

WEDNESDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2005

Present

Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury, B
Fowler, L (Chairman)
Maxton, L
Peston, L

Witnesses: **Professor Fabian Monds**, BBC National Governor for Northern Ireland, **Ms Anna Carragher**, Controller of BBC Northern Ireland, **Mr Pat Loughrey**, Director of Nations and Regions and **Reverend Rick Hill**, Member, Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland, examined.

Q615 Chairman: Good morning. I was going to say thank you very much for coming but what I should be saying is thank you very much for allowing us to come here and take evidence in your own office. You know the background so I will not labour that; it is that we have completed our first report and we are now looking at areas which we did not have quite enough time to do. One of those comes under the category of regional broadcasting, but it goes wider than that. Could you say what BBC Northern Ireland's main goals in both television and radio actually are?

Ms Carragher: Chairman, in the main the overall goal is to ensure that the BBC has a whole portfolio of programmes and services that meets the needs of audiences within Northern Ireland. The essential main way in which we do that is the provision of local services within Northern Ireland, local television programmes which cover a range of genres, provision of dedicated radio service in Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle and our online services. We also ensure that the networks meet the needs of BBC audiences, and this is done in a variety of ways because obviously I am concerned to ensure that the UK is fully represented and that the tastes of the UK are fully met. So, for example, we have a very young population in Northern

Ireland. Radio Ulster is a very, very successful radio service that provides for a slightly older population, therefore Radio Ulster/Foyle works very closely with Radio 1 to ensure that Radio 1 meets the needs and tastes of the younger audience. In television programmes we were very conscious that programmes like *EastEnders*, although it is a most successful BBC1 programme in Northern Ireland, nonetheless, compared with the performance in particularly the south of England, performs less well here as against *Coronation Street* or *Emmerdale* which, our residents being northern and industrial, northern and rural, therefore meets the taste of audiences here more closely. One finds, for example, that a programme like *Cutting It* or *Clocking Off*, which is covering the north of England, has a greater resonance with the local audience than something like *My Family*, which is deeply popular in the south of England but does not have a particular resonance within Northern Ireland. So that is the overall view. Turning then briefly to the local output and local services, I think it will come as no surprise to any of you that, as is the case everywhere in the BBC, but very particularly in this society, the provision of an accurate and impartial news service is an absolute paramount responsibility across radio, television and indeed online. Exploration of life in Northern Ireland through a whole range of single programmes, chat shows and series are very important, as is reflecting the cultural diversity of Northern Ireland. We have very distinctive tastes in things like music, in sports and, ironically, in what one might not first think of, like humour, for example. And obviously languages. We have an incredibly important role and possibly one which other parts of the UK may wish to emulate, in a conflicted society being a space where people can meet and debate and discuss, where stories can be told and where views can be aired. I think in a post-conflict society, a society that has the legacy of The Troubles, we are increasingly conscious that one of the things that people want to be able to do is to tell their story and have their voice heard, and that is a very, very important role we have.

Q616 Chairman: You are – I was going to say a veteran – someone who has worked on a number of programmes like *Question Time* and the *Today* programme. If I was sitting here, as I was this morning, would I be listening to *Today* from London or would I be listening to *Today* from Belfast, a completely different programme?

Ms Carragher: You have a choice of listening to either depending where you went on your radio dial. *Good Morning Ulster* is the local programme which runs from 6.30 to 9 o'clock and provides a comprehensive local national and international news service, a news service which is obviously going to be tailored to particular tastes in Northern Ireland. Therefore, for example, this morning our main story was the Review of Public Administration, which may have been a footnote in the *Today* programme but obviously is a very, very important political development for people within Northern Ireland.

Q617 Chairman: Yes, I heard that. How many in Northern Ireland would listen to that and how many would listen to John Humphrys and co. in London?

Ms Carragher: The vast majority of people would listen to *Good Morning Ulster*. That is a reflection of the fact of a number of things. First of all, Radio Ulster is one of the most – and I think is the most successful station which is run, not just by the BBC in the UK. It has a very, very large audience share of 31%, which is extremely high indeed. Northern Ireland is a very news hungry society. For the *Today* programme, the audience share in Northern Ireland is much smaller at around 5.6%.

Chairman: Would it be fair to say that they take their style, judging from the interviews I was hearing, from the *Today* programme? Or perhaps it was the other way, I do not know!

Q618 Lord Maxton: Could I link into television on that because in Scotland, where I come from, of course, there are those who seek the BBC to do what is called the *Scottish Six*, in other words they do the total news on television at six o'clock because they think that the six

to half past six news is certainly English centralised if not London centralised. Are there people in Northern Ireland saying, “We should have an Ulster Six”?

Ms Carragher: No, not particularly. We have an issue with the under performance of the six o'clock, which is partly due to scheduling issues in that the local news on Ulster Television runs at six o'clock and people do tend to go to that for local news.

Mr Loughrey: There was not the same lobby in Northern Ireland for a different arrangement of news between six and seven.

Q619 Chairman: How many do you employ in BBC Northern Ireland?

Ms Carragher: Seven hundred and thirty-two.

Q620 Chairman: Obviously as I listened this morning one could hear the traditional political divides. Do you have any figures on how the religious affiliations, if I can put it that way, break down?

Ms Carragher: The religious affiliation of BBC Northern Ireland's workforce is profiled on a regular basis in accordance with the requirements of our Equal Opportunities legislation. BBC Northern Ireland's monitoring returns to the Equality Commission include freelance and contract staff in addition to those employed on permanent contracts and this means that the figures can look somewhat higher than those quoted for our full-time equivalent head count. The breakdown is 409 Protestant, 335 Catholic and 122 non-determined. That is a much higher proportion in non-determined than would be the case for most employers in Northern Ireland, which is largely due to the fact that we would employ more people who have come from other parts of the country. The breakdown, to give you percentages, from the Equality Commissions Monitoring Report No 14 Published in November 2004, is that excluding those whose religious or community background is non-determined, the composition of BBC Northern Ireland's workforce is 55% Protestant, 45% Roman Catholic.

