

Media 03

Task and Finish Group on the future outlook for the media in Wales

Response from Pam Price-Thomas

Dear Mr Skates

I read with interest your article in the Western Mail on Monday 31 October 2011 and would like to offer my thoughts towards your Committee's inquiry.

Like you, I am concerned about the future of print journalism in Wales and the fate of the Western Mail in particular.

Independent investigative journalism is vital in safeguarding democracy and good governance and I believe that the Western Mail and the South Wales Echo still provide this at present. They are effectively the only source of news and comment about politics, government etc in Wales and are the only means by which the organisations that control our lives in Wales are adequately scrutinised.

This may sometimes be uncomfortable for you and your colleagues in local government, but it is absolutely essential for a mature, functioning democracy. If there are no independent voices scrutinising what such institutions are up to, then it is very easy for them to become detached from those whom they serve and can result in corruption and complacency.

I am very concerned that the present ownership of the Western Mail and South Wales Echo means that those newspapers are under threat, either from closure or gradual decline and loss of readership. It seems to me that these profitable papers are being milked for the benefit of the shareholders, to the detriment of the papers' quality and therefore their vital function in Welsh democracy.

If these newspapers are allowed to disappear or be so constrained by cost cuts etc, then I fear for democracy in Wales. Without the accountability that these newspapers demand, then who will ask the difficult questions on behalf of ordinary voters?

I certainly do not believe that the BBC or S4C can be adequate substitutes for an independent media in Wales. I have long since given up on BBC Wales' news programmes (the few that there are) as they are so lightweight and always seem to avoid difficult issues. The standard of journalism at BBC Wales just does not seem to match that which is currently provided by the Western Mail in particular. If BBC Wales/S4C were to become the sole providers of news and comment in Wales, then I believe that Welsh democracy would suffer.

As you will be aware, the national press almost never cover Welsh issues, so their existence is of no relevance.

I fear for the future where the Welsh Assembly obtains more and more powers over Wales, yet would face none of the scrutiny and accountability that only a free press can provide.

It seems that with 5-year parliaments, reduced numbers of directly-elected AMs, and a proportional representation system that mitigates against changes in government/assembly membership, the Welsh Assembly will become further and further detached from the people of Wales, which cannot be what you and your colleagues want from devolution. The point of devolution is to bring power closer to the people, and yet whilst the Westminster Government is under constant scrutiny, analysis and criticism, for good or bad, the Welsh Assembly only ever seems to receive the constructive criticism that is so important to its democratic functioning from the Western Mail – the BBC/S4C cannot or will not do this.

You mentioned in your article about the Local Government produced “glossy papers” – I fear that without the Western Mail etc, then our only source of information about the Welsh Assembly will be similar propaganda publications (or worse still, the Welsh Government website, which is appallingly user-unfriendly).

I hope that you and your Committee are committed to ensuring that newspapers such as the Western Mail and South Wales Echo are not allowed to decline beyond the point of no return and that you will use all your powers and influence to maintain a thriving, independent press in Wales.

Yours sincerely
Pam Price-Thomas