

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: E-petition session: TV Licensing, HC 1233

Monday 1 March 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 March 2021.

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Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Jonathan Gullis.

Other Members present: Rosie Cooper; Damian Collins; Gill Furniss; Gareth Bacon; Jamie Stone; Ben Bradley; Tahir Ali; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Allan Dorans; Virginia Crosbie; Mr Gregory Campbell; Simon Jupp; Jeff Smith; Huw Merriman; Chris Bryant; Mark Eastwood; Ian Paisley; John Nicolson; Chris Matheson; Rt Hon Mr John Whittingdale OBE, Minister for Media and Data.

Questions 1-21



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Chair: Thank you all for joining us today. Today's e-petition session has been scheduled to give Members from across the House an opportunity to discuss TV licensing. Sessions like this would normally take place in Westminster Hall, but due to the suspension of sittings, we have started holding these sessions as an alternative way to consider the issues raised by petitions and present these to Government. We have received more requests to take part than could be accommodated in the 90 minutes that we are able to schedule today. Even with a short speech limit for Back-Bench contributions, it shows just how important this issue is to Members right across the House.

I am pleased to be holding this session virtually, and it means that Members who are shielding or self-isolating, and who are unable to take part in Westminster Hall debates, are able to participate. I am also pleased that we have Front-Bench speakers and that we have the Minister attending to respond to the debate today. With Westminster Hall reopening next week, this should be the last of our sessions, so I wanted to take this opportunity to thank the broadcasting team, *Hansard*, all the Members and everyone who has been vital in ensuring that these sessions can take place, and to thank Ministers and Members who have attended these sessions so that we can discuss the important issues that we know petitioners really care about. To open today's session, I call Jonathan Gullis.

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you, Chair. I beg to move that this House has considered e-petition 300118—"Revoke the TV licence using legislation"—which has received 110,839 signatures. I would like to thank the petitioner, Terry Savage, for sharing his reasons for starting this petition in advance of today's debate. Terry started this petition because of the BBC's decision to end the free TV licence for the over-75s. To summarise Terry's views, he feels that the BBC licence fee is outdated and is not fit for today's society, preferring to see a subscription service. Along with all those who signed his petition, he is asking for the Minister to revoke the royal charter as soon as possible, to bring the BBC into the modern era.

Ahead of today's debate, I also spoke to Rebecca Ryan, the campaign director for Defund the BBC; Clare Sumner, director of policy for the BBC; and Andrew Scadding, head of corporate affairs at the BBC. I thank them all for their time and for sharing their views. It is no shock that the Defund the BBC campaign share a lot of Terry's concerns and ideas. They believe that it is a social injustice to legally require people to pay for a service that does not represent them anymore, highlighting the way in which the BBC and some of their employees conducted themselves in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum. Stars such as Sue Perkins have labelled leave voters as "headbangers" and "zealots", and Gary Lineker, a well-known remoaner, said Britain had won the "golden dumbass award". Despite this clear breach of impartiality rules, nothing happened. People in places such as Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, which I proudly serve and which voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU, felt ostracised and belittled.



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I say this because I agree with Terry that the BBC licence fee should be scrapped at the next charter review, and that the Government should instantly decriminalise non-payment of the licence fee. I will return to my views, but I will simply say that my feelings towards the BBC were drastically affected by its conduct over Brexit, which I campaigned and voted for. Even under a new director-general, political impartiality has still not been tackled, as seen in the BBC's reporting of the Black Lives Matter protests. The BBC's largely peaceful headline somehow avoided the violence that saw police officers injured and property destroyed.

The Defund the BBC campaign also referred to the apology that the BBC was forced to give in the wake of calling a deceased IRA terrorist a veteran. This reckless action besmirched the memory of the 1,400 British soldiers who lost their lives during the troubles, and it angered our veteran communities, such as those in Stoke-on-Trent, many of whom served in Northern Ireland.

To give balance, however, I will outline views that are shared by Clare and Andrew, who are senior executives in the BBC. I was grateful for their time and was honest with them about where I stood on this matter. They argued that the BBC's own studies show that the favoured option is still for the BBC licence fee to remain in place. They also argued that the value for money from the TV licence comes out not just via broadcast content, but via educational materials, regional radio and the BBC's more than £1 billion investment into the UK creative sector.

Clare and Andrew put it to me, as I am sure others will, that adverts are not wanted, and that a subscription model could cost more than the current licence. Simply put, they said that if the BBC licence fee was revoked, there would be no more BBC as we know it, and people need to be really clear in their minds that that is what they want. They have conducted estimates of the cost of decriminalising non-payment of the licence fee, which Andrew said stood at more than £1 billion over five years, leading inevitably to a decline in value for licence fee payers.

Lastly, they made it clear that the BBC recognises concerns over its lack of impartiality, and that work is being done with BBC staff, particularly its journalists, regarding their use of social media and how their views are aired. The challenge set by the new director-general to ensure that the BBC represents communities outside the M25 bubble has been accepted, and Andrew and Clare hope that the public continue to stand by this British institution.

I hope that I have adequately represented some of the views on both sides of this debate, but I will quickly state my views and those of the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. Ahead of today's debate, I held a survey on my website for residents of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke to complete, and nearly 3,000 responded. BBC executives should look away now, as the results will not make for easy viewing. An astonishing 96% of those who took the survey want to see the BBC licence fee scrapped. That overwhelming response should be an urgent wake-up call that something must change at the BBC. Platforms



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such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have moved with the times. They understand the current mentality of mass consumption, and offer a subscription-based service with which the consumer can choose whether to pay to access the goods—a simple structure for the digital age that offers choice and value for money.

That said, I can confidently say that there is one service that does not offer value for money in my opinion, and that is the BBC. I am not alone in thinking that. A YouGov poll from 4 January 2021 found that more than 61% of Brits agreed that the licence fee is not good value for money. From 1 April this year, the British taxpayer will be forking out £159 a year for BBC content, but what are they paying for? Content produced by individuals pushing out-of-touch views on to cities and towns such as Stoke-on-Trent, while the BBC continues to cave to the wokery on the left by censoring and removing some of its most successful shows.

The BBC prides itself on being a public service broadcaster, but I find it difficult to understand how it has actually served the public. In a year that has seen many struggling to put food on the table or keep up with rental payments, our family-friendly BBC has continued to pay virtue-signalling presenters such as Gary Lineker sky-high salaries. In a year that has seen grandparents cut off from their loved ones, isolated and alone, the BBC decided it was best to scrap the free licence fee for the over-75s. That has caused serious concern and stress for many over-75s, who now face being taken to court, fined, and even getting a criminal record if they do not pay up. Let us not forget that when former director-general Lord Hall accepted the good deal back in 2015, the BBC accepted to take over the funding of the free TV licence for the over-75s. They had years to prepare for that deal, but they are now turning their backs on it, pretending that such a deal was never agreed to.

I know that decision has caused serious concern and stress for many over-75s, and it has disgusted people in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. In my survey, 87% of people felt that the BBC should prioritise keeping free licences for over 75s. If the BBC were really in tune with the public, it would know that 53% of Britons believe that all those aged 75 and over should get a free licence. Some 61% think it completely unfair that the licence fee is being increased, and a majority of the British people would rather see the BBC funded by subscription or advertising than the current licence fee model, as reported by YouGov.

Families are no longer congregating in their masses to watch *Morecambe and Wise* or the *BBC News at 10*. Instead, they are logged in on multiple devices, monitoring and streaming content from various services. If you do not pay for Netflix, Amazon Prime, BritBox or Disney+ subscriptions, what happens? Do they launch an investigation? Do they send you letters harassing and threatening you with criminal charges? No. They simply cancel your account, and if you want to access it, all you have to do is pay.

We are also stuck in the bizarre situation where people are kept in a straitjacket when it comes to paying the licence fee to watch live TV. I



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know that I am not the only one who thinks that is absurd. In my survey, 97% said that you should not have to have a TV licence to watch other live services such as Sky.

