

## **STATEMENT BY THE GSLP/LIBERAL OPPOSITION**

**2 March 2010**

**25/2010**

### **THE FUTURE OF BROADCASTING**

The Opposition has taken time to consider the position paper issued by the GSD government on the future of GBC.

In order to ensure that the Opposition's reaction was accurate, this press release has not been issued until after the answers in the Parliament to the questions set down by the Leader of the Opposition and followed up by the Spokesperson for Broadcasting (Mr Picardo) on this subject.

### **NON-PUBLICATION OF REPORT**

The Opposition condemns the GSD Government for refusing to publish the full report into GBC prepared by Allan King. This report has cost the taxpayer £50,000 and should be made public so that everyone in Gibraltar can then make a judgement over whether the recommendations extracted by the Government, are the best solution for GBC or not. Similarly, the Audience Survey which was carried out some 14 months ago (which cost an additional £70,000) and which is referred to in the King Report should also be made public.

The Opposition believes that it is an insult to the democratic process that this report commissioned by the Government and paid for by the taxpayer should remain secret, when the implementation of it will require further public spending. It was indeed shameful to listen to Joe Holliday in Parliament insisting the Government will not make the report available even to the present Board of GBC or to the employees of the Corporation, but not offering any reason or explanation whatsoever for this decision.

### **LOOKING FOR SCAPEGOATS**

On the basis of the recommendations of the Government alone, the Opposition cannot be in a position to gauge whether what is being recommended is the best way forward. What certainly can be said is that some of those recommendations are not new and have been raised by the staff side with management on innumerable occasions and that nothing ever happened. We believe that there is enough talent and professionalism within the Corporation for it to develop if the resources to do this are made available, and that it is wrong for the Government's position paper to make references such as there being some "deadwood" within

the staff, or refer to a “job for life” culture to try and find scapegoats for the shortcomings of GBC. Furthermore, the Opposition fails to understand why the Government refer to the salary structure at GBC being analogued to the BBC in UK, but then they refuse to say in Parliament which posts they refer to. We take note that in a recent Viewpoint programme on GBC, the present Acting General Manager, Mr Stephen Cumming, said that there was presently no one in post who enjoyed an analogue with BBC pay grade equivalent and that this had already been the case for the past 6 years! This explains why Mr Holliday refused to provide in Parliament any answers to the questions from the Leader Opposition on how many posts were analogued to BBC grades.

## **ROTATING MANAGEMENT**

The Government, in its wisdom, decided three years ago to recommend to the Board of GBC that it should not replace the outgoing General Manager and to keep a rotating management at the top whilst it Commissioned and studied the King Report. Despite this being a manifestly bad move for GBC, the Board accepted the recommendation. This temporary rotating management has regrettably contributed to the decline in the recent fortunes of the Corporation since there could be no proper leadership provided under those circumstances and even trivial decisions have had to be referred to the Board. We believe that this state of limbo at GBC has had a detrimental effect and that the Government cannot shirk its responsibility for this since they have been dragging their feet in coming up with this position paper which they now say will take some years to implement.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL UPDATE**

There is definitely a need to bring GBC into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technologically. Moving to digital is now an international requirement and is long overdue. We did not need a report to tell us this since even small TV stations on the other side of the frontier have gone digital. What the recommendations do not say is what the initial infrastructural cost will amount to or the kind of increase to the annual subsidy that the Government is thinking of. Without this information being made available there is no General Manager or Chief Executive that can prepare a comprehensive business plan on the way forward.

## **INDEPENDENCE OF GBC**

The Opposition also considers that the recommendations of the Government fail to address a highly important matter which is of concern to a wide range of people; the independence of GBC. We believe that it is time for the method of appointment to the Board to be changed and that a more representative system be introduced to ensure that there is no de facto ability for any Government to control the Corporation. The proposal at present is for the Government to continue to appoint the new proposed Board of Governors and this is

unacceptable to the Opposition. There have been recent instances, since the GSD came to power, where this matter has manifested itself; the coverage of the referendum over the New Constitution and the coverage of the interventions of the Leader of the Opposition at the UN when the Chief Minister has chosen not to go. These are not theoretical issues but actually very real issues affecting the journalistic output of the Corporation and therefore the quality of our democracy.

