



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 26 February 2026

Session 6



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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2026, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Angus Robertson (Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 26 February 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 08:32]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2026 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. The fact that this is our last public session before dissolution will be of interest to committee members.

Our first agenda item is a decision on taking in private future consideration of the draft report on our inquiry on transparency of intergovernmental activity and the implications for parliamentary scrutiny, the draft report on our inquiry on Scottish broadcasting and the draft legacy report. Do members agree to consider those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Broadcasting

08:32

The Convener: Our second agenda item is an evidence session on our inquiry on Scottish broadcasting. We welcome to the committee Angus Robertson, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture; and, from the Scottish Government, Jamie MacDougall, who is deputy director of culture and historic environment, and Emily Green, who is head of screen, broadcasting and print media. A warm welcome to you all. I believe that you have a brief opening statement for us, cabinet secretary.

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the broadcasting landscape in Scotland. For clarity, I should put on the record that I am a broadcaster by profession—I was a reporter for the BBC for the best part of a decade, and I was a news editor for the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation.

As the committee knows, broadcasting is a reserved matter. I am absolutely clear that that should not be the case. Broadcasting must be devolved, so that it can fully meet the needs of our audiences and creative industries.

This is a critical moment for broadcasting, particularly with the generational opportunity for change that the BBC charter review presents. It is vital that the Scottish Government takes this opportunity to ensure that the interests of Scottish audiences and creative professionals are reflected.

I have made clear that the Scottish Government is a strong supporter of the BBC in its delivery of its public service obligations. However, changes must be made, and I will ensure that our engagement with the charter review continues to press those points, particularly in relation to meaningful commissioning from Scotland that supports creative professionals who live and work here; sustainable, high-quality news provision that meets the needs of audiences across Scotland; and more robust regulation by Ofcom to ensure that vital public service obligations are met not only in letter but in spirit.

I am also clear that Gaelic must be better reflected in coverage. Gaelic broadcasting does not currently receive the recognition that it deserves, which is reflected in its omission from the terms of reference for the charter review, despite the Scottish Government advocating for its inclusion.

Beyond the charter review, adequate news coverage is a priority for us. Audiences in Scotland

are interested in news that reflects and represents them. In response to Ofcom's recent consultation on STV's proposed changes to its news provision, we expressed our concerns in the strongest terms. There is no justification for the change, which will negatively impact audiences in the north of Scotland. It is an unnecessary erosion of news provision and I am deeply concerned that it is part of a broader trend, particularly following the BBC's recent reduction of news and current affairs programming hours from 250 to 125 a year. Audiences in Scotland must be able to access a plurality of news that is duly accurate, duly impartial and trusted. It is essential that public service news providers meet their core obligations in a meaningful way and ensure that coverage accurately reflects Scotland's interests.

Alongside those issues, United Kingdom network news continues to fall short in adequately and accurately reflecting the UK's devolved landscape. Too often, stories that have substantial relevance to Scotland are overlooked, inaccurately framed or incorporated only as an afterthought in UK-wide coverage. Improving representation is not simply a matter of fairness; it is a core requirement of public service broadcasting. Audiences in Scotland must be able to rely on UK network news to give them a full, balanced and accurate account of the issues that affect them.

Another key focus is the proposed switch-off of digital terrestrial television services. Last month, I wrote to the UK Government to urge it to consider the impact of the prospective switch-off on vulnerable groups. I specifically raised the issue of potential health and wellbeing impacts if households lose access to the television services on which they rely.

I know that the committee is keen to discuss the skills landscape. A skilled workforce is vital to a sustainable screen sector. Screen Scotland supports a wide range of training initiatives for people at all stages of their careers, and skills development is baked into many of its funding streams. However, broadcasters must play their part. I remain deeply disappointed that the BBC cancelled "River City", which resulted in the loss of associated training programmes. Although I understand that the BBC has committed to providing training elsewhere, I urge the BBC—and other public service broadcasters—to consider whether it could do more to support the next generation of Scottish talent and further develop the skills of those who already work in the screen industry.

I want to emphasise that Scotland's broadcasting landscape is not only central to our democracy and cultural identity; it is a major driver of our creative economy. PSBs play an indispensable role in sustaining jobs, supporting

independent production companies, investing in skills and projecting Scotland's culture, languages and talent to audiences at home and globally.

I am happy to discuss any of those matters in more detail.

The Convener: I have a question about your submission to the committee, in which you acknowledge that, although broadcasting is a reserved matter, the Parliament and the Government have a role in charter renewal scrutiny. You say:

"we work constructively within that framework to ensure that Scottish audiences' needs are fully understood, and we will continue to advocate as strongly as possible for Scotland's interests in all our engagement with the UK Government, Ofcom, the PSBs, and others."

Will you give an example of where that advocacy has taken place? You mentioned that Gaelic had not been supported. Is there a genuine relationship with broadcasters on the matter and are Scotland's views, as expressed by the Government, heard on it?

Angus Robertson: I have regular and open dialogue with the broadcasting and screen sector. It is an area that I am particularly interested in, because the direction of travel in that area is essentially positive. Things are significantly better in Scotland than they were even in recent decades, which is good. At the same time, there are a number of things that should give us reason to seek to make change, because they inhibit the potential for growth of public service operations in Scotland. As a consequence, we are not fulfilling our cultural and economic potential.

I regularly meet the BBC, Ofcom and people in the sector more generally. The last time that I was in London, I met Ian Murray, the Minister of State for Creative Industries, Media and Arts, and we discussed those issues. We had a lot in common in wanting success for the creative industries, which we talked about. However, when it came to charter renewal, that was a very good—or bad—example of the difference between being heard and things being acted on.

I have repeatedly given evidence to the committee about a change in atmospherics. It is no longer a new Government, but the current UK Government came into office saying that it wanted a reset with the devolved Governments and the European Union. It repeated often, "We want to discuss. We want to listen. We want to hear." There are formal invitations to share views on, for example, the terms of reference for BBC charter renewal. However, on that, I asked a simple question: could Ian Murray or his officials point out to me anything from the Scottish Government's submission on the terms of reference for the BBC

charter renewal that had been included? Answer there came none.

That is the difference between saying that one wants to co-operate and doing so. There are other examples of what is not included, but there is no parity of esteem between the indigenous languages of Wales and Scotland in the terms of reference. That is to the detriment of Gaelic speakers in Scotland and all of us who do not speak the language but wish it to be properly served. I totally understand why Welsh is included—as it should be—but the suggestion that the Scottish Government made that Gaelic should be included was not adopted.

I will continue to encourage colleagues in the UK Government to take on board such suggestions. We have shared with the committee our priorities. It is public access information and, to be frank, it is beyond me why one would not want to include sensible suggestions.

The Convener: By way of example, I will talk about an experience that I had on Tuesday morning when driving here and listening to an item on “Woman’s Hour” on Radio 4 about the Labour Government’s announcements of support for additional support needs. Then, 53 minutes in, the programme mentioned that the changes would be relevant to England only. The other thing that I find incredible is that, although the Labour Government is implementing almost the same processes as those that we have had in Scotland for a number of years with integrated support plans for young people, the programme did not examine Scotland’s experience and the lessons from that at all.

I give that example because I wonder whether you feel, as I do, that, although we concentrate on BBC Scotland and the output from Scotland, the BBC as a whole does not represent what happens in the devolved nations.

