

Truth Matters: The BBC and Our Need for It to Be Right

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Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1 Decadent Speech

Chapter 2 The Loneliness of the Short-Distance Entwistle

Chapter 3 Every DG Needs to Make a Mark

Chapter 4 The British Bilious Corporation is Useful, But Only Up to a Point

Chapter 5 Trusting

Chapter 6 The Suits

Chapter 7 The Future Crises

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Introduction

Eighteen men have filled the office of Director General of the British Broadcasting Corporation: of the three who made the greatest mark, two were engineers. John Reith learned the trade from the age of seventeen after his father refused to pay for further education which, in the Church of Scotland minister's view, was being wasted on the recalcitrant boy. He served as DG from 1927–1938 (though for five years before his appointment, he was general manager of the privately owned British Broadcasting Company). He, still the largest figure in the Corporation's history, its founder and spirit-guardian, built the Corporation's ethos.

John Birt, who took an engineering degree in Oxford – where a majority of post-war DGs were educated; two others in Cambridge, though no others in any of the sciences – served from 1992–2000. A stern critic of the Corporation's news and current affairs output when head of the small current affairs department – which he had created – at London Weekend TV, he saw the BBC's mission to inform in the most ambitious terms: he also, leaning heavily on consultants, greatly reformed its internal financial structure, secured a large licence fee settlement and pushed it into the digital age before most corporations in the private sector. Its present structure owes most to him.

One other made a large mark. In an issue of the Royal Television Society's magazine, *Television*, in June of this year, a conversation between the former TV producer and entrepreneur Peter Bazalgette and Paul Fox, the former Controller of BBC 1, later Managing Director of Yorkshire Television, highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of several DGs – among whom Fox chose Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, the DG from 1960–69, as the most influential figure in the BBC's, even the UK's, post-war history – making the BBC, reduced to a 28 per cent share of audience in 1960 by a resurgent ITV, popular and socially liberal. In doing so, Carleton Greene was charged with flouting Reith's claim that 'we have been right in declining to cater down on a 'give-the-public-what-they-want' basis'. Carleton Greene was as convinced, at least publicly, of his liberal stance as Reith was of the ethical calling of his corporation and Birt of the need for radical reform and a correction of what he called 'the bias against understanding' in news and current affairs: he was intolerant with those who opposed him, most famously of the moral campaigner, Mrs Mary Whitehouse (see below). In his time, satire, comedy, drama and more enquiring current affairs all flourished, and broke new ground.

The Bazalgette – Fox conversation took in other DGs as well. Sir William Haley, the post-war DG (1944–52) created a news division where before there had been only a few correspondents, mainly reporting on the war; and Thompson, following Greg Dyke, was seen by both Bazalgette and Fox as one who stabilised and developed the BBC after the four year leadership of Dyke. The latter, while a 'splendid fellow' (Bazalgette), was one who misread BBC/government relations and left the BBC 'in peril' (Fox). For all that, Dyke in his four years did get the BBC ratings substantially up, made his office popular and, on some accounts, sharply improved morale.

This is to simplify: Reith also had to create a structure, if infinitely more simple than the present one. Greene took advantage of, as well as created, a much greater spirit of inquiry, scepticism and irreverence. Birt

refurbished its ethos, driving it deeper into news, analysis and investigation, areas in which Reith's BBC hardly ventured, with the explicit intent of creating a more informed and active citizenry. But all were deliberate and determined builders in their own spheres, and their legacies, especially Reith's, are large and influential beyond the UK.

The BBC retains its ability to act as an exemplar of the public service broadcaster, even if battered; and it is something of a global model of journalism, more than any other news organisation, largely for its attachment to objectivity, even now. The scholar of media management, Lucy K ung, argues in her book *Inside the BBC and CNN: Managing Media Organisations* (Routledge 2000), that the 'vision of the role and responsibilities of public service broadcasting shaped not only the BBC but also the continental public service peers from their inception to the present day'. That vision was Reith's.

This essay, which is most concerned about the news and current affairs output of the BBC, will have a lot to say about the office of the Director General, as well as the nature of public service in journalism, for it has been, and remains, a cockpit of what one interviewee has called 'Britain's psychodrama with itself': the place where all tensions inside and out of the Corporation are expected to be resolved by the wisdom of one who, by inheriting the seat, is required to be Machiavelli in the guise of a modern Archbishop of Canterbury.

The top executive of the BBC is not always a game-changing figure: some, like the three who followed Reith between 1938 and 1944 – Sir Frederick Ogilvie, Sir Cecil Graves and Robert Foot (the latter two shared the job in 1943) – are all but forgotten. Mark Byford, a former deputy director general, had a five-month acting DG role after the resignation of Greg Dyke and the assumption of power by Mark Thompson in 2004; the Head of Audio and Music, Tim Davie, is presently performing the same function and, if all goes as planned, will cede his office to Tony Hall next March; while the least fortunate, George Entwistle, had 54 days in the job, from 17 September to 10 November, 2012, of which nearly half were torrid.

The power which flows to and from the DG's office has, of course, to be used effectively in order for change to be made, accepted and routinised in a large and diverse Corporation, and that depends very largely on management, both the structures and the individuals, about which this piece will also have much to say. But the fact that the power can be so great, and while subject to many checks has no balance of anything like its weight, means that the office is always at the centre of any consideration of the BBC.

1. Decadent Speech

The last long-term holder of the office of Director General, Mark Thompson, now Chief Executive of the *New York Times*, had some parts of the characteristics ascribed to both Machiavelli and a modern Archbishop of Canterbury (though he is a Catholic), even if he disguised it under a slightly awkward bluff heartiness which smacked of the rigours of the boarding school. He was, indeed, educated at the Jesuit-run boarding school, Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, but the Order's reputation for intellectual discipline appears to have been the most lasting influence on the man: Thompson was more of an intellectual than any of his predecessors.

In a short series of lectures given earlier this year, he left a formidable challenge for all his successors. The lectures were little noticed at the time (November 2012) because the revelations of the widespread sexual abuse of minors on the part of the late Sir Jimmy Savile, a former and popular BBC presenter and worker for charities. Thompson was called by the news media to account for what he knew about Savile's behaviour, and when he knew it (he denied all knowledge. He flew back from New York at the end of November to answer questions put by Nick Pollard, the former Sky executive then investigating the Savile affair and the BBC). In the midst of this, he spent his evenings for a week giving three talks and two seminars on the theme of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' – hosted by his former colleague Mark Damazer, former Head of Radio 4 and now Master of St Peter's College in Oxford, in memory of the New Labour strategy advisor Philip Gould and with the bills paid by Matthew Freud of Freud Communications.

The lectures are a good place to start an account of the present BBC, because they are concerned with the use of language – the bedrock of the BBC's business (Damazer had been fond of describing his Radio 4 job as being about the production of 'intelligent speech'). At the same time, they express a deep worry – at times, a real pessimism – about the health of the democratic debate because of the abuse of words: Thompson, as much as any major director general, has been concerned about the BBC's effect on democratic and civil society, and saw its civic role as fundamental to its public service remit.

Part of his theme was an old one: that much of the news put out by the BBC (and all 'upmarket' news providers) is unintelligible – 'might as well be in Sanskrit'. That is especially the case of that news which attempts to describe what is happening in the economy, an area replete with acronyms, concepts (a BBC survey showed only 16 per cent confident to describe 'inflation') and mysterious institutions – a fact which contributes significantly to a disengagement from public affairs. Deeper than that, though, is a new concern: that the public language employed by politicians, commentators and other public figures is now destructive of trust and of real engagement – 'that the public language which most people actually hear and *are influenced by* is changing in ways that make it *more* effective as an instrument of political persuasion but *less* effective as a medium of explanation and deliberation' (his italics).

The main example he gave was the phrase 'death panel', used by the former governor of Alaska and vice-presidential nominee of the Republican Party, Sarah Palin, to describe the – wholly voluntary – medical interview which would be offered under President Obama's health care plan to senior

citizens about their present and likely future health. A subsidiary example was the contention by the liberal commentator Polly Toynbee that Conservative plans for the National Health Service would mean that 49 per cent of NHS hospitals' beds would be allocated to private patients – though the draft legislation nowhere specified that, merely laying down that a Foundation Health Trust cannot make more of its income from non NHS (ie, private) sources than from the NHS itself.

