

21 July 1989

Gaelic Television Services

Malcolm Rifkind has written to you objecting strongly to Nigel Lawson's rejection of a proposal for the special funding of additional Gaelic television services.

The crux of his argument is that current policy treats broadcasting in Gaelic and Welsh quite differently (namely forcing the private sector to subsidise one but not the other) for no very good reason and that the White Paper specifically proposed additional broadcasting in Gaelic.

The White Paper and Gaelic Broadcasting

His reference to the White Paper is slightly misleading. While the White Paper contains numerous references to Welsh broadcasting and S4C, it contains only one reference to Gaelic broadcasting; and this is in the context of cable & MVDS rather than terrestrial. It is no accident that the wording of the White Paper is very careful. It specifically states that while the government recognises the importance of broadcasting in the Gaelic language, "no change is implied in present policies toward Gaelic broadcasting at national or regional level." It was equally very clear to point out that additional Gaelic needs would be met through new local services not existing terrestrial services.

Gaelic and Welsh

The major plank of the Scottish Secretary's argument is that Gaelic should be given at least some of the status which is accorded to the Welsh language.

However, there are key differences between the two:

(a) Roughly 20% of Wales - just over 500,000 speak and write Welsh - and more would understand it.

By contrast roughly 2% of Scotland - about 80,000 speak Gaelic.

(b) The place of the Welsh language in Welsh life is very different from that of the Gaelic language in Scottish life. The Welsh language has been a political issue in Welsh life for the last 30 years. The result is that today between 20-30,000 Welsh speakers can be found in the Cardiff area.

By contrast Gaelic is largely confined to a region of Scotland and plays very little role in Scottish national life.

(c) The demand for Welsh broadcasting is widespread.

By contrast the demand for additional Gaelic broadcasting has not come from the Western Isles but from prominent members of the Scottish television industry who see their budget being augmented in this way. It is to this pressure that the Secretary of State is responding.

(d) Another telling point is that HTV spent a great deal of money producing programmes in Welsh, including a 6 o'clock news (and a total of roughly seven hours per week) long before S4C was set up.

By contrast Grampian & STV produce only a token amount of programmes in Gaelic eg a 15 minute programme late at night occasionally.

Evaluation

Malcolm Rifkind is on weak ground in basing a case for special funding for Gaelic broadcasting on the example of Wales. The cost of his approach, which could be financed by diverting the funding of S4C by the Scottish companies would amount to £3.8M. This is not a large sum.

The danger of going down this route however, is that it opens the door to other minority languages - which on grounds of numbers have a far better claim than Gaelic to receive special funding.

The way forward envisaged in the White Paper is that Gaelic services could be expanded on a local basis using the new technology, if there were sufficient local demand to justify it.

This still seems a sound approach.

Conclusion

The White Paper did not make a commitment to additional Gaelic broadcasting and the case based on Welsh is not a strong one.

The Home Secretary, however, has already agreed that officials should consider various options.

While it may be argued that the diversion of some funding of S4C from advertising to Gaelic is not unreasonable, the crucial question is the likely knock-on effect.

Recommendation

- (i) Express scepticism on the case for additional Gaelic broadcasting.

(ii) Ask officials to consider in detail the likely knock-on effects in terms of other minority languages.

(iii) State explicitly that no decision will be taken until this work is completed.

Brian Griffiths

BRIAN GRIFFITHS