SUBMISSION FROM DR DAVID RUSHTON

Addressing the Scotland Bill consultation

What is your view on the Scottish Government’s call for more influence in the regulation of the reserved matter of broadcasting? How might such increased influence advantage or disadvantage Scotland (a) culturally and (b) economically?

The published proposal amounts to a veto over policies and ideas made from Westminster. They fail to recognize that because Scotland is relatively remote geographically from mainland Europe and that for the most part the population is spread out there is a great abundance of the electromagnetic spectrum on which to deliver TV (and other wireless services). Because there is considerable restriction on spectrum use in southern and eastern England there is a tendency for UK service design and engineering to address delivery on the basis of this limitation.

Scotland has sufficient spectrum in the TV bands to have an extra public service multiplex (mux) offering three or more video channels to virtually all households. Using signal compressions likely to be introduced in future the number of TV channels uniquely available to Scotland could be greater than ten. The introduction of this so called additional Scottish spectrum or ‘seventh mux’ needs to be the core of the Scottish argument on broadcasting. ‘Give us the railways and we’ll build the carriages.’

The case for securing the best utilization of spectrum in Scotland can already be made within the terms of Ofcom’s responsibilities set out in the 2003 Communication Act, in which they are to ensure that spectrum is used effectively.

There are already a number of services that those living in Scotland would like to deliver including local TV that should include rural as well as urban households as well as a new national public service channel advocated by the Scottish Broadcasting Committee.

It seems to me that the incremental approach being advocated in draft for the Scotland Bill is too timorous in address a veto of Westminster’s decisions in Scotland. The reality has always been that spectrum can only be used where it is transmitted and that terrestrial use of spectrum is aggregated to provide regional and national services. Where spectrum is demonstrably not available to support UK wide services its use can effectively be secured by those within reach of its signal.

This ‘most efficient use of spectrum’ is not a Scottish or a political argument but a local and pragmatic argument. The Scottish Government are best placed to carry forward a plan for spectrum use where this is only available in Scotland since it is only services on a local or on an aggregated within Scotland that this spectrum can serve. What is wrong with current thinking is that this spectrum can be ignored because there is scarcity and lack of similar availability elsewhere.
Studies carried out for Ofcom and Digital Britain have been supplied with evidence over five years stressing the value to Scotland of programme making being allowed to flourish across the nation. Economically there is too great a concentration on production focused through Glasgow (according to Scottish Enterprise figures, 95% of programme spending). This is packaged mostly for the UK market when less centralized and complimentary form of distribution within Scotland can support partnerships on a smaller than UK scale and provide a richer portrayal of the diversity of Scotland’s cultures.

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