

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

MEDIA BILL

First Sitting

Tuesday 5 December 2023

(Morning)

CONTENTS

Programme motion agreed to.

Order of consideration agreed to.

Written evidence (Reporting to the House) motion agreed to.

CLAUSES 1 AND 2 agreed to.

CLAUSE 3 under consideration when the Committee adjourned till this day
at Two o'clock.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Saturday 9 December 2023

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2023

This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairs: JUDITH CUMMINS, † MARTIN VICKERS

- | | |
|---|---|
| † Baynes, Simon (<i>Clwyd South</i>) (Con) | † Peacock, Stephanie (<i>Barnsley East</i>) (Lab) |
| † Blackman, Kirsty (<i>Aberdeen North</i>) (SNP) | † Tuckwell, Steve (<i>Uxbridge and South Ruislip</i>) (Con) |
| † Bradshaw, Mr Ben (<i>Exeter</i>) (Lab) | † Western, Andrew (<i>Stretford and Urmston</i>) (Lab) |
| † Butler, Rob (<i>Aylesbury</i>) (Con) | † Whittingdale, Sir John (<i>Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries</i>) |
| Carter, Andy (<i>Warrington South</i>) (Con) | † Williams, Hywel (<i>Arfon</i>) (PC) |
| † Collins, Damian (<i>Folkestone and Hythe</i>) (Con) | † Wood, Mike (<i>Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury</i>) |
| † Efford, Clive (<i>Eltham</i>) (Lab) | |
| † Foster, Kevin (<i>Torbay</i>) (Con) | Huw Yardley, Kevin Candy, <i>Committee Clerks</i> |
| † Green, Chris (<i>Bolton West</i>) (Con) | |
| † Hunt, Tom (<i>Ipswich</i>) (Con) | |
| † Owen, Sarah (<i>Luton North</i>) (Lab) | † attended the Committee |

Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 5 December 2023

(Morning)

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Media Bill

9.25 am

The Chair: We are now sitting in public and the proceedings are being broadcast. I have a few preliminary announcements. *Hansard* colleagues would be grateful if Members could email their speaking notes to hansardnotes@parliament.uk. Please switch electronic devices to silent. Tea and coffee are not allowed during the sittings.

The selection list for today's sittings is available in the room. It shows how the selected amendments have been grouped together for debate. Amendments grouped together are generally on the same or similar issues. Please note that decisions on amendments take place in the order not in which they are debated, but in which they appear on the amendment paper. The selection and grouping list shows the order of debates. Decisions on each amendment are taken when we come to the clause to which the amendment relates. A Member who has put their name to the leading amendment in the group is called first. Other Members are then free to catch my eye to speak on all or any of the amendments in the group. A Member may speak more than once in a single debate. At the end of debate on a group of amendments, I shall call the Member who moved the leading amendment again. Before they sit down, they will need to indicate whether they wish to withdraw the amendment or seek a decision. If any Member wishes to press any other amendment in the group to a vote, they need to let me know.

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale): I beg to move,

That—

1. the Committee shall (in addition to its first meeting at 9.25 am on Tuesday 5 December) meet—
 - (a) at 2.00 pm on Tuesday 5 December;
 - (b) at 11.30 am and 2.00 pm on Thursday 7 December;
 - (c) at 9.25 am and 2.00 pm on Tuesday 12 December;
 - (d) at 11.30 am and 2.00 pm on Thursday 14 December;
2. the proceedings shall be taken in the following order: Clauses 1 to 17; Schedule 1; Clauses 18 to 27; Schedule 2; Clause 28; Schedule 3; Clauses 29 to 36; Schedule 4; Clause 37; Schedules 5 to 7; Clauses 38 to 40; Schedule 8; Clauses 41 to 48; Schedule 9; Clause 49; Schedules 10 and 11; Clauses 50 and 51; Schedule 12; new Clauses; new Schedules; remaining proceedings on the Bill;
3. the proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 5.00 pm on Thursday 14 December.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and to debate with the hon. Member for Barnsley East, reprising the enjoyable time we had in the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill Committee not long ago. This Bill is important for the future of our public service broadcasters and the media in this country. It has been some time in the preparation. It has been through pre-legislative scrutiny,

and has been amended considerably to reflect the views put forward to the Government. As a result, I hope that it is generally non-controversial, but it is obviously important that we scrutinise it in detail.

The Programming Sub-Committee met yesterday evening to debate the programme for consideration of the Bill. It was agreed that we should meet today at 9.25 am and 2 pm, again on Thursday, and then again on Tuesday and Thursday next week. That was the unanimous view of the Committee. On that basis, I commend the programme motion to the Committee.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you chairing the Committee today, Mr Vickers. It is a pleasure to stand opposite the Minister. The last work I did with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was on the Online Safety Bill, which took a significant time—significantly more than I expect this Bill will. I will talk more generally about the Bill later, when we have moved off the programme motion.

I have questions for the Minister about the lack of oral evidence for the Bill. There is no programme for taking oral evidence. That generally happens when the beginning of a Bill's Committee stage is taken on the Floor of the House; for example, we have the first part of the Finance Bill Committee on the Floor of the House. The Government have been keen not to take oral evidence on the Finance Bill. It also happens when a Bill originates in the Lords; then no oral evidence is taken in the House of Commons.

I understand what the Minister said about there having been pre-legislative scrutiny. However, I spoke to an external organisation that is often called to give evidence on things related to media, and it assumed that it would be giving evidence this morning when it first saw the draft timetable for Committee during Second Reading. It did not expect that there would be no oral evidence sessions. Let me make it clear how useful oral evidence is. We are able to ask so many experts for their views on specific parts of the Bill. The Minister said that there is a large amount of agreement on much of the Bill, and I do not disagree, but there are significant points of contention, such as the use of the word "appropriate" as opposed to "significant" in relation to prominence. It would be helpful to have experts here who could explain why they believe that "appropriate" is not the appropriate word in the circumstances.

We have had a tight turnover from Second Reading. I very much appreciate all the organisations that have worked hard to put together their written evidence in such a short time, but I guarantee that not everybody in the room will have read all the written evidence, given the tight timescales.

I have two questions. First, why did the Minister decide not to schedule oral evidence sessions when programming the Bill? Will he be slightly ashamed if we do not meet on Thursday 14 December, and we would have had time for an oral evidence session? My second question relates to the timing of the Bill. It is fairly unusual for Committee to begin this quickly after Second Reading. There were two days after Second Reading to table amendments before the deadline. That is a fairly tight turnaround, especially given that we will probably discuss most of the Bill over a few days. I would appreciate it if the Minister let us know the Government's thinking on the programming.

9.30 am

Sir John Whittingdale: I hear what the hon. Lady says and understand her points. However, as I indicated, the Bill has been in gestation for a long time. I chaired the Culture, Media and Sport Committee until 2015, and it called for a number of the measures in the Bill, so certain parts have taken at least seven or eight years. As she rightly points out, the Government published the Bill in draft form, and that led to lengthy Select Committee hearings, in which a large range of stakeholders gave evidence. Indeed, there was the Select Committee's report, and the Scottish Affairs and Welsh Affairs Committees also made recommendations. All those were taken into account by the Government, and published evidence was available.

Since that time, we have held a number of roundtables to hear from stakeholders. I obviously recognise that those were private meetings, so there is not a public record of them, but nevertheless, as the hon. Lady points out, there has been an opportunity for all stakeholders to submit written evidence. I am shocked at her suggestion that there could be members of the Committee who have not read all the written evidence submitted, but it is publicly available. Given the time spent consulting on the Bill, it was felt that a public oral evidence session in the Committee was not necessary. If anybody wishes to make further representations, we would gratefully receive them.

The Programming Sub-Committee felt yesterday that the timetable gave sufficient time, given the Bill's non-controversial nature. Relatively fewer amendments have been tabled than were tabled to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, which the hon. Member for Barnsley East and I took through Committee not that long ago. I hope that we will give the amendments proper scrutiny. I view the timetable with a certain amount of *schadenfreude*, in that I shall be stepping down from my position at the end of the year so that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) can return to her role. I am pleased that I shall have the opportunity to take the Bill through the whole of Committee, because it is one that I have spent quite a lot of time on. For those reasons, I think the programme motion and the amount of time allocated for consideration of the Bill are correct, although I join the hon. Member for Aberdeen North in hoping that anybody with further representations to make does make them, even if we are not having oral evidence sessions.

Kirsty Blackman: I will not vote against the programme motion, but I echo the Minister's call to stakeholders on written evidence, and say to any stakeholders who are watching: "You have been wrong-footed by the very short timescales we were given for amendments, but there is the opportunity to make amendments on Report." If they get in touch with us about any amendments they want before the deadline for Report, they could be debated then, even though we may not necessarily have had time to craft them before Committee proceedings.

Question put and agreed to.

The Chair: The Committee will therefore meet again at 2 pm this afternoon, and on every sitting Tuesday and Thursday until 14 December, unless we complete consideration of the Bill before then.

Ordered,

That the Bill be considered in the following order, namely, Clauses 1 to 17, Schedule 1, Clauses 18 to 27, Schedule 2, Clause 28, Schedule 3, Clauses 29 to 36, Schedule 4, Clause 37, Schedules 5 to 7, Clauses 38 to 40, Schedule 8, Clauses 41 to 48, Schedule 9, Clause 49, Schedules 10 and 11, Clauses 50 and 51, Schedule 12, new Clauses, new Schedules, remaining proceedings on the Bill.—(*Sir John Whittingdale.*)

Resolved,

That, subject to the discretion of the Chair, any written evidence received by the Committee shall be reported to the House for publication.—(*Sir John Whittingdale.*)

The Chair: Copies of any written evidence received by the Committee will be circulated to Members by email and published on the Bill webpage. We now proceed to line-by-line consideration of the Bill.

