



From the Director-General

17 December 2014

Sir William Cash MP  
Chairman, European Scrutiny Committee  
House of Commons  
7 Millbank  
London SW1P 3JA

Dear Sir William,

I am writing in response to your further letter.

I have given this some considerable thought, and I wish to assure you and the Committee that my overriding concern here is to balance two things: the editorial independence of the BBC, including the perception of that independence; and Parliament's proper scrutiny of the BBC.

I thought it might help if I set out how the BBC is accountable for our broad coverage of issues to the BBC Trust, who represent the licence fee payers interest in the BBC under the terms of the BBC's Royal Charter, and how the BBC is scrutinised by Parliament for matters relating to its management and finances.

Before doing so, I wish to be clear about one issue. It has been suggested that I would be willing to use my position as a member of the House of Lords to avoid scrutiny by a committee of the Commons. Can I take this opportunity to put on the record that I never have, and never will, use the fact that I am a Peer to avoid appearing in front of a Commons committee which, as I outline further below, I have done on several occasions since being appointed Director-General.

I wish you and your committee no disrespect, but with regard to your invitation to appear before the Committee, on this occasion, for the reasons I set out below – alongside those I have previously outlined – I believe that the right balance will have been struck with the Chairman of the BBC Trust, and the Chairman of the Trust's Editorial Standards Committee, appearing before you on 14 January.

As you will be aware, the BBC's Royal Charter establishes the constitutional basis for the Corporation, and explicitly provides for the BBC's independence. Article 6 of the Charter explains that, subject to any requirements put upon us by the law, that the BBC "shall be independent in all matters concerning the content of its output, the times and manner in which this is supplied, and in the management of its affairs".

The Charter also provides for a bespoke governance process – more complex than for other public bodies – which has been put in place specifically to ensure that the BBC is able to operate without fear or favour, and to provide programmes and services solely for the benefit of licence fee payers. This is a key component of the Corporation's independence, and these arrangements make the BBC by far the most trusted news organisation in the United Kingdom.

This governance and accountability structure places with the BBC Trust – the Corporation's governing and supervisory body – the task of overseeing the BBC in the interests of licence fee payers. As Director-General and Chairman of the Executive Board I am accountable to the Trust for the management of the BBC and for operating within the editorial framework established by the Trust.

Parliament has a legitimate role in scrutinising the BBC in how it delivers its public purposes and spends the licence fee. It is for this reason that our Charter requires us to submit the BBC's Annual Report and Accounts to Parliament. It is perfectly appropriate that the Corporation is questioned on this report about the decisions we have made throughout the year; we do this through the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. For matters related specifically to efficiency and value for money we appear before the Committee of Public Accounts. In the 18 months since I took up the role of Director-General of the BBC I have appeared in front of these committees four times in total.

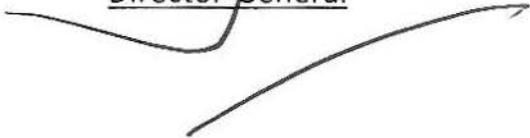
The BBC's Charter was designed specifically to ensure that the editorial decisions of the BBC were made away from direct political influence, which is why I am responsible to the BBC Trust for how I run the BBC and it is the Trust that has the function of holding me and my Executive Board to account for our performance. Article 24(1)(c) of the BBC's Charter states that one of the functions of the Trust is "assessing the performance of the Executive Board in delivering the BBC's services and activities and holding the Executive Board to account for its performance".

Under these circumstances – and particularly as the terms of reference of your inquiry go directly to matters of editorial decision-making – it is only correct that in this instance it is the Trust that answers questions on how they ensure that the BBC is fulfilling its public purposes in general, with regard to the areas of interest to your Committee. I am sure that the Chairman of the BBC Trust will do this when she appears before the committee on 14 January.

Best wishes,



Tony Hall  
Director-General



cc: Members of the European Scrutiny Committee  
Rona Fairhead, Chairman of the BBC Trust  
Rt Hon. Sir Alan Beith MP, Chairman of the Liaison Committee  
John Whittingdale OBE MP, Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee  
Lord Boswell of Aynho, Chairman of the European Union Committee of the House of Lords