



A DIVORCE FOR AUNTIE

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Its treatment of the BBC well illustrates the tendency of modern politics to substitute rhetoric for substance. Too many areas of British life still suffer the anti-competitive and bureaucratic diktat of consensually minded oligarchies. Education is one. Television is another.

The BBC is a victim of its bulk and of the monolithic corporate culture this engenders. Large organizations invariably develop a doctrine and a world view, a liberal one where their personnel are recruited from the ranks of English middle class verbalists. This has the effect of excluding both Tory and radical left opinion: because of this, the BBC genuinely believe they are impartial when in fact they are confusing neutrality with political centrism. The very notion of objectivity in a visual medium with a strong entertainment imperative is a false one; it would be better to have simply admitted the redundancy of the ideal and license a heterogeneity of views. Nor is the BBC a conspiracy. This would imply strategic pre-meditation, and we must accept the claim of broadcasters that they attempt to be fair; they lack the intellectual detachment to recognize their value slant.

AN IMPLICIT BIAS

The bias of the BBC is however an implicit one. Of course, there are overt instances, such as the "Maggie's Militant Tendency" or "Real Lives" documentary controversies, the "Monocled Mutineer" historical fiction, Mr Hannah's trade union consultancy etc. These, which conservatives have made issues, hardly matter: their ideological colour is clear for all to judge. Indeed it would inhibit creativity if producers felt they could never ventilate radical beliefs. What counts is the insidious bias of the mass of programming. Yet the mess the right gets itself into when it looks for explicit evidence is well illustrated by the martyrdom of Miss Adie. In fact her report of itself was a humane reaction to carnage: the distortion was more subtle, lying in a failure to place the event in the wider context of Libyan sponsored terrorism.

How, then, can we "prove" distortion? Only by evolving a set of tests that would detect and seek to measure implicit bias, and this would demand a lengthy content analysis of BBC programmes. The producers operate by selecting areas where the government has performed badly, and offering increased state funding as the only

honourable solution: the points made are not in themselves illegitimate, but in the aggregate they amount to distortion. Government achievements are entirely neglected. In this context the preoccupation of the BBC with the NHS is interesting since they simply advocate expenditure with no reference to structural reform.

The image constantly put before us -- "General Hospital", "Roads" etc -- is of a dowdy Britain, one unrecognizable to most viewers whose average living standard has increased 25% over the past eight years. The BBC's dissection of our political culture is exclusively an economic one, so that there is a vacuity to the debates it seeks to sponsor. But in the absence of a research study such accusations will always be dismissed as mere opinion and selection of instances.

Nor does the BBC only discredit specifically political conservatism: it sneers at the entire range of traditional values. It finds suburban life both hysterically funny, and sinister. Apparently it feels it should justify its subsidy not be giving us standards to aspire to, but by mirroring us at our worst. It has expressed no skepticism about permissiveness as its social casualties mount, and in its treatment of the AIDS crisis the corporation has been predictable in the choice of "graphic" and mechanical advice to the exclusion of any moral dimension. The BBC was historically liberal, but a belief in moral and aesthetic standards, social mobility etc, were once a concomitant of that ethos.

Insight into the corporation's philosophy is provided by Mr Richard Dunn of the Director General's secretariat: "A party which is in government is bound by its nature to be making controversial decisions every day. The taking of such decisions is the exercise of power, and in a democracy such as ours, it is the job of the BBC to question whether that power is being exercised in the best interests of society". This argument is appealing, with a happy suggestion of knight errantry, yet it conceals a fallacy. In British democracy there is always another major party to assume the functions of government: therefore if electors are to make an informed choice, if the corporation is really to pursue the educative function it arrogates, the policies of the political alternatives also merit close scrutiny. Seldom if ever do they receive it.