Clause 1

REPORTS ON THE FULFILMENT OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE REMIT

Kirsty Blackman: I beg to move amendment 39, in clause 1, page 2, line 38, at end insert—

"(iii) at least ten hours' transmission time per week in the Gaelic language as spoken in Scotland."

This amendment would add a similar requirement for broadcast of programming in Scottish Gaelic as there is for Welsh language broadcasting.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 5—*Gaelic language service*—

"The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passage of this Act, review whether a Gaelic language service should be given a public service broadcast remit."

Kirsty Blackman: It is a pleasure to take part in the Bill Committee, Mr Vickers. I am glad to see everybody here early on a Tuesday morning, either with or without coffee—I mean, definitely without coffee, as that is not allowed in Bill Committees.

Amendment 39 to clause 1 relates to Gaelic language programming. I hold my hand up: I am sorry that this is not a very good amendment. I have been pretty clear about the fact that there was an incredibly quick turnaround, and I could have done a significantly better job on this amendment. In fact, I am quite happy to support new clause 5 on this issue, which was put forward by Labour.

The Gaelic language and its preservation through public service broadcasting was debated at significant length on Second Reading. The subject is incredibly important. It exercises people in Scotland and across the rest of these islands. There is massive concern about the lack of a requirement for Gaelic language public service broadcasting. There is no requirement for a minimum amount, and no requirements relating to new content. There could, for example, have been a requirement in the Bill for the BBC to produce new Gaelic language content. The Minister is aware that MG ALBA and BBC Alba are involved in producing Gaelic language TV in Scotland, which is absolutely excellent and makes a massive difference to the use of the Gaelic language.

On Second Reading, we heard about the issues that there have historically been with Gaelic. There was the intention by authorities over a significant number of years to reduce the amount of Gaelic spoken in Scotland, and to stamp it out, and Gaelic is still slowly making a

[*Kirsty Blackman*]

comeback. In Aberdeen, we have Gaelic-medium education; that provision is massively full at the moment, despite Aberdeen not being known as a centre for Gaelic, being on the east rather than the west coast. When I visited a Gaelic nursery in my constituency, I asked people whether they found it difficult to ensure that their children were brought up with enough Gaelic language in Aberdeen, where it is not nearly so prominent as it is in, say, the Western Isles. They talked incredibly positively about the impact of children's TV in Gaelic. Children can watch that TV and learn Gaelic as a native language. Given that there is less Gaelic spoken by the population, public service broadcasting is even more important. Free-to-air public service broadcasting in Gaelic is vital to ensure the continuation of the language, particularly when many adults in the area are not speaking Gaelic regularly.

I would very much like the Minister to consider the lines about Gaelic in the Bill and whether they are sufficient, because I do not believe that they are. I do not believe that Gaelic is given enough of a footing in the Bill. It talks about having an "appropriate" level of provision in the indigenous languages of the UK, but it does not put Gaelic on the same footing as, for example, Welsh; it talks significantly more about quotas and minimum levels of new content for Welsh. That is incredibly important, and I do not at all want to take away from what is happening with Welsh, because that should be happening.

I am asking for parity for Gaelic, or an increase of it—or even an acknowledgement from the UK Government that Gaelic is important. It should not be mentioned as a small aside, and simply be included in a list of other languages. I would very much appreciate it if the Minister considered augmenting the provisions relating to Gaelic, to make it clear how important it is to people in Scotland and across these islands, as one of our indigenous languages. I will not push amendment 39 to a vote—I will return to the issue on Report—but I am happy to support new clause 5, put forward by Labour.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am delighted to be on this Committee. I support amendments 39 and 40 from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North. The one thing in clause 1 that I baulked at slightly was the term "regional language". I would not say that Welsh is a regional language, though there are regions in Wales where language is used slightly differently; there is Welsh and Welsh English, if I may use that term.

I suppose I should confess that I was a participant in a campaign during the 1970s to establish S4C, the Welsh language channel. It was a very long time ago—40 years ago—and perhaps it would be better to draw a veil over my activities then. If hon. Members are interested in the lessons from the last 40 years on how to build, sustain and improve a channel such as S4C, I refer them to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport document of 2018, "Building an S4C for the future", by Euryng Ogwen Williams. It is a very interesting document that chronicles, to some extent, what has happened with Welsh in respect of the channel, and it has useful lessons for similar channels, and for Gaelic provision.

One of the outstanding successes of our campaign a very long time ago was ensuring minimum hours in Welsh, to refer to a point that my hon. Friend the

Member for Aberdeen North made, and ensuring that programmes in Welsh on a specific channel should be broadcast at peak hours. That was a great success. It is now entirely unremarkable to have programmes in Welsh mid-afternoon, or late in the evening. The very fact that that is unremarkable is a measure of success.

The two sorts of lessons I will briefly refer to from our experience in Wales are, first, what one might call the economic and diversity arguments and, secondly, the cultural arguments. Certainly initially, the arguments for a Welsh channel, and perhaps for a Gaelic channel or Gaelic provision, are essentially cultural. To point to some of the economic features of the argument, an increase in hours in Gaelic would have the same sort of effect.

Initially, in Wales at least, there has been a greater diversity of providers. As with Channel 4, the intention—and the achievement—was to have a larger independent sector and to locate it outside Cardiff, Swansea and Bangor. In my area of Caernarfon, and in Arfon in general, that has led to a huge economic benefit in terms of not only the people employed in television production, but all the other work that has come our way because we have Welsh language television production in the north-west. Those independent producers have also diversified and now participate in international production that has nothing to do with the Welsh channel itself. As a result, we have greater growth in television production skills, and some people have graduated to working in other parts of the world. So there is that argument.

9.45 am

I was in Salford last weekend recording a programme, and there is now a large, successful centre of television production there, so that is an example of the value of regional diversification within England. I should also note that the "Today" programme came from Truro this morning, so even the "Today" programme is catching up with this argument.

As I said, the growth in production in Welsh has led to domestic and international productions. This is from a long time ago, but one instructive example—this is relevant to clauses we will discuss later—is that one of the channel's early successes was a football programme called "Sgorio". I am not a sports fan myself, but the channel spotted a gap in the market and broadcast football matches from across Europe when they were not available on the BBC or ITV. That led to people in the areas on the borders of Wales watching S4C, not because they understood Welsh or were interested in Welsh, but because they liked watching Italian football. I remember being at a pub in Liverpool where people were watching Italian matches or Spanish matches—I cannot remember which—in Welsh, which none of them understood.

Another early success was that the volume of production allowed S4C to produce feature films. Some hon. Members will know, for example, that a film called "Hedd Wyn" was an international success and an Oscar nominee early in the channel's existence. Incidentally, Members will be interested to know that, when it was nominated, the Oscar committee was at pains to find a category in which to fit it, although it was from the UK. Usually, it would have been in the mainstream category, but the committee included it in the foreign language films

category. It was a nominee, but it did not win. On all those counts—increasing hours, increasing diversity and increasing the location of producers—this proposal could have an extremely beneficial effect for our friends in Scotland.

Let me turn briefly to the cultural arguments. I have been a long-term campaigner in this field, and I would say that people have an absolute right to be able to speak to each other in the language they use—I think the term is “autochthonous language”, which means the language of the area where they live. One effect of that in Wales, which my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North referred to, is the growth of the language, which came as a surprise to some people at least. The age range of Welsh speakers is heavier towards the younger end; people usually assume that older people speak the language and that younger people do not bother, so it dies out. However, Welsh, at least, is more likely to be spoken by younger people than older people, and television production and provision are part of the reason for that. That is a very hopeful sign for my language and, I am sure, for my hon. Friend’s language as well. So there is also that function—a language-planning function, I suppose—rather than just the matter of television production. It legitimises the language and establishes it in a new area—a new *pau*, as we would say in Welsh.

Lastly, as I said earlier, this proposal allows a breadth of provision—more hours and a greater diversity. A long time ago, I discussed the issue at length with a fellow academic from the United States, and it got quite heated—it was quite late at night, if you take my meaning, Mr Vickers. She eventually broke off the argument by saying, “You are saying that if there is trash to be had, it should be in Welsh as well as in English.” Well, I would not put it that way, of course, but we do now have provision that goes from game shows to sports, to drama and feature films, and that also includes erudite late-night discussions on the virtues of 14th-century Welsh poetry, if necessary. Reflecting on all of that, it can only be good for the hours for Gaelic provision to be increased and for that to be stated on the face of the Bill.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I have actually watched “Hedd Wyn” on YouTube. What analysis has the hon. Gentleman made of the distribution of Welsh language products on other digital platforms, rather than just on S4C?