This is not just about a vast organisation that is reluctant to move with the times, like a polar bear clinging to a receding piece of ice, as Michael Portillo said. This is about social injustice. How is it right that almost a third of women's convictions are for not paying the TV licence fee? According to Ministry of Justice data, women are 10 times more likely to be convicted for not paying the annual fee than men. The procedure itself is completely discriminatory towards women. Some 72% of all prosecutions for non-payment of the TV licence in 2018 were against women. For them to be slapped with a criminal record simply for answering their door is frankly disgusting.

Dame Vera Baird QC, the Victims' Commissioner, is in favour of decriminalising failure to pay the licence fee, because she argues that the law as it stands penalises less well-off women. It is ludicrous that in the 21st century we are continuing to criminalise minor matters such as not paying the licence fee. It is a waste of police time and resources.

However, it is not just the licence fee that is unpopular. The biggest issue here is that the BBC is in breach of the obligations set out in its own charter. Where has it been in breach of its charter? First, the BBC is obliged to be impartial. Yet time and again it appears to be forgetting its commitment to the people. The results of a recent Ofcom survey on the impartiality of the major news programmes showed that the BBC was ranked bottom. Just 58% of those surveyed felt that BBC News was free of bias. Sky News led the way with 69%, followed by Channel 4, ITV and Channel 5. Evidence of this could be seen when Emily Maitlis, the presenter of the BBC's flagship political show *Newsnight*, was found guilty of using her Twitter account and social media following, to promote her political views.

Secondly, the BBC is also obliged to represent, and provide unifying programming for, all parts of the UK. However, despite its having various regional branches throughout the United Kingdom, everybody can see that the BBC is trapped in a London bubble of its own making. In my constituency survey, 94% said that the BBC does not represent their views. Most areas of the UK who felt let down by the obstructionism of the last Parliament voted for change, turning the red wall into a blue one, heralding a move away from the views of Sadiq Khan's woke, virtue-signalling, metropolitan elite, so-called progressive agenda. Yet left-wing activists are routinely given platforms on news programmes where they masquerade as ordinary people.

This lack of honesty, and failure to represent those who live outside a 20-mile radius of New Broadcasting House, is a complete failure to adhere to the charter obligation to represent all parts of the UK. While the BBC continually pushes the identity politics of that London bubble, shoehorning its divisive narrative into much of its programming, according to the BBC the countryside is bigoted. Only last week skiing, too, was labelled racist. I



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ask again: why should we continue paying a licence fee, the proceeds of which will not benefit the majority of Britain, when the BBC is in breach of its own charter obligations?

To conclude, the licence fee might have made sense when there were only three channels to choose from on the telly, but times have changed, and so must the BBC. The BBC has been in breach of its charter obligations, and it would be wrong for this House to merely sweep the matter away. I have highlighted the key concerns. The BBC has a duty to the people, whom it has let down. Now we must carry out our duty for the people we represent, provide justice in scrapping the licence fee, and make way for real reform.

[Tonia Antoniazzi took the Chair.]

Q1 **Chair:** I am standing in for the Chair. Can Rosie Cooper please start?

Rosie Cooper: Thank you, Tonia, and Chair.

At a time when many pensioners have spent the year alone, rarely, if ever, seeing loved ones, it is deeply upsetting that some may have been placed in financial difficulty or left unable to afford one of the most basic comforts once afforded to them. The withdrawal of the free TV licence for over-75s in August last year was a shameful example of the lack of compassion the Government have for older people. In the midst of one of the most frightening times for the elderly, it defies logic that this callous policy was adopted. To vulnerable people, with degenerative conditions, limited mobility and no family to keep them company, television is often an essential source of companionship. A report completed by Age UK last year suggested that 6.1 million people over 60 were feeling lonely.

As we are now in the middle of our third lockdown, have the Government truly considered the impact that the introduction of a complicated new system for TV licences has had on people's mental health and on those with dementia? It is unmistakably cruel to force elderly people to struggle with that, and heartbreaking to think of the anxiety and distress that this will have caused. In my constituency of West Lancashire, around 5,600 people over 75 will have lost their TV licence. Many have contacted me, such as members of the west Lancashire pensioners forum, to explain the situation they are in and the effect that this has had, and will continue to have, on their lives.

So much has been said in the past year about supporting and protecting the vulnerable, so it is unbelievable that I am still having to make this point. It will be an easy change that would make a huge difference in people's lives. I strongly believe that the Government need to reverse this policy immediately. I am not campaigning to abolish the BBC. I want to see the BBC and this Government treat pensioners as well as they treat their celebrities. Thank you, Chair.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you, Rosie. We will move on to Damian Collins.



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Damian Collins: I disagree with the petition that we should scrap the licence fee and defund the BBC, but I agree with it on one point: the decision to scrap the free licence fees for the over 75s. The promise was made to people that those licences would be there. The BBC has made the decision because it cannot afford to fund it. It miscalculated the amount of money that it would cost, and it was probably wrong to enter the agreement that it did. Nevertheless, that commitment had been made and should have been honoured. I totally sympathise with people who have signed the petition on that basis.

If we are going to call for the defunding of the BBC or the scrapping of the licence fee, then we have to accept that the BBC will either cease to exist as we have known it or will be much, much smaller. It will have far less money. I am not aware of any time when the BBC has sought to make cuts at scale or when Members of the House of Commons have supported those cuts. On the whole, people tend to campaign for the retention of services, particularly services that are important to local communities.

One of the first places where cuts to services are often felt is at a local level—local news services, local radio stations and the deliveries of services that have a small but important audience. Those are all an incredibly important part of what the BBC offers. If the BBC has less revenue, it will have to decide what to do less of. The director-general has already challenged the BBC to consider what it would make if it had 80% less money than it has today—80% less output. That would lead to many services being changed dramatically across the way the BBC works.

It is in a position, even today, where its current model is probably not sustainable, with the revenue it gets in from the licence fee set against the rising costs of making programmes, partly as a consequence of the inflationary pressure caused by new services, such as Netflix and Amazon, meaning the BBC will have to look seriously at what it makes and what it can continue to afford to make.

If the BBC accepted advertising, then advertising would be taken from ITV and Channel 4 to fill those gaps. Advertisers aren't suddenly going to increase their budgets by a third or more, just to take up extra slots on the BBC. It would have a very big impact on ITV, Sky and Channel 4 if that advertising money were to be shared around.

If it becomes a subscription service, it will largely, as Netflix and Amazon do, make programmes for its subscribers, not for the whole nation. The BBC is not perfect; it makes mistakes. That is why it was right that we decided that it should be regulated externally by Ofcom, not just left to mark its own homework. We can challenge it to seek to improve the breadth of services it offers and to make sure the diverse voices from the whole of the United Kingdom are heard on its airwaves. We can only do that because it is publicly funded and independently regulated through Ofcom. We could not have those conversations with any other broadcaster.



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The BBC around the world and the World Service are a huge asset to this country. As we seek to expand Britain's global reach and influence, then we shouldn't undermine one of our great global brands, which is the BBC.

[Catherine McKinnell resumed the Chair.]

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Gill Furniss.

Gill Furniss: The BBC provides world-leading, informative, educational and entertaining programming, as well as a strong network of local news, radio and online resources. However, for many older people, television can be so much more than that; it can also be a friend. It is therefore deeply disappointing that the Government have broken their long-standing commitment to protect the free TV licence for the over-75s.

For years, loneliness has been a key public health concern. Research from 2019 showed that 77% of those aged 75 and over felt lonely at least some of the time, including 330,000 who felt lonely "always" or "often". Due to the covid-19 pandemic, sadly, those figures are now inevitably higher. The television therefore provides a source of comfort for many, a companion to link people who might otherwise be isolated to the outside world.

