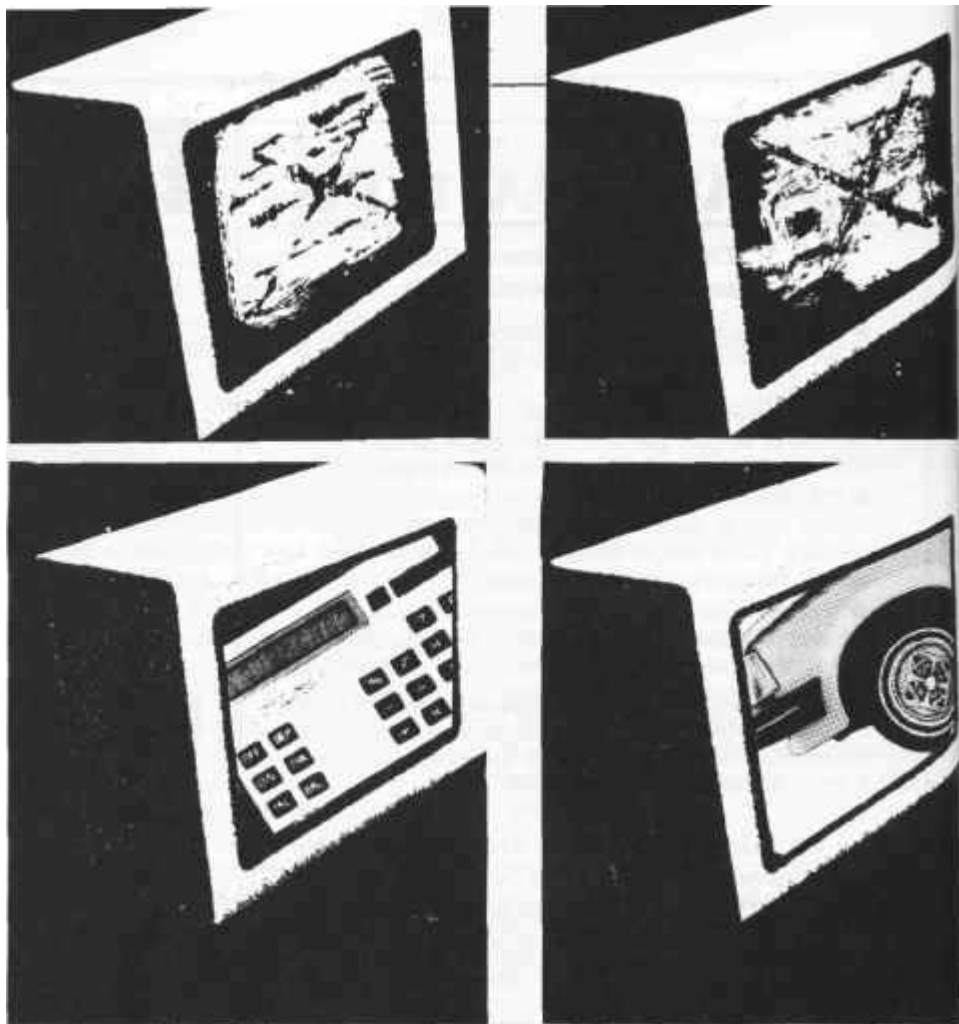


**The BBC is in serious trouble. In a few years it may look very different from now. What should the Left think of this?**

# Auntie Shows Her Age

Ian Connell

AT THE END of March an uneasy peace was established between those who had been squabbling over the issues raised by the BBC seeking an increase in its licence fee. Leon Brittan, the Home Secretary, announced in the House that the colour licence fee would be raised from £46 to £58, and that it would be pegged at the new level for up to two years. The BBC's Director General, Alasdair Milne and the



Chairperson of the Board, Stuart Young had been campaigning for an increase to £65. The BBC said it was disappointed, and that the new licence represented a loss of income of £350m. However, no-one in the BBC can have been entirely surprised by the shortfall.