Hywel Williams: I thank the hon. Member for that point, and I will refer to it if I am lucky enough to be called to talk on the relevant provision later. Welsh programmes are available on all kinds of platforms, but a large number of Welsh-speaking people in England, for example, cannot see programmes in Welsh, because those are not available digitally to the extent I would want. As one would imagine, people have found a way around that, but for the language to prosper and thrive and for provision to be right across the available platforms, we must move forward, and I will speak to that later.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers, and to welcome the Media Bill as it enters a new stage in its passage. Before I begin, I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

As I said many times on Second Reading, I am supportive of the Bill on the whole; I only wish it could have been brought forward sooner after the Government U-turned on their decision to privatise Channel 4. Good progress has been made on the Bill thanks to the excellent work of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, whose recommendations the Government have largely taken on board. That is to the credit of the many interested stakeholders who provided detailed evidence.

It is with that in mind that I have tabled only focused amendments where I feel they are really needed, and I will not unduly dwell on areas where no concerns have been raised. I would like to make as much progress as possible, so that our creative industries can reap the benefits at the earliest opportunity. I look forward to having productive discussions with the Minister and with members of the Committee on both sides of the House in the coming days about how we can ensure that the Bill best achieves its aims and truly secures the future of UK television and radio for years to come.

It is with that in mind that I turn to amendment 39 and new clause 5 on Gaelic broadcasting. Language is a cornerstone of culture; it is not just a way of communicating. Languages are daily expressions of history, reflecting a way of life, values and heritage as they are spoken. The diversity of languages in our nations and regions is therefore a living, breathing expression of the rich identities and traditions that we are lucky to carry with us. Understanding that, however, also requires an understanding that, if we lost a language such as Gaelic or Welsh—if they are not nurtured and passed down through the generations—that rich culture would also be at risk of being lost. With that recognition in mind, I am pleased that we are explicitly discussing the importance of Gaelic at the top of the Bill.

According to the Scottish Government’s Gaelic language plan, census results in 2011 found that, of the population aged three and over in Scotland, 1.7%—just over 87,000 people—spoke, read, wrote or understood Gaelic. While that represented a decrease in the proportion of people able to speak Gaelic in most age groups since 2001, there was actually an increase among those under 20 years old. That is perhaps due in part to Scottish Government initiatives to encourage Gaelic education, including the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, which gives parents the right to ask their local authority to provide a Gaelic-medium education for their child.

In order to nurture a language, however, progress cannot be limited to education. There must be cultural opportunities surrounding the language too, and Gaelic broadcasting can and should play an important part in that. Indeed, BBC Alba—the Gaelic-language television service launched in 2008 as part of a partnership between MG ALBA and the BBC—is a huge asset to Gaelic culture, providing a wide range of high-quality Gaelic programming for speakers to enjoy. I was pleased to meet representatives over Zoom a few weeks ago.

MG Alba is also of economic importance, sustaining around 340 jobs, half of which are in economically fragile areas. The Government have acknowledged that contribution on multiple occasions, saying that MG ALBA makes a hugely valuable contribution to the lives and wellbeing of Gaelic speakers and recognising that certainty over the future is important for MG ALBA if it is to continue to deliver in that way. The fact that

[Stephanie Peacock]

Gaelic broadcasting is recognised for the first time in the public service remit in clause 1 of the Bill is therefore welcome.

However, as was mentioned several times on Second Reading, the Bill, and legislation more broadly, seem not to recognise Gaelic-language broadcasters in the way they do S4C in the Welsh language, despite apparent cross-party support for doing so both here and in Scotland. That is not to dismiss the importance of the provisions made for S4C or to say that the situations of the Gaelic and Welsh languages are comparable—there is currently a much larger population of Welsh speakers than of Gaelic speakers—but it seems to be a disparity that MG ALBA, for example, is not mentioned in the legislation at all. Indeed, there is somewhat of a cycle of reinforcement here: if having fewer Gaelic speakers means there is less provision for Gaelic programming, then less Gaelic programming may in turn mean there are fewer Gaelic speakers. Conversely, a boost for Gaelic broadcasting could be hugely beneficial to the language as a whole. That is something new clause 5 and amendment 39 seek to highlight.

Amendment 39 tries to address the problem by directly rectifying disparities in quota requirements. Specifically, a quota requires the BBC to provide S4C with at least 10 hours of Welsh-language programming per week, but no such quota exists—not even at a lower level—for Gaelic broadcasting. The amendment tries to mirror that requirement with a similar measure for content in the Gaelic language. There is more to be done to understand how we can best incorporate quotas and support for Gaelic services in existing legislation, which is why the new clause I have tabled looks to review the status of Gaelic services in legislation in the round.

I want to be careful to make sure that there is enough flexibility in the legislation to ensure that any future changes and partnerships in the area of Gaelic broadcasting are accounted for. However, I am supportive in principle of the idea of ensuring that there are regulatory and legislative measures in place that give Gaelic broadcasting the status it deserves. That may well be the start of a minimum level of content being available in the Gaelic language.

I anticipate that some might say this particular measure is not necessary given that, for the first time, the public service remit now acknowledges the importance of providing content in minority languages, which I of course welcome. However, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North has argued, without a definition of “sufficient quantity” of content, there is a risk that that inclusion will not result in the kind of tangible change and assurance needed to ensure the growth or even maintenance of minority language content. I therefore support the idea that “sufficient” should be better defined, whether that be through legislation, Ofcom or elsewhere, so that the provision can be truly enforced and upheld.

New clause 5 takes a more holistic look at the ways in which the Bill fails to address Gaelic broadcasting and suggests an assessment be made on whether giving a Gaelic language service a remit as a public service broadcaster might be suitable. That would be an opportunity to look at how we can ensure the statute catches up with events—BBC Alba did not even exist when the Communications Act 2003 was passed—and would reflect

Parliament’s will for there to be an enduring television service in both Welsh and Gaelic. Further, it would provide a chance for Government, Parliament and Ofcom to view the Gaelic service as something to be acknowledged in reference to its own needs, benefits and missions, rather than only being considered as a small part of the wider BBC portfolio.

For instance, just a few days ago Ofcom published its sixth review of BBC performance, and mentions of a Gaelic service totalled four lines in an 80-page report. That comes from the need to assess BBC Alba only as a BBC portfolio service, as that is what the BBC operating agreement does. Given, however, the importance of the service to Gaelic speakers, it would be appropriate to see it acknowledged and assessed as such, irrespective of whether the service remains tied to the BBC. Indeed, new clause 5 is not prescriptive, and recognises that although the partnership between BBC and MG ALBA has been working well, this may not always be the preferred set-up for either or both parties involved. Therefore, with future-proofing in mind, it simply looks to provide an opportunity for Gaelic broadcasting to be recognised in its own right, whatever form that might take.

I hope the Minister might be able to lend his support to the new clause, but if he chooses not to, I would like to hear from him on the measures the Department is taking to support Gaelic broadcasting in the way it deserves and needs. This should matter not only to those who speak Gaelic and will enjoy the content, but to our society as a whole, as we look to keep alive the unique culture and heritage of all our nations.

10 am

Sir John Whittingdale: I thank the hon. Members for Barnsley East and for Aberdeen North for speaking to their amendments and allowing us to debate the importance of the Gaelic language. It is something we spent a little bit of time on at Second Reading, but it is an important issue.

The Government absolutely share the view of the vital necessity of supporting the continuation and future of Gaelic, and recognise the important contribution that the Gaelic media service MG ALBA makes to the lives and wellbeing of Gaelic speakers across Scotland and the rest of the UK. It is for that reason that the Government embedded a duty to support regional and minority languages, although I take the point made by the hon. Member for Arfon about Welsh not being a “regional” language in that sense. It is, nevertheless, a minority language—as is Gaelic. There is a duty within the BBC’s general duties under the current charter arrangements. We want to help ensure that audiences are able to access this culturally important minority language content in the decades to come.

The Bill goes further than existing provisions. Clause 1 makes the importance of programmes broadcast in the UK’s indigenous languages, including the Gaelic language, clear in legislation, by including it in our new public service remit for television. That is a new addition, which puts on the face of the legislation the need to continue to support minority languages of this kind. We will debate later the way in which the public service broadcasters are required to contribute to the remit and are held accountable for doing so. The purpose of clause 1 is to place a requirement on Ofcom to consider

how the public service remit has been fulfilled. It sets a high-level mission statement for public service broadcasters, and is underpinned by a more detailed system of quotas in later clauses. It is intended to be simpler and to provide PSBs with greater flexibility.

That point notwithstanding, I reassure the hon. Member for Barnsley East that the availability of Gaelic language content is provided for elsewhere. As she knows, the BBC has a specific responsibility in the framework to make arrangement to provide BBC Alba, which is a mixed-genre television channel for Gaelic speakers and those interested in the Gaelic language. Ofcom also places a number of more detailed responsibilities on BBC Alba in the BBC's operating licence. For example, it must provide music of particular relevance to audiences in Scotland, live news programmes each weekday evening—including during peak viewing time—and a longer news review at the weekends.

It is for Ofcom to determine whether these requirements remain appropriate, including on the basis of feedback. It is the case, however, in terms of the amount of Gaelic language broadcasting that takes place, that at the moment BBC Alba broadcasts in Gaelic from 5 pm until midnight. That is seven hours each day, starting an hour later at weekends. When not broadcasting television programmes in Gaelic, it plays—forgive me if I pronounce this wrong—BBC Radio nan Gàidheal, which is the Gaelic language radio station. That is broadcast with static graphics during the periods when television programmes are not being aired. That means that there is a total of something like 2,579 hours of Gaelic television content, certainly in the course of last year.

I think that the amount of Gaelic language already being broadcast meets the ambition set out in the amendment from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, and it is now contained in the public service remit, serving all channels, and the BBC charter agreement. For that reason, I think there is already considerable provision to ensure the continuation of Gaelic language.

