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Ofcom  
Riverside House  
2A Southwark Bridge Road  
London  
SE1 9HA

3<sup>rd</sup> December 2008

Dear Sir,

I write as an elected Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for the constituency of Upper Bann. I would like to put on record that I believe that some of the recommendations put forward in the Second Public Service Review put at risk the high quality public service television we receive in Northern Ireland from both the BBC and UTV.

In particular the option of a single licence for Channel 3 across the UK is something I strongly oppose. UTV has delivered high quality news for many years. It is highly valued by the audience and its place in Northern Ireland's broadcasting future should be guaranteed. Indeed without UTV, we believe that the BBC service would not be as competitive as it currently is.

To quote directly from Ofcom's own commissioned research for this Review, the Opinion Leader report which was an annex to the Phase 2 document, states in relation to UTV and other devolved nations services "*guaranteed continuation in their current forms as providers of nation's news...acts as a default decision criteria...These channels have a symbolic value beyond their PSB provision, and are seen to represent national identity in ways in which other TV channels do not.*" Opinion Leader report. 1.2 Overview of findings, p5.

I strongly oppose the proposal of a single Channel 3 licence for the whole of the UK. As a newly devolved Assembly we need a strong local broadcaster to report, analyse and scrutinise the workings of this Legislature.

A UK-wide licence would be detrimental to the viewer and take local accountability away from programme makers. A single licence would not benefit

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viewers as it would potentially lose all the regional strengths and lead to a homogenised service across the UK.

A single licence would lose audience in the devolved nations and actually make the provision of public service content for these nations less viable rather than more viable. I would argue that the sense of ownership a locally accountable and branded service provider adds to the audience loyalty is something that a single licence holder could never achieve.

While I understand the commercial difficulties facing all ITV licencees, there should be a bare minimum of five licences proposed for the future, those being Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England and the Channel Islands.

I would also like to bring to your attention that on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> November 2008, this matter was debated by the Assembly and it was resolved:

*That this Assembly expresses concern at Ofcom's proposals for a diminution in the public service obligations of UTV through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes; calls on Ofcom to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and programming; calls for the extension of Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation period for a further three months; and further calls on UTV to suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of this consultation process, and following meaningful consultation and negotiations with the trade unions representing staff at UTV.*

Please find enclosed a copy of that debate for your reference.

In light of the points which I have raised, I trust you will be willing to look into this matter in greater depth as I believe the possible consequences of this decision will lead to great disappointment and annoyance from a large majority of UTV viewers who not only watch, but appreciate and enjoy its output.

I trust that this matter will be met with your sympathetic consideration and I look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'George Savage', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

**George Savage MLA**

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rubbing points between the rightful jurisdiction of the Assembly on certain matters and the jurisdiction of Westminster on excepted matters, including terrorism. Such matters may require particular methods to communicate to the Executive and the Assembly what is, or is not, happening at Westminster. Given the future devolution of justice, I submit that there may be some deeper learning to be gained from this matter.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I agree with the Member that any use of urgent procedures is likely to apply in a similar circumstance to today. On behalf of the Executive, we are happy to work with the Assembly to determine whether an alternative mechanism is required to deal with such situations. I believe strongly that credit unions are part of the solution to some issues in working-class and other areas throughout Northern Ireland, and I hope to be in a position to make a statement about that next month.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### UTV

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr McElduff:** I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at Ofcom's proposals for a diminution in the public service obligations of UTV through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes; calls on Ofcom to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and programming; calls for the extension of Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation period for a further three months; and further calls on UTV to suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of this consultation process, and following meaningful consultation and negotiations with the trade unions representing staff at UTV.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag moladh na tairisceán seo, mar atá a fhios agat.

There are, essentially, two crucial interrelated issues: the future of local broadcasting in the medium and long term; and UTV's current restructuring and redundancy programme, which includes plans to axe certain locally produced programmes.

Broadcasting is not a devolved matter; powers are retained by Westminster. However, it is a major issue that concerns everyone.

People in our society value quality local news and current affairs programming and are hugely interested in public-service broadcasting. They are interested in how our society is portrayed — or not portrayed. Indeed, we are often disregarded — even anonymous — on the BBC and ITV networks. People are interested in quality local programmes that provide creative opportunities for local people and give a platform to local talent. The Irish language broadcast fund is considered a model of best practice that offers such opportunities and allows for the reflection of that unique aspect of our cultural heritage.

Commercial broadcasting faces difficult times because advertising revenue is in decline. The regulatory functions of the Office of Communications (Ofcom) include a review of public-service broadcasting at least every five years. Ofcom and UTV are at pains to highlight the fact that the current level of commercial public-service broadcasting cannot be sustained in an increasingly competitive and challenging environment. Local current affairs programmes are likely to come under pressure because of the increase in multichannel broadcasting and the digital switchover in 2012. Therefore, it is important to understand the context and the financial environment.

Ofcom completed phase 1 of its consultation earlier in 2008, and phase 2 is due to be completed on 4 December. Some early conclusions have emerged: the BBC should remain the cornerstone of public-service content with a secure core budget; audiences need a choice of providers; and a diverse and challenging media is necessary in order to avoid monopoly, particularly in the realm of news and current affairs.

BBC and UTV appreciate each other's competition. For example, Peter Johnston, the local BBC controller, said that competition from UTV's 'Insight' programme improves the quality of 'Spotlight' on the BBC. I recognise the importance of RTE and TG4 to viewers on the island of Ireland and in the North. During my upbringing, my father used to try to pick up RTE radio on a Sunday; it was described as "crackling towards Athlone".

