

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

Response from EQUITY

Background:

1: Equity is the principal union for workers in the performing arts. Our members include actors, dancers, singers, designers, directors and many others involved in the creative teams in theatre television and film. Across the UK we represent 37,000 workers and in Wales we represent just over 1,500 of whom about 450 are Welsh speakers.

2: Equity's main focus of interest is in broadcasting as we have no sphere of influence in print media.

English language issues:

3: The broadcasting industry in Wales is in a very contradictory state. On the one hand there is the expansion of the BBC through the development at Roath Lock which will be of huge importance to the industry in Wales, and on the other hand there is a contraction of work both at BBC Wales and S4C as a result of cuts connected directly to the Westminster Government's cutbacks on public spending.

4: It is important for the Committee to realise that the expansion of work in Roath Lock is very much driven by the central BBC wish to devolve production to the Nations and Regions which is itself a result of pressure from unions and producers over a period of years. This means that the vast majority of the work that will be generated there will be managed from London, and we fear that this will result in the facility being largely metropolitan in its outlook and that it may not connect with the wider media and broadcasting community in Wales which would be regrettable.

5: From Equity's point of view we want the Roath Lock development to bring about a renaissance in development of local talent and reverse the trend that has been so prevalent since time immemorial, namely that in order to make a career as an actor or director from Wales, it is necessary to move immediately out of Wales.

6: Cardiff now has a world class facility in the newly refurbished Royal Welsh College and the graduates of that institution need to be encouraged to remain in Wales, to see that they have a future in Wales and that they will be employed here. This will be of enormous and lasting benefit to the whole cultural infrastructure of Welsh arts and broadcasting which needs to be seen in a holistic sense and not as separate independent industries.

7: While this expansion takes place in Roath Lock, the amount of money available to BBC Wales for indigenous programme making will be reduced. We have opposed from the outset the way in which the BBC budget nationally has been effectively top sliced to pay for the World Service and S4C. The resultant cuts in service in the Nations and Regions can be traced back directly to that decision.

8: There has been no indication where these cuts may have the most impact but it is likely to be on high cost drama and documentaries, which will mainly affect members of this union. BBC Wales has been exemplary in its investment in regional drama over the last fifteen years. Series like The Bench, Belonging, Crash and latterly The Baker Boys have all been made in Wales for Wales. It would have been even more satisfying if any of these productions had made it on to network, but that was not their primary purpose. They fulfilled an important cultural need, namely that the national

broadcaster told stories about Wales to Wales. The big question now is whether that will be able to continue.

9: This is equally true of the investment in drama and light entertainment on Radio Wales and Radio Cymru. There is no other broadcaster other than the BBC providing this breadth of work for actors and writers in radio.

Welsh language issues:

10: Equity has been heavily involved in the development of the independent production sector in the Welsh language since the inception of S4C in 1982 and we have been very clear about our role to make sure the rewards to those who make the programmes are commensurate with actors across the UK doing similar work. We have never believed that the workforce at S4C should be the poor relations of the broadcasting industry.

11: Having said that we have also been realistic about the resources available to the channel and to their strategic objectives. This has in practice resulted in a regular readjustment of the contractual relationship between the independent sector and performers and we believe we have at all times behaved responsibly. We feel that this has shown a continuous commitment to the success of the channel.

12: We have on a number of occasions cautioned S4C against what we perceive to be unrealistic expansion of programme making given their inability to expand income. This was most noticeable over the huge increase in hours in the lead up to analogue switch over. The quality of programme making in this circumstance could not be maintained and resulted in what we felt was a downward spiral of standards and consequentially audiences, leading in the end to the crisis of confidence in 2010 which is well documented and made the channel susceptible to attack from central government .

13: Along the way there have been a number of areas where we believe S4C has over committed. The obvious one is in the number of broadcast hours. We recommended that this be scrutinised as part of the long term strategy but it has been flatly rejected.

14: We also believe that the reluctance of S4C to see the unions as stakeholders in the service is bluntly insulting. Given the support and assistance given by all the unions over the last 30 years and given that it off the back of our members that the main success of S4C can be measured we feel we should have such a status.

15: We also believe that there is an absolute need for the S4C Authority to be fully accountable and that the National Assembly through some mechanism, be it a Broadcasting Commission or Committee, should develop scrutinising powers. S4C affects so many people's lives in Wales so often and so fundamentally that for the Welsh Government to have no direct say in what it does or how it operates is absurd.

16: We are pleased that the BBC and S4C have now reached an accommodation which gives the latter more certainty over funding through to 2017 but we have to acknowledge that the cutbacks to the service likely through the reduction in programme budgets will be drastic. As stated above, our members work in the "expensive" end of the market and yet it is an end by which most broadcasters are measured. It is through their drama output that most broadcasters make a lasting and evocative mark and we want every assurance that S4C will continue to commit to this type of work. We have been critical in recent years about the lack of co-production money that has come into the Welsh language TV industry and it is to be hoped through the pedigree of the new Chief Executive that this will radically change for the better.

Conclusions

17: There are some very important opportunities facing broadcasting in Wales in the next few years. If the increase in production can be maintained and through the Welsh Government encouragement can be given to the local employment, Welsh creative talent could flourish like never before.

18: The Creative Industries could become an even more important driver of the Welsh economy than they are already.

19: The role of the unions as partners in the success of the media is also crucial. It is wrong for S4C not to treat us as stakeholders. It is equally wrong for Inquiries as wide ranging as the Hargreaves Report to be written without any consultation with the unions at all.

19: Despite the fact that broadcasting is not a devolved issue, the Welsh Government should make the strategies being employed by all the broadcasters in Wales their business. There must be some mechanism established to facilitate this.

20: There needs to be a discussion throughout Welsh civic society about how broadcasting and the media in Wales is funded and managed. It is that important to the cultural infrastructure of the national identity. We have to guard against any notion that by 2016 the media in Wales is wholly run by organisations based outside Wales.

21: We have to recognise how crucial the industry is both to the culture and the economy of Wales and respond to its needs accordingly.

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