I want to turn to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Barnsley East in new clause 5, which refers specifically to the manner in which Gaelic is delivered. BBC Alba is a requirement as part of the charter, and we will again consider how it is delivered by the BBC when the charter renewal takes place. The charter review starts in 2025 and has to be completed by 2027, and we will set out further details in due course on precisely how it is to be carried out.

In the more immediate term, we have recently brought together BBC and Scottish Government officials to discuss the co-ordination of funding decisions for Gaelic language broadcasting between the two organisations. In that respect, I hope that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North and the hon. Member for Barnsley East will recognise that the intention behind their amendment and new clause is already delivered by the Bill and on that basis will be willing to withdraw their amendments.

Kirsty Blackman: I thank the Minister for his response and colleagues for their comments on the amendment and the new clause. I am pleased to hear the Minister talk about the co-ordination of funding decisions and the group that has been brought together to discuss future co-ordination on these decisions and how that may work.

There is a significant asymmetry between the funding settlements for the Welsh language and for Gaelic, particularly with the amount that comes from the licence fee and comparing, for example, Gaelic-speaking broadcasting to Welsh-speaking broadcasting. As I have acknowledged, there are significantly more Welsh speakers, and I am not trying to say that those two things should be directly comparable, but looking at the percentage required from the Scottish Government compared with the amount provided by the licence fee, there is a significant difference between that and what is provided for Welsh. I am glad to hear that the Minister has recognised that decisions are required to be made about the future of funding going forward, and is ensuring that discussions take place.

I am not a Gaelic speaker, but I think my pronunciation of nan Gàidheal would be more accurate than the Minister's—it does sound like it has a lot more letters than that. I am, however, a native Scots speaker and grew up speaking Doric as my first language. In fact, I think I am the only MP ever to have sworn in to this place in Doric. I have done so twice.

I appreciate that Scots is also mentioned as one of the recognised regional minority languages, and I want to back the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon and the hon. Member for Barnsley East about the number of young speakers. There has been a significant increase in the number of young people speaking Scots. Even when I was at school, which is some time ago now, we were very much discouraged from speaking Scots, but anyone standing at a bus stop in Aberdeen nowadays will hear young people arguing and bantering with each other in the broad Doric. That just would not have happened in the same way 25 or 30 years ago, when I was at bus stops bantering with my pals.

It is good to see that increase, but we have not seen a commensurate increase in the amount of Scots language TV. There is some Scots language programming, but it is very unusual for us to hear somebody speaking in an Aberdeen accent, for example. A significant proportion of those in the north-east of Scotland would be able to speak Doric, or at least understand it were it on our TVs. Doric is a dialect of Scots, which is a recognised language, and it is spoken in the north-east.

The Minister talked about the BBC provision and the licence conditions in the charter. I appreciate all that, but the safeguarding of that in this legislation would have shown Gaelic speakers and people who care about the Gaelic language that it is important to have this at this level. It is important to have it not just as part of the BBC charter and of the potential BBC charter negotiations, but as a recognised part of public sector broadcasting. Gaelic should not be playing second fiddle; it should not be down the list of priorities. It is important, and we should not just say, "It is included in the charter, so that's okay." That is not exactly what the Minister said, but it was angling in that direction. Such an approach does not provide that safeguarding we need, and it does not provide the requirement for Ofcom to monitor this. He mentioned that Ofcom has to check whether or not there is an appropriate level of Gaelic programming because of the conditions in the Bill. However, what Ofcom has to check is whether there is a "sufficient quantity of audiovisual content",

and, as the shadow Minister said, no clear definition of "sufficient" is provided.

Sir John Whittingdale: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that Ofcom has a duty under the Bill to monitor the delivery of the public service remit, but she will be aware that in addition Ofcom has the duty to oversee the BBC's delivery of its requirements under the charter and the agreement. To that extent, Ofcom will be monitoring whether or not the BBC is meeting its obligations.

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate that Ofcom will be doing that right now, but, as the Minister says, the charter negotiations are about to open; 2025 possibly seems slightly further away to me than it does to him, but those negotiations are about to begin again and there is no guarantee that that duty will continue to be part of the charter. If the Media Bill provides that this is a required part of public sector broadcasting, it would make it easier for that to be included in the charter and to be part of the licensing conditions, and for Ofcom to ensure that the BBC or any other public sector broadcaster was delivering it.

The last point I wish to make on this is about BBC Alba. Later, we will be discussing the appropriate placement of public sector broadcasters on on-demand services, be it on Sky or wherever else one happens to watch TV. There is a requirement for public sector broadcasters to be given an appropriate level of significance. If we ensure in the Bill that Gaelic-language broadcasting is part of the public sector remit, we increase the likelihood of these broadcasters being given that level of prominence on those on-demand services and digital viewing platforms. We have a requirement for them to be given prominence but at the moment BBC Alba is not included in that, because it is just considered part of the BBC, rather than as a relevant service in its own right. I appreciate that the Minister is unlikely to accept amendment 39 and I am not going to press it to vote, but if the shadow Minister does press new clause 5 to a vote, I fully intend to support it. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Kirsty Blackman: I beg to move amendment 40, page 3, line 10, at end insert—

“(iv) an annual increase in the spend on content and combined content duration made in Scotland until they reach a population share.”

This amendment would add to Ofcom's reporting requirements a requirement to report on the extent to which the public service broadcasters had made available audiovisual content including an annual increase in the spend on content and combined content duration made in Scotland until they reach a population share.

I promise that I do not have an amendment on every part of every clause—I am sure everyone will breathe a sigh of relief. Amendment 40 is about the proportion of content made in Scotland and the conditions in the Bill for content made outside the M25. It is important that more content is made outside the M25, and I am glad that the Government have recognised that and that there has been a move in public sector broadcasting to ensure that that happens. I recognise the work that broadcasters have done to ensure that that continues to be the case, and that much more content is produced outside the M25 than previously. That is positive and I am glad to see it.

10.15 am

However, Ofcom has produced state-of-the-nation reports on each individual part of the UK regarding broadcasting and viewing: how much television is watched,

what kind of TV is watched, and how people are watching. As a strange aside, there is a significantly higher proportion of people in Scotland who watch TV through their gaming consoles compared with the other nations of the UK. I am not sure why, but that was an interesting read for me.

One thing included in the reports is the spend on production, and the number of hours of production and viewing in each of the countries. People in Scotland watch slightly more television than people in most of the rest of the UK. The average number of hours is slightly more, not significantly, but less content is made in Scotland and there is less spend based on population share. TV is really important, as in the case made by the hon. Member for Arfon, not culturally but economically.

The amendment would require Ofcom to look at the percentage of spend. It would require Ofcom to report on the extent to which the public service broadcasters had made available audio-visual content, including an annual increase in the spend on content and combined content duration made in Scotland, until they reach population share. Currently, 6% of spend is made in Scotland, despite the fact that Scotland has 8.5% of the UK's population and a higher proportion of watching hours. It would ensure that we see an increase in the amount of broadcasting content created and money spent in our communities. That is incredibly important, particularly for some of the rural communities in Scotland. We have seen some amazing content, for example, the “Trawlermen” and “Landward” series, produced around Scotland, showcasing different places and accents in the country. There has been a growth of television series and films being created in Scotland.

We still have a fairly small number of people working in broadcasting in Scotland. It is still relatively difficult for newcomers to find their way into broadcasting in places such as BBC Aberdeen, whose representatives I am meeting again tomorrow. There is a very small turnover of staff, because it is a small office and people like their jobs there, which is great.

Hywel Williams: The rule here is that if there is a facility for growth, growth will occur. There is an Irish saying that I like very much: “Live, horse, and ye shall have hay.” If it is there, it will grow. Perhaps the proof of that, in Wales at least, is that the Welsh-speaking population is equal to the size of Sheffield, but is able to sustain a full channel. I am sure that would happen in Scotland, as well.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. If there were a requirement for more broadcasting, not just outside the M25, and for looking at population share, even reporting on spend and population share, there would be clarity and transparency about that spend, and whether it is anywhere close to population share. I think that public sector broadcasters would have a look and think, “Actually, we could probably do better than this. We could produce more content that is more exciting and relevant to people across all of these islands, produced in places with incredibly diverse scenery and people taking part in it.”

As for the Government's position on levelling up, a fairly general statement on content produced outside the M25 is not going to cut it. It will not bring about levelling up or an increase in broadcasting in places that

do not currently see significant amounts. As I said, I appreciate that the Minister and his Government are trying with the outside-the-M25 quota, but it could be done better in order to encourage more content, or at least transparent reporting on the level of broadcasting, spend and content creation in various parts of the UK. As expected from an SNP MP, I have highlighted Scotland, but many parts of these islands could make a pitch for more content to be made in their area, or at least reporting on the level of spend and content created in each region.

Stephanie Peacock: Not too long ago, just after the Scottish Affairs Committee concluded its important inquiry into the topic, I was joined by colleagues in Westminster Hall to talk about Scottish broadcasting. One of the biggest takeaways from the debate was just how important the sector is to people.