Ofcom proposes a diminution in UTV's public-service obligations through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes. Ofcom claims that that is a floor and not a ceiling. News coverage will be reduced from five hours and 20 minutes a week to four hours, and non-news coverage will be reduced from four hours a week to one hour and 30 minutes. The motion calls on the Assembly to record its serious concern at the proposals and on Ofcom to do its job properly by acting to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and local programming.

The quality and quantity of local news and local programming should be maintained at the current level and developed for the future. Furthermore, the motion calls for a three-month extension — until March 2009 — of Ofcom's public-service broadcasting review consultation period. I understand that Ofcom is disinclined to facilitate that extension. However, it is legitimate for Members to ensure that the consultation is comprehensive and proper, and I understand that Ofcom might consider submissions that are received slightly after 4 December 2008.

Although the consultation period is not exhausted and Ofcom's proposals are merely proposals, it appears that UTV management is taking those proposals as a given and is initiating cutbacks.

UTV management has stated that it intends to reduce employment in the organisation by shedding up to 35 jobs. It has also stated that it intends to reduce news, current affairs and local-interest programmes. We understand that the axe is to fall on the 'Insight' programme, although we are told that it will appear four times a year, making it like one's very best china. 'Insight' is a quality UTV programme that has been at the cutting edge of investigative journalism down the years. It has not always been kind to me, and perhaps not even to you, Mr Deputy Speaker; nonetheless, I

support it. 'UTV Life', 'Late and Live' and various news bulletins are also due to be axed.

People will be made unemployed — household-name presenters, some from the world of news and some from the world of sport, are being considered for unemployment. As we all know, this society places a high value on local sports coverage.

**Mr McCarthy:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McElduff:** If the Member is very brief.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am always brief. Does the Member agree that the least that UTV could do would be to wait until Ofcom has finished its deliberations?

**Mr McElduff:** The Member is 100% correct, and I thank him for that point. UTV should not go ahead with this precipitous action before the consultation is complete. That is perhaps the main point of the debate. I am speaking for 10 minutes, but Mr McCarthy encapsulated that point in 10 seconds. Therefore, I give him credit for that.

UTV has initiated voluntary severance and compulsory redundancy schemes. The internal deadline for signing up to those schemes was 14 November, then it was 24 November — which is today — and it may now be extended further. I hope that public pressure is paying off.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure examined the issue in fine detail. Last Thursday, it heard evidence from the unions, including the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU). Those organisations obviously have a direct concern for the welfare of their members, but they also believe that the proposals serve to undermine UTV's ability to fulfil its public-service remit.

In the midst of all this, and as I said, people are saying nice things about the quality of UTV's programmes. It should, therefore, be pleased. Apparently, 'UTV Live' is the most watched news programme here.

We should be considering the future needs of news-coverage provision. At a time when the political institutions are bedding down, people are interested in everyday concerns; it is a false argument to claim that news coverage does not need to be at the same level as it was when the conflict was at its height. People are interested in news today, in the workings of our political institutions, in the various Departments, and in general day-to-day news. Although 4 December is a deadline and the Ofcom report is not due to be published until spring 2009, UTV is pressing ahead with implementing changes that are based on the report. That is happening before the process has been completed. Indeed, I received a memo from UTV management that states that that is the case.

We want to ensure that the consultation is real and meaningful. That is why the motion calls on UTV to suspend its redundancy programme until the consultation is complete. There is a need for a wider debate on the future of long-term and medium-term broadcasting and on what models for the delivery of public-service broadcasting are best to serve this society. The BBC is making a welcome commitment to increase local programming. The Committee has been considering broadcasting in other places, including Scotland, Wales and the rest of Ireland, and it has been discussing the possibility of establishing a broadcasting commission. The debate on the matter still has longer to run, but UTV could do a lot in the short term to respond to the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We now know that the Member has china at home.

**Lord Browne:** I support the motion. In its second consultation on the future of public-service broadcasting, Ofcom published a number of key findings. One of the main findings from new audience research was that that nine out of 10 people do not want the BBC to be the only provider of public-service content, either now or in the future.

12.45 pm

There is no doubt that audiences value highly public-service broadcasting alternatives to complement that of the BBC. Most significantly, most people want ITV to continue to provide regional news and programmes. However, as the Ofcom report states, pressure is mounting on the current system. We must accept that.

The Ofcom analysis confirms that commercial public-service broadcasters such as ITV1, Channel 4 and Five — as well as cable and satellite broadcasts — will continue to deliver sports, entertainment, archive and acquired programming that is made in the United Kingdom. The analysis also underlines that some types of UK-made public-service contents are, increasingly, commercially unattractive. Unfortunately, those include current affairs, nations, some regional programmes, drama, scripted comedy and factual programming for children. As we know, the situation is made worse by the growing deterioration in the advertising market since Ofcom's first consultation document was published in April 2008.

If audiences want to continue to enjoy the current level of public-service content, it is Ofcom's considered opinion that £330 million to £420 million is likely to be required in 2012. It also estimates that existing regulatory subsidies would contribute around £185 million, leaving a likely gap of approximately £145 million to £235 million. However, it is very interesting to note that Ofcom's research showed that audiences in Northern Ireland attach particular importance to programmes that are made in, or are about, Northern Ireland. That is especially true for news, as audiences

here told Ofcom that competition to the BBC should be maintained. It would not be wise for the BBC to have a monopoly of news coverage in Northern Ireland.

