

Why Britain needs a global vision;
LABOUR'S LEADING COMMUNICATIONS EXPERT ARGUES THAT THE
GOVERNMENT MUST ACT SWIFTLY TO MAINTAIN A BROADCASTING
SERVICE THAT IS THE ENVY OF THE WORLD

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COMPARED with great political issues, such as mass unemployment, rising crime and the problems in our schools, the future of Britain's media - television, radio and Press - might seem unimportant.

But how would people feel if, by the end of the decade, their favourite sitcoms were being replaced by cheap pap, if Christmas viewing was filled with old, hand-me-down films, and good reporting of local news could not be found on either TV or radio?

Up to now, we have been spoiled. It has become a cliché to say that Britain's television is the envy of the world, but the statement is no less true for that. No television organisation anywhere has a finer reputation than the BBC. The regional character of ITV is its most precious asset, keeping alive local programme-making and keeping London bias at bay.

Even Britain's much criticised Press - national and local - keeps us interested, informed and entertained to a high standard. When a favourite newspaper closes, a chunk is taken out of our lives.

Yet, a media revolution is taking place which threatens financial ruin for all but the strongest newspapers and which is transforming the face of British television.

Whether this transformation is for good or ill, and whether British values and language - not to mention British investment and jobs - will have survived this revolution in ten years' time depends on decisions made by the Government and Parliament now.

Driving the media revolution are technological changes unforeseen even five years ago. As a result, Britain's hitherto industrially-cocooned and highly-regulated broadcasters are facing a future in which airwaves are being created almost without boundaries, and barriers to those airwaves are disappearing overnight as a result of new digital technology.

High-performance cable and satellite systems, as well as fancy devices to create new ways of charging for TV, mean that households with the appropriate receiver and de-coder can have access to hundreds of new television channels. Whereas, once, broadcasting frequencies were scarce, they are to become super-abundant with the promise of a 500-channel world before the year 2000.

And that's not all. The telephone is getting in on the act. On the way are dial-up video-services where consumers will be able to choose any film from a huge library and have it sent to them directly over the telephone wire and on to their TV.

We are entering a new era of the all-purpose television screen, when it will be used not only for entertainment but for home shopping and home baking, for universities of the air, for access to data bases - like the popular Minitel system operating already in France - and even for electronic job hunting.

This multi-media jamboree is creating huge business opportunities. Corporate giants are already jockeying for position in the new multi-media market.

But the closest to home these opportunities have come for Britain, so far, is in Rupert Murdoch - of Sun and Sky fame - linking his television, news and Hollywood interests in a far-reaching, multi-billion pound global entertainment service.

It's time for the rest of Britain's media industry to catch up with these dramatic and rapid changes. And to do so, the Government must accept that new laws for regulating broadcasting can be so quickly overtaken by technology that they are often out of date by the time the Queen has signed on the dotted line.

Recently the Government recognised that with an ITV system based on 15 different regional companies, commercial television was too fragmented to take advantage of the multi-media revolution.

A change in the rules created by the 1990 Broadcasting Act now allows ITV companies to merge, as long as they hold no more than two regional television licences and do not flout the important programme conditions laid down when these licences were issued. As a result, London's Carlton TV is merging with Central Television, and Granada is trying to gain control of London Weekend Television.

But those are only the opening shots in the bidding war - and only the start of likely further changes in the media rule book.

At present, the law prevents newspaper publishers from owning more than 20 per cent of an ITV company, despite the natural business alliances that can be built up between the two. And despite the fact that Rupert Murdoch, an American citizen, has been allowed, through a legal loophole, to accumulate ownership of 35 per cent of Britain's national newspaper sales and control the 20-plus channel BSkyB, which will soon be bigger than the whole of ITV put together.

This muddle needs to be sorted out by the Government. If Murdoch cannot be beaten - and there are many who believe that his media holdings need to be cut down to size - we should encourage more British media companies to grow, compete, and give Mr Murdoch a harder run for his mega-bucks.

But while bigger players and competitive strength are the key to Britain becoming more prominent on the international media stage, there are dangers that, if national newspaper and broadcasting companies become too busy buying into each other, control of the media will pass into fewer and fewer hands.

That would mean a less varied, less distinctive and less independent media at home.

A free and diverse media is the lifeblood of Britain's democratic system, and this would come under even greater strain than at present if business interests were given a free hand at the expense of journalists and programme-makers.

For these reasons, Parliament needs to agree a framework of regulation that gives adequate power to the Mergers and Monopolies Commission to prevent excessive concentration of media ownership, and give more teeth to the Independent Television Commission to ensure that programme standards and political impartiality are maintained throughout ITV.

Cable and satellite broadcasting need to be brought into this framework, too, although European rather than national action is inevitably required to tackle these issues properly.

Vision, business sense and creative freedom are all needed if Britain is to succeed in the new media world.

Our universally commercial language and creative talent offer huge employment and trade opportunities for Britain. At present, though, we have a system of regulating the media which bears more than a passing resemblance to a camel designed by a committee, presided over by a government which, like King Canute, is trying desperately to stop its policies dissolving as the seas of technological change and global competition lap around them.

If John Major and his ministers could get this issue right, there would at least be something to thank them for in years to come. But time is running out.