Unfortunately, responsibility for providing free TV licences fell to the BBC under the last royal charter. That left the BBC with the impossible decision of either ending that vital lifeline or significantly cutting its services. That was a deliberate tactic by the Government; they knew that transferring that responsibility without the adequate funding to support it would result in it becoming unsustainable.

Under the means-tested system, millions of older people now face an extra financial burden. Linking it to pension credit does not ensure that the system works for those who need it, as that benefit does not cover every older person in financial difficulty. It also requires a sometimes lengthy administrative process. In some cases, older people have been asked to provide a photocopy or scanned image of their bank statements or pension documents, in order to prove that they receive pension credit. Many lack the equipment to do that and, furthermore, it leaves older people vulnerable to fraud and identity theft.

Successive Conservative Governments have spoken out, claiming to be against the move. However, they are the ones who can do something about it. Social and welfare policy is the responsibility of this Government, not of the BBC. They could announce today that they will fund universal free TV licences and lift this financial burden from our older people.

The ONS has projected that more than a fifth of people will be aged 75 or over by 2030. With an ageing population, we must combat loneliness head-on. I therefore urge the Government to guarantee the free TV licence for everyone aged over 75. As I said, that will not solve loneliness, but it is a small step that would help some of the most isolated people in our society and give a sense of companionship in the lockdown and beyond.



Q4 **Chair:** Thank you. Gareth Bacon.

Gareth Bacon: The BBC is the world's oldest national broadcaster. Founded in 1922, it played a pivotal role in the time of this country's greatest peril, in the second world war. Domestically, it helped to unite the nation. Internationally, it broadcast truth and hope to a world shrouded in darkness.

The licence fee was originally conceived in 1946 to fund television in the post-war years, when there was only one channel and one broadcaster. The BBC's guiding principles to educate, entertain and inform in an impartial manner were greatly appreciated by all. I speak as someone who previously greatly admired the BBC with its history of impartial journalism and the wide range of programmes offered.

In 2021, however, times have changed markedly. With the rise of satellite and online streaming offering consumers the choice of hundreds of channels, the imposition of a compulsory tax, payment of which is punishable by imprisonment, is now rightly questioned. The decision to renege on the deal agreed with the Government in 2015 to provide free TV licences to those aged over 75 has rightly been criticised.

Standards at the BBC have notably slipped in the 21st century, and it has fallen a long way from its original founding principles. Too often it deviates from its requirement to operate in an impartial manner, not in a partisan political way, but certainly in a tonal and ideological way. That has been particularly acute in recent years—for example, the tone of its coverage of the Brexit process and the progress of the coronavirus pandemic have been remarkably skewed. Presenters' personal opinions have been presented as facts and the proportion of interviewees representing one side of an issue heavily outweighing those of another. Highly paid BBC employees have taken to expressing their personal political views on social media, making a nonsense of the corporation's claims to be committed to impartiality.

BBC executives increasingly appear to believe that the world of Twitter represents the collective view of the real world. In an attempt to pander to the world of social media, the BBC's output has become increasingly woke, with almost every aspect of its output, from news broadcasts to light entertainment and even to costume dramas, embracing a distorted world view. This reached its nadir last year when a particularly appalling decision was taken to ban the words of *Land of Hope and Glory* and *Rule, Britannia!* from the BBC's broadcasting of the Last Night of the Proms, with allegations that the songs had racist overtones and should not be heard. The deluge of criticism that this insult to the nation provoked soon led to a volte-face, but the fact that such a disastrous error of judgment could have been made is a remarkable indictment of the leadership of the BBC in recent years.

I would much prefer the BBC to return to being the impartial and trustworthy broadcaster that used to unite people. I believe that, unless



the BBC once again decides to serve everyone, the time will soon come when the licence fee should be abolished to give people genuine choice.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you. Jamie Stone.

Jamie Stone: Obviously, I come from very far away from the M25, and to be honest I and, I think, most of my constituents will always support the BBC. There is a universality of the BBC that means that they do everything. We have news; we have journalism. We have radio; we have podcasts. We even have, now, lower-league football. And of course we have drama—who did not love *His Dark Materials*?

Netflix, per head, actually costs us more than does the BBC, and Netflix, while very worthy—I love *The Crown*—only does entertainment. So I see the BBC a bit like an NHS waiting room, where you meet all sorts of people in society. I would say that folk from all across the political spectrum pay for the licence fee and it does not matter what their views are. We all have different political views, but the BBC—despite what has been said—is, I believe, impartial, and I think that is pretty important in the context of UK media. As far as I am aware, and despite what has been said, fake news and bias are not known. Remember that I live in a part of the UK that has very considerable political arguments on the go right now; you will be aware of that. So I would suggest, with respect, to people with different opinions from mine, that the BBC—Auntie, the Beeb—does keep the rest of the industry honest, and I think that is important.

Personally—to conclude my brief contribution—I think that if we do not back the BBC, we are going down a very slippery slope and could end up with a free-for-all where bias and distortion do become all too commonplace. All I can say is, just look at some of the reporting that we have seen in other countries, which has been very, very questionable. To come back to the point, I agree with other speakers about the licence fee for the elderly. I absolutely back what has been said; I will not repeat it. I will simply say this: without the licence fee, the BBC will change—that, I think, we are all certain of—and in my opinion, it will change for the worse.

Q6 **Chair:** Thank you. Ben Bradley.

Ben Bradley: It is safe to say that this has not been a debate I have shied away from. It is something that sparks a lot of interest from our constituents, too. So I am going to fly through a few things. I am sure colleagues know that I could speak about identity politics for hours, but in short, it baffles me that the BBC is spending £100 million on diversity while at the same time ditching regional news in order to save £25 million. I think this is one of the clearest indicators that it is out of touch. The Government are focusing on reaching out to communities across the country, but it sometimes feels like the BBC has forgotten that other places exist outside London—places that are actually different. I do not think that the programming represents the full range of thoughts and values that are out there. In spending this £100 million on diversity of



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physical characteristics, it seemingly has no plan to combat the lack of diversity of experience and geography, and of diversity of thought.

We know that our state institutions can suffer from this. Being based in London inevitably leads to the recruiting of a middle-class metropolitan demographic, but as far as I can see, this still is not a priority for the BBC. I struggle to see how it can represent working-class towns like Mansfield and Warsop if it scraps regional teams and runs the whole thing from London. I think that, given a choice between that diversity budget and regional news, the vast majority would take the latter. I honestly do not think—contrary to what some say—it is deliberately biased in its content. I just think it has tunnel vision, based on the lack of genuine diversity of experience and background in its teams, because it follows the wrong priorities on things like recruitment. I also think, frankly, it is impossible to maintain the veil of impartiality in the 21st century in a Twitter world where news is so instant and constant. Perhaps we should just stop trying to pretend that it can be done.

The licence fee model is not sustainable in the long term, and with the rise of new technology, it is outdated. It made sense back in the day when there were three or four channels and the Government subsidy was vital, but nowadays there is no need for taxpayer-funded media. We are spoiled for choice, with a myriad of services to choose from. People should have the choice as to whether to pay and watch BBC content, rather than being criminalised. On that point, the impact of criminalising the fee on our courts is massive. Data last year showed that a third of all women's criminal convictions are for evading the licence fee. Why are we clogging up our courts with issues like this instead of putting time and money into seeking justice against those who pose a threat to our society? I could talk about presenter salaries or fees for the over-75s if I had the time.

While my speech probably has not reflected this, I want to see the BBC succeed, and I am hopeful that it can correct many of the problems it has created for itself. I think the best way to help it do that is to set it free, make it compete in the market and effectively force it to deliver what the market wants, rather than what the BBC wants. It creates some absolutely fantastic content. I was hooked on *Peaky Blinders*—I bought the grandad collar shirts, and it took all my strength not to buy a flat cap. That kind of programming will sell. It will compete in the market and make money. In a post-licence fee world, the BBC can seek an audience and income from the whole world, not just from UK taxpayers. That will make it leaner, fitter and better. In my view, the sooner that happens, the better.

