

## **The War Against the BBC by Patrick Barwise and Peter York (Penguin, 2020)**

This is a comprehensive, well informed, fully referenced and highly readable defence of the BBC against what the book's subtitle calls "an unprecedented combination of forces [set on] destroying Britain's greatest cultural institution" - as witness the entirely hostile consultation on decriminalising non-payment of the licence fee (try that with income tax!).

It starts by setting out the extraordinary contribution the BBC makes to the economy, to the entertainment industry and to civic life, providing so many tv and radio channels, websites and promotion of the UK abroad through exports of programmes and formats and the highly trusted World Service. It describes the new media landscape, with the arrival in the last two decades of online competition originally in the shape of YouTube and Facebook, and now subscription and video on demand (SVoD) from Netflix, Amazon, Apple & Disney - but with the BBC and other PSBs hobbled at an early stage by the Competition Commission's ban on their forward-thinking proposal for Project Kangaroo (a joint video-on-demand portal for their back catalogues which has too late been revived as Britbox).

It catalogues the ways the licence fee has been 'raided' to pay for things way outside the BBC's remit - the digital switchover, the World Service, the Welsh S4C channel, BBC Monitoring (largely for the Foreign Office), local news partnerships, and a contestable fund for children's tv, and now for free tv licences for over-75s on universal credit. It demolishes sample vituperous press onslaughts from the *Mail*, *Express*, *Telegraph* and others that allege waste and inefficiency and parallel political attacks from (for example) the dubious Grant Shapps and the obsessed John Whittingdale. It analyses and reduces to nothing James Murdoch's 2009 McTaggart Lecture. It reveals the network of right-wing 'think-tanks' that share not only an address at 55 Tufton Street in Westminster but also common lines of attack on the BBC, often manufacturing astroturf (fake grassroots) campaigns. It examines the various allegations of left-wing and anti-Brexit bias in BBC reporting and shows them to be groundless, the best academic studies showing a slight but growing bias in the opposite direction, partly led by the BBC's following an agenda set by the predominantly right-wing press.

Despite everything, the BBC is by a huge margin the most trusted medium for impartial news - chosen by 44%, against 10% for ITV, 6% Sky, 5% Channel 4, 3% the *Guardian* and less for all the rest, in an Ipsos MORI survey that also found comparable support for the BBC on a range of other questions. It confronts criticisms that the BBC does too much, especially in popular entertainment, crowding out other providers, and shows from various published econometric and other studies that this is not true (and what anyway is popular? - when the *Great British Bake Off* started, it was derided by all the critics). It examines the licence fee - 43 pence per household per day: when in 2014 volunteer families critical of the licence fee - 'we never use the BBC: why do we have to pay?' - were deprived of all its services for nine days in return for their money back, 33 out of 48 realised that it was actually good value. It costs far less than the basic Sky package, is cheap to collect (by comparison, a subscription model would require adapting equipment to prevent it receiving BBC services without paying and an expensive marketing and billing function). Studies (starting with Alan Peacock's in 1985 at the behest of Margaret Thatcher) have shown (contrary to Peacock's initial easy assumption) that advertising on the BBC would divert money from

other advertising-funded tv services, would require an extensive and costly marketing operation by the BBC, and would seriously distort its priorities.

The book suggests that a household levy or similar charge would be better than a licence fee based as it is on possession of receiving equipment, but it would need to be set by an independent mechanism insulated from political interference. It points out how little the BBC costs as part of total public expenditure - just over £3bn of public funds (the NHS alone costs £151bn), which is hugely supplemented by the BBC's commercial activities selling programmes abroad and so on. And the book looks frankly at the BBC's failures (the Saville/McAlpine saga, 'Sachsgate', Cliff Richard, Lonely Planet, the digital media initiative, celebrity and unequal pay) and sets them in the context of a huge enterprise exceptionally open to public examination and under sustained attack by ideological enemies - and wonders that there are in fact so few failures.

Summing up (before five detailed annexes) it denounces six 'pretty much complete myths' - that many people do not use the BBC but go to prison for non-payment of the licence fee, that it is bloated and inefficient, that it is the best funded public broadcaster in the world, that it crowds out other providers, that it undertook to fund the licence for all over-75s and that it could do so if it did not overpay its managers and stars (actually paid below the market rate but capping them all at £150,000 pa would save only £20m against the over-75s cost of £750m.)

Yet the BBC's public income has already been cut since 2010 by 30% in real terms by licence fee settlements imposed without consultation by George Osborne, and these, only partly offset by increased efficiency and commercial income, have already forced significant cuts in BBC services with many more threatened. More such surreptitious cuts or ill-considered impositions risk radical, even terminal, damage to the institution - yet the BBC remains under constant unprincipled and self-interested attack from ideological politicians and self-interested rivals and needs to be vigorously defended by those who appreciate its contribution to British life.

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