Scottish broadcasting brings communities together. It promotes pride in place and strengthens local economies. For those reasons, and many more, I strongly believe that Scottish broadcasting can and must continue to form a vital piece of the puzzle in the UK's creative sectors. Indeed, Scotland is already a popular destination for broadcasters. Not only is it home to Amazon, but the BBC and Channel 4 operate there alongside STV, which in 2021 reached 80% of Scottish people through its main channel. Content made in Scotland often represents Scottish people's lives and the diversity within them. That sort of representation matters. I know, for example, that it was exciting for many when the first Scottish family finally appeared on "Gogglebox".

I am very sympathetic towards the aspect of the amendment that looks to ensure that the level of content made in and for Scotland is proportionate to the number of people who live there. However, I have questions about the mechanism used to achieve that. For example, what are the implications of directly attaching spend to population? How would population be measured and how frequently, and how would that impact the legislative requirements to match it? I wonder whether this issue could be better addressed through individual channel remits. For example, both the BBC and Channel 4 have existing nation quotas. Perhaps it would be better to focus on that rather than insert a strict spend requirement, tied to population, on the wider remit.

I would like to show my support for Scottish broadcasting, but further investigation might be needed into how we can best ensure that there is a comprehensive and holistic package of regulation and legislation to secure its future.

Sir John Whittingdale: I start by agreeing with both Opposition spokesmen about the importance of supporting the production sector outside London and across every region and nation of the United Kingdom. The growth of the independent production sector outside London has been a phenomenal success in recent years, and we now have very strong companies in all parts of the UK. That is shown by the fact that since 2010, PSBs' production spend allocated to programmes outside London has increased from 39% to over 50%, with ambitions to go even further. For instance, the recent publication of the BBC's "Across the UK" strategy commits it to increasing the proportion of its own TV production budget outside London to 60% by 2027.

The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North focuses on Scotland, where production spend is now worth over £266 million, supported by developments including the opening of a Channel 4 creative hub in Glasgow in 2019. As I say, the BBC's "Across the UK" strategy includes commitments to expand its production studios within the city.

Damian Collins: Screen Scotland has pointed out that the total production spend last year on film and television and audiovisual content in Scotland was more than £600 million, which is a 55% increase on the 2019 figures, which shows a substantial increase in production in Scotland. Does the Minister agree that that is to be welcomed?

Sir John Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not just the public service broadcasters that are committing to spending money on production in Scotland; it is right across the range of broadcasters. That exemplifies the strength of Scottish independent production. Indeed, similar figures can be quoted for Wales; it is not unique to Scotland. Every part of the UK is benefiting. Of course, Scotland has its own broadcasting company in the form of STV, which has a production arm, STV Studios, which has an ambition to become a world-class content producer for global networks and streaming services.

The success of the production sector in Scotland and across the UK has been supported and underpinned by a regulatory system. The importance of programmes being made outside London is in the new public service remit. In addition, all public service broadcasters, with the exception of S4C, are subject to regional programme-making quotas for spend and hours of production outside London. Channel 4 has its own out-of-England quota; the BBC also has a specific quota for content made in Scotland. Those quotas are set by Ofcom, which has the power to amend them, where appropriate. One example of the success of that regulatory system is the "Made outside London programme titles register", published by Ofcom, which, in 2022, had 811 entries, including 543 from English regions outside London, 53 from Northern Ireland, 117 from Scotland and 72 from Wales. In each case, broadcasters are exceeding the production quotas quite comfortably. The Government will continue to support screen industries across the UK through a system of tax reliefs, investment in studio infrastructure and the UK global screen fund.

In line with the Government's broader ambition to level up the UK, we want the production sector in all areas of the UK to continue to thrive, and we believe that PSBs play a very important role in our meeting that ambition. Returning to comments made by the hon. Member for Arfon, which I did not address earlier, S4C plays an extremely important part in that. I have not had the opportunity to visit production facilities in Scotland, but I have been to visit both BBC Wales in Cardiff and S4C, where I went on the set of "Pobol y Cwm", and production in Wales is thriving. The position for S4C is slightly different from that for Scotland, in that there is, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, a dedicated television channel for the Welsh language in the form of S4C. However, the Government are committed to supporting the production sector in all the nations of the UK.

[Sir John Whittingdale]

I share the view of the hon. Member for Barnsley East that attempting to set quotas that are exactly in line with the population proportions would impose a constraint, which would be limiting and unnecessary. For that reason, I ask the hon. Member for Aberdeen North to withdraw her amendment.

Kirsty Blackman: I highlight that the focus on content made outside the M25 is not enough. There needs to be a focus on ensuring that the economic and cultural benefits, and the talent pool, are spread wider; “outside the M25” cannot just be Salford, for example. It is possible for “outside the M25” to mean “focused in a small place”, which means benefits are not spread as widely as they should be.

10.30 am

I appreciate the comments made about the increase in spend in Scotland, and I am pleased about that. People are recognising not only the glorious scenery of Scotland, but, for example, the brutalist architecture of the zoology building in Aberdeen; it is not just the hills and glens of Scotland being seen on the big screen, as well as the small screen.

The Minister said that public sector broadcasters are comfortably exceeding their quotas for spend in various nations. If a quota is being comfortably exceeded, it is probably not a good enough quota. I feel that we all agree that it would be better if the benefit was spread, so perhaps it would be useful to at least discuss with the broadcasters how to stretch that, and to see if there could be greater commitment to do more across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the far-flung reaches of England that are not within a couple of hours’ drive of the M25. However, I will not press the issue. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Stephanie Peacock: I beg to move amendment 19, in clause 1, page 3, line 13, at end insert—

“including education, entertainment, music, arts, science, sports, drama, comedy, religion and other beliefs, social issues, matters of international significance or interest and matters of specialist interest.”

This amendment would add detailed description of the range of genres which Ofcom must report on whether the public service broadcasters have made available.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clause stand part.

Clauses 2 and 7 stand part.

New clause 1—*Delivery of public service content on relevant television services*—

“After section 264A of the Communications Act 2003, insert—

264B Delivery of public service content on relevant television services

- (1) Ofcom must monitor the extent to which the public service remit for television in the United Kingdom is met in respect of relevant television services.
- (2) If Ofcom considers that the public service remit for television in the United Kingdom is not being met in respect of such services, it may set whatever programming quotas it considers necessary to ensure that the remit is met.
- (3) For the purposes of this section, “relevant television services” means—

- (a) the television broadcasting services provided by the BBC;
- (b) the television programme services that are public services of the Welsh Authority (within the meaning of section 207);
- (c) every Channel 3 service;
- (d) Channel 4;
- (e) Channel 5.”

This new clause would give Ofcom powers to measure the delivery of public service content on the linear services of the public service broadcasters, and set quotas if it considered the current level to be unsatisfactory.

Stephanie Peacock: On the whole, I am pleased to welcome the clause, which looks to simplify the public service remit, and to allow broadcasters to contribute to the remit with programmes that are made available on a wider range of services, including their on-demand service.

Clause 1 makes an important attempt to simplify the public service remit. Currently, the remit consists of a set of purposes that public service television must fulfil in accordance with a different set of public service objectives. The Bill condenses those requirements, so that the PSB remit is considered fulfilled when providers together make available a wide range of audiovisual content that meets the needs and satisfies the interests of as many different audiences as possible. A list is then provided, setting out the types of content that can form part of such a contribution.

That simplification is, on the whole, a welcome idea, and the inclusion of minority language services and children’s programming in the remit is great to see. However, the Voice of the Listener & Viewer, the Media Reform Coalition, the International Broadcasting Trust and others have expressed concerns that the simplified format has been coupled with the removal of requirements for public service broadcasters to provide specific genres of content.

When the Government first released the “Up next” White Paper that preceded the Bill, it made no mention of references to genres such as entertainment, drama, science and religion being removed from the remit, as they have been in the Bill. Content from those genres is important to people, and has huge societal and cultural value. If we remove explicit reference to them in the remit, there is a risk of less programming in those areas, particularly where they might be of less immediate commercial benefit. That is surely contradictory to the aim of having a public service broadcaster, which is fundamentally to ensure that public benefit is balanced against purely commercial interests.

The change is especially concerning at a time when, commercially, there is more choice than ever before in popular genres such as entertainment and drama, and less choice when it comes to dramas that provide diversity and difference for UK audiences. This would not be the first time that a reduction in requirements for PSB content led to a decline in culturally valuable content. As the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport highlighted in its report on the draft Bill, Ofcom identified how provision of non-animation programming for children became limited outside the BBC after the quota for children’s programming was removed.

I am pleased that the public service broadcasters have issued reassurances that the new remit will not significantly impact programming in the removed areas, and I am

glad that, since its draft version, a small protection has been added in the Bill to secure

“an appropriate range of genres”.

However, the removal of references to specific genres is still a concern, even after these reassurances and amendments. Indeed, if there is no clear specification of what counts as a “range of genres”, there is no guarantee that Ofcom will monitor the amount of content in each of the removed genres. Without such monitoring, falls in provision will be difficult to identify and rectify.

It is with that in mind that I proposed amendment 19, which would ensure that public service content continues to be provided across a range of genres, including entertainment, drama, science, and religion and other beliefs. Further to that, in combination with the powers in clause 10, the amendment would enable Ofcom to properly monitor those genres and make proper suggestions, where content is lacking.