Q621 Chairman: That would also apply up and down the scale? For example, the number of producers, would that roughly be the same percentage?

Ms Carragher: It would roughly be the same percentage, and there would be some individual variations.

Q622 Chairman: That is a dramatic difference between now and where we were in, say, the 1960s when I first came to Ulster.

Ms Carragher: Yes.

Q623 Chairman: What would have been the position then?

Ms Carragher: I do not have the exact figures and I can get back to you with them, but from memory they were roughly 90 per cent – ten per cent.

Q624 Chairman: So that has been the revolution which has taken place inside.

Ms Carragher: Yes.

Q625 Chairman: My last question in introduction, the main challenge that you find, is it balance? You have a very politically aware local population who feel very strongly about various issues, so keeping the balance there must be quite difficult, even more difficult than in some parts of the rest of the United Kingdom.

Ms Carragher: It is undoubtedly a challenge and a challenge in that there are far more political parties here than there are in the UK as a whole. Five larger parties and then when you go to smaller parties up to 11 or 12, and within those parties there are different wings as well, so you are balancing within parties in a greater number of parties with a very politically aware audience. So that is undoubtedly a challenge.

Q626 Chairman: Do you have surveys which can show whether the BBC is accepted as being fair and balanced?

Ms Carragher: Yes, we do. We carry out continual surveys. The last figures I was looking at on this, the number of people who felt that our output was biased was 18 per cent, which assumes that 82 per cent are satisfied with the impartiality of our coverage, or certainly do not feel we are biased. The levels of satisfaction with the service is very high; it is 78 per cent showing that they are satisfied.

Q627 Chairman: Is there any difference between Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom in satisfaction surveys?

Mr Loughrey: There are approval indices, Chairman, across the UK. What Anna is quoting is a specific survey about Northern Ireland, so there are not benchmarks necessarily for that survey. But if you would like to see the approval indices I am sure we can send them to you subsequently.

Q628 Lord Maxton: In this highly political world the Broadcasting Council must have a very important role to play, much more perhaps important than Broadcasting Councils elsewhere, would that be right?

Professor Monds: The Broadcasting Council of Northern Ireland has all the same responsibilities that the Welsh and Scottish Broadcasting Councils have and the priority is to provide communications to management and to the Board of Governors on the way in which, in our case, BBC Northern Ireland is delivering an appropriate mix of programmes and is spending its budget appropriately, in our view, across the programme genres. But it is true that in Northern Ireland we have a somewhat more complex environment, not just because of the community and political considerations and history but also we have a somewhat unique broadcasting environment, in that Northern Ireland has for some time been a multi-channel

analogue terrestrial environment with RTÉ transmitting to approximately 50 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland, and that is now available on D-Sat as well. So BBC Northern Ireland has a particular challenge to cope with that competition. I should have said at the beginning, Chairman, how pleased we are that you have chosen to bring the Committee to Northern Ireland and we are grateful for this opportunity of communication on that subject.

Q629 Lord Maxton: When you are recruiting to the Council – and maybe this is in part a question to Reverend Hill as well – do you try to reflect the political religious divides in Northern Ireland? If I can be quite direct with you, do you feel that when you are on that Council you are representing the Presbyterian Church, or do you think you are on there as an individual representing the people of Northern Ireland?

Professor Monds: If I could start and then Reverend Hill to come in. Just to outline the process, which is that the Lord Nolan principles are applied. We use external assessors and advertising and the invitation for applications is completely open. In deciding on individuals to join the Council, yes, attention is paid to the mix, but this cannot be a crude head count on a religious basis or indeed on an urban basis; the individuals' abilities, interests and backgrounds are all relevant. One thing we pay attention to is geography, in the sense that if we get a distribution of individuals across Northern Ireland that helps to ensure some degree of correlation with the proportional community distribution. But we have been very successful, I think, in getting balance and representation. We worry about such things as rural versus urban, the business community representation and the like. But you asked the Reverend Hill a direct question, so over to you, Rick.

Reverend Hill: If I could comment and say that I believe the Broadcasting Council's role is to be listening and responding to the audience, to assist the BBC in understanding the local audience. Am I a representative of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland? I am not. I am first and foremost a licence payer who is an advocate for other licence payers. Of course I bring to

that some skills and interests that would clearly be influenced by my own employment background and by my previous background as a physicist and the fact that I have been building computers since I was 16 years old, so I have a technology interest as well. I know from the mix in the Council that we have a diverse range of skills, interests, cultural backgrounds, sporting backgrounds, and actually I think that the Council is greater than the sum of its parts because of that eclectic mixture that we have. In its recruitment materials the BBC state that the Council's membership should reflect the diversity of the BBC's audience in Northern Ireland and should, consistent with the principle of appointment on merit, include people with different skills, interests, areas of expertise and backgrounds. The process is independently audited, it is publicly advertised, it is wide open and transparent. Details of all this are on our website, which seems to attract 10,000 to 12,000 people a month viewing it, so you can check that there for yourself and see that. Baroness Onora O'Neill said in her Reith Lectures in 2002 that "real accountability involves substantive and knowledgeable independent judgment of an institution's work by people who have sufficient time and experience to assess the evidence and report on it". I think that is what you have in the Councils.

Q630 Lord Maxton: Could I ask one last question on this? It is not clear – and we did not actually recommend it ourselves – whether or not there will be governors from the nations on the Board of Governors in the future. What is your view on that?

