

“On the whole, they treated business as if it was a criminal activity.” “The public may enjoy watching a man Sugar on *The Apprentice*, but I don’t believe the business community likes him or his New Culture Forum TV show ... *The Apprentice* is a phoney talent show full of boastful people who should know better – and transmitted by a broadcaster that has a bias ... if you believe, from the bottom of the heart, that there is nothing in the

Koran or the Sura which in any way supports Wilders’s arguments, then it is the job of an honest BBC documentary-maker to prove it. Simply shooting the messenger using cheap smears, dishonest juxtapositions, crude assertions and dodgy innuendo serves its audience – nor the BBC’s impartiality guidelines – not one jot.” “BBC ‘group-think’ means that BBC executives will have assumed the lazy and vicious left-wing demonisation of Wilders is axiomatically true and unchallengeable. They will thus have suspended any critical faculties or professionalism to which they might ever have laid any claim.” “Any Questions ... conferred the honour

and prestige of its presence on a mosque whose true nature can be found with little more than a Google search. Less than five weeks later ... the programme ... which it was broadcast hosted a speaker ... who has called for women who use perfume to be flogged. From the same platform ... a preacher ... who said ... the ... real, real sense that political correctness has basically gone too far. And, in many ways now, political correctness is not a symbol of impartiality but actually a symbol of bias. And people were talking at length about how it had proved unduly restrictive in the context of open debate.” “There is

an inbuilt but unconscious bias against religion, fuelled by the fact staff are not representative of the public. It is not a conspiracy, but it needs a correction.” “The biggest problem is that the philosophy [secular liberalism] is so utterly dominant that it’s presumed to be a neutral worldview. That’s what leads to so many instances of unthinking, unin-tended, institutional bias against both traditional forms of Christianity and social conservatism in general.” “No political issue has so far come near Jerry Springer in terms of anger and emotion. It wasn’t politics that put a security guard outside my house, it was a debate about how the BBC handles religion.” “The liberal elite of the BBC constantly refer to immigration from Poland because

they are using the Polish community as a cat’s paw to try to tackle the thorny issue of mass, unchecked immigration into our country ... They won’t dare refer to controversial immigration from other countries.” “I’d put a pillow over David Cameron’s sleeping head.” “The BBC has a great deal to answer for by screening utter trash like this, and I don’t give a toss if it was from one of our nation’s leading writers, it was a disgrace to portray life in the forces, especially in Afghanistan, like this.” “They [Clegg and Cameron] are savage and evil people.” “If you want to find the most solid evidence of partiality, look at the BBC’s entertainment output – its dramas, comedies and arts programmes. This is where its guard is down, where the BBC editorial police are not watching out for ‘balance’ weak points. And

partially, the partiality is far more subversive.” “I do think it a bit rich for Sir David [Hare] to complain that there is a Right-wing bias in the arts. It’s the equivalent of saying there is a Right-wing bias among Radio 4 comedians, or BBC broadcasters in general. (Given how big the BBC is, I accept that it is possible that one or two Right-wingers might have slipped through the net. But there can’t be more than five of them. A small percentage, statistically negligible.)” “We should listen hard to those who accuse us of drowning our viewers and listeners in a small metropolitan pond of stereotypes and prejudices, what Flaubert called ‘received ideas’.” “By and large, people who work in the BBC think the same, and it’s not the way the audience thinks.”

## A Question of Attitude: The BBC and bias beyond news

Dennis Sewell

# A Question of Attitude

The BBC and bias beyond news

Dennis Sewell

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# About the author

Dennis Sewell is an author, broadcaster and contributing editor of the *Spectator*. He spent more than twenty years on the staff of BBC News, where he presented Radio 4’s *Talking Politics*, BBC World Service’s *Politics UK*, worked as a reporter for BBC 2’s *Newsnight* and was an award-winning documentary maker. His latest book is *The Political Gene* (Picador, 2010).

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## 1

## Introduction

Like its chairman, I think the BBC should be biased. As Lord Patten declared at his pre-appointment hearing at the House of Commons, ‘I think it should be biased in favour of tolerant, civilised pluralism.’ Most of us, I believe, would concur with that.

Conservatives, on the whole, tend to believe that the BBC has other, more unwelcome biases. While still in opposition, the culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt, said the BBC needed to address its ‘innate liberal bias’. Today, it would be hard to find a Conservative politician, activist or ordinary grass-roots member who does not think the BBC is biased, either politically or culturally. The feeling on the centre-right of politics is near universal, as five minutes spent looking at the websites of the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Spectator* or Conservative Home will confirm.

This sentiment is not new. I spent more than 22 years working for BBC News. Right from the beginning, I found myself having to reassure my friends from business, the City or the professions that I was not spending every working day among communists. I would explain to them how painstaking we all were at the BBC to ensure that every word we uttered was self-policed for impartiality, and how significant time might be spent debating with colleagues over whether ‘admit’, ‘claim’ or plain ‘say’ was the *mot juste* in a particular story.

I took the joshing of my friends lightly, but one day was rather brutally mugged by reality. At a Conservative Party Conference, a stranger approached, inspected my ID and, putting his face uncomfortably close to my own, asked: ‘Why should I, on pain of imprisonment, be forced to pay bastards like you to peddle a philosophy that represents everything in life I despise?’ As it turned out, he was not an escaped lunatic, and, despite being at party conference, he was not drunk. He was the CEO of a well-known company. It would be hard to overstate the elemental force of this man’s rage. His face grew puce, his words were spat out

like venom. It was either cut-and-run, or get to the bottom of it. Was it the BBC’s reporting of the Israel–Palestine conflict? Was it Europe? Was it robust and challenging questioning styles? No, he couldn’t care less about Israel; he wasn’t particularly Eurosceptic; Jeremy Paxman was ‘sound’ and John Humphrys practically a soulmate. Instead, he produced a litany of offences allegedly perpetrated by BBC colleagues in arts, drama, documentary and religious programmes – all areas beyond news and current affairs. Each individual beef, ranging from the status of the family to issues in contemporary art, was thoroughly thought through and cogently argued. He gave examples of how a particular tone of voice or an unwarranted assumption had distressed him. It was, he concluded, ‘chiefly a question of attitude’. I returned to London wondering whether some of those people working on floors I did not stop at in the lift might be letting the side down.

The BBC tends to ascribe all talk of bias to mischief making by its media rivals, and particularly to newspaper groups with extensive television or internet interests. Yet both Director-General Mark Thompson and Director of BBC Vision George Entwistle have made speeches in which they gleefully attest that their private polling tells them that readers of the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* turn out to be more supportive of the BBC than readers of other newspapers. While I can appreciate the rhetorical allure of that point, it surely points up a logical flaw: if support for the BBC is lower among readers of papers without a dog in the fight, then perhaps that talk of bias is not entirely synthetic or newspaper generated.

The BBC is currently going through a period of enormous change and adjustment. It will shortly have a new director-general. Yet while the Corporation feels the pain of learning to live with a net reduction in income, many Conservatives – both in Parliament and in the country – think it has got off far too lightly. Unlike his predecessors as Conservative leader, David Cameron did not ratchet

up the anti-BBC rhetoric while in opposition. Some say that this was a cunning ruse to help him change the party’s image and get him elected, and is only being extended because of the special situation of coalition. Many Conservatives hope that he will take a tougher line if he obtains an overall majority next time. The Mayor of London, who is highly attuned to sentiments of the Conservative grass roots, recently called upon the BBC to appoint a Tory as director-general.

The 2010 British Social Attitudes Survey reported that, for the first time since 1991, more people in Britain identified themselves as Conservative supporters than as Labour. Later that year, the Tories almost won a parliamentary majority, garnering a little over 36 per cent of the popular vote. As recently as March this year, the party was standing at 40 per cent in the polls.

For the purposes of this paper, I am going to take the smallest of these figures – the 32 per cent of Britons who identified themselves as Conservative supporters in the British Social Attitudes Survey – as a proxy for a section of society that shares what might broadly be termed a centre-right, as opposed to a left-liberal, outlook or worldview. That number possibly understates the size of such a group. If so, that is all to the good: in this area it is generally best to leave things understated, in order to minimize the scope for nit-picking. But wherever one makes the slice, it is undeniable that, taken together, big-C Conservatives and little-c conservatives represent a hefty chunk of the BBC’s audience and need to be attended to.

My aim in this paper is to explore some of the territory beyond news in which perceptions of political and cultural bias are formed. My hope is that such an exploration will help ‘the 32 per cent’ understand the BBC a little better, and the BBC to see more clearly what it is about its output that so frequently gets the ordinary conservative’s goat.

London, May 2012 

## 2

## Rolling out the wagon wheel

The New Culture Forum (NCF) was founded in June 2006 by a group of writers, filmmakers, historians and others involved in the arts and media. The founders shared a concern that, although the right had won all the significant battles of ideas in the fields of economics and geopolitics during the latter part of the twentieth century, the citadels of culture – including public service broadcasting – continued to be held by the left.

According to the fledgling NCF's analysis, the prevailing orthodoxy in cultural institutions was characterized by social and moral relativism, political correctness and a visceral rejection of conservatism, both political and social.

This orthodoxy found a variety of expressions: in a vague, almost nostalgic attachment to some of the tattered remnants of socialist economic thinking; in an obsession with identity politics – particularly sexual and ethnic; in a tepid contempt for traditional institutions such as the armed forces and the monarchy; in a suspicion of business and enterprise; in Europhilia and anti-Americanism. It did not amount to anything so coherent as an ideology, consisting rather of a flabby impressionability that was dignified by the label 'progressive' and a set of reflexive assumptions about the world that were rarely challenged or examined. It was, and still is, commonly referred to as the 'left-liberal consensus'.

There must have been something in the air in the summer of 2006, for similar concerns to those of the NCF's founders were percolating in – of all places – the BBC. On Friday, 22 September, the Corporation hosted a seminar entitled 'Impartiality: Fact or Fiction?', which brought together senior BBC executives and an invited audience drawn from the wider media, think tanks and the academic world. The event was not held behind closed doors – it was streamed live on the web.

Discussion was free and frank. Much was said that was noteworthy and important; but perhaps the most lapidary contribution (now emblazoned in an 'I-told-you-so' sort of way across various websites

critical of the Corporation's news coverage) came from the BBC's then political editor, Andrew Marr:

[T]he BBC, I would argue, is not an impartial organisation ... The BBC is a publicly funded urban organisation with an abnormally large proportion of younger people, of people in ethnic minorities and almost certainly of gay people than the population at large. It depends on the state's approval at least for its funding mechanism and all this creates an innate liberal bias inside the BBC ... which is much more clearly expressed as a cultural bias than as a party political bias.<sup>1</sup>

Some months later, the BBC published a report examining how impartiality might best be assured in the future. It was, in its own way, equally candid:

Monetarism was regarded in the mid-1970s as an eccentric, impractical enthusiasm of right-wing economists – today it is a central feature of every British government's economic policy. Euro-scepticism was once belittled as a small-minded, blinkered view of extremists on both left and right: today it is a powerful and influential force which has put pro-Europeans under unaccustomed pressure. Multiculturalism was for years seen by many in Britain as the only respectable policy for managing the problems posed by immigration – over the past two years it has been much harder to find people in public life who support it. Programme-makers need to treat areas of consensus with proper scepticism and rigour. So often those in the media who think they are in the mainstream find that the river of public discourse has cut a new channel, and left them stranded in ox-bow lakes.<sup>2</sup>

While such an acknowledgement of past failings may be unexpected and refreshing, even the above passage is itself based on some questionable

assumptions. It might be argued, for instance, that there was always a significant portion of the general public that was suspicious of, and hostile towards, the EU (or before that, the Common Market), and that throughout much of the period when Eurosceptics were being treated by broadcasters as certifiable lunatics, some of their views actually commanded the support of a majority of the British public. Similarly, there were always plenty of people who were worried about the dangers of isolation and separatism arising from multiculturalism, and who foresaw some of the unwanted side-effects of mass immigration. The BBC's report talks of 'consensus' – but whose consensus? There was never a consensus on these issues even among something as narrowly conceived as the 'political class' – the Powellites and the Maastricht rebels were, after all, members of the political class, too. The actually existing consensus was even more tightly drawn. There was no sudden cutting of new channels of public discourse. It was not that the people had not spoken yet; it was that the broadcasters had not really been listening.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the 2006 seminar and the subsequent impartiality report were grounds for celebration and congratulations. They offered persuasive evidence that the BBC was prepared to give serious thought and attention to its duty to be impartial, and was prepared to take reputational risks to do so. Inevitably, much of the newspaper coverage of the seminar gave a distorted account of the occasion, suggesting that the proceedings amounted to a public confession by the BBC that much of its output – including its news and current affairs programming – was downright biased. The general impression given was that the BBC had done a Gerald Ratner.

That was not the case at all. In fact, the seminar considered very little real programming at all. Much of the time was devoted to a series of challenging hypotheticals – would senior managers allow the Bible or the Koran to be consigned to Room 101?

