



The BBC: how independent is the newsroom's future?

Beeb On Trial

The conventional view is that Tebbit has overdone it. In the general hounding of the BBC by this government he broke the rules. He wanted to shoot the fox, but has missed and hit the pack. One of them, Sir William Rees-Mogg, has been heard to utter a few yelps of protest. This is the same Sir William who was making it clear, a few weeks before, that the appointment of his old *Times* crony Marmaduke Hussey on a free transfer from the Murdoch team was the last chance to make the BBC run properly. Now Mr Hussey has had to show that he stands with the BBC in its rebuttal.

It is true that Tebbit went too far. He attacked a particular news report, though he dared not name Kate Adie, who has a special reputation as a tough and dispassionate reporter. The grotesque suggestion that a reporter who happens to be on the spot when a hospital is bombed and children maimed and killed should report this positively has been rightly ridiculed. How positively? A Betjemanesque tone: come friendly bombs and fall on Tripoli? Or the insinuation that these small cadavers are really an elite unit of midget terrorists, neatly zapped by the F1-11s?

The government has had to edge away from Tebbit. It was only the party chairman, they say. Yet lining up behind him to fire the next shot are the second rank of rabid BBC-baiters and publicity junkies in the government. Edwina Currie clutches a dossier on *Casualty*, because it shows the NHS stretched to breaking point by overwork and damaged morale. *Woman's Hour* is said to be next.

One response to all this would be to rest the case on the good sense of public opinion. When asked to add up the Tebbits and credits of BBC coverage only 10% of it sides with the chairman, and the portrayal of the Tories as manipulators of the news becomes more sharply etched with each *Spitting Image*. But that is too complacent by half. What we are seeing now is the attempt to soften up the BBC, as the principal medium of communication not in Tory hands, before an election. If you threaten to shoot the messenger they may be persuaded to alter the news. But let us suppose that the Tories actually win the next election, alone or in coalition with the SDP. How far could they alter the character of the BBC for good?

The answer is that they

could. Indeed they already have. The relationship between the Board of Governors and the management has changed; is changing still. Sustained attack wears an institution down. McCarthyism, after all, was dismissed with contempt when it first appeared, yet altered the climate of the times long after the disgrace of the Wisconsin demagogue himself. Pressure and insinuation took their toll. Executives grew weary of defending the controversial. The day came when Ed Murrow himself, who had gone out after McCarthy, was told by his chairman: 'I don't want this constant stomach-ache every time you do a controversial programme'. Murrow replied: 'I'm afraid that's a price you have to be willing to pay. It goes with the job.' The price was too high for Chairman Paley.

What price will be too high for Chairman Hussey? Because of the concentration of editorial responsibility in the BBC the strain at the top is intense. Our best television dramatist is under fire for *The Monocled Mutineer*. *Rough Justice* has been overhauled and humiliated. A *Brass Tacks* on buddy relationships between top Scotland Yard men and criminals is dropped, and reappears on ITV's *World in Action*. The

BBC abandons its case which it originally regarded as 'rock-solid' on ultra-rightists in the Tory Party, with the further embarrassment that the ex-chairman of the Young Conservatives bravely continues with his own defence, even when the plaintiffs try to drop their action against him. Behind it all there is the delayed response to the Peacock Report; the sense that the Corporation is still on the Thatcher hit-list. Therefore it had better behave.

A caponised BBC diminishes British journalism. If the present pressures succeed, internal self-censorship will continue what external McCarthyism has begun. Tebbit has distracted attention from the *Panorama* libel case. But there the BBC comprehensively abandoned its journalists under fire. The Board chose the worst moment to do so. No senior executive resigned in protest, nor said publicly what all said privately. It has been left to the ingenuity of maverick MPs to keep the case under review. Too great a sensitivity to the government of the day, because it can always alter the rules of the game and the money available, makes top executives cautious.

What is needed is a dispensation which saves the best of public service broadcasting from the depredations of this government and any thin-skinned successor. That means devolving editorial control within a pluralised system, and merging the Board and the senior management.

And since broadcasters do make mistakes, and can be arrogant or unmindful of opinions they do not share, there has to be a right of reply mechanism infinitely better than the BBC's current feeble efforts in this sphere.

Unless BBC management tackles these problems it will never address the question of its own long-term survival in a cold political climate. It can only do that by candour and courage. They have to go with the job. •

Phillip Whitehead

National Opinion Poll

Do you think the Conservative Party is right to try and influence the way the BBC covers news items or should it leave such matters to the BBC governors and managers?
 Right 6%
 Leave it to governors 88%
 Don't know 6%

What do you personally think was Mr Tebbit's main reason for producing the report of BBC bias?
 For party political reasons to help the Conservative Party 43%
 A real concern for the BBC to be fair and unbiased 17%
 A general dislike of the BBC because it is paid from public money 19%
 Other answers 2%
 Don't know 19%

Questions devised with the Independent Broadcasting Research Unit