I want to be clear that this addition is not intended to change the nature of the remit, so that the issue would be covered by the PSBs as a whole. I understand that it is not, and should not be, the responsibility of each and every individual public service broadcaster to hit each and every one of the remit requirements, and that is no different for the provision of genres. For example, ITV provides nations’ and regions’ news in a way that means it is not realistic for it to meet some of the other obligations; those are then covered by the likes of Channel 4 and Channel Five, which do not provide the same level of news coverage. That sort of balance works well, and I want to explicitly state that I do not propose that every genre would have to be addressed by every provider. I hope that, bearing that in mind, the Minister can take on board what amendment 19 proposes. Simplifying the remit is a good idea, but not if it is done at the cost of the kind of content that sets our public service broadcasters apart.

I move on to the other major consequences of clause 1: the changes that allow content provided through a wider range of services to contribute to the remit. This change makes sense as viewing habits start to shift in a digital age. As the Government know, last year, the weekly reach of broadcast TV fell to 79%, down from 83% in 2021. That is the sharpest fall on record. Meanwhile, on-demand viewing increased, reaching 53 minutes a day this year. Having the flexibility to meet the remit through an on-demand programme service is reasonable, given that this pattern is likely to continue for years to come.

In the meantime, online content can also help to deliver content to niche audiences. Indeed, ITV estimates that 3.8 million households in the UK are online only, meaning that they have no traditional broadcast signal. However, it is important to note that, while habits are shifting, a number of households still do not have internet access. Having previously served as shadow Minister for Digital Infrastructure, I have engaged extensively with telecoms providers and organisations such as the Digital Poverty Alliance, all of which have shared their concern and acknowledged that not everyone has access to or can afford a broadband connection. There is a movement to ensure that social tariffs and lower-cost options are available, as well as to improve the roll-out of gigabit-capable technology, so that as many people as possible can be connected.

Regardless of those efforts, there has been and will remain a section of the population for whom broadcast signal is their sole connection to media, news, entertainment and information. It is incredibly important that those people, who are likely to be older citizens, families in rural areas and those struggling with bills as a result of the cost of living crisis, are able to access public service content as usual on linear channels, delivered through a broadcast signal. That case has been argued extensively by the campaign group Broadcast 2040+, which is made up of a number of concerned organisations. We recognise that the direction of travel is that people are watching content online more than ever, but that does not need to mean diminishing content on broadcast linear services, especially where that content caters to a local audience. That belief goes beyond this Bill and ties into wider worries about the impact that a digital-first strategy will have on traditional means of broadcasting, and, as a result, on audiences.

It has been four months, for example, since the BBC decided to replace some of its vital and unique local radio programming with an increase in online journalism, which has been to the detriment of local communities up and down the country. That decision was made without consulting the communities that would be impacted, and it could easily be repeated in other areas, since there is nothing to stop many more services being axed in favour of online services. This is not to say that there will be no decline in audiences in the years to come as the rise in online content consumption continues, but no co-ordinated effort has been made to ensure that our infrastructure is ready for a mass movement toward online broadcasting. That effort must be made before such a transition takes place. The consequences for the internet capacity that will be needed to cater for spikes, and the implications for national security in a world where TV and radio are no longer methods of communication between the Government and the public, have not been thought through. As long as that remains the case, we must think of those for whom internet connection is not an option. That is why I tabled a new clause to protect the provision of high-quality content on linear services.

The new clause would introduce a safeguard, so that if Ofcom believes that the delivery of PSB content on broadcast linear services is less than satisfactory, it will have the powers needed to set a quota—to ensure that a certain proportion of public service content remains available to linear audiences through a broadcast signal. In short, quality content should remain available to those families up and down the country who rely on their TV rather than watch online content. The new clause makes no prescriptive requirements on how that should be achieved; nor does it set a specific figure for how many programmes must be available to a certain percentage of people. It simply allows Ofcom to monitor the effect of the Bill, which allows PSB content to be delivered online, and allows Ofcom to intervene with such measures as it sees fit if the new remit has unintended negative outcomes.

As well as encouraging him to accept the new clause, I urge the Minister to update us on whether the Government intend to support linear broadcasting beyond 2034. If they do not, what plans are they putting in place to manage a possible transition away from linear services? We have simply not heard enough about this from the

[Stephanie Peacock]

Government, and I would be grateful to hear today what the Department's position is and what work it is already doing on this.

Finally, I come to the rules that state that for on-demand content to count toward the remit, it must be available for at least 30 days. In the draft Bill, public service broadcasters including ITV and the BBC raised concerns that that minimum period was not appropriate for every type of content, because on-demand rights in certain areas, especially sport, news and music, often mean that such programmes are available for limited periods. It is welcome that those concerns are recognised in the Bill, and that an exemption is being introduced for news programmes and coverage of sporting events. Did the Department consider adding programmes covering music events to the list of exemptions? If it did, why was the decision made not to do so? Overall, I support a simplified remit, and the change in clause 1 that allows online content to count toward the remit, but further safeguards around certain genres of content and linear television are needed to protect against unintended or negative consequences.

I am broadly happy with clauses 2 and 4, which are consequential to clause 1. Clause 2 updates Ofcom's reporting requirements to reflect the changes being made; likewise, clause 7 makes consequential changes to section 271 of the Communications Act 2003. On those issues, I refer Members to my remarks on clause 1 as a whole.

Kirsty Blackman: I want to pick up a couple of points relating to clause 1 that I have not mentioned yet, but that the shadow Minister has mentioned.

I am happy to support the provision in new clause 1 that would ensure that public service content is available on linear TV, but I do not think it goes far enough, and it does not add much to Ofcom's requirements. The same concerns arise around matters such as "significant prominence". The Minister said from the Dispatch Box on Second Reading that the move away from broadcast terrestrial television would not be made until the overwhelming majority of people in the UK were able to access television by other means. I hope that is a fairly accurate version of what he said. I am concerned that the phrase "overwhelming majority" is also not specific enough, although I appreciate the direction of travel that the Minister was indicating with that remark. My concern, like the shadow Minister's, about the potential removal of terrestrial TV and non-digital output is for the groups who would be significantly disadvantaged by that loss.

10.45 am

The people who are the most likely to be able to access television only through digital TV are those who are already marginalised, struggling or in more vulnerable groups. The impact is greater on rural communities throughout these islands, not just in Scotland, where access to fast enough broadband can be significantly more difficult. People who are struggling financially are less likely to be able to afford the broadband speeds required. Even with social tariffs, which are important, the ability to access fast broadband, so that people can actually stream a TV show to a reasonable quality at the

same time as their child looks at Facebook is more difficult for families who are already financially vulnerable, and in the cost of living crisis, that struggle is unlikely to abate any time soon. The fact that there is no firm, clear quota commitment to the preservation of the ability to watch free-to-air on terrestrial television is therefore important. Will the Minister be more explicit about how he will ensure that "overwhelming majority" does not mean everybody except those living in extreme poverty or in rural communities, or who are at the older end of the age spectrum, or digitally excluded as a result of their lack of education and ability to access digital technology? The Minister is talking about an overwhelming majority, but if the 5% who are left unable to get access are in those marginalised groups, would that be a problem for him? Would he consider that the "overwhelming majority" remit or quota was filled if those groups were still excluded?

On that point, as one who grew up in a house where we had only terrestrial television but a lot of my friends had access to Sky and cable, children's TV programmes on public service broadcasters were really important educationally. They are important for a lot of families. For some, that is the main way that children access educational TV shows and content. They may not have fast enough internet to be able to watch YouTube, for example—although YouTube itself is not very good. Things such as CBeebies and the kid's TV shows on the main BBC channels viewable on Freeview are important and make a difference. If we end up moving away from terrestrial linear broadcasting and families are further disadvantaged as a result of the Government's decision to withdraw provision, that will be increasing and entrenching inequalities.

I am still unclear about the 30 days. I appreciate the requirement, but are the 30 days consecutive? Is it 30 days from the day of broadcast or within a year of the day of broadcast? It may be clearer in the Bill, but if the Minister can explain it more clearly than I can understand it from reading the Bill as drafted, that would be incredibly helpful. I do not have the firmest of views on this; 30 consecutive days or 30 days within a certain period from the broadcast date would be the best option. If it is 30 days over the course of a year, for example, and you can view the programme only every second Tuesday, that is deeply unhelpful and will not do anybody any good. If the Minister can provide clarity, that will be helpful.

We are also debating clauses 2 and 7 stand part. Like the shadow Minister, I think it is reasonable that they follow on from the provisions in clause 1.

Sir John Whittingdale: The past decade has seen a complete transformation in the way in which people access television. Ten years ago, streaming services barely existed; now, they are ubiquitous. That is why the Bill is so important in modernising our approach and, in particular, ensuring that the public service broadcasters continue to thrive in this new landscape.

Clause 1 amends section 264 of the Communications Act to create a modernised remit for public service broadcasting against which Ofcom must report at least every five years. The new remit replaces and simplifies the purposes and objectives of the current public service broadcasting system. That is set out in proposed new subsection (4), and it will be fulfilled when the public

service broadcasters provide a range of content that satisfies the interests of different audiences and is delivered in a way that meets the needs of those audiences.

Proposed new subsection (5) identifies the principal types of public service content that should form part of the PSBs' collective contribution to the remit, specifically news and current affairs, children's content and distinctively British content, as well as original, independent and regional productions. For the first time, regional and minority language content—content in Gaelic, Welsh, Scots, Ulster Scots, Irish and Cornish—is specified as contributing to the public service remit.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): In that list of protected genres, I note the exception of music. Does the Minister agree that the BBC has an integral part to play in the UK's cultural landscape as the biggest commissioner of music and the biggest employer of musicians in the country? It has a proud cultural record, from the discovery of new artists and the Proms to innovative, brilliant cultural BBC radio programming at home and abroad. It is vital that all that is protected under amendment 19.