(Bible – yes/maybe; Koran – no, too risky.) Would the BBC broadcast a one-hour interview with Osama Bin Laden, if he offered it, and how would its considerations be influenced by a request from the home secretary to desist, or by the fact that Al-Qaeda was holding the BBC's Justin Webb as a hostage against full compliance? There was much more in a similar vein, flinging the doors wide open and almost inviting a tabloid romp. Nevertheless, there was certainly no general *mea culpa*, and nor did the event approach anything like a Maoist self-criticism session. Although the seminar did address the left-liberal assumptions, even prejudices, of many of the BBC's staff, the senior executives present clearly had confidence in their ability to contain them. The BBC, after all, has values, it has a sense of professionalism, it has editors – so why would the ideological petticoats of producers or reporters ever show to the viewing public at home? Between the groupthink and the output falls the rulebook: the BBC's Editorial Guidelines. That is the theory.

Yet what was most striking about the discussion was how inchoate the BBC's impartiality policy appeared to be. The seminar's participants (with the aid of focus-group research) were still working on notes towards a definition of the concept. The event was predicated on the idea that the world had changed: impartiality in the future could not be like impartiality in the past. The binary opposition of left vs. right was obsolete. What use were stopwatch seconds or the crude punch and counterpunch of For and Against in a new dispensation, where every argument is multifaceted and where audience participation can tip the most carefully contrived balance into a messy heap?

No doubt the world has changed. The Berlin Wall has fallen, and so have the Twin Towers. The internet has been invented and broadcasting has gone digital, multichannel and multiplatform. We have phone-ins and smart-phones, email and Twitter. For sure, all this must have implications for how the BBC keeps its programmes honest. But one cannot help



remembering that, back in the days of *That Was the Week that Was* or the *Wednesday Play*, during the sexual and attitudinal revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, during all those rows involving Lord Longford and the Nationwide Festival of Light, there were many issues of a multidimensional kind, defying facile binary opposition, rooted in differences of cultural standpoint and stemming from passionate religious conviction. So how did the BBC manage then?

Setting these objections aside, if the BBC needed to imagine a great shifting of tectonic plates to prompt it to sharpen up its act, to rethink and renew its commitment to impartiality, then so be it. Better late than never. Besides, the seminar participants were saying many sensible things. They explored the importance of open-mindedness, fairness and keeping a distance. Above all, they emphasized the need to make programmes that reflected all of Britain, allowing every person to feel that his or her views were articulated in the BBC's output, giving expression to many shades of opinion – letting a thousand pixels bloom.

This revamped approach found fuller expression in *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century*, published in June 2007. This is one of the most thoughtful, intelligent and well-written documents to have been published by the BBC in recent times. It was largely the work of John Bridcut, an independent programme maker (who began his career in the BBC), assisted by a steering group of BBC grandees and four outsiders. Bridcut's report was formally adopted by both the BBC Trust and the Executive Committee and has the force of policy.

The document's title goes a long way towards explaining its central idea: henceforth, impartiality was to be less about balance and more about diversity and inclusivity. Out go the pendulum and the seesaw, and in comes a wagon wheel with many spokes, each providing a different perspective on any given issue. But it is no plain, old-fashioned

wagon wheel. Bridcut had to stretch – even digitally manipulate – his metaphor to make it work. He invoked the television graphic used in the BBC's cricket coverage to chart the trajectories of balls knocked for six by batsmen, before crystallizing the concept thus:

The wheel is not exactly circular, it has a shifting centre, the 'spokes' are not necessarily evenly spaced, nor do they all reach the edge of the wheel, nor does one 'spoke' necessarily point in a directly opposite direction to another. So opinion is not confined to 'left' and 'right' but ranges through 360 degrees. One opinion is not necessarily the exact opposite of another, nor do they all reach the extremity of available argument.<sup>3</sup>

Having established the big idea, the author then went on to elaborate twelve guiding principles. These are designed to supplement, not supplant, the BBC's Editorial Guidelines, but in a sense are over-arching. Perhaps an apt analogy would be the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Catholic Catechism. The Twelve Guiding Principles are set out in full on the website of the BBC's College of Journalism.<sup>4</sup> These are the measures that I will chiefly be using to assess the programmes we look at as test cases in this report. For the time being, it would be helpful to pick out five of them, and in a different order from that in which they were originally promulgated:

- Impartiality applies across all BBC platforms and all types of programme. No genre is exempt. But the way it is applied and assessed will vary in different genres. **(GP 6)**
- Impartiality must continue to be applied to matters of party political or industrial controversy. But in today's more diverse political, social and cultural landscape, it requires a wider and deeper application. **(GP 3)**

- Impartiality involves breadth of view, and can be breached by omission. It is not necessarily to be found on the centre ground. **(GP 4)**
- Impartiality requires the BBC to examine its own institutional values, and to assess the effect they have on its audiences. **(GP 10)**
- Impartiality can often be affected by the stance and experience of programme-makers, who need constantly to examine and challenge their own assumptions. **(GP 9)**

This selection of principles, presented in this order, would seem, at first sight, to offer considerable cheer to those who, like the founders of the NCF back in 2006, have concerns about the prevalence or hegemony of a left-liberal consensus within the BBC and its effect on output. Although not exactly intended to be so, it amounts almost to a manifesto for reform, which, if implemented in full, would go a very long way towards addressing the anxieties of at least the BBC's more level-headed critics.

The first of the principles listed above, GP 6, is a reminder that impartiality is required right across the gamut of the schedule. This is by no means a new imposition, but the fact that the public tends to consider impartiality to be most important in news and current affairs may well have given some staff working in drama and comedy the impression that it is not a consideration they need to keep in the forefront of their minds. These are, however, very often precisely the kinds of programme likely to provoke some viewers to throw things at the television, threaten to stop paying the licence fee and declare the BBC irredeemably biased.

One would not have to be particularly prone to choleric outbursts to nurse a suspicion of the BBC's Drama Department, given its history. During the 1970s, an improbable number of its producers and directors were associated with an extreme left-wing groupuscule called the Socialist Labour League (later to become the Workers' Revolutionary Party or WRP). One of them, on leaving the BBC, went to

work full time as WRP organizer. What made this situation all the more remarkable was that at this time – indeed, until as late as 1986 – BBC employees and contractors were subject to vetting by the Security Service. If the combined sleuthing of MI5 and the BBC's own in-house security liaison officer (ever on the *qui vive* for subversives) was unable to keep BBC Drama safe from Trotskyite infiltration even during the paranoid years, one has to wonder what the political complexion of the department became subsequently, when vetting was discontinued and a more relaxed view taken of political affiliations.

Some clue is perhaps offered by the revelation in the *Sunday Times* in February 2010 that some members of the programme team working on *Doctor Who* in the late 1980s were smuggling anti-Margaret Thatcher propaganda into the scripts and basing parts of the Doctor's dialogue on material obtained from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. One script editor said that he had always been upfront about his agenda, even telling the producer at his job interview that what he hoped to achieve if given the post was 'to bring down the government'.<sup>5</sup> One of the actors in the series described the team as 'a group of politically motivated people' (a possibly unwitting echo of Harold Wilson's characterization of union wreckers and militants), and one of his former colleagues confessed that detesting Margaret Thatcher was almost a job requirement. Clearly, the duty of impartiality, if it was considered at all, was one that staff felt they could safely ignore at that time.

Whether things have improved markedly in BBC Drama will be considered later in this report. The BBC provided grounds for pessimism on this score in July 2009, when Ben Stephenson, its controller of drama commissioning, announced in the *Guardian*: 'We need to foster peculiarity, idiosyncrasy, stubborn mindedness, left-of-centre thinking.'<sup>6</sup>

This remark provoked a number of complaints from Conservative MPs, as well as a letter to the

director-general from Jeremy Hunt, now the culture secretary. Hunt’s public statement on the affair revealed that the suspicion that there might be a pervasive problem was one shared at Shadow Cabinet level:

No journalist or editor should be following a political agenda, let alone someone as senior as a controller ... The fact that this appeared publicly also arouses grave concern about many others who may have the same agenda privately.<sup>7</sup>

Stephenson subsequently issued something that, had it not been quite so gnostic, might have been termed a clarification:

When I used the term ‘left of centre thinking’, I most certainly did not use the phrase in the context of any political meaning or ‘left liberal’ mindset. Like left-field, it is a phrase that I use with frequency when talking to the creative community to encourage them to develop and approach their ideas from a completely new perspective – where centre is used to convey the sense of the expected or the formulaic.<sup>8</sup>

Not everybody believed this explanation.

The next in my own selection of guiding principles, GP 3, makes reference to ‘today’s more diverse political, social and cultural landscape’. This implies an acknowledgement that impartiality should extend to the clash of attitudes and worldviews within society, rather than be limited to debate that is more plainly political. It is because this terrain is so vast and variegated that we need the wagon wheel. The Bridcut report talks of a variety of issues in this context: the integration of different ethnic and religious groups; the decline of marriage; the social effects of an ageing population. It specifically singles out ‘assertive religious belief’. But what is very far from clear is where the BBC’s

default positions should be set. The questions, for instance, of whether there is any God at all and, if so, whether his name is Allah will ignite as many controversies about the way the BBC referees the ensuing discussion as about the substantive issues themselves. Is Britain still a ‘culturally Christian’ society, requiring the BBC to act as if the Christian story (if only on a metaphorical level) were true? Or should the Corporation maintain strict neutrality between the claims of the established Church in England and Islam – or, indeed, the atheism promoted by Richard Dawkins?

Questions about what is normative extend right across the board: should the BBC be neutral on the institution of marriage? Its research might tell it that marriage is in decline, but we have a coalition government pledged to reaffirm its importance and value. The BBC hints that it is prepared to be guided through this minefield by its audience, but opinion polling (particularly if it looks like push-polling) will be a treacherous guide. Is there a need for a wider public debate about where the BBC does (and should) stand on a range of social and cultural controversies? And should that debate ever stop?

One cultural chasm that remains as yet unmarked on the BBC’s charts is arguably the most significant of all. That is, the one relating to worldview or general disposition: the divide between people who are culturally conservative and those who are culturally progressive. This is not the same distinction as ‘socially conservative’ and ‘socially progressive’, where conflicts are about issues such as gay marriage and so forth; rather it embodies a more fundamental set of differences in outlook. A person of conservative disposition, for instance, may be reflexively antipathetic to anything that smacks of neophilia, whereas a progressive may feel starved without a daily fix of novelty. The dramas that Ben Stephenson likes to foster, whether they are merely edgy and out-of-left-field, rather than politically left wing, seem likely to appeal only to

the progressive tendency. The conservative/progressive distinction may colour views on matters as diverse as how much of the licence payer’s money should go to Radio 4 or whether the tone of an interviewer’s question should be cheerily upbeat or ought to contain a dollop of scepticism.

Here, GP 4 becomes relevant, with its explicit warning that ‘impartiality ... can be breached by omission’. Who will choose the spokes of the wagon wheel, and according to what criteria? The BBC is very practised at chopping up the world by age, gender and ethnicity, and by whether people live in the Metropolitan Bubble or in the Ultima Thule of the North East, but is less assured at segmenting by outlook. When it does so, it tends to assemble a series of ‘types’ from responses to various issues, and, when looking at the right of the spectrum, to construct a series of Frankenstein’s monsters: the white, working-class racist; the amoral Tory Boy; etc.

The chief danger of the wagon-wheel approach is that whoever decides taxonomy controls access to the airwaves. And putting people into categories is not as straightforward as market researchers make it seem. Compare our own customary classification of animals – dogs, cats, horses – with the one playfully ascribed by Jorge Luis Borges to the ancient Chinese: ‘Those that belong to the emperor; embalmed ones; those that are trained; fabulous ones; ... those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush; ... those that have just broken the flower vase; ... those that, at a distance, resemble flies.’ Taxonomies can be seen to be almost arbitrary *and* to exhibit a high degree of cultural specificity. If the BBC does have a left-liberal cultural bias, can it be trusted to assemble the spokes of its own wagon wheel?

If it is to be so trusted, then it will require GP 10 and GP 9 to be rigorously observed. GP 10 says that ‘impartiality requires the BBC to examine its own institutional values, and to assess the effect they have on its audiences’. It would be altogether more

encouraging if it said ‘examine its own institutional culture’ rather than ‘institutional values’, but perhaps this is to make a distinction without a difference. So what are the BBC’s values?

