

# **NORTH KOREA: The BBC announces a Korean-language World Service**

*Lord Alton of Liverpool, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea*

Lord Alton (16.11.2016) – As Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea, I welcome today's announcement by the BBC of a Korean-language World Service. The announcement follows many years of work by the APPG and others, and we congratulate the BBC and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on making the correct decision for the people of North Korea.

This is a practical and overdue step in breaking the information blockade that engulfs North Korea – and fulfils our duties under Article 19 of the Universal declaration of Human Rights – to ensure unimpeded free access to information and news.

Whether in the dark days of Nazi occupied Europe or in remote parts of the world today, the BBC World Service has always provided access to truthful reporting and given people hope in times of oppression and despair. Mikael Gorbachev once said that even he relied on the BBC to learn what was really going on in the world while Aung San Suu Kyi said that the BBC World Service kept hope alive during her years of house arrest in Burma.

In July 2014, I initiated a wide-ranging House of Lords debate on the BBC World Service. In that speech, my colleague, Lord Eames, stated:

*'I visited North Korea...From a most unlikely source, there was a remark that will live with me for a very long time. Obviously, I cannot disclose the complete circumstances, but the words speak for themselves. "Where", he said to me, "is the BBC?". If you knew the person who said that, the circumstances and the position that he held, it would set the balance right of many of the impressions that we have of what is going on in North Korea. Those words speak louder than statistics, transmission problems and the facilities needed, and I convey them to the House with great feeling'.*

North Korea is a country where access to foreign media is prohibited and accessing such media is punishable by barbaric sentences. Today, the BBC and the United Kingdom Government have taken a stand against the censorship and repression practiced by the North Korean Government. Free speech, objective news, and voices from the outside world will now travel from London to the darkest corners of North Korea.

Over the past decade, the APPG has listened to many calls from exiled North Koreans to send information to their compatriots north of the 38th parallel. This call has now been heard. A mistake which has often been made is to believe that to engage with North Koreans, one must deal with the North Korean Government. Our approach at the APPG has differed. We have instead listened to the knowledge and stories of the 30,000 North Koreans who have escaped their homeland. Some of these exiles have bravely addressed our group in Parliament and their stories have undoubtedly inspired today's BBC service and will go on to challenge a sixty year old status-quo on the Korean peninsula.

The work of the APPG has long-established the increasing desire of North Koreans to know what is happening in the world outside. Escapees say that significant numbers risk imprisonment and even execution to consume foreign media. But try as they may, the North Korean Government has been unable

to put the information genie back in the bottle.

In 2014, a United Nations Commission of Inquiry, chaired by Justice Michael Kirby, detailed 'an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought' as well as 'the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information and association' in North Korea. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights insists that citizens have a right to access news and information.

For the people of North Korea, I am pleased that breaking their information blockade and upholding their given rights is to become a central pillar of UK foreign policy and BBC practice. From the Soviet Union to Burma, the BBC has shown that broadcasting can inspire and broaden the horizons of the repressed.

Facing the challenge of North Korea is an urgent diplomatic and political problem, but it is also a moral obligation. A BBC World Service in the Korean-language should come as a sledgehammer to the North Korean Government's information blockade and inspire those who will one day lead a new North Korea into the light.

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