Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

The problem of BBC bias [1]

Written by **Whig** [2] | Friday 12 October 2012

The Chairman of the BBC Trust, Chris Patten, has launched an enquiry [3] into impartiality in BBC news reporting. It should be noted that the BBC controls 60% of the broadcast news audience in the UK, which makes a mockery over any fears that Sky might pose a threat to competition in the market. The BBC is required by its statutes to adhere to impartiality in its reportage. This position is reinforced by the requirement that all broadcasters in the UK present impartial views on news. Clearly this presents some serious issues for freedom of speech; it allows politicians and bureaucrats to have general oversight over the content of news broadcasts as they are in a position to arbitrate what constitutes impartiality.

Most on the 'right' accuse the BBC of a 'liberal' bias - that is socially liberal and economically interventionist. In this article [4], Prof. David Miller suggests that the BBC is not necessarily liberal but instead takes 'establishment' views. According to this viewpoint, the BBC's reporting holds views on immigration or Islam which are markedly illiberal. We Classical Liberals will laugh at this absurdity - this simply means that none of the BBC's views are worthy of the name Liberal at all, but this is unsurprising from what is essentially an organ of the state (although not any particular government). What would be more remarkable would be if the BBC were biased towards free enterprise and economic laissez faire, however, this would make the BBC no more acceptable to Classical Liberals.

Miller argues for an independent enquiry - although one doubts that this would make any substantial difference as it would, of course, be led by a member of the establishment. On the other hand, it strikes one as slightly absurd to think of there being 'an establishment' which has one homogeneous set of views - Prof. Miller is guilty of reification, as indeed am I by referring to the BBC as having a view. The Archbishop of Canterbury and a member of the Conservative Party Free Enterprise Group [5] are both members of the 'establishment' but they have very different views. That said, I do agree that there is a prevailing set of étatist views which dominate most opinion in the UK and the bulk of BBC output is certainly in line with that.

I would suggest that it is the function of these enquiries to find that the BBC is somewhat biased towards certain positions and to offer some mild programmes for how to ensure impartiality. I would be pretty surprised if it found that the BBC was wholeheartedly neutral, not only because it is not, but because that would lessen the apparent impartiality of the enquiry itself! On the other hand, it would be surprising to hear that the BBC's news broadcasting is rotten to the core, as this would suggest that the organisation is in breach of its statutory duties. It would be a brave enquiry, internal or external, which took such a position.

To my mind, the whole impartiality debate is entirely misleading and that, of course, is the point. I would argue that it is impossible for news reporting to be impartial and it is impossible for any enquiry to assess

impartiality. No amount of study or research could possibly discern the motivations and detect the subtle sins of commission and omission which such assessment would require. Moreover, such researchers would necessarily have their own bias . Rather more abstractly, it is impossible for any human being to be impartial in a field so complex, diverse and unfalsifiable as human social activity i.e. 'the news' - only an omniscient god could make such a claim of knowledge.

This realisation should not lead us into some postmodernist nihilism; it simply means that we require pluralism and freedom in our media so that we can select that position we believe to be most accurate, not have it selected for us (as mentioned above and here [6] it is clear that the BBC also presents a threat to media plurality and undermines competition). This does not mean that organisations should not strive for impartiality, but that they will not achieve it. The problem, therefore, is not that the BBC might be biased but that we cannot tell whether it is biased or not. Or, rather more simply, the BBC must ipso facto be biased.

Naturally, every news outlet must be biased, even one which claims impartiality. In a free market, this presents no problem as there is plurality; one pays one's money, one takes one's choice, as with newspapers or internet media where competition thrives. We all know that the Telegraph tends to the right, the New Statesman to the left and the ASI Blog to logical and sound positions. The BBC is different as it is funded by a forced public levy (find out what happens if you don't pay) - but as a publically funded organisation it cannot be allowed to be partial. But hold on, I hear you cry, have we not just observed that it is impossible for any human being or organisation to be impartial? Well then, the only logical and sound position is that a publically funded organisation should not broadcast news.

blog comments powered by Disqus [8]

Source URL: http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/media-culture/the-problem-of-bbc-bias

Links:
[1] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/media-culture/the-problem-of-bbc-bias
[2] http://www.adamsmith.org/authors/whig
[3] http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/oct/10/bbc-review-liberal-bias
[4] http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/11/bbc-liberal-bias-inquiry
[5] http://www.freeenterprise.org.uk/
[6] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/media-and-culture/the-leveson-inquiry-should-not-advocate-statutory-regulation-of-the-press
[7] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
[8] http://disqus.com