The Home Secretary also announced a wide ranging inquiry into the funding of broadcasting, the results of which would be expected by the summer of 1986. Among other things this inquiry will consider whether advertising and sponsorship can be extended to meet at least some part of the BBC's costs. The inquiry will be chaired by Professor Alan Peacock, currently professor of public finance at Heriot Watt University and formerly vice-chancellor of the University of Buckingham. He has also been a chief economic adviser to the Department of Trade and Industry. Commenting upon his appointment, the Entertainments Trade Alliance said 'given the known views of Professor Peacock, the Government seems to be taking steps to ensure the inquiry comes up with the recommendations the Government wishes'.

Whether this is so or not, there is little doubt that within the Conservative Party there is considerable support for the idea

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that the BBC should be funded by some other means than the licence fee. The Home Secretary's announcements incorporated virtually all that Tim Brinton and John Gorst, chairperson and vice-chairperson of the Tory backbench media committee, had proposed. But the hostile response of other Tory backbenchers came because they thought the BBC had been let off the hook and that pressure on it to improve efficiency had been reduced. No secret has been made of the fact that there is also support, all the way up to the PM's office, for treating the BBC like other public corporations and privatising at least some parts of it. Radio One and local radio have both been quoted as candidates. And, there have also been criticisms of the BBC's insistence, as Tim Brinton sees it, 'on doing everything that anyone else is doing, like going into breakfast television or starting a soap opera like *EastEnders*.' Unlike some of his colleagues Brinton is

not in favour of advertising on the BBC. 'If you have adverts', he has said, 'what is the point in having a BBC? Why not just make it a commercial institution?'. There are growing numbers of Conservatives who would think this a splendid idea.

Less than a year ago the prospect of adverts on the BBC or of privatising it was just about unthinkable. Then, in June, the Adam Smith Institute published its Ome-



ga Report in which both were advocated. At the time this seemed little more than the rapacious ravings of the radical and none too influential Right. Subsequent events, culminating in Mr Brittan's announcements, now make both seem quite likely to be accomplished by the end of this Parliament.

#### Market caution

Outside the ranks of the Conservative Party, however, the prospect of advertising on the BBC has not been received as welcomingly as might have been expected. To many of those involved in the advertising industry and in the entertainment sectors of the telecommunications industry these are seen as perplexing and troubling times. Threats to what has till now been a comfortable, glamorous, extremely well-paid and profitable line of trade are coming thick and fast, in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The exploitation of new and not so new technologies, of cable and satellites presents the prospect of an alternative system to the existing centralised networks. During the last four years estimates of the numbers viewing network programmes have fluctuated wildly. While this fluctuation has been attributed to changes in measurement technology, this has not prevented a slump in the income from advertising. February's takings are down by 8% on the same month last year, and already the smaller TV companies are implementing off-screen economies and/or delaying projects until the autumn in the hope that by then revenue will have returned to its former levels. This is not all bad news for it means that the ITV com-

panies can plead something that looks like poverty at a time when the Government is considering changes in the levy on their profits. On top of all this there are fears that whatever may happen in the longer term as a result of cable and satellite development, the audience for the existing services is already fragmenting as a result of competition from other domestic electronics such as video cassette recorders, video games and micro-computers.

In commercial television and the advertising industry responses to the prospect of advertising on the BBC have, in some cases, been circumspect and, in others, explicitly opposed. One of the leading, but cautious, advocates of it has been Rodney Harris, Media Director of D'Arcy MacManus Masius (DMM). Writing last September in *Marketing Week* he stated that while the Omega Report was 'jolly good reading', its great flaw, unfortunately, 'was that it gave no details of how all the grand schemes could be realistically implemented'. Its, and the Government's enthusiasm, was at the expense of attention to the effects advertising might have on other, commercially supported, media, not least those TV companies now 'suffering' from declining profits.