**Our values**


- Trust is the foundation of the BBC: we are independent, impartial and honest.
- Audiences are at the heart of everything we do.
- We take pride in delivering quality and value for money.
- Creativity is the lifeblood of our organisation.
- We respect each other and celebrate our diversity so that everyone can give their best.
- We are one BBC: great things happen when we work together.<sup>9</sup>

Cynics may scoff at the last of these, but though it does indeed resemble a piece of corporate boilerplate that could easily figure among the values of a pharmaceutical company or a biscuit manufacturer, it does have a resonance in a large organization where people work in discrete silos, doing very different sorts of jobs. The penultimate bullet point is sure to raise a chortle from those who are heartily fed up with the Corporation wearing its political correctness on its sleeve, and may be seen by some as something added to appease a vociferous internal lobby. The first four, however, are pretty much what one would expect, and are generally uncontroversial, save for the fact that the statement ‘we are independent, impartial and honest’ reads more like a claim or a boast than a value, and may be seen by some as contestable.

It is in its general spirit, rather than in its precise verbal formulation, that GP 10 offers hope. It can be read as an acknowledgement that the BBC has a duty to examine itself, know itself, recognize its

shortcomings, attend to the concerns and anxieties of sections of its audience (even if one of those sections – Conservative voters – did not quite achieve a parliamentary majority at the last election).

If GP 10 is a little vague and woolly, GP 9 is crisply to the point and directly addresses concerns about cultural bias. It recognizes that impartiality can ‘often’ be influenced by ‘the stance ... of programme-makers’ and enjoins them ‘constantly to examine and challenge their own assumptions’.

Almost five years have now passed since the wagon wheel was rolled out and these principles were ratified, in the summer of 2007. The question is: have they solved the problem? 

# 3

## Testing the spokes of the wagon wheel

In this section, I examine a selection of BBC programmes, drawn from a variety of genres. Some of the programmes have been chosen because they illustrate certain of the difficulties the wagon-wheel approach faces in being applied in practice; others because they offer an entry point to broader areas that commonly give rise to perceptions of political or cultural bias.

***Page Eight***  
**BBC Two – 28 August 2011**  
**Genre: Drama**

*Page Eight* – a film written and directed by the playwright Sir David Hare, would at first sight seem to offer an example of the BBC managing to fulfil both parts of Huw Weldon’s exhortation to ‘make the good popular and the popular good’ – something that has almost the force of a mission statement within the Corporation today.

*Making the popular good* must have seemed straightforward in this instance. Here was a popular genre – the spy thriller – that could be lent added value through the recruitment of a nationally acclaimed writer and a cast that included Bill Nighy, Rachel Weisz, Michael Gambon and Ralph Fiennes.

Nor is there any doubt that the finished work was popular. The drama was watched on BBC Two by an audience of 3.56 million, while a further 324,200 watched on BBC HD. BBC Two’s average audience for the slot had been running at 2.51 million. In terms of ratings, *Page Eight* was BBC Two’s second-biggest single drama in five years.<sup>10</sup>

However, satisfying oneself that something is ‘good’ requires more than just a reliance on a celebrity scriptwriter and a starry cast. It requires judgements to be made about both content and context.

The BBC’s own Editorial Guidelines are not onerous in the categories of drama, education and culture. A superficial reading of Section 4.4.16 might lead one to think that a writer of Hare’s standing is given what amounts to a free pass:

The audience expects artists, writers and entertainers to have scope for individual expression in drama, entertainment and culture. The BBC is committed to offering it.

That means that even a writer who has staked out a personal political position over many years will be free to strike political attitudes in his script. In theory, any risk to the BBC’s reputation for impartiality will be mitigated by its commitment to broadcasting ‘a range of views’ on any subject. BBC Drama employs close to three hundred writers each year, and more than one hundred at any given moment. They can’t all be left wing, can they?

Even so, the licence the Corporation affords itself is somewhat qualified in Section 4.4.17:

A drama where a view of ‘controversial subjects’ is central to its purpose, must be clearly sign-posted to our audience. Its excellence and insights must justify the platform offered.

The main plot of *Page Eight* concerns the issue of the complicity of the British security and intelligence services in the CIA’s programme of extraordinary rendition, its network of secret prisons across the world, and the torture of terrorist suspects. The drama extends the web of complicity to include Prime Minister Alec Beasley, who is played by Ralph Fiennes as a menacing fusion of Tony Blair and Vladimir Putin. Our country’s involvement in rendition and torture is presented within the work as an established fact. The dramatic tension arises from whether this will be publicly exposed or successfully covered up, a question whose resolution is deferred until the final moments of the film.

In its Editorial Guidelines, the BBC stresses that ‘due impartiality’ is not enough when dealing with ‘controversial subjects’, particularly if they are ‘major matters’. In determining whether subjects are controversial, some fairly obvious considerations apply:



- the level of public and political contention and debate
- how topical the subjects are
- a reasonable view on whether the subjects are serious
- the distinction between matters grounded in fact and those which are a matter of opinion.

‘Major matters’ are defined as: ‘matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy that are of national or international importance’.

It is undeniable that the issue of whether Britain was complicit in torture and rendition was a matter of very great controversy and concern at the time *Page Eight* was broadcast. Two Metropolitan Police investigations were under way at that time. Operation Hinton related to claims that MI5 officers were complicit in the alleged torture of the former Guantanamo detainee, Binyam Mohamed. Operation Iden was looking at whether an MI6 officer witnessed the mistreatment of a prisoner by the US at its base in Bagram, Afghanistan. Moreover, Sir Peter Gibson had been appointed to lead a judicial inquiry into whether British personnel had been in any way involved in the torture or ill-treatment of detainees – something that had been repeatedly denied by former ministers.

The BBC’s Editorial Guidelines impose a number of special obligations when broadcasting a drama dealing with such controversial and topical themes. We will come to those later. First, let us address the more basic question of whether a script by David Hare that touched on topical political matters or the War on Terror would be likely in its *excellence and insights* to justify the platform offered.

“I’d put a pillow over David Cameron’s sleeping head.”

David Hare<sup>11</sup>

The BBC knew what it was getting when it

commissioned David Hare. He was well known for having strong political opinions, and many of his plays had dealt with explicitly political themes. The *Guardian*’s theatre critic, Michael Billington, had described Hare as ‘a combative controversialist, who can rarely see a cudgel without stooping to pick it up’.<sup>12</sup> He was certainly a man of the left. One of the first acts of the incoming Labour government in 1997 had been to award Hare a knighthood, and he became emblematic of the moneyed, *bien pensant* New Labour Establishment.

Like so many others of that class, though, the playwright had fallen out with Labour over the Iraq war. He penned a series of polemical newspaper columns denouncing the invasion, and in 2004 he wrote *Stuff Happens*, a play that directly addressed the subject.

Despite containing a strong *agitprop* element, Hare’s plays had not been pure propaganda. His political will had presumably been restrained by command of the imagination. They may offer little that illuminates the human condition, but Hare’s dramas are not vulgar, political rants.

Not everybody, however, would endorse so generous an assessment of Hare’s *oeuvre*. Back in 2004, Stephen Pollard (now editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*, but then writing for *The Times*) denounced the playwright on his newspaper’s comment page:

The rise of Sir David, and the Establishment’s veneration of him, symbolise what is so wrong with the artistic life of the country ... There seems to be no left-liberal cliché which escapes Sir David’s attentions.<sup>13</sup>

Pollard was witheringly scornful of Hare’s focus, in *Stuff Happens*, on the neo-conservatives, who were widely demonized by the left at that time on account of their support for the liberation of Iraq:

I doubt if Sir David had even heard of the term ‘neocon’ – let alone had the slightest idea what

it really means – until a year or so ago, when its use became *de rigueur* among the chattering classes, who latch on unthinkingly to modish phrases.

Pollard, of course, was just one theatre-goer among many, albeit one with a platform in a major national newspaper. But his take has a greater significance in view of his own political provenance. A former research director of the Fabian Society, Pollard had, at the time he wrote this article, voted Labour at every general election. It is evidence that you do not have to be a reactionary right-winger to find David Hare’s treatment of the Iraq war annoying. He has the capacity to irritate the centre ground – even the centre-left. He also has the capacity to appeal (in this area perhaps chiefly to the sort of person who goes about declaring that Tony Blair is a war criminal and should be carted off to The Hague). But given both the tone and the substance of some of his more recent statements about the coalition government and leading Conservative politicians, many will inevitably regard Hare’s politics as sophomoric, perhaps even juvenile.

There is no doubt that Hare had an agenda when it came to *Page Eight*. In a promotional interview for the film, he told the *Herald* that he had had conversations with a number of intelligence officers from MI5. On the basis of these encounters, he had come to believe that the use of intelligence had become corrupted during Tony Blair’s premiership; that the intelligence services had been asked to come up with evidence about Iraq that suited the government’s case; that MI5 had refused to do so; that MI6, by contrast, had been more compliant; and that both the intelligence services and ministers had turned a blind eye to the torture of detainees suspected of involvement with terrorism.<sup>14</sup>

David Hare, it would seem, was in a position that in many ways resembled that of Andrew Gilligan: he had an informant (or more than one) on the inside (as Gilligan had had Dr David Kelly) and he

had drawn certain conclusions from what he had been told (but did not have the full picture by any means). Like Gilligan, he had the choice either of remaining silent until more evidence emerged from police or public enquiries, or of putting what were essentially private suspicions into the public domain in a way that implied that his case was rather more robust than it actually was.

But there were huge differences, too: whereas Gilligan was bound by the editorial disciplines of BBC News, Hare enjoyed plausible deniability. He, and the BBC, could always say that he was just writing fiction. Besides, he was a celebrity playwright. Any attempt by the BBC to ask him to tone down his script would have risked accusations of censorship.

Yet the BBC had relatively recently shown itself to be alert to the impartiality requirements for drama in this highly sensitive area. In spring 2010, it emerged that the Corporation had decided to scrap a drama that was in development entitled *The Accidental American*, based on a book of the same title by James Naughtie, which examined the relationship between Tony Blair and George W. Bush. It was reported that the script contained a scene where Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell are seen to exert improper pressure on John Scarlett, the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), to ‘sex up’ the dossier setting out the government’s rationale for war.

Since Alastair Campbell and Tony Blair are real people, the ‘it’s just fiction’ defence would not wash. It is hardly surprising that the BBC should have been so cautious: the Kelly/Gilligan affair and the subsequent Hutton Report had led to the loss of both its chairman and its director-general. Why risk going there again?

But in the case of *Page Eight*, the Corporation was much more cavalier. Not only did it put out a film written by a well-known left-wing writer, known to subscribe to various common conspiracy theories about both Iraq and the struggle against Islamist

terror, but when complaint was made, instead of resorting to the ‘it’s just fiction’ retort, it declared the programme’s agenda and, on the face of it, associated the BBC with it. This startling admission reportedly came in response to a viewer’s complaint:

The principle [*sic*] subject for the drama was to defend the integrity of the security services and to object to their manipulation by politicians for political ends. In researching the film, David Hare drew on direct sources within the security services. He was originally prompted to write ‘Page Eight’ because of the frustration and outrage he witnessed among those sources at the way in which they felt traditional security practices had been abused and undermined.<sup>15</sup>

So, not ‘just fiction’ at all, but rather almost a kind of ‘journalism by other means’. Which surely takes us straight back into Hutton territory. The phrasing of this reply suggests that the film was agenda-driven or campaigning drama – something the BBC is not supposed to engage in. Never mind what the 2004 Butler Inquiry into the use of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraq war may have said (‘We found no evidence of JIC assessments and the judgements inside them being pulled in any particular direction to meet the policy concerns of senior officials on the JIC’),<sup>16</sup> the BBC was content to accept David Hare’s view that the intelligence services had been corrupted for political ends. Never mind what the Metropolitan Police might have turned up, or the Gibson Inquiry (had it lasted) might have found, the BBC was content to run with Hare’s line that both the spooks and the ministers were complicit in torture – all, of course, justified by the worthy aim of ‘defending the integrity of the security services’, an interesting, even novel, extension of the BBC’s public purposes.

As for David Hare’s supposed ‘research’ or special, inside knowledge – there is no evidence that this amounted to much more than perhaps having

met an intelligence officer at a dinner party. It seems unlikely that he has anything approaching a network of moles at the heart of the security and intelligence establishment. Besides, in another publicity interview given to the *Guardian*, Hare displayed a less than sure grasp of which of the two outfits – MI5 and MI6 – does what.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequent to the screening of *Page Eight*, the director of public prosecutions, Keir Starmer, announced that the Crown Prosecution Service had decided not to bring any charges against members of the security and intelligence services, and that Operation Iden and Operation Hinton were now closed. No doubt the BBC reported this in its news outlets, but it is unlikely that these had more than a fraction of the impact on the public mind of David Hare’s drama. For many members of the public, the prejudice they take away with them will be that, of course, there was British complicity in torture, and that the spooks and their political masters were up to their necks in it.

But that is less than the half of it. What provoked real outrage about *Page Eight* was its subplot. This concerned the shooting of a peace activist by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) during a demonstration to protest against the erection of a security fence on Palestinian land in the West Bank. The young man was shot by Israeli soldiers, despite carrying a white flag of truce at the time. His family had been unable to obtain any satisfaction from the Israeli government, which covered up the incident or stonewalled any investigation into it. The young man’s sister, through her association with a senior MI5 officer (played in the film by Bill Nighy), finally obtains justice (of a sort) for her dead brother.