Professor Monds: Chairman, the BBC's response to the Green Paper was to argue quite explicitly for national representation on the new Trust, and I think that the arguments are strong for each of the nations and indeed it is proposed that the English National Forum, which does not have constitutional status at the moment, should be treated in the same way as the Broadcasting Councils. But I think that the track record of communication – and I would emphasise communication rather than representation – from National Governors in Scotland,

Wales and Northern Ireland has been helpful. The relationship through the Broadcasting Councils with listeners and viewers in the nations is effective; there is obvious scope for improvement, but my personal view is that Northern Ireland deserves and requires representation at that level.

Q631 Lord Maxton: If the devolved government is restored in Northern Ireland do you think they should have a role in the selection of that governor, in the sense that that would be a better way of ensuring accountability and so on?

Professor Monds: The experience we have had in Scotland and Wales has been that the national governors have been able to represent the Board of Governors to the Assembly and the Parliament as required, and I think that gives a good level of accountability.

Q632 Chairman: You have used the word a number of times, “representative” on the Board. All best corporate governance rules these days are that once you are on the Board your loyalty is to the Board. Are you there as the representative simply to stand up for the interests of Northern Ireland?

Professor Monds: Certainly not. In fact, with regard to my particular interests, I have all the responsibilities, as all the national governors have, of any governor for oversight and the regulatory powers and responsibilities that all the governors have. I do carry a full workload of responsibilities within the Board of Governors. I have a particular interest in digital roll-out, and am charged with helping to monitor that objective. No, I think the present Charter is very clear on the way in which national governors are appointed, that they are full governors, and their relationship with the Broadcasting Council. I think I used the term “representation” in a broad sense in that Northern Ireland would retain, as would Scotland and Wales, the same level of visibility and profile within the United Kingdom arrangements.

Q633 Chairman: If a decision came before you that pointed to extra resources going to Manchester you would not actually feel that you had to argue the case for Northern Ireland at every Board meeting?

Professor Monds: It is never as simple as that. The out of London strategy has involved not just the move to Manchester but the distribution of resources right across the BBC. So I think what national governors bring to the debate is a knowledge and awareness of the situation in their own nations, but that is to contribute to the discussions, not to lobby in any sense for particular special treatment.

Q634 Chairman: And you never lobby?

Professor Monds: Not in that sense, no.

Q635 Chairman: In what sense do you lobby?

Professor Monds: I have used the term “communication”, I think it is important that information is available and the special circumstances of Northern Ireland need to be reflected.

Reverend Hill: Can I comment on that and give you an example. At our public meetings – and we have had 22 public meetings of the Council in the last financial year – one of the recurring themes that emerged from local licence payers was that digital radio coverage in Northern Ireland was extremely poor and that many people who had bought these devices on the understanding that they would work discovered they did not; there was only about 43 per cent coverage. The Council were very exercised by this and concerned. We met with management in London in relation to this. We were not wholly content with how that was proceeding. With our report to the governors and through our national governor we were able to have this raised at the Board of Governors and eventually three new transmitters were built in Northern Ireland to serve the audience. I think that demonstrates that there is a reporting

path there where a nation's representation in the broader sense is important. Our Council has stated in an appendix to the BBC's Green Paper response that nations' representation on the BBC Trust is an important expression of the representative principle, and will be critical and important to the work of the Board's ability in understanding the UK's diversity. I think that does matter from that point of view. So representation in the broadest sense does matter to the Council and they have stated it, and that arises out of 22 public meetings, four breakfast meetings with people specifically on the topic of the Green Paper, as well as *A Sky full of Voices* radio talks, at which the audience was a public audience and we had 70,000 listeners. If you look at the DCMS website and the submissions in relation to this you will find that all of the main churches have said that this is an important principle. So we are listening to the audience and reflecting that view back to you.

Q636 Lord Peston: Could I come in on that because I think all of this raises very deep questions, but it was Reverend Hill's remark about digital. I live in East Anglia and I am pretty sure that the population of East Anglia is larger than that of Northern Ireland, but we have no representation in the sense that you are talking about at all, and our digital coverage is not good enough. One of the reasons why some of us query the whole nations' approach to this is the fact that each part of England is as big as any of the nations, and there seems to be no way of doing in parts of England what you do as part of the nations. I am not opposed entirely to the nations but I bristle a little when I hear about representation in the broad sense because I then say, "What about me?"

Professor Monds: Yes, there is quite a substantial network of local advisory councils and the English National Forum.

Q637 Lord Peston: It is not the same thing.

Professor Monds: It is not the same and I did say a while back that efforts do need to be made and arrangements do need to be made to improve on that. The present Board of Governors is making considerable efforts in terms of accountability events. I would say that in terms of best practice here in Northern Ireland, as Reverend Hill has indicated, we have been pretty active in getting out and about and meeting with people. To be frank, the Board of Governors as a body in a UK sense has not been quite as visible in those terms. Tonight we have a public accountability event in Glasgow, and we have had one in London and there will be a series of these. But I think you are quite right there, that accountability needs to be very, very visible and the appropriate arrangements made across the United Kingdom. That does not, in my mind, negate the arguments for representation.

Mr Loughrey: You do have in the Regional Advisory Council, which is part of a stratum of accountability known as the English National Forum, where the various Regional Advisory Councils in England and the local Advisory Councils for local radio come together, a member of the Board of Governors with special responsibility for English regions, Ranjit Sondhi. What we are proposing in Building Public Value is that there is equity of status between the English National Forum and the Broadcasting Councils and therefore we create a Broadcasting Council for England. It is difficult to explain why that has not existed to start with – it was an artefact of past arrangements – but we are alert to your concern, and I think it is a very valid one.

Q638 Lord Peston: Can I take this on more generally into the complaints and feedback area? First of all, in terms of your own experience is complaining a major Northern Ireland activity?

