

**Dermot Lavery, Joint Managing Director, DoubleBand Films—
written evidence (FCF0019)**

**House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the
future of Channel 4**

“I am Channel 4”.

A view from Belfast.

Make no mistake this is a perilous moment in 100 years of the most successful public service broadcasting sector in the world.

The Government’s ‘preferred option’ to privatise Channel 4 will, perhaps unknowingly but surely inevitably, become the first stage in the decline of a broadcasting ecosystem that has public good, social coherence and UK and global creative success at its core.

We need to remind ourselves that Channel 4 is a publicly owned broadcaster. Every citizen, viewer, producer and tv industry worker has a stake in the future of Channel 4 - as such we all have a voice. Now is the time to stand up and be counted and to state that “I am Channel 4 too”.

The term ‘public service broadcasting’ refers to broadcasting intended for public benefit rather than to serve purely commercial interests. Channel 4 is a publicly owned commercially funded broadcaster with agreed and protected obligations and as such is a profoundly important institution for the citizens of the UK – were they to know it.

That the Government is embarking on a process that will inevitably lead to the demise of Channel 4 is at best evidence of misplaced concern and at worst an ill-informed misstep that will devastate the regionally critical independent production sector and, with it, the delicate balance that maintains the planetary alignment in British broadcasting.

Broadcasting as a tool in a declared Government ambition to ‘level-up the UK’ will lose its most committed proponent.

We must resist jaded disillusionment and be clear-sighted about Channel 4. It was and is the genius creation in British broadcasting. Its ambition must be re-stated and re-imagined rather than hollowed out.

With its unique model of public service broadcasting the big idea underpinning Channel 4 is that profit is re-invested in production. It does so at no cost to the public purse. Along with the BBC, it is the brilliant twin sister of British broadcasting. In other words, Channel 4 has, for almost two generations, been a net contributor to the creative capital of UK PLC. It has helped make British broadcasting content the envy of the world. For a very long time it has been the best in the world of its type.

In its 40 years Channel 4 has launched hundreds if not thousands of independent production companies (being supplied almost exclusively by companies from across the UK). Its creation by Margaret Thatcher's government unleashed the rapid growth of the UK independent production sector - something that barely existed before the Channel's launch back in 1982 - and its success cascaded down to tens of thousands of creatives. Many of those independent companies went on to become the largest and most admired on the planet, joining and creating media empires and leading to the evolution of what have become internationally competitive 'super-indies'. The supplying companies, not the publisher-broadcaster, become the real growth driven profit centres.

The Channel's unique remit to be youth focused, innovative and risk-taking makes it a natural hothouse of creativity, and as such it is more prepared and future proofed than any other UK broadcaster. So many innovations in the craft of television production were seen first on Channel 4. A shimmering window of creative UK, Channel 4 will, if allowed and emboldened, innovate again in the crucial coming marketplace battle with the streamers.

With its progressive culture, it understood before others the importance of the drive towards diversity and regionality in on-screen and production representation - what other broadcaster would have conceived of the fearlessly brilliant coverage of the Paralympic Games or the recently outstanding #Black to Front? It has understood the significance and challenge of diversity and turned it into a creative opportunity. Its news and current affairs are the independent minded guardians of journalistic integrity in broadcasting, the best in British broadcasting for a decade.

So let's be clear - Channel 4 and privatisation are contradictions in terms. Ultimately the Channel is accountable to the public - something that is incompatible with privatisation. The genius child of British broadcasting would be killed off at the moment of privatisation - and at a time of reconstruction when it is needed most. It would become, classically, a conflict of interest. In a private ownership model focused on the primacy of profitable performance and accountability to shareholders, public service obligations would inevitably become the burden that would threaten survival - and so would fall into decline.

If Channel 4 is privatised, the genius idea is gone forever. Whether in Belfast, Glasgow, Birmingham or Brixton, one of the most important pipelines for new entrants into the broadcasting mainstream would be cut off at source. The independent production sector will lose a key influence on renewal and re-imagination. Untold numbers of future new companies will not be incorporated. Thousands of creatives and entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds will have no route into the industry.

We have a duty to those creatives and entrepreneurs that come after us. We all have a duty as producers, citizens and viewers, to make sure that Channel 4 survives as the world's best public service broadcaster in the world's best public broadcasting sector.

I am able to say this because I am Channel 4 too.

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