I think that all Members of this House will agree that Ulster Television has a reputation that is second to none in producing popular programmes. Despite growing financial competitive pressures, I hope that those productions continue. I welcome the commitment of Channel 4 to increase its production from Northern Ireland. With the BBC's proposal to produce 17% of its output from regions — with 3% of that coming from Northern Ireland — that can only help the production sector and improve how Northern Ireland is portrayed.

The Ofcom director for Northern Ireland, Denis Wolinski, confirmed that viewers in Northern Ireland value the programming that is made by UTV and BBC Northern Ireland, and that they want both stations to continue to provide local programmes. Despite the current commercial pressures that face UTV and ITV, I hope that the current levels of production of local programmes continue.

One of Ofcom's main aims is to maintain and strengthen the UK's high-quality public-service broadcasting by making sure that a broad range of television programmes is made by independent producers as well as by broadcasters, including those in countries and regions in the United Kingdom.

As we have heard, Ofcom's consultation period closes on 4 December 2008. In light of all the current responses, I call upon Ofcom to protect our local broadcasting and to extend the consultation period by three months.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Lord Browne:** As a result, I ask UTV to suspend its proposed restructuring, pending the completion and outcome of the consultation process.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member's time is up.

**Lord Browne:** The unions should be fully consulted. I support the motion.

**Mr McNarry:** At the outset, I stress that all local networks — including the BBC — do excellent work in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is unfortunate that this debate is about an issue that pertains to one specific major network in Northern Ireland.

There is a rumour circulating that UTV has ended its dispute with the unions. However, I understand that that rumour has no substance. Confusion may have arisen due to UTV having delayed the taking of any action until December. Although I commend UTV for that, the motion calls on that organisation to suspend any action until the outcome of the consultation process, which will extend well beyond December.

The issue is active in the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Only last week, the Committee held a lengthy meeting with all the key players. Indeed, the Hansard report of that meeting should make for excellent reading, and it is a pity that that report was not available before the debate today. It is an active item in a Committee of the Assembly, charged to carry out its work. Therefore, it seems premature of the proposers — all three of whom sit on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure — to have tabled such a motion. Is the consensus of the Committee — of which we will hear today — not sufficient to drive the issue, without the need to bring it before the House and have a full-scale debate?

All I have heard from Sinn Féin so far is an attempt to build a platform to drive that party's Irish agenda. I see opportunism here — an opportunity for "themselves alone" to look good, while leaving UTV and the integrity of public broadcasting in the background.

It is all too easily forgotten, despite the major strides made in the past decade — since my party led the way in creating peace and stability — that Northern Ireland is still recovering from the impact of 30 years of terrorist war, and that the process of the normalisation of society here still has some way to go. Our society cannot recover from the brutality and mayhem of a campaign of murder and indiscriminate savagery overnight, and that is what makes the role of public-service broadcasting here so significant. That is why it matters; that is why it is different here; and that is why the Ofcom proposal for cuts of up to 50% in public-service broadcasting commitments across the United Kingdom is inappropriate here. A commitment to protect the integrity of local broadcasting is critical and deserves to be acknowledged by all concerned.

UTV has opted for a near-40% cut in public-service broadcasting: from nine hours a week to five and a half hours a week. However, that is too much too soon. Those cuts are hitting areas that are important to the democratic process in Northern Ireland. The media plays, and will continue to play, an important role in bringing information to people in their homes through their televisions and radios. Those people are not sitting in the Public Gallery — there is no one there at the moment. Furthermore, those cuts are affecting soft-news programmes such as 'UTV Life' and 'UTV Late and Live', items that are helping with that process of normalisation. We need the media to help conduct our affairs in relation to normalisation, and to scrutinise MLAs — in the public interest — as much as we scrutinise each other.

UTV must take note of the widespread public reaction to its proposals and rethink them. This is bad publicity and bad public relations for one of our leading television networks. The public do not favour the intentions of

UTV. They want local news; they cannot let go of that. The time is wrong for UTV to be doing so.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members to stick very closely to the motion under debate.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the motion: it is very timely. In 1992, Bruce Springsteen sang:

"There's fifty-seven channels and nothin' on".

As a result of the social input to the BBC and the networked independent channels with a public-service broadcasting remit, we have always been blessed with good-quality television. I remember when we had only three or four channels and there was always something worth watching. Now we are moving towards an era where people watch television with set-top boxes and with remote controls in their hands. It is easy to waste an evening flicking between channels, looking at poor television programmes that are infested with advertisements.

The BBC and UTV stand out from the crowd. The BBC is the gold standard, and UTV has consistently lived up to that. It would be a real shame if that ceased to be the case because UTV decided to follow the crowd. The people of Northern Ireland are saying that UTV is proposing a minimalist approach to its public-service broadcasting obligations. Such a strategy seems lazy — it is about increasing financial returns on reduced investment.

None of that would matter a great deal if television were not socially and economically important and if the industry did not provide opportunities for employment and new enterprise. It is time for broadcasting to be devolved to Northern Ireland — there are real opportunities to develop the industry here.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure talked about TG4 in Galway. TG4 broadcasts a large proportion of locally produced programmes. As a result, a cluster of companies has developed in that area, which has created a range of jobs, including in scriptwriting, programme-making, acting, editing, sound, lighting, graphics, subtitling, production, company management, and so forth. There are hundreds of jobs in the area, and the companies — with development support from Government — are expanding to become export-oriented. The TG4 business model, which is about quality, expansion and opportunity, is something that we should emulate.

