



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

The Future of ‘Let’s Talk’

17 September 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

The Future of ‘Let’s Talk’

17 September 2009

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Johnston) BBC NI

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr McNarry):

We are joined again by Peter Johnston from the BBC to discuss the potential cancellation of ‘Let’s Talk’.

Mr Peter Johnston (BBC):

Let me clarify that, because there has been various comment on it. We are always refreshing our portfolio of output, as I said in my previous submission.

I will cut to the chase about what is happening with ‘Let’s Talk’: it is not being brought back in its current format. We will continue to provide the very important function that ‘Let’s Talk’

has performed, which is allowing members of the public to have direct engagement with politicians.

At present, ‘Spotlight’ is shown on Tuesday nights, and ‘Stormont Live’ is also shown when the House is sitting. ‘Hearts and Minds’ is shown on a Thursday, and that is when we opt out of ‘Question Time’, roughly once a month, to show ‘Let’s Talk’. We then have the ‘Politics Show’ on a Sunday. We are trying to tidy up the portfolio, because that is a lot of politics and current affairs programmes across one week. Such programmes are very important and popular with audiences in Northern Ireland, more so than anywhere else.

In the ‘Spotlight’ slot on a Tuesday night, we will continue to have studio-based shows. We are going to intersperse them into that slot where ‘Spotlight’ is currently shown. There will be some familiarity with the programme, because it will still be presented by Mark Carruthers, and there will still be politicians with a panel and the audience. The first show will be broadcast in mid-October, when you will be able to see what it is like for yourselves.

There will be a change to some of the formatting to refresh the programme and to give it a new dynamic. That strand has been running for a very long time. We are not bringing ‘Let’s Talk’ back as such; but we are going to effectively integrate it into the ‘Spotlight’ slot on a Tuesday night at 10.35 pm instead. That means, admittedly, that there will be fewer of those types of shows, because you could not physically fit as many in, otherwise it would stretch the schedule out too far. It will, however, be well-timed to the political cycle.

‘Let’s Talk’ was created and conceived at a time when there was no Assembly sitting. The new programming will include the key points of the business calendar of the Assembly. That means that ‘Spotlight’ can — as it always has done — be flexible and do studio-type shows, depending on the agenda.

Overall, current affairs output has expanded over the past number of years. For example, ‘Stormont Live’ was introduced, as was the ‘Politics Show’ on a Sunday. We have also introduced coverage of conferences, which we did not do before. Coming next is ‘Democracy Live’, which will be launched quite soon. It is a big, new investment by the BBC that will use the new technology of the web to video stream the activities of the various legislatures in a comprehensive new way. That will include, where possible, the activities of Committees such as

this, so that we can provide the audience with a proper, regular and deeper insight, somewhat unmediated in that sense, direct to the business that is being done.

In considering that portfolio as a whole, I would argue that we have got a much more diverse range of politics and current affairs television output than any other nation. We use Scotland and Wales as comparators quite often, because the way in which the BBC structures its services means that there is a richer portfolio of output in those places.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you for that clear explanation. It is proper and appropriate that the Committee registers its thanks to the BBC for ‘Stormont Live’. It serves a very useful purpose, and MLAs benefit directly from it. It is a good opportunity for them to make their opinions known on the spot.

We were disturbed at the prospect of ‘Let’s Talk’ not coming back, because we noticed that there was a younger participation in its audience. We thought that that was excellent, and that it made a change. We could see that young people were taking a general interest.

How do the audience figures of the programmes that you are maintaining — ‘Hearts and Minds’, the ‘Politics Show’ and ‘Spotlight’ — compare with the figures that ‘Let’s Talk’ had?

Mr Johnston:

It is quite difficult to make a like-for-like comparison, because one is shown on BBC 2 and one is shown at Sunday lunchtime. ‘Let’s Talk’ was and is undoubtedly popular, and that is not just to do with the audience figures. The BBC is often challenged about worrying about figures too much. ‘Let’s Talk’ is an example of trying to make the portfolio more seamless.

I agree with your point: I went along to the filming of ‘Let’s Talk’, and there was a good spread of younger participants. We want to ensure that we continue that as best we can with the new format. We are always happy to provide data on audience figures when we can. ‘Spotlight’ tends to have the highest audience per se, because of the nature of its slot, but ‘Let’s Talk’ would probably, on average, be next. ‘Hearts and Minds’ is primarily shown on BBC 2, and then repeated on BBC 1, and the ‘Politics Show’ is shown at lunchtime on a Sunday, so it cannot be directly compared with the others. All those programmes, including the ‘Politics Show’, when direct comparisons are made with the rest of the UK, are nearly always more popular in Northern

Ireland than anywhere else.

The Deputy Chairperson:

‘Let’s Talk’ lasted for more or less an hour. Are you going to devote the same time to the ‘Spotlight’ programme?