Mr Dunn is pleased to add: "You will appreciate that it is the job of an independent organization like the BBC

to question the actions of politicians. When those politicians are in power, that questioning must be even more rigorous, and when the party is as active and radical as the present government, it is natural that the BBC finds that it has many areas of government action to examine on behalf of the democracy". The logic of this is that the corporation deems political change, and not political inertia, to be suspect. The worth of the status quo, or whether it was continuing to serve the nation, is unquestioned.

EXPLICIT BIAS?

The dramatist, Ian Curteis, has made some of the most revealing claims about explicit bias in the BBC: he was asked to excise scenes of Mrs Thatcher crying over British casualties in his "The Falklands Play", which has been shelved by the corporation: "Suddenly and comparatively recently TV has become a one party state one entire rich half of drama is being excluded. The corporation are however interested in Charles Wood's "Tumbledown" ("The Falklands war is a reason for shame, regret and anger").

On the matter of state secrets the policy of the BBC is clear: "The Official Secrets Act is really a dreadful piece of legislation" (Alan Protheroe, former Assistant Director-General, Radio 4, February 1987). Hence BBC Scotland's "Secret Society" series by Duncan Campbell, which could have included the Zircon Satellite programme (in the language of the Assistant Director-General, "I do not know whether Duncan Campbell is left-wing or not").

More generally presenters appear to make little effort to disguise their orientation. Ms Valerie Vas, former chairperson of Ealing's Council's Police Committee and presenter of a new programme for Asians, has stated: "Police State South Africa is only a heart-beat away". In November 1986 a television newsreader reacted thus to the choice of Barcelona for the 1992 Olympic Games: "You could count this as one more casualty as a result of Margaret Thatcher's attitude to sanctions against South Africa" (Lord Chalfont's paraphrase). A BBC Radio London producer replied to a complaint from the Tobacco Advisory Council: "I hope you sleep easy at night, being paid to defend the indefensible". And we have the assurance of Vincent Hanna himself on the power of television, for in offering his services to trade unions he told them: "Once you know the techniques of TV presentation, you can use the medium to infiltrate and control people's lives". Even in the last General Election there were instances when presenters could not hide their sympathies, as in Sue Lawley's continued interruption of Mr Tebbit in contrast to her blandness with Mr Kinnock.

The BBC interpretation of the international scene rarely deviates. They have consistently caricatured the administration of President Reagan, the reports of Charles Wheeler being particularly cynical. Russia is given the occasional censure: the head of BBC external services recently (July 28th) cautioned on the dangers of Mr

Gorbachev proceedings too quickly with liberal reforms. The "experts" interviewed seldom represent conservative opinion -- for example the "ex-CIA agent" Vincent Marchetti. Lord Chalfont has asked whether anyone had ever heard the BBC put forward arguments in favour of the Strategic Defence Initiative. And while other police state censorship is never mentioned, reports from South Africa long carried a censorship codicil.

Compiling lists of prejudiced assertions may occupy a dreary Sunday, yet this activity has limited value in the debate since such evidence is impressionistic and anecdotal. The corporate rejoinder will always be that left could do the same. The dimensions of research that really examined all of BBC programming over a set period would be daunting. A simpler test is to ask the BBC when it has ever endorsed a right-of-centre stance.

Yet the BBC has significant statutory obligations: clause 13 of its license under Royal Charter states:

"The Corporation shall at all times refrain from sending any broadcast matter, expressing the opinion of the Corporation on current affairs or on matters of public policy".

In addition, during a general election the BBC is subject to section 93 of the Representation of the People Act. While there are many who find ITV programmes somewhat partisan there is a crucial distinction: they have no obligation to legal neutrality and the public purse. However, the nature of the duopoly may cause concern: there be less indulgence in the confectionery of political dogma in a freer market.

But currently there is no public accountability: as Lord Orr-Ewing reminds us, the corporation is judge and jury in its own case. The BBC receives 10,000 letters a week: what does it do with them? A government spokesman has said that the onus is on the individual to make a complaint if he perceives bias, but what possible incentive can he have? However, the corporation refuses to reveal how many complaints it receives about its current affairs programmes. We do not, therefore, know how broad is public skepticism: the BBC's own activities are veiled in the very secrecy it castigates in the British State.

