



Shadowy Guerrillas On The Fringes

There was a time when the most vocal critics of British broadcasting were on the Left. In those days, the broadcasters were most concerned with 'shadowy guerrillas on the fringes' such as the Glasgow Media Group, who throughout the late 70s and early 80s challenged the central notions of impartiality and neutrality which were seen to guide output.

Their criticism was based on the theoretical principle that there can be no real 'neutrality' in cultural production. Although broadcasting was formally organised as a public service, went the argument, it played a crucial role in the state apparatus of modern Britain as part of the

ideological superstructure. The critique was informed by the ideas of Gramsci, Althusser and others, which were in turn based on a marxist, materialist analysis of the role of mass media in a capitalist society.

These critical voices, and that of the Glasgow Media Group in particular, attracted attention and were widely heard at a time when the political consensus in Britain was defined by the right wing of the Labour Party. When their book, *Bad News*, appeared in 1976 a Labour government was still in power. The left critique of public service broadcasting drove much of its resonance from the manner in which it

challenged the cosy social democratic assumptions of that period.

But as we begin 1987, the terms of the media debate in Britain have been transformed. Public service broadcasting is in deep crisis; its existence threatened on the one hand by a sustained and vociferous assault from the radical Right in British politics (culminating in the Conservative central office dossier of BBC 'bias' in its news coverage of last year's Libyan crisis), and on the other by rapid technological development. The combined effect of these influences has been, and continues to be, the breakdown of the BBC/IBA broadcasting

duopoly. However, in so doing, they also make the traditional left critique of the media increasingly irrelevant, and make necessary a rethink of attitudes and policies.

The moving force in this process has been the rise of Thatcherism. Since 1979 the political consensus in Britain has shifted sharply to the right, leaving social democracy floundering and confused. *Marxism Today* has described the consequences of this process in many articles over the years. In the field of the media it is now very obviously reflected in the Conservatives' approach to public service broadcasting.

There is now an ongoing struggle to redefine the core notion of 'impartiality' in broadcasting output. The new impartiality favoured by Mr Tebbit and his colleagues means no less than the uncritical acceptance of Thatcherist tenets. Whether in news, current affairs or drama, criticism of the Conservative government (implied or actual) is interpreted as 'bias', even subversion.

The mini-soap *Casualty* is singled out for dealing with the subject of hospital cuts. *The Monocled Mutineer* is attacked for dramatising an event in the first world war from a perspective other than that of the British establishment. Even reporting international criticism of a foreign power (as in the BBC's coverage of the Libyan crisis) is condemned as 'bias' if that foreign power is an ally of the Conservative government.

We have reached the stage where a leading Tory MP can speak seriously of 'a plot by the broadcasters to wreck the United Kingdom, to spread political poison, and to undermine the gratitude of the people for the unique privilege of being ruled by such a splendid government as we are fortunate to have'.

The greatest proportion of this criticism has fallen on the BBC, which cannot be explained merely by the fact that ITN's news coverage is dominated by Sir Alistair Burnett. There is a great deal

of output on ITV and Channel 4 which the Conservative Party would rather not see. At the very height of the 'Spycatcher' court case in Australia, as the government was asserting it to be a matter of principle that no member of MI5 should be permitted to speak publicly about his or her work, Granada's *World In Action* repeated a lengthy interview with Peter Wright originally broadcast in 1984. And it was ITV which produced the recent series of documentaries on *Apartheid*.

Thus if the BBC is being accused of 'bias' more often than ITV or Channel 4 it cannot be due to the content of programming alone. In the view of one senior BBC executive the attacks are the product of 'a strong ideological wish to undermine the BBC as an institution, to discredit it in functional terms and prepare the ground for a practical attack on its operations'.

The radical Right's attempt to redefine the concept of impartiality in line with its own preferred notion of the 'consensus' is matched by a determination to privatise and deregulate the BBC. ITV and Channel 4 are privately-owned (though guided by the public service ethos), and are thus to some extent immune from this pressure. The BBC, with its reliance on public funding and rejection of crude commerciality, is in media terms the antithesis of all that Thatcherism stands for. By labelling the BBC as a bunch of subversives the Conservatives clearly hope to enlist support for their ultimate goal of breaking it up and selling it off.

While the conclusions of the Peacock Committee were less favourable than the government had hoped, the campaign will intensify if the Conservatives win a third term in office.

This ideologically-based assault on the BBC has been reinforced by important technological changes which in themselves tend to weaken the traditional conception of public service broadcasting. Cable, satellite and video are increasing the range of television options available to

the population, and encourage the government to push ahead with its plans for deregulation (though not entirely successfully, as the experience of cable has shown). These innovations create the technological base on which the government's media strategy is based. Regardless of how it ultimately fares with the ideologues of the Conservative Party, the BBC will have to come to terms with a changing technical and commercial environment.

As for the British Left, it must formulate a response to all of these changing circumstances. In relation to the developing technologies of information and communication, it must resist the influx of Rupert Murdoch-type media entrepreneurs into an ever-expanding market. On the other hand, the Left should not be afraid to seize the opportunities which new technology will bring. While the labour movement spends £7m on its forthcoming national newspaper the future will bring tv and radio broadcasting into its price range. At present the law prevents a media system like that which exists in Italy (where communists have their own radio stations) from arising here, but the law could be changed by a future Labour government, and access allowed to political organisations.

Of more immediate importance is the problem of how to deal with the present Conservative attack on public service broadcasting. Having seen its thunder stolen by the radical Right, the Left is presented with a dilemma: whether to defend a system of which it has historically, and with good reason, been suspicious and critical, or to support that system as a lingering bastion of a consensus more humane and liberal than the one Mr Tebbit would impose on us? The dispute between the BBC and the government reflects an ideological struggle within the British state of unusual intensity, and it will not do for the British Left to stand idly by. •

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