Sir John Whittingdale: While I completely share the hon. Lady's love of music and recognition of the importance that broadcasters play in the promotion of music, the purpose of the new remit is to remove the specific naming of individual genres and instead put a requirement for them to be a "broad range". In my view, that would certainly include music. Ofcom will have a duty to ensure that the broad range of different aspects of public service broadcasting is delivered, and there is a backstop power. If it is felt that broadcasters are failing to deliver sufficient quantities of the specific genre, it is possible for us to pass additional regulation to include a named additional genre. While music is no longer specifically mentioned in the remit, I am confident that that will not lead to any reduction. Indeed, the broadcasters have made clear that they have no intention of reining back on specific genres just because they do not appear in the legislation.

On how content is delivered, the Bill updates the present system so that on-demand provision contributes to the fulfilment of the remit, but to count towards the remit, as has been mentioned, it has to be online for at least 30 days. The only exceptions to the requirement are news and the coverage of live sports, which are regarded as being of instantaneous value, but value that perhaps diminishes over a short space of time. We thought about including music, but I think the value of music lasts beyond 30 days—I am as keen to see a performance from Glastonbury today as I was at the time it was broadcast. It would therefore not be appropriate to include it as one of the exemptions to the requirement. The Government recognise that it is valuable for audiences to be able to access news and current affairs in a traditional format, and the Bill accounts for that by ensuring our public service broadcasters are still subject to quotas that require them to deliver news via traditional linear television. Taken together, these changes will help ensure that our regulatory regime keeps up with modern viewing methods.

Clause 2 updates section 264A of the Communications Act in the light of the new public service remit for television. Section 264A describes how Ofcom, when

undertaking a review under section 264, should consider the contribution that other media services, including those provided by commercial broadcasters, make to the remit. The changes made by the clause are needed to implement the new public service remit.

Clause 7 makes changes consequential to clause 1. In particular, it amends section 271 of the Communications Act to apply the existing delegated powers in the section to the new public service remit, as opposed to the old purposes and objectives. That will ensure that, should there be a need, the Secretary of State can by regulation modify the public service remit in clause 1, as I was suggesting to the hon. Member for Luton North. I therefore commend the clauses to the Committee.

I understand the intention behind amendment 19, which is to ensure that the range of content shown is broad. We want that too, but we feel that no longer specifying a large number of individual genres simplifies the current system of public service broadcasting. We want to set a clear and simple vision for the industry that narrows in on what it means to be a public service broadcaster, but we do not see that that need comes at the expense of breadth. We continue to want to see a wide range of genres, and we believe the clause achieves that.

Kirsty Blackman: The Minister said it is possible by regulation to amend the list to add genres. Could he write to me with information about the process by which that could happen? How can amendments be made to add genres to the list, should that become necessary?

Sir John Whittingdale: Ofcom has a duty to monitor the delivery of the remit, and that includes satisfying itself that there is a sufficient range of genres and that there has not been a diminution of a particular genre that would be considered part of the public service remit. If, however, it becomes clear that broadcasters are failing in any area, there is a backstop power that allows the Secretary of State to add a specific genre to the remit. We believe that safeguard is sufficient to ensure continued delivery of the range of genres that the hon. Lady and I want to see.

Sarah Owen: I thank the Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous with his time. At what point would the backstop power be initiated? Is there a standard below which the Government believe the backstop should be initiated? If so, why not just lay it out on the face of the Bill?

Sir John Whittingdale: The position is that Ofcom has a duty to monitor the delivery of genres, and it produces a report on that. If it becomes clear, and Ofcom states, that the public service broadcasters are failing to deliver aspects of the remit, section 271 of the Communications Act, which is amended by clause 7, provides a delegated power to amend the remit following the report by Ofcom. Proposed new section 278A allows for the creation of additional quotas for underserved content areas. Those powers are designed to address any underserved content areas that have been identified, and could be used to add a specific genre if that proved necessary.

Kirsty Blackman: On that point, for clarity in advance of the remaining stages of this Bill, it would be really helpful if the Minister wrote a letter explaining that. He has mentioned both that the Secretary of State would have the power to vary and to initiate the backstop, but also the power to create regulations, and I am not entirely clear about which it is. It would be great if he just laid that out to us in a letter.

11 am

Sir John Whittingdale: I am very happy to provide the hon. Lady with a written briefing on exactly how the powers can be used.

New clause 1 would put a specific duty on Ofcom to report on how public service broadcasters deliver the public service remit. We agree that that is very important, but we think that the Bill already achieves that. Clause 1 amends section 264 of the Communications Act to put a responsibility on Ofcom to review and report on the extent to which public service broadcasters fulfil the remit. Regarding the specific requirement of delivery of the remit on linear, I think that we are straying into the territory of debate on the next group, about how long viewers should be able still to rely on digital terrestrial television. I am very happy to debate that, but I think that discussion that is more appropriate to the next grouping.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North raised a specific question about how the measurement of the 30 days requirement should operate. I can assure her that the broadcaster would certainly not be able to pick out individual days and put them all together to make up that 30. It is 30 consecutive days starting from the day that the content is first made available.

I believe that the clauses that we are debating represent a modernisation that will ensure that public service content remains at the heart of our broadcasting landscape but is modernised to take account of the extraordinary transformations that are occurring. On that basis, I commend clauses 1, 2 and 7 to the Committee, but I would, I am afraid, be unable to support new clause 1 or, indeed, amendment 19.

Stephanie Peacock: I appreciate the Minister's comments on amendment 19, but it still remains the case that, without clear specifications as to what counts in the "range of genres", there is no guarantee that Ofcom will monitor the levels of content in each of the removed genres. Without such monitoring, it will be very difficult to identify whether there is a reduction and to rectify that. With that in mind, I would like to press amendment 19 to a vote.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 7, Noes 9.

Division No. 1]

AYES

Blackman, Kirsty	Peacock, Stephanie
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Western, Andrew
Efford, Clive	Williams, Hywel
Owen, Sarah	

NOES

Baynes, Simon	Butler, Rob
---------------	-------------

Collins, Damian
Foster, Kevin
Green, Chris
Hunt, Tom

Tuckwell, Steve
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wood, Mike

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

PUBLIC SERVICE REMITS OF LICENSED PROVIDERS

Kirsty Blackman: I beg to move amendment 35, in clause 3, page 7, line 15, at end insert—

“(c) which is broadcast via UHF frequencies that can be received by a minimum of 98.5% of the population of the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would amend the definition of public service for Channel 3 services and Channel 5 to include an obligation to broadcast via digital terrestrial television.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 36, in clause 3, page 7, line 32, at end insert—

“(d) which is broadcast via UHF frequencies that can be received by a minimum of 98.5% of the population of the United Kingdom.”

This amendment would amend the definition of public service for Channel 4 to include an obligation to broadcast via digital terrestrial television.

Amendment 37, in clause 15, page 17, line 35, at end insert—

“(c) after paragraph (c), insert—

“(d) provide for the broadcast of programmes for or on behalf of a Channel 3 licensee using the MPEG-2 or MPEG-4 digital video broadcasting standard via UHF frequencies that can be received by a minimum of 98.5% of the population of the United Kingdom.””

This amendment would amend the definition of public service for Channel 3 licensees to include an obligation to broadcast via digital terrestrial television.

Kirsty Blackman: We covered a little of this in the last debate, in relation to access to terrestrial television services. As I said, there is still significant digital exclusion in our society when it comes to those who access television services and public service broadcasts through non-digital means.

It is possible to do what I do, which is to access television entirely through digital means—I have not had an aerial for a significant time. We moved into our house in 2016 and I am not aware that we have ever watched terrestrial television there, but we are lucky enough to have and be able to pay for a fast broadband connection and to live in a city where we can access one; we are not in any of the excluded and more vulnerable groups that find it more difficult to access television through on-demand means. A significant number of people can still access TV only through terrestrial services.

The amendments are about trying to pin the Minister down on what he means by “an overwhelming majority”. This is about looking at the numbers: is 98.5% of the population the kind of figure that the Minister was thinking about when he said “overwhelming majority”, or did he mean 60% or 70%? I am in debt to my hon.

Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who, like me, has met Broadcast 2040+, which crafted these amendments. My hon. Friend is significantly more of a football fan than I am, and has specifically mentioned the fact that football viewing figures are higher for terrestrial TV than they are for subscription services. Removing access to terrestrial TV, which may happen at some point in the future and may need to happen at some point in the very distant future, will reduce the number of people able to access Scottish football. Therefore, in addition to the comments I was making about the educational provision available on television, I make the point that it is also important that there is the ability to view sport.

Yesterday in the Chamber, there was a ministerial update on the risk and resilience framework, which was published by the Government last year. Ministers have been at pains to state how much more transparency the framework enables than was the case previously. I appreciate the work that the Government are trying to do to update the national risk register, to ensure that it is as public as possible and that people are able to access this information. However, an incredibly important part of local resilience is being able to access up-to-date news, up-to-date and on-the-spot weather, and information when something significant happens.