Such caution is occasioned by the view

that advertising will not continue to expand, like the volume of traffic on motorways, to fill each and every new route that is opened up. On the contrary, it is argued that the pool of advertising for network television is finite, and, moreover, may even begin to decrease as advertisers have to become increasingly discerning about who they need to reach, and who they *can* reach via such television.

#### Changing patterns of viewing

Since 1980 the number of occasions on which the effectiveness of existing forms of broadcasting as selling media have been questioned has increased dramatically. Attention has been drawn to the impact of video recorders and of remote control pads on this effectiveness. Prior to 1980, the domestic use of video recorders in this country was virtually non-existent. Current projections suggest that although sales in 1984 were down on 1983 by about 50%, video recorders will still attain a 40% penetration of UK households in the course of 1985. Remote control units, accompanying either the TV set or a video recorder wired to the TV, are now into approximately 24% of all UK households. This has led to the suggestion that 'channel flickers' and 'video speeders' are becoming

## there are really no clear-cut differences between the public and private sectors so far as programming is concerned

commonplace. People with the technology use it to avoid commercial breaks, either by zapping through other channels or by fast-forwarding material recorded off-air. The main domestic use of video recorders, according to research conducted by Audits of Great Britain on behalf of BARB, is to view hired video tape rather than for the purposes of time-shifting - viewing programmes recorded off-air at a later time than transmission.

But even if people are not deliberately avoiding commercial breaks, they may not be around when they are on. Scrutiny of *Social Trends* has led some agencies to consider the amount of time people spend travelling to and from work in particular ITV regions. Where, as in the South East, this is above average, advertising that might have gone to TV is being directed to more appropriate media, to taxis and public transport and to billboards on sites where commuter traffic is heavy.

Such discernment on the part of advertisers has led to some preliminary speculation about alternatives for TV. A prime candidate in this respect is sponsorship, and, especially, that level of sponsorship which would allow the client editorial control of programmes. This could well prove an attractive development to the growing independent sector of production (independent that is of the ITV companies and the BBC). This sector already is linked into the industrial-commercial world and has been boosted by the existence of Channel 4. There are already suggestions that the BBC might in future emulate C4 and take a greater number of programmes from this extra-mural sector.

But let us return to the question of the financing of the BBC. At the moment the front-runner by a short head remains the proposal to introduce advertising to the BBC. The proposal is that the BBC, like other state systems in Europe, should raise only part of its finances through advertising. If it were allowed to do more, say to take advertising on the same basis as ITV at six minutes per hour of total broadcasting, it is predicted that the ITV companies would go bankrupt. Harris of DMM has estimated that if the total supply of com-

mercial airtime was increased by 6% per year and carried by the BBC, it could provide 15 seconds of advertising per hour in the first year rising to about 30 seconds in the second, and the licence fee could have been held at £46. Such a low incidence would permit adverts to be scheduled rather differently. Commercial breaks could be confined to the space between programmes and not permitted in the course of them. This, for instance, has been RAI's (Radiotelevisione Italiana) practice in Italy in response to the effective challenge mounted by the vigorous and attractive private sector which has developed there since the mid-70s. But, there is a catch. Scheduling commercial breaks in such a way might just encourage further the habit of skipping commercials entirely.

### The BBC's defence

It is probably not surprising that Alasdair Milne and Stuart Young have opposed outright any suggestion that the amount of advertising could be contained and confined. This, they've argued, would contradict the advertisers' inevitable requirement of TV companies to deliver to them the largest audiences possible and would result in them placing pressure on the BBC to expand the amount of time available to advertising. Moreover, they've argued that a BBC with advertising would mean a fairly rapid deterioration of programme standards, and, the inevitable fight for ratings would lead to more demanding programmes being expelled from peak time. In short, public service broadcasting in the UK would be eroded. The BBC would continue to entertain, but the quality of that entertainment would have to be 'lowered', and, it would no longer be able to sustain that mix of entertainment, information and education that it claims to have provided since the days of Reith's Director Generalship.