Q7 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Tahir Ali.

Tahir Ali: Through the course of the pandemic, the value of having a trusted news source has been underlined in a dramatic fashion. We are fortunate that we have the BBC, an institution that has continued to provide information, education and entertainment to us all through this difficult time—so much so that it has even decided to put on lessons for children at home. More and more people are tuning into BBC News and other channels for education purposes and leisure, and as a friend, to keep



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us up to date with the rapidly changing series of events that have been brought with the covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, I think that at a time such as this it is important to defend the social value of a public broadcaster that is universally available to the public. That is why I believe it is essential that we continue to fund the BBC. Whether it is by way of a TV licence is a debate to be had. The BBC creates and sustains thousands of jobs and supports independent media producers and suppliers across the country. Therefore, we should view the BBC as an asset that deserves investment and should continue to receive direct support from the Government.

The relentless round of cuts by the Government has left the BBC in a more precarious position than ever. Thousands of jobs have been lost in the BBC, which has threatened its ability to sustain the diversity, breadth and depth of its coverage. That is why we desperately need significant investment in our public broadcaster, not more privatisation and cuts. We only have to look at other countries, where broadcasting companies are backed by filthy rich capitalists, and at the agenda that is driven and the rubbish that is broadcast by some of those privately funded channels.

My plea is that we need to protect jobs, not lose more of them. I must restate my preference for a fully funded, fully public BBC that is universally available to all. I must state my opposition to abandoning the TV licence without having a proper debate about how alternative funding can be made available. My final point is that we need to look at free TV for the over-75s, but maybe bring the age limit down to 70.

Q8 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Brendan Clarke-Smith.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: British television is admired around the world. It is something that we can be quite rightly proud of. I grew up on a diet of *Bread and Porridge*, and I have always enjoyed some of the excellent comedies, drama, nature programmes produced not only by the BBC but by many of the private providers. I still regularly follow the progress of my beloved Notts County on BBC Radio Nottingham.

I am not here today to bash the BBC. We have all heard the arguments about wokeness and bias, especially relating to Brexit, but that is not why I am speaking today.

Covid has plunged many of our constituents into financial difficulties, and the TV licence is something that many of the poorest in society struggle to pay. There have been improvements over the years, such as the ability to spread payments, but the cost is still a challenge for many, however small the increase. It is fundamentally wrong that many of my constituents over the age of 75 have had their free TV licences taken away from them. We all know that tough decisions need to be made, but this predates covid, and I believe the BBC has lost a lot of public support.

That brings us on to the problem of those who cannot afford to pay and are subsequently convicted. Women are almost 10 times more likely to be convicted for not paying their TV licence than men; some 74% of 114,000



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convictions for licence fee dodging in 2019 were for women, and only 1% of almost 4,000 women in prison are there for violent offences. Some 72% of all prosecutions for TV licences were against women in 2018, and in 2017 the offence constituted 30% of all prosecutions against women, meaning it was the most common offence that women were prosecuted for.

I polled my Bassetlaw constituents recently, and 78% said they felt the licence fee was not good value for money. Half wanted to move to a subscription service, and a whopping 87% felt that those over 75 should receive free TV licences. I would like to see not only the licence fee decriminalised, but a move towards a subscription-based model such as Netflix.

There is also another option that should be explored. I mentioned earlier that British television is in many cases the envy of the world, and there have been numerous commercial opportunities created through that. The BBC has shown it can use those to its advantage. The World Service and the BBC's online content already make revenue from advertising, which can be offset against the cost of the television licence fee. Perhaps it is time that we see some market forces and for that option to be exploited domestically.

Q9 Chair: Thank you. I call Allan Dorans.

Allan Dorans: Part of the stated mission of the BBC is to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial services. The BBC does not achieve that aim, and the mandated BBC TV licence is no longer fair to significant sections of this country.

I will focus on just two issues: the evidence that the BBC does not meet the needs of the young, and the decline of key audiences, including those in Scotland. The Ofcom annual report for 2020 states that "time spent with the BBC by 16-34 year-olds now stands at less than an hour a day, down 22% since 2017." Only 39% of 16 to 19-year-olds ever watch the BBC, even for a few minutes, down from 61% in 2015. Ofcom explains this trend by commenting that "audiences now have access to a much wider breadth of high-quality content, which is inevitably attracting audiences away from the BBC—this is increasingly being seen across all age groups", but particularly younger audiences.

Ofcom research also suggests that the BBC's reach is in decline, and at a faster rate for some, including minority ethnic audiences, those aged under 35, those in lower socioeconomic groups, and audiences in Scotland. This clearly illustrates that the BBC is no longer meeting the needs or interests of significant sections of the population.

While there is more than one reason for significant drops in Scottish viewing figures and TV licence subscriptions, political bias—sometimes blatant, but often subtle—against Scottish independence in BBC news coverage is a major factor. An obvious example is the aggressive



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questioning of SNP politicians during interviews, while their political opponents enjoy an easy ride.

As recently as last Friday, the BBC Scotland editor Sarah Smith reported that the former First Minister Alex Salmond claimed that Nicola Sturgeon “had broken the ministerial code and that he thinks she should resign.” That was totally untrue. Alex Salmond did not say those words. Other than deliberately spreading misinformation, what explanation can there be besides blatant political bias on the part of the BBC?

In conclusion, the BBC does not serve the needs of the diverse peoples of the United Kingdom sufficiently to justify a mandatory licence fee, far less one backed up by the threat of prosecution, a fine or even imprisonment. All that, and now charging the majority of over-75s for a TV licence, is totally outrageous and unacceptable. The TV licence fee must go, and the BBC must be replaced by an organisation that is impartial and serves all audiences within the United Kingdom.

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Virginia Crosbie.

Virginia Crosbie: The licence fee as part of the royal charter will not be reviewed in 2027. In the last consultation in 2016, 60% of respondents felt that the licence fee model did not need to be changed. However, while the licence fee per se is not up for debate at this time, there are matters intrinsic to this petition that it is right to debate.

The petition makes reference to the licence fee being seen as an “unfair tax on those on low income”, with the penalty for non-payment being prosecution and “possible jail”. The licence fee funds the BBC to offer a wide range of media to a broad audience, and in Wales, it also supports Welsh-language resources such as S4C and Radio Cymru. In the past few months of isolating and shielding, the BBC has been a lifeline for many, but particularly the elderly, many of whom in my constituency of Ynys Môn are first-language Welsh. In rural communities such as Ynys Môn, many elderly people will have barely seen anyone in the flesh for the past 12 months, so alongside excellent community radio stations such as Môn FM, the BBC has been a friend and companion through this lonely time.

Last year, the BBC scrapped the free TV licence for over-75s to all but those on pension credit. That meant that around 4 million people had to find an extra £157, at a time when they were more dependent on television and radio than at any other time in recent years. When the BBC announced it was scrapping free licences for the over-75s, I received letters and emails from many, many constituents who were angry, frustrated and disappointed at the change. Our over-75s have been the backbone of this country. They have lived through war, depression, recession, and now a pandemic. It is their hard work and their hard-earned taxes that have made the UK the strong country that it is today, and I believe they deserve to be able to watch television without having to pay for the privilege.

Q11 **Chair:** Thank you. Gregory Campbell.



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Mr Campbell: The BBC used to be known across the globe with its fearless reputation for impartiality, but sadly no longer. For many years now, there have been many cases—which I am not going to go over; some have been alluded to by previous Members—of partisanship and lack of professionalism. I would love to be a champion for an independent, non-partisan public service broadcaster, but we have to get one first. In recent years, the BBC's reputation has been vastly diminished. It is viewed in many ways as being partisan.

There is another aspect that has not really been touched upon in the debate thus far. Up until fairly recently, there has been an extreme reluctance for openness and transparency at the BBC regarding the publication of on-screen talent's salaries. That went on for many years. The BBC argued that this would lead to a loss of talent to commercial channels. Eventually, it was dragged kicking and screaming to release bandings for salaries, and there was no massive loss of talent.