Professor Monds: I see this from two points of view. One, I happen to be and have been for a few years a member of the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee, so in the last year we have had a radical review and rearrangement of the complaints processes, through the

Editorial Complaints Unit in the BBC and to the referral and handling of complaints by the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee. I think that we now have a very powerful, coherent and accessible system which can be accessed through the Web as well as by other means. So in a UK-wide sense we have the complaints process well in hand, I believe, and it is working well. In Northern Ireland, the Broadcasting Council sees each month a report on complaints that have been logged with BBC Information. I do not see – having the opportunity to see the patterns UK-wide and in Northern Ireland – a huge difference, I may say. Perhaps there is a preparedness to lift the telephone or dash off an email or a text, but that rarely translates into a formal complaint. There are, of course, exceptions; the *Jerry Springer The Opera* show precipitated a very large number of written complaints, but we understand why that happened.

Q639 Chairman: Before or after?

Professor Monds: Principally before but some after.

Q640 Lord Peston: Could you give us – apart from *Jerry Springer*, which I beg you not to take us into – an example or two of the sort of complaint?

Professor Monds: A huge diversity from excessive reference to Londonderry or 'Derry, the way the city is referred to. I think that Northern Ireland viewers and listeners are quite alert that to perceived or real offence. We had an example at the Broadcasting Council where a presenter referred to a Catholic church as a chapel and this precipitated a complaint. Some of them can range from the absolute trivial to very serious complaints.

Reverend Hill: Not from me!

Q641 Chairman: Say it is a more serious complaint and one of your programmes has done an injustice to one of the participants? Take us through the process. What would then happen? You would attempt to reconcile that at Northern Ireland level?

Professor Monds: Are you taking an example of a political concern?

Q642 Chairman: Yes.

Professor Monds: It may be that a politician would choose to write to me or to the Controller. Anna, you are better equipped to explain what has happened in our experience in that category.

Ms Carragher: Occasionally politicians will ring or write to us and complain about their treatment on particular programmes and obviously the first thing I will do in that case is show them that I will investigate the complaint. I will then talk to the programme's producers and find out the circumstances. If we have made a factual inaccuracy, which has happened, but I am happy to say has very rarely happened, we will apologise and rectify it.

Q643 Chairman: On the air?

Mr Loughrey: Yes.

Ms Carragher: Usually, yes. I say usually, because occasionally the individual concerned may think it is too trivial to then be recognised on air, so we will take a judgment in each individual case. If, as is more often the case, it is a matter of opinion we will consider it very, very carefully indeed and look at it from all angles and come back to the individual again either with an acceptance that we have made an error, in which case we will apologise, or a robust defence of our position. The individual then has the opportunity, if he or she so wishes, to take that further, either to the Editorial Complaints Unit, or the Governor's Programme Complaints Committee and in specified circumstances to Ofcom. I think we have

had only one instance in the last year of a complaint being taken to Ofcom by a politician, which was not upheld.

Q644 Chairman: But you could not take a complaint to Ofcom in terms of accuracy, could you, I do not think?

Mr Loughrey: Very often, Chairman, in my experience, in those negotiations that Anna has described, there is a fair opportunity to reply. It is very often the perception of an accusation made without the right of reply, or at least not the right of reply at the same time within the same programme. Very often we can reconcile those concerns by providing time for that right of reply. Fair enough, not always, and that is when it goes to the formal complaints procedure.

Q645 Chairman: Then what happens there?

Professor Monds: The Editorial Complaints Unit, if it has not been reconciled informally, will deal with it – if it is a question of accuracy or impartiality or fairness – will attempt to have a dialogue with the complainant to try to reach an understanding. And this may involve the producer of the programme giving a view or the researcher on the programme who uncovered the particular point giving a response. So there may be an exchange of letters between the Editorial Complaints Unit and the individual. If that fails to reach agreement – and the majority of cases are dealt with in that way, an explanation is given and an acceptance of that explanation follows – the complainant is advised that their next recourse is to the Governors’ Programme Complaints Committee, and we deal with probably four or five complaints which have reached that level a month.

Q646 Chairman: Four or five a month?

Professor Monds: Yes, it is a very, very small proportion of the literally thousands of inputs that come in.

Q647 Chairman: It is not just a Northern Ireland question.

Professor Monds: I am talking about the UK.

Q648 Chairman: But you have to be pretty determined to get it up there, have you not? You must almost be forgetting what the complaint is by the time it has got to you.

Professor Monds: Not in my experience!

Q649 Chairman: Okay, in your experience by the time that four or five complaints a month have got up there, they are people who feel very strongly.

Professor Monds: Indeed they do.

Q650 Chairman: Do they say, “That is great; this BBC Committee has looked at these complaints against the BBC and has found against me as the complainant, that is the end of the matter, I regard that as an entirely fair and sensible process”?

Professor Monds: We uphold complaints from time to time and we partially uphold complaints.

Chairman: From time to time?

Q651 Lord Maxton: What is from time to time? Once a year, twice a year?

Professor Monds: There is a quarterly bulletin published both by the Editorial Complaints Unit and by the Governors’ Programme Complaints Committee. The statistics are there and I can give you the actual percentages, but it is not insignificant.

Q652 Chairman: But you would not feel that it was better from the point of view of the complainant and the public generally if the end result could be an appeal to someone who was not the BBC, like Ofcom?

Professor Monds: In certain categories of complaints that is the case.

Q653 Chairman: But not in impartiality and not in accuracy.

Professor Monds: I think there are real benefits in the Board of Governors being aware of the standards that are being achieved by the BBC in that area, and I think it is an appropriate exercise of responsibilities of the Governors to deal with such complaints.

Q654 Chairman: I was not really asking that. I agree with that, but for someone who is still dissatisfied, should he have a right of independent appeal where in other walks of life, not to mention other parts of television, he does?