Angus Robertson: I agree with you. There is a systemic problem, and I find it frustrating that the issues have been raised repeatedly.

You might be aware that, recently, the BBC network managed to misreport the headline announcements from the Scottish Government budget. That was pointed out to the BBC, but it did not correct it on air. It then suggested that it would be difficult to correct it in the programme the next day, until I said that I would escalate the matter to the director general of the BBC. Then, I was informed that the BBC would correct the error the next day. That was on the day of the Scottish Government budget. The next morning, the BBC “Today” programme did not manage to mention the Scottish Government budget once in three hours of headlines and discussion.

When I raised that with Tim Davie, he agreed that the matter was so serious that I should speak with the head of news and the editor of the programme, who conceded that both examples were failures on their part. I appreciated their candour and understanding that that was a particularly egregious example of what you pointed out, convener.

All of that was the subject of the King report—which was written a long time ago—and it all reflects the inability of the BBC, and indeed others, to report the realities of devolution and the asymmetrical nature of Governments in the UK. Commitments have been received time and again that the BBC takes that seriously and is doing the best that it can.

08:45

Convener, you gave an example from “Woman’s Hour”. This morning, the “Today” programme again managed to report on student loans at length without pointing out, at any point, that that was only relevant in one part of the United Kingdom.

The BBC has a systemic problem in its news coverage in relation to commission and omission. It has guidelines but is not fulfilling them. We have had commitments that the BBC will be sorting that out but, to be absolutely frank, I do not think that it is doing so at all. That is another reason why broadcasting should be devolved. The BBC and others think that they can get away with that, frankly. It is actually a matter of misleading licence fee payers in Scotland by misreporting or not reporting things that should be accurately reported by a public service broadcaster. That is not good enough and it must change.

The Convener: I now move to questions from the committee.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Cabinet secretary, I am heartened to hear what you have said about broadcasting. You are quite right, by the way, in saying that we have a special interest in the skills pipeline and in the general skills ecosystem for broadcast in Scotland. I am heartened to hear you say that things have gotten better in recent decades.

You then went on to talk about the things that were deficient. What are the things that are going better? I think that we should hear that story.

Angus Robertson: Thanks for the opportunity to talk about that.

If we were meeting 10 or 20 years ago, a lot of the discourse about the screen sector in general would be about the absence of studios, the absence of significant commissions for network and the absence of job opportunities. If you wanted

to get on and be successful in film or television, you had to leave Scotland. We had a very underdeveloped screen and television sector in Scotland—which, incidentally, would also have been the case in Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions.

Since then, for a number of different reasons—a bit of push and a bit of pull, externally and internally, from within the sector—that has begun to change. As we know, measures have been introduced to try to make public service broadcasters commission more from outside London and the south-east of England. There has been significant success with that, although there is more to do. Studios have opened in Scotland, and repeat series as well as big-budget films have been commissioned, which has helped the system across the piece to grow.

We are now approaching the point of the screen sector becoming a billion-pound annual industry in Scotland. That is a success by any measure, compared with where we were. However, I think that the committee has received evidence from the likes of Screen Scotland and trade unions and, when one looks below that headline success, we can see that there are very different realities for different parts of the film and television sector. We need to be cognisant of that and to intervene, where we can, to ensure that, while the general direction of travel is welcome, those other challenges are dealt with.

Stephen Kerr: Are you thinking about any group specifically? The group that I have in mind—I do not expect you to read my mind, cabinet secretary—is independent producers and freelancers who, in the evidence that we have heard, seemed to report something quite different in relation to their experience: a lot of frustration. What would you say to them?

Angus Robertson: First, I acknowledge the reality in which they find themselves. In effect, what is happening is that significant commissioning is taking place at the highest end of television and production—

Stephen Kerr: Big-scale programmes—

Angus Robertson: Indeed, we can point to many big-scale, award-winning television programmes, across different genres, that were made in Scotland, which is tremendous. We can also point to big-budget films, which, again, is tremendous. However, that has squeezed the work that is available to independent producers.

Secondly, we should observe that that is happening at a time when the screen sector is beginning to grow, so we have more independent producers. That is why Scotland-based commissioning is so important, because decision

makers then understand that there are independent producers in Scotland who can produce fantastic products. However, there is a squeeze there, as there is elsewhere. Indeed, it is not just a Scottish or even a UK phenomenon; a lot of that has to do with the arrival of streamers and what they are commissioning.

At the same time, there are pressures on really important public service commissioners such as the BBC, Channel 4 and others. I assume that you have heard that the BBC is having to look very closely at its operating model and how it still commissions at scale. However, what really matters for Scotland plc or Scottish screen plc is that we try to continue to make it as attractive as we possibly can for our domestic producers to grow talent and companies so that they can begin to do things at bigger scale, because commissioners will hand over very expensive projects only to companies that have a track record and the capacity to deliver.

One of the other things that we can point to in recent years is award-winning production companies that have produced fantastic film and television products. However, there is a fragility at present because of the countervailing forces that I have described. That is why it is important to help especially the public service broadcasters who have a foundational commissioning role so that they can continue to commission in the nations and regions, and why I have had a heightened degree of concern about the fact that, where there are guardrails to ensure that commissioning happens outside London and the south-east of England—I am talking specifically about the likes of Ofcom in that respect—they are, sadly too often, observed by the letter and not the spirit of their intended use.

That should concern all of us. I do not think that any of that is a party-political matter. We want the film and television sector in Scotland to have a fair cut of the pie of work to ensure that the sector is successful. There are concerns about workarounds—I am sure that members of the committee will have heard the term “shift and lift” previously—and about companies that are not based here applying to do projects here under quotas because their claim to being Scotland based or having a significant footprint here is not the reality, when one looks a bit closer.

It is really important that Ofcom polices that in a meaningful way and that public service broadcasters live up to their obligations. Recently, I expressed my disappointment about Channel 4’s resistance to updating safeguards for production in the nations and regions, especially given that the channel was one of the first to take nations and regions seriously.

We have to keep things on track. Mr Kerr's question was absolutely right—the picture is mixed, but we have to keep the general trend heading in the right direction.

Stephen Kerr: The problem is that public service broadcasters are drawn to big-budget productions. They feel that they are in a competition with streamers for viewers and are therefore drawn to such productions, which creates a squeeze elsewhere.

You mentioned a lot of things that raise questions, which I am sure that colleagues will ask. I am always interested to hear about your experiences with Ofcom. It gave evidence to this committee in relation to STV. Regarding the old Grampian region and STV's proposed cuts to news production in the north, I was astonished that Ofcom seemed to prejudge the issue by agreeing with STV's premise that there was a need to rationalise its services out of Aberdeen. What was your reaction to that? Ofcom did not seem to be waiting for the evidence; in effect, it had already gone ahead and given STV the green light.

Angus Robertson: I often have the feeling that Ofcom wants to play a key role but does not make full use of the powers at its disposal. That was definitely the case with STV, because Ofcom knew that something had to happen because what was proposed was not acceptable. However, it was enough for Ofcom that STV made just a few changes to the plan. There are other such cases. A very high-profile case was raised in relation to a television production in Scotland and how many people from here were working on it, and Ofcom was involved with that. I think that Ofcom intends to do right, but I am not entirely sure why it is reluctant to be more decisive, because it should be.

