

BBC seen as crucial to keeping cultural links after 'yes' vote

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The BBC can play a key role in maintaining cultural links between an independent Scotland and the rest of the UK, according to a leading commentator.

Philip Schlesinger, Professor in Cultural Policy at the University of Glasgow, said the broadcaster, like the Crown and the Pound, could be a channel for "continuing soft, 'UKanian' cultural power" in Scotland, should the country vote 'yes' in the referendum.

"If there is Scottish independence you want to keep as much cultural commonality as possible," he said. "One way of doing this is to ensure there is a common broadcasting agenda."

In last month's White Paper, the SNP Administration set out its plan for a Scottish Broadcasting Service (SBS), funded largely by licence-fee payers in Scotland and a "proportionate share" of the BBC's commercial ventures. The new service looked to many critics like a takeover, but Professor Schlesinger said the notion of launching the SBS as a joint venture with the BBC had merit.

"The Scottish government's approach to this obviously is to make changes, but not to make them so absolute that they completely fracture existing relationships," he said.

In a blog on the influential Policy Scotland website, Professor Schlesinger cited Alex Bell, Alex Salmond's former head of policy, who described the position set out in the White Paper as "a continuous BBC service disguised as a Scottish Broadcasting Service",

essentially an attempt to make the BBC north of the Border more autonomous.

Last night Professor Schlesinger said: "I suppose the question I'm asking is whether a future rUK [rest of the UK] Government, necessarily linked to a Scottish government by a number of other factors, wants stability north of the Border, particularly when television continues to be a central cultural medium for the public.

"There is a demand for sport, drama and comment north and south of the Border which will continue, whether political arrangements change or not."

The White Paper asserts that the SBS will co-commission, co-produce and co-operate with the BBC, delivering a proportionate share of network productions. It would opt in and out of BBC One and BBC Two schedules, programming its own material for purely Scottish audiences. The SNP also insisted: "Current programming like *EastEnders*, *Doctor Who*, and *Strictly Come Dancing* and channels like *CBeebies*, will still be available in Scotland."

Professor Schlesinger said: "The BBC is a global brand: this is an attempt to get a privileged trading position when [the SBS] is not formally part of the BBC." He conceded that the SBS would face opposition in some quarters.

"There is an economic argument that says this isn't going to wash, the rUK licence payer is not going to be interested in subsidising a Scottish broadcasting service. The SNP government would say that will not be the case but it's possible to foresee future adverse trading conditions if others disagree."