But both women's claims – especially that of Palin – were immensely powerful: in both cases, Thompson claimed, 'explanatory power has been wholly sacrificed in the interests of rhetorical impact'. That this kind of language works so well usually trumps the more cautious, often ambiguous and provisional, language that surrounds the crafting of compromise: but the former is 'simpler and more powerful [and] ... potentially dangerous'. Language, Thompson believes, is 'a cause as well as a consequence of change'. Argument, which depends on lengthy passages of reasoning, gives way to a 'systematic concentration on the research and use of ... individual words and phrases'. Public language, says the man who commanded the broadcaster which carried most of it, 'is entering a decadent phase – less able to explain, less able to engage except in the purely political, more prone to exaggeration and paranoia'.

These reflections were from the first (and richest) lecture; it was followed by two more – one discussing the question of authority, especially scientific authority, and its erosion by challenges and misrepresentation from the world of public debate; and the last on war and the reasons given for it, and the difficulty, even impossibility, of 'doing justice to complex, finely balanced policy choices and yet satisfy a public need for utter simplicity and clarity when it comes to morality'. In one sense, these were curious talks: here was a leader of the BBC, whose main output relies so heavily on vision, focusing only on words. The reason, it seemed, was that he had become perturbed by the way in which all news media now acted as transmission belts, willy-nilly, to decadent speech. The antidote, which he admitted might sound inadequate, was to teach civic behaviour in schools, and to hope for the return of 'a generosity of spirit' and a culture of reasoned compromise among politicians and other public figures.

These lectures constitute an important pointer to the mission of the BBC. Just as Prime Minister Blair gave a speech on the nature of the news media a few days before leaving office (12 June 2007), so former Director General Thompson chose the time between leaving his post on 17 September and taking up the new one at the *New York Times* on 12 November to issue a veiled, but harshly pessimistic, warning that the changing nature and intent of public language is now alienating men and women from politics and the public sphere. Had he said it while in office, or said it more simply and dramatically, and at a time when the media was not consumed by another BBC scandal, then it would have caused more of a stir. And it should have: for he was casting doubt on the ability of the BBC, the only channel claiming to exert itself full time to provide broadcasting which is in the public interest, to stop a crucial civic rot: the decadence of public language, and with it, of mutual comprehension and ability to compromise in pursuit of agreement.

If it took one of Thompson's intellect and range of reference to think through the dilemmas he described, it would have to be a director general of the BBC who would even attempt the exercise. The head of no other institution in the UK, and very few in the world other than prime ministers

and presidents of a reflective bent, and with some time, would trouble himself with such business. Leading the BBC prompts, indeed dictates, such considerations: which is not to say that all, or most, DGs gave them brain room. Surrounding the BBC, and all of the questions which have to do with leadership, management, governance, relations with government and much more, is a large, inchoate, permanently unsatisfied public expectation that it provides civic and moral sustenance, a guide to living as well as to watching and listening.

It is, in the words of the same interviewee who spoke of 'Britain's psychodrama with itself', a 'kind of Vatican', where 'priests' of high intelligence and diligence dedicate their adult lives to the service of programmes which not only inform and educate but which sketch in, usually implicitly, a public and even a private morality, guiding the citizenry through public and personal choices, indicating what is thought presently acceptable – sometimes called politically correct – and what not. Reith made that explicit: the fact that it is now subterranean, even deniable, doesn't detract from its mission's continuing power. Thompson was taking that mission seriously, and claiming that it was now battling against a harder headwind than before, because its basic tool – language – was being so polluted. The concern by the high minded for the dumbed down has not been a new trope for some centuries: Thompson's take, though, was presented as urgent because of the power of the killer word or phrase amplified and multiplied as never before through social media – about which he had too little to say. Still, the former DG showed, by the care with which he argued and the pessimism of both his intellect and conclusions, how high the stakes are for this most unique Corporation, and how inevitable it is that its internal errors become national crises. 'Britain's psychodrama with itself' exacts no less.

2. The Loneliness of the Short-Distance Entwistle

George Entwistle, at 50, had in his professional life little experience of the world outside of the BBC and none outside of journalism and broadcasting. He joined the Corporation as a broadcast journalist trainee in 1989 after five years working at Haymarket Magazines, mainly on *What HiFi: Sound and Vision*. He was non (London) metropolitan in his upbringing: educated privately at Silcoates School, a nonconformist foundation in West Yorkshire, he went to Durham University. In his professional life, he was in line with all DGs from Greene onward: their careers from young adulthood had been in broadcasting, and most in broadcast journalism. Tim Davie, the temporary DG between November 2012 and March 2013, is the exception – recruited from PepsiCo by Thompson in his late thirties. Entwistle rose quite rapidly in the BBC, according to colleagues, because of his intelligence, decisiveness and straightforward manner: the adjective most often used, though latterly tinged with pity, is ‘decent’. He was a highly successful current affairs producer, serving on *Panorama*, *On the Record* and *Newsnight* – where, in his stint as editor from 2001–2004, the programme won five Royal Television Society awards.

He took the director generalship in a field in which the leading contenders for the job included Helen Boaden, Head of News and Current Affairs; Caroline Thomson, the Chief Operating Officer; and the outsider Ed Richards, Chief Executive of Ofcom. Boaden had made most of her career within the BBC and all of it in broadcasting; Thomson, who joined the BBC as a trainee after York University, spent ten years at Channel Four from 1984, returning to the BBC as Deputy Head of the World Service: she had briefly acted as an aide to Roy Jenkins when the latter was leader of the Social Democratic Party in the early eighties. Richards, the Chief Executive of Ofcom, had by contrast made no programmes nor supervised any broadcast companies or divisions. He had been head of BBC Corporate Strategy under John Birt and had been a policy adviser for Tony Blair when he was Prime Minister. Entwistle impressed the BBC Trust – whose members make the appointment – because he stressed the need for change. Though he had risen fast under Thompson, he was the anti-Thompson candidate: a fact that played well for him.

The Trust had grown frustrated with Thompson. His self-confidence had allowed him to stand up to, even ignore, the advice of the Trust when he wished – under both Michael (Lord) Grade, the first Trust Chairman (2004–6) and Sir Michael Lyons (2007–2011), and for the last year of his tenure, Chris (Lord) Patten. Patten and his board had pressed him to appoint a head of corporate affairs; had worried that the current affairs output was underpowered; and that he had become over-dominant among the senior executives, with no obvious successor. It had worried about over-centralisation in London, and a ‘we all live in Islington’ (i.e. left-liberal) mentality among the editorial staff. Entwistle had proposed forming a new and more collective leadership, in which he would be *primus inter pares* but not as *primus* as Thompson; had called for greater devolution to the regions; had argued for a more plural internal culture, with the liberal-metropolitan approach to politics and society challenged by other views. Caroline Thomson, seen as the other front runner, was by contrast regarded as one who largely accepted the Mark Thompson BBC as he had shaped it, and planned to carry on in much the same vein.

Entwistle wanted a collective leadership, but *his* collective leadership: he did not want to inherit the people who were around Thompson. Of the two closest to the former DG, Mark Byford, Deputy DG and Head of BBC journalism, had left in June 2011, saying he was going of his own volition because the 25 per cent reduction in executives which had been mandated by the Trust should have at least one top level casualty. He may have been discomfited that his resignation was accepted by Thompson, who would otherwise have been under pressure to find another top executive to sacrifice who did not want to leave.

Caroline Thomson, who ran the BBC machine and had not planned to leave after she was beaten to the top post by Entwistle, was told by the new incumbent that she should leave – to the surprise of many, including the BBC Trust. The Director of Communications, Paul Mylrea, was downgraded by being dismissed from the management board: the post would normally provide strategic advice to the DG on his own and the Corporation's presentation in public and to the media, and act as an intelligence service as to what the main stories and themes were in the press – vital, when so much of the press is hostile to the BBC. In the subsequent crises, it did not seem to have performed that role well.