People in Northern Ireland are, rightly, concerned at UTV's attitude and strategy. I believe that UTV is making a commercial mistake. People here like local television production, local analysis of our political situation, and a local take on world events. World events are important to us in a different way than they are to people who live in London, because they affect us differently.

People in this part of the world also enjoy discussion. The programming at RTÉ 2 and Radio Ulster involves wall-to-wall discussion for most of the day. That is because that is what people here want — we like to talk, listen and watch people talking. If UTV goes down the road of emulating the non-public-service broadcasting channels, it will lose its differentiation and, ultimately, its competitive position. It will become a me-too operator in a crowded marketplace. Good-quality drama, music, live programming, news, sports, and current affairs with detailed analysis are life-enhancing. They are educational as well as entertaining.

From an economic perspective, another issue is that 35 important jobs at UTV are under threat. Good-quality television can give good returns for a region. As I mentioned earlier, local production companies tend to cluster around broadcasters to produce local programmes in the first instance, before going on to produce programmes for other markets. A reduction in local programming will reduce the opportunities for local, independent production companies.

The cuts at UTV seem to be paradoxical, given that production and broadcasting costs are falling because of technology. There is scope for multiple channels and lots of ways of broadcasting but, at the same time, there is a diminution in the quality and quantity of the content. In the interests of quality and local involvement in the industry, we need to send the message to the broadcasters that they must maintain local production and content. Northern Ireland is not the same as London — people here value local content and proper analysis from a Northern Irish perspective.

The people of Northern Ireland expect UTV to get into serious dialogue with the trade unions in relation to the impact on jobs. We also expect UTV to talk to members of the Executive and to the people of Northern Ireland in relation to the impact on our television services. We need to send the message to UTV that if its objective is to maximise shareholder wealth, dumbing down is a very short-term strategy that will ultimately mean that it will lose its competitive edge here and become like the rest of the 57 channels with nothing on.

1.00 pm

**Mrs Long:** Other Members referred to the value that the public rightly places on local broadcasting. Ofcom's research shows that Northern Ireland audiences place particular importance and emphasis on programmes that are made in, and specifically for, those audiences, and that is especially true for news programming. Audiences stated that they want UTV to maintain a competitive market with the BBC and that a single broadcaster should not be allowed to operate in the local marketplace.

Such competition is good, because it automatically drives up standards, and, over the years, Northern Ireland

has benefited from, and should be proud of, its high-quality journalism. For example, if one watches national broadcasting, or if one travels to other regions and watches regional programming, the number of Northern Ireland voices that can be heard is surprising. Those people cut their teeth here on local news programmes, shining above the rest, and went to other regions to take up fantastic jobs or were employed on national programming. Therefore, it is important that people should have the opportunity to progress their careers.

Members referred to the timing of the debate, which is pertinent, because today is the deadline that UTV set for voluntary redundancies. From a total staff of 118, UTV has been seeking 27 to 30 voluntary redundancies, which would amount to approximately one quarter of its workforce, and that is a matter for concern.

The proposer of the motion, Barry McElduff — and I apologise for not hearing all of his contribution — and Kieran McCarthy said that UTV is pressing ahead with reducing staff numbers and, consequently, some people will be gone by the time that the consultation report is completed. Putting decisions in train before completing a consultation makes a mockery of the consultation process.

Moreover, such actions suggest something else. Although Ofcom stressed that it had set a minimum threshold for local programming, the immediate reaction to that of reducing local programming suggests that minimum levels rapidly become the norm. We should be concerned about, and guard against, that.

As other Members said, the proposed cuts would result in morning and weekend-lunchtime news programmes being axed. In addition, programmes such as 'Insight', 'UTV Life' and 'Late and Live' would be axed. Although we sometimes take such programmes for granted, they often unpack, discuss and inform the public more widely about news stories, and that provides people with an opportunity to better understand what is happening in the world around them and to relate that to local circumstances. Therefore, we would lose out if such programming were to end.

It is essential to retain UTV as a strong regional broadcaster and as competition for the BBC, because, as I said, that drives up standards. UTV is not just another part of ITV; it recognises Northern Ireland's distinct broadcasting requirements, which are not reflected on other digital broadcasting platforms. We all recognise that political and investigative journalism is not cheap; however, we cannot afford to be without it. As other Members said, many digital channels increasingly produce lightweight, but cheaper to produce, programming, which is not necessarily what we need from public-service broadcasting.

Furthermore, Northern Ireland has a distinctive political culture and, therefore, reporting here must include the extra dimension that investigative journalism

provides and which is important for basic democratic discussion. It would harm democracy in Northern Ireland if there were only one platform for political debate on television.

In addition, the political context here is different. For example, the uncovering of a financial scandal involving the Conservative Party or the Labour Party would have ramifications throughout the regions, but it would not necessarily have direct implications for Northern Ireland, where people look to have improprieties in their local parties investigated. Therefore, in that context, a specific job must be done here.

Mr McNarry mentioned that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has been taking an active interest in this matter. Although I realise that it is not a devolved matter, it is disappointing that there was not an Executive response.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

**Mrs Long:** I hope that the House will be reassured that the Executive are making representations on the matter.

**Mr Shannon:** I support the motion. I wish to emphasise clearly that there must be further consultation on the matter. As anyone knows, many people, after returning home from a hard day's work, sit down to watch 'UTV Live'. We know that from the viewing figures, which show that 'UTV Live' is one of those programmes that people use to become clued in to what is happening. That is why we need to retain regional news and non-news programmes. We were all shocked to find that UTV might reduce its programming and would be letting some well-known faces go.