Stephen Kerr: One of the things that Ofcom representatives told us was that they felt that they had a responsibility to safeguard the profitability of licence holders. It was really odd to hear them say that.

Angus Robertson: I am not here to represent STV, but I have met its executives, and I have heard them lay out their case—because they are a commercial organisation—for why they need to make such changes.

Ultimately, there has to be a balancing act. Any fair-minded person would concede that a commercial organisation must balance its commercial interests with its public service obligations, which is where Ofcom, at times, needs to adjudicate.

Stephen Kerr: In other words, STV had two licences, but one of them has effectively gone—it has basically merged them. Ofcom felt that it had

to do that, and very early in the process it was saying, "Yes, we accept all that." It seems very odd—it just renewed one of the licences.

Angus Robertson: Your observations are entirely fair. I say that as somebody who lived in Aberdeen for four years and represented a parliamentary constituency in the north-east of Scotland for 16 years.

Historically, the relationship with Grampian Television was strong. People in that area felt that Grampian Television was linked to their community and to having news from their part of Scotland. People there are right to feel that the provision of public service broadcasting, particularly in the context of news, has been denuded. At what point do the holders of the powers to intervene say, "This far and no further"?

Stephen Kerr: Do the licence terms mean anything or not?

Angus Robertson: Indeed—I agree with Mr Kerr.

09:00

Stephen Kerr: I have other questions that I would have liked to ask, but time is probably against us. I would have liked to ask you about the BBC Scotland channel and the charter renewal—maybe we will come back to those issues.

However, I have a final question about something that intrigued me, and I am sure that you will give me a good answer. How on earth would devolving broadcasting ensure that Scotland will get mentioned on "Woman's Hour" on BBC Radio 4? I do not understand the connection. How would you make that happen?

Angus Robertson: It is a bit of a case of being out of sight, out of mind. Imagine that one is a senior BBC executive who works out of London and, because broadcasting is reserved, regularly gives evidence before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in the House of Commons. That committee does not have a single member from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland sitting on it; it hardly has any members from outside London or the south-east of England.

Stephen Kerr: That is true of the current iteration of the committee, but its membership changes.

Angus Robertson: Of course it changes. However, at the present time, the BBC and broadcasting are reserved and, in a parliamentary context, broadcasters are answerable to a House of Commons committee in which there is literally no lived experience of what broadcasting is like in the nations of the United Kingdom outside England. I have also given a perfect example of

how the UK Government will ignore things, even when they are highlighted to it.

If broadcasting were to be devolved, things would change in the same way as they have changed in areas that are presently devolved. I was joking with a member of this committee in the canteen this morning about the regularity of my attendance at the committee, and I said that, if broadcasting were devolved, the committee would no doubt regularly have BBC decision makers and others in broadcasting in front of it—and rightly so.

I know that Mr Kerr has playfully teed up the idea that this matter relates to “Woman’s Hour” on the BBC, but I hope that he would concede that it is a much broader issue than that. We are talking only about news, but there is a much wider issue of holding BBC decision makers to account in relation to how the BBC as an organisation is organised, its head count and the direction of travel.

Stephen Kerr: I take those points—I may not agree with them, but I take them as valid expressions of your opinion about the need to devolve broadcasting. However, I still do not understand how that would change what you heard on the “Today” programme about student loans, because I do not think that those things are connected. I understand the arguments that you are making about devolving broadcasting, but I do not understand how that connects with “Woman’s Hour” or the “Today” programme. Maybe you were being rhetorical.

Angus Robertson: Is there an automaticity in all those things? No. However, if Government ministers and parliamentarians were to be empowered to have closer and more direct engagement with broadcasting, then public sector broadcasters, instead of sending decision makers up to Edinburgh or Glasgow on day trips, would need to have an altogether different relationship with decision making in Scotland.

At the end of the day, what matters is the question of whether devolving broadcasting would make a difference to listeners and viewers. I believe that it would. If it is true that devolving powers changed things for health, education, justice, transport or the environment—I could go on—then it is also true for broadcasting.

Stephen Kerr: To be fair, BBC Scotland is pretty responsive to the committee and to us as individual committee members.

Angus Robertson: My issue is less about BBC Scotland being responsive or not, where there are issues—and there are some current issues related to BBC Scotland that may come up—but is more about BBC network and the frustration of having meeting after meeting about such issues. I do not know how it operates with other political parties,

but Scottish National Party members of this committee take part in an annual dinner hosted by the BBC at the SNP conference, which I feel is like groundhog day. We sit and raise issue after issue, and we largely get a very sympathetic hearing, with people saying, “That’s fair,” or “There is a balance of things that we need to get right, but that is a fair point,” but people then go away and nothing changes.

Stephen Kerr: I have good news for you. I have attended lots of conferences, and I have never been invited to a dinner by the BBC. You are probably getting special treatment straight off the bat.

Angus Robertson: Mr Kerr looks so disappointed.

Stephen Kerr: I am so disappointed with that—but I was looking for a nice dinner.

I hear your argument, but I still cannot see how devolving broadcasting would change the BBC network, even though I may accept that need for us to hear the BBC clearly saying, “This is about England, not Scotland or Wales,” for instance. I strongly agree with that point, and the BBC needs to communicate that to its wider audience a lot better.

Angus Robertson: Can I give Mr Kerr a specific and last example, if he is coming to the end of what he is saying?

Stephen Kerr: If I can, I will come back to BBC Scotland and BBC charter renewal.

Angus Robertson: Of course.

I was asked by senior BBC news executives how they would know that they were on the right path and were understanding the problem. I said, “The day you stop talking about ‘the Government’.” There are three Governments in the United Kingdom. It is endemic: it is absolutely accepted that saying “the Government” means the United Kingdom Government, while the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government are correctly presented in that way.

As I said to those executives in conversation, that never happens in other European countries with devolution or federalism, because it is automatic, on German public television, to talk about the federal Government, the Bavarian Government or whatever. The BBC cannot get even that most simple of things right. Once you have heard or seen that, you cannot unhear it. Anybody on the committee or anyone watching these proceedings should listen to BBC Radio 4 and the endemic misreporting. It is an issue that has been raised with the BBC, which it says it is taking seriously, but it just cannot get it right.

Stephen Kerr: To be fair to the BBC and other national broadcasters, that is not just a problem in the broadcasting world; it is a general problem. The nature of the devolved arrangements for health and social care, in England or in Scotland, is a much wider problem. Interestingly, although we are on completely different sides of the political argument about the constitutional arrangements for Scotland, we would probably agree here.

I need to hand back to the convener. I have gone on too long.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Kerr.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Good morning. I was starting to think that Stephen Kerr was so close to getting it.

Stephen Kerr: You would be surprised.

Patrick Harvie: Basically, the case that you are making, cabinet secretary, is that, just as the UK does not really perceive itself to be a multinational country, the BBC does not perceive itself to be a multinational broadcaster, and that as the culture at the top of the BBC is not to see itself in that way, that filters down to its output at every level. Is that the basic case that you are making?

Angus Robertson: Ironically, at least formally, the BBC gets it better than some UK Governments have got it, if I can put it that way. It is baked into how the BBC describes its mission. It talks about “nations and regions” and it has made some big decisions about pushing commissioning and head count out of London to Salford. The facility there is amazing, and it is absolutely right and proper that it should be there.