A spokesman for Israel’s embassy in London described the drama as ‘pure demonization’ of Israel and said it had gone far beyond the bounds of artistic licence. Other supporters of Israel invoked the parallel of the ‘blood libel’ – a stock anti-Semitic trope. They pointed out that no peace activist had ever been killed by the IDF while carrying a white

flag (a detail that had presumably been put in to inflame anti-Zionist feeling) and that both the two well-known cases of peace activists being killed by the IDF had been investigated. In the case of Tom Hurndall (a British photography student shot dead in 2004), an Israeli soldier was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to eight years in prison. In the case of Rachel Corrie (an American activist killed in 2003), the girl’s death had been deemed accidental.

Once again, the BBC eschewed the ‘just fiction’ defence. Its reply to a complainant actually invoked these real-life parallels:

The subplot you have referred to was not unlike the Tom Hurndall story or that of Rachel Corrie (both killed in Palestinian occupied territories in 2004 and 2003, respectively) and, therefore, not at all in the realms of ‘fantasy’ or beyond credibility. David commented that it was notoriously difficult to get justice from the Israeli army and that families who have suffered losses like the one depicted in the drama have, as a result, become politicised. To take one small strand of the drama and derive from it that ‘Page Eight’ is an anti-Israeli diatribe is to deliberately misconstrue the subject of the piece.<sup>18</sup>

It is a particular feature of David Hare’s work that it alludes to real-life events. This makes considerations of impartiality in respect to his work all the more tricky.

Although the BBC’s complaints system can – and ever so politely does – tell supporters of Israel who complain about its programmes to take a running jump, it cannot control the adjudications of equivalent systems elsewhere. *Page Eight* was shown on the ‘Masterpiece’ theatre strand of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), a non-profit network of more than three hundred TV stations across the United States. PBS is committed to impartiality, but has itself sometimes been accused

of having a left-liberal bias and is sensitive to such claims. Its stations are largely funded by voluntary subscription, often solicited on air.

PBS has an in-house ombudsman, whose role is described as ‘an independent internal critic within PBS, receiving and dealing with commentary and criticism from viewers and seeking to ensure that PBS upholds its own standards of editorial integrity’.<sup>19</sup> The incumbent is Michael Getler, who teaches at Johns Hopkins University and previously acted as ombudsman for the *Washington Post*. Mr Getler, who was inundated with complaints about *Page Eight*, commented: ‘I can’t blame those viewers who feel outraged and wonder why PBS needs to broadcast this nationwide. PBS will probably pay a price for this.’<sup>20</sup>

**A selection of complaints about *Page Eight* received by the PBS ombudsman<sup>21</sup>**

‘Mr. Hare certainly left no doubt as to where his sympathies, or on the other hand, his animosities, lie ... I really resent the fact that PBS aired this program ... I certainly will not support PBS financially.’  
(Baltimore, Maryland)

‘[Informed] by an extremely tendentious reading of ... events, it is an extraordinarily crude piece of agitprop. It is unworthy of the BBC that produced it and, even more so, of PBS, for inflicting it on an unwary American public.’  
(Syracuse, New York State)

‘I’m still in a state of shock after seeing this program, which as few others I’ve ever seen on your channels deeply violates not only my sense of balance but so very deeply my very sense of truth.’  
(Baltimore, Maryland)

‘Your production staff should have refused to broadcast despite the fact that you have a time slot to fill! You accepted this airing as a channel receiving public tax supported donations and have an obligation to be “politically balanced” in dealing with controversial subjects.’  
(Las Vegas, Nevada)

‘[As] I watched ... “Page Eight” unfold, I grew sick. Here in the States we are well aware that police shows, such as Law and Order, will take stories that emerge in the news, and build on them narratives that closely follow the plot lines of actual events. I often smile as I recognize the events the writers have used to create their stories. But, what I haven’t seen recently – and maybe I don’t watch TV enough – is where writers create propaganda and suggest that it is based on what we already know to be true.’  
(New York)

As the authors of the BBC’s impartiality policy made clear back in 2007, ensuring impartiality is neither easy nor straightforward. In dealing with *Page Eight*, the Corporation had to balance a number of diverse, and perhaps irreconcilable, considerations.

On the one hand:

- The opportunity to screen a classy thriller by a celebrity writer, with a strong cast, to a huge audience.
- The chance to demonstrate that the BBC does not duck or avoid tricky issues or pursue a policy of ‘safety first’.

On the other hand:

- The risk to the BBC’s reputation that would

inevitably attend allowing a well-known left-wing public figure to ride one of his favourite hobby horses at the licence-fee payer’s expense.

- The particular risks associated with Hare’s habits of alluding to real events, creating characters that the audience will intuit to be based on real people, hinting at special knowledge gained through research (in this instance including testimony from intelligence sources) – thus blurring the line between fact and fiction.

From *Seesaw to Wagon Wheel’s* Guiding Principle 5 states:

Impartiality is no excuse for insipid programming. It allows room for ... controversial, passionate and polemical arguments by contributors and writers.<sup>22</sup>

However, the document goes on to emphasize that passionate, polemical, ‘authored’ work should be balanced over time. Had David Hare’s drama been screened in response to, or been reasonably closely followed by, a drama dealing with similar or related subjects and authored by a passionate and polemical right-wing writer, then the requirements of impartiality would have been met, and would have been seen to have been met. The problem is that no one seems able to recall the BBC ever broadcasting any drama by a right-wing writer comparable to David Hare. Besides, unless such a balancing broadcast were flagged up, how would anyone know that another spoke on the wheel had been (or would at some time be) fitted?

The BBC’s Editorial Guidelines acknowledge this problem and offer other ways to safeguard impartiality in cases where a programme or drama is concerned with topical controversial issues:

- ‘Consideration should be given to the appropriate timeframe for reflecting those other perspectives and whether or not they need to

be included in connected and signposted output taking account of the nature of the controversy and the subject matter.’

- ‘It may be appropriate to offer alternative views in other connected and signposted output.’<sup>23</sup>

‘The Saturday Play ... was very entertaining, but it was also an hour of almost undiluted socialist claptrap. I don’t mind that, but will they put on a play next week that’s an hour of right wing claptrap, just to even things up? I very much doubt it.’

‘How do you know that the play you listened to wasn’t, itself, balance for an earlier piece from the other end of the political spectrum? Maybe a programme you didn’t catch?’

Source: Exchange on Usenet – DigitalTVBanter.co.uk, July 2010

There can be little doubt that the audience would have considered it way over the top had the BBC followed *Page Eight* with an earnest studio discussion – whether about British complicity in torture or the point where anti-Zionism morphs into blood libel. That would have been to lend stature and dignity to what was, after all, just a thriller – comparable to the sort of paperback one might pick up to while away a train journey.

However, the underlying assumptions of *Page Eight* are so closely congruent with the prevailing left-liberal narrative of the Iraq war and the struggle against Islamist terror that one must wonder whether all the promising resolutions always rigorously to question such assumptions amount to very much in practice.

So, in the end, the public just has to take it on faith that, at some indeterminate time, another programme will put a different point of view. Many

will believe that when they see it. Others may be willing to play along with the idea that, with David Hare’s *Page Eight*, the left-liberal Establishment has been given a free kick, and make a mental note that the BBC now owes the right-of-centre insurgency one, too. But who at the BBC is keeping score?

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***Freefall***  
**BBC Two – July 2009/Repeated August 2010**  
**Genre: Drama**

*Freefall*, written and directed by Dominic Savage, was BBC Drama’s first take on one of the most important political and economic stories of recent times – the 2008 financial crash and credit crunch. First broadcast just ten months or so after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, it boldly sought to look beyond the effects of the crash and to consider its causes.

Savage has built his reputation in TV drama as an exponent of gritty, social realism. He has always shown himself to be sure-footed in traversing the territory of social wretchedness: teenage pregnancy (*Nice Girl*), racist thuggery (*Love + Hate*), young offender institutions (*Out of Control*), a shelter for the homeless (*Born Equal*). Savage is as much at home in an area of multiple deprivation as Julian Fellowes is in a country house.

But *Freefall* takes him, for at least part of the action, into a different world – that of high finance. Gus is a City investment banker specializing in packaging and selling sub-prime debt. Needless to say, he is a man who is morally warped, corrupted by acquisitiveness, consumerism and greed. And, needless to say, he is also sleeping with a co-worker. Is there ever any successful businessman in a BBC drama who is not an adulterer (or, if divorced, is not having an affair with a subordinate)? Sexual deceit and ego-driven sexual indulgence are easy metaphors for a more pervasive dishonesty and



ruthlessness. And in a certain worldview, all business is just an amoral racket, isn't it? It is seen as a zero-sum game, where every transaction has a winner and a loser, a spiv and a mug, screwdriver and screwed. To buy at one price and sell at a higher one is just cynical opportunism. Sex, illicit or exploitative, helps tweak the moral meter reading from amorality to immorality. In *Freefall*, sex and enterprise almost fuse: one minute another consignment of dodgy, soon-to-be-toxic paper is despatched; the next the high-octane bankers are *in flagrante*, and a stock left-liberal stereotype is given another run.

Then there is Dave, one of Big Capitalism's poor bloody infantry. He sells mortgages on commission and his conscience is just as atrophied as Gus's. The message is clear: big business, small business, they're all the same – part of a web of dishonesty and corruption. When the bottom falls out of the home-loans market, Dave moves on to sell solar panels: different product, different patter, but essentially just another scam. No enterprise, not even a Green one, can be regarded as honest work by those who see commerce as just a branch of crime.

In 2007, when the action begins, Dave runs into an old school friend, Jim, a security guard. Jim, who comes from a poor background, now has a steady job but is living in rented accommodation. Dave offers him a mortgage. Jim and his wife are now able to buy their own home. The property they choose is Mock Tudor – a nasty little detail, presumably inserted to belittle the aspirational working class and re-recruit any middle-class leftist sneerers among the audience who may be flagging.

When the sub-prime time bomb explodes, it all goes wrong for everyone involved. And there is a kind of justice in this, if you accept the specious moral of this drama: that everyone was complicit, everyone driven either by greed or by the unworthy dream of home ownership. But in the real world, sub-prime lending was not the fault of people like Jim – Englishmen, in work, with a regular pay cheque. The problem started in the US, where

progressive, egalitarian politicians used state power to coerce banks into lowering their lending criteria and offering mortgages even to people on welfare, in pursuit of an all-must-have-houses policy. There is not the briefest allusion to that in *Freefall*, which framed the whole issue solely in accordance with the left's chosen talking points.

“On the whole, they treated business as if it was a criminal activity.”

Jeff Randall, former BBC Business Editor<sup>24</sup>

Not that a single drama needs to cover every base. The BBC has certainly broadcast a vast number of programmes about the banking crisis and has looked at it from every conceivable perspective. In that sense, it has done its duty by the wagon wheel. *Freefall* was not so ideologically loaded as to raise compliance issues, but it does serve to illustrate how some programmes can contribute to a perception of bias among some parts of the audience, even when meeting impartiality tests. Although few, if any, would have been moved to protest about this drama, there will have been a significant number who rolled their eyes or issued an exasperated sigh as each platitude and stereotype came winging in from out of left field. The perception of bias does not always arise in response to a major outrage, but sometimes through the relentless repetition of small irritations – just as a basin can be filled to overflowing by a dripping tap.

Back in 2001, Jeff Randall was appointed Business Editor of BBC News, with an explicit brief from then Director-General Greg Dyke to be an agent of change. On his arrival, Randall found a deep-seated suspicion of business and businessmen, even among his own staff on the business desk. Today, with journalists like Robert Peston and Evan Davis among its most high-profile staff,

it would be hard to sustain a case that BBC News is anti-business. In 2007, the BBC Trust commissioned a review of impartiality in BBC News's business coverage, which was chaired by Sir Alan Budd. The review was augmented by audience research carried out by the Blinc Partnership. This review found that the audience was not much exercised about impartiality in news coverage, and that the BBC was the most trusted business news source among broadcasters. Nevertheless, Sir Alan Budd did note:

We are aware of criticism made by some of our witnesses from the business community that the BBC has an institutional bias towards a centre-left political viewpoint. It is claimed that such a political stance leads to a partial and hostile approach to business.<sup>25</sup>

Sir Alan rejected any systematic bias, but accepted that:

The BBC is at times unconsciously partial and unbalanced in its coverage of business issues. This unconscious partiality may stem in part from a lack of awareness of the business world. Many BBC journalists have never worked in business and do not seem to have a full grasp of how it operates ... This unconscious partiality may also come in part from a preoccupation with taking the consumer perspective.

