



AN COMUNN GAIDHEALACH
BROADCASTING IN THE 90's
COMPETITION, CHOICE AND QUALITY
REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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BROADCASTING IN THE 90s: COMPETITION, CHOICE AND QUALITY

Comments on the White Paper

PREAMBLE

An Comunn Gaidhealach has been aware of the fact that Radio and Television has now formed an integral part of the cultural fabric of our nation and acknowledges that both have a unique power to shape our perceptions and thus influence our attitudes and actions.

Consequently the Association has, for many years now, been in constant consultation with BBC Scotland, Grampian Television and Scottish Television (STV) with a view either to initiate or expand upon Gaelic programming.

Much has been achieved within the last decade (especially with regard to radio broadcasting) but it has now been accepted that, mainly due to the Broadcasting Authorities own internal problems, it is impossible for them to provide a GAELIC BROADCASTING SERVICE within the existing framework.

INTRODUCTION

Considering the above, An Comunn Gaidhealach now welcomes the opportunities the White Paper provides for members to highlight the unique requirements for our language while acknowledging the recognition within the Paper given in Section 6 Paragraph 37 which states that "the Government recognises the importance of broadcasting to the Gaelic language and its future development". We are however deeply concerned that the implementation of the philosophy, outlined in the White Paper, would be detrimental to Gaelic language broadcasting.

We recognise and accept that broadcasting within the next few years must, and indeed should, change and that the present and future technology is such that a reappraisal of broadcasting is now pertinent and necessary. However we are sceptical as to whether a philosophy based on "competition, quality and choice" in general may commend itself to and be appropriate for, serving the needs of a scattered and at times sparsely populated Gaelic speaking community.

Gaelic Television Broadcasting

The present situation is very unsatisfactory as Gaelic Broadcasting does not enjoy the output given to the Welsh (S4C) and the Irish language (RTE). While welcoming the Government's recognition given in the White Paper we are disturbed by the statement that future broadcasting would be given via cable/MVDS which suggests that Gaelic Broadcasting would be a local provision rather than a national service. Also, for a general broadcast provision this method would be impossible technically owing to the scattered nature of the Gaelic communities and the topography of the areas concerned.

An Comunn Gaidhealach has, for a number of years, supported the concept of a national Gaelic Television Service as an important contribution for the future development of our language and culture and have looked with considerable envy at the provision given to our Celtic cousins in Wales. We are pleased that the Government recognises the success of the Welsh 4th Channel (S4C) and that the current conclusion is to continue with the service. We are, however, naturally displeased that the service proposed for Gaelic be via "... a new local franchise (which) may also provide a means of delivering additional service to Gaelic speakers in parts of Scotland" (para. 6.37 page 28) while noting that the White Paper is supporting the status quo with respect to S4C (para 6.26 and 6.27 page 26).

It is our contention that as Government has recognised it to be their duty to ensure that the Welsh Language is sustained, in a national content, via

S4C, the Governemnt should also recognise that a similar arrangement must be provided for the Gaelic language.

In order to attain this we submit that a separate Broadcasting Authority in Scotland be established; that this authority would have a remit similar to the Welsh Fourth Channel Authority; that Seannail 4 Alba (S4A) be funded on the same principle as S4C. Once established it would naturally follow that the Authority would have overall responsibility for developing a Gaelic television service in Scotland and that, similar to S4C, it be bilingual, with provision made for regional opt-outs for specific areas for the transmission of Gaelic programmes at times when other areas could continue with their own programmes. This method of transmission/receiver is similar to the current situation with respect to radio.

FRANCHISE

It is of great concern to members of An Comunn Gaidhealach that the White Paper proposes the privatisation of regional franchise as this could militate against minority programmes. Given that according to the White Paper the Independent Television Authority (ITA) is to be replaced by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and that the latter will adopt a "light touch" principle there is an obvious danger that profit could be put before quality. If this should happen then obviously minority interest programmes like Gaelic could disappear altogether.

We are also concerned that the White Paper advocates dual franchise ownership and submit that as Scottish franchise could be bought by a bidder with little or no interest in Scotland, the present situation with respect to regional transmission should prevail.

If on the other hand if the latter became a reality then we submit that Gaelic programming must have built-in protection inserted into the legislation as is the case with Welsh.