When one speaks with senior decision makers, one hears very plausible declarations that they want to get the matter right. Nobody from the BBC has taken issue with me about the criticism that I am making, Mr Harvie. I have made points about the BBC talking about “the Government” and other issues, and when I have met senior BBC decision makers, none of them has taken issue with those criticisms. They say that it is all part of the process of trying to do it better and that the experience of Covid helped the BBC to understand that there are four national health services in the UK.

Patrick Harvie: If I can cut through it, the case that you are making, if I understand it rightly, is that structural change towards a more decentralised BBC and a role for the devolved institutions in the oversight of broadcasting would fix the issue, rather than warm words and intent.

Angus Robertson: That is it. How many meetings does one want to have in which one has no power over anything and—surprise, surprise—it does not change? That is why decision making needs to move.

Patrick Harvie: That being the case, and acknowledging what you said about your degree of scepticism that Scotland’s voice will be taken account of in processes such as charter renewal, I would still like to have on the record what the Scottish Government’s desired outcome is, even if we are sceptical that it will happen.

When we talk about broadcasting, we still frame it in an out-of-date way, in the way that the Scotland Act 1998 does. That act has a reservation on broadcasting, which covers the Broadcasting Act 1990, the Broadcasting Act 1996 and the BBC. It also has a reservation on, to use the outdated language, “Telecommunications and wireless telegraphy”, which now includes internet services. Some of that has been replaced by the Digital Economy Acts, which were not in place at the time, so were not specifically reserved but are taken to be reserved. It also has a reservation on entertainment, which includes the Video Recordings Act 1984 and the Cinemas Act 1985.

The media landscape that we have now is touched on by a fragmented range of different specific reservations in the Scotland Act 1998. Whatever the outcome of a particular review, are we in danger of still having a fragmented approach to the regulation of the media landscape in the UK as a whole, even if there were a degree of decentralisation of the BBC? In particular, are we missing a trick if we just look at the public service broadcasters in isolation in the way that we did when they were dominant? They are no longer the dominant force in the media landscape. They have to fight against a torrent of dross, artificial intelligence slop, misinformation and conspiracy theory, which will only get worse.

Angus Robertson: I totally agree with Mr Harvie’s characterisation of the fragmented media landscape in the UK. I also agree that there is much that is outdated. However, there is also an inability or difficulty in relation to the fact that the advances in technology are so rapid and the intergenerational gulf in what one sees, consumes and is interested in is so wide but the decision makers tend to come from the older end of the age spectrum rather than being younger people. In fairness, that is a big challenge not just in a Scottish or UK context but internationally.

Younger people, in television terms—again, I am using an outdated term—do not watch a television. They certainly do not watch linear television and—as we know, because Ofcom has reported it and we can all see it—they get most of the content that they view on screens from elsewhere, not from public service broadcasters. That is why the likes of the BBC are making baby steps in having a presence on sites such as YouTube. They realise that you have to go where the audience is going.

Patrick Harvie: When the BBC witnesses were—

Angus Robertson: Sorry—I will just finish the point, Mr Harvie, to perhaps get a bit closer to the question. I have a concern that all of us who have an interest in this area are trying to find ways to regulate and legislate, and understand, something that is moving so much quicker than our ability to do those things.

09:15

Mr Harvie ended his observation by talking about the likes of AI. That is just turbocharging the equivalent of Moore's law in the area of digital, online and screen: what we would traditionally have talked of as television. He is absolutely right to say that we should not lose sight of the fact that the challenge is much bigger than a public service broadcaster, but I will offer one last thought on that. The BBC is the only public service broadcaster for which we pay a licence fee, and we therefore have a particular interest in making sure that that public service broadcaster—which, although it is not as dominant as it was, is still very important—is everything that it could and should be.

Patrick Harvie: When representatives of the BBC were in front of the committee, they mentioned the steps that the BBC was taking to have a big presence on YouTube, for example, to which you referred. I made the case that that is a concern, and that it is not enough to have some reliable, trustworthy and high-quality regulated content on YouTube if it is simply swilling around in the wider context of conspiracy theories, extremism, lies, anti-science propaganda and what-have-you.

Do you share the concern that that approach is taking public service output that is produced in accordance with a public service broadcasting ethos and simply diluting it in an ocean of unregulated content?

Angus Robertson: I very much hope not. In that online space, there are many things that are not good, but there is much that is good. People are able to access information in ways that they were never able to in the past—

Patrick Harvie: And disinformation.

Angus Robertson: And disinformation, too, which is concerning. However, there is an argument that to meet the highest standards of public service broadcasting output, it has to be seen where the people are. It is not good enough for decision makers to sit on high and say, "No, no, we insist on there being three or four television channels"—to be frank, that sounds almost North Korean now. The world has changed and we have

to accept and understand that, among the younger demographic in particular, literally nobody is watching linear television. If younger people are not there, but we wish them to be able to access the best of television and information, that is not straightforward, but it is unavoidable. That is where I wish the BBC and others well, because they are looking to try to find ways in which they can get a fair return, protect intellectual property and so on.

Patrick Harvie: Just to tie this off, I have a final question. Would you agree with the argument that, although the Scottish Government can—and in my view, should—continue to make the case for decentralisation of the BBC and for a role in the oversight of broadcasting, the opportunity provided by charter renewal also needs to be taken to make a wider case for a reformed and updated approach to the regulation of the media landscape more generally and for a devolved role within that? It is not enough to see broadcasting in isolation.

Angus Robertson: I totally agree.

Patrick Harvie: Thank you.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I have just a couple of questions. From all the evidence that we have heard, it is clear that what is common to the BBC and other broadcasters is the threat, as it is perceived, from streaming and various other sources, and the fact that a majority of people, when they switch on their TV, now look at YouTube first, rather than a terrestrial channel. It seems to me that broadcasters look through only one end of the telescope—focusing on how they cope with all those threats—rather than considering what their subscribers and customers want, which is a mix of local and national news. That is the sentiment that we have seen in the responses to STV closing down its functions in the north-east and so on.

If broadcasters were to consider what viewers want, surely they would better safeguard their audiences. I am not saying that they should ignore streamers or the various threats that they face, but the idea—although I have got it across quite badly—is that you could establish a cohort of people who are experts in broadcasting, such as the entire production crew, so that if some of the big streamers or companies want to locate a project in Scotland, they have the ready resources to do so. The BBC is best placed to do that, because it is the biggest organisation, but it keeps on chasing the latest thing, rather than rooting itself in what is wanted. You made the point that Gaelic is underfunded, not least compared to the Welsh language service. Surely it would be more productive for the BBC, and broadcasters in

general, to look at what people in Scotland actually want.

Angus Robertson: I totally agree. I am mystified by STV's approach to news, particularly in the north-east, because it is reducing its ability to produce news content and share it. Everybody on the committee knows how important it is for a broadcaster to have an online platform on which people can access its content. We are encouraged to go to iPlayer and STV Player and those are ways in which we increasingly get our news—in an online context. In this case, there appears to be a total lack of application of modern technology to ensure the delivery of news content from the north of Scotland. Surprise, surprise, people in the north of Scotland say that what is proposed will diminish what they are able to see about their part of the world on television. I agree with that.