Professor Monds: My position would be that the rigour of the present process does address in a fair way that concern.

Mr Loughrey: With external expert advice as well.

Professor Monds: Yes. I should say that the new arrangements for complaints do include the opportunity for a hearing, if that seems appropriate. But as Pat reminded me, we do take external expert advice as well.

Q655 Lord Peston: That is very interesting; thank you. Could I take us on to another rather important matter, which is the question of languages and the Irish language? I am never very clear, is Erse the Irish language? Erse is only the answer to a crossword clue regularly in *The Times*. What is the Irish language?

Mr Loughrey: Gaelic.

Q656 Lord Peston: So Erse is Scots then maybe?

Mr Loughrey: Gaelic for Scots, Gaelic for Irish.

Q657 Lord Peston: My serious question is – and it takes us back to Anna’s opening statement, where she sometimes used the words “needs” and sometimes used the word “wishes”, and the two of them, wearing my economics hat, are not quite the same – do you get pressure – and it is not all that far removed from the complaints business as well – for you to act as promoters of Gaelic? Secondly, that there should be always the option of having Gaelic as an available language?

Professor Monds: Are you thinking in terms of the role of the Broadcasting Council in this?

Q658 Lord Peston: No, I am thinking more of the role of the BBC more generally in this. I felt that the Broadcasting Council might be one of the paths into it, but I think the main BBC view is the one I would like to know.

Mr Loughrey: I guess with the responsibility for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland one is constantly doing an endless balancing act between the needs and indeed the demands of minority languages bodies and the majority monoglot audience. Issues of parity, fairness, equity – I discussed these with you when I gave evidence in Cardiff – the relative spend per head of the population, those kinds of equations are constantly a factor in our decision-making. However, I think it is right to say that the reason the BBC provides dedicated services for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is a product of the distinctive heritage, culture and linguistics of a diverse United Kingdom. If it were not for the uniqueness of the heritage then the case for distinctive services would be less. A very large part of our brief is educational; it is cultural. We celebrate and nurture the distinctive cultural voice and identity of the different territories we represent. They provide for us a colour and texture of the United Kingdom that the digital world, for example, will never provide, the kind of pervading mid-Atlanticism of multi-channel television where there is such a lack of British-made

content of any description. I think the BBC has nurtured from its inception the unique and distinctive linguistic heritage of these islands, and that is something of which we should be proud, while constantly being mindful of the equation of parity and fairness for the English speaking majority. I guess it is fair to say that in the midst of all of the debate the single most popular BBC programme in all three nations is *EastEnders*, which is a fact of life alongside the unique heritage, culture and identity of those countries.

Q659 Lord Maxton: Why do you not do Urdu in Scotland? There are more Urdu speakers in Scotland than there are Gaelic speakers.

Mr Loughrey: We provide in the Asian network a dedicated service across the United Kingdom with nations-related input for the Asian community in its entirety. We have a language learning strand called *Colin and Cumberland* online, on radio and on television across all three nations, because I believe that one of the particular roles of the BBC is to provide access to the minority language community for those who feel excluded from it; and, as we do from Lord Reith's vision of the BBC, allowing access for people to the broad cannon of culture, people who never go to a theatre or a recital but who, thanks to the licence fee, have access, we can provide access, learning resources for indigenous languages. We are about to provide that same resource for non-indigenous languages, for the languages you described, Lord Maxton. It is an important part of cultural awareness and a celebration of diversity to provide learning opportunities.

Q660 Lord Peston: Speaking as someone who under no circumstances – a tiny oppressed minority – would ever watch *EastEnders*, and we are a small oppressed minority, surely one of the great benefits for public service broadcasters is that they can take a responsibility for the cultural heritage and languages. But the question I am pushing you on is, do you do that in terms of need, saying, “It is our duty” in BBC Northern Ireland, “to make sure that we

foster the language because that is part of the heritage and national identity,” and you are now always designated as nations, *a fortiori*, or do you wait for others to pressure you to say, “Why are you not doing that?” That is why I made the needs-wishes distinction. As a university teacher it never occurred to me ever to ask what the students wanted, I knew what they had to have. I felt that was my duty.

Mr Loughrey: I think the truth of language provision here in Northern Ireland is of a very slow start. For the first decades of our existence we made scant, if any, provision or recognition that the Irish language even existed on our airwaves. It was because of the deep cultural and political division in Northern Ireland that that was the case, and it is not something of which we are particularly proud. Over recent years with all due diligence we have been trying to address and to create some provision initially on radio and now increasingly on television to make good that deficit.

Q661 Lord Maxton: How many actual Gaelic speakers are there in Northern Ireland? In Scotland it is under 60,000, and I would hate to think what the cost per head of providing Gaelic services are.

Ms Carragher: In the 2001 census I think that 167,490 people indicated that they had some knowledge of Irish and of that number approximately 75,000 are estimated as being fluent in the language. It is the third most widely taught language in schools in Northern Ireland.

Q662 Lord Maxton: What is your budget in terms of providing your Gaelic services?

Ms Carragher: Our current budget for Irish is £350,000 in the production of television – that was 2004/2005; and £240,000 for radio. So it is a relatively modest provision.

Q663 Lord Peston: I would approve of that.

Mr Loughrey: I am sure you will meet others in the course of the morning who have less approval, but this is a moot issue in the constant debate, as you know, in Wales and in Scotland. I think the BBC has an absolute obligation to reflect the diversity of the languages in the United Kingdom. At the core of that cultural diversity is language.

Q664 Lord Peston: I have one last question down here which I do not understand so I am going to read it out and hope you understand the question. This is following the Ofcom statement. How do you react to Ofcom's suggestion that you ought to foster an enhanced relationship with TG4 to increase Irish language broadcasting? That is the question; I hope you have written down the answer!

Ms Carragher: TG Ceathair, TG4, is the Irish language broadcaster, which is based in Galway in the Republic of Ireland, and which the Agreement signed in Belfast on Good Friday did actually ask both governments to place its availability within Northern Ireland, which has been, in our case, partly due to transmitter modification. So it is now available more widely within Northern Ireland. It is certainly something in which we talk very frequently with TG Ceathair; we have done co-productions with them and we are currently both of us accessing the Irish Language Production Fund, which the government set up, and we have reciprocal transmission arrangements for programmes for which both of us are accessing funding. As we go ahead, particularly as we go into the digital world, I think the partnership with TG Ceathair is something we would be very interested in exploring with them as a mechanism of delivering Irish language programmes to the Irish language audience in Northern Ireland, and as a mechanism for ensuring that the Irish speaking audience in the Republic of Ireland is also aware of some of the issues surrounding Northern Ireland as well. I think there is a lot of work to be done and this is a journey. I think there is work to be done in terms of what the arrangement might be, what the regulatory framework is going to be, what the funding arrangements might be. I think there are a number of issues to be involved

in. I also think that as we go ahead towards the digital world that the notion of delivery of all kinds of services, including languages services, through the milieu of television channels, will become increasingly irrelevant in a sense, and that as we have broadband delivery as a way of broadcasting it may be a better way of delivering services to those audiences in connection with the online provision that Pat mentioned to you earlier, in a way which is actually not going to deprive the monoglot English speaking audience of services as well. I think we need to be adept and careful of that. And Northern Ireland, by the way, is 100 per cent broadband enabled and we have already worked on broadband pilots. So I think we are quite well placed to do that. As we go ahead we need to be imaginative and innovative as to how we deliver those services.

Q665 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: That leads very nicely to what I wanted to ask you about, which is the role of independent production in Northern Ireland. Is there a strong independent production sector here and does the BBC work efficiently with it, and are you prepared for what is required of you by the introduction of the WAP?

Ms Carragher: Let me give you a few facts on the strength of the sector first. We currently have 70 independents from Northern Ireland registered in our commissioning system and 28 registered from the Republic of Ireland. However, if you look at PACT membership there are 16 members of PACT, but I think it gives you the picture which is that a lot of those 70 Northern Ireland companies will be quite small enterprises, very often one or two people.

Q666 Chairman: Did you say seventy?

Ms Carragher: 70, seventy, who registered in our commissioning system, but only 16 are actually members of PACT. So that will give you a view that it is not a particularly strong, large sector, in which this is a small place and it is only ourselves and UTV and to a much lesser extent Channel 4, who are commissioning programmes from the sector. We do work

very, very closely with the independent sector and we do have good relations with them. We currently commission 35 per cent of our qualifying output from the independent sector in hours and that is just over 30 per cent in money. So we have a good relationship with them. The expertise is mainly in factual programmes. We are looking at ways to build expertise in other genre and the two areas we are particularly interested in are entertainment. We have a very strong partnership with a number of companies who make entertainment programmes and we have been successful this year in delivering network entertainment programmes, *What Kids Really Think*, which has recently gone out on a Saturday evening. *Just for Laughs*. We are also promoting drama and working with the RTÉ and a co-production in developing drama expertise where there is less strength in drama, and that along with current affairs is one of our centres of excellence. So we are keen to build on that.

Q667 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: You mentioned that you deal with a production company based in the south. You said earlier that you wanted a channel where the UK was fully represented and tastefully met. Do you ever deal with independent production companies based in England and Scotland?

Ms Carragher: Yes, we do, absolutely; we do indeed. We have dealt with a number of companies, one company in particular based in Scotland for local programmes. I do see that we have to nurture the sector in Northern Ireland, that is the primary economic and cultural driver, but we have worked for local programmes with companies in Scotland and our drama department has worked very closely with companies in Scotland, England and occasionally the Republic to deliver drama to the networks as well. So, yes, we do.

Q668 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: You also mentioned – and we all fully accept that things are going to change massively with digital switchover – and you have talked about the important role that the BBC plays here in the ongoing and unfolding story of

Northern Ireland. Do you have concerns about a proliferation of channels and how that will affect the role you are talking about that the BBC plays here?

Ms Carragher: In terms of the independent sector?

Q669 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: No, I am talking about digital switchover and the proliferation of channels.

Ms Carragher: I think as the channels proliferate that the television channels, particularly the public service television channel, which is actually rooted in the community that is nurturing the voice of the community and the economic development of the community, actually has a stronger role to play, as we go forward.

Mr Loughrey: Local programmes, if they are single genre, are more resistant to share decline than elsewhere. Back to the earlier point, I guess that their distinctiveness is more obvious.

Q670 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: In our last report we recommended shared centres of regional excellence. Does the BBC in Northern Ireland share its resources with other regional production companies, or could you do more in that area?

Ms Carragher: I am sure we could always do more in these things, I am sure that is absolutely the case. But we do routinely pool resources with other broadcasters and we work closely with RTÉ, with Sky and UTV, particularly for coverage of any major events, where we absolutely pool resources. We have also worked with RTÉ in the past on sports coverage and pooled resources for that. In drama, where our resource is very much for our staff, we do a huge amount of staff sharing between independent companies and other production sectors, sending people to work on productions in London and Scotland. The same with entertainment, in particular when we have an expertise in entertainment, and we are looking forward in particular to the building of Pacific Quay, with that very large studio facility there, where we will be able to share resources much more closely with BBC Scotland.

Mr Loughrey: As we discussed in Manchester yesterday – and I know you will be hearing from UTV later – we are constantly open to means of putting more of our resources and monies on air rather than sitting in studios. So we are very, very open to negotiating the best possible maximisation in this very small place. As it happens, we have both created new studios, albeit in the BBC’s case a drive-in and relatively low cost studio at around the same time. I think if UTV and ourselves were thinking of creating two separate studios it would be very unlikely to proceed. We have inherited something from the last decade. I doubt if we would recreate it, but I will leave that to my colleague.

Q671 Lord Maxton: Are you going into any joint production with RTÉ? It seems to me to be sensible in the digital world.

Ms Carragher: We have some co-productions with RTÉ, as I mentioned earlier a major drama co-production. We are of course competitors in a sense and we broadcast within the same territory; the audience is able to access both BBC programmes and RTÉ programmes. So there are issues around transmission times and rights, et cetera. But these are conversations that we do have, and we do undertake co-productions.

Q672 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: We talk here today about celebrating diversity within the nations, but also there is the fact of bringing the nations to the whole country, and in his evidence to our Committee Mark Thompson said that the BBC’s focus has been quite a heavily national one, based in Glasgow, Cardiff and Belfast. How can the BBC decentralise in the nations?

Mr Loughrey: This is slightly less of a problem in Northern Ireland, given the scale, I have to say. But, here too, of the numbers of staff that Anna has said, 700 odd, for me an unacceptably large number of those people sit in this building day in day out talking to each other and connecting with the outside world on the telephone or on the PC. I think the

contemporary technology gives us a degree of dexterity, of mobility that we should see and hear more on air. We should be more accessible to our audience; we should be more engaged with communities from Newry to Crossmaglen, Ballynune and Ballymena. There are lots of fascinating interesting stories and fascinating interesting characters that only of late have we allowed to tell their stories on air, and I think that is a growing trend. In terms of the strategic plans to go forward to secure that local television is at the heart of it, where in Northern Ireland there will be an on demand television news service for the first time for the west of Northern Ireland, and allowing that kind of Belfast dominance to be offset.

Ms Carragher: And a strong presence in the northwest will be Radio Foyle and an opt out service in Enniskillen. As Pat acknowledges we have changed a great deal in the last few years in terms of having journalists who are living in the community, in Newry, in Coleraine and out of the Belfast area, and feeding back into the communities.

Q673 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: You have mentioned Scotland and Wales. In England you hardly get a Scottish story. On *Newsnight* you have the opt out and there is a real sense that with devolution bits of the country have been cut off from each other.

Mr Loughrey: I think that is a very real concern. I sit on the BBC Journalism Board and we discuss it often there. Peter Horrocks has been recently appointed head of television news and he has very exciting plans with Mark Byford, Deputy Director General to make *BBC News 24* a different and more vigorous service. It is happily now outperforming Sky on a consistent basis for the first time. All of us believe that it could be and should be more inclusive of the great news gathering strength we have across the UK, so that that could be made available to the whole United Kingdom on a far more regular basis. I think you will see over the months ahead – and we are perfectly happy to be scrutinised on this basis – a significant change in the agenda and style of *News 24* and it will be seen not as a secondary service within the BBC but

as a primary service with continuous news provision, given that the lives we lead is at the core of what we do, not as somewhat further down the food chain.

Q674 Lord Maxton: Will there be opt out? Will there be a BC 24 for Scotland, in part?

Mr Loughrey: That is a very interesting question. That is actually being discussed as we speak. We first of all have to discover whether or not the transmitters will allow us to opt out *News 24* across to different platforms. Secondly, I have a little caution that opt outs lead to ---

Q675 Lord Maxton: I am not necessarily in favour of them.

Mr Loughrey: I am ambivalent myself but we are modelling and discussing precisely at this time about that. I think what Lady Bonham-Carter is leading us to is the integration in the normal news agenda rather than silos.

Q676 Chairman: Just going back to what you replied to Lady Bonham-Carter, is there a tendency – I mean not just here but in other parts of the UK – for newsrooms and journalists and organisations just to talk to each other? That was rather the impression that you gave.

Mr Loughrey: I am on very subjective territory here, but happily it is not just myself. I think if you read Andrew Marr's book and memoirs of his experiences in the print media, and a colleague, a friend of mine who is currently editor of the *Yorkshire Post*, who said that our problem is "air conditioned journalism". Andrew Marr, as I recall, described the cult personality as a product of news driven by press release and the personal computer. I think the heritage of a chap in Mac walking the streets finding out what is going on and recording it, the wealth of colourful news and incidents and events, has diminished. The story content in all news across the United Kingdom and across Europe has been changed by technology and not necessarily enhanced. What we are very keen to reverse is that depth of choice that editors of programmes have at their disposal to broaden the ratings. If we are discussing

matters of health we have strength on the ground to provide unique insights into health provision in every corner of the United Kingdom, not just one little corner, and I think that you will see the BBC, especially in *News 24*, flexing that journalistic muscle to a greater extent than before and getting out of the domination of the press release.

Professor Monds: Chairman, if I could add to that? I think there are some important issues here and we find always at our public accountability events an appetite for localness and for projection of local interests on a broader scale. If I could just observe the movement of journalists, I think that BBC Northern Ireland has been a remarkably powerful training ground for journalists who have then brought those skills to the wider United Kingdom, and it is very gratifying that BBC Northern Ireland will be a centre of excellence for news and current affairs, and I think that is complementary to what Pat has been saying.

Q677 Chairman: To some extent we all sign up for localness and all that in every part of the United Kingdom, but to some extent – and the same too with newspapers – it is a function of economics, is it not? If you have 50 reporters you can do more of what you are saying than if you have 20 reporters. So there are cost implications.

Mr Loughrey: There are, and this is a broader thesis. The economy of television was founded on a scarcity model, a scarcity of very expensive resources, television studios and of camera kits which were enormously expensive, up to £100,000 for a kit, and the scarcity of airtime. But the economy is still managed on the basis of scarcity. The kit is infinitely cheaper and able to deliver at a very high professional standard. Airtime in the digital world is relatively plentiful and I am not sure that our thinking or strategic planning until very recently took account of that remarkable change in the prism in the economy of broadcasting. That is why we in nations and regions are so vigorously supporting the story telling skills of members of the audiences as well, the citizen journalists. It is pity that Lady Howe is not here because that is a very rich vein of enthusiasm for it. As well as employing our own staff more

dexterously and more regularly and using that very mobile kit to gather more effectively there are many, many other sources of input to what we do.

Q678 Chairman: It is a very interesting thesis. We all remember the days when we were interviewed and about seven people turned up, one with sound, one with light and goodness knows what else.

Mr Loughrey: I remember Lady Thatcher being particularly impressed by that.

Chairman: Yes, it did make her feel very warm!

Q679 Lord Maxton: I have to say that my experience of that is that if you were interviewed by someone from the continent there were far fewer of them than there were from the BBC.

Reverend Hill: Could I comment and say that the Council has certainly welcomed correspondents connected with different regions in Northern Ireland and the increase in PDP, one person with a camera who is also a journalist producing the entire thing. I have people out in my community where, for all the wrong reasons it was news there this summer, but people on the ground telling their stories, talking to people, and I think there seems to be a trend towards more localness. This summer the Milk Cup football match, an international youth game in Coleraine, had a broadband site so that you could watch the matches and see the interviews all on broadband. So it brought home the importance of not just thinking in terms of DTT or satellite but also the broader range of platforms in terms of getting that localness through.

Q680 Chairman: I just have one small question. We are doing religion as well and religious broadcasting, and one of the acid tests is *Thought for the Day* on the *Today* programme and who actually goes on to *Thought for the Day*. In your Ulster programme, do you have *Thought for the Day*, or the equivalent of it?

Ms Carragher: We certainly do have *Thought for the Day*, yes.

Q681 Chairman: Do you confine *Thought for the Day* to what I call the recognised religions or do you go outside that to, for example, humanists and people like that?

Ms Carragher: We broadly follow the same guidelines as set out by Allan and followed by *Thought for the Day* and particularly across Radio 4. It would be broadly spiritual. We do have representatives of specifically humanist organisations, but we would not necessarily have people who had a faith label on them. We do not expect *Thought for the Day* to be anti-religious; it would be broadly spiritual but not necessarily from a spoken faith, as it were.

Q682 Chairman: So if I came on I would not actually have to say that I was Protestant or Roman Catholic?

Ms Carragher: Absolutely not.

Q683 Chairman: I might not actually be anything.

Ms Carragher: Yes.

Q684 Chairman: But I would not come on and attack the church.

Ms Carragher: You would not attack the church but you would not be expected to go on and be from a particular faith.

Q685 Chairman: Is that acceptable to you, Reverend?

Reverend Hill: At this point one of the seven values of public life that we as Council members are supposed to follow is probity. I am going to declare the interest. I do *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4, Radio 2, Radio Ulster, the independent networks and broadcast services. I have experience as a broadcaster as well.

Q686 Chairman: I am amazed you have any time at all after that!

Reverend Hill: I am amazed I am here today! There is a diverse range of voices and religious backgrounds and I think that is to be welcomed. It is not just persons from the traditional religious groups that you might expect in Northern Ireland; you will find a range of opinions. Some infuriate listeners, some challenge them and some comfort them. You have all of that. It feels a little like Radio 2 in some ways, the Terry Wogan slot where you have that diversity. I would suggest that the Radio Ulster slot would have a similar kind of diversity within our context.

Q687 Chairman: But you do not find it offensive that there are non-religious people actually in that slot from time to time?

Reverend Hill: When you say non-religious?

Q688 Chairman: I mean people who are not signed up to a particular faith.

Reverend Hill: They are people with a spiritual perspective. It is very much a point in the day for a spiritual perspective. They may not sign up or tick the boxes that I have ticked but they nonetheless have a spiritual perspective on life, and certainly the evidence from the United Kingdom is that people are broadly spiritual; the churches may be in decline but spirituality is on the increase. I know humanism is also there and I would like to see it at other places in the schedule.

Q689 Chairman: I am now totally confused. I go back to Anna Carragher. Just interpret what actually this means in a programme? I understood your first reply as meaning that someone who was, for example, a humanist might actually do the equivalent of *Thought for the Day*.

Ms Carragher: They would not come on as a humanist. People would come on who may not be of a particular faith, but whose thought would be a broadly spiritual thought, but who would not necessarily be signed up to be either Catholic, Protestant, Sikh, Jewish; they may be somebody who is coming from a broad disparity perspective, who might be a signed up member of your faith.

Q690 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: So you do not have, as on the *Today* programme, the name and profession, like a Sikh who does *Thought for the Day* and says, “Editor of the Sikh” whatever, which identifies what he does.

Ms Carragher: Sometimes. It would depend on the individual. Sometimes.

Q691 Chairman: Rather than putting this at the tail end we have to investigate it in a little more detail, but it sounds to me as though you do go a bit wider here than the national *Today* programme, but I see Lord Maxton shaking his head.

Ms Carragher: It is in broad guidelines.

Mr Loughrey: It is not significantly different, Chairman.

Lord Peston: To take an obvious example, following what Reverend Hill said, the fastest growing belief in this country seems to be a belief in astrology. Polls show that an enormous number of people believe in the validity of astrology, but you would not dream of having an astrologer on, I hope, saying that, “Today is not a propitious day for doing this, that or the other”?

Chairman: At this point we will draw this bit to an end! I am enormously grateful; thank you very much indeed. I think we may have some further questions on this issue and on others which we have dealt with before, so perhaps we could write to you on those if we do have them? Thank you very much for your evidence, which we have found fascinating and really very interesting indeed.