Mr Johnston:

Yes, it will still be an hour.

Miss McIlveen:

What will the change of format entail? Will it still be a panel discussion?

Mr Johnston:

The change is pretty cosmetic. It will still, primarily, be a panel of four or five politicians with a gathered audience of around 100. When I refer to changes, I mean the shape of the set and so on, as there are slightly different ways in which to format the programme. There are more of those types of programmes that involve questions. In agreeing and developing the change, my brief was to continue to have the ability to do that function and we did not want to lose the direct interaction between the audience and the politician. Many of the other shows are more mediated.

Miss McIlveen:

Have you considered whether the audience figures will be to your benefit by changing it from Thursday night to Tuesday night?

Mr Johnston:

We get a reasonable number of complaints about opting out of ‘Question Time’ once a month, and that is an advantage of moving it to Tuesday nights. On balance, Tuesday night would probably be a higher viewing night, just because of where it falls in the week. ‘Spotlight’ has performed very well over many years, so we know that there is a good audience there. Who knows with such things? We always depend on the audience choosing to watch, but I expect that Tuesday night will be a better slot.

The Deputy Chairperson:

‘Let’s Talk’ was shown at around 10.25 pm. Will ‘Spotlight’ be screened at that time?

Mr Johnston:

Yes, it will be at the same time.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you, Peter, for your synopsis. Can I be slightly controversial and ask whether there might be an overexposure to politics for the local audience here? Having said that, I am going to retreat again and say that I am delighted that you are going to give some coverage to the Committees, which has certainly been a bee in my bonnet. It is quite devastating for those of us who sit regularly on Committees for more three hours to go home and turn on the television to hear a journalist say that nothing much is happening at Stormont. My wife wants to know where I have been. *[Laughter.]*

There is a need to educate the public about what politicians are trying to do in politics here. Quite often, when one listens to some of the more popular radio programmes, the audience will come on with steam coming out of their ears, and make statements that show, quite clearly, that they do not have a clue about what is achievable here or what we can do here in local politics.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Are you asking when he is taking Nolan off the air?

Mr K Robinson:

No. I, unlike you, do not go on those programmes. I leave it to the stars.

It is obvious that we have discussions and people get het up about issues — and rightly so. However, we never seem to move on. For instance, the councils always get the blame for doing something for which the Department of the Environment, the Department for Regional Development or the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs is responsible. There never seems to be that education of the public. The public need to know about the responsibilities of each of the Departments. They sometimes ask whether we can do something, and we cannot because it is a power that lies at Westminster — much as we would like or not like to be able to do it, we are not in that position. Is there a chance to get such an element built into some of those programmes?

Mr Johnston:

It is an interesting point. I suppose that for the more politically astute and interested, a programme such as ‘Hearts and Minds’ can, sometimes, get into much more complex territory. However, with regard to the regular weekly or daily news, on topical daily radio, they perform certain functions, and it is hard to do some of the things that Ken referred to. However, we have a duty to look at our documentaries and other programmes to see whether something can be done.

Two documentaries are coming up in the autumn schedule. In one, Sir Gerry Robinson has had a look at the establishment of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland, which took more than a year to make. That programme tries to get under the surface of the challenges that the healthcare profession faces, its political structures, and so on. That can be done much more effectively with that kind of format, and people are given a genuine insight. Of course, our challenge, as always, in some of those more complicated but important areas, is to do it in a way that will engage with people, because if that does not happen, nothing is achieved.

We are also making a programme about education, in which we are bringing in some educational experts from around the UK and elsewhere to look at the challenges that are involved. Such documentary programmes can help somewhat.

Ultimately, we must strive for a better understanding in all our outputs. However, sometimes, that is a difficult. It is, though, important that that is at the heart of what we do.

The Deputy Chairperson:

What is ‘Democracy Live’?

Mr Johnston:

‘Democracy Live’ is a big project that is starting around the UK. The Committee will get more details on that quite soon. A pilot version will be available soon. It will stream the live activities of the Assembly and as many Committees as it physically can on the BBC news website. The only limitation will be the physical nature of it. I am afraid, Ken, that your wife will be able to find out where you are if she logs on to the website. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson:

So, is the reliance on Committees is down to ‘Democracy Live’, rather than anything that the

BBC is doing?

Mr Johnston:

We hope that that will create a sustaining feed that can also be used for other things.

Mr McCartney:

Will the setting for 'Let's Talk' be fixed or move about?

Mr Johnston:

As yet, that has not been decided. The studio in Belfast has already been specced for the first couple of programmes in the run. It is more likely that that setting will be used; however, we do want to try other locations, because it is good to go elsewhere every now and again. As you know, 'Let's Talk' and 'Question Time' already do that.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Peter, on behalf of the Committee, I thank you for being open and frank; we appreciate that, and we appreciate you giving us your time.

Mr Johnston:

Thank you.