Rather than looking at the opportunities of perhaps doing something a little bit different, broadcasters focus on threats. For them, financial drivers are their official reasoning. Instead of prioritising the production of content that people want to see by using new technology—there are different ways of using automation in the production of bulletins and longer-form programmes—and then promoting that in particular geographical regions, the priority is to diminish their footprint and produce less. That is completely the wrong way round and seems like a missed opportunity. I strongly encourage broadcasters to make more of that. I agree that people want to see their locality and their news, but we are seeing a retrenchment of that.

Keith Brown: One of my local newspapers advertised for an AI journalist. I am not entirely sure what that is, to be honest. There is very little local content in local newspapers now, and there tends to be a concentration of ownership.

It seems to be the case that we do not have what we should have, in relation to the funding of the Gaelic language, for example. It seems to be the case that network TV at a UK level does not serve us. A lot of the examples that we have heard about, including the convener's, are about a news item that comes on at six o'clock or ten o'clock on the BBC and completely forgets to mention a dramatic situation. There is so much coverage of student loans just now, but virtually none about student loans in Scotland. That is a serious concern, but more fundamental is how they choose which stories to concentrate on.

Yesterday, there was one on recycling rates for food waste, which was actually about England, although it did not say that it was for England. It was a very good piece on Wales that said that every local authority in Wales has a scheme to uplift food waste every week. That is newsworthy,

but that was not the basis for the story. It was about the Barnett formula. The BBC decides what is important in England, and then it might do an add-on. It decided that the UK Government was telling English local authorities that they had to comply with that, and then it covered a bit about Wales. The issue is the basis of the BBC's decisions on what news to report.

The point is not just that, very often, the news is irrelevant to Scotland. It is also that the BBC does not understand that Scotland has a separate NHS—that just does not register with it at all. Frequently, we have headlines here about some development or a crisis in the NHS in England, but the BBC does not cover such issues here. If the BBC is not giving Gaelic broadcasting its place and is not covering Scottish news—sometimes it just blacks out things such as the aircraft carriers, which I have mentioned before—maybe we should pay only part of the licence fee. I say that as somebody who supports the BBC and the licence fee, but we are not getting the same service as the rest of the UK gets. We are being short-changed. I am interested to hear your view on that.

Angus Robertson: That might be among a range of suggestions that would help BBC executives to take the issues a lot more seriously. The BBC knew that it had a problem after the 2014 referendum, and that was from its statistics, which showed that the public in Scotland had the lowest level of trust in BBC news of any part of the UK, with good reason. The learnings from that in the BBC were then applied to how it covered Brexit. It seems to me that there is an awareness that there is a thing—a challenge. I think that we all understand the challenge, which is that there is no BBC England; instead, there is BBC network, which is both BBC England and BBC UK at the same time. That is really confusing for most of the people who work in it, who are not from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, because they have not lived with—

Keith Brown: To your point, cabinet secretary, you have said before that we have been saying this stuff about the BBC for years. I do not attend the BBC dinners at the SNP conference. Stephen Kerr can take my place at those if he is keen to go to the SNP conference.

We have said this stuff for years. I will give two recent examples. You mentioned Ofcom. I raised with BBC Scotland what is I suppose a niche concern that the network news regularly overruns, thereby delaying the Scottish bit of the news. I presume that the news is also delayed in every other part of the UK. The issue was the utterly dismissive way that the people from BBC Scotland dealt with that—they said, "Oh, sometimes, there are scheduling issues." That is not about a big crisis that requires an extended news piece. There

is regular overrunning, and there is a contempt for local—as they see it—news. The issue is the BBC's complete lack of response, which was mirrored by Ofcom.

I raised with Ofcom the BBC's press review programmes—most of the channels have such programmes now, with a token leftist journalist and a token rightist journalist. The issue is that a Scottish person is never involved. The programmes highlight in a very one-sided way the print media and all the stories that it wants to print. There is never a case for Scotland. When I raised that with the woman from Ofcom—I forget her name now; it might be Christina—she absolutely brushed over that with no concern whatsoever. Those programmes usually continue through election periods as well. I noticed that the BBC website has truncated some of its coverage of the newspapers because of the by-election today. It is recognised that a democratic process is going on, and that such coverage might influence that, but the BBC does not do that with its press reviews.

My point is that neither the BBC in Scotland, nor in the UK, nor Ofcom is taking those points seriously. They have had every chance over the years, so perhaps we have to try something different. I argue that the solution is to devolve the BBC. I think that we would suddenly see a lot more attention on the customer in Scotland if it was devolved. That is just my view.

Angus Robertson: Well, we want a window into the mindset, and that issue has been raised again and again. I invite you to listen to the BBC press review, in which—surprise, surprise—every single newspaper that is mentioned almost every single day is published in London, which is just utterly inexplicable.

In a past life, I used to do the press review involving newspaper titles from across Europe but the BBC apparently does not have the wherewithal to include what the headlines might be in the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *Western Mail* or any Scottish newspaper except when, as part of its initiative of trying to get all of this stuff right, it dispatches Nick Robinson to Edinburgh for two days to co-present the "Today" programme. Because he happens, magisterially, to be in Edinburgh, one includes the newspapers that are sitting in front of him today. It is considered to be warranted because he is in Edinburgh as opposed to it being the default position of the British—I stress "British"—Broadcasting Corporation.

09:30

Keith Brown: It is a bit more than that. Look at the sports coverage. Look at the coverage of the six nations. Every programme has to have at least one English representative on it to safeguard the

programme from local natives going over the score. Every programme, regardless of who is playing or who the presenter is, there will always be an English player there to talk about it. With the Nick Robinson stuff and what happened during the referendum, it is like the BBC has to send somebody who will understand and can translate into language that the corporation will understand what is happening in this distant land. It is a mindset that the BBC cannot seem to shake.

Angus Robertson: I agree with Mr Brown. Unfortunately, I do not think that we will have enough time to go through the phenomena that are the BBC's shortcomings. However, the BBC acknowledged that it is a significant-enough problem that it commissioned a major report. To go back to how one might drive some cultural change in the matter, it agrees that two things need to happen.

First, the BBC needs to get designations right in news and all other programmes. Once one has designations right, one will be able to reflect on the fact that the news content is totally out of whack and the fact that something that happens in one of the other nations of the UK passes the bar of being newsworthy only if it has a direct or indirect impact in England. That is surely absolutely and totally unacceptable for any listener or viewer here in Scotland, in Wales or Northern Ireland.

I appreciate that it is very difficult when 85 per cent of the population is of one nation in this multinational state. It is not simple for the BBC and I have said to the corporation that it will not get it right all the time but it has to do a lot better than it currently does. Ultimately, the only solution is for there to be decision making here, in Wales and in Northern Ireland.

The BBC will have to take the issue a lot more seriously because, if it does not, more people will raise questions about why they are paying a licence fee for misinformation. That is what it is. It is misinformation and misreporting.

The Convener: We need to move on.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. The reason why I asked for us to have this broadcasting inquiry—and I think that Stephen Kerr had similar reasons—was that I thought that Scotland's voice was getting lost in broadcasting. I am not talking about the received-pronunciation BBC types that we normally get; I am talking about Scotland's voice in broadcasting.

I used to blame the broadcasters but, after seeing Ofcom come to the committee on a number of occasions, I have to say that it is the problem because it does not use the powers that it has. To be fair to Ofcom, the Media Act 2024 took a lot of powers off it. However, on the whole, we heard the

regulator talking about how it had to help the broadcasters and make sure that they were okay. It said that STV might give back its channel 3 licence—let us not kid ourselves: a channel 3 licence in Scotland is a licence to print money. STV might not be as profitable as it used to be, but it is still a profitable company.