In fact it could not be clearer that the GSD government seeks to control the Board of GBC than by the way that Mr Caruana has more or less told the Board of GBC that it should appoint Mr Alan King as its first CEO when that post is created. Although the Chief Minister has not said so in so many words, the statement he made in an interview with Stephen Neish was to the effect that he expected the Board of GBC to do as he said. His exact words were as follows:

*“I mean the government does not chose the chief executive officer of GBC, that is a matter for its board, the government is making a proposal to the board of GBC which I hope the GBC board will favourably consider in the context that the proposals is made, in other words, as an essential part of the implementation of this change.”*

Moreover the Chief Minister made clear in the Parliament that in respect of the Board of GBC, he more or less expected them to do as he / the GSD government required. In an exchange in Parliament, in supplementary questions and answers to Question 256 of 2009, Mr Caruana said the following:

**HON J J BOSSANO:**

*...So what the Chief Minister is confirming is that, in fact, obviously the Government think the Board is sensible if the Board say yes to what the Government want. But independent of that, is he confirming that the Board is free to take a different view even though the Government might not consider it sensible? I am asking specifically whether there is that freedom of action available to the Board of GBC?*

**HON CHIEF MINISTER:**

*Strictly speaking, yes. Now, I do not suppose it is any different than it was in his days. The Board of GBC that looks to the Government, and indeed they might cease to exist, because there is no guarantee that the new GBC will have a Board of the sort that it has now. But the Board of GBC, who support the Government's initiative in a review and restructure and a reform of GBC, is sensibly and, despite having autonomies secured to it by statute, nevertheless does not wish to impede what is the full extent and scope of the possible reform of GBC. Therefore, the Government are in the driving seat of the future shape of GBC. Not least because it will require legislation that will*

*need to be brought to this House, and because it all has to be funded by the Government, and therefore, there is editorial independence by GBC, perhaps more than there has ever been in the past. But that does not mean that the Government are uninvolved in the resourcing, in the financial and in the reform aspects of GBC, just as happens in the UK with the BBC and in Spain with state-owned television channels. So the answer is that if the Board of GBC were suddenly to decide to ignore the Government's advice and proceed, it would be a regrettable measure which will certainly not help the reform of GBC and the Government do not expect it to do so...*

## **COMMENTS**

*Opposition Spokesman for Broadcasting, Fabian Picardo, had this to say:*

*"It is an affront to the principles of parliamentary democracy that the Government should commission this report with public money and then refuse to put these into the public domain despite the requirement that more public money be expended in its implementation. The Opposition cannot, under these circumstances make a reasoned judgement over whether what is being proposed, as a package, is the best way forward for GBC because we haven't got all the facts at our disposal as the Government have. There are certainly aspects of the recommendations which we object to and which we think have a political orientation or objective; that there should be an attempt to pin the blame of past shortcomings at GBC on the staff; that it should give the impression that GBC should move towards a more commercial environment when the opposite is true; that a perception is created that no-one was aware of the leaps in technology needed until Allan King came along and that the recommendations do nothing to safeguard the independence of the Corporation and leave themselves open to the control of the Corporation by the Government. The GSD Government is addressing the issues of GBC as it does everything else, trying to steamroll its own policies without concern to the views of others and keeping vital information away from the public to limit the criticism that can be made of their own recommendations. It is a shameful state of affairs because GBC is the public broadcaster and should be answerable to the community; it does not belong to Peter Caruana and should not be solely accountable to him or his Government. In order to increase that accountability, we make a positive commitment now that in Government we will publish the King Report in its entirety."*

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