The new DG was thus exposed to any crisis that might come along: especially in the news and current affairs division, where crises usually did come along. The first concerned Savile: an investigative report had been prepared by the nightly late-night current affairs programme, *Newsnight* on the entertainer, ready for transmission in late 2011, which would have brought forward evidence that he had abused girls in care homes (the enquiry into the affair, by Nick Pollard is due to report around the time of the publication of this essay). The two *Newsnight* staff who worked on the story, producer Meirion Jones and reporter Liz Mackean, had believed they had sufficient evidence to support a programme which charged Savile with abuse at a care home. The programme Editor, Peter Rippon, had encouraged them to pursue the trail – but shortly before the scheduled transmission, he changed his mind and told Jones and Mackean that he did not believe the programme was secure enough to transmit – to their vocal disappointment. Savile, who had died in October of that year, was the subject of a special commemorative programme, a revival of his best known show, *Jim'll Fix It*, presented in the Christmas schedule by the comedian and actor Shane Richie, with clips from old shows and with much praise lavished on the 'unforgettable' Sir Jimmy by Richie.

The following October, ITV did the show which *Newsnight* had balked at – with several witnesses attesting to Savile's abuse of young girls. This was the prompt for the first *Newsnight* crisis, framed in a series of questions. Why was the programme not broadcast the year before? Was Rippon persuaded by a senior executive not to transmit the programme because of the upcoming tribute? Was he warned by Helen Boaden, Head of News and Current Affairs across all of the BBC news outlets, that the standard of proof had to be as high as if Savile was still alive – and had that been taken by him as either an impossibly high bar, or even a veiled hint not to broadcast? Had Boaden told Entwistle about the programme when he was still Head of Vision? Did he not wonder why it had been stopped? Questioned by the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee on 23 October, Entwistle was not forceful, constrained to admit he did not know, could not recall, appearing to both lack curiosity and grip – the latter a word much used around the BBC at

this time. Though there was considerable speculation that he would have to resign, it appeared just as likely he could stay, as he expressed a determination to understand what happened.

The coup de grace came on 2 November, when *Newsnight* did broadcast a programme about a child abuser – and got it wrong. The programme had been largely reported by Angus Stickler, who was on secondment to *Newsnight* from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism – a non-profit organisation – and had previously been a BBC reporter known for getting scoops, but also known to be one whom editors had to watch carefully, and control. The programme alleged that a man named Steve Messham, when in care at a home in Wrexham, North Wales, had been abused by one whom the programme described as a ‘prominent Thatcher-era Tory figure’. At the same time the former Tory treasurer during Margaret Thatcher’s leadership, Lord McAlpine, was being named widely on the net as the abuser – indeed, Steve Messham had himself believed him to be so, though he had not been shown a photograph of McAlpine, and McAlpine had not been called to have the allegations put to him. Evidence of the widespread belief that the prominent figure was McAlpine came from tweets put out after the programme was aired – including one from Sally Bercow, wife of the Commons Speaker, who wrote: ‘Why is Lord McAlpine trending? *innocent face*’; while George Monbiot, a *Guardian* columnist, tweeted that: ‘I looked up Lord #McAlpine on t’internet. It says the strangest things.’

However, it was not Lord McAlpine: and there were warnings the day before the programme aired that it was not – including tweets from Michael Crick, a former *Newsnight* reporter and now Channel 4’s Political Editor, who had called McAlpine at his home in Umbria then tweeted that “‘Senior political figure’: due to be accused tonight by the BBC of being paedophile denies allegations + tells me he’ll issue libel writ agst BBC.” The programme went out – and Entwistle was caught looking even more helpless. Harshly interviewed on 10 November by the *Today* presenter John Humphrys, he was reduced to stumbling excuses that he had not had time, had not been informed, had learned of the problem only after the programme was transmitted, had not even known (or been told) about a *Guardian* report casting doubt on the guilt of McAlpine published the previous day. He resigned a few hours after the interview.

The new DG was caught in an exposed position and subjected to deadly fire – the deadliest from his own colleague, whom he had honourably if naively chosen to face when he had only a sad story to tell to the least sympathetic of interlocutors. He was exposed most of all because he lacked what his predecessor had had for nearly all of his period of office: a fixer for the crucial, troublesome news and current affairs division. That is one of the immediate and most important lessons of the affair: the need for an Editor-in-Chief.

3. Every DG Needs to Make a Mark

Mark Byford, the Deputy Director General, had taken over command of News and Current Affairs at the end of Greg Dyke's tenure as Director General, in an effort to tighten up controls in a division then seen as lacking in internal discipline after the affair of the 'Dodgy Dossier' on Iraq. He briefly ran the Corporation after Dyke's resignation in 2004; when Thompson beat him to the post of DG – he after said that the choice was correct – he had the status of Deputy to Thompson, and all of BBC news in every form, foreign and domestic, thousands of hours a week, to control. He controlled by poking his head everywhere: coming into editorial offices or editing suites, asking what was being done, why and how; making clear his approval or lack of it. He would tour the country in a camper van to look into regional and local newsrooms; he chaired weekly meetings with heads of news and current departments; created an early warning system for knowing what delicate investigations of confrontations were coming up, speaking to the Head of News and Current Affairs, Richard Sambrook, then Helen Boaden, at least once daily and to Mark Thompson three or four times a day, ensuring there were no surprises.

To keep in touch with political opinion, he would read the leaders in the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *FT*, the *Guardian*, the *Sun* and *The Times* every morning, having become convinced – as he once put it in a 2006 seminar – that the old BBC mantra, 'if the left complains and the right complains, we must be doing it right' was a vapid rationale, and that political and social coverage had to be nuanced and diverse. He was not popular with the programme editors, themselves leading harried lives, requiring to stamp their authority on staff then being subjected to a grilling from Byford: but most would now acknowledge both his effectiveness and his necessity.

When something did sneak in under his control, as the 'Ross-Brand episode', he would take over the response. Since 2006 the comedian Russell Brand had presented a weekly radio show; when, in 2008, his co-host Matt Morgan refused to work with him any longer, he invited a series of co-hosts; on 18 October, that co-host was the TV presenter Jonathan Ross. The two made a call to the actor Andrew Sachs, who, they said, had promised to phone in to the show; with no answer, they left a message on the answerphone, in which Brand said he had slept with Sachs' granddaughter, and Ross shouted 'he f****d your granddaughter!'

The show evinced little reaction – until the *Mail on Sunday* discovered it and ran an outrage story on its front page on 26 October. The complaints came in their thousands, and the story overshadowed all other news. Byford, clearing his desk, had within days secured the suspension of both performers: Brand later resigned from the BBC and Ross was suspended for twelve weeks, losing over £1m of his salary. Lesley Douglas, a much lauded radio executive who was Controller of Radio 2, as well as David Barber, the channel's Head of Specialist Music and Compliance, resigned: both were aware of the contents of the recorded show, had approved its contents, but had not listened to it.

Byford had, by his presence and his activism, 'solved' a problem about which there is much comment: that of the coupling of the functions of Director General and Chief Editor in one office – when the DG, unlike Reith, could have little idea of what the BBC's thousands of hours of news and current affairs broadcasts were planning or broadcasting. He was the filter,

controlling and guiding what went on, getting to know what might produce difficulties, disciplining when needed, telling Thompson what he needed to know and proposing what needed to be done. How far he raised the quality of the news programmes by his leadership is a matter of some debate still within the BBC: what is agreed is that he acted as a necessary fixer and one-man intelligence service.

Entwistle had no such figure (nor had Greg Dyke when the broadcast by Andrew Gilligan on the *Today* programme in 2002 provoked a larger crisis, and the Hutton Report). The BBC, according to several of its news and current affairs executives, must be run on a series of systems: these depend on a passing of information up and down the hierarchies. A fatal flaw, according to one executive, is that because the systems are in place, and there are a number of people at various levels who can and usually should know what is happening in detail, it is easy to believe that those who should know, do know – and thus not check that such is the case.

Byford was a systems man: he put many more compliance measures into force after Ross-Brand, which called for at least two people to listen to every recorded programme – a provision no longer in force in that form. But he was also an out-of-systems man, who operated as a freelance troubleshooter and intelligence operative, using his authority to get informed, and crucially to make sure the boss knew. Birt, though a different kind of operator and with the authority (and, early, the unpopularity) of one who was known to be soon DG, was similarly interventionist: I was told that he sat, on at least one occasion, in the editing suite of *Panorama* in order to ensure that it was made in the way he wished it to be. With such a figure, the apparent absurdity of an overburdened Director General also pretending to 'edit' BBC news output became manageable: the new DG, Tony Hall, himself a former Head of News and Current Affairs, will likely re-animate the post.

