

CONSUMER NEWS UPDATE

FROM THE NATIONAL
CONSUMER FEDERATION

JULY 2005

Queen's Birthday Honours

I was delighted to see that Jocelyn Hay, who appeared in the list as Elizabeth Joyce Hay, Chairman of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV) has been awarded a CBE for 'Services to Broadcasting'. She was awarded the MBE in 1999.

Penelope Ann Boys, who is the Executive Director of the Office of Fair Trading, has been awarded the CB, and Callum McCarthy, the Chairman of the Financial Services Authority, has received a Knighthood despite crossing swords with Tony Blair about the tough regulatory regime of the FSA.

Jocelyn Hay founded the VLV, then called the Voice of the Listener, in 1983 to campaign against the BBC intention to turn Radio 4 into an all-news channel. Nowadays it very effectively represents the interests of listeners and viewers across the whole range of broadcasting issues. This is just as well as the ordinary person has little or no power to influence the shape and structure of British broadcasting or to make any positive input into the programme making process.

VLV provides open forums for listeners and viewers to make their views known to MPs, the BBC and other broadcasters. These forums (or are they fora?) also provide a platform for broadcasting practitioners to make their views known.

For more information about VLV visit the website www.vlv.org.uk

A Children's Commissioner for England

Perhaps one should say 'at last', as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have had Children's Commissioners for some time now. Professor Al Aynsley-Green took up his position as England's first Children's Commissioner on July 1st after a gruelling selection process in which children were members of the board that selected him. The successful candidate had to be someone who understood the needs and aspirations of

children and young people today as well as being the sort of person who could influence others and bring about change when merited.

Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills obviously thought Professor Ainsley-Green was the man for the job as she said, "His appointment will strengthen the voice of children and young people, giving them their very own representative to take forward matters close to their hearts".

Peter Clarke is the Children's Commissioner for Wales and has been in post since 2001. That Wales had a Children's Commissioner before the rest of the UK perhaps arose in part from the aftermath of Sir Ronald Waterhouse's report "Lost in Care" about abuse in care homes in North Wales.

A Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (NICCY.org), in the person of Nigel Williams was appointed in 2003 and there is now a Children's Minister for Northern Ireland. In Scotland the Children's Commissioner is Professor Kathleen Marshall who was appointed last year.

Food Standard Agency Board meeting

The FSA holds regular open Board meetings around the country and they are usually very interesting. The FSA is genuinely anxious to attract more consumers to these meetings, which are held at various centres throughout the country. The next one will be on 14th July in Cardiff.

While anyone can attend, you have to register, and do so in good time before the meeting if you want to receive Board papers before the meeting. The Glasgows Group, Customs House, Customs Way, Preston PR2 2UW deals with registrations – phone 01772 767730 or ask fsaboardmeetings@glasgows.co.uk for a registration form. You can register online, at www.food.gov.uk/aboutus/ourboard/boardmeetings/

Free Electronic Gift Scam stopped by OFT

The Office of Fair Trading announced on July 1st that promoters of websites offering the latest expensive high-tec gadgets as free gifts in return for buying a low value product such as a mobile phone signal booster or a ring tone CD, have given binding undertakings that they will no longer promote the schemes.

These are 'matrix' schemes where by purchasers are added to a waiting list for the expensive 'free gift'.

The OFT explains that the nature of matrix schemes means that the number of members waiting for that elusive expensive 'free gift' always far exceeds the number of gifts awarded. They consider the schemes to be unlawful lotteries under the Lotteries and Amusements Act as participants had to pay for a chance to receive a prize or reward, were not required to exercise any skill and the distribution of prizes was substantially outside their control.

The undertakings were obtained from Lewis Ames of, and Tom Hashemi formerly of pulsematrix.com and Darren Ithell of phones4everyone (at the mobilematrix.com) under part 8 of the Enterprise Act 2002. They have all undertaken not to continue or repeat the promotion of any scheme that constitutes an unlawful lottery. If they breach the undertakings the OFT could seek a court injunction which, if ignored, could lead to contempt of court.

Penny Boys, OFT Executive Director (see Birthday Honours) said:

"These schemes are ultimately unsustainable and will eventually collapse to the detriment of thousands of people. Very few will ever receive the 'free gift' they expect to get."

VLV wants Free-to-Air Digital Satellite for the UK

A press release from the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, whose Chairman is Jocelyn Hay (see Birthday Honours), urges the Government and OFCOM to work together to launch an independent digital satellite because it will benefit viewers and every section of the industry. They say it will create a competitive horizontal market in the provision and delivery of digital satellite services for the very first time.

Perhaps just as important is the fact, stated by VLV, that when the analogue signal is withdrawn, starting in 2008 in the West and North and proceeding region by region until the Channel Islands are switched off in 2012, some UK households will not be able to receive the free-to-air digital terrestrial television (DTT) FREEVIEW services until **after** the existing analogue service has ceased to transmit the signal.

They can, of course, turn to BskyB's satellite service where they can see the five public service broadcasters (PSBs). Sky presently

provides a digital satellite service that includes all the PSBs plus many other channels on a free-to-air basis. The service is encrypted and can only be accessed if the viewer has a Sky 'Solus' viewing card. This gives free viewing for the next five years, at the end of which terms may change and a charge could be made just at the time when the analogue signal is being switched off.

VLV sums it up by saying "The launch of an independent free-to-air satellite would introduce, for the first time, the benefits of a horizontal market with competition at every level of digital satellite delivery and access which is the kind of horizontal market that is now serving DTT Freeview users so well.

Free Internet for Campaigners

Help is at hand for campaigners on both local and national issues from CampaignON.com They encourage and help groups or individuals to set up their own fully-fledged website to promote small scale local issues. It is free and looks simple to use and could provide a cost-effective and practicable means of communicating with supporters and local decision makers as well as the media.

It can be used to campaign on any issue but seems particularly suitable for consumer issues. Of particular interest is the offer of use of databases of MPs, MEPs, Scottish and Welsh members, local councils and local newspapers.

A visit to the central website www.CampaignON.com will show you a long list of existing campaigns using this service, both national and local. A typical national one is www.campaignon.com/healthchoice which is self-explanatory. A local interest one is www.campaignon.com/gifachredatetramast where the residents of the village of Gifachreda are campaigning against the erection of a police communications mast, so far unsuccessfully, but their campaign continues with the help of this site.

Greg Irwin of CampaignON.com says "We have a good website and we want people to put it to good use."

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