Is Ofcom not the problem? To put it more bluntly, is Ofcom as good as a chocolate fireguard?

Angus Robertson: During this parliamentary session, I have had cause a number of times to say to Ofcom that it should act on what has been happening in the commissioning of screen content in Scotland and in relation to public service broadcasting conditions for news. I do not think that it has used the powers at its disposal to full effect, so I agree with Mr Adam that it should, because if it does not, we will not have the optimal outcome.

George Adam: I am sorry to interrupt, cabinet secretary, but the problem is that, when Ofcom comes here, its mindset seems to be that of the broadcaster and the producer of the content, not the audience. That seems to be the wrong way round, because it has to protect the audience as well.

Angus Robertson: It does, but it is not for me to sit here and speak on behalf of Ofcom.

George Adam: I am just asking for your opinion.

Angus Robertson: My opinion is that Ofcom should use its powers more—for example, on commissioning, the spirit of the outcome of the rules, as well as the letter, is clear to be seen and understood. There has almost been a reticence on the part of Ofcom to use its full powers for fear of I do not know what.

That is why there is a regulator in this space. We need it to do what it should be doing. It has some very competent people working for it who can make that happen.

George Adam: It has a big test.

Angus Robertson: Yes, it does.

George Adam: As the media landscape changes, Ofcom has a massive test coming up with the Sky-ITV merger. The idea of losing the equivalent of Grampian news in Scotland pales into insignificance when you consider the number of licences when the ITV network and Sky merge. Ofcom is going to have to deal with that. Do you think that it is up to the task of dealing with that and, at the same time—to bring it back to Scotland—protecting our broadcasting? It does not have a good track record.

Angus Robertson: That is a fair concern, because the jury is out on what happened on those

two examples when Ofcom had a locus; it should have protected screen commissioning in Scotland, and in the case of public service obligations to news, it should have protected the interests of viewers, but it did not do that to the full. One has to be concerned that it will not use its powers to the full to the advantage of the viewer and, by extension, provision in Scotland. Both those things should matter.

In fairness, I have to concede that Ofcom has to balance quite a number of competing interests, and I think that most fair-minded people would do that. However, you have boiled it down to a very simple point, Mr Adam, which is, should one not be acting in the interest of the viewer and consumer, and not just in the interest of the broadcaster in question? That is a fair concern to highlight.

George Adam: I will make a prediction on the ITV-Sky merger, which is that they will probably get more grief from the Monopolies and Mergers Commission than they do from Ofcom. That is just me being cynical.

On the STV News idea in Aberdeen, STV decided to launch STV Radio nationally at the same time. It is a good thing that we have another commercial radio station, but it did it at the same time that it was cutting news jobs in Aberdeen. STV's pitch was that customers would be able to advertise on breakfast radio in the morning, when people still listen to radio, right through to their flagship show, STV News, at night.

Surely there is madness in the idea that major companies—as you know, as someone who lived and worked in the north-east of Scotland—would think of advertising with the local broadcaster. There would be no point, because their audience is not actually getting anything. STV made a change with Ofcom on the times, and I think that there will be an extra couple of minutes. If Aberdeen Football Club is playing a game in Aberdeen, there is a good chance that football will take that time up, or the local weather will.

STV has said that its decision on the news was a business one, then all of a sudden, it changed things again, after investing millions in a studio up there. Is that not just madness? I just cannot see the logic behind much of it.

I am not asking you to run STV. I am just asking you, as the cabinet secretary for culture, whether there is a better way for one of our major public broadcasters to approach this than what is happening at the moment.

Angus Robertson: There was quite a lot in that question. I should say that I worked for the first public service broadcaster to become digital in Europe, and that change was, at the time, revolutionary. The idea of radio stations editing

tape, literally with a razor blade, for the evening news is still quite recent, or I am that old—whichever way one wants to look at it. However, I started working in broadcasting when that change was happening.

What mystifies me about the situation with STV is that we are discussing the phenomena that Mr Adam has described, instead of whether it is adopting new and transformational technology to provide news content that people in the north-east of Scotland really want to see. That, to me, is the missed opportunity. It did not concentrate on that; instead, it was prepared to concentrate on the bottom line, not on the viewers.

Perhaps Ofcom's arrival after these decisions have been made is part of the problem. A very accelerated change is going on out there, and it is having an impact on broadcasters. The environment in which people consume news—and, indeed, everything else—is changing, and public service broadcasters are taking a differentiated approach to dealing with this new technology. Meanwhile, all the rest of us—some of us on our phones—are having our content provided in an automated way by an algorithm. It is the difference between the analogue world and the digital tech world, and an outdated approach to things is going to lead to the death of services. That is it in a nutshell.

George Adam: Finally, I note that you mentioned radio at one point. The funny thing about radio is that it is an early adopter of different ways of broadcasting—indeed, it now has televisual elements to it, too—and radio in Scotland, even with the difficulties, has been the great survivor. It is managing to be one of the few places where Scotland's voices are still heard. Global pulled out of Scotland in Heart and Capital radio; its audiences tanked; and it came back a couple of years later and has now been broadcasting in Scotland for a while. Clyde 1, which is owned by Bauer, is a phenomenon, although the football traffic might have helped with that one, right enough. I know that Radio Scotland is still struggling, which is why it has a new broom going through it as we speak, but a lot of its audience comes from football traffic, too.

Radio might be doing well, cabinet secretary, but the question is: how do we protect what we have? Radio Scotland is moving in a certain direction; people have found that difficult, because some favourites are no longer there, and they are questioning whether that is the way forward and whether it is going down a more commercial route. At the same time, there are some very successful Scottish commercial stations, which have advertising and which are still moving forward—they have adopted the new digital realm. In fact, Clyde 1 has even moved back to Glasgow from

Clydebank after about 30 years. How do we protect radio broadcasting in Scotland?

Angus Robertson: First of all, we need to appreciate how good it is. Mr Adam has pointed to a number of top-quality aspects of both commercial and public service radio. I would say that it is more than top quality; indeed, I have said so to Hayley Valentine and Tim Davie. On a Saturday, BBC Radio Scotland's sports coverage, from "Off the Ball" to "Open All Mics", is world class. I know of no other national broadcaster that does what BBC Scotland does in covering the major league, and others, at the same time—and literally with open mics. I have not heard of that happening in any other country.

George Adam: And it does it on both television and radio.

09:45

Angus Robertson: Indeed. I know that, for people who are not sports fans, it probably does not mean much to point all this out but, for those who do appreciate sport, the first thing to realise is that not just football but Saturday afternoon sport in general on BBC Scotland—and on its commercial competition—is world class.

One of the challenges that BBC Scotland faces is that it is very unusual. I was joking about North Korea earlier, but very few countries have one channel as the public service radio station—and that is what BBC Scotland is. Of course, it has BBC Radio nan Gàidheal for Gaelic listeners, but with regard to its English provision, it has one channel on which it has to accommodate all the different listening interests—spoken word, music, sport and so on. One of the things that BBC Scotland wants to do better is to cross-promote so that someone who turns on the radio on a Saturday afternoon—say, a sports fan who does not listen to Radio Scotland at any other point in the week—realises that, for example, Ricky Ross has a fantastic music programme. I am sure that the commercial stations are thinking likewise. How do they ensure that people who tune in because the sport is amazing stay for the rest of the output?