I will give an example. Recently, there were significant floods in Brechin, which is just down the road from Aberdeen—although I am not sure that people in Brechin would want to be described in relation to Aberdeen; Brechin is a very lovely place in its own right and not just a neighbour of Aberdeen. People in Brechin saw really significant flooding, and a number of properties were evacuated. Without the ability to access information on what was happening through terrestrial TV or radio services, people would have been much less aware that the river was about to break its banks. If there is really significant wind—as there was, during the significant rain—accessing mobile phone masts, for example, is much more difficult. Terrestrial TV service masts, having been up for significantly longer, are significantly less likely to come down in the kinds of winds that we saw during Storm Arwen and Storm Babet, as weather events increase. In terms of resilience, it is important for people to be able to access that.

During the covid pandemic, people were glued to their television screens for updates about what was happening and the latest lockdown news. If some of our most vulnerable communities were struggling to access such content because, after the withdrawal of the terrestrial services, they did not have the broadband speeds necessary to watch television on demand, they would be less likely to be able to comply with and understand the law if another pandemic or national emergency happened.

It is important for the Government to know that they can reach the general population; that is how they could make the case for lockdown restrictions or ensure that people were aware of when the Queen sadly passed away last year. They can make those announcements and ensure people have the understanding and ability to know when significant national events have happened.

If people who are older, in poverty or otherwise digitally excluded are less likely to hear timeously about extreme weather or massive national events of incredible importance, then we further marginalise communities

that are already struggling. As I said, I appreciate the Minister using the term “overwhelming majority” but I am just not confident enough that—

Damian Collins: The hon. Lady should recognise that such switchovers are possible only when the technology supports it, which is a question of changing the distribution mechanism at some point. That can lead to more choice.

Take the village in Kent where I live. When we had to do the switchover in 2012, the consequence of turning off the analogue signal and replacing it with a digital one was that we could get Channel 5, which people would otherwise not have been able to get at all. With the improvement in infrastructure, some people may see a significant improvement in services, but only where that infrastructure is ready.

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate that and think it is important, but my point is about those who cannot get access and do not have the financial ability to do so. If we have a commitment to continue to provide terrestrial services and the legacy infrastructure, the providers of that infrastructure—the public service broadcasters—can continue to invest in it and not just say, “Well, the Government are going to allow us to turn it off in 2040 so there is no point in investing in it now. It has only got 17 years left to run, so we are just going to run the network down.” I am concerned that that may be the direction of travel.

Without a very clear commitment from the Government, I am worried that there will be a lack of investment in terrestrial services and that people will lose out. I would not want anybody to lose out on Channel 5 and I am very glad that people have access to it, but they need to have the choice. I would rather people had access to some public service broadcasting than none, which would be entirely possible if the digitally excluded could no longer access terrestrial TV services.

If the Minister made some really clear commitments today, that would be incredibly helpful. He may not be able to do that, in which case I may press some of the amendments. I will certainly be supporting the Labour party’s new clause. If the Minister cannot make more commitments, will he make clear the Government’s point of view about people likely to be excluded from taking part in a switchover, in relation to current investment in the network and investment to ensure that the network can last the next 15, 20, or 30 years? Would the Minister be happy to see that network diminish and for there to be a lack of investment so that services run down of their own accord or would he would prefer people to continue to be able to access them?

It would be great to have a little more clarity from the Government on the proposed direction of travel. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North and also Broadcast 2040+ for all the work that they do to try to ensure that marginalised groups can continue to access public service broadcasting.

11.15 am

Stephanie Peacock: As I outlined during the discussion about my new clause 1, it is incredibly important that we recognise the value of broadcast television services and ensure that they are available where needed, particularly when thinking about making public service content available to as many people as possible. Indeed, the

[Stephanie Peacock]

Government have themselves highlighted that millions of households in the UK still rely on broadcast television as their form of access to visual content—a trend expected to continue over the next decade.

Furthermore, unlike internet streaming services, PSB content on terrestrial TV does not require a strong broadband connection or rely on monthly subscription fees. Such content is primarily relied on by those already marginalised in society—people on the lowest incomes, people of an older age and those in isolated rural areas. There is a higher population of such people in Scotland given its increased rurality, island communities and comparatively older population, so I understand and support the reasons why the amendment has been tabled. It wants to ensure the future of terrestrial services for those who need them. That is particularly important because, as we have discussed, under the Bill on-demand content can now contribute to public service remits. That is the right move but it should come with safeguards for content on terrestrial TV, which is what my new clause seeks to address.

A host of implications are not being properly considered when digital-first plans are put forward in the Bill for broadcasting. If we move away from broadcast services prematurely, there will be huge implications for telecoms operators, who will have to handle unprecedented surges in internet traffic. For example, if everyone watched the World cup final online rather than on their broadcast TV, the infrastructure would need to be strong enough to carry that. Without due preparation and regulation, questions may arise about how that would be funded without costs being passed on to consumers and without raising bigger questions on topics such as net neutrality.

As we have discussed, there are also national security implications to moving away from broadcast infrastructure in its entirety. How would local and national Government communicate with the public if the internet was down due to an emergency situation? With all that in mind, we need to consider the future of our broadcasting landscape and the important role that terrestrial television will continue to play in the years to come.

I am unsure, however, whether the amendment is right to be so prescriptive in legislation about the percentage of the population who must be reached through digital terrestrial television, particularly given the rapid advances in technology taking place around us. There are already statutory obligations in the Broadcasting Act 1996 that feed into broadcast and multiplex licences, which require the likes of ITV to use DDT on the UHF frequencies to broadcast. Those obligations mean that 98.5% of the population are able to receive broadcast television.

However, although the current infrastructure broadly allows for 98.5% reach, I do not believe that is a precise enough figure or a stable enough measurement to warrant requiring it specifically in legislation; if the Bill wants to be future-proofed and recognise the importance of terrestrial television, I am not sure that quite strikes the balance. I hope the Minister takes on board the strength of feeling on this issue and seeks to ensure that the public service content remains available up and down the country. I also hope the Department puts a future plan in place that really considers the importance of broadcast services and of the certainty over the future that that could provide these services and the people who rely on them.

Sir John Whittingdale: I want first to make it clear that the Government remain committed to the future of digital terrestrial television. We absolutely accept that millions continue to rely on it. We have already legislated, as hon. Members know, to secure its continuity until at least 2034 through the renewal of the multiplex licences. Obviously, I understand that the Opposition would like to go further and give a commitment going beyond 2034, and the amendments are tabled with that purpose in mind.

I said “overwhelming majority” on Second Reading, because I do not want to be tied down to a specific figure, particularly when we are now looking 10 years ahead, but I repeat that it would be a brave Government who switched off DTT while there was still a significant number—even a small number—of people relying on it.

Stephanie Peacock: Since the Minister is not willing to commit to going further than 2034, will he outline when he will make a decision on whether he will extend it past 2034? If not—this is quite important—what plans are the Department putting in place to ensure any future transition takes place effectively?

Sir John Whittingdale: I am happy to say a little more about what the Department is doing. First, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North is absolutely right that broadband availability is one of the factors that would need to be taken into account. I also have ministerial responsibility at the moment for digital infrastructure, and I can confirm to her that the Government remain committed to the universal availability of gigabit broadband by 2030; if we achieve that target, that is one factor that will have been met. There is also the availability of low-cost tariffs, and I agree with her about the importance of those.

The hon. Lady also talked about resilience. Resilience is important, but it is worth bearing in mind that the Bilsdale transmitter fire was not that long ago—that took out DTT for a significant number of people for quite a few months. Every technology is subject to occasional risk, and that was a rather more dramatic one.

On getting vital messaging across, I gently say to Opposition Committee members that radio is, of course, available through a variety of different technologies as well as television.

Stephanie Peacock: The fire that the Minister referenced really outlined how important linear television is to many parts of the country. Actually, the further north we go, the more communities rely on it. In that particular case, I think that a prison was affected as well as a number of older people. It is a good example of how important terrestrial TV still is to many in the country.

Sir John Whittingdale: We completely recognise that terrestrial TV is important to many in the country. I was in my second incarnation as a Minister at the time of the Bilsdale fire, and I talked to Arqiva about the importance of restoring services as rapidly as possible. A very large number of people were left without the ability to access information, entertainment and all the things that people rely on television to provide.

Looking forward, as hon. Members may be aware the Secretary of State recently announced that the Department is going to carry out a new programme of work on the

future of television distribution. That includes a six-month research project working with a consortium led by the University of Exeter, looking at changing viewing habits and technologies. We have also asked Ofcom to undertake an early review on market changes that may affect the future of content distribution. I am very happy to keep the House updated on those. That will be looking at all the various factors that would need to be taken into account.

I make one final point about amendment 37. It puts a particular requirement on channel 3 licensees to use particular standards for compression technology. As with all technologies, the standards for television distribution will change over time. We want to ensure that there remains flexibility, so restricting channel 3 to a particular use of one technology would be severely limiting and actually be contrary to precisely what the Bill is designed to achieve.

Kirsty Blackman: On what the Minister just said about the report on the future of television provision being done and the timeline for decision making, does

he recognise my point that the degradation of the technology is possible if the Government do not make fairly early decisions—I am not talking about in the next three months—on whether they are going to extend it beyond 2034? Does he understand the importance of making a decision in fairly short order to ensure that broadcasters, for example in Arqiva, keep the technology running so that it stays viable beyond 2034 if necessary?

Sir John Whittingdale: As I say, we are committed to keeping the House updated about the research. I recognise the point, and my own expectation is that DTT will be around for quite some time to come. For the reasons I have explained, I am not able to accept the amendments. I hope that the Opposition will withdraw them.

11.25 am

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Mike Wood.)

Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