Comment on the need to separate the two functions has come from politicians, media figures and newspaper editorialists (including a piece I wrote in the *FT* on 22 October). It seems commonsensical, especially to newspaper journalists, used to an editor who generally takes a close interest in much of what goes into the paper and who has the authority to intervene and change at any time in the production cycle in any section for any reason. A 'Chief Editor' who would often know little more of the BBC's news and current affairs output than an interested member of the public, and who under BBC protocol seems inhibited in intervening until after the fact of some mistake or scandal, does not seem to merit the title of "chief editor". Other large news organisations – such as Thomson Reuters (the main funder of the Reuters Institute) – do split the function of CEO and Chief Editor, invests supreme authority in the former but would expect the latter to be held to account, and in extremis resign, for any failings in the journalism.

In fact, the case to retain the coupling of the two is quite compelling, and speaks again to the specialness of the Corporation. As I argued earlier, the office is only partly that of a 'normal' CEO. It has a very large social/moral/emotional dimension, and is the target of many disparate opinions, longings and disappointed expectations, not least in its news and current affairs output. People feel much more strongly about the BBC coverage of almost anything than, for example, the more overtly leftish news on Channel 4 – even though the latter is the possession of a state corporation – and are much more prone to complain. More prosaically, a chief editor who carried the can for what many view as the BBC's most important output could

challenge the primacy of the DG; and even if s/he did not, the separation and the devolution of ultimate responsibility to a figure other than the DG would send the message that the non-journalistic output was less important than the sport, entertainment, children's programmes and other broadcasts for which the top person was responsible. But if, as Mrs Thatcher once said (referring to her Deputy Prime Minister William Whitelaw), 'every Prime Minister needs a Willie', so every DG needs a Mark, even if he is already called one – a Mark, moreover, prepared to use the office to poke into the journalism, right down to the level of the local radio station sub-editor.

With such a person and mechanism in place, the coupling of "Chief Editor" with Director General can work, and be transformed from a Reithian holdover to a necessary fiction. Crucial to its working, however, is that the Deputy DG, or Head of News and Current Affairs, does act like a newspaper editor, in the sense that Byford and Birt did: that s/he has the authority and the experience, as well as the will, to grasp as much of the monster output of the BBC as possible, and set his/her stamp on it. One former Head of News and Current Affairs said that he 'looked up and out, not down': that is, he talked mainly to his most senior colleagues, and to external groups and figures. He was unable to do more than keep himself informed, in general terms, of what was happening across the vast range of news and current affairs output. That imprisoning position needs to be changed.

4. The British Bilious Corporation is Useful, But Only Up To a Point

Humphrys' destruction of Entwistle was a prominent, but not unique example of a remarkable part of contemporary BBC culture: the extreme lack of deference shown by the troops to the officers, especially the generals – or, in television parlance, by the creatives to the suits. It was very pronounced when John Birt came from commercial television (London Weekend TV; he had previously worked for Granada). He faced anger and contempt, openly expressed, especially on the part of two famed foreign correspondents, Charles Wheeler, the expert on the US and Mark Tully, the long-time correspondent in India: both patrician in their style, they had become legends within both the BBC and their area of expertise, and were secure enough to disdain Birt. Tully wrote an open letter in 1996 blasting Birt's rule, and spoke in a lecture later that year of the BBC being 'run on fear and sycophancy' (he later left the BBC). In 1987, during a meeting with current affairs staff to explain planned changes in the division, Wheeler sharply asked Birt what he had meant. Birt began to reply – 'If you had listened to what I said...' Wheeler cut in, saying: 'I wrote it down, actually' – and read back Birt's words, mockingly.

There were large figures on both sides: and some, such as the celebrated investigative reporter on *Panorama*, John Ware, had originally despised Birt but were converted to support. But the habit remained: at slightly lower levels, the heads of departments, themselves usually former reporters, producers and editors, were routinely disparaged in meetings when they sought to change things: and initiatives were often abandoned. Birt had decreed the appointment of 'executive editors' in radio current affairs, figures who would take several similar programmes under their command, with the individual editors still in place but losing much of their authority.

The editors revolted, and refused to operate the system: it was brought in greatly diluted, but was scrapped in under two years. Part of BBC anecdotal lore – a rich seam – concerns a new Head of Current Affairs, enthused by attendance at a management course, who decreed that the editorial floor should be open plan and his office walls have transparent glass, so that he could see the programme producers and reporters at work and be seen to be part of the programme-making process. The *Panorama* team, near his office, came in at the weekend and piled up furniture between their space and his office, thus rendering them again invisible. A tactical victory only: the new Broadcasting House, built on to the old one in Portland Place, just up from London's Oxford Street, is relentlessly open plan and transparent.

This institutionalised impudence was on show at Entwistle's going: the BBC, collectively, was determined not to be seen to be inhibited in paying close and critical attention to its own crises. The result was coverage which, both for the Savile case and for the McAlpine affair, dominated bulletins (and much newspaper coverage) for two weeks. Both affairs were, to be sure, much more serious than Ross-Brand – a bad taste piece of arrogant clowning; but because the focus was so much on the BBC, both the (allegedly) hundreds of victims of Savile and the other institutions in which he was said to abuse them were relegated to a distant second and third place.

There is much in this which is noble. Some senior executives who went through these flash-mob occasions now say that, though resentful and angered at the time, they now think the process is a good one, necessary if the BBC is to be seen as trustworthy by the public, able to cleanse itself. Of the BBC's two 'engineers', Reith demanded and got obedience – sometimes, according to his biographers Ian McIntyre and Andrew Boyle (both senior BBC executives) amounting to servility. Birt got hostility, and only slowly convinced some of his staff – many of them the generation now running the BBC – of the worth of his ideas and the effectiveness of greater internal financial discipline, the focus on the coming digital revolution and the canny playing of an initially sceptical government to get a large licence fee settlement. Little question that the latter course – where management strategy has to be hard won, and where the intelligent and open minded (who, of course, have the added impetus of wishing to further their careers) accepted much of the package – is the more effective method than management fiat.

The insubordination springs, also, from another source. BBC staff, most of whom will not rise to the senior ranks, dedicate themselves to the institution, even as they curse and denigrate it and its leaders. They own, even if lightly, the public service ethos of the place: the media management writer Lucy Küng writes of the 'wide belief in the specialness of the BBC', of the rejection of any suggestion that it is a 'business'. The rejection of Birt was, in part, a sense that this had been violated by a 'commercial' man. Georgina Born, a Cambridge-based sociologist (now at Oxford), was given large access to the BBC in the latter part of Birt's period in office, and wrote a book, *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC* (Vintage, 2005), sharply critical of him and strongly supportive of Dyke. She appeared to echo much of BBC rhetoric in a judgment that, in the reign of Birt, 'widespread cynicism, both angry and bemused, swept through the corporation ... faced with budget cuts, job losses and departmental closures ... the identification of many staff with the BBC now took root in a collective contempt for senior management'. That contempt, however, did not stop the rise of those considered the best and the brightest: Mark Thompson, George Entwistle and Tony Hall, the DG-to-be, all benefitted in their careers during Birt's time in office.

Some of the emotional and intellectual identification with the BBC went back to Reith and the Reithian ethos, of cultural education, a pervasive effort to raise the tone of the society by self-improving talks, music and drama. Andrew Boyle, in his *Only the Wind Will Listen: Reith of the BBC* (Hutchinson, 1972) writes of 'the ethical values that were Reith's inheritance [which] ... lay buried in the bedrock on which the BBC itself stood, like a tall lighthouse illuminating the surrounding blackness.' By the 1980s and 90s, the light shone on different objects: its overt task was not so much cultural and moral enlightenment (though that remained implicit) as civic instruction, the provision of knowledge and insight which the active citizen should have, or at least have access to. However changed, it remains a definition of public service in broadcasting: serving the public interest, even where the much of the public is not interested. In a talk with Mark Damazer in 2005, when he was Controller of Radio 4, he told me that the channel's six-o'clock news was the most important bulletin of the day, one in which all (or as much as possible) of the news which was significant would feature – including, as an example, the results of the Italian elections, even if people's interest in which parties Italians elected were small.

