



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

DAI DAVIES

Member of Parliament for Blaenau Gwent

PLEASE REPLY TO-

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Our Ref DD

Mr Rhodri Williams
Director Wales – Ofcom
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October 3rd, 2008.

Dear Mr Williams

Ofcom's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review

Ever since the inception of the Welsh Assembly there has been concern expressed across the political spectrum about the lack of coverage of its debates, the issues and decisions it is taking.

I have similar reservations about coverage of Westminster issues as they affect Wales – by ITV Wales.

The concern, which is entirely, genuine, is that without full and proper scrutiny and coverage by a wide range of media the people of Wales are effectively being dis-enfranchised.

I had serious concerns about the lack of coverage, and its effect on the flow of information to the people of Wales of what is happening in this new democratic Assembly, and Westminster, *before* ITV announced that it was further reducing its news and other programming.

This follows cut-back after cut-back by newspapers in Wales of specialist political journalists based in the National Assembly, the loss of the Welsh Daily Mirror, and the almost complete lack of coverage of democratic decision-making and debate by any other national newspaper. Commercial Radio is now owned by Ulster Television and is also reducing its coverage of areas like the south Wales valleys.

This adds up to a very serious democratic deficit.

ITV was awarded its franchise contract to provide distinctive and specific Welsh programming, yet the proposal you appear to have accepted allows ITV to renege on that commitment. That, effectively, adds up to reneging on legal contract.

OFCOM's role is to protect such programming, and to ensure that commitments made are kept.

If ITV fail to do this then OFCOM has the capacity to re-open the franchise process and seek an alternative news and programming provider. Have you considered this alternative?

The reduction of Welsh news to just half-an-hour per evening during weekdays is, to say the least, a minimal service.

The reduction of all other programming from four-and-a-half hours a week to just one-and-a-half is much worse.

What commitment have you been given by ITV regarding those mere 90 minutes? Will all political coverage disappear other than short reports in the news programme? If so do you believe that that adds up to effective coverage of issues and decisions involving the spending of billions of pounds worth of public money, and services to every citizen in Wales?

ITV is one step from walking away from any coverage of Wales, its issues, its political and democratic processes, and the cultural formation which good television programming can help to create in a small country like ours.

In its previous round of cutbacks it literally cut ALL local programming from other UK ITV franchise areas. Wales escaped such a complete cutback, I suspect, because it would have been too 'political' given the then devolved situation. Are ITV now taking advantage of the 'recession' to argue for a slow withdrawal from Wales altogether?

How vigorously have you held ITV to account on its contractual commitment to provide full and proper programming? The way you have been quoted since the announcement was made gives the impression that ITV effectively said 'take these cutbacks or we will pull out of Wales altogether'.

I am sure that I don't need to remind you that as the Regulator of the Welsh Communications Industry your 'principal duty' as stated, clearly, in the OFCOM's Statutory Duties (under the Communications Act 2002; 3 a and 3b) *.... is to further the interests of citizens in relation to communication matters' and 'to further the interests of consumers ... by promoting competition'.*

In fact what you are agreeing to contravenes both elements of your principal duties.

The citizens of Wales are being denied a full and proper communications coverage service, they are being fed a diet of game-shows while coverage of Westminster, the Welsh Assembly, and other news is being dramatically reduced; and – as the public watchdog – you are effectively agreeing to a serious reduction 'in promoting competition'.

I say 'what you are agreeing to' advisedly. I share the concerns expressed by my colleague Trish Law (Assembly Member for Blaenau Gwent) when she calls the OFCOM consultation a sham because while this so-called 'consultation' is still underway, and within days of publication of OFCOM's Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, ITV announced that 17 posts are to be cut in Wales.

In allowing that to happen, and in agreeing to what looks like an ITV ultimatum, you have also seriously undermined OFCOM and its duty to 'promote competition'.

We are one step away from having no competition in the English language in television terms.

The next step will be for ITV to pull out of its commitment to Wales altogether. That would leave the BBC with a monopoly propped up by public funding.

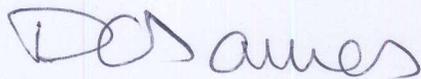
This is profoundly undermining democracy, and a competitive edge and balance where the coverage of news, politics, current affairs, contemporary, arts, cultural and historical programming are concerned.

I urge you to re-consider your position. I urge you, too, to re-enter discussions with ITV to press them to fulfil their contractual obligations – and if they fail to do that for you to seek to find an alternative supplier and/ or to explore the idea of a media company to be formed internally (within Wales) consisting of the considerable television talent which has been lost from broadcasting progressively since the 1980s, along with the talent still in Wales which was once employed by the many independent programme making companies.

Welsh language programming is under-pinned by considerable amounts of public subsidy, I and my colleague Trish Law will be more than happy to press the case for a similar public under-pinning of English-language television in Wales both at Westminster, and in the Assembly.

I would appreciate a full response, from you as the official public watchdog in Wales, to all of the questions and points that I have raised, above, and you may look upon this as my formal response to the 'Consultation' process which OFCOM should publish.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dai Davies". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D".

Dai Davies MP

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