Aa' hae bin stappit bi' fowk, fae ivery wauk o' life, that er sae pit aboot tae larn o' tha Ofcom minded thoughts. But maer sae tae see that tha UTV heed yins wur ready tae cut bak oan staff, in spiet o' tha fact that ther haes bin nae shair desisin maed, as tae tha lang laustin o' tha progremmin, as muckle tauks erney neerly quat.

I have been approached by many people, from every walk of life, who were dismayed to learn of Ofcom's recommendations. However, they were more disappointed to learn that UTV executives were prepared to cut back on staff, despite the fact that no firm decision has been made about programming viability, as the consultation has not yet been finalised. It seems to be a wee bit wrong to look at recommendations when the consultation process is ongoing.

I have some difficulty with the fact that UTV Media posted pre-tax profits of some £115 million in 2007. That is an increase of £2 million on the previous year. There is no financial need to cut back before the process

has been finished, and most definitely not before everyone has been consulted.

Even more surprisingly, the top executives received substantial bonuses and benefits to the tune of £250,000. Then there is the question of the number of staff being reduced from 118 to 83. That is just a wee bit absurd when one considers that, had the top five executives not taken bonuses and had they made do with salaries of approximately £320,000, the £200,000 in bonus and benefits that they each received would have paid each of the redundant workers an average wage of £28,000 a year — a tidy salary by any means.

For that and other reasons that have been expounded by Members, I support my constituents' calls for fairness for the rank and file in UTV. I realise that when a company is running at a loss, it must make cutbacks in order to survive, but I hark back to what I said about UTV's profitability and the fact that it made more money last year than in the previous year. If that was happening to other workers in my constituency, I would be just as concerned about their losing their jobs.

The company is running successfully and yet it has grasped the first opportunity to cut back before anything has been finalised. Any good employer values his or her staff and knows that getting rid of staff is the last possible option. However, UTV Media has taken the opportunity to cut salary costs when there is, as yet, no financial reason to do so.

News programmes are vital for everyone. Among non-news programmes, 'Lesser Spotted Ulster' is a success story; increasing numbers of viewers watch it. We must look at the issue because of that. Ofcom's report stated clearly that audiences in Northern Ireland attach particular importance to programmes, and I believe that 'Lesser Spotted Ulster' is one such programme.

There is hope that some arrangement can, and will, be reached to ensure that programming is enhanced, not disintegrated. However, UTV Media is happy to throw in the towel before the first round is over. The question is raised: had Ofcom stated that it believed that the executives should have had their bonuses axed and their salaries halved, would that have been an easier way to make cutbacks?

Another concern relates to the fact that the BBC's central office in London has stated that it intends to increase by 40% each of its regional services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Therefore, as the BBC is upgrading its regional service and allocating extra money to it, UTV is considering another way out of the job that lies ahead.

I ask UTV Media to meet union representatives and to lengthen the consultation process by three months. UTV has catered for everyone at some stage — no matter who they may be. It is a sad state of affairs that



that should change long before there is any need for it to do so or before any alternatives have been lined up.

I support the motion and ask that the chief executives stop looking at UTV's bank balance and look at the people whom they want to let go and the people of the Province who support wholeheartedly the staff of UTV.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag labhairt ar son na tairisceana seo.

I support the motion. The motion addresses the issue of public-service broadcasting in a number of ways: the Ofcom review of public-service broadcasting; its immediate impact on UTV through redundancies and programme changing; and its long-term impact on the provision of public-service broadcasting, particularly current affairs, news and Irish language programming.

Sinn Féin contends that the Ofcom review of public-service broadcasting should be extended for three months, and the motion calls for that. At the meeting of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure last Thursday, we heard that the public response to the review was not as high as one would expect of such an important issue. There are many and varied reasons for that, but it must be accepted that many people do not realise fully the long-term impact that a reduction in public-service broadcasting will have. That impact will stretch across public-service broadcasting from current affairs programmes to such programmes as 'Lesser Spotted Ulster', news programmes and sports programmes, and it will be evident in the approach — already minimalist — that is taken towards Irish language provision.

There is also an impression that decisions are made before reviews begin, and the public, therefore, ask whether there is any point in making a contribution to such a review. That is why we are asking for a three-month extension to the review's consultation period.

The review of public-service broadcasting was set against a backdrop in which Michael Grade stated publicly that ITV will hand back its licence and apply for another one, which will not have any public-service commitments, if he does not get his own way. Bodies such as Ofcom have to resist that type of approach when setting limits to public-broadcasting provision. Ofcom has to see itself as the protector of public interest and consider what is required in public-service broadcasting.

In response to David McNarry's comments, the Assembly has a role to play. The Committee has an important role to play, but the Chamber is the proper place for such a debate to take place. Important as the Committee's role is, the Assembly has a broader remit, and that is why it is possible, and probable, that the motion will be passed: we have to send out a clear signal that the Assembly wants to see the highest standards possible.

There is no doubt that the staff at UTV believe that the management is using the Ofcom review as a means

of introducing staffing cutbacks and other issues. That was articulated by the union delegation, which made a presentation to the Committee last Thursday. The Committee heard also from the management side, who presented a contrary view. However, the Committee urged UTV management to put in abeyance any decision until the end of the review. They agreed to that, but we are looking for a three-month extension now, and I think that they should fulfil that also.