Responding to this argument Rodney Harris and Andrew Roberts, writing in *ADMAP* (March 1985), consider Milne and Young's an 'understandable but . . . an emotive belief that does not stand up to inspection'. Their research suggests not only that 'quality programming' is valued by viewers, but *also* by advertisers. Advertisers, they conclude, 'are willing to pay for it directly in terms of an editorial association or because of the quality of audience that quality editorial attracts'. And, though they did not do so, Harris and Roberts could have quoted C4 as further evidence of the advertising industry's preparedness to be involved with a channel that transmits 'minority' programmes,

programmes that are sometimes innovative, and often of a 'quality' which would be acceptable to BBC editors. Advertising, then, need not lead to the production of programmes which the BBC's editorial would consider qualitatively inferior.

### Public service versus commercialism?

There is a sense in which Milne and Young are right to suggest that 'public service broadcasting' is currently under pressure, but it is so for reasons rather different to the ones they have proposed. On various occasions Alasdair Milne has argued that 'public service broadcasting' is something which the BBC 'itself evolved and cherished'. This is an argument which has proved persuasive with many on the Left and has led them into something of an unlikely alliance with a patrician elite to defend the BBC from any further commercial colonisation. To his credit Philip Whitehead, the former Labour spokesperson on broadcasting, recently began to question the validity of this argument when he suggested that 'we have been hung up for too long on the notion, assiduously fostered by the BBC, that everything the BBC does is public service and the rest is not. . . We should shift our view now to the notion of a variety of public services which would collectively push back and not ape the commercial competitor'. This seems to leave Mr Whitehead in a position not too dissimilar to that adopted by Mr Brinton.

Philip Whitehead does not go far enough in his rejection of the association of the BBC and public service. Like many other left critics he too assumes that at least in cultural affairs, commerce and public service are fundamentally and irreconcilably at odds, and therefore we should not expect to find public service within the commercial sector. On the contrary, within the commercial sector we can only hope to find the cynical manipulation of public need, the exploitation of popular feelings and pleasures in the pursuit of profit. Just how does this body of assumption stand up to close inspection?

The first point to make is that there are really no clear-cut differences between the public and private sectors so far as programming is concerned. Most of the programme formats that have come to be associated with public service, whether in news and current affairs, documentary or drama, were not even originated in the public sector. During the last period of extensive innovation in broadcasting, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, these formats were employed for the first time

## too often the BBC has behaved as an irreproachable purveyor of quality culture

and were adopted from the highly commercial and competitive networks in the US. It is a nonsense to suggest that the commercial sector does not provide a public service. Precisely because it is driven by the pursuit of profits the commercial sector has had to produce 'useful' programmes - however opaque or even unacceptable that usefulness to various cultural critics. The commercialism of the commercial sector has led it to being responsive to the sorts of publics that the BBC and its supporters would instinctively regard as the targets of their reforming cultural zeal. All the fuss arises, all the accusations of 'pandering to (the worst of) popular taste' have been made because the commercial instinct is not to change taste, first and foremost, but to align products with it, to insinuate its products within that which is most widely familiar.

If the commercial sector has attempted to identify with and celebrate the popular, the BBC has often seemed only to truck with it in order to change it. Too often the

BBC has behaved as an irreproachable purveyor of quality culture - far, above and beyond the doubts, reservations or criticisms of its users. Too often it has acted as if it knew best what viewers *really* wanted or what was in their best interests, it has never really cast off that arrogant conviction that its chosen editorial paths are not only the correct ones, but quite possibly the only ones worthy of consideration. Its tone of reply to critics remains much as that adopted by a previous Director General who to encourage the troops said 'we must not allow ourselves to slip into the despairing attitude of seeing ourselves as casting pearls before swine . . . The course of wisdom is for us to see ourselves as casting pearls before people who have been taught by us to appreciate their value'. Maybe because such advice has been heeded, the BBC has done much to encourage the swine to look elsewhere.