TRANSMITTERS

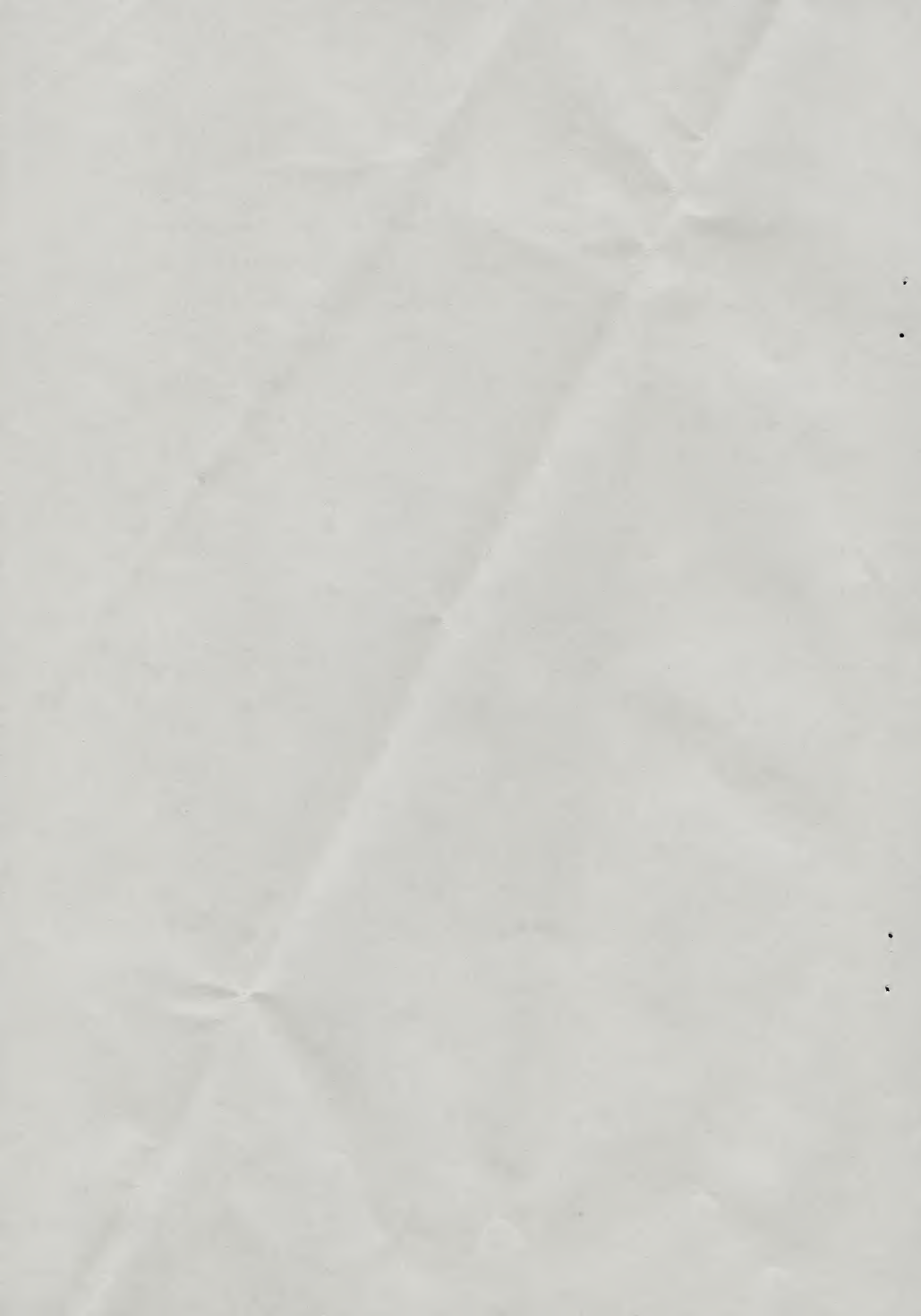
We note that the White Paper advocates the privatisation of the transmission Service. This situation, if it materialises is of significant relevance not only to Gaelic language output but to Scotland as a whole.

Due to the topography of the country, extra transmitters and relays are required, eg Grampian Television area currently has a network of five main transmitters and eighty relays serving 1.13 million people. London on the other hand has one transmitter and a few relays serving 14 million viewers. It follows that, due to high maintenance costs, the transmission service in Scotland is extremely expensive compared to other areas. If cross-subsidisation is discontinued it is obvious that owing to such high maintenance costs money would be diverted from programme making to transmitter/relay servicing.

Owing to the obvious threats to minority programmes if the transmitter facilities are privatised, An Comunn Gaidhealach recommends that the present system be continued, thus ensuring the same principle of universality which applies to other services like electricity and telephones.

SATELLITE ETC SERVICES

Direct Broadcasting by Satellite (DBS), MVDS and cable transmission are of little or no relevance to the development of a Gaelic broadcasting service at present as this is not a viable means of providing signals to rural and/or scattered communities. We do submit, however that after further research and advancement there could be, in the long term, developments which would be of relevance to the transmission of minority interest programmes.



RADIO BROADCASTING

An Comunn Gaidhealach applauds the advancement made in Gaelic radio in the last number of years while looking forward to the time when a national Gaelic radio service is provided throughout Scotland.

We are concerned that when the proposal to introduce at least three new national commercial radio stations is implemented, in direct competition with the BBC, programme content and quality are not sacrificed in favour of popular and trivial material.

We welcome the White Paper's proposals for the establishment of local radio stations as this method of radio broadcast could provide local communities with the opportunity to initiate a service which could complement the National radio service currently provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

An Comunn Gaidhealach's recommendations are summarised as follows:

that the franchise should be expressed as a fixed price and not necessarily given to the highest bidder.

that dual franchise ownership should not apply in Scotland.

that the transmission system be retained on a cross-subsidy basis.

that the provision of new radio stations must not affect the BBC commitment to minority interest programmes.

that the Gaelic programming be protected by legislation.

that the Government legislates for a Scottish 4th Channel Authority.

that a special television channel be given to Scotland, similar to the Welsh example with opt-out facilities.

