogyny dressed up as Glasgow street wisdom. It doesn't express my Scottish identity to the world.

The BBC deserves criticism for its metropolitanism. But the chorus of disapproval has members with, at the very least, an interest to declare. It is perhaps heartening to see the commercial broadcasters voicing support for BBC Scotland. And the impetus which (quite fortuitously) commercial television gave to regional broadcasting gives them some credible grounds for doing so. But it's a bit like the support you get from a noose. Nobody at the November conference was impolite enough to point out that while commercial broadcasters may genuinely espouse the merits of their Scottish

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identity, their business is to sell audiences to advertisers to produce a good bottom line for their shareholders. And if the two collide, it's the bottom line that will win out each time. At least the BBC has the potential, as a public service broadcaster, to put questions of regional and national identity on its agenda without asking what the commercial return would be. It is surely too easy to forget what a great achievement, for all its faults, the BBC and the traditions of Public Service Broadcasting it established have been.

The point of course, is that if BBC Scotland had more resources, and the career paths for talent didn't all lead to London, there would be a stronger material basis for producing better programmes. It would be a great pity if we somehow assumed that more market pressure on the BBC might help it to decentralise: but wouldn't this be the sort of equation the present government would find it easy to make? The BBC does need to decentralise. It does, along with commercial networks, need to emancipate itself from its metropolitan parochialism. But it can surely do this best if it is given the public support and encouragement it needs to be the best public service broadcaster in the world. The political impact of rapid technological change has made regulation more difficult, and public service broadcasting less popular with governments at the same time as it faces ever more terrestrial, satellite and computer/video competition. In this context it is vital to get that regulation right for 'the only major cultural institution in Scotland where control lies South of the border'.

Unfortunately the equation between markets and decentralisation is already apparently being made in the BBC with negative results for Scotland. At the November conference, John McCormick, Controller of BBC Scotland, had some bold words to say about retaining 'creative communities' in Scotland, embracing

not only writers, actors, journalists, producers, performers, but also crafts people: VT editors, audio and camera operators, film-makers, technicians, graphic artists, wardrobe and make up specialists.

It is important to us that broadcasting is rooted in the communities so it is important that we can make programmes in different parts of Scotland. That resource, that infrastructure, is crucial. To do it costs money. An economist would argue that, in accountancy terms, it doesn't make sense. To use an analogy, whether you are making tin cans or radio or television programmes it is cheaper to do it all in one place. But people who make tin cans don't necessarily believe in cultural diversity. I do.

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Because of this, the BBC would not become a publisher broadcaster in Scotland, and countering its concentration in London would mean more programme production in Scotland. Citing McDougall's **Down Among the Big Boys** he asked: 'how many million pound films were made in Scotland this year?'.

Now it seems that recently the Drama department in Scotland (responsible for **Big Boys**) was reorganised along 'internal market' lines to compete for funds with all other regions, and apparently is in 'deficit'. Thus on 14 March it was announced that *all* core production staff in the Drama department in Glasgow would go. Henceforth the department will comprise development officers commissioning *ideas* (alongside inevitable *accountant* functions), and will rely on independents or crews from elsewhere in the BCC actually to make programmes. It is also rumoured that the BBC's production facilities in Aberdeen may close soon. Not many prospects for million pound films! Maybe the accountants will suggest it starts making tin cans.

So much for BBC anti-metropolitanism, but it would be mistaken to be more sanguine about independent competition. While commercial broadcasting has hitherto encouraged regional TV in the UK, the government's reform of the regulatory environment and emphasis on markets may have thrown this into reverse. Regional opt-out TV may be cheap, but not relative to audience size and ratings. As mergers amongst commercial stations proceed, and franchise bidding requires a substantial war chest, it would be unsurprising if the commercial broadcasters honoured their commitments to regional programming in letter rather than spirit. And a pretty cheap shoddy letter it could be. This would not be such a surprising outcome from a government whose broadcasting cultural policy seems to comprise the ability to intone the holy words 'market forces' and read a bottom line. The rousing statement which headed this article (cited by Alan Shiach at the conference) was Ian Lang speaking at the 1993 BAFTA Scotland ceremony. Maybe he is oblivious to the logic of his government's policies, or maybe he was just reliving his Cambridge Footlights days and enjoying a good joke.

Expressions of support for Broadcasting for Scotland should be sent to Eddie Dick, Co-ordinator, Broadcasting for Scotland, at the Scottish Film Council, 74 Victoria Crescent Road, Glasgow G12 9JN.

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