These shortcomings have since been addressed in BBC News, through seminars and training organized by the College of Journalism. Nevertheless, in the interviews and conversations I have conducted in researching this report, I have found that a perception of anti-business bias at the BBC persists on the political right. In particular, there are concerns about the portrayal of businessmen and entrepreneurs, a sense that business is presented as morally disreputable, and a feeling that

the BBC places too much emphasis on ruthlessness, brutality and lack of qualms. This is seen as a problem even in programmes that are designed to foster greater public interest in business and entrepreneurship, such as *Dragons' Den* and *The Apprentice*. The red-in-tooth-and-claw aspects of these programmes may be largely playful, owing more to the grammar of television than to any intention, conscious or unconscious, to present the business world as unethical or lacking compassion; but they can leave some feeling that the unreconstructed parts of the Corporation still harbour an animus towards commerce and enterprise.

“The public may enjoy watching Alan Sugar on *The Apprentice*, but I don't believe the business community likes him or his loathsome TV show ... *The Apprentice* is a phoney talent show full of boastful wannabes, made by people who should know better – and transmitted by a broadcaster that hates business.”

Luke Johnson, entrepreneur<sup>26</sup>

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*Geert Wilders – Europe's Most Dangerous Man?*

BBC Two – 14 February 2011

Genre: Documentary

If you watched *Geert Wilders – Europe's Most Dangerous Man?* at the time of its transmission, you may well have found yourself checking the remote again and again during the broadcast to confirm that the programme really was appearing on the BBC. Made by an independent film company



based in the Netherlands, it seemed to break many of the rules that the BBC’s own news and current affairs journalists are taught to observe.

Billed as a profile of the controversial Dutch politician, for much of the time it felt more like a character assassination. A relentless catalogue of smear, insinuation and innuendo, with a good deal of the testimony against Wilders coming out of the mouths of interviewees whose backgrounds, in some cases, do not stand up to even cursory scrutiny. What was worse, their true affiliations had been sanitized by the programme makers.

The film began with narration over a montage of pictures establishing that, after 9/11, the world had seen an upsurge in anti-Islamic sentiment. It went on to tell us that this had even been the case in Holland, a country previously associated with ‘liberalism and tolerance’, but which was now witnessing ‘political murders’.

A very brief diversion is required at this point to put what happened next in context. The fact is that in documentaries there is generally a consonance between what is being said by the narrator or reporter and what is being shown on the screen. This is achieved either by ‘writing to pictures’ or by ‘cutting to soundtrack’. Where words and pictures conflict – such as, for example, where the phrase ‘an apple a day ...’ is illustrated by a shot of an orange – the viewer experiences a sudden jolt.

By this stage in the Wilders film, when the words ‘political murders’ were spoken, viewers’ minds had been prepared by the soundtrack to expect a picture of the body of a Muslim, perhaps beaten to death by skinheads. But the shot that accompanied the words was not of a Muslim murdered by an anti-Islamic mob, but of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who had been assassinated by an Islamist. In a way, the resulting jolt was salutary: it readied the viewer for a programme in which the normal rules would not be observed, and in which the inversion of victim and aggressor could happen at any time.

One of those adduced to denounce Wilders

was Martin Smith, identified as an anti-fascist campaigner. What the BBC chose not to vouchsafe was that Smith had been, at the time the interview was conducted, the national organizer of the Socialist Workers Party. Had we been told that Smith was not just the common or garden variety of right-on do-gooder, but a Trotskyite entryist, involved in the political equivalent of a false-flag operation, we might have taken his criticisms of Wilders with a larger pinch of salt. Nor were we told that Smith had, as recently as September 2010, been convicted in the UK of assaulting a police officer – something that might have led the viewer to ponder whether Wilders (who has not been associated with any criminal violence) would even be a candidate for the most dangerous man in this film.

An alternative candidate for ‘most dangerous man’ was another prominently featured critic of Wilders, Sheikh Khalid Yasin. He was introduced by the programme makers thus:

Sheikh Khalid Yasin is an American Muslim teacher extremely popular among young European Muslims. He has embarked on a mission to de-radicalize them.<sup>27</sup>

The clear implication is that Yasin is a moderate. Viewers who saw the 2007 Channel 4 documentary *Undercover Mosques* might contest that description. There he was identified as a radical cleric, preaching a message that blamed the World Health Organization and Christian missionaries for putting the AIDS virus into Africans’ drinking water. He has claimed that there is no evidence of Al-Qaeda involvement in 9/11 and has declared that the Twin Towers were probably brought down by a controlled demolition. He has also unambiguously stated what he calls the Koran’s ‘clear position’ on homosexuality: that it is punishable by death.<sup>28</sup>

At one point in the film, Yasin asks by what authority Wilders speaks out on Islam, given that the Dutchman has no Arabic and is not a Koranic

scholar. This train of thought is extended for some time and is allowed full rhetorical impact. The normal BBC form in such circumstances is to challenge the interviewee’s point, either by asking a supplementary question or by juxtaposition of a qualifying point. Here the obvious and appropriate counter was that Wilders has a *democratic* authority: he is an elected politician, whose party came second in the 2009 European Parliament elections and third in the 2010 Netherlands general election. His party underpins the present minority government. But no such counter was put. Wilders’ right to speak out on this issue was effectively left questioned.

**“If you believe, from the bottom of the heart, that there is nothing in the Koran or the Sura which in any way supports Wilders’s arguments, then it is the job of an honest BBC documentary-maker to prove it. Simply shooting the messenger using cheap smears, dishonest juxtapositions, crude assertions and dodgy innuendo serves its audience – nor the BBC’s impartiality guidelines – not one jot.”**

James Delingpole, *Spectator*<sup>29</sup>

Another Islamic critic of Wilders, who, in the film, referred to the politician as a fascist and a racist, was Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra. He was introduced as someone seeking to develop a new form of Islam ‘in line with British norms and values’. Again, there was a dissonance between words and pictures, as the sheikh appeared in such an elaborate version of Islamic dress as to imply a total rejection of British sartorial norms, at the very least. To be fair,

Mogra is no Yasin, and is very active in interfaith dialogue. However, given that it badged him as a representative of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), it would have been fairer of the BBC to have reminded its audience of the ups and downs that the BBC itself and the UK government have had with that organization. The BBC’s *Panorama* had previously been critical of the MCB and some of its affiliates, and in 2009 the Labour government had briefly broken off all contact with it. This film, however, implied that the MCB was undeniably a moderate and respectable outfit.

There is much in Geert Wilders’ political programme that should be examined and challenged by the BBC. In particular, his contention that Islam is really a political ideology, rather than a religion, and his refusal to admit that there is any meaningful distinction to be made between ‘moderate’ and fundamentalist or politicized Islam. But this film did not get to grips with these questions at all. There is no doubt that Wilders does play to the gallery by making provocative gestures – for instance, his proposal for a tax on headscarves. But such statements need to be examined in context, not merely sensationalized, as they were here. More than once in the film, emphasis was placed on Wilders’ supposed wish to have the Koran banned. At one point, he was accused of wanting to deny access to the text to ‘one and a half billion Muslims’. Wilders has many times explained and clarified his position on this – and indeed is briefly glimpsed in the film, trying to do so at a press conference. The truth of the matter is that, within the context of a discussion on banning the sale of *Mein Kampf* in Holland (a measure that was passed into law at the instigation of the left), Wilders remarked that, if the left were to be consistent, the logic of its arguments for banning Hitler’s book should lead it also to seek a ban on the Koran, which contains passages that it should find just as odious as the passages in *Mein Kampf* that were so objectionable. This may not be a very profound or original observation – a

similar point is frequently made by atheists, who contend that the Bible contains passages that, on one reading, appear to condone genocide. However, to rob Wilders’ remarks of nuance and context, spinning them as a simple desire to ban the Koran, is a propaganda trick, not impartial journalism.

As the film progresses, the accusations against Wilders become ever more reckless and wild. Having portrayed him as a fascist, a racist and an Islamophobe; having implied that he is funded by sinister external forces; having hinted that he is psychologically warped and morally corrupt, the film then floats the idea that he may also be a Mossad spy. This suggestion then allows Sheikh Yasin once again to appear the moderate, as he proposes a more modest alternative: that Wilders is merely an agent of influence of the Israeli state.

**“BBC ‘group-think’ means that BBC executives will have assumed the lazy and vicious left-wing demonisation of Wilders is axiomatically true and unchallengeable. They will thus have suspended any critical faculties or professionalism to which they might ever have laid any claim.”**

Melanie Phillips<sup>30</sup>

The documentary was broadcast by the BBC at a time when Wilders was on trial in the Netherlands for incitement to religious hatred. Filming appears to have begun just as the trial commenced – opening arguments are included in the footage. References to the case appear throughout, as do phrases such as ‘hate speech’. No one coming fresh to this controversy would conclude from the evidence presented in the film anything other than that Wilders must be guilty as charged. However, some months after the programme went out, Geert Wilders was acquitted by an Amsterdam court on every count.

That this film appeared partial can, to some extent, be explained by Wilders’ own refusal to take part. This thought is hammered home in scene after scene, where the documentary maker, Joost van der Valk, hangs about with a boom microphone, like a low-rent Nick Broomfield, trying and failing to get Wilders to say a few words. Wilders’ refusal was compounded by the fact that, early on in the production process, one of the main anti-jihad organizations circulated a report that it had got wind of an impending media ‘hit-job’ on Wilders and recommended that his friends and supporters internationally should have nothing to do with the film. In the narration there is a fleeting and gnomic reference to a Dutch media company, which, it is implied, might also have had a hand in funding the documentary. Wilders, it is revealed, treats this Dutch company with suspicion. The mention is brief and insubstantial, but it has the feel of a pro-forma declaration of interest, perhaps spatchcocked in at the insistence of a BBC executive, anxious to cover himself. The organization named in the film, VPRO, is described on its Wikipedia page as the most ‘culturally radical’ of Netherlands broadcasters (though Wikipedia does indicate the need for further citation).

When it comes to the makers of this documentary themselves, there is less doubt about their ideological position. The production company is actually called Red Rebel Films (something that should in itself have sounded the tocsin) and describes itself on its website as ‘dedicated to filmmaking that promotes change’. Its films, it says, ‘challenge and provoke’. The company was founded in 2007 by a former BBC producer, Mags Gavan, and Joost van der Valk.

Fair enough. No one ever said that politically committed filmmakers should never get a spoke on the wagon wheel. But the idea is that opposing ideas will also be put. Can we therefore expect another film saying that Wilders is not, after all, a Nazi-Zionist conspirator? Or has the news coverage of him celebrating his acquittal on the steps of

the court, together with the interviews Wilders sometimes gives BBC News, already done that job? It appears that this is not even a consideration. Remarkably, the BBC reportedly chose to defend this documentary as sufficient in itself. In a reply to a viewer’s complaint, it allegedly stated:

We feel the film is a piece of impartial journalism, which explored a wide range of Mr Wilders’ ideological positions, hearing from both sides of an argument of which he is prominently involved in.<sup>31</sup>

The claim that ‘both sides of the argument’ were put is substantially reliant on the fact that voices supportive of Wilders were included. But because, with the exception of Daniel Pipes (who presumably didn’t get the memo), the more respectable end of the anti-jihad movement refused to take part, the programme makers included contributions from extremists instead: a clip of an English Defence League member addressing a rally; an interview with Chaim Ben Pesach, leader of the Jewish Task Force, who served five and a half years in federal prison for his involvement in 18 bombings in New York and Washington. A fair analogy might be the BBC broadcasting a profile of Ed Miliband, slanted in a ‘Red Ed’ direction, where the only supportive content – beyond a few vox pops with Labour voters – would be a clip of a Socialist Workers Party activist addressing a ‘Stop the Cuts’ demo, and an interview with a former Baader–Meinhof terrorist. The cynical stratagem of seeking to promote guilt by association is no substitute for balance.

In any case, anyone relying solely on the BBC for their knowledge of the currents of opinion in the wider world could easily be unaware of any respectable end of the anti-jihad movement, or indeed any ideological front in the West’s confrontation with violent Islamism.

It would be possible to watch the BBC avidly for years and still be wholly unaware of Ibn Warraq

or Nonie Darwish, let alone more controversial figures such as Robert Spencer, the Eurabia crowd surrounding Bat Ye’or, or the phenomenon that was the late Oriana Fallaci. Even the telegenic Ayaan Hirsi Ali seldom appears on programmes other than *Newsnight*, *Hard Talk* or similar productions emanating from BBC News. It can sometimes seem as if the Corporation regards this global political movement – ubiquitous on the internet – as just a hobby horse of Melanie Phillips, Douglas Murray, Nick Cohen and (until his death) of licensed jester Christopher Hitchens.

This neglect – whether attributable to ignorance, prejudice or a combination of the two – is a major driver of perceptions of BBC bias. Where once hyperbolic critics of the BBC would denounce the Corporation as ‘communist’, today they denounce it as ‘Islamist’. Between the BBC’s own self-image and this rhetorical extreme lie shades of opinion that deserve respectful attention. The BBC is widely seen as being overprotective towards Islam, as if afraid that even reasoned criticism of that faith will lead to baying mobs burning down mosques in the West Midlands.