It has, at any rate, certainly been some considerable time, since the BBC has had anything like that 45% share of the potential viewing public that it has claimed as its right. According to William Phillips, the facts are that 'until 1968, 45% was the best it ever got in a month: indeed, from ITV's airdate in 1955 until the end of 1970, the BBC managed to get 45% or more in only

18 months out of 183, although it had BBC 2'. During the 1970s the best share it ever had was 56% in October 1979, and over the last couple of years its share has been progressively decreasing.

### What can be done?

What is then currently under pressure to change are certain definitions of public service, namely those which have been most carefully cultivated within the public sector. There are other definitions and these are to be found within the commercial sector - even at its most 'de-regulated'. Within the next few years it is more than likely that the BBC will be transformed. It is probable that - certainly while Thatcherism reigns - parts of the BBC's current range of operations will be privatised and that whatever remains will be financed in part by advertising revenue and possibly also by sponsorship. It may even be the case that the BBC will be made to model itself on C4 and become mainly or solely a transmitting organisation and not as now one which is also directly involved in producing programmes and services.

If the BBC is to be defended from this future by the Left, it must be borne in mind that it will be opposed by a powerful and politically heterogeneous alliance.

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This scenario for the BBC is not at all conveniently advocated by only the radical Right but it has attracted support already in the political centre. Moreover among those who are merely consumers there is no great sympathy for the BBC, or rather, if there is sympathy this does not translate into viewing on a sufficient scale. But all this should not occasion a desperate pessimism, nor should it lead to any defence of the BBC on its own preferred terms.

The Left in its quite proper concern to maintain and indeed to develop a responsive public sector can, as I have suggested, too easily go no further than defending the BBC as it is. Just because it is currently under pressure, all those criticisms and reservations which have hitherto been pointedly raised against the BBC should not now be forgotten. So, the first useful thing that can be done is to decide precisely what it is about the BBC that is worth defending and then incorporating only those aspects within a programme for a vibrant, responsive public sector.

The next thing the Left can do is learn to accept that ITV has also served the public and is also capable of instituting genuinely progressive developments. This is not to absolve ITV or to ignore the limitations which are imposed by its sometimes quite


ruthless pursuit of profits. However it is to recognise that where the BBC has been aloof and patrician ITV has often been responsive to public demand, has taken into account what it is viewers actually watch and want to watch. The track record which C4 is establishing demonstrates that 'giving viewers what they want' does not always nor necessarily lead to despicable programming. Far from it indeed.

There are then possibilities within ITV, and this also applies more generally within the commercial sector. Though slow and halting, the development of cable systems, for instance, is, as in Coventry at the present time, making provision for local programming units which will directly involve a wide variety of local groups and campaigns. The cynical may dismiss this sort of development as merely an attempt to fulfil as cheaply as possible franchise requirements. It may well be, and clearly the prospect of 'big money' in cable has been seen to lie elsewhere, namely in the development of a pan-European market. However this prospect is no good reason for the Left abandoning involvement in such local units.

A policy for a public sector must learn from the private sector where it is appropriate to do so. Consider the ques-

tion of representativeness. The BBC has an extensive structure of supposedly representative committees which are meant to transmit the public's views to the programme-maker. It is widely acknowledged, however, that they do no such thing, not least because they are peopled by the 'great and good' at the national and local levels. This structure should be set against the routine attempts of the Broadcasters Audience Research Bureau to compile and interpret ratings. Often this work amounts to little more than head-counting, though there are of course times when it is useful to know just how many of what sorts of people are watching what. Monitoring practices are far from adequate and this is recognised not just by critical academics interested in understanding why people watch TV and what pleasures and information they derive from it, but increasingly within the television industry itself. The development of a genuinely responsive public sector will need some such monitoring instrument far more than yet more committees. The Left can and indeed must intervene here too to contribute to a monitoring service that gives the consumer an effective voice in the production of programmes and services much more adequately than at present. D

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