However, what continues to this day is that some on-screen talent have their own private companies, which can then bid for contracts for programmes to be broadcast on the BBC, leading to an imbalance and fewer opportunities for the independent media sector to compete on a level playing field. That needs to be brought out into the open, to see what element of advantage, if any, is given to BBC broadcasters holding their own companies and being able to bid for and get contracts that others are unable to get.

I posed a series of questions to the head of BBC Northern Ireland; I could not get answers, and I had to come to London—to the BBC there—to try and get answers. I ended up going to the Audit Office in London to try and get answers to very comprehensive, fundamental questions about funding of the BBC. There is foot-dragging, and it has to end.

Some presenters appear to have learned their questioning trade from a great philosopher called Maximus Interruptus. There needs to be a change—a radical change—in how the BBC is funded. It is quite obvious to everyone that the licence fee has outlived its usefulness. It may have been fine in the '60s, '70s and '80s, but in the past 10 or 15 years, funding models have changed: so must the BBC.

Q12 **Chair:** Thank you. Simon Jupp.

Simon Jupp: Thank you, Chair. The BBC is still the best broadcaster in the world. It is one of Great Britain's finest exports. *Planet Earth* and many documentaries about the wonders of the world have wowed audiences and made us reflect on the environmental challenges we face. The groundbreaking journalism of *Panorama* lifted the lid on abuse in care homes and corruption at FIFA, and it went undercover to reveal real life in North Korea. We have laughed while watching *Yes, Minister*, cheered during *Match of the Day* and cringed at *The Office*. Every single day, BBC Parliament provides unrivalled coverage of democracy in action. Meanwhile, the World Service educates and informs millions of people every day, contributing to our nation's standing across the world.



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Closer to home, the BBC produces local daily news bulletins that command huge audiences every night, and BBC local radio stations serving communities from Devon to Dundee have a loyal listenership. Since January, the BBC has helped children unable to attend school because of the pandemic keep up with their studies by broadcasting lessons on BBC2, CBBC and online.

I was proud to work for the BBC for nearly seven years as a presenter, producer and TV reporter. I saw the difference that good journalism can make—and where there is room for improvement. Many people on both the left and the right accuse the BBC of being biased. I agree, but it is a metropolitan bias, strengthened by centralisation in London, the fact that most newsrooms, and therefore journalists, are based in urban areas and that most of them went to university. The BBC needs to embrace remote working, harnessing technology to ensure journalists live the life of their audiences. Editors in London should use talent based in the nations and regions rather than sending national reporters across the country.

Much is said about the BBC's focus on diversity. It is important to have a wide range of backgrounds represented at every level of the corporation, and diversity of thought among staff will be key to reconnecting with audiences who have signed the petition to revoke the licence fee. As is obvious, I do not support such a move. However, I do believe that the TV licence should be free for those over 75 and that reform of the licence fee is necessary. Revoking the licence fee would place a financial tourniquet around the neck of the BBC, resulting in many thousands of skilled jobs being lost across our country, weakening our nation's journalism and our cultural offer here and around the world.

Much has been said about cancel culture in recent months. Let us not push that agenda any further by cancelling a big part of our country's culture.

Q13 **Chair:** Thank you. I call Jeff Smith.

Jeff Smith: I am pleased to say that only 87 of my constituents signed this petition—fewer than one in 1,000—and normally I would only attend a petition debate if lots of my constituents had signed the petition, but maybe it is right that the 999 out of 1,000 constituents who did not sign it are represented by some remarks in opposition.

With 10 TV services, 10 national radio stations, 40 local radio stations plus everything on offer from iPlayer, BBC Sounds and the BBC website all for just over £3 a week—less than the price of a pint—the licence fee might just be the best bargain in Britain today. For every £1 spent by the BBC, it generates £2 for the wider UK economy. But it is not just about value for money; it is about the part it plays in our national life, and not just because nine out of 10 people use the BBC's services every week. It is a question of what kind of country we want to be.

Do we want universal, high-quality public service broadcasting? That is what the licence fee exists to support. Universality is an essential part of public service broadcasting and, in a world of Fox News and fake news,



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surely public service broadcasting has never been more important—especially in the current crisis. Dangerous fake news about coronavirus and vaccines has only emphasised how the universal availability of accurate, impartial news and trusted information is more important than ever. The BBC is the most trusted and popular source of news in the UK, with 83% of people trusting the BBC’s TV news, and 80% of the public turned to the BBC for information at the start of the pandemic.

It is also about our place in the world, our country’s soft power and how the BBC is the world’s most trusted news source. Now, as we have heard demonstrated today, impartiality is in the eye of the beholder. When both sides of an argument think the BBC is biased, it is probably doing okay. People in this country and abroad trust the BBC. Yes, the BBC is not perfect—it makes mistakes and it gets judgments wrong—but if it gets it wrong, it is called out for that, and it learns lessons and apologises if necessary. I would rather those mistakes than the deliberate misinformation and bias we see on broadcast networks in the US.

Let us imagine a BBC funded by subscription and making programmes aimed at subscribers—not for every UK citizen—or going increasingly for the lowest common denominator content that has to appeal to advertisers. It would be more expensive—just compare the price of subscription channels—so older and poorer people who rely on the BBC would be unable to afford a subscription. I have said before in Parliament that there are six letters that make me proud of this country: NHS and BBC. I pay for one through my tax and national insurance; I pay for the other through my licence fee. Between them, it is the best money I spend.

Q14 **Chair:** Huw Merriman.

Huw Merriman: Thank you very much indeed for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I chair the all-party parliamentary BBC group. In that role, I think it is important to make sure that we support and encourage the BBC but also bring up matters where the BBC can do better. It is important that we have this debate and, indeed, have differences of opinion.

In the time I have, I want to correct a few things that have been said for the record. We have talked a lot here about misrepresentation, so I hope it will be okay to bring a few facts to the fore. First, with regards to the over-75s provision, it is not the case that the BBC was funded for this, or that it promised to continue it. It was a decision given by my Government at the time, but it was down to the BBC to decide whether it wished to fund it. The cost of this would be £750 million. The BBC was given just over £100 million, with an increase in the licence fee in the usual course. In fact, the decision the BBC made—to fund the over-75s licence fee for those in receipt of pension credit—is costing it £250 million. It is already putting more money into over-75s than was the case previously when the Government was doing this. It is just not right to say that the BBC promised to fund this, or that it is being funded. That is not the case at all. I know the Minister will bear that out, because I shared a speech with him on the Benches when we talked about what really happened at that time.



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Secondly, I want to address the decision to ensure that the licence fee is still a criminalised matter. Despite all that is said about convictions and court process, a written parliamentary question revealed that not one person is currently sitting in a jail because they have not paid the TV licence fee. If people end up in court or, indeed, in jail, it is because there tends to be a large series of unpaid fines from courts that have looked at bills not being paid as a whole. It is really important to note that. Equally, before over-75s were given the licence fee for free, there were no prosecutions of over-75s, so we should not feel that there will be either. Again, those are important points to make.

Finally, when it comes to value for money, it costs 43p per day to get hold of the BBC. It is a public service, and the essential ingredient of a public service is that it is universal. It is affordable. It would probably be about three times the price, looking at all the subscription channels that give the same content that the BBC gives. The reality is that it does not matter what kind of survey I put on my website as a Conservative MP: I know people will comment, because they are likely to be Conservative sympathisers. We know that the licence fee remains the most popular means to fund the BBC—above subscription, and above advertising. I hope that those are a few matters to throw into the pot.