However, not even a zeal for fostering good community relations can explain some of the BBC’s editorial decisions in this area, many of which offer a marked contrast to its treatment of Geert Wilders.

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***Any Questions***  
**BBC Radio 4 – 5 March 2010**  
**Genre: Discussion/Live audience**

On Friday, 5 March 2010, BBC Radio 4’s *Any Questions* was broadcast from the East London Mosque. That same venue had previously hosted an address by Bilal Philips, described by US authorities as an ‘unindicted co-conspirator’ in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and a video lecture by Anwar al-Awlaki, a senior Al-Qaeda commander of such importance that a month after the *Any Questions*

programme was aired, President Obama approved his targeted killing.

But even without these direct links to actual terrorism, there were many good reasons for the BBC to be aware that the East London Mosque was not in the same comfortable category as the Women's Institutes, village halls or ancient grammar schools that customarily host Radio 4's flagship discussion programme.

**“Any Questions ... conferred the honour and prestige of its presence on a mosque whose true nature can be found with little more than a Google search. Less than five weeks before the programme, the very hall from which it was broadcast hosted a speaker ... who has called for women who use perfume to be flogged. From the same platform ... a preacher ... hosted a ‘Spot the Fag’ contest.”**

Andrew Gilligan, *Spectator*<sup>32</sup>

Earlier that week, Channel 4's *Dispatches* had exposed a secretive Islamist organization called the Islamic Forum of Europe (IFE). The reporter, Andrew Gilligan, demonstrated the close connections between this Islamist supremacist group, allegedly involved in political entryism in the UK, and the mosque and its adjacent annexe, the London Muslim Centre: 'Over the last five years, the IFE has had 22 trustees. Seventeen of them have also been trustees or senior staff of the East London Mosque.' Gilligan went on to cite numerous instances of extremist activity within the mosque complex, including a visit by the spokesman for Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose followers have fought with the Taliban against NATO and British forces. However, the focus of

Gilligan's investigation was on how IFE activists were penetrating mainstream politics, gaining influential positions in the local Labour party and on Tower Hamlets Council. Most of the interviewees who were critical of the IFE in the Channel 4 film were Muslims; most of those who were not were Labour politicians, such as the local MP, Jim Fitzpatrick.

However, in the course of the subsequent *Any Questions* programme, Ken Livingstone was able, largely unchallenged, to denounce Channel 4's investigation as 'a disgrace' and to accuse Gilligan of 'pandering to racism and Islamophobia'. This was greeted with cheers and whistles by a clearly partisan audience, presumably substantially Muslim. The ball had been set rolling by a question from someone introduced simply as Musleh Faradhi, who asked a general question about whether the media tended to whip up anti-Islamic sentiment. At no point was it revealed that Faradhi was the president of the IFE, the very organization that had been the subject of Gilligan's exposé. Faradhi took the opportunity of having a microphone in front of him to denounce the film, claiming that Gilligan had not even visited the mosque, and to imply that the reporter had made the whole thing up. In fact, Channel 4 had sent Muslim undercover reporters into the mosque; they had attended an IFE training course and come away with clandestine recordings. The filmmakers had also compiled, during six months' research, a substantial body of eye-witness and physical evidence to support their case.

No effective defence of the *Dispatches* revelations could be made. The other panellists seemed to be unaware of the controversy. The presenter, Jonathan Dimbleby, confessed that he had not seen the Channel 4 film either. Nor, it appeared, had he been briefed on the true status of Faradhi, whom he treated with the same scrupulous politeness he generally extends to slightly dotty old ladies who are having trouble framing their points on *Any Answers*. Being a seasoned professional, having

had considerable experience of the wily Livingstone and no doubt conscious of what sounded like an orchestrated live audience reaction, Dimbleby clearly sensed that something was up. But there was nothing he could do except to suggest that Andrew Gilligan might like to ring in to *Any Answers* the following day.

The BBC may have walked into an ambush with its eyes shut. The listener at home, however, might have drawn a different conclusion. The whooping, baying crowd in the hall evoked memories of the disgraceful BBC *Question Time Special* broadcast immediately after 9/11, during which the American ambassador, Philip Lader, struggled to hold back his tears in the face of a brutal Islamist-leftist rent-a-mob. Only a few months before the *Any Questions* broadcast, three British Muslims had been convicted of plotting to kill 10,000 people in a coordinated wave of airline bombings. Yet once again, just as it did after 52 people were murdered on the London underground, the BBC appeared to be dodging the real issues, cosying up to Islamists and preferring to attend to Muslim sensitivities about media coverage, rather than getting to grips with the ideology that underpins terror. Worse: on this occasion, the BBC permitted journalists from a rival broadcaster, who had done an honest job of investigating extremism, to be smeared as Islamophobes. Is it any wonder that some people think this is all deliberate?

In November 2010, the BBC returned to the East London Mosque when BBC One aired the documentary film *Middle EastEnders*. The accompanying blurb gives a flavour:

Islam is often seen as a divisive force, but from the outset in 1910 its founders wanted a mosque that promoted harmony between Christian, Jews and Muslims in the east end. Baroness Uddin of Bethnal Green, worshippers from different generations, historians and undertakers and trustees of the mosque, examine how successful the mosque has been as a force for integration.<sup>33</sup>

It is hard for an outsider not to laugh sometimes at the po-faced way in which the BBC goes about sanitizing the various institutions of Islam. But many moderate Muslims are not amused at all. The East London Mosque has, over the years, been the site of struggle between competing factions. Some have been openly extremist; others have called themselves 'moderate' (and by the standards of Osama Bin Laden may well be so, but by post-Enlightenment Western standards are decidedly not). Then there are the true moderates, though some of these have not always been so: Shiraz Maher, for example, was once an Islamist, a member of the radical group Hizb ut-Tahrir. After abandoning that ideology, he worked at the Policy Exchange think tank, before becoming a senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. In 2009, Maher wrote the influential policy report *Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for engagement with Muslim groups*, which was praised by such prominent politicians as the former communities secretary, Ruth Kelly, and the present education secretary, Michael Gove. Maher is clearly neither a racist nor an Islamophobe, and it would be hard to find anyone better qualified to pronounce authoritatively on the situation at the East London Mosque. In an article for the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2010, Maher wrote:

The East London Mosque is among Britain's most extreme Islamic institutions ... Last year, for example, it hosted an event titled 'The End of Time: A New Beginning,' where pamphlets were distributed showing Manhattan crumbling under a Hadean apocalypse of meteors, which shattered the Statute [*sic*] of Liberty asunder and set the city ablaze. One of the invited speakers ... described the beliefs of Christians and Jews as 'filth.' ... A report published last year by the Department for Communities and Local Government on the Pakistani Muslim



community in England states that ‘the East London Mosque [is] the key institution for the Bangladeshi wing of JI [Jamaat-e Islami] in the U.K.’ Jamaat-e Islami is the radical South Asian party created by Syed Abulala Maududi, which aims to create an Islamist theocracy.<sup>34</sup>

While BBC News programmes such as *Panorama*, *Newsnight* and Radio 4’s *File on Four* have been at the forefront of exploring extreme political Islamism, it appears that many in the non-news parts of the Corporation share Ken Livingstone’s view that such investigations are tantamount to ‘pandering to Islamophobia’. It sometimes feels as if someone in the BBC has sent round a memo instructing programme makers to compensate for the negative publicity that inevitably attends the exposure of terrorist plots to murder large numbers of people by force-feeding the public whitewashed or positive images of Islam. Though no doubt well-meant, and carried out in the furtherance of community cohesion, this approach does not help moderate Muslims who have to contend with extremists, and risks nurturing suspicions of institutional bias.

Those who complain about BBC bias in this area frequently point to a tonal difference between the BBC and Channel 4, saying that the BBC never misses a chance to remind its audience that ‘only a tiny minority’ of British Muslims support extremism, while Channel 4 goes out to assess the size of that minority – by conducting opinion surveys as well as by undercover reporting – and discovers that the numbers who are sympathetic to the 7/7 bombers, who deny that 9/11 was the work of Muslims, who wish to establish Sharia or a Caliphate are actually not ‘tiny’ at all, but are worryingly large, especially among younger British Muslims. The BBC, its critics maintain, regards Islamophobia as a bigger problem than Islamism.

The sheer scale of programming devoted to Islamic matters can itself provoke concern. In 2008, the media monitoring group of the Network of Sikh

Organisations accused the BBC of displaying a bias towards Islam in its religious commissioning, complaining that, since 2001, the BBC’s Religion and Ethics department had made 41 programmes about Islam and only one about Sikhism. Even more striking is the number of programmes touching on Islam from other perspectives. To take just one month and one network by way of illustration, listeners to Radio 4 in January 2011 could hear:

- 3–7 January: ***Five Guys Named Mohammed***

‘As Mohammed – in all its spellings – becomes the most popular name for boys born in Britain, five men reflect on their lives and about what it’s like to be a Mohammed in this country today.’  
(Five parts, broadcast on consecutive days)

- 17 January: ***Young, Muslim and Black***

‘Dotun Adebayo ... asks why is Islam providing such an attractive religious alternative to Christianity for Black Britons seeking spiritual answers?’

- 24 January: ***It’s My Story: The Imam of Peace***

‘Nadene Ghouri profiles John Butt, an Englishman who travelled to South Asia on the hippy trail, converted to Islam and trained as an imam.’

- 27 January: ***Face the Facts: Islamophobia***

‘Are sections of the British press increasing tensions within communities by publishing negative stories about Muslims?’

All very good, if a tad relentless – even *Face the Facts*, which gave some of the sillier tabloids a well-

deserved slapping; though it did, unfortunately, include an interview with a journalism professor who had undertaken one of those fatuous ‘scoring’ exercises, which showed that Islam tended to get quite negative media coverage during terrorist trials.

“There was a real, real sense that political correctness has basically gone too far. And, in many ways now, political correctness is not a symbol of impartiality but actually a symbol of bias. And people were talking at length about how it had proved unduly restrictive in the context of open debate.”

Magnus Willis of Sparkler, presenting market research findings to the BBC’s impartiality seminar

In summer 2011, BBC Two screened Rageh Omaar’s three-part series, *The Life of Muhammad*, which was careful not to show any images of its subject’s face (although there are plenty in Persian art). For some, this appeasement of Sunni sensitivities was further evidence that the selfsame broadcaster that had put *Popetown* into production and had screened *Jerry Springer – the Opera*, and that was prepared to consider putting the Bible into Room 101, but not the Koran, was still operating a double standard when it came to Islam.

Once people start looking for such double standards, or for suggestions of bias, they can find them everywhere. For instance, the BBC’s website features something called a ‘Salah Calculator’. This enables a Muslim to ascertain, at the click of a mouse, the five daily prayer times, correct to the minute – simply by inputting his location (Dewsbury, say) and the date. More fastidious Muslims can choose to avail themselves of optional extras: inputting the sun’s depression angle at Fajr (the first of the daily

prayers) or the shadow ratio at ‘Asr (the third). Only a public service broadcaster would think of providing such a useful tool free of charge. Yet, though there are probably around four times as many baptized Catholics as there are nominal Muslims in the UK, Googling turns up no Catholic Liturgical Calendar on the BBC site, and so it is not possible for a Catholic to discover whether we are still in Ordinary Time. Little things like this lead some people to wonder if the BBC has developed a preferential option for Islam.

In January 2010, the screenwriter Lynda La Plante, the creator of ITV’s *Prime Suspect*, vented her irritation with the BBC’s drama commissioning team:

If you were to go to the BBC and say to them, ‘Listen, Lynda La Plante’s written a new drama or I have this little Muslim boy who’s just written one’, they’d say: ‘Oh, we’d like to see his script.’<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps La Plante’s suspicion that BBC Drama has a thing about Islam was prompted by a July 2008 episode of *Bonekickers*, which featured the beheading of a peaceable Muslim man at the hands of a group of Christian fanatics. It seems likely that the storyline was suggested by the arrest in 2007 and subsequent trial of a group of Birmingham Islamists in connection with a plot to kidnap and behead a soldier.

A complainant wrote to the BBC after the transmission of *Bonekickers* to say that, by transferring the problem of violent fundamentalism among radical Muslims to evangelical Christians, the programme was irresponsible and biased. He/she noted that evangelical Christians were far more likely to be the victims of terrorists and religiously motivated beheadings than the perpetrators.

The complainant stuck with the BBC complaints process for almost two years, escalating the matter eventually to the BBC Trust. At this stage, the



procedure becomes somewhat legalistic, and for a complaint to succeed it is necessary to prove that a programme has transgressed one or another of the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines. The *Bonekicker* complaint was ultimately rejected on the grounds that the programme was clearly fictional and that the audience would not have taken it seriously.

