

Brief submission by Tobar Productions to Ofcom's public service broadcasting consultation

It was apparent at the conference held on 13th November, that the model represented by the Irish Language Broadcast Fund, was one which should be explored further in an effort to find the best way to meet public service broadcasting needs in the Northern Ireland situation. Speaker upon speaker made reference to the remarkable achievements of the ILBF, despite its small financial and human resources.

However, the welcome positive attention which was given to the ILBF, raised additional crucial questions. Tobar Productions fully supports the submission of the Ultach Trust and the separate issues addressed therein, and commends the organisation for highlighting a huge failing of OFCOM, namely that OFCOM has a binding duty to ensure that the UK Government carries out its legal obligations with regard to providing adequate financial support for Irish Language television production in Northern Ireland. The fact that the ILBF has no security beyond 2010 is evidence that the UK Government is breaching an internationally negotiated treaty, i.e. the Good Friday Agreement. Ofcom must make immediate and effective recommendations in this regard and hold the British Government to account.

In addition the current level of funding received by the ILBF, falls far short of its needs and is well out of step of that received by the other indigenous language regions in the these islands. Ofcom needs to take the lead in addressing these huge imbalances.

There appears to be little or no joined up thinking with regard to a strategy for public service broadcasting on the island of Ireland as a whole. Ofcom may argue that it has no authority to make recommendations to government bodies in another jurisdiction, but it has every right to do exactly that, otherwise there is little point in discussing these matters with broadcasters and government departments from the Republic of Ireland.

There were many analogies made at the conference of 13th November in the discussions to agree upon on an appropriate public service broadcasting model. One speaker spoke of designing a model which must not have bits left over upon completion as is often the case with airfix model toys. Another speaker spoke of the Scottish broadcasting situation being just a tip of the iceberg, and that much more needed to be achieved. Following this theme, Tobar Productions argues that a if the ILBF model should be adopted, the Irish language production needs must be fully incorporated and not subsumed. The ILBF is a small efficient model. It cannot meet the needs of the various and conflicting agendas. In other words if the ILBF is seen as a small rowing boat, it must be brought on board the new cruise ship, and not left to drift alone, and there must be plenty of other similar boats on board, otherwise there may not be sufficient lifeboats should an iceberg come into its path!

It is a bit ironic that the newest and most dynamic element of television in the North, i.e the ILBF is leading the way in resolving the problems faced by the long established broadcasters, the very same broadcasters who ignored the Irish language for decades and frowned upon it as a divisive narrow minded area of activity. Now everyone wants to jump on board and céad mile fáilte to them all. Vive la ILBF!