That is where, as you have highlighted, BBC Scotland has been making some scheduling changes. The move has caused some concern in the music sector, and I have met the BBC to talk about the matter, because I do not think that it is in anybody's interests for such an important public service radio broadcaster to diminish, or cause people to believe that there has been a diminution in, the opportunity to showcase emerging talent in Scotland. If it is to be Scotland's national radio station, it has an important obligation—and opportunity—to do that.

I talked to Hayley Valentine about this, and she agreed that BBC Scotland plays an important role in showcasing talent and gave me a commitment that that would continue to be so. Indeed, there might well be more opportunities arising from better cross-promotion to ensure that things that might traditionally be on very late in the evening—programmes featuring musician of the week, album of the week, breakthrough artists or whatever—can be heard by all those people who might not hear them when they tune in at other points in the week.

Radio always has to evolve, but I am very confident, given how good public and private radio is in Scotland, that it will go from strength to strength. We have not even talked about news on radio, but I would observe that, in an environment where we work cheek by jowl with journalists, I have noticed that there are more radio journalists than was the case 10 or 20 years ago covering news from here. I know that there are countervailing pressures in other parts of the country where there is less local news or local news provision, and that is a concern. Ending where I started, though, I think that we just need to appreciate how good radio is in Scotland, and the strong listening figures support that.

George Adam: Thank you.

The Convener: Mr Bibby, did you want to come in?

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): My questions have been covered, convener.

The Convener: In that case, I will bring in Mr Halcro Johnston.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am glad that we have got away from the spiral that we got into in previous contributions to talk about some issues that I think really matter.

I want to ask about BBC Scotland's dedicated online channel. What is the potential for that? A huge amount of money has been invested in it, but do you feel that it is delivering? Do you watch the channel yourself?

Angus Robertson: I have a confession to make, which is that I do not watch linear television full stop. In that, I am probably part of an emerging majority in the country. However, I watch programmes that have been made for the BBC Scotland channel, just as I watch things that have been commissioned elsewhere in the BBC, because I access what is new and emerging through the BBC iPlayer.

Part of the conversation around the BBC Scotland channel, which has got a little bit lost, is that, if we go back to the genesis of all this, it was

around news coverage, because there is a problem—not a spiral. There was a problem, there is a problem and it still needs to be sorted. At that time, there was a notion that things might be better served by having a dedicated 6 o'clock news on television, in exactly the same way as BBC Radio Scotland in the morning does Scotland, the UK and the world, in that order, from the perspective of people here. The idea was to do the same for television, which is what happens in all other normal countries.

However, because that became political—because some people thought that it was very important and some did not, or were not prepared to countenance it—the discussion moved on to asking, “Well, if that can't happen, but we know that there's a deficiency, what can we do? Can we, with modern technology, have particularly focused scheduling for a Scottish audience somewhere in the linear world?” However, that discussion is taking place just at a time when the linear world is not what it was. If BBC Scotland were BBC One ten years ago, I think that it would be in a different place from where it is now.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Do you think that, in essence, the BBC reacted to political pressure and brought in a product that was probably already on its way out?

Angus Robertson: No. I would not conflate the two things.

On the one hand, we have the issue of linear access, whereby people consider channels 1, 2, 3 and 4 to be important, and everything else to be a lot less important. If they have kids, they perhaps also know where CBeebies is, or they perhaps like the history channel or whatever. I think that that is probably where most people are at.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am sure that Channel 5 might have its opinion on that.

Angus Robertson: Yes. I will regret not mentioning Channel 5, although I do not watch that on linear output either.

However, my point is not an unfair characterisation. We have the linear issue, and then we have a BBC Scotland channel that is available on linear television but is not number 1, and we have all that at this moment of change, as we move towards much more of an on-demand situation. We know that to be true, because we know what the streamers do. We tell them where we are, through the geographical locator, and they also begin to learn our viewing habits. Mr Bibby might be into sport and Mr Halcro Johnston might be into opera or whatever it is.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: We have known each other for a very long time. I think you know that I

am certainly more likely to be into sport than the opera.

Angus Robertson: Or country pursuits. However, we will say rugby. After a while, the algorithm knows that Mr Halcro Johnston likes watching rugby, and that he lives in Scotland. Ergo, the chances are that, on the iPlayer, he will get much more rugby, and Scottish rugby, content. I think that that is how everything that is produced on and for the BBC Scotland channel will be accessed, because, frankly, everything is going to be accessed through iPlayer or the equivalent on STV and so on.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I will ask a question, which is not intended as a gotcha at all, but to which I genuinely do not know the answer.

When the BBC Scotland channel was set up, there was quite a large budget—I think that it was about £38 million. I do not know what the current budget is or what the current viewing figures are. However, there will certainly be arguments about whether it delivers what it needs to deliver. If we are looking at a future in which there will be no linear television, is that the right place to be spending money, or should that money be available for programme development and other things? Does the BBC Scotland channel still have a role to play?

Angus Robertson: All channels will have a role to play as long as there is an older viewing demographic that accesses television in a largely linear way. That will continue until people stop accessing linear television. Those of us who do not watch linear television will be watching material that is produced for the BBC Scotland channel as we will be watching elsewhere.

It is worth speaking about this in the context where, historically, the BBC has invested significantly less in Scotland than the licence fee has contributed. Frankly, if £38 million is the number—I do not know whether that is right, but it is what has been quoted to me—it needs to be seen in the wider context of how much is spent on broadcasting, employing people and skills development. By way of a contextual observation. Danish public radio and television has twice as many staff based in Copenhagen as the BBC has in Scotland. We need to compare like with like. We have a population of 5 million that has been underserved until now. We are playing catch-up and this is one of the areas where the BBC is playing catch-up and we should support it in doing so.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: We have talked a lot about radio and the growth of radio stations. Radio provides an easy way of listening, and it allows for the targeting of markets. Local radio is vitally important in communities such as mine and across

the Highlands and Islands. The BBC plays a massive role there, but there are also local stations such as Radio Skye, Shetland Islands Broadcasting Company, Moray Firth Radio—although that is slightly more regional—and Nevis Radio. A huge number of radio stations play an important role, but they are independent radio stations that rely on income. What is the Scottish Government doing to support them? Is there more that can be done to support them, given the issues with advertising and the like?

Angus Robertson: That is a perennial question, and I am sympathetic to the perspective that you come from in asking it. You are right to point out that there are tremendous community radio stations. There is also local news provision, which is important, through the likes of BBC Orkney, BBC Shetland, BBC Aberdeen and the opt-outs, and they work very well. When I was the member of Parliament for Moray, it was important for me to know what was in the local headlines. All of that is important.

As Mr Halcro Johnston knows, the Government advertises in support of health campaigns and so on, and decisions about advertising are taken on a commercial basis and involve analysis of its effectiveness. I would want to be assured that that advertising was reaching the public. If, as part of that, it could help to support local media, I would be supportive of that.

Perhaps one needs to see things through the other end of the telescope and identify whether there are any particular campaigns that one might want to deliberately direct through more local community outputs. I am happy to take that away and to reappraise myself of that issue so that Mr Halcro Johnston can pursue his interest in it.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I recognise that control over advertising on independent local radio is an issue that is reserved to the UK Government.