The desire for a broadcast commission arose from the necessary public debate on the issue, and the Committee discussed it last Thursday. The Scottish Executive have established a commission, and the Committee received evidence that all the interested parties see the commission as an important way of promoting and enhancing public-service broadcasting in Scotland. Such a commission is required here: it will benefit local broadcasting.

In our case and circumstances, public-service broadcasting has a remit beyond the North: BBC, UTV, RTÉ 1, RTÉ 2, TV3 and TG4 are broadcast in homes across the island, and they often make joint productions. Any commission, therefore, should come under the auspices of the all-Ireland Ministerial Council and ensure that we have public-broadcasting services across the island that are proper and fitting to our circumstances. I support the motion. Sin é. Tacaím leis an rún seo. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr K Robinson:** I agree with the contention of my colleague David McNarry, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, that this is still a live issue for the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and that the Committee is the best forum for related discussions. Perhaps it is premature to bring the issue to the Chamber now, but it is here, and I proceed on that basis.

I am a firm believer in regionalism, and broadcasting is no exception to that. It is a vital part of building a sense of engagement with the local community, and it is an important vehicle for building community self-confidence. Television is the major vehicle for communication, and, therefore, it is important that we take an active interest in local programming.

*1.15 pm*

Television is how most people receive their news and engage with the rest of the world. Not only is television a major vehicle for public awareness, it has a key role in how our community develops. I praise local television companies for their sterling work in helping to build that local sense of community and for giving the community a sense of self-worth. People in Northern Ireland used to be retiring and shy, and some of them still are — I was not looking at you, Fred. However, local television has changed that and, as one Member has already said, Northern Ireland voices are

heard all across the airwaves. We must not only preserve that: we must build on it.

I welcomed the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's comments last week, when responding to my colleague David McNarry, that he was considering a broadcasting commission for Northern Ireland. As other Members have said, that seems to be the way that things are going in Scotland, and it is certainly worthy of further investigation. I encourage the Minister to go in that direction. Broadcasting is too important to be left out on the sidelines.

Local programming is an important imprint of our local identity and personality. It is like the high street. It is so refreshing to encounter a local unique shop amid all the high street multiples that can be found all over the nation and that make every town look exactly the same. In the same way, it is refreshing to find a local programme amid all the repeats, soaps, national plays — that always seem to be police dramas, spattered with violence and blood — and all the endless, boring low-quality reality shows. Much local programming has been of a very high quality and it has helped to vary and improve our overall television offering in the Province.

There is a lot that I could say about television advertising, but I will not digress too much into that minefield, except to ask whether advertisers are aware of the fact that it is extremely irritating to the viewer to have those advertisements blasted out at much higher decibels than the programme proceeding them. It is also extremely annoying that some advertisements have no demarcation from the programme that they are interrupting, which can make it hard to follow what is going on.

Cutting regional news and current affairs programmes from nine hours a week to just five and a half hours is a backward step, and most definitely a step in the wrong direction. It will see the loss of what I refer to as the soft-news programmes, which contain the type of positive, engaging local news items that help to build up a real sense of community cohesion.

Mr Deputy Speaker, it is the sort of programme that the Assembly could benefit from. Rather than having the hard news where the journalist stands outside and the interviewee is windswept, we could have media interviews in the beautiful television studio and suite downstairs and develop the type of news that would show the Assembly in a more positive light than is sometimes the case. I also feel that this is the wrong time to be making such cuts. This is precisely the time for local programmers to be given more flexibility, especially on news and current affairs, so that we can help people to engage more with the political process. Here I mean "political" with a small p and, perhaps, with a large P.

Local television has an important role to play in building a positive awareness of the democratic possibilities that devolution offers. That is never more

necessary now than after the recent disgraceful 22-week gap in Executive meetings.

I appeal to UTV to consider the retrograde step that it is contemplating. Just because one can do something does not mean that one should do it; just because Ofcom may allow UTV some flexibility in making cuts in local news and current affairs broadcasting does not mean that it should have to do that. I also counsel UTV to look carefully at the rates of advertising revenue that will be attracted during the well-watched programmes, and consider the overall position when that is set against some of the proposals that it has been making.

All in all, I support the motion, although with the earlier reservations that I pointed out.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am sure that the media will rush to take up the Member's suggestions.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirim inniu le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo, agus gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltaí a thug go dtí an Tionól inniu é.

While Ken Robinson was speaking, it flashed across my imagination that maybe we should redesign the 'Stormont Live' studio for a new series and perhaps call it, 'I'm an MLA... Get Me Into There!'.

The chances are that most Members outside the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure may have been less aware of Ofcom's proposals for a decrease in the public-service obligations of UTV had it not been for UTV itself.

Many people believe that UTV has used the Ofcom proposals as an opportunity to launch a pre-emptive strike and to wield the axe on its public-service schedule and some of the more experienced staff who deliver it. Of course, UTV may deny that, but many are convinced that the fact that the UTV cuts were announced at the same time as the Ofcom proposals was more than mere coincidence. If those people are right in their belief, UTV has shown a blatant disregard for the integrity of the Ofcom consultation process and, worse still, for the views of the public here. I agree with the motion that UTV should suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of the consultation process and the identification of a future model of public-service broadcasting for Northern Ireland. I also agree that the Ofcom consultation period should be extended for a further three months.