This identification with an admirable ethos is mixed, however, with less inspiring features – as a reluctance to change, fear for loss of status or even jobs, groupthink and an unexamined belief that the BBC, dependent on a licence fee and a charter sanctioned by Parliament, can go on growing and spending forever, and should (since it is naturally noble). And least inspiring, at times of crises, is the sight of a Corporation full of people who sometimes savagely compete and often seek to further their personal and team aims at the expense of others (as in any large institution), coming together to exult in the schadenfreudlich abasement of the top man. Entwistle got an icy blast of this, and perished in it.

Greg Dyke, more than any other recent DG, is credited with a sustained attempt to change this culture, and believes – others agree – he did. Certainly, when he left after his offer to resign following the ‘Dodgy Dossier’ scandal was accepted, he was vocally supported by a significant number of the staff.

Both the scorn which greeted Birt’s ideas and the excited contempt which Entwistle’s performances evinced were more than simply the BBC showing how uniquely democratic it was. First, the judgment was skewed: the stories, while important, should not have dominated a news list for as long as they did: it put the BBC on the same footing as the tabloids, who had editorial reasons for emphasising the horror of it all.

Second, the divide between the suits and the creatives is one which has a basis – the increase in the numbers of various kinds of managers to ensure that standards are observed, regulations and procedures are followed and objections and accusations answered has been, on internal witness, considerable, as have increases in the numbers of those surveying audience reaction and working on the BBC’s external image in various ways.

But it is to an extent self-generating by the creatives, for self-regarding reasons. The BBC has not had the success it has had, and still has, nationally and globally because it is run and managed by people with a narrow and bean-counting vision. The macho quality of the internal debate, in part stemming from an ersatz communal interest at crisis times in demonstrating scorn, would be better replaced by a conscious effort to see the concern to maintain high standards as one which embraces all. Such a culture would demand thoughtful rather than mere reactive criticism and recognition of limits and constraints with which managers have to deal – and on their side, ensuring that the space given for full, considered and probing journalism is large and protected.

5. Trusting

The BBC Trust, chaired by Lord (Chris) Patten, appointed George Entwistle because it thought that the then Director of Vision really did have the vision needed for the Corporation's next phase of development, and would get the internal support required to push it through. Patten, who had had a testy relationship with Thompson, believed that his relations with Entwistle – whose pitch spoke of solutions for many of the fears and frustrations the Trustees felt – would be much better. The older man, after a distinguished career in the Conservative Party, in government and a stint as the last Governor of Hong Kong (1992-97), is also Chancellor of the University of Oxford, has contacts all over the British establishment and is a prolific author (he is Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Reuters Institute). He would take care of the politicians and much of the public world: Entwistle would get on with energising the creative people.

The BBC Trust was created by Royal Charter in January 2007, charged with setting the overall strategic direction of the BBC and overseeing the work of the BBC's executive board. That latter institution is headed by the DG (presently Tim Davie, who as Head of Audio and Music was a member of the board already – in Entwistle's brief reign, he had been named as Head of BBC Worldwide) and includes executive and non-executive directors, the latter largely from the business world usually with some link to media. Both the executive and non-executive directors, apart from the DG – who is appointed by the Trust – are appointed by a nominations committee, though the non-execs are also approved by the Trust. The heads of the main BBC divisions are members, and comprise presently of Lucy Adams, Director of Business Operations; Helen Boaden, Director of News; Roger Mosey, Acting Director of BBC Vision; Ralph Rivera, Director of Future Media and Zarin Patel, Chief Financial Officer.

The non-executive directors are Sally Davis, former CEO of BT Wholesale; Mike Lynch, the co-founder and Chief Executive of Autonomy Corporation; Dame Fiona Reynolds, former Director General of the National Trust and the senior non-executive member of the board from December 2012; Brian McBride, the former Managing Director of Amazon.co.uk; and Simon Burke, a former Head of Virgin Entertainment Group and Chairman of Hobbycraft. There is some criticism of the external directors for playing a largely passive role: the one part which they were said to play, in the mid-2000s, was to express shock of the low level of top executive salaries and to press for them to be raised (it's fair to add that the criticism applied, in some cases, to former non-executives). The BBC executives, with a reportedly decorous show of reluctance, did so – with the result that BBC salaries became and have remained the centre of newspaper attention, especially in the tabloids. Mark Byford, who earned £475,000 as Deputy DG, was given a pay-off of around £900,000 and a pension of two thirds his earnings – a fact which the *Daily Mail* found 'staggering'.

The Trust itself has a Vice Chairman in Dr Diana Coyle, a former economics editor of *The Independent* and ten other trustees, about half of whom have had a career, or part of it, in the media. The Chairman is expected to spend three – four working days on its business, the Vice Chairman two and a half days. The Chairman's salary is presently £110,000, the Vice Chairman's is £77,000. In 2010, the Chairman's salary was reduced from

£143,000, and other Trust members, and members of the BBC's executive board, took a cut equivalent to one month's pay.

The Trust is often thought of as the BBC's regulator – as the old Board of Governors was – and thus is accused of having a schizophrenic existence, poised uncomfortably between the roles of cheerleader and critic. In fact, much of the regulation is now done by Ofcom, with the Trust having a residual role as a guardian of its impartiality. The aim of the Trust, in which the then Labour Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell invested much faith, was to concentrate on strategy and the future, and to offer frank advice and analysis of the BBC leadership's progress. The Chairman and the DG would usually have a weekly meeting, which was private; that would be the main medium for pressing the Trust's concern, and for argument about how far the DG should or could accommodate them.

The service licence, introduced as part of the current Charter, is the main instrument by which the Trust holds the Corporation to practical account. Each licence sets out a desired set of programmes within a particular area or genre; describes what it expects from the BBC output of all kinds for that genre; and measures the BBC performance against these licences. A note from the Trust says that

Service licences provide BBC managers with a set of editorial aims and a framework which helps them decide whether approval from the Executive Board and Trust is required if they plan to change a service. The licences provide licence fee payers and any other interested stakeholders with certainty over the scope and remit of each service. In markets where competition is particularly fierce, such as pop music radio, the licences and the approvals system based on them have led to a tangible reduction in allegations of the BBC having negative market impact.

These are unloved within the BBC: there's a strand of opinion which would favour the detail of the licences being replaced by a broader demand for, as an example, more on education – not necessarily on any particular channel, but across the BBC – replacing detailed demands with a call to broaden the scope of this or that area of programme making.

The Trust, however, remains convinced that service licences are useful, and should be detailed as to the output of each channel: in late November, it published a review of the system, and simplified them in some respects. In a comment on the move, written in a blog on the Trust's website, the former ITV executive David Liddiment, a member of the Trust, wrote that 'we took a careful look at the use of quotas or targets – a subject of much debate over the years. While these should never exist for the sake of it, we concluded that quotas are helpful in some areas alongside qualitative commitments. For example, remembering that BBC One's serious arts output nearly disappeared under a previous governance regime, we are clear that a minimum quota for arts and music on BBC One alongside a small quota for religious programmes, is necessary.'

One reason why the licences have their supporters is because the competition depends on them. This is perhaps more important in the radio world, where the BBC has some 55 per cent of listening figures, and the commercial stations have to fight hard for a living. Thus, for example, Classic FM, the commercial classical music station, is very watchful that BBC's Radio

3, for so long the one radio full-time provider of classical and serious music, remains securely upmarket and leaves it with the job of attracting an audience to the more popular classical works.

The Trust also sees itself as having something of a popular role. Some members believe that the senior executives do not get out enough; and that when the latter grumble about having too many stakeholders to pander to, they actually spend too little time with the main stakeholder, the public. Nor, the Trust believes, do they have enough engagement with politicians; the fear of being seen to be taking orders from political leaders inhibits the executives from having sensible conversations, and understanding what the concerns of politicians – and through them, the electorate – are.

In the *Newsnight* crises, however, the Trust was helpless: not, in the main, its fault, but embarrassing to be so clearly exposed as being so. Under the constitution, it is the sovereign body for the BBC – thus it stands to get the blame for everything while being unable to materially affect anything happening in real time. In the Savile affair, Patten had been misled – as had others in the BBC hierarchy – by a mistaken account of *Newsnight's* canned report by its Editor Peter Rippon, and he, Patten, expressed his irritation publicly. In the second, much more serious, lapse, Patten was inhibited from any action in part because it was not the Trust's business, in part, too, because as a former senior Conservative figure of the Thatcher era himself, he could certainly not afford to be seen to be preventing a revelation of Lord McAlpine, a former political colleague.