There is no political campaigning or advertising on radio, although the listening public might be delighted by that. However, members of the Scottish Parliament cannot pay to advertise events such as local surgeries on independent local radio. For example, I cannot pay for an advert for a surgery in Shetland. Do you think that that could or should be changed? Is there a Government position on that political aspect?

Angus Robertson: I am not aware of there being a Government position on that, although Mr Halcro Johnston knows that there are parliamentary rules about what is permissible that he and I, whether as members of the Scottish Parliament or the Westminster Parliament, have to stick to. The issue of permissibility is partly to do with the policing of such matters. On the margins, there have always been concerns about whether

rules are being followed, which is absolutely right and proper when we are talking about public funding.

10:00

Mr Halcro Johnston might point out that he can advertise his surgeries on any number of social media sites and can satisfy himself, as most of us do, that that is a highly cost-effective way of advertising that those surgeries are to take place in different places. That is another example of how fast the world is changing.

However, the question about local radio is one for the parliamentary authorities. Such advertising is not allowed on television, either, but that is more to do with the perception that it would bring politics on to television.

Some people are very imaginative. I know one political party that advertises very effectively at the St Mirren home ground—I am looking at the member for Paisley—and gets itself on television every time there is a corner.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I feel we might get into the issue of jigsaw identification.

Angus Robertson: I have digressed.

The Convener: We will move on.

Mr Kerr, you indicated earlier that you had some other questions. Do you want to come back in?

Stephen Kerr: We had a discussion about BBC Scotland in which we touched on the licence fee. From what I have heard, I assume that the cabinet secretary would wish the current BBC funding model to continue. That was basically what I was going to cover, and I see that it is 10 o'clock.

Angus Robertson: I will say yes and then leave one thought with you by circling back to a question that you asked earlier, which was about skills. Something really exciting is happening in relation to the broadcasting and screen sector. I strongly encourage the committee to take an interest in the introduction of screen studies in Scottish schools, because we are the first country in the world to do that, and I believe that it has the potential to be transformational. The draft curriculum is available online if colleagues want to have a look at how it will be rolled out in schools, at both primary and secondary level. I am particularly enthused because I am confident that, in particular areas in which we would not traditionally have educated kids to expect that they might have a career in broadcasting or screen, the curriculum will give them a solid introduction to all of that, with a view to pursuing a career in the sector.

There are attendant advantages to having that subject taught in Scottish schools, which I know

that Mr Kerr will be interested in because of his interest in the matter. Piloting of the subject showed that it had a transformational impact on kids who were thought to be unlikely to stay on for fifth or sixth year or to pursue more academic qualifications. Their interest in and attendance at school changed noticeably following the introduction of screen studies.

There is a lot to that, but I wanted to share with the committee my enthusiasm for something that I think will be transformational in schools and in our broadcasting and screen sector in the years to come.

Stephen Kerr: There is one other thing that I would like to ask about, so I must reverse my previous position.

Angus Robertson: Surely not.

Stephen Kerr: A point that came out of the evidence that is connected to what the cabinet secretary has just said is the fact that there is a lack of a structured connection between, on one side, BBC Scotland and Channel 4 and, on the other, Scotland's colleges and universities. I was surprised to discover that the exposure that the BBC has in colleges and universities came about, basically, as a result of the personal commitment of key BBC personnel. I am talking about not only creators but engineers and all the other important broadcasting careers that are available to young people in Scotland.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it might be a good idea for the BBC, when its charter is renewed, as I am sure that it will be, to explore having a more structured partnership with Scotland's further and higher education sectors?

Angus Robertson: I agree with Mr Kerr, but I want to make a wider observation: I encourage the BBC and others across the sector to become involved in the teaching of screen studies. Their interest should start earlier than third-level education. Perhaps that is an issue that could be looked at in the next parliamentary session. We need to better understand the provision across Scotland's colleges and universities of screen studies, film studies, broadcasting studies and all attendant subjects that might be connected.

We have inherited a position that is atomised. Because of the absence of an established screen sector at scale, there has not been a concomitant provision of service at our colleges or universities that has specialised in broadcast and screen. This emerging sector—there are more studios, more independent production companies, more work and more projects, and the direction of travel is good—is an area where there is definitely room to grow.

Mr Kerr spoke about the lack of a “structured connection”. That is part of it, but there is a bigger issue than that, which is that we need to understand the level of training that is provided by colleges and, importantly, the trades. The trades play an important role in the broadcast and screen sector. I am referring to trades that one might not think about in relation to broadcast and screen—there is a really exciting career opportunity for people who may want to become electricians, joiners or, by extension, screen builders.

Stephen Kerr: We both agree that the BBC and Channel 4 remain the anchors for all of this, as they have been for a long time and will be for the foreseeable future. The other broadcasting entities—the streamers, as we collectively call them—do not make the same investment that we expect of the public service broadcasters.

Angus Robertson: That is true, but you might add to that the national performing companies, such as Scottish Opera, which is a really good case in point. I will correct what I said a moment ago—I said screen builders when I meant set builders.

Sets are required for television, but they are also required for opera and the National Theatre of Scotland. We have different centres of excellence, and demand for the skills is growing. In the past, we did not have the capacity, because there were not the opportunities, but now multiple film and television projects are under way concurrently in Scotland. We want to be able to produce younger people, in particular, with the skill sets that they need in order to fulfil all those jobs. We are aiming to have a £1 billion gross value added sector in Scotland by 2030, but that is not the summit of my ambitions. I think that there is further room to grow, but we must produce students with the skills to fulfil all those opportunities.

Stephen Kerr: As we all know, Scottish Opera, in particular, has an outstanding global business in scenery building. That is all to be encouraged.

Angus Robertson: Yes.

The Convener: I have mentioned to the committee before that I was lucky enough to visit Rothesay academy on the Isle of Bute, with Screen Scotland and Education Scotland, to showcase some of the animation work that has been done with young people there. Emerging talent was obvious to see, so that is a great example.

On that note, I have a final question. Earlier in the parliamentary session, the public interest journalism working group was considering the establishment of a Scottish public interest journalism institute. Has any progress been made in that area?

Angus Robertson: At various stages, I have met people who are involved in the project. The Government wants to be as supportive as possible, but, understandably, there is a requirement for that to be an arm’s-length body because of the independence of journalism. There is a challenge in that, and I would be happy to write to the committee to update it on where things have got to, if that would be helpful.

The Convener: That would be very welcome, cabinet secretary. I thank you for your contributions, and I thank your officials for attending.

Before we move into private session, I note that this is the final public meeting of the committee this session. On behalf of the committee, I extend my thanks to our committee advisers, including Katy Hayward, Michael Keating, Chris McCorkindale, Tobias Lock and, of course, Lisa Whitten, who developed the EU law tracker in conjunction with the committee, to the benefit of the whole Parliament.

I also thank my deputy convener, Jamie Halcro Johnston, and the previous deputy conveners, Donald Cameron and Alexander Stewart, for supporting the work of the committee. I am grateful for all the contributions from members, whether they have left us and come back or have been here for a long time. We have been a productive, generally consensual and constructive committee, and we still have a number of reports to produce before the end of the parliamentary session. Finally, as always, I thank our clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre for the support that they have provided for the committee’s work. I wish everyone well in the future. We will see how we have all got on when it comes out in the wash.

10:11

Meeting continued in private until 10:46.

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