In November 2011, the digital channel BBC Three showed a superbly made drama-documentary – *The Boarding School Bomber*. This compelling film told the story of Andrew Ibrahim, the middle-class son of a Bristol NHS consultant, brought up in a Christian family, who converted to Islam while still at school and was subsequently radicalized. In 2009, Ibrahim was convicted on terrorism charges, after being found with explosives, and is currently serving a ten-year sentence. The film confronts all the issues to do with Islamism that so many BBC programmes avoid, and in a way that would likely satisfy even the social cohesion team at the Henry Jackson Society. It certainly deserves a wider audience than BBC Three can provide. The film does not, however, necessarily betoken any great change of heart at the BBC, as it turns out that it was an adaptation of a project originally commissioned by Avon and Somerset Constabulary to help keep young Muslims out of trouble.

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***Nativity***  
**BBC One – 20–23 December 2010**  
**Genre: Drama**

***The Bible’s Buried Secrets***  
**BBC Two – 15–29 March 2011**  
**Genre: Factual/Documentary**

It is said that a group of bishops wept at a private screening of *Nativity*. And, surprisingly, they wept because they found the drama profoundly moving; not because the BBC had made a travesty of the

birth of Christ. Before the programme aired in prime time during Christmas week 2010, there was some tabloid mischief making, which suggested that Christians would find the drama – written by former market trader and lead scriptwriter of *Eastenders*, Tony Jordan – grossly insulting. Far from it: *Nativity* received rave reviews even from *Thinking Faith*, the online journal of the Jesuits, and later went on to win a prestigious religious programmes award.

Despite all the plaudits, there may have been some within the BBC who felt short-changed, for they did not get the programmes they originally asked for. In a newspaper interview to promote the series, Tony Jordan described how he came to write *Nativity* in the first place:

‘I’d probably had a couple too many rums, but they asked me what I would do,’ recalls Jordan, ‘and I pitched the ridiculous notion of doing the inn in Bethlehem as a single play, a bit like ‘Allo ‘Allo. So you’d have the landlord and the Roman soldiers with silly accents, and about 50 minutes into a 60-minute play there would be a knock at the door, and our version of Rene would open it on a man saying, “My wife’s pregnant, can you help me?” Rene sends him to the stable, and right at the end goes to check up on them and walks in on the nativity. A week later, I had ... forgotten all about the conversation when I got a telephone call from someone at the BBC saying, “We love it, can you write the script?” It was a bit of a shock.’<sup>36</sup>

Jordan went on to tell the interviewer that once he started working on the nativity story, he felt he could not reduce something so beautiful to a cheap gag. He began to consult theologians. Somewhere along the way, he came to believe in the essential truth of the nativity story, including the Virgin Birth.

Perhaps Tony Jordan was rather exaggerating the cynicism of the original commissioning app-

roach; but perhaps not, for the BBC does have form in such matters. When, back in 2006, it made a series about the miracles of Christ, it chose a Muslim, Rageh Omaar, to present the programmes. When, more recently, it made a series about how archaeological discoveries are changing the way people interpret stories from the Bible, it plumped for an atheist.

The BBC is similarly consistent in pursuing a revisionist line in such programmes. In 2002 it aired – in Christmas week – the documentary *The Virgin Mary*, which proposed that the mother of Christ became pregnant as a consequence of being raped by a Roman soldier. The following year, the documentary *St Paul* floated the suggestion that the saint’s experience on the road to Damascus was nothing more than an epileptic fit.

*The Bible’s Buried Secrets* was in the same tradition, but spiced up with a touch of Dan Brown. The presenter, Dr Francesca Stavrakopoulou, repeatedly claimed to be revealing dramatic discoveries that threatened to rock the foundations of Christianity. Chief among them were that God had a wife called Asherah and that the ancient Israelites were polytheistic. She also claimed to have found the true site of the Garden of Eden. Perhaps because she is an atheist, Stavrakopoulou displayed an uncertain grasp of Christian doctrine, more than once implying that Christians believe humanity to be ‘fundamentally bad’ (something most major Christian denominations do not believe). She also seemed to think that monotheism (with a male God) was what produced patriarchy. Judging by Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, the women of polytheistic Athens would have disagreed.

It is not clear why the BBC persists in making programmes of this sort: they irritate those who take a serious interest in religion, and are unlikely to be watched by those who do not. The constant reductivism and the attempts to debunk traditional beliefs suggest that the BBC is institutionally antagonistic to religious faith, and that a mildly mocking atheism is its default position.

“There is an inbuilt but unconscious bias against religion, fuelled by the fact staff are not representative of the public. It is not a conspiracy, but it needs a correction.”

Roger Bolton,  
former presenter of BBC Radio 4’s *Sunday* programme<sup>37</sup>

“The biggest problem is that the philosophy [secular liberalism] is so utterly dominant that it’s presumed to be a neutral worldview. That’s what leads to so many instances of unthinking, unintended, institutional bias against both traditional forms of Christianity and social conservatism in general.”

David Kerr, former assistant editor, *Newsnight*<sup>38</sup>

“No political issue has so far come near Jerry Springer in terms of anger and emotion. It wasn’t politics that put a security guard outside my house, it was a debate about how the BBC handles religion.”

Mark Thompson, BBC Director-General<sup>39</sup>

From time to time, Christians and other religious groups are given the chance to express their dissatisfaction directly to the BBC. One such opportunity was afforded by the Corporation’s public consultation over its diversity strategy. In January 2011, the research company Public Knowledge, which managed the consultation of both the public

and BBC staff, released a summary report of the responses. This established that religion had been one of the main subjects raised by the public, and that ‘a key theme ... was the concern that the views of Christians can be marginalised or misrepresented by BBC programming despite the heritage of the country’.<sup>40</sup>

Examples of points raised by the public in the BBC’s diversity consultation

‘As a Christian I find that the BBC’s representation of Christianity is mainly inaccurate, portraying incorrect, often derogatory stereotypes. It is also wholly disproportionate in representation of Christians and Christianity in programming i.e. not representing Christians fairly numerically.’

‘Seldom do we find a Christian portrayed in drama, and when we do, it is usually a “weak” person or a “bigot”. The BBC could do much more in portraying good and balanced Christian [sic] actively participating in their society.’

‘In BBC drama Christians are either not represented at all, or if they are ... they tend to be depicted as dogmatic and unsympathetic people, or as weak and washy and woolly, or as old and aged.’

‘It is annoying how Christians are portrayed on TV. It is extremely irritating how other religions are protected at the expense of Christianity. It is a sad reflection today how the Christian faith is dismissed as irrelevant.’

Source: *Development of a BBC Diversity Strategy: Summary of responses to public and staff consultations*

Surprisingly, there was more concern about the Dot Branning (previously Cotton) stereotype in *Eastenders* than about the trend towards portraying Christians as vicious and violent. Whereas Dot is merely a somewhat self-righteous and prejudiced old woman, the other notable Christian in *Eastenders*, the Pentecostal pastor Lucas Johnson, is a murderous maniac. He callously leaves his wife to die, murders two other people (and a dog) and ends up scrawling Biblical verses on his prison cell wall in his own blood.

Inversion seems to be an acceptable substitute for originality throughout BBC Drama. The very first episode of BBC One’s MI5 drama *Spooks* in 2002 featured ‘pro-life’ terrorist bombers. The drama department thought the idea of murderous anti-abortionists was so good that they recycled it for the 2009 cop drama *Hunter*, though on this occasion the pro-lifers were threatening to kill kidnapped children unless the BBC showed a video of a 24-week termination. The viewer had not just to suspend disbelief, but to garrotte it – thereby insulating the programme makers from such complaints as the one over *Bonekickers*. It can only be a matter of time before we see a homicidal anti-euthanasia activist. What is going on here?

One answer that merits consideration is that this kind of loopy distortion is perfectly consistent with a left-liberal cultural bias. It has long been observed that left-liberals tend to consider themselves more virtuous than those who disagree with them. They think of themselves not merely as right, but as better people, too. The corollary of this is that their opponents – Tories, businessmen, members of other ‘out groups’, such as devout Christians – must be bad people. If they do not demonstrate sufficient genuine vices that can just be highlighted, then they must have synthetic vices attributed to them. An alternative possibility is that the people who make these programmes have little experience of religion or religious people.

In 2010, the BBC began to collect information about the religious beliefs of those people joining its staff. The following year it conducted an internal census, inviting voluntary disclosure from existing staff. Almost 12,000 of the BBC’s 21,000 or so staff complied, representing 56.9 per cent of the total. Although the data do not afford a complete picture, the responses constitute a much larger sample than would be found in a typical market research survey. Of those whose religious belief is known, Christians account for 43.5 per cent and Atheists/No religion for 45.4 per cent. This suggests that the BBC may, as many have long suspected, employ more atheists and non-believers than Christians.<sup>41</sup> By way of comparison, in the 2001 Census, 92 per cent of those who filled in census forms chose to answer the voluntary question on religion. Of those who did, only 16 per cent stated that they had no religion. Of the clear majority who identified themselves with a major faith, nine out of ten identified themselves with Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

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The Day the Immigrants Left  
BBC One – 24 February 2010  
Genre: Factual/Documentary

For many years, the topic of immigration was taboo among the liberal left – and consequently in large parts of the media. Since most immigrants are members of racial minorities, immigration was regarded as a proxy for racism. Wise politicians steered clear of it. Even those without a racist bone in their body feared they would be indicted for ‘playing the race card’ if they raised the issue. It was almost guaranteed that, if they so much as mentioned the subject, radio or television interviewers would accuse them of recklessness that could foment violent assaults. This was a conversation stopper, effectively closing down any debate.

The public felt differently: people consistently told pollsters that they were worried about immigration. The failure of the system to respond was one of the factors promoting cynicism and disengagement from politics.

During this period, the BBC was both part of the silence and a major enforcer of it. Michael Howard’s 2005 statement that ‘it’s not racist to talk about immigration’ could have been directly addressed to the Corporation.

But then everything changed. The arrival in the UK of large numbers of Poles and other East Europeans from the countries that joined the EU in 2004 cut the cord binding immigration to race. Immigrants were now likely to be fair-skinned, and as such were not entitled to victim status. The way the centre-left pounced with gusto on the topic of immigration will be remembered as one of the great political hypocrisies of modern times. Gordon Brown talked of ‘British jobs for British workers’, lifting the rhetoric straight out of the British National Party’s (BNP) playbook. The Labour party blew the dog whistle on Polish immigration at the 2008 Crewe and Nantwich by-election. The trade unions accused the incomers of stealing jobs. No one in the media seemed to care if Poles or Lithuanians were beaten up or not.

“The liberal elite of the BBC constantly refer to immigration from Poland because they are using the Polish community as a cat’s paw to try to tackle the thorny issue of mass, unchecked immigration into our country ... They won’t dare refer to controversial immigration from other countries.”

Daniel Kawczynski MP<sup>43</sup>

Evan Davis’s film *The Day the Immigrants Left* was an honest attempt to challenge the new orthodoxy. As a smart economist, Davis understood that there was more to it than ‘stealing jobs’ – that immigrants could help expand the economy, create their own jobs for the longer term and help enterprises launch or stay afloat. Besides, there was room for doubt whether unemployed Britons were capable of doing the jobs occupied by the new immigrants (or were even minded to try).

The film was set in the small town of Wisbech in Cambridgeshire. The town had attracted around 3,000 immigrant workers from Eastern Europe, and 2,000 locals were on the dole. The programme team persuaded a number of local employers to give their immigrant staff some days off while unemployed locals took their place.

One of the Brits texted in sick, after a late night out. Another two cried off, claiming to have food poisoning, while yet another was a no-show because his girlfriend was ill. Two others turned up half an hour late for work and then became surly and resentful when told off. Another group struggled to work at half the pace or productivity of their immigrant colleagues, while one Briton proved himself so innumerate that he could not count up to five.

The film was all the more eloquent for its ‘show-don’t-tell’ approach. At the end, Davis made a generous-hearted plea for the country not entirely to write off its own.

As for what Daniel Kawczynski termed ‘controversial immigration’ – the sort that changes the character of towns, leads to ethnic segregation and ‘white flight’; the sort that involves cultural collisions between people of different races – that largely remains taboo.

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**Accused: Frankie’s Story**  
**BBC One – 22 November 2010**  
**Genre: Drama**

*Frankie’s Story* was one of a series of thematically linked dramas in the *Accused* series. It dealt with a group of British soldiers serving in Afghanistan, and involved scenes of bullying, including one where a soldier has excrement poured over him. Colonel Tim Collins, the Gulf war commander who, on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, made a moving speech calling for discipline and restraint, was sent an advance copy and was horrified. He accused the BBC of stabbing in the back those soldiers serving in the front line.

Setting aside the merits (or otherwise) of the work itself for one moment, the furore over the drama and the twists and turns of the BBC’s reactions to it were revealing in themselves. During the Falklands conflict, the Corporation showed itself uncertain how to conduct itself in wartime, spending a good deal of time in internal – and subsequently public – wrangling over questions such as whether or not to refer to British troops as ‘our forces’.