A number of former executives believe that the Trust is not fit for purpose – as do leading politicians in government, both Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Among the possibilities mooted are included giving all regulation to Ofcom and appointing a Non-Executive Chairman to head the BBC's executive board, together with more powerful and active non-executive members sitting beside the top BBC people – a board much in the model of other large corporations. It's argued that the Trust's anomalous position, of being at once distant and close, would be better abolished in favour of a board which would be constantly engaged in the day-to-day as well as the strategic, and thus marry the two more effectively.

There is much in the view, constantly expressed – including by senior people in the Trust, who not unnaturally wish to retain it – that the form of governance is less important than the quality of, and relationships between, the people in the governance system. But the central problem with the form of the Trust – which one prominent broadcasting consultant called 'a praiseworthy but sadly botched attempt', is that it combines still those elements of regulation it retains, with accountability. It would likely be a good idea to focus on the latter and turn over all of the regulation to Ofcom.

The question then would be: should it continue as an external body, with its own staff and resources – since holding the BBC to account, especially through the system of service licences, is a large task which requires time, energy and close knowledge of the output. Or should it be collapsed into a conventional board, with a non-executive chairman, other non-executive but more active directors, the DG and other senior full-time executives? The advantage of the latter approach would arguably be greater and closer focus and the assumption by the senior executives of functions which are specified in the service licences, but which should be their responsibility to develop and maintain. The question of whether or not one system ensures greater accountability than another is hard to determine in the abstract: it should be

the subject of a dispassionate review in the near future, one which draws on the experience of other media companies with, as far as possible, comparable features with the BBC.

6. The Suits

In pursuit of the Trust's mission to reach out, Patten gave a speech on 26 November to the annual conference of The Voice of the Listener and Viewer, founded (in 1983) and presided over by the redoubtable Jocelyn Hay, a former freelance broadcaster. It was a speech of some regret, the more for having thought, in the summer, that 'the BBC was in a pretty good position; we had stable finances, a clear strategy and the politicians were, by and large, leaving us to get on with it'.

It was a reminder of how quickly 'pretty good positions' can crumble in the media world, and how suddenly an institution which, more than any other news medium, inspires trust can be represented as so untrustworthy. But Patten also dwelt, at some length, on the nature of management – implicitly blaming Entwistle's predecessor for leaving his successor with a BBC in which both BBC insiders and outsiders thought 'it was successful despite its management culture, not because of it'; that it was both 'over-managed and undermanaged', the first coming from 'the sheer weight and numbers of senior people, their pay, their titles, their jargon' and the distraction of people at the top because of this from 'the central question of whether the programmes are good enough'. Under-management came from the problem which Byford's appointment as news-Czar had sought to solve: a 'lack of collaboration and co-operation between different baronies', leading to blockages of information – and a lack of acknowledging mistakes, and keeping a grip on spending. In an interview with Andrew Marr on 14 November, Patten said he liked to observe that the BBC had more senior leaders than the Chinese Communist Party.

Some of these views are widely shared. The weight of senior executives – though somewhat reduced by Thompson – remains heavy. In her *Uncertain Vision*, Georgina Born writes that 'during the nineties, the nature of the bureaucracy changed through the introduction of new kinds of professional management, bringing with them new values. Producer Choice [budgeting at programme level], the independent quota [putting out at least 25 per cent of productions to the independent market – the real figure is now getting close to double that in some areas: it is a substantial reason why the creative industries in the UK have done as well as they have] and the volatile employment market together necessitated a rapid increase in management ... tiers of financial, legal, personnel and administrative apparatuses grew to handle the new operations ... the mid-nineties also saw the growth in many parts of the BBC of management focused on strategy, planning, market analysis and market research'.

Many executives in the BBC have worked there all or most of their professional careers, and have become accustomed to the BBC's management bureaucracy; more positively, they often believe that it its various levels are essential to the delivery of quality. However, at least one – and probably more – senior executives believe that at least one layer of management – that, for example, between the overall Head of News and the programme editors – could be stripped away: similar layers in other departments would get the same treatment.

Salaries, too, will not again rise to the heights they achieved in the mid-2000s, with Mark Thompson taking a salary of £834,000 – cut in the summer of 2010 by 20 per cent, or £123,000, then further cut to just over £600,000. George Entwistle came in on a salary of ‘just’ £450,000 per annum. Indeed, they may be cut further: and though that would please many, it would mean that BBC top people earned a great deal less than their equivalents elsewhere in the media world, including in the UK commercial TV and Channel 4. The period of high salaries at the BBC owed much to the pressure of the higher-paid outside executives, but it also had a root in the internal market in production created by Birt: that slopped over into the consequence that markets would drive pay. Thompson, the major beneficiary, himself believed that the job merited the high (or relatively low, depending on from which angle it is viewed) salary. Even for executives convinced of the BBC’s public purpose, their ‘natural’ reflection was that they were being paid much less than equivalent high pressure jobs in the private media sector (of course, on the assumption that these existed, or they would get them). A reflection that higher pressure jobs in governing the country were paid much less was, presumably, less often entertained.

C4’s Chief Executive, David Abraham, earns a little over £700,000 in all, commands a much smaller organisation and does not have the duties of a chief editor; while Jay Hunt, former BBC 1 Controller who became C4’s Chief Creative Officer, who does, is paid around £400,000. Danny Cohen, who now runs BBC 1, is paid £270,000 in total as of June 2012. Helen Boaden, Head of all news and current affairs at the BBC, receives £340,000. In July of this year, *Mediatweek*, using a Freedom of Information request, discovered that C4 has 4.7 per cent of its staff (36) earning more than the £142,000 Prime Minister David Cameron received in 2011; while the BBC had only 1.5 per cent of its staff (305) in a similarly comfortable bracket.

The BBC has to attract people, at every level, who believe in the core mission and wish to serve it with at least as much energy and talent as their much better rewarded private sector colleagues. That credo, battered in the last two decades, cannot but be reasserted if the BBC is to remain what it claims to be – a public good, an indispensable instrument to understanding the world from a British perspective, and a social glue-factory. Two strong supporters of the BBC in the academic world, Steve Barnett and Jean Seaton, both Professors at Westminster University (the latter the BBC’s official historian) argue in a *Political Quarterly* article, ‘Why the BBC Matters: Memo to the New Parliament about a Unique British Institution’ (Volume 81, Issue 3, pages 327–332, July–September 2010), that

the BBC space cannot be commodified: its communication is not contingent on giving potential recipients a commercial value and does not treat them as consumers whose demographics and wallets must be attractive to potential advertisers ... the non-commercial nature of this space both defines the BBC’s approach to creating its content and the nature of the consumer experience.

This is not wholly true: the BBC has to ‘shadow’ successful commercial programming in a number of genres and times: but it has an important core of truth. And it means that salaries, too, can only be ‘commodified’ in a limited

way, and must be subjected to the more modest influence of public service, which is its own reward.

This collides with another problem. The BBC now carries much more programming which can be described as 'public service' than any other channel, including C4 which, though self-funding through advertising, is ultimately state-owned via the Channel Four Television Corporation, a public body. Executives in broadcasting outside of the BBC, especially those in the proliferation of digital channels which seek profitable niches, have quite different aims and constraints than the BBC people: it means that a search for top people, including for the DG, does not have a field of candidates like John Birt, formerly of London Weekend TV and Jeremy Isaacs, formerly of Thames TV, the first Head of C4 (unlike Birt, he had worked for the BBC, for *Panorama*, in the 1960s).

The hiring of Davie from PepsiCo, and the success he is said to enjoy, is a pointer to another route: finding leaders still relatively young who don't have broadcasting skills but who are fast learners and good at both process and command. Indeed, it may be that such figures, if carefully chosen, could be more effective than those who were producers and editors: they lack experience, but also the inhibitions the BBC men and women who have shot up the preferment ladder may have, to lead forcefully those with whom they had previously been friendly, and with whom they shared the BBC's anti-authority culture.

