

Rt. Hon. Karen Bradley MP
Secretary of State
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
House of Commons
LONDON W1A 0AA

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10th March 2017

EUROPEAN INTERVENTION NOTICE RE. PROPOSED ACQUISITION OF SKY PLC.

Dear Secretary of State,

This is a personal open letter, also to be placed on the website of the independent BBC Pensioners' Association, of which I am a committee member and former chairman.

I was heartened to learn of your being minded to refer the proposed bid for Sky plc by 21st Century Fox to Ofcom. I was further encouraged on hearing you speak to the House of Commons on Monday, when you raised a number of important issues.

If Sky, already with an income from the UK and Ireland of more than twice the BBC's £3.7bn p.a. from licence fees, is to become wholly under the aegis of an American multi-media company, it would show that the Government no longer regards the BBC as the 'Voice of the Nation'. For that company to be 21st Century Fox, run on the ethics of a dynastic family, would confirm that the Government believes that commercial criteria, no matter how compromised, count for more than any principles of public service.

This should not be taken as a plea for the BBC not to face competition. Broadcasting is already losing ground to the challenge of social media at every turn. If Sky's acquisition by 21st Century Fox were to raise the overall level of public interest in broadcasting in general, and broadcast news in particular, the BBC should readily accommodate a fellow traveller bound by the same standards of impartiality as itself. But that situation already pertains, such that a change of Sky ownership would, on the face of it, imply the same Government and Ofcom policies about news content.

What those policies won't do is answer concerns about plurality across media platforms that UK and European legislation seeks to address. It would mean a concentration of Sky's international, national and regional broadcasting interests being held in common ownership by Murdoch family members alongside their UK newspaper interests in the Times, the Sun and regional distribution.

Surely, the essential analysis is not so much about which entity owns what, but about who directly controls cross-media ownership, promotion and advertising.

Whether it is News UK and Sky in Britain, News Corp and Foxtel in Australia or News Corp and Fox News in America, this international behemoth cannot pretend to have any other motive at its heart than corporate self-interest. Outstanding questions over the 'fit and proper person' test are legion, with phone-hacking at the forefront of UK concerns, Rebekah Brooks back again as the CEO of News UK, Leveson 2 apparently stillborn, and James Murdoch, already chairman of Sky and CEO of 21st Century Fox, backing Team Sky with its reputation so recently laid bare by the DCMS Select Committee.

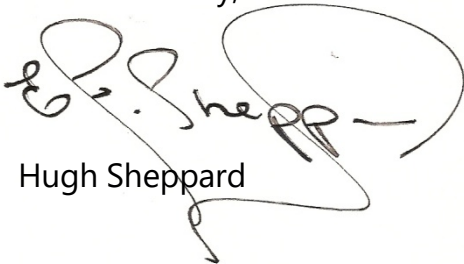
This at a time when, between yourself at DCMS, Sharon White at Ofcom and Damian Collins MP at the Select Committee, the relationships of culture, media and sport seems, at last, to be properly motivated in the national interest. Now it is up to the three of you not to let the machinations of Messrs. Murdoch scupper broadcasting as we know it.

For 21st Century Fox to acquire Sky could mean the end of the very special identity British broadcasting has brought to radio, television and film-making. In any event, it would very likely bring about the end of the distinctive identity of the BBC. That this still stands high could not be better expressed than by Sharon White in closing her speech to the Oxford Media Convention earlier this week:

"The BBC is for everyone; it lies at the centre of our collective, cultural identity."

If this can survive the present hiatus, I feel sure that a vote of confidence from members of this association will be overwhelmingly endorsed by society at large.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Sheppard', with a large, loopy flourish extending from the end of the signature.

Hugh Sheppard

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