Q15 **Chair:** Thank you. Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: I think that the UK has the best broadcasting mix in the world, and we would be absolutely daft to cut it to pieces. At the very heart of it is the BBC, funded by the licence fee. It means there is a competition for quality in this country between all the different broadcasters. Yes, of course there is a debate about what impartiality looks like. I get deeply frustrated when the BBC has one person for one side of the argument and another person for the other side of the argument, when the other side of the argument has absolutely no factual base—for instance, over climate change. Yes, of course there will be that debate, but there is a debate about equality in broadcasting in this country in a way that there isn't in so many other countries.

Because of the licence fee, the BBC has to provide something for everybody. That means my constituents in the Rhondda, and not just the really high-value people that the broadcasting marketeers want to chase, such as through Netflix. I want to say to Conservatives, who think that all of this should be handed over to the market, man was not made for the market—the market was made for man and woman. You cannot simply hand over every single thing to the marketplace, because it does not provide equally for everybody; some people get overserved because they are wealthy and they might buy other products through advertising.

I get furious when I hear Conservative MPs attack the BBC for its decision on the over-75s. It was a cowardly decision by the Conservative Government to force the BBC to negotiate at the end of a shotgun and to hand over social policy to the British Broadcasting Corporation. If the Conservative Government wanted to end free TV licences for the over-75s, they should have had the courage to say so themselves and do it, but they



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did not. They were cowardly and they decided to go through the back door.

I get furious about this pretend debate about wokery. I have no idea what that means. It is a fib; it is a lie. At the very heart of it is a fundamental attempt to cast everybody else as being in the wrong. I remember it in the 1990s. It was when we were all attacked for being loony lefties, just because we thought that gay people should be treated equally with the rest. Now, I would just say to anybody on this woke argument, if you really do not think that people should be treated equally or are equal regardless of their race, their creed, their colour or their sexuality, just say so. Do not pretend it is anything to do with the BBC.

Q16 **Chair:** Mark Eastwood.

Mark Eastwood: I will start off by confessing that I quite like some of the programming on the BBC. Now that Leeds United are in the Premier League, watching *Match Of The Day* is enjoyable, albeit only when Leeds win; I could not stomach watching Manchester United put six past us. Dara Ó Briain is one of the funniest stand-up comics I've seen live and *Mock The Week* is hilarious at times. Drama series *The Serpent* was a tour de force—gripping, tense and improbable, except for the fact that it was based on a true story.

I receive quite a few emails about the BBC from my constituents, mainly from people who think its coverage is biased against the Government, but is the BBC biased? Certainly, its coverage during the Brexit debate was questionable and it could easily be argued that its broadcasts favoured remain. However, go on Twitter and there are many on both sides of the political divide who claim it is biased against them. This may suggest that it is not that biased after all.

It has been said that the BBC is a national treasure and should be protected, but regardless of whether we think the BBC broadcasts quality programming or that its output is biased, we appear to be missing an important point, and it is all about choice. We live in a modern age, where we have the ability to choose from a multitude of channels on subscription. We all have a choice if we want to pay for these channels. With the BBC, we do not get the choice and are forced to pay for the TV licence, regardless of whether we watch it or not.

I could understand paying towards a state broadcaster if we only had three channels to choose from, as we did back in the day; I am showing my age now. But in the new era of broadcasting and subscription services, the requirement to have to pay for a licence is becoming ever more obsolete.

It is a national disgrace that anyone could be subject to proceedings if they do not pay. In 2019, there were around 115,000 convictions for non-payment of the licence fee. Nearly 74% of them were women, often single mothers struggling to pay the bills, and now the over-75s run the risk of prosecution.

Non-payment of the fine even carries the risk of imprisonment. It is



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absurd that we clog our courts and make criminals out of people daring to watch television without a licence. In 2015, these cases accounted for 10% of total prosecutions. If the BBC is truly a national treasure, then surely it would thrive as a subscription channel or finance itself through commercial advertising. I might even subscribe to it myself, but that would be my choice.

In summary, I fully support this petition to revoke the TV licence, and I urge the Government to consider a phased scrapping of the licence fee and give the people of this country the choice they deserve. Thank you.

Q17 **Chair:** Ian Paisley.

Ian Paisley: Last year, the BBC got £3.5 billion from its fees. That equates to 71% of its total funding. It made a further £1.42 billion from its commercial activities. Almost 111,000 people signed this petition to revoke the TV licence. I would say that they signed up to three things: that it is not value for money; that people face criminalisation if they dare to oppose and not pay their TV licence; and they object to the opinionated news versus factual news. Of course, we have heard some of the arguments today of those who are fearful of change about the BBC, who fear reform of the BBC and are sycophantic about the BBC.

In 2019, 114,000 people were criminalised in the UK. They did not go to jail, but they were criminalised for non-payment of their licence fee. Some 74% of those people happened to be women from poor families. In 2018, the most common offence that women were charged with in our courts was the non-payment of the BBC television licence fee.

The pension credit argument, the opt-out for the over-75s, is a complete and total joke. In my constituency, 1,300 people over 75 no longer get the free TV licence because they do not have pension credit, so they are now punished with almost a £160 fine essentially for watching the BBC. That is wrong. I agree with Lord Botham, who said last week that the over-75s should not be prosecuted for the non-payment of this fee.

In terms of the value-for-money argument, my constituent wrote to me this week. She objected to the annual licence fee because, in her words, she was paying for the vast majority of entertainment programmes that are "repeats, and repeats of repeats". She said that the average BBC day comprises "repeats, trailers, fillers, recaps, padded out with news and weather". For two years my constituent has written to the BBC and has never once received a response from them, yet she is a paying customer. How can that be right? In the letter that I quote from, this 89-year-old constituent is denied a free TV licence.

Another constituent asked the BBC why so many repeats are put in place, and she was patronised with the answer of, "Viewers appreciate and enjoy timeless classics." That is simply not good enough. When asked for figures about these repeats, we are told that this material is commercially sensitive.



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One constituent told me that she is sick of watching *Dad's Army* repeats. She has seen so many *Dad's Army* repeats that the royalties now must be meaningless because most of the talent is no longer there. The BBC has got to change. It has to move away from its opinionated news to factual news. I do not need a reporter to tell me what the news means. I just need to see the news.

Chair: I call Tonia Antoniazzi.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Thank you for fitting me in, Chair. I very much appreciate it. Happy St David's day from Gower.

I do not support this petition and many of the views of the Government Members. The covid pandemic has really shown how many people from so many walks of life have depended on the BBC's invaluable service. It has shone a light on the cost of keeping up with the myriad pay-to-view services. We have spoken about Netflix and Disney+, which, for a single parent, are frankly excessive and put a strain on family budgets, especially now. So many of my over-75 constituents in Gower were extremely upset about losing their free access to the BBC licence.

I am not shocked by the views of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, who has singled out individuals at the BBC such as Gary Lineker and Emily Maitlis, which I think is embarrassing and unbecoming of his position. To call the BBC "woke" and accuse it of extreme political bias from a position of right-wing extremism is like Donald Trump throwing his dummy out of his pram, and it is not fit for British politics.

The last 12 months have shown how important public service broadcasting is to audiences the length and breadth of Wales. *BBC Wales Today* audiences have risen almost 30% year on year, and BBC Wales's wide range of factual and drama programming has seen a growth of over 13%. *DIY SOS* is also a jewel in the crown. It touches the hearts of so many communities across the United Kingdom, and I was particularly proud to see the only covid programme be filmed in my constituency for Surfability in Caswell Bay.

The BBC online services are excellent. We have seen this particularly with the online teaching resources and the coronavirus-related content. The archive of sport during a period when no live sport could take place, *True Crime* and old favourites such as *Weatherman Walking* and Iolo Williams have provided a varied schedule that has resonated with their audiences.

Welsh rugby is also a national treasure, cherished by all. We do not want to see it behind a paywall, because on Saturday, when Wales famously beat England for the Six Nations triple crown, 1.3 million people tuned in, and that is the most watched programme on any channel in Wales so far this year. In response to the hon. Member for North Antrim, if you look at the BBC annual report and accounts, there is page after page of commitments and reporting of original, first-run UK programming. For example, on BBC 1 in 2019-20, there were over 4,000 hours of first-run originals, and that, Chair, is what we need to keep on reminding



ourselves. The BBC is fit for purpose and it is valued by many.