However, there are other issues which lie under Patten's impatience with the Chinese Communist-like ranks of BBC commissars, and the high salaries. One is that the BBC has steadily reduced the productions it does in-house, especially drama and comedy: these are now very substantially done in the private sector, or are co-funded and produced. The two drama series which Patten instanced in his *The Voice of the Listener and Viewer* (VLV) speech – *The Hollow Crown*, the Shakespeare history plays, and *Parade's End*, an adaptation of Ford Maddox Ford's sprawling novel – were, in the first instance, largely funded by the US channel NBC and in the second was a co-production between the BBC, the successful US big-idea drama producer Home Box Office (HBO) and Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie (VRT), the Flemish (Belgian) public broadcaster. In a piece in the *Weekend FT* on 1/2 Dec, Nick Edwards noted that 'making TV drama is so expensive that even the most lavish series produced in Europe cannot expect to match the budgets of their US rivals ... drama departments from different countries are pooling their budgets to create shows that ... can compete with the US on its own turf'.

Co-productions can – as the two instanced by Patten are – be very fine, and the BBC, working in the world lingua franca, English, and with a massive drama tradition and expertise, is very well placed to play major roles. But it also means that the synergies once gained from having the production of almost everything – news, current affairs, documentaries, sport, comedy, game shows, soaps, children's programmes, reality TV, religious broadcasting, arts programmes and drama – under the same BBC 'roof' is now declining (some 40 per cent of programmes are made by independent producers), and with it part of the culture and the ethos that the BBC provides everything for everyone – which, in its great growth period from the 50s to the 90s, it aspired to do. It means that the BBC becomes a little more like C4, where the executives don't make programmes but commission them from independent producers – this including the C4 news, which is supplied by

ITN. It has also meant that the ratio of suits to creatives in many departments has gone up, as the latter have left for the private sector. The suits, who have after all constructed and run corporate cultures, have usually stayed and are in the ascendant; the creatives, who often like to see themselves as free spirits, have more often left and are now more independent – though shorn, usually, of job security and guaranteed pension – which may prompt the reflection that the spirit can be free, but life, especially in Islington, is expensive.

More resented generally has been the imposition, at different times with different intensities, of compliance directives. These have usually come in after crises – of which the major ones have been the affair of the Dodgy Dossier, where the reporter Andrew Gilligan reported, on the *Today* programme, that Tony Blair had knowingly lied about the possession of WMD by the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, in 2002; the rigging of a *Blue Peter* phone-in in 2007, where a breakdown in equipment resulted in a visitor to the set pretending to call from outside to keep the show going – an incident which sparked revelations of other anti-competitive practices in phone-ins; the *Year with the Queen* affair of the same year, which saw the then BBC 1 Controller Peter Fincham comment that the Queen had ‘lost it a bit’ when a documentary appeared to show her storming out of a photo-shoot, an editing trick about which Fincham had not been informed (the documentary was done by the RDF Media company) but which cost him, and the RDF Creative Director Stephen Lambert, their jobs; the Ross-Brand episode of 2008; and, in two successive months, October–November 2012, the *Newsnight* scandals. When the new compliance measures came in they gave producers and editors more paperwork to do and also increased the ranks of middle-rank executives to administer and monitor compliance, increased the number of human relations, accounts and PR people to cope with the new systems and tipped the balance more against the creatives.

Though people at the Trust don’t believe that the BBC leadership spends enough time with stakeholders, most who have been in these high ranks, and many further down the hierarchy, believe that the need to answer to various constituencies does leech away a great deal of management time and attention. At the same time, they also believe, or say they believe, that dealing with stakeholders is a necessary part of working at a high level in a public service broadcaster, and is a rough equivalent to (and often less testing than) needing to worry about shareholders, profit margins and share price.

The stakeholders include the government, usually in the shape of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport; Parliament, both upper and lower houses; interest groups concerned by coverage of their area of interest, as (often cited) those concerned with coverage of the Middle East, the groups speaking to both the Israeli and the Palestinian interests; organisations directly concerned with broadcasting, of which the VLV is the most courted and flattered; free speech and civil liberty NGOs, large institutional players like the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the City of London; overseas embassies, usually distressed by some issue of stereotyping or misrepresentation; organisations speaking for youth and children and families; and others.

The days when Carleton Greene, when DG, would throw darts at an obscene, many-breasted picture of the moral crusader Mary Whitehouse and kept her off the airwaves are very long gone: a figure like Whitehouse would now be making polemical programmes and appearing regularly on important talk shows like *Any Questions*. Mark Thompson used to reminisce how, when

first a BBC production trainee in the late seventies, complaining letters were read out to general hilarity, then thrown away without an answer being given. Now they are carefully, if sometimes formulaically, answered. As Lucy Küng writes, the top BBC people are generally 'very bright, articulate, well-connected': their people skills vary, but most can muster a good deal of charm and conviction in presenting the BBC's case and deflecting criticism. Georgina Born puts it characteristically more harshly, arguing that what was undoubted 'producer arrogance' and 'tyrannical elitism' has been replaced by

'tyrannical populism' that took 'actual audience tastes' as its justification.

One of Thompson's achievements was to broaden the cultural/political remit of the BBC: the most obvious sign of that was the inclusion of Nick Griffin, Chairman of the British National Party, on the panel of a *Question Time* in October 2009 – where, harried by the other panelists, he made a poor impression, a fact that meant that though there were protests before the programme that one with extreme racist views should be accorded a place beside mainstream politicians and others, there were few after. More important, however, for the BBC is that it must avoid being tarred with the 'live in Islington' brush: for a very important, if reluctant stakeholder is the political right, especially on the right of the Conservative Party and in the press of the right. Usually allied with that strand of political opinion are many working in the upper echelons of independent television, and particularly in the Rupert Murdoch-owned media. In such a diverse field there is no one view – except that all would concur that the BBC should be smaller, and some would question its right to be there at all, since a generally held view is that were the BBC to disappear, nearly all news, current affairs and other public interest goods would be provided by the market – where they are not provided already. This would leave a 'market failure' BBC perhaps a small niche, which could be filled much more modestly, with less damage to what commercial broadcasters see as its tendency to 'crowd out' market-based media companies.

Managers must also cope with internal stakeholders – as the BBC regions in the North of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – with whom they are required to plan for years ahead. One recently retired executive said it was an 'old style Soviet economy', an echo of John Birt's view of it, in the 1993 Fleming Memorial Lecture, as 'a vast command economy, a series of entangled, integrated baronies, each providing internally most of its own needs'. Quotas of production have to be set very far ahead: people from the private sector coming into the BBC were, said the retired executive, amazed by the domination of plans and targets, which though open to change nevertheless require endless – and time-consuming – tending.

Can management be better? Of course: but the BBC has to acknowledge what limitations it has. First, there is, for the BBC, no way out of complexity. The demands of being a public service broadcaster with such a purchase on British, and to a much lesser degree foreign, attention and emotional commitment dictates constant openness to the public, or publics, in different forms. The BBC of Reith and his successors till the sixties was one which could assume taste leadership – whether it was the austere Reithian diet of enlightening programmes larded with some lighter moments, or Carleton Greene's proactive encouragement of a liberal approach in nearly all departments.

Now, in the interactive third millennium, it needs to know what its audience and stakeholders think and want, and to be equipped to hear and absorb their contributions to both its programming and its governance. It needs to engage with them constantly, in a way no other media organisation does: that is, not just knowing what they like to watch and listen to and read, but maintaining a constant interaction so that it both knows about opinions and movements and grumbles high and low, and that it puts into British society ideas, initiatives and arguments for improving the public culture and the wider understanding. Such networks are an important dimension – perhaps the most important dimension – of maintaining creative quality and leadership.

One of the arguments that the Trust had with the departed Mark Thompson was that he should appoint a Director of Corporate Affairs: a top executive charged with presenting the BBC to the public, but also with presenting the public to the BBC. Thompson proved reluctant to do so – or at least, didn't: he may have felt that the BBC needed another high-paid functionary, whose duties, expenses and salary would be fought over in the tabloids, like a hole in the head. But the Trust in this instance was probably right.

Second, this essay is largely about the news and current affairs output of the BBC: and there is no argument anywhere that the provision of these must demand high standards, if the reputation of the Corporation is to be sustained – and, given what happened in November, recovered. Yet the BBC has done a great deal for editorial standards: its creation of the Journalism College, a rich device for training in different aspects of news gathering and news broadcasting all available online, is as good a virtual journalism course as any available anywhere. It certainly is not clear that more compliance, or layers of editorial management, would help.