CULTURE CLUB?

Moreover the BBC has accorded itself not a Reithian cultural ideal, but a pseudo-commercial one. It has decided that it must compete on audiences with ITV, and hence wished "East Enders" on us and American soap. Licence money largely goes on pulp whether we want it or not. Yet a special appropriation is only justified if it can support worth that could not survive commercially: otherwise there is no logical rationale, since a private channel could provide the same fare.

A further iniquity of the licence is that it fails to distinguish between heavy and occasional viewers. And as

the number of viewing alternatives to the BBC expand, its share of the total audience is bound to fall and thus the corporation's defence of a specific appropriation undetermined.

The case for a large, publicly funded BBC is, therefore, made even less impressive with the imminence of satellite with its Euro-channels and the like, the prominence of video and the general fragmentation of the media that they portend. Ironically the BBC's case would be stronger had they argued it on more elitist grounds. But they have not. They have solicited the test of populism for many years: on it, therefore, will they be judged. De Toqueville claimed that the more democratic societies became, the more would egalitarianism stifle the high arts that were a function of hierarchical social orders. The modern state has often claimed to conserve such excellence by its payments to the bureaucracies who usurped the patronal function. The irrelevance of this argument is shown by BBC programming on almost any night of the week.

PERSONNEL

The political flavour of the BBC arises from personnel, training and promotion policies which extinguish ideological divergence or prevent its entry, in a process of hermetic sealing. The BBC do not openly discuss details of their recruiting policies. But all positions are advertised internally on notice-boards; junior positions are also advertised externally, especially in "The Guardian". Senior production posts are normally filled from within. Promotion is via a "boarding" structure, where a committee from all departments consider candidates -- hence perpetuating the choice of men and women of their own identikit form. The significance of such a narcissistic promotion method in the creation of a corporate ethic is clear. One left-wing critic has spoken of the "criteria which has been known to exclude candidates who were otherwise eminently suitable but who were suspected of being mavericks and not 'organization men'". All this is fortified by the practice of annual report and interview -- each staffer is evaluated by the departmental head and then interviewed by the head of the service. Training programmes complete the process, informally encouraging the view that his troubles are always the creation of "society" not the individual, and the mission of the state is their "solution".

The fifty top appointments in the corporation are made by the governors. These governors are political appointees: clearly then, the long years of Labour governments influenced personnel so that the composition of middle management now reflects the political realities of a decade ago. Governors are not chosen for talent or expertise, but for representativeness -- the familiar British habit of anointing the ordinary. Thus we have always a trade-unionist, A Welshman, A Scotsman, a Northern Irishman, a black governor, a diplomat. They will spend several days a month on BBC business, so that the corporation's governance is ultimately determined by what a group of consensus-model luminaries chooses to think and do in its surplus time.

CENTRAL CONTROL

The byzantine proportions of the BBC have consequences for the quality and political homogeneity of its output. There is a contradiction in the notion of centralized control of a large organization whose "product" is individual creativity. Size creates competition for centrally allocated resources, so that energies are absorbed in parish politics and the production and consumption of memoranda. Bureaucracy interferes with producers: for example their budgets are never subsequently reviewed and they have no control over salaries. Attempts to give them more flexibility have generally failed. Anthony Jay's early proposal for independent extra-departmental production units was resuscitated for Lord Annan in 1975 and subsequently adopted by Channel Four.

Corporate imperialism constrains decision-makers at top levels. Leapman describes the travails of Alistair Hetherington, controller of BBC Scotland, who found that personnel, finance and engineering were controlled from London, and he himself had to visit London on a weekly basis; he became convinced that he could have made considerable savings, had he been permitted.

