

SCOTLAND'S TELEVISION: HALFWAY HOME?

Ian Bell

THE PROSPECT of 1988's European Year of Film and Television had about as much impact on Scottish Television viewers as the average public information film. The underlying assumption of the year, that indigenous broadcasting is under threat from a flood of US product, is obvious (not to say ironic) enough to leave most of us cold.

In Scotland we have had little enough broadcasting of our own over the years. Traditionally Scottish Television, Grampian, BBC Scotland and Border have been the out-stations of English metropolitan producers and the country subsists on a diet of 'foreign' TV, from London or the US.

People who talk about the hegemony of US television tend to forget that the power of American producers has nothing to do with the size of their industry. Conversely, while Scotland supports TV stations it is regarded as being too small to sustain a TV service. We are, both literally and figuratively, a client state.

Put it this way; in the late 20th century television is perhaps the single most powerful medium for the shaping and projection of national culture and identity – if you are not on TV you do not exist. Yet in the year to March 1987, Scottish Television supplied (or was allowed to supply) only 2.5 percent of the 3,492 hours of networked programmes shown on ITV while Grampian supplied 0.7 percent. The figures for the BBC are little better. Scotland, with 10 percent of the UK population, earns only a 3.2 percent 'representation' at a time when our political distinctiveness has never been more marked.

Channel Four with special remit to serve minorities, fails the largest minority of all. They get £15 million of income from Scottish Television and Grampian and 10 percent of audience, but commissions to Scots about Scots amount to only 0.75 percent of production budget at a guess.

The Scottish broadcasting industry, meanwhile, is worth 2,000 jobs and our indigenous broadcasters carry a greater burden of responsibility in the areas of language, culture, religion, sport and education than their counterparts south of the Border. Scottish Television, for that matter, is the only major media outlet in the country which is Scottish-owned.

Twenty years ago Stuart Hood wrote an article entitled 'The Backwardness of Scottish Television' which depicted a broadcasting landscape scarred by a legacy of BBC cowardice in the face of authority at a time when the Canadian Lord Thomson was, not to put too fine a point on it, looting STV. Hood demanded more documentaries in the Grierson mould and more 'realistic' drama. He wrote: 'Both on a popular and on a higher creative level regional accents must be heard.' He concluded that 'a radicalisation of Scottish life in all areas' was the key to the development of Scottish Television.

It was not an encouraging picture. Yet twenty years on, if you should chance to talk to the people who run TV in London, you would be forgiven for thinking that little or nothing has changed. Michael Grade, the man who runs Channel Four, told this writer recently that Scottish independent producers 'moan' constantly about lack of access yet fail to generate sufficient programme ideas. Scottish commercial stations, which complain in similar terms, gather much advertising revenue from his channel, he suggested, and their grievances were not worth considering. More startlingly, he thought that SC4, the Welsh version of Four, was necessary and justifiable because of threats to that country's language and culture; similar considerations did not apply to Gaelic!

The real worry is that there is little or nothing that Scottish programme makers can do about such attitudes. Scottish Television recently won for itself a place on the ITV controllers' group representing the ten 'regional' companies in a network dominated by right of the Big Five who are fighting a rearguard action to defend their privileged position. Winning more access to the UK network can be very rewarding in terms of programme variety and production jobs. The extra access won in the last year allowed STV to double programme sales to £11 million. Its 'fair share' would be double that – enough to create hundreds of new jobs.

Politics aside, it is the demands of the networks which cripple Scottish broadcasting. With their own market too small to generate revenue for programme makers, the ITV companies must serve and protect Scotland while touting their wares to an English audience.

Nevertheless, Scottish broadcasting has changed immeasurably since Stuart Hood composed his critique. The very existence of independent producers is beginning, slowly, to establish a continuity of production and skills – a nascent industry, in other words. Both the BBC and Scottish have demonstrated, if only from time to time, that they can make programmes of quality which both reflect their origins and satisfy the networks, whether they be Tutti Fruitti or Taggart. Cable, meanwhile, is slowly extending its tentacles in Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

It is not going too far to suggest that even in their news reporting the

Scottish stations are beginning to achieve a style and an attitude which reflects the country's political condition and marks them out from their complacent and slavish English counterparts. It is no accident that the troubled Secret Society series, which so provoked Downing Street, was made in Glasgow.

Downing Street has a knack of hitting back, however. It seems more than likely that the hard-won gains of Scottish broadcasting over the past twenty years will be forfeited if plans for 'deregulation' and satellite broadcasting are carried out in their present form. Both Scottish and Grampian will, for example, have to fight hard just to survive if the Independent Broadcasting Authority is abolished and franchises are auctioned to the highest, multi-national bidder. Satellite, by definition, is no respecter of national boundaries or identities. The BBC, meanwhile, is running backwards in the face of a hostile government.

Unless and until Scottish broadcasting is regarded as a national asset such processes can only accelerate. The European Year of Film and Television has been an attempt to foster national identities within the continent while calling for more co-productions and EEC legislation to protect indigenous broadcasting. Scotland, forever on the periphery, needs that initiative more than most – and never more so than now. Just when we were half-way home and dry, the tide is rising again.

Ian Bell, Glasgow Herald.