Q18 **Chair:** Thank you. We now go to the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson John Nicolson.

John Nicolson: Thank you very much indeed. The petition we debate today calls for the end of the licence fee as, according to the proposers, people no longer watch the BBC, preferring to watch other media sources. It is true people now access a range of sources. It is called choice.

There are on average 5 million people using a BBC service at any one time. For the daily price of a pint of milk, 91% of the population use the BBC at least once a week. That gives them access to an important news source but also a breadth of other content. We often hear that young people are not interested in the service, yet 12.5 million folk under the age of 35 use the BBC at least once a week and a peak of 6 million children logged on to BBC Bitesize in a single month this year, so we can knock on the head the idea that no one is watching.

Is the BBC perfect? Well, obviously not. In Scotland there is a substantial gulf between what we raise through the licence fee and what the BBC spends. That must end. Scotland is hungry for programming investment—not just news but cutting-edge drama, radio, educational programming, natural history and Gaelic. During the covid pandemic, the BBC has demonstrated how important it is in times of crisis. BBC News has helped stem a tide of disinformation about vaccines. Its entertainment programmes have provided company for so many—especially the elderly—the very same pensioners who now have licence fee bills dropping through their letterboxes.

Some of the speakers in this debate are trying to rewrite history. It should not be the BBC's responsibility to offer free TV licences. That was, and should be, a Government social provision. The Government was warned at the time that imposing this responsibility on the BBC would result in hardship for pensioners and huge job losses at the corporation. Alas, it was only because of the BBC's spinelessness at the time under Lord Hall that they succumbed to the Government and that this mess now exists. I would urge the Government even at this late stage to re-engage with the BBC and take responsibility for pensioners.

Is there an alternative to the licence fee? I would argue that it is good value. It is a lot cheaper than its commercial rivals Sky and Virgin and it provides good value for the economy at large, providing a return of £2 in jobs, economic opportunities and expenditure for every £1 spent. For years, alternatives to the licence fee have been debated, but no better alternative has been found, and I cannot help but notice that many of the Members supporting this motion span a wide range of pro-Brexit opinion from extreme to howling. What they seem to hate is diversity and questioning journalism. What they lament is a lost imagined world of the 1970s where Morecambe and Wise shared a bed without titters and Mary Whitehouse supervised. To those on my side of the political fence and



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constitutional argument on Scotland, be careful what you wish for. For the moment at least the licence fee has to remain.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you. Now to the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson: Chris Matheson.

Christian Matheson: Thank you, Chair. Can I also thank everyone who has taken part in this petition and, indeed, all the petitions that we are considering today?

Even without many of us realising it, the BBC is woven into our daily lives. My good friend the SNP spokesman referred to the 91% of adults and 80% of young people who are tuning into the BBC each week, right across its portfolio of services: 40 local radio stations, News, World Service and Bitesize. It is a unique part of our social and community story about who we are. How many reference points from our past are defined by what we saw on TV together as a national, from *Trumpton* and *Mr Benn* to the *Tweenies* and the *Teletubbies*, from Michael Parkinson to Graham Norton, from *Play for Today* to *Line of Duty*. Those are national TV moments that shape and unite us, like the NHS waiting room, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross said. Crucially for the licence fee debate, the BBC should not be expected to make every programme appeal to everyone. Universality is about ensuring that there is something for everyone across its total radio, television and online output.

As hon. Members have said, during the pandemic the BBC has been of huge value as a provider of trusted national and local news coverage, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington mentioned—every metric demonstrates that trust, as do the viewing figures and page impressions online—as well as the education programming. The BBC is also vital to the wider broadcasting and cultural sector. Giving evidence to the DCMS Committee recently, Anne Mensah and Benjamin King of Netflix both commented on the importance of the BBC to the wider creative ecosystem. They highlighted that one of the main reasons that they chose to make their home in the UK was because of the work of the BBC and the impact that it has had in building the profile of the UK creatively, bringing through young talent, and investment in production.

The licence fee underpins universality and is a critical foundation investment in the UK's creative economy, ensuring sustained investment—£1.4 billion by the BBC in TV content production. Every £1 spent on the BBC through the licence fee produces £2 of value through jobs, economic opportunities and expenditure. With the BBC's rich contribution to music, arts and theatre, many jobs in those fields are reliant on its success. The creative sector has been one of the hardest hit during the pandemic, and any cuts or further financial strain on the BBC will have a significant impact on people reliant on jobs in those fields.

The BBC is able to take risks because of its funding mechanism. There was a furore last year over the frankly stupid decision, which has been referred to, to cut out bits of *Last Night of the Proms*, but let us be clear, with a commercially funded BBC, *Last Night of the Proms* would become *Only*



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Night of the Proms. Only with the current funding can we have the whole season of Henry Wood concerts that are such an important part of our cultural year. Only with the current funding can we have the network of 40 genuine local radio stations.

Turning to the over-75s, despite the clear importance of the BBC and its contribution to the creative sector and the economy, it has faced many years of Tory attacks, threats and funding cuts, which are all designed to undermine the corporation's independence. The BBC has to deal with significant financial burdens as a result of the broken manifesto promise of the Conservative Government, who dumped the cost of the over-75s licence fee on to the BBC, and in doing so, betrayed millions of pensioners. The Government made the BBC an offer it could not refuse, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda said: take on the cost of the over-75 licence fee, or face ever greater slashing of its funding and the consideration of the removal of the licence fee altogether.

This Government now refuse to accept responsibility for their broken promises, and instead dump the blame on the BBC for every cut in service or job redundancy that it has to make as a direct result of the Government's policy. In this licence period alone, that is £800 million in funding, in addition to the £125 million deficit that has arisen during the covid-19 pandemic. The bill for the over-75s eligible for a pension credit will cost the BBC around £250 million. The decision to abolish the free TV licence for the over-75s has had a real impact on significant numbers of isolated and disadvantaged older people on low and modest incomes. Age UK has spoken about the effect of the policy on increased loneliness and isolation, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough.

We welcome the fact that the BBC has abandoned, for now, its absurd plans to decriminalise non-payment of the licence fee, which is another of the petition subjects covered in the debate. That would be another mechanism for removing funding from the BBC, but the consequence would be civil debt collectors knocking at the door of non-payers, which would be just as undesirable. When it comes to the licence fee, it may not be a perfect system, but it is arguably the best of the options, as the independent review on TV licence enforcement, the Perry report, and others before it, have suggested. Having said that, a subscription-funded BBC would look entirely different from today's BBC. It would have to make programmes aimed just at subscribers, not for the whole of the UK, and people would end up paying more, pricing some people out, as has been said. It would cost the BBC more to operate a subscription service, taking money out of content investment. The BBC is able to speak to the whole of the UK, through national programming, and through its network of local TV and radio stations. At a time when the Union is under threat, that is crucial.

Furthermore, funding the BBC through advertising would draw money away from commercial broadcasters and content investment. That would be bad news for other broadcasters, which will face new competition for



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dwindling advertising revenues, at a time when we are introducing restrictions on advertising food products and considering restrictions on gambling advertising. The point was made by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe. The delicate balance in the broadcasting ecosystem is because each part has a distinctive funding debate—TV licence fee, advertising and subscription.

Given the wide range of the services that the BBC provides, the price of a licence fee is still good value. To purchase the range of media offered through the licence fee in a bundle of subscriptions to provide advertising-free, high-quality services comparable with those delivered by the BBC across video, audio and news would cost £453.45 per year. That is in comparison with the current licence fee of £157.50, just 43p a day, as the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle said. Instead of bashing the BBC and trying to undermine its independence for political gain, the Government should start to champion it—as a beacon of British excellence in broadcasting and journalism, as a trusted source of information in an age of fake news and disinformation, as a powerhouse behind our world-leading creative industries and as the most trusted form of British soft power overseas.