Waste is, therefore, a consequence, as well as ideological conformity. The British Broadcasting Corporation employs a staff of 25,000. Its licence income is one billion pounds, compared to Channel Four's £130 million. It owns twenty television stations, thirty local radio stations, seventy camera groups and many service businesses. One former producer told us (I cannot give his name: apparently the corporation operates a blacklist) that the BBC is inefficient by £250 million per year, and that half its manpower is superfluous. Nearly all of production is in-house so that the large domestic workforce can be sustained; the government wishes to see 25% of programmes independently produced, the corporation before the election had plans for only 10%.

FUTURE POLICY

Of the available policy options, the BBC could at the very least contract out more of its work, possibly setting up many of its producers as independents on a contract basis. Next, the BBC could privatize components of its own empire, including local radio, camera crews, breakfast television, and some regional television. The BBC might, as Lord Orr-Ewing has suggested, be scrutinized by an independent regulatory authority, and Radio be run by a separate organization. These are the least radical of all the suggestions, and reform can go further. BBC1 could take commercials, or even be privatized altogether. Its employees, no longer dependent on the state themselves, would cease to prescribe it as the panacea for everyone else. There are other policy alternatives which would also reform the status quo: for example, all licence holders could automatically be made shareholders -- so that the BBC was directly responsible to those who fund it.

Would "cultural" presentations therefore suffer? A private subscription channel could be founded, and ad-

vertisers would pay for the opportunity to reach a highly educated, high-clarity market segment. A subscription method was part of the Peacock proposals. However, some element of government funding may be necessary to support arts and current affairs programmes as non-marketable minority interests. Predictably, the independents oppose a more market-driven BBC: Jeremy Isaacs has said that both would compete for the same source of revenue, corroding programme standards. This argument is slender, since it assumes the potential advertising revenue is static.

The gunge will continue, but gunge with a social "message". The Tories ignore at their peril the effects of another four or five years of mischievous anti-Tory propaganda. They neglect the evolution of a politics of rented rather than inherited allegiance, and the historical fact that the ideology that controls the media often controls the votes -- witness the impact of the Army Current Affairs Bureau during the war. The government remains complacent: in the words of their spokesman in the Upper House: "I am sure that House will join me in expressing a debt of gratitude to the broadcasting authorities for the work they carry out".

The BBC should be taken away from its privileged position as the protected child of the state. If its inadequacies derive from institutional causes, it is the institution itself which must be changed. There will be far less cause for concern once the BBC stations form part of a large number of independent and competing stations which have to survive on their merits.

With the advent of cable television and direct satellite broadcasting, there will soon be a proliferation of channels and choices. This will, in itself, diminish the exag-

gerated idea the BBC has of its own importance. Further steps such as those which will make Channel Four independent, or even privatize the IBA itself, will create a world of broadcasting infinitely more varied and more complex.

It is anomalous that in such a world, dominated as it will be by the supply of every type of broadcast entertainment and information, that an empire should continue to exist which sits a self-proclaimed elite upon a throne of public money to force its own narrow vision upon a reluctant public. Just as surely as the restrictive practices of the trade unions are being terminated, the closeted professions opened up to advertising and competition, the City institutions liberated from the small cliques which ran them, so should the BBC feel the draught of a clean wind blowing through its corridors to sweep away its smug complacency and the institutionalized betrayal of public trust.

The BBC will continue to be a thorn in the side of this government as long as reform or privatization are not on the agenda. Inherent leftism will be fortified by the need of BBC bosses, whatever their initial political flavour, to "prove" their independence from government; out of every clash they will emerge as moral victors with a renewed lease of independence because the government can be relied on to pursue the elusive chimera of explicit bias, and because the corporation will always appear the victim of attempted censorship.

The BBC fulfils the definition of elites as they have existed at every stage of British history: great power sustained by certain income with responsibility to none. It exhibits the hubris of all such orders and its demise is as assured.

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