The BBC jealously (and rightly) guards its independence from government; but should that independence mean that the Corporation has no responsibilities to the nation, as a community – particularly in wartime?

In this instance, General Sir Peter Wall, the chief of the general staff, wrote to the BBC’s director-general requesting that the drama be pulled from the schedules. Other senior figures, such as Lord Dannatt, joined in.

Chief among the concerns publicly voiced by former senior officers was the possible effect that broadcasting the film would have on morale among troops in Afghanistan. Would they, far from home and facing danger daily, feel – as Tim Collins had put it – stabbed in the back? What loyalty and support does the national community, including the national broadcaster, owe to those we send

to fight, and in some cases to die, for our national interests and security?

A close secondary consideration was the distress that would be caused to the families of those serving in theatre. Both soldiers and families can experience a troubling sense of isolation if they feel the country is not wholly behind them, and that we are not all in this together.

While the BBC’s reluctance to be seen to be in any way censored or ordered about by generals was understandable, for most people on the centre-right of politics the decision faced by the BBC was a simple one: the Corporation’s civic duty to soldiers and their families should trump a very slight loss of face. Even though the programme concerned was a minor crime drama, rather than a work of significant cultural importance, the BBC chose not to change its schedule. Indeed, it has repeated the drama twice since.

**“The BBC has a great deal to answer for by screening utter trash like this, and I don’t give a toss if it was from one of our nation’s leading writers, it was a disgrace to portray life in the forces, especially in Afghanistan, like this.”**

Posting on the Army Rumour Service message board

The portrayal of military life in the drama was seen by many soldiers as defamatory and stemming from a culpable ignorance. In many ways, it recycled an old stereotype of private soldiers and NCOs as brutalized thugs, almost feral in their intemperate violence.

Some saw the drama as continuing a campaign of denigration of the army begun by the 2008 documentary *The Undercover Soldier*, in which the BBC sent a reporter to sign on as an army recruit and to undertake secret filming. There may be

something to this – given that when it was broadcast, *Frankie’s Story* was followed by one of those ‘... anyone who has been affected by the issues raised in this programme’ announcements, along with an invitation to call a helpline.

In her public defence of *Frankie’s Story*, the BBC’s Jana Bennett was inconsistent. At one point she stressed the fictional nature of the drama; at another she said she was glad that the drama was provoking public discussion about an important issue – somewhat suggesting that it was intended to be seen as more realistic. People will supply their own answers to the question: ‘Whose side is the BBC on?’



## 4

## What is the problem, and what should be done?

I would hope that by now everyone – from whichever side of the argument they come – will have begun to appreciate how difficult it is for the BBC to be fair and impartial at all times and across all genres, and also how near impossible it is to hold the Corporation to account when it is not.

Those, for instance, who were outraged by an episode of *Spooks* (broadcast shortly after the BBC's impartiality seminar in 2006), in which 'Arab' terrorists who had taken over an embassy turned out to be Israeli Mossad agents in disguise, had no hope of gaining any satisfaction. No guideline had been broken and the programme was clearly fiction. Yet, assuredly, somewhere someone was gleeful at having manipulated the system to deliver another propaganda punch. To defame any group or movement that does not engage in terrorism, as *Spooks* had previously done with English pro-life activists, is bad enough; but to target a group that has good cause to be particularly sensitive to blood libels seems an especially venomous sort of bigotry, and not one with which the BBC should wish to be associated. It is perhaps understandable that a thoughtless or naïve writer might have come up with this storyline; but given that broadcasting is, by its nature, a collective and collaborative affair – all programmes are, to some extent, made by a committee – it seems odd that at no stage did anyone exercise that editorial control that the BBC so vigorously defends.

Most of what gives rise to a perception of bias – whether political or cultural – is not so stark, arresting, offensive or outrageous. It is more a matter of tone of voice, underlying assumptions, the predicates upon which propositions are built. Often the issue is not that arguments challenging a liberal orthodoxy are excluded, but is rather the way in which they are treated, ganged-up upon, or cursorily dismissed. The philosopher Roger Scruton took part in BBC Two's 'Modern Beauty' season in 2009:

For better or worse I have been identified by the British establishment as the person who can be relied upon to defend the indefensible, and who might be allowed to defend the indefensible even on state television (that is, the BBC) provided the defense is sufficiently diluted by others defending the obvious. In official code, 'indefensible' means 'conservative,' while 'obvious' means 'left-liberal.' Hence when the BBC asked me to contribute to a television series on beauty it was expected that I would argue that there really is such a thing, that it is not just a matter of taste, that it is connected with the noble, the aspirational, and the holy in our feelings, and that the postmodern culture, which emphasizes ugliness, despondency, and desecration, is a betrayal of a sacred calling. So that is what I said, since after all they were paying me. To achieve the balance that the BBC is required by its constitution to deliver, two other programs were commissioned, reaffirming the orthodoxies. They argued that art is not about beauty but about originality, and originality means putting yourself on display, with the tongue, or some other suitable organ, sticking out.<sup>44</sup>

Despite being given a whole hour to elaborate his own case, Scruton came away dissatisfied, because the way in which the debate was framed made the conservative position appear maverick and the progressive normal. It is a question of what the default settings are, and whether the BBC should have any default settings that are obvious to the audience.

As in cultural commentary, so in religion: an edition of Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* broadcast in autumn 2011 included an interview with a young Christian woman street-pastor about her upcoming mission in Leeds. She would work at night, going among the young people who were out drinking or taking drugs in nightclubs. There was nothing

remotely aggressive or even sceptical about the line of questioning, until towards the end, when the presenter asked 'But you're not going to evangelize, are you?' The clear implication was that it was fine for a Christian pastor to carry out social work, but for her to evangelize was to cross the line. Much of the BBC's approach to religious subjects hints at the same underlying attitude: that religion is fine so long as it is largely an expression of ethnicity and culture – dressing up in funny clothes – or is concerned with doing good works; but if there is any actual religious content involved, then it becomes decidedly iffy.

Political attitudes – though sometimes aggressively foregrounded in drama – are more often than not more subtly interpolated. BBC Two's *The Hour*, first broadcast in summer 2011, was set in 1956, during the run-up to Suez. Of course, there was never any question that Anthony Eden's Conservative government was anything other than a bad thing. Indeed, it was taken as a given that it was so morally corrupt that its intelligence service would murder an English girl. The hero, home affairs correspondent Freddie Lyon, was – in dress, manner and haircut – an essentially modern figure. In outlook he was almost a caricature of the sort of person right-wingers imagine BBC journalists to be nowadays. It sometimes felt as if Freddie had been transported back in time to tick off the Britain of the 1950s for failing to observe the social orthodoxies of today. There was, however, a redeeming irony to the whole thing: in the end, Freddie and his like-minded producer were found to be the 'useful idiots' of a manipulative BBC executive, revealed in the denouement to be a fully paid-up Soviet agent. I suspect the full humour of the situation was lost on the programme's creator.

When it comes to more blatantly political work, the BBC surely has a problem safeguarding impartiality. Not only is there no comeback against any individual agenda-driven drama, but there is virtually no hope of balance over time either.

The enormous stable of BBC drama writers are seldom shy of hinting at, or even baldly stating, their affiliations in newspaper interviews. But I can recall not a single instance where one has identified him or herself as a political conservative. The BBC simply does not make dramas in which progressive schoolteachers are the villains or where *Guardian*-reading social workers kidnap small children. (Maybe such storylines would be insufficiently far-fetched?)

**“They [Clegg and Cameron] are savage and evil people.”**

Russell T. Davies, writer of *Torchwood*<sup>45</sup>

The result is that right across the piece – from soap operas through crime dramas to single plays – many on the centre-right perceive a steady drip of snide little propaganda points demonizing people that left-wing screenwriters do not like: Lady Thatcher, social conservatives, other political conservatives, people worried about immigration or multiculturalism, businessmen, traditionalist schoolteachers, parents who educate their children privately, army officers, toffs (particularly fox-hunting toffs), Eurosceptics, evangelical Christians, Catholics, Zionists and so forth. And no one at the BBC holds up a hand and says 'Hang on, that's at least 40 per cent of our audience you are damning there!' Actually, if Eurosceptics and those worried about immigration are included, the figure would probably be pushed up beyond 70 per cent; but even if the case were understated by a Corporation executive, that would still represent progress.

Back in 2006/07 there were signals that things might change. When Andrew Marr warned at the BBC's impartiality seminar that 'out there in all our audiences there are people who are turning off us because they think we are biased in new ways, or unfair in new ways, or simply not talking to them properly',<sup>47</sup> most of the senior executives seemed



to concur. But five years on, not much seems to have changed in drama. As we have seen, the BBC's solution – the wagon wheel – can only work if someone is keeping score and commissioning work from other perspectives; and in drama that may be impossible. Many years ago, Nicholas Hytner put out a call for right-wing playwrights to bring their scripts to the National Theatre. Either very few turned up, or their scripts were no good.

**“If you want to find the most solid evidence of partiality, look at the BBC’s entertainment output – its dramas, comedies and arts programmes. This is where its guard is down, where the BBC editorial police are not watching out for ‘balance’ weak points. And it’s also where, arguably, the partiality is far more subversive.”**

Tom Leonard, *Daily Telegraph*<sup>46</sup>

The same is true with comedy. I deliberately chose not to include any comedy programmes in the last chapter, because trying to analyse gags is futile. Yet radio comedy is one of the areas in which a left-wing bias is most blatant. The BBC has never found its P.J. O'Rourke, yet it can summon an endless supply of Mark Steels, Jeremy Hardys and Marcus Brigstockes. Have you heard the one about Obama? Of course not. He wouldn't be the butt of a left-wing comedian's joke – even when accepting a Nobel Peace prize while fighting two wars.

So what should the centre-right do? Surrendering the ground is not a sensible option: although it would be easy just to press the 'off' button, there is the successor generation to consider. The BBC's drama and comedy output is too important to be left in the hands of the barbarians. Drama transmits

and shapes values. Comedians designate not only what is ridiculous, but also what is acceptable.

It may be that it is ages since many of us have seen a drama by a right-of-centre screenwriter, or heard a joke told by a conservative comedian. But most of us will have seen good plays and heard good jokes on the BBC. We should not care how wrongheaded the political or economic opinions of a writer are, so long as his work makes us think or weep, extends the range of our sympathies, or illuminates the human condition. We should not care how a funny woman votes, so long as she makes us laugh. What we need to do, therefore, is, as a significant chunk of the audience, help shape what the BBC considers good and what it considers funny. We need to have a *quality* argument, not a narrowly political one.

What we need to do is convince the people who run BBC Drama that littering their work with stereotypes and prejudices is a stylistic fault, so that next time Abi Morgan shows up with a script like *Royal Wedding*, someone says, 'If you'd just drop the cheesy Thatcher-bashing and cheerleading for the Greenham women, it could be quite good. The rewrite might take some time, but the wait would be worth it.' Equally, the comedy commissioners need to be brought round to understanding that politically correct, obviously politically partisan gags generally fail. They are usually far too predictable to be funny.

This is not an argument for imposing blandness or for stifling creativity in comedy or drama. It is an argument for having the sort of BBC that would have said 'yes, please' to Chris Morris when he pitched *Four Lions*, rather than turn it down because it offended against political correctness. True, the sort of BBC I am advocating would say 'no, thanks' to at least half of what Marcus Brigstocke puts up, but its output would be no more bland for that. Nor would it be stifling creativity to challenge the legion of gritty, social realists who write for BBC Drama to confront some of the problems that

the liberal-left tend to move swiftly past. A work exploring the consequences of multiculturalism on a human scale might be worth watching on a rainy night: perhaps something that examines the fears of an elderly couple in a northern town who are the only white residents remaining in a district that has become otherwise wholly Asian. But only if the audience could be confident that the elderly couple's situation would be treated with some sympathy, and that they would not be crudely portrayed as racists (as would almost certainly be the case now).

**“I do think it a bit rich for Sir David [Hare] to complain that there is a Right-wing bias in the arts. It’s the equivalent of saying there is a Right-wing bias among Radio 4 comedians, or BBC broadcasters in general. (Given how big the BBC is, I accept that it is possible that one or two Right-wingers might have slipped through the net. But there can’t be more than five of them. A small percentage, statistically negligible.)”**

Nigel Farndale, *Sunday Telegraph*<sup>48</sup>

In short, what we need in drama and entertainment is not some sort of quota of right-wing claptrap to balance the left-wing claptrap (which is what the wagon wheel hints at, but cannot deliver), but a raising of the quality bar and a recognition by both commissioners and writers that it is simply unprofessional to abuse their position of privilege in a publicly funded institution to advance a personal or political agenda by stealth. They should also be encouraged to be more open-hearted, fairer to sections of the audience that do not share their

worldview, and to pay particular attention to those principles in the BBC's impartiