

WEDNESDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2005

Present

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

Witnesses: **Mr Allan Bremner**, Director of Television, Ulster Television, **Ms Patricia Galvin**, Head of Regulatory Affairs, RTÉ and **Mr Pádraic Ó Ciardha**, Deputy Chief Executive TG4, examined.

Q692 Chairman: We are very grateful to you for coming in. I think you know what we are doing in terms of this inquiry; we are now on to stage two and we are looking at particular aspects of the BBC's work – and that is our remit – which we really did not have the time to go into in the same detail, and obviously we are looking very much at regions and we are looking at Northern Ireland in that general area. I think the most useful way of beginning would be if you could not only introduce yourselves but also actually say what you do and what your organisation is. Mr Bremner, we met you last night, and we have a vague idea.

Mr Bremner: Like my employers! As you probably know, ITV is now a consolidated organisation consisting of the former English ITV companies and the Welsh ITV Company. Three ITV companies remain outside that single company. You have Scottish Television and you have UTV and the Channel Islands. In terms of our position, if you like, in ITV we are effectively an affiliate. We have come to the very obvious conclusion that we do not wield any power with the network centre, but obviously we depend on the programmes which we purchase from the network centre. We represent about 2.5 per cent of the population served by ITV. We are a successful company inasmuch as there is a considerable appetite for television in Northern Ireland and we are, as a result, able to sustain one of the highest shares

of viewing in the ITV matrix. We are now a diversified company; we have our own Internet company, we have a telephony company, we own six radio stations in the Republic of Ireland and ten days ago we started our new radio service here in Belfast, which serves the Greater Belfast area. We also own 17 radio stations in England, one of which is a network, the talkSPORT network. In terms of local programmes, I would argue that we have a very diverse range of local programmes; we do news, current affairs, documentary, entertainment, religious programmes, children's animations, sports and community programmes. As I was trying to articulate last night, I think that we are relatively different in that if you look at this week I suspect that we are the only ITV company that does a story on investment in Londonderry at eight o'clock at night. And tonight, for example, we start the first of four half hours on the problem of race in Northern Ireland. I hope that is a helpful synopsis.

Q693 Chairman: Just tell me about ownership.

Mr Bremner: We have no significant corporate ownership at all; we are a company owned by a diverse range of small shareholders that are in both the island of Ireland and Great Britain.

Q694 Chairman: There is no chief shareholder?

Mr Bremner: No.

Q695 Chairman: There is no one who owns 15 per cent, 20 per cent?

Mr Bremner: No.

Q696 Lord Maxton: Advertising?

Mr Bremner: Advertising is going through a difficult period at the moment. We do not sometimes feel that chill wind as much as English ITV companies would do because 50 per cent of our revenue comes from the island of Ireland. ITV had a bad year in 2005. They are

headed for what looks like their worse ever year for 2006. We think that we will break even whereas the network will be considerably down on its income.

Q697 Chairman: Patricia Galvin, tell us about you.

Ms Galvin: Thank you, Chairman. Firstly, may I send apologies from Cathal Goan, our Director General, who very much wanted to be here but unfortunately could not? I will try to answer any questions that you may have and will be happy to provide any further information in written submissions. RTÉ is Ireland's public service broadcaster and that consists of two television channels and four radio channels. It is a dual-funded broadcaster that is currently funded more or less 50-50 through the licence fee and advertising funding. Most recently, really in the last ten years or so, has become more freely available in the north. There was some spill-over over in the years from the Clermont Carn transmitter site, but thanks to the concerted efforts of the Good Friday Belfast Agreement greater efforts were made to try and make the signal of the RTÉ services available in the north. I think analogue terrestrial coverage is at about 40, 45 per cent currently. Earlier this year RTÉ became available on Sky Satellite service here, which is currently reaching about 200,000 television subscription owners, and we are also available on NTL Digital in the north. The premise for RTÉ as a public service broadcaster is that we have a statutory mandate, a remit that is defined in broadcasting legislation. It is a broad remit, not dissimilar to that of the BBC's, though obviously we are funded also partly commercially. There are two other significant commitments. One is that most recently there was what one might call a top-slicing of the licence fee, so five per cent of the licence fee overall funding is now put to one side and that is to encourage and foster development of the independent production sector. Also we have a commitment in legislation – I think it is 28 million – to commit to the independent production sector. At the moment RTÉ nearly doubles that commitment.

Q698 Chairman: We will perhaps come on to some of those things in a moment.

Ms Galvin: I suppose the last point is that while our services are available in the north we are not commercially active in the north; there is no commercial revenue. We clear the rights, we make whatever provisions are necessary to make the services available in the north, but we are not extracting commercial revenue from that. I work in the area of regulatory affairs, by the way.

Q699 Chairman: Thank you. And TG4?

Mr Ó Ciardha: My name is Pádraic Ó Ciardha; I am the Deputy Chief Executive of TG Ceathair, TG4. Shorthand for this Committee's purposes, we are the equivalent Irish language service to S4C, without the funding. That is to say, we are a dedicated Irish language service channel set up nine years ago, funded directly by the Exchequer to the tune of 23 million Euros a year, currently, current funding. We also receive, similar to the BBC, an hour a day programming from RTÉ, under whose corporate umbrella we currently sit, but there is a government proposal to make us totally independent. Like S4C and Channel 4 we are a publisher/broadcaster and most of our programming is sourced in the independent production sector. We are, like RTÉ, receivable here in Northern Ireland and have been since the beginning, but the signing of the Belfast Agreement contains two specific provisions: one in which the UK Government commits to trying to extend our receivable signal here in the north; and secondly, there is a provision in that Agreement whereby the British government commits to trying to give financial encouragement to local Irish language production. The reception commitment has taken the form of there being a strengthening of our signal from the Republic; a local transmitter here under this mountain became operational last spring, almost at the same time as we, along with RTÉ, became available to Sky subscribers, here on encrypted satellite. The financial supports take the form of an Irish Language Broadcast Fund, which was set up and announced earlier this year, which is a fund available for local

production in Irish here in Northern Ireland, currently administered by the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission. That is what we do.

Q700 Chairman: Thank you very much indeed. How do your audience figures compare with the BBC? How do yours in Ulster Television?

Mr Bremner: My understanding, Chairman, is that we have a peak time share of 33 per cent, 34 per cent. I am only talking at this stage about BBC Northern Ireland, the first channel, and my understanding is that their share would be about 24 per cent. That is peak time. Then if you looked at morning and afternoon the BBC would have a clear lead in both those day parts.

Q701 Chairman: But at peak time you have a clear lead, do you?

Mr Bremner: We have, yes.

Q702 Chairman: What about audience figures elsewhere? What do RTÉ and TG4 do?

Ms Galvin: For example, in the Republic of Ireland RTÉ's share would be on average about 40 per cent – 35 per cent, 40 per cent. We do not have any accurate data as yet in terms of audience share in the north. We have recently joined the Bar Panel but the data is not yet refined enough to be able to provide any accurate data.

Q703 Chairman: TG4?

Mr Ó Ciardha: In the Republic our peak time share would be about three and a half per cent. Again, like RTÉ we only have anecdotal ideas of the reception. The level of interest anecdotally is very strong in Northern Ireland but we do not have firm data.

Q704 Chairman: That will come, will it, in due course?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Yes, it will, although we will have to be careful, as I think Anna Carragher said this morning, and we will probably hear again, given that there are very complex rights here. So to have the information available and not make commercial use of it or not being accused of making commercial use of it for Northern Ireland would be a difficult act.

Q705 Chairman: Are there any particular unique demands placed on broadcasters operating in Northern Ireland, that you find?

Mr Bremner: I think the context in which all of us operate is quite obviously a unique context. I feel very strongly that first and foremost we have to provide an impartial and fair news service. I think most people would agree that if you look at the newspapers in Northern Ireland they are declared, inasmuch as I think you could easily identify, some papers find themselves at the Orange end of the spectrum and others who would find themselves at the Green end of the spectrum. And I use that only as a matter of shorthand. So I think television has a unique place to play in its provision of news. I also feel strongly – and I know that the BBC and ourselves share this – that current affairs has an important role to play. We live in a state where there have been considerable ebbs and flows about how the institutions of state conduct themselves. So do I feel very strongly that investigative current affairs is something which the BBC and UTV would commit themselves to. I have to say that it is self-evident also in TG4 and RTÉ, but in the north I think it is absolutely no accident that both BBC Northern Ireland and UTV have won Royal Television awards, national awards for the quality of their current affairs. Thirdly, I think that in general programmes we have a very real challenge to show the diversity of this particular society. We are not merely Unionists or Nationalists and in general programmes I think we have to recognise that, and also celebrate the talents that we have in this community and not castigate ourselves for that.

Q706 Chairman: Looking at the BBC and BBC Northern Ireland, they obviously also provide a very comprehensive service, but are there gaps in it? When you look from the outside do you feel that there are things the BBC could be doing that they are not doing?

Mr Bremner: I feel very strongly – and I am not simply saying this because I am here – that we have in Northern Ireland a BBC service, both on radio and television, which is fully committed to serving Northern Ireland. I think that both of us would probably say that sometimes we find ourselves scheduling against each other when it might be better if we were scheduling in a complementary fashion, but that is not always manageable. I see no deficit at the moment in BBC services.

Q707 Chairman: What do you feel on either of the points, Ms Galvin?

Ms Galvin: I suppose on the challenges and the issues of being present in the north, the ability of a broadcaster to be able to fairly and impartially reflect the events in Northern Ireland is a challenge, and I would agree that in many respects it raises the standard and the benchmark for journalism, particularly in the area of current affairs and editorial standards. An interesting dilemma, as it was for RTÉ over the years, was that we had a Section 31 list of organisations that could not be covered on television or on radio, and I think that made it very difficult over those years up until 1994 – from about 1971 to 1994 – to cover and to truly reflect the events in the north, given that there was this ban on certain organisations not being mentioned and not being interviewed on air. That has now changed. I think we are also looking forward to an era where, with technological developments, with digital eventually and with broadband TV, we can give a little bit more in-depth coverage with the opportunity for updates in years to come and will be able to give a little bit more in-depth coverage and reflect that.

Q708 Chairman: And gaps in the BBC?

Ms Galvin: Not for us to say, I think. There is nothing that we would observe, but given that we operate under a mandate in a different jurisdiction it is not for us to say.

Q709 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: In the Republic is the BBC picked up?

Ms Galvin: Yes, it is; for many decades actually because of the power of the analogue signal – we call it spill-over – there has been a quite healthy reception of the BBC’s channels and also UTV’s channels and ITV’s channels as well. Also the BBC is now available on cable and satellite platforms and so, yes, it has a very healthy presence, and I suppose in that sense we have a competitive dynamic in that sense.

Q710 Chairman: Let me bring in TG4 and then throw it open.

Mr Ó Ciardha: I was about to make that point. It is very important to bear in mind that the first television in the Republic was UK television, and it is very much seen as being a *sine qua non* of any television reception platform in the Republic, that it will bring to you UTV and BBC Northern Ireland. We have had Members of Parliament or Dáil elected on the specific issue of trying to bring better reception of international, that is to say UK television. It is an absolutely crucial part of the television mix. Again, like Patricia, I am not here to point up gaps in a colleague broadcaster in another jurisdiction but I do, as an Irish language broadcaster, see the huge challenge for the BBC in servicing the real expectation of the Irish language community here, to have provided to them by the public service broadcaster here the same level or an equivalent level of service as they see happening in Wales, where the BBC provides programming to S4C and whatever happens with Scots Gaelic. So I am not expressing a personal view there, but I do know from membership of things like the Celtic Film and Television Festival that Irish language users in this community do have a real expectation and do have, I think, a growing appreciation of the challenge that that does place on the BBC with its restricted airtime. So perhaps innovative and thinking outside the box

needs to be brought in there because more and more Ireland is becoming an all-Ireland television landscape, we do cooperate on so many things. I think going forward there is a willingness and a need to think about more creative ways of servicing those expectations.

Q711 Chairman: My last question and then I will bring in others. How is the quality of the BBC, the impartiality of that BBC actually seen in the Republic? How do viewers look at it? Do they look at it as reliable, as unbiased, or do they look at it as rather putting a particular point of view?

Ms Galvin: I would say absolutely seen as an essential, I suppose, component. We have an expression where we describe the UTV, the BBC channels and the Irish terrestrial channels as being the “meat and two veg” for viewing in the home, and it is often the package that cable and satellite operators will promote in order to sell their basic package maybe as well as additional channels. I think Irish viewers have been so accustomed to multi-channel viewing because of the spill-over from many decades, as I mentioned, that there is an expectation that it is an essential part of the mix, the range of viewing that you are going to have in the home. So I would see it as being part of their viewing expectation.

Q712 Chairman: But an “essential part of the mix” is not quite the same as actually saying that that is an organisation which is providing a totally impartial and fair portrait of what is taking place.

Ms Galvin: I suppose it depends on a viewer’s sense of what is taking place, where and what events there are. Clearly there are Irish terrestrial channels that can spend a little more time telling stories about ourselves to the viewers, and clearly the BBC’s remit is one primarily for a different audience – it is for the UK licence fee payers essentially. But given those small variations in terms of impartiality and fairness I do not think they are different.

Mr Ó Ciardha: I would echo that, with the exception obviously when England are playing Ireland at rugby, then obviously we know which channel to watch! The BBC is held in extremely high regard throughout Ireland, with obvious certain exceptions – people from a particular political perspective may take a different view. It is seen very much as being the benchmark for UK broadcasting, yes.

Q713 Lord Maxton: This comes to the point. Do you do an Ulster News, as opposed to you only doing it when Ulster is part of, if you see what I mean, something that affects the south? Do you actually do an actual Ulster opt out of any sort? No?

Ms Galvin: We do not have the technical functionality really for that yet. Clearly it is an essential part of the news story telling on a regular basis and, as I mentioned earlier, hopefully with all going well with digital free to air signal in the north, if there is the opportunity for RTÉ to be able to extend its services via digital – we are a little bit limited at the moment with analogue – it will make it a little more easy to have the opt outs.

Q714 Lord Maxton: Presumably that is the same?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Yes, it is, but I think it is also important that our coverage of Northern Ireland is not just of the obvious political. Economic and sports stories – particularly for us, sports stories – and drama and entertainment, we do not see a border in that sense. Stories are covered, documentaries are made, dramas are produced irrespective of their origin. So there is no anti-Ulster bias.

Q715 Lord Maxton: No, I am not saying there is an anti one, but obviously you are both based elsewhere.

Mr Ó Ciardha: Yes, and funded by it.

Q716 Lord Maxton: And funded elsewhere. Could I therefore ask it the other way around?

Mr Bremner, do you have any specific coverage from elsewhere rather than just doing an Ulster News and only where it affects Ulster?

Mr Bremner: There is a difficulty in the sense that under our Ofcom licence what we have to do is to service the community in Northern Ireland, and not to prioritise the community in the south. But by definition what happens in the Republic quite properly is part of our news agenda, and we have a reporter and a crew in Dublin to cover that. In terms of political coverage it is a considerable matrix if you have Dublin, Washington, Belfast and London all contributing to the news of the day.

Q717 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: In our first report we recommended that the BBC should work with other companies to create centres of regional excellence. Can I ask Mr Bremner first, does that happen here? Do you share your resources? Also, do you think that is a good idea?

Mr Bremner: In many ways I suspect that the levels of cooperation between the BBC and UTV are exceptional. This shared effort probably does not qualify as a centre of excellence. I think possibly we are the only BBC and ITV companies that share some of our sports contracts. At production level we quite often share each other's technical resources. When things were bad we would agree that if we were burnt out of UTV we would be allowed to broadcast from here and vice versa. One of the things that is also unique to Ireland is that all of the broadcasters sit on a group called Broadcasters of Ireland Group, and that again is a unique forum for cooperating broadcasters. Two years ago we did a short series of films on the subject of home; and all the broadcasters in Ireland contributed films and then all the broadcasters could show the films. So you had what I think is a unique arrangement where on UTV you have a short film made by RTÉ or TG Ceathair. On BBC you had a short film made by UTV. So I would have thought that there is a broad perception that we are quite a

cooperative bunch. I think there are considerable problems for us being able to contribute to a centre of excellence because we do not get a single penny from the ITV network for any of our activities. So to a certain extent our operation is structurally different and operates in a different fashion to that of the BBC.

Q718 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: What would RTÉ think about that, particularly considering, as you were saying, the digital future?

Ms Galvin: Certainly to date, in so far as it makes economic sense and it makes sense in terms of quality and coverage, there is terrific cooperation in terms of shared facilities, et cetera, as has been the case historically. The status of RTÉ in the north at the moment is such that I suppose it is primarily motivated by the spiritual diversity and purism to make these services available in the north for no additional commercial gain. There may be an opportunity in the future, again with availability on platforms, and if there is an opportunity to extend the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement in the digital area, if and when we have a digital terrestrial platform in the Republic of Ireland as well, there is an opportunity for reciprocity which could change the dynamic and possibly even the effort and the focus that can go into making the service available and a dedicated service for the community of Northern Ireland.

Q719 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: I was interested you said that historically you have shared facilities with them. In what sense?

Ms Galvin: For example, initially when RTÉ started to cover more stories and to be present in the north the BBC would have had an infrastructure and there would have been opportunities to have shared circuits and a lot of technical sharing and facilities sharing.

Q720 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: Studios, editings?

Ms Galvin: Yes. I think more back office, technical sharing and circuits and things like that, especially rather than duplicating if there was coverage of a live event or something like that. Then there would be an opportunity to share on a *quid pro quo* basis.

Q721 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: You would pool?

Ms Galvin: Exactly, yes.

Mr Ó Ciardha: We have some co-productions that we have made with BBC Northern Ireland, but we probably have as many, if not more, that we have done with BBC Scotland because of the Gaelic-Irish connection, and S4C, obviously. I think going forward though the specific context of Irish language in Northern Ireland and this new mechanism called the Irish Language Broadcast Fund does provide a basis for cooperation. I should also say that co-production is a wonderful thing at a late night dinner, to say, “Why do we not make a drama together?” which is all very well, but when you come to make the drama you have to see whether it services the schedule needs of both partners and whether the action is going to take place in the west of Ireland or the west of Scotland, and sometimes co-production can actually be trickier than corporate co-production and sharing facilities. So we are all in favour of that and I think, as I say, as we go forward because of the digital possibilities, because there is an opportunity, in my own personal view, to create an all Ireland digital platform for all the traditional broadcasters that operate, it could actually find a common platform. But there are legal and rights issues there. There is a huge level of cooperation and a genuine spirit of cooperation between all the broadcasters, north and south, including the BBC.

Q722 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: Do you think that the BBC produces enough for Northern Ireland? Is there a big enough production basis?

Mr Ó Ciardha: I am very loath to enter into any personal view. I do not pay a BBC licence fee; I am not a citizen of the UK. I enjoy greatly having the reception of BBC Northern

Ireland and all the BBCs that are available to me in my home in Dublin on NTL Digital. I can only reflect to you that in the context of the Irish language – and you will hear it, I suspect, more as the day goes on – there is a real expectation from the Irish language community here for increased content creation. How that gets delivered is, I think, a major challenge for the BBC.

Q723 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: What do you think, Mr Bremner? Do you think that the BBC has a big enough production base here?

Mr Bremner: I think that is patently the case and I think you can see that both in the commitment to the quality of programmes that they have and the spread of programmes that they have at the moment. We are a little bit anxious that when it actually comes to tallying how many hours we each do that there are different forms of counting, and Ofcom are going to have a look at that again. But I doubt if anybody could dissent from the view that this is an ambitious broadcaster, yes.

Q724 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: What about the independent sector? Do you think that is sufficiently supported?

Mr Bremner: I agree with what Anna Carragher said about the independent sector. We also exceed the quota of independent programmes that we have amongst our regional programmes. We have about ten companies working for us presently, and two of those are from the Republic. Interestingly enough, not all the ITV companies have an obligation to do 25 per cent of the regional programmes; some of them stick to the notion that it is 25 per cent of the total schedule, and therefore they do not get that commitment within the regional programmes. We have no formal commitment to do that but we have never ever gone below the quota; this year it is about 28 per cent and next year it is 30 per cent of our qualifying programmes will be made by independents.

Q725 Chairman: Just a question in passing. Because you are owned by your own shareholders and a mixture of them, you could be taken over at any stage?

Mr Bremner: That is exactly the case, yes.

Q726 Chairman: Are there any restrictions on who could take you over?

Mr Bremner: None.

Q727 Chairman: So, for example, an American company could take you over?

Mr Bremner: Absolutely, yes. We have a situation in Ireland where a year ago CanWest, a Canadian company, had a 30 per cent share in UTV and in TV3, the commercial channel in the south, CanWest had 45 per cent. Granada also had 45 per cent in ITV3 and then ten per cent of other shareholders. CanWest exited from UTV last year, that is why I say we have no significant corporate shareholder. But we still have Granada and CanWest substantially based in the south. Speaking frankly, the ITV network is always going to be at the mercy of Granada because of its strength. What we want to be known as is that we are the company who can manage best in Ireland, and not Granada.

Q728 Chairman: But it could be beyond Granada?

Mr Bremner: Exactly. As with Channel 5 there is no geographical restriction and they do not even ask people to be fit and proper people to own an ITV company, which they used to.

Lord Maxton: Whatever that might mean.

Chairman: Thank you very much. Lord Peston.

Q729 Lord Peston: At least one of you heard us talking to the BBC this morning about languages. I am still a little lost. RTÉ has the specific language responsibility, that is right, is it not?

Ms Galvin: That is right, yes.

Q730 Lord Peston: But TG4 does not have the specific language responsibility?

Mr Ó Ciardha: TG4 is the Irish language retainer.

Q731 Lord Peston: Do I deduce by that it means the Irish language?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Yes. We do broadcast English language material but the station was established and is enshrined in legislation as being to provide primarily a service in the Irish language.

Q732 Lord Peston: What we need is a little perspective on scale, if you like. What numbers are we talking about?

Mr Ó Ciardha: To put it into context, we will put to air today and tomorrow more Irish language programming than BBC Northern Ireland will make for the year. We are putting to air about ten hours of Irish language programmes, five hours a day of new material, more or less. Our schedule is 19 hours a day, of which seven hours is Irish language programming, of which approximately half is original, new to air. That figure can vary obviously, depending on seasons. So ours, just like S4C, primarily a Celtic language service with material in other languages to support it. RTÉ would probably output an hour a day across the seasons in addition to the hour a day that they supply to us. As with the BBC and BBC Wales it is obliged by statute to provide S4C with 550 hours a year of Welsh language programming, and the statutory obligation on RTÉ is to provide us with 365 hours a year of Irish language programming.

Ms Galvin: Since 1961 we have been producing programmes in the Irish language. For our own services and television it is about an hour a day, as Pádraic says, as well as the hour a day to TG Ceathair. Then we have a dedicated Irish language radio channel, Raidió an Gaeltachta.

Q733 Chairman: So you are doing one hour a day, and you are doing how many hours a day?

Mr Ó Ciardha: About four or five hours a day. Most of ours comes from the independent production sector. As I say, ours is very much modelled on the S4C model.

Q734 Chairman: How much would the BBC be doing?

Mr Ó Ciardha: I think the figure is something like ten hours this year.

Q735 Chairman: So that would be a few minutes a daily rate.

Mr Ó Ciardha: On television.

Q736 Lord Peston: To take it into an economic domain, does it make sense that all of this is happening separately or should it not all be done jointly in some way? The Ofcom view seems to be that there should be a much closer relationship. I am not clear what Ofcom really had in mind.

Mr Ó Ciardha: I am a native speaker of Irish; it is my native language. I should also point out, perhaps, in passing that it is the native language of, I suspect, more than 20,000 people currently resident in the UK. Somebody pointed out to me once that the greatest urban concentration of Irish language speakers was either in Kilburn or in Govan. I just mention that in passing. The expectation I think is that a public service broadcaster will provide service in the indigenous languages of the community which it is servicing. In the case of the Republic and in the case of Northern Ireland that includes the Irish language, clearly. Whether it is more proper to do that on one dedicated/marginalized service, or whether the public service broadcaster should raise the profile of the language by including it in its own network channels is a debating point. In the case of RTÉ, I think RTÉ has always said, even after the establishment of our channel, that it would wish to include Irish language material in

a high scheduling position on its own channels as well as contributing programming to us, and I think that probably would be the shared view in the Republic, that it should not be consigned to one channel.

Q737 Lord Peston: Patricia, do you agree with that?

Ms Galvin: I do.

Q738 Lord Peston: So you are not against cooperation?

Ms Galvin: No, absolutely. I suppose the spirit is reflected in the Belfast Agreement to foster linguistic diversity and to promote it through whatever means possible. If we have a broad remit and a duty to reflect as much as possible the interests of our society then Irish language has to be a key part of that. So, absolutely, anything that can be done to foster that.

Mr Ó Ciardha: Can I add one small thing? It is important as we go forward and as technology develops and as the huge increase of channels available to us magnifies, providing a service does not necessarily mean providing all programming and television form on one channel. There are many ways of skinning this particular televisual cat.

Q739 Lord Peston: One question I forgot to ask the BBC. Do the Higher Education institutions in Northern Ireland and in Ireland as a whole have any involvement in what you do? To reveal my ignorance, I do not even have the faintest idea whether, say, in the south they teach it?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Irish is a mandatory subject.

Q740 Lord Peston: I do not mean in schools, I mean in universities?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Yes, they do, and in addition to the linguistic and literary study of the language at third level there are also, particularly since the advent of our own channel, courses now in a number of third level institutions to provide both undergraduate and postgraduate

training in television production in the Irish language and in video skills and all of that. So they do play a key role in providing us with a talent pool from which we can draw.

Ms Galvin: Also to add to that point, Irish early last year is an official language of Ireland, in which case all documentation, signing, et cetera ---

Q741 Lord Peston: Of the EU?

Ms Galvin: Of the EU, indeed. I think that very much serves to make the language pervasive in the sense that it is on maps, it is on road signs, et cetera. That will, I suppose, enable us to foster and recognise the presence of the language even more.

Q742 Lord Maxton: Despite all that investment are the numbers speaking the language going up or going down?

Mr Ó Ciardha: You may ask that question more specifically of the North/South Irish Language Body, who is visiting you this afternoon.

Q743 Lord Maxton: I meant across the whole of Ireland.

Mr Ó Ciardha: The numbers using it are probably going up in the sense that it has become more fashionable and slightly more chic and certainly more trendy, I think. The number of people speaking it in the rural heartlands of the Irish speaking areas on the west coast, where I am from myself, are probably declining. But I should point out that this is not a unique phenomenon. I think UNESCO has said that of the 6000 languages in the world 5,965 are in imminent danger of extinction, and that does not include Irish. All the Celtic languages are under huge pressure from the Anglophone word, which predominates the globalisation.

Q744 Lord Maxton: Despite the fact it being the official language in the south and despite the fact that it is a compulsory subject in schools and is taught in the universities, and you have your own station?

Mr Ó Ciardha: As is the case with Scots Gaelic and Welsh.

Q745 Lord Maxton: Scots Gaelic and Welsh are not in quite the same position. Scots Gaelic is certainly not the official language of Scotland.

Mr Ó Ciardha: That is true, but it is the case, as I said, that almost all of these lesser used languages, let us call them, are under huge pressure, and in the case of Welsh, Scots Gaelic and Irish because of the cheek by jowl nature of the major world language of the media, and such excellent language, the English language the medias have. The odds are very much stacked against it, despite the official status.

Q746 Lord Peston: To revert to Lady Bonham-Carter's question about independent producers. If you want to produce one of the great works of Irish literature in Irish are there independent producers out there sufficiently to do that kind of thing for you?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Dozens of them!

Q747 Lord Peston: So that would not be a restraint?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Not at all, not at all. Just in passing, it was one of the benchmarks we set ourselves when we were established in the mid-90s, that we wished to reach, as S4C had already reached, I think, that year, the position where *Branwen*, a Welsh language feature film, had actually been nominated for best language film at the Oscars, buy sadly it did not win. To produce a feature film in Irish is one of our ambitions, but it is very much a realisable one.

Q748 Chairman: Mr Bremner, to complete this picture, how many hours – and perhaps I have missed it – Irish language programmes do you do?

Mr Bremner: We do not do any Irish language programmes, Chairman.

Q749 Chairman: At all?

Mr Bremner: What we have done in the past is we have produced Irish language programmes with TG Ceathair, and we have also produced Irish language programmes for network ITV schools, but we do not do any Irish language programmes and we have no plans to do Irish language programmes. The way that we contribute is if we get commissions we will employ people with competence in the Irish language, or people who wish to become competent producers in the Irish language. But effectively the programmes that we showed on UTV simply did not secure the audience we need, when we are making programmes ---

Q750 Chairman: You did try?

Mr Bremner: Yes, we did.

Q751 Chairman: What was the result?

Mr Bremner: The take-up was lower than we actually can sustain.

Q752 Chairman: Can you remember what the audience figures were?

Mr Bremner: We did three series, we did a couple of documentaries – and this is now eight years ago – and their performance was at about 20 per cent of the level that we expect. That is not the sole criteria but it is an important criterion, of course. We did an animation series where we re-voiced *Thomas The Tank Engine* and there was a poor up-take on that, and there was a poor uptake on the scripts that we made available. It was very novel at that stage but in a commercial channel, to be straightforward about it, no matter what subject you are covering you need to generate a larger audience.

Q753 Chairman: And basically you are not going to do it?

Mr Bremner: We are not.

Q754 Baroness Bonham-Carter of Yarnbury: Can I ask a slightly odd question? You said that you made a film. Would you consider sub-titling?

Mr Ó Ciardha: We sub-title everything; we sub-title everything we make in Irish into English, to make the programming accessible.

Q755 Lord Maxton: Does that include sport, because you have mentioned sport several times?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Anything.

Q756 Lord Maxton: What sports do you show?

Mr Ó Ciardha: The Gaelic Games; the rugby we have just lost the contract to the Celtic League, which was a huge unexpected success for us. People do not associate the Irish language with rugby playing, strangely enough, in Ireland, but we secured the rights to that in its opening two seasons, and it was very successful. We did Spanish soccer and we did Scottish soccer for a year. Most of the games – golf, horse racing – most of the major sports that we can afford to buy rights to, which is getting more difficult.

Q757 Lord Maxton: You say you used sub-titling. Having once tried to watch a rugby match being shown by S4C I have to say I found it a slightly weird experience because there was no English and I could not fathom who they were talking about.

Mr Ó Ciardha: Live sub-titling poses a particular challenge and nearly all of our sports are live. I have to say that we expected when we started, particularly in rugby which would not have a natural hinterland of Irish language supporters, to get quite an amount of flak of people saying, “You cannot sub-title that.” We got none for the two years we were in it. People I think just ---

Q758 Lord Maxton: Watch the game.

Mr Ó Ciardha: Watch the game. Sport has its own spectators.

Q759 Lord Maxton: The people watching it know what is going on anyway. Digital switchover. I think we are aware in the north that the north is now 100 per cent broadband, which some people think is the future, not terrestrial. What about the south? How far down the road in terms of broadband are you?

Ms Galvin: Getting there. There is a lot of fibre optic in the ground. There probably is not the concerted effort by one or two, let us say, national players to get it to such a level that the speeds would be video enabled. So IPTV is still some way, probably in the five to ten year, possibly 12-year timeframe. But that said, if there were a buyer of Eircom in the near future that could turn it all around.

Q760 Lord Maxton: Eircom is your telephone company?

Ms Galvin: BT equivalent. I suppose they are in the position where, short of any obligatory obligation – they have a very healthy ISDN business, that is doing quite nicely. Pushing the higher end, DSL is still a bit of a struggle, and I think they are talking about it and they have plans, within three to five years, to reach over half of the homes with the equivalent of one megabyte. That is quite good. But, that said, if there were further investment it could go a lot faster. We are still not absolutely clear – the government has announced its intention to launch a pilot for DTT early next year. All going well that should run for one or two years; all going well they would hope to launch a DTT platform. Who knows what will happen in the broadband market? As I say, if there are investors it may well be that we could have IPTV sooner than digital terrestrial. As a public service broadcaster our belief is that we want to produce public service content that is accessible and available on all major platforms. So we broadcast to mobile, IPTV, DTT and of course availability on digital, cable and satellite.

We are watching and monitoring for availability and excellence to all of those platforms. Which comes first, there is still a little to play for there.

Mr Ó Ciardha: The person that designed Ireland gave us many mountains and valleys and not all of them are commercially viable propositions for television delivery, and I think that is very important to state here, that whatever platform or combination of platforms is arrived at universal service is wonderful if you live in the Midlands where one transmitter reaches 45 per cent of the population, but some of us come from parts where it takes two transmitters to get it into the valley. Secondly, I just want to echo the fact that the Ofcom Review – I do not know if it is permissible to mention the Ofcom Review in this context – specifically said that consideration should be given in the UK switchover in this part of the world to extending our service of our own channel. It is a specific proposal by Ofcom.

Q761 Lord Maxton: You say that but of course even in remote areas people tend to have telephones, presumably.

Mr Ó Ciardha: They certainly do.

Q762 Lord Maxton: And certainly the higher bands of ADSL provide broadband down that telephone line. Going back a little bit, can I ask about the switchover to using terrestrial digital, which means there is going to be an increased signal from different parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland and from Wales, and is that going to mean that people in the south will be able to get BBC and other channels much more easily than they can at the present time, and will that affect you?

Ms Galvin: Certainly the switchover in the north and also in parts of England and Wales a little bit earlier, in 2009, will have a significant impact on the availability of particularly the BBC's signals through analogue spill-over, which they have traditionally received. I think it is about 16 per cent of the television viewing population enjoy Irish terrestrial services and

the multi-terrestrial, as we call it, the spill-over channels. So there will be significant impact there. If there is not a free to air digital platform for Northern Ireland to go to then they will have no other choice but to go to Pay TV, cable or satellite in order to continue to receive the UK channels that they have been accustomed to. The other more important issue, I suppose, is that with switchover, particularly in the north, there are going to be issues about interference, about degradation of the signal, about spill-over of the signal either way, but as part of the World Radio Conference, RRC06, next year, there have been very active bilaterals between the UK and Ireland for a number of years now on teasing out and agreeing basically the frequency plan and power level of either side of the border, to make sure that any interference is minimised. So that is ongoing. I think also through the Broadcasters' Group there is quite a bit of discussion about what can be done to alleviate any unnecessary interruption, but also how could we perhaps capitalise on this and make sure that, for example, capacities can be found on platforms in both communities to make sure that the choice of channels is extended rather than lessened.

Q763 Lord Maxton: Have you had discussions with Freeview actually to get on to their platform?

Ms Galvin: The issue to date is, yes, we very much like the idea of being available on it. The difficulty is also the signal being available in the UK and the cost of clearing the rights for a territory the size of the UK for a broadcaster from Ireland. If greater capacity is released after the RR06 negotiations, under the care of Ofcom some of that spectrum may well be re-released for broadcast purposes. There may well be opportunities for both digital radio and digital terrestrial television. Our broadcasting legislation to date, albeit the DTT platform did not take off at the time, but there are provisions in the legislation also to allocate some capacity for UK services to be available on a digital platform in the north. So we hope that there might be opportunities for a similar reciprocal arrangement, all being well.

Mr Ó Ciardha: It should be emphasised, the Republic has 1.4 million TV homes. We do not have, as yet, an indigenous digital platform of any kind. The second figure is that over half of the 1.4 million homes have already signed up to a non-national delivery means, whether it is subscription satellite or digital cable. So the clock is ticking for the Republic and we as a nation need to make some very quick decisions, and hopefully they will be decisions that would be compatible with the shared television experience we have had for the last 40 years.

Q764 Lord Maxton: Can I come to you on that, Mr Bremner, the same issue? Because it seems to me in the multi-channel and then into what I term now the multi-choice world of television, your advertising revenue is likely to be hit, is it not?

Mr Bremner: Yes, and I think that is one of the reasons that encouraged us to diversify in the way that we did. In terms of broadband provision Northern Ireland is about 98 per cent provided for, and we have to look very carefully at a new generation as very technologically literate, not watching television as it were, communally on a settee, but as a single viewer looking at his or her television with a handheld device, being able to bring a whole lot of different media across to that device. That is one of the reasons, as I was saying, that we diversified. On the subject of digital switchover, we argued – and I think Ofcom accepted that – that it would be particularly injurious if the analogue service was switched off in Northern Ireland when the analogue service in the south was still going strong, because we were worried that with the switchover to digital – and there are still nearly 45 per cent of people who do not have digital – we were concerned that some of our analogue viewers might then look to the channels that were coming from the south.

Q765 Chairman: The last questions, on religious programmes. I think the ITV evidence said that the BBC should basically be the leading broadcaster of religious and faith programmes. Would that be your view, Mr Bremner? Are we simply stating that this is

inevitable, that because of the very nature of a company like Ulster TV you are not going to get very much advertising – or possibly not very much advertising, and where do you put it in any event? – to support religious broadcasting?

Mr Bremner: Our position is not that of ITV's, Chairman, at all. We would see our schedule as deficient if it did not have some religious programmes in it. But I do have to say that over the last five or six years we have set aside the morning worships that we used to do; we used to do six of those a year. Interestingly enough, if they were strong enough services or they were dealing with something that people were very, very interested in we would move it to two o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. We set that aside because we think that that is adequately provided by other channels and what we now do is we make religious factual programmes, and we expect them to punch their weight. We show them at half past seven on a Tuesday, and they do punch their weight and that is why they will stay and one of the reasons why we would want to keep them in the schedule. Interestingly enough, in a series called *Journeys* – and we have just shown our second series – I counted the number of faiths that were represented in that series, which exceeded just under a dozen. So it is a popular programme, it is in peak, it does show that there are diverse faiths in our community, and I think it would be negligent if we did not have it in our schedule.

Q766 Chairman: That is very interesting. What kind of programme is it?

Mr Bremner: We do themes. For example, in the first series the first programme was about birth, so there were three human interest stories on a theme in each programme. The first one was about a man, his joy at having his first child. The second one was a young woman, a devoted Christian, but had had three children, two of which had significant disabilities. And the third one was a woman who had been unable to conceive and when she conceived her child had died. Then we asked religious commentators to say what perspective could these bring in the very testing experiences in two of the subjects there. People watched it and they

watched it when we repeated it. So we feel strongly that any subject can be done on commercial television if you have it produced interestingly. If we are doing a programme, as we are, about a charitable project in South Africa – we will be showing that at Christmas – it has to get people to watch it and, like any teacher, any lecturer, you should be able to interest your audience.

Q767 Chairman: And you do it on issues which might be controversial.

Mr Bremner: Yes.

Q768 Chairman: Birth control, for example.

Mr Bremner: Yes.

Q769 Chairman: What do you feel about this, Mr Ó Ciardha?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Our own channel does not do what, not in any disparaging sense I call event coverage; we do not do religious services. But we do carry in our documentary, particularly in our documentary strands both newly made content about matters religious and spiritual, and interestingly enough one of the disciplines of having no money and in trying to not use just the American and English-made documentaries we have a significant stream of documentaries which are re-voiced from other languages. One consistent theme running through those is a French-made programme on world religions, which unfailingly gets us very good ratings and particularly active feedback from the audiences. As Allan says in another context, it is not just about the figures. But religion is a very important theme in our programming, but because RTÉ, as Patricia will confirm, does religious services very consistently on both radio and television we do not feel that we would be adding any value or extending the choice. But it is important.

Q770 Chairman: RTÉ do just what has been described?

Ms Galvin: Indeed, and I suppose the only issue there is that RTÉ has to constantly assess and to check in to make sure that it is still reflecting the society in which it is broadcasting, and it is becoming an increasingly fast changing, growing and much more multi-cultural and secular society, and to make sure that we are getting that balance right.

Q771 Lord Maxton: Do you represent the secular aspect?

Ms Galvin: I think increasingly so, yes, over the last couple of years a lot more programming has been introduced to address that. I think we are still trying to find that right balance as Ireland is changing faster than we can keep up.

Q772 Chairman: But you would actually show the different faiths?

Ms Galvin: Yes.

Q773 Lord Maxton: Is there a religious question in your census?

Ms Galvin: Yes.

Q774 Lord Maxton: What does it show?

Mr Bremner: An almost vertical drop certainly in the Christian faiths.

Q775 Lord Maxton: But non-believer.

Mr Bremner: Non-believer would probably be at 30 per cent now and non-practising would certainly be much higher, I suppose. It used to be that non-believer and non-practising were less than ten per cent, but I think we are probably moving towards at half and half.

Chairman: It is interesting, is it not, that you have figures like that and yet Mr Bremner is saying that you can put on interesting – which I suspect is the point – programmes on religion at 7.30 on an evening, which is peak viewing time, and get good audiences for it.

Q776 Lord Maxton: I do not see the argument for that because I might watch a programme if I thought it was interesting even though I have no religious point of view.

Mr Ó Ciardha: That would be our experience as well. The fact that people do not attend a religious meeting once a week, certainly in the Republic of Ireland, in our audience, does not translate into a lack of interest in matters spiritual, or in formal examining of other religious faiths about their benefits and their downsides.

Q777 Chairman: Mr Bremner, you intend to continue with these programmes?

Mr Bremner: Yes, Chairman.

Q778 Chairman: We have to remind ourselves that we are looking at the BBC, however fascinating everybody is, but how do you rate the BBC's coverage of these things? I know none of you want to comment on the BBC, et cetera, but do you think that they cover religion well?

Q779 Mr Bremner: I cannot answer that question, simply because I am not familiar with the output. When I look at network television and I look at local television it seems that in terms of its frequency it is reducing, but no, I simply do not know the content.

Q780 Chairman: Then we will call that a day. Are there any other points that my colleagues want to ask and make? Any additional points we have not covered?

Mr Ó Ciardha: Thank you for having us.

Chairman: Thank you very much for coming. What you have said is very interesting and perhaps if there are any other factual points we could write to you? Thank you so much for coming.