We all have examples of times when we have been unhappy with BBC news coverage. For every one of the hon. Members of the DUP, the SNP or the Conservative party who can point to allegations of political bias at times, I can meet those allegations and raise them with complaints that the Labour party has made. However, the truth is that the BBC's success—its role in our society and the role it gives us in the world—is only possible because of the unique funding method that is the TV licence fee. Let us not undermine that just because we did not like a particular news story or an individual programme.

Q20 Chair: Thank you. I will now call the Minister for Media and Data to respond to the debate. Briefly, just before 6 o'clock, I will go back to Jonathan Gullis, who opened the debate on the petition, for his final comments. Minister, you have until shortly before 6 pm.

Mr Whittingdale: Thank you, Chair. First, I thank the Committee for calling this debate, and the petitioners for raising what is, as the debate has demonstrated, a subject that produces extremely strong views on both sides of the argument. Previously, I chaired a Select Committee inquiry into the future of the licence fee, then had responsibility as Secretary of State for the last licence fee settlement and the renewal of the charter, so it is an argument that I have been involved in for some considerable time. I know how strongly many people feel.

We should recognise, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn pointed out, that the licence fee is not just to fund the BBC; it also funds S4C, and we have used some of the fee to fill in the gaps left by public service broadcasters, through things like the young audience content fund and the audio content fund. Obviously, however, the overwhelming majority of the money does go to support the BBC.



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It is right to recognise, first, the huge asset that the BBC is to this country. It is widely admired around the world. In particular, in the course of the past year, when I suspect that most of us have watched more television than we have done for a very long time, it has filled the gap by providing not just, as several speakers have pointed out, a reliable source of information against the fake news and misinformation that has been circulating, but education for the many children who have been unable to attend school, by giving over a large part of daytime children's programming to educational content, and some great TV content.

I recognise the remarks of the hon. Member for North Antrim, because I received the email from his constituent as well, complaining about the number of repeats. To some extent, however, that has been because of the difficulty in making original content during a pandemic. All broadcasters have struggled slightly, although they have been ingenious in finding ways around it. The BBC has still produced some terrific dramas—*The Serpent* was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury, and we are looking forward to the next series of *Line of Duty* in just a few weeks' time.

Having said that, the BBC is open to criticism and there are areas where reform is clearly needed.

I welcome the fact that the director-general has made it clear that impartiality is paramount with the BBC and has acted to stop news presenters expressing opinions on social media, made it clear that some of the salary levels are excessive, and tackled some of the more ludicrous examples of what my hon. Friends have described as the "woke agenda" by, for instance, reinstating *Rule Britannia* at *Last Night of the Proms*.

In particular, I know the director-general recognises the concern that the BBC has exhibited an unduly metropolitan bias. I very much agree with those speakers, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, who reinforced the importance of regional news coverage and of ensuring that the BBC represent opinions from right across the country, not just the metropolitan heartlands.

During the course of the debate, a couple of specific issues were raised that I would like to touch on. The first is decriminalisation. The Government recognise that many people feel that it is disproportionate that this particular charge should be enforced through criminal sanction, and we are concerned about those who believe that that is unfair. As a result, we looked carefully at the issue of whether to decriminalise. However, as the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for City of Chester, pointed out, we must look at what the alternative would be.

If we moved to a civil enforcement, it could lead to licence fee payers facing possibly greater costs and bailiffs turning up at the door if they failed to pay. Therefore, we think it needs to be examined further. We recognise the strength of feeling that decriminalisation should take place but, before moving down that road, we need to be very clear about what



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the consequences would be and what possible alternatives there are. We continue to consider that.

A number of speakers in the debate raised the issue of the over-75s. It is the case that an agreement was reached with the BBC that various measures that it had asked for, the raising in the licence fee in line with RPI and the closure of the so-called iPlayer loophole, would be taken; in return, the BBC agreed to take on responsibility for the over-75s. The Government remain disappointed that it decided not to continue with the full extension and instead restricted it to those on pension credit.

I have only a few minutes left, and I wanted to touch on the absolute core of the debate: the future of the licence fee. As has been pointed out, it is set until the end of this charter. The licence fee model will continue until 2027. The level of the licence fee has risen in line with inflation each year since the last settlement, and we are now in the process of discussing with the BBC the next settlement, which will cover the next five years. That is an ongoing discussion. The Secretary of State has made it plain that he wants the BBC to justify the amount of money that it receives against the public purposes of the BBC, but that is a matter that will be decided within the next few months.

In the longer term, I think the BBC has reason, as do all traditional broadcasters, to view the change that is taking place with some concern. There is no question but that the huge increase in choice available through the streaming services has led to a decline in linear TV viewing. Already, it has fallen from something like 72% of viewing to a predicted 61% within the next five years. It is also suggested in one survey that, of the linear TV viewing at that time, less than 13% will come from those aged under 35.

We are already seeing that young people are turning more and more to video-on-demand services. That prompts the question of whether the licence fee model, which has been based on the fact that everybody uses the BBC, can continue. Although it was very clear when we drew up the current charter a couple of years ago that the licence fee model was the best means of continuing to fund the BBC—I think that is still the case now—it may well be that when we come to the next charter, we will need to look at alternatives.

The one proviso that I enter is this. A lot of people say they have a wide choice of streaming services—they can go to Netflix, Disney and Amazon—but we need to bear in mind that there is a significant proportion of the population who do not have access to any of those services and at the moment rely on Freeview. Many of them say that they do not want to meet the cost of a broadband subscription; they are perfectly happy to have the choice of the traditional public service broadcasters and a few others through Freeview. While they are on Freeview, it is not possible to introduce a subscription TV service. The technology does not allow it. Before we can consider moving to subscription as an element of the BBC's funding, everybody will need to be capable of receiving video on demand. That, I believe, will come. The roll-out of broadband is very fast, we will



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reach universal coverage, and there will come a time when it will be possible for us to move towards a full subscription service for everybody, but that time has not yet arrived.

Therefore, I believe that this debate will continue and will become more relevant as we reach the time of the next charter renewal in about six years' time. For the moment, it is the case that the licence fee still remains the best, and in many ways the only means of funding universal TV supplied through the BBC. I would like to thank all hon. Members who have taken part. We have had, I think, 21 contributions to this debate, which demonstrates how wide the feeling about this subject is, even though opinions on it diverge quite dramatically, as we have seen.

Q21 **Chair:** Thank you, Minister. I now go back to Jonathan Gullis for his concluding comments.

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you, Chair. I welcome all those who contributed to the debate and the Minister's response. As he says correctly, this is a wide-ranging debate, which existed long before I was a Member of Parliament and will probably continue long after I have gone. Ultimately, it is a debate that is important to have.

As someone who grew up on *Dad's Army* and *PorrIDGE*, and loves the traditional BBC programmes of the past, I reiterate that, sadly, the BBC has, as my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington said, moved beyond what it used to be. I believe that we are in a time of choice and value for money. Value for money is when I am able to choose if I want to pay something, not when I have to pay for something—that means that choice does not exist. Ultimately, I think we need to trust the British people to vote with their feet. I think they will still back the BBC in more ways than we suspect. I am not here to say, "Let's bring down the BBC." I am certainly not pushing an extremist agenda, as one hon. Member said. I am very happy for the BBC to continue existing. I just want to decide whether or not I pay for it.

I am very grateful to all Members who took part, and I am very grateful to the petitioner. One of the great things about democracy is that we get to speak in this place on behalf of those who have signed petitions. I look forward to taking part in many other petition debates on a massive range of issues in the future.

Chair: Thank you, and thank you to everyone who attended today's session. Thank you to the Front-Bench speakers who responded to the debate. Thank you to the broadcasters, *Hansard* and all the staff who work incredibly hard to facilitate these online sessions. Thank you very much indeed.