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CCP

Prime Minister

GAELIC TELEVISION SERVICES

Follow up Pg

I must admit to being taken aback by the arguments advanced by Nigel Lawson's letter of 6 July in opposition to the principle of a modest expansion of Gaelic television services funded from franchise receipts, since these arguments would have equal force against the provision of Welsh services. They are not arguments likely to achieve public acceptance for our making a distinction between Gaelic and Welsh, especially since no such distinction was signalled in the White Paper.

The White Paper promised retention of S4C. On Gaelic it recognised the importance of broadcasting for the language and envisaged additional Gaelic broadcasting, at local level, through MVDS and cable. These parallel statements reflect the equal status of Gaelic and Welsh, our only indigenous languages other than English and languages in which there has been a broadcasting service from the beginning. The only differences between Welsh and Gaelic are the difference in numbers speaking the language and the fact that the service for Welsh has been regarded by its audience as satisfactory whereas that for Gaelic has not. The White Paper reference itself implied an acceptance of the long-standing pressure for an improved service for Gaelic by proposing the use of MVDS and cable (proposals since shown to be impractical as far as Gaelic is concerned).

I do not see any way that the demand for additional Gaelic services could be met by market forces within the normal broadcasting arrangements, given the scattered Gaelic-speaking population, the incapacity of foreseeable low-cost broadcasting techniques to cope with the kind of terrain involved and, above all, the small scale of the potential market. But commercial considerations would also not permit the normal broadcasting arrangements to provide a viable solution to the Welsh need, as the White Paper acknowledged.

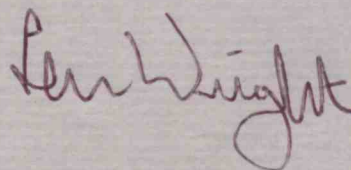
Similarly, subsidy by the territorial department has not been suggested for Welsh broadcasting. Indeed, it is recognised that whilst S4C should be financed from its own advertising revenue and any subscription or sponsorship income it may obtain, the remainder of its finances should be supplied by a subsidy from the ITC ie from franchise receipts. Thus, if Welsh broadcasting is in future to be subsidised directly from the ITC there can be no valid reason why support for increased Gaelic broadcasting should not be funded in the same way.

I do accept the difference of scale between Gaelic and Welsh and I have had that very much in mind in working up a proposal designed to stem the pressure for a full-scale Gaelic broadcasting service, but I cannot see a difference of principle and the Scottish population as a whole will not be able to see one.

As you will know the Scottish television companies have until now been subsidising Welsh language television and it is assumed, understandably, that the contribution they have made will, in future, form part of the new resources to be available for Gaelic. I am very willing to be flexible on the total amount of new resources involved but it is essential that there should be some real improvement in the current pathetic level of Gaelic broadcasting.

Perhaps the best way forward would be to ask my officials and those of the Home Office and the Treasury to urgently work up proposals. This could then be put to Douglas Hurd, Nigel Lawson and myself to establish whether we could agree to it, before reporting back to you.

I am copying this to the members of MISC 128 and to Sir Robin Butler.



M R

Approved by the Secretary
of State and signed in his
absence

BROADCASTING POLICE PT9

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