The two crises happened in one programme, in *Newsnight*. It seems that the issue over Savile turned on a breakdown in communication and possibly trust both within *Newsnight*, and in those who should have grasped what it was doing in first commissioning, then halting, a major piece of investigative work on a famous and recently deceased star. It should have been either confirmed as something the BBC would not do for good editorial reasons or passed to a programme with better investigative traditions, such as *Panorama* – hard as journalists everywhere would find such a generous gesture.

In the second case, the wrongful 'naming' of Lord McAlpine, the matter – still puzzling – appeared to see a programme take leave of the most basic editorial precautions, perhaps in an effort to cancel a recently acquired reputation from backing down from making a difficult exposure. In both cases what is needed is not more people checking, but – as argued above – an interventionist and experienced boss making sure that hard subjects are properly dealt with and generally understood by those who need to do so.

Third, the view that a layer of management could be removed without much loss is likely to be right – providing that news and current affairs executives are not bound, as one said, to work up and out, not down. 'Down' is where the work is done which makes the BBC's news machine the indispensable player in British public life which it is: 'up' is reporting what must be known above, which is essential but not normally overly time consuming; 'out' is the domain of corporate affairs.

7. The Future Crises

The Licence Fee

This is now fixed, and at its limit. The BBC will probably continue to get, in Lucy Küng's words, 'poorer slowly' – a state of affairs not helped by the fact that governments will continue to 'top slice' part of its revenue for other purposes. However, it is unlikely to become really poor and could do much by productivity. The problem is that a licence fee invented for a time when people had fixed receivers – radios, then televisions – now meets a digital age developing in leaps and bounds, where more and more programmes will be watched on a variety of platforms – screens, lap- and desktops, tablets, smartphones.

Tim Suter, a former BBC and Ofcom executive and now a consultant with the firm Communication Chambers (which has the BBC as one of its clients) says that 'the BBC now has to rethink the licence fee for a new age. It could become not just a TV licence, but also a universal licence, no longer linked exclusively to the television set but a tax on households using media, a tax of which the BBC would take a part.

In fact, another country with a rich public service broadcasting tradition has already rethought the licence fee, and acted. Germany has scrapped a system which was a model of the BBC's and replaced it with a monthly household tax, which all householders must pay and which covers the cost of the the public broadcasters ARD and ZDF, providing both TV and radio channels (unlike the BBC, these channels also carry advertising). The solution detaches the money required to continue these broadcasters from the TV in the corner of the room, and seems likely to work better in a world of more mobile programming: while at the same time recognising that the TV in the corner of the room, or on the wall at the end of the bed, is still the favoured viewing position for most of us.

The BBC's Channels

BBC 1, BBC 2 and the others will now also undergo a radical rethink. The experience of the Olympics – a blessed event for the BBC, one which in crisis seemed suddenly far away – boosted the view of strategists in the Corporation who believe that the money must move away from the channel controllers, the great barons of the BBC kingdom, towards the producers of programmes, the senior creatives. Content, not this or that channel, is now king: and the Olympics provided content which could be and was spread across a number of channels – with the content leading, rather than the channel controlling how the content was presented.

Moving away from the dictatorship of the controllariat would mean that rather than they dictating what programmes they wished to put in the mix of evening viewing, the producers would take the money and produce programmes which would, in some cases, be made for the channels – but in others would be made for, say, on-demand showing or even for distribution outside of the BBC – an idea too far for the present, but one which may find some traction in the future. Channel controllers want as large audiences as they can get: they thus tend to seek programmes, the expenditure of public money on which can be hard to justify, and which are generally the kind of programmes which the commercial sector points to as not requiring a publicly funded institution to produce.

The Olympic Games are only once every four years, but many large sporting and other events, as the Glastonbury Festival, are more frequent, and they would, too, assert the primacy of the content over the channel. Increasingly, new generations of viewers seek programmes rather than channels: a recognition of the BBC's specialness is much more common among older generations than younger – the latter precisely the viewers who tend to watch on the move. By adroitly inserting itself into a range of activities with which it would identify itself, the BBC could (and already does) gain wider recognition: but the trend away from fixed sets showing fixed channels at fixed times is powerful, and accelerating – even though the conventional listening and viewing has held up well, and the BBC remains strong within it. Further, because of its specialness and public role, the BBC must constantly justify itself in public interest terms: and it's argued that a few controllers and top managers deciding on what will be the viewing for many millions will no longer be regarded as right.

Channels are not expected to disappear: but the BBC's urge to do everything will meet both tighter financial limits, and more public scepticism. It will for the foreseeable future require big well-funded channels to do big things, even if these big things are increasingly co-productions: but the examples of BBC 3, designed for youth, and BBC 4, designed for intellectuals, goes to the argument on the need to scale back. Young people search the net constantly for a range of different content; intellectuals tend to read more than watch, and where they do watch, they are picky about what, giving pride of place to older forms like cinema and theatre (and DVDs of films and plays).

The convergence of the computer and the television and the primacy of digital in carrying all media will continue to eat away at the conventional behaviour of TV viewers. Tim Suter of Communication Chambers says that 'I think the BBC faces a very important question here: does it lead or follow its audience? It's true that broadcasting is still very popular but I think it should lead, in the sense that it could accelerate the move towards broadband – as the introduction of the iPlayer already has – by putting its capacity to offer on-demand television at the front of its offering.'

Mark Thompson's Challenge

The lectures, described at the beginning of this report, outlined a theme not likely to be at the top of the new DG's mind but it should in the future take some space there. Insofar as the BBC will continue to define itself, explicitly and implicitly, as an institution necessary to the civic health of the nation it was designed to serve, it will need to acknowledge the weight of Thompson's charge that words are being debased and dragging down politics and democratic life with them. The BBC is not mainly responsible for this, but it reflects that debasement and sometimes furthers it: it needs to adopt some of the rigour with which Thompson described the ill, and find some form of antidote.

He sketched in one form of that: the teaching of civic behaviour in school. The BBC already provides services for schools – notably Learning Zone, a service which broadcasts dramas, documentary and animation programmes to schools overnight, to be downloaded and used in class as the teacher wishes. It could build further on that, becoming part of what Thompson says is a partial solution. It could also deliberately promote a culture of 'reasonable compromise': one way would be to shape programmes and interviews, in some cases, round examples of consensual action, in

politics and elsewhere in public life, rather than relying only on confrontational interviewing techniques which can degrade as much as enlighten.

The greatest heuristic instrument, though, is the BBC's practice at its best: in news and current affairs, the search for truth. In an essay in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (Volume 28, Issue 4, 2008), Jean Seaton the BBC historian, writes that balance and impartiality, important for themselves, are ways by which the BBC discovers truth – and claiming that, especially, impartiality 'is an injunction against ideological precepts and the avoidance of a blinkered outlook; it is an injunction not to go into something expecting to know what's going to happen'. This example, of course, goes much wider than the practice of journalism: it is a rare lesson which journalism, when thus practiced, can teach the wider society.

BBC Drama

The following is a suggestion which seems a little farfetched but is probably important in practice. If the BBC is to remain at the centre of the nation's cultural life – or psychodrama – it will have little choice but to present itself, not simply its programmes, more vividly. Part of the tragedy of George Entwistle was that, for all his much-recognised private and professional virtues, he too–little looked the part of a confident, creative leader. He was, of course, faced with an escalating crisis, caught in a media glare: yet even without that, he seemed too inward-facing and modest to convince as the head of the greatest broadcaster in the world – still the BBC's boast, most recently repeated in Patten's speech to VLV.

It seems unfair to demand of one filling that post, with its multitude of demands, that s/he should also be something of an actor. But it's probably necessary: Patten's political-thespian skills, honed over a long public career, assisted in his survival over difficult weeks. Entwistle's inability to project confidence and some measure of optimism helped doom his leadership before it had properly begun.

Future would-be leaders should note that, and if not blessed with such skills naturally, should make them their study, while the Trust, or any future body which decides on the top job, should factor their possession into its criteria. It may already have done so: Tony Hall has two attributes which point towards a more assured presentation. First, he is a Lord – created Baron Hall of Birkenhead in March 2010, the first to head the BBC while titled – and Lords, since they are members of a parliament, generally have some rhetorical skills. Second and more importantly, he will, by the time he re-enters the BBC as DG, have been Chief Executive of the Royal Opera House for twelve years: some elements of the self-dramatisation of the prima donnas with whom he has worked must have crossed the footlights, and embedded themselves in his personality. He should hope so.

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