

# **Ofcom review of ITV public service broadcasting requirements**

## **By Michael Moore MP and Jeremy Purvis MSP**

### **Introduction**

This submission to the Ofcom review of ITV public service broadcasting requirements is made by Michael Moore, Member of Parliament for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, and Jeremy Purvis, Member of the Scottish Parliament for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale. As constituency parliamentarians, we represent in total a region of some 110,000 people in the south of Scotland who, in the main, receive their channel 3 programmes from ITV Border, based in Carlisle. We believe there are serious issues affecting the future of regional public service broadcasting, which have now been brought into sharp focus by ITV plc's plans to make severe cuts to the regional news operations including those of ITV Border. We set out below our concerns and our hopes for this review.

### **Importance of ITV Border**

ITV Border, and its independent predecessor, Border Television plc, have provided regional news and other programming to the north of England and the south of Scotland for decades. The particular engineering challenges of broadcasting to a vast rural area with limited population have co-existed with the unique historic, cultural and political differences defined (but also sometimes blurred) by the border between Scotland and England. ITV Border has, over the years, risen to the challenge very successfully. There have, of course, been issues that have arisen over time relating to Scottish sport and other Scottish programmes, but, by and large, ITV Border has served our region well.

As technology has developed over the years, innovations have been introduced which have allowed ITV Border to be central to the news agenda in the south of Scotland. The opt outs, which have allowed the south of Scotland to enjoy different segments to the "Lookaround" programme, have been a good example of this. Similarly, although it may not have been used in the Borders as often as we would like, the use of satellite trucks to transmit news more speedily, or indeed live into the bulletin, has helped to keep ITV Border relevant to our constituents. There are now plans to introduce "video journalists" who will use the most up-to-date broadband and other facilities to ensure that stories reported on in the Borders make it to the newsroom in good time for the evening programme; the days of having to put a tape on the X95 service down the A7 to Carlisle should now be consigned to history.

These innovations, married to a long-term commitment to, and understanding of, the south of Scotland, have ensured that, while it is not without criticism, ITV Border has continued to be recognised as one of the key sources of local information and news for our constituents. In a multi-channel, multi-platform world, this has been no mean feat.

## **Digital switchover**

The area covered by the main Selkirk transmitter in our constituencies will transfer to digital broadcasting in November. Apart from the limited trial in Whitehaven last year, this is the first major switchover to occur in the United Kingdom. In recognition of the seriousness of this development, the Borders Digital Forum, set up and chaired by Michael Moore MP, has explored many of the issues at a series of meetings over the last couple of years. ITV Border, the BBC, Ofcom itself and the former Secretary of State, James Purnell MP, have all been involved in the activities of the Forum. We believe that these debates and deliberations have given us a good insight into the issues that arise from the switchover, and allow us to reflect the opinions of a cross-section of our constituents.

The new world of multi-channel television offers some exciting opportunities and, on the face of it, a great deal more choice for people in the Borders. By and large the switchover process has the support of people in our region, but that support is not unqualified.

A commonly expressed anxiety, which we share, is that the prospect of more choice will, in fact, be illusory. While there will be many more channels, there are widespread concerns that they will represent 40 different variations on a single metropolitan theme driven by an agenda set exclusively in London. More choice ought to allow greater diversity and proper recognition of the many regional variations which exist around the United Kingdom. Finding some space for that variation and diversity in a multi-channel world ought to be a priority and fundamental to future public service broadcasting policy.

A related issue is that of "Freeview Lite" which means that, under the existing plans, anybody served by a relay transmitter will not receive the full suite of channels. Somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of our constituent will, in effect, receive a second class service. While the formal "public service broadcasters" will be included on all transmitters, including the relays, none of our constituents can understand why they are to be discriminated against in this way. It is hard to think of any other area of public policy where this would be deemed to be acceptable. As the schedule changes over time, our constituents stand to be further disadvantaged through no fault of their own. We believe that public service broadcasting should be understood in a broader sense and we urge Ofcom and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to revisit this issue as a matter of urgency.

## **ITV proposals**

ITV plc place their proposals for a serious reduction in regional news capability in this context of a new multi-channel world in which their revenue base is squeezed and their costs continue to rise. We have been unable to review the financial projections or the underlying assumptions on which they are based to see whether or not their economic/commercial case is a fair one. But we are able to foresee that, under their plans, the extent and quality of coverage for regional news in the Border area will be diminished.

Providing a meaningful regional television news service for the south of Scotland is extremely challenging. There are thousands of square miles and countless communities to cover. We have not been persuaded that centralising news gathering and editorial decisions somewhere in Tyne Tees will help ITV to face up to these challenges any better. In fact, we believe we will see the reverse, with editors and decision makers further removed from the communities we represent and, through no professional fault of their own, less in touch with the issues facing those communities. Again, we have seen very little detail of what is proposed or indeed how much resource will be allocated to the south of Scotland. The existing arrangements are not exactly generous and it is hard to see how the sketchy outline proposals will work to our advantage. We recognise that, since their original submission, ITV plc has revised its indicative plans to include dedicated opt-out broadcasts after the main ten o'clock ITV news and we welcome that change of heart. However, the issue of resources remains, and we request that Ofcom takes a very robust look at the plans which are being put forward. We would urge you to insist on ITV putting more of their detailed planning into the public domain so that we can have as informed a debate about this as possible. We believe it is vital to the credibility of your review that we, and our constituents, have all the relevant information at our disposal. As things stand, we remain sceptical of the plans and believe that they should be rejected.

### **Scottish Television**

We are aware that there have been some suggestions that one possible solution to the restructuring of ITV Border and its neighbouring regions would be to offload the south of Scotland to Scottish Television in Glasgow. We do not support this option because we do not believe that Scottish Television is seriously interested in it and there is no evidence to suggest that they would be any more sympathetic to the unique features of the south of Scotland than a regional news service in the north of England. If this emerges as one of the possible solutions, we would urge you to insist that detailed plans are published so that our constituents, along with us, can judge them for ourselves.

### **Conclusion**

We welcome the fact that Ofcom is carrying out this review. In the context of the digital switchover process, it is vital that appropriate policy decisions are made to ensure that public service broadcasting continues to play a major part in British television and that standards and requirements are maintained. We are not in a position to judge the financial underpinnings of the ITV plc proposals for reducing their regional news coverage, but we do not believe that their plans fulfil their public service broadcasting remit which they are obliged to fulfil under their existing licences. We believe it is vital that Ofcom recognises the continued importance of regional diversity in UK broadcasting and does not sacrifice this to broader financial concerns. Above all else, we must not find ourselves in a situation where an era of "greater choice" ends up with us having a broadcasting monoculture across the whole country.