UTV has told us that it intends to deliver more current affairs coverage next year than it has done this year, and that the type and the output will change. It has told us that there will be more relevant political, cultural and social coverage; that it will deliver the key stories of the day in more detail; that there will be more current affairs programmes on UTV in 2009 and

more UTV programmes at peak times. UTV will do all that while shedding some of its most experienced, creative and expert staff. To me, the equation does not add up. How can UTV produce more and better programmes with fewer experienced and expert staff? The simple answer is that it cannot and will not.

The UTV equation delivers savings for the commercial company and, in my view, losses as regards the quality of public service that it provides. In future, UTV's public-service broadcasting standards will not be the same as they have been in the past. UTV will certainly look after itself, but the question arises: who will look after the public? The UTV pun that the "U" in UTV equals "you" will ring a little hollow in those circumstances, unless UTV waits to hear what the people of Northern Ireland think before it wields the axe.

Ofcom's own research shows clearly that the public demand high-quality competition to the BBC. In other words, the higher the quality of public-service output from UTV, the higher the standard that BBC Northern Ireland is likely to reach and the greater the choice available to the public. The danger is that Ofcom's proposals for the reduction of UTV news output from five hours and 20 minutes to four hours a week, and of non-news output from three hours to one and a half hours, will help to hollow out the kernel of public-service broadcasting in UTV and leave the public with only a shell.

UTV's argument that post-conflict Northern Ireland does not need the type and amount of news coverage that it did during the Troubles is not convincing. In fact, with the return of devolution, there is more news of a wider and more varied nature. Previous emphasis on conflict has been replaced by greater emphasis on the bread-and-butter issues, which require as much, if not more, reportage.

A model of funding for public-service broadcasting is needed, perhaps based on the Irish Language Broadcast Fund model, which would give Northern Ireland its fair share of public-service cake and underpin indigenous language broadcasting.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr D Bradley:** UTV should wait and consider such a model. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McCausland:** Over the past 30 or 40 years and throughout the course of the Troubles, we in Northern Ireland have been well served by the high quality of the current affairs programmes that have been produced by local television companies.

All of us can think of many very good, high-quality, investigative programmes that brought information to light. Those programmes provided high-quality analysis, and we have been well served in that respect. That is

important, because although new sectors are emerging in the media, the power, importance and influence of television in our society cannot be underestimated.

Current affairs will evolve as society changes. The previous Member who spoke mentioned that we are in a post-conflict situation, which means that there will be a difference in the nature of the programmes produced and the subjects investigated. Nevertheless, the ethos, character and quality of current affairs programming are important and should not be diminished.

I am disappointed that UTV has announced cutbacks at such an early stage, because the Ofcom consultation is nearing completion. The consultation period has been too short and should have been extended — and it is concerning that the Ofcom representative Denis Wolinski told the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that the consultation had received few responses. As that consultation is still going, and, therefore, its results have yet to be analysed, it is premature in the extreme for UTV to start making cutbacks. The cutbacks, which would remove some of the most experienced members of staff at UTV, should be postponed until the consultation has been completed.

The DUP and the Committee have held meetings with UTV. At both meetings, I listened to the presentations from UTV very carefully, but I was not convinced by reasons given for the cutbacks. I was also not convinced that the quality and character of current affairs broadcasting by UTV would be preserved. In one meeting, I said that UTV was "dumbing down" its format, which drew criticism from the UTV representative who suggested that such a remark was journalese. However, unless we are very careful, that is what could happen.

Although current affairs broadcasting will change, its ethos, character and quality must be preserved. As politicians, we are very familiar with current affairs — it is one aspect of television production that Northern Ireland is very familiar with. The investigative nature of those productions is important. Although the nature of the investigative work may change due to changes in our society, the need for it still stands. I am concerned that we will lose out, as regards the quality of UTV broadcasting of current affairs, as a result of the changes.

UTV and the BBC are the two main broadcasters in Northern Ireland; both make local productions and provide a local perspective. It is important that there is competition, so that we do not end up in a situation where current affairs productions are dominated by one provider — the BBC — and where we lose the competition and variety of perspective that UTV provides. Therefore, I support the motion.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When discussing a commercial operator such as UTV, we should not be surprised that loyalty to the workers and the community is not present — such

a sentiment is not in the nature of commercial operators. Clearly, we do not have any great commercial pull that would stop UTV from leaving here tomorrow, if it decided to do so.

I read a report on commercial television and public-service broadcasting in Scotland, which contains some interesting facts that we could compare with our situation.

Scottish viewers watch more television than anyone else on any other part of these islands. Scottish people listen to local radio a great deal, but not so much to BBC radio. Almost twice as many of them buy daily newspapers than people from elsewhere.

The £1.5 billion that is generated from advertising depends largely on press and radio advertising, yet television advertising generated only £24 million of regional spend in Scotland in 2007. Television advertising is very expensive for Scotland and for us. In America, 32% of the advertising budget is spent on regional advertising, whereas, in Scotland, only 8.5% of the budget is spent on advertising.

1.30 pm

I thank Barry McElduff for proposing the motion. He said that the major concern is how our society is portrayed. Therefore, we need plenty of good television, and we need it to portray accurately what we are here. He suggested that Irish-language funded programming is a model of how local broadcasting could be independent of organisations such as UTV. We could consider that issue, and it could be coupled with a call for the establishment of a local broadcasting commission, which another Member mentioned.

All Members who contributed to the debate said that if there were a diminution in UTV's service, or, if it were to go completely, the major negative would be that competition would end and the BBC would have the monopoly, which it could possibly use to its advantage. Indeed, it would mean that the BBC would have no other broadcaster at which to look over its shoulder.

In a way, we are lucky that, up here, we have general access to RTÉ programmes. During Ofcom's deliberations about our requirements, I asked whether it used that access as a means of assessing how much we could do without. Ofcom is moving towards the possibility of our having an all-Ireland television broadcaster, with each region—north, south, east and west—getting its fair share.

However, the nub of our objection is UTV's proposal to axe so many jobs held by people who have been loyal to them for many years, through good times and bad. It is amazing that the organisation can be so insensitive as to issue the threat a couple of months before Christmas, but it is a measure of the kind of people with whom we are dealing. In fact, we should not be disappointed or surprised if the broadcaster

eventually walks away altogether. Indeed, Ofcom has stated that such a situation is not entirely impossible. Therefore, Ofcom must be careful when dealing with those people, because they keep an axe hanging over people's heads. It is a very difficult situation, because the broadcaster may simply decide that it can do without having the licence.

All party leaders signed a letter addressed to UTV's management, and, apart from the fact that it will use up a couple of my allotted minutes, Members may be interested in hearing what it says. The letter states:

"As political leaders we recognise the need for a robust and diverse media in Northern Ireland. It can be a vehicle for reflection, communication, investigation and analysis and has provided, in its different forms, a valuable role here over many turbulent years and can provide a similar role in years to come.

Television has contributed greatly in this regard with a strong independent sector competing with the BBC."

The issue of competition continually comes up, and it is vital.

The letter continues:

"Recently we have learned of plans by UTV in Northern Ireland to radically cutback its workforce on the back of Ofcom proposals which may allow the broadcaster to reduce some of its programming. These are minimum proposals which Ofcom has put out for consultation.

However UTV is moving ahead with its cutbacks before the consultation has ended. The process may in fact mean that the cutbacks will have gone through before any meaningful discussions conclude.

We fully understand the economic pressures UTV finds itself under but we think it reasonable that UTV should halt its plans to allow for those discussions to go ahead and also for the completion of the Ofcom consultation and final report."

That sums up what we all think.

David McNarry was churlish in his attitude to Irish-medium output. We should all welcome everything that is local, whatever it is — it promotes this place, with all its cultural and sporting diversity.

Pat Ramsey mentioned competition, as did everyone else who contributed to the debate. Naomi Long highlighted the poor timing of UTV's decision.

I was not going to say this, but Jim Shannon spoke in Ulster Scots at the beginning of his speech, and, from that point, Members on these Benches debated among themselves about whether he continued to speak in Ulster Scots. *[Laughter.]*

Fair play to Jim — I hope that we hear more Ulster Scots spoken, as opposed to speaking about it. Jim acknowledged that the BBC is increasing its local output, and I hope that that is not adversely affected by UTV's downsizing. We can all see the danger of that.

Raymond McCartney referred to the presentation from the trade unions to the Committee for Culture.

Arts and Leisure, and he reiterated our total support for the workers.

As I mentioned earlier, Ken Robinson spoke of the possibility of setting up a local broadcasting commission, which would be an excellent move.

Dominic Bradley condemned UTV's precipitous plan to lose some of its most talented and popular staff. The names of presenters who are synonymous with the programmes that they present have been mentioned. We tend to refer to a programme by the name of its presenter, and switch on the television to see whoever, rather than whatever.

Nelson McCausland spoke of how current-affairs journalists — UTV journalists among them — worked through the worst of times. He implied that UTV are saying that — as in the old phrase — the Troubles are past, and God has forgotten.

I conclude by paying tribute to one of UTV's greatest current assets: Eoghan Quigg from Dungiven.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am surprised that the Member has not mentioned Eoghan Quigg before now.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly expresses concern at Ofcom's proposals for a diminution in the public service obligations of UTV through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes: calls on Ofcom to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and programming: calls for the extension of Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation period for a further three months: and further calls on UTV to suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of this consultation process, and following meaningful consultation and negotiations with the trade unions representing staff at UTV.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Education Welfare Officers

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr McCallister:** I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the vital work undertaken by education welfare officers in supporting children, families and schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to take all necessary steps to resolve the ongoing pay dispute as a matter of urgency.

The dispute between education welfare officers and their employers, the education and library boards, is long running. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), which represents the education welfare officers, has negotiated a settlement with the education and library boards, which is being voted on by its members. I hope that the dispute is about to end, and that this debate will help to focus minds.

The dispute has been ongoing for six years. Although the employers are the education and library boards, why has the Department of Education allowed the dispute to go on for so long without intervening?

Education welfare officers do an important job. Their main preoccupation is with attendance, but they are involved with many other children's issues. Child protection, child behaviour in schools, suspensions, expulsions, child employment and special educational needs also come under their remit. Their task is to resolve issues and remove barriers that prevent children from meeting their educational potential.

On Tuesday 18 November, we debated the issue of school-leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). We discussed how an impact could be made on the one in 10 16- to 19-year-olds who are in that category. Education welfare officers play an important role in ensuring that children get the level of education to potentially lift them out of the NEET category.

Schools have their own pastoral arrangements, and teachers, in addition to their instructional responsibilities, also deal with the welfare needs of their pupils. Teachers are at the day-to-day front line of children's welfare issues, but, when problems reach a magnitude that can no longer be adequately dealt with at school, individual pupils are referred to educational welfare specialists, who work full time to resolve the problems that stand between individual pupils and their ability to benefit from their schooling. Education welfare officers deal with the more difficult and often more deep-seated