

Dr Tom Mills, Chair, Media Reform Coalition—supplementary written evidence (BFF0064)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into BBC future funding

Responses to follow-up questions from the Committee

Are the existing principles underpinning the existing funding model the right ones?

In broad terms, yes, the underlying principles are sound. We need a universal service that is independent of political and commercial pressures and which supports independent journalism, active citizenship, cultural participation and representation and mutual understanding. The problem is not so much around the principles, but the fact that they are not realised in practice.

Should anything be changed around the notion of universal access, and everyone paying the same?

Universal access is an absolutely fundamental principle of public service media and must be preserved to guarantee everybody's full participation in politics and culture. However, there is no reason why everyone should pay the same, and very good reasons why they should not. We support a move to a more progressive system of public funding that guarantees political independence and universal access.

To what extent should one of the BBC's primary objectives be to provide a form of 'national glue' that binds different sections of society together?

This has long been an argument made for and by the BBC. John Reith believed that the BBC could unite Britain and its empire behind national symbols, and described the first broadcast of George V as 'making the nation as one man'. In 1977, the Annan Committee reported that the then BBC chair, Sir Michael Swann, had argued that:

an enormous amount of the BBC's work was in fact social cement of one sort or another. Royal occasions, religious services, sports coverage, and police series, all reinforced the sense of belonging to our country, being involved in its celebrations, and accepting what it stands for.

We at the Media Reform Coalition believe that public media has a crucial role to play in facilitating political debate, active citizenship and cultural understanding. In that sense the BBC can and should operate as 'social glue'. But the crucial point is that it should not see its purpose as encouraging unity in a 'top down' way that simply encourages a passive identification with national symbols and

institutions – with which many people do not identify and from which many people feel excluded. Rather public media should allow for well-informed political deliberation, cultural exchange and mutual understanding. This should be participatory and organic, with the BBC in its role as a devolved and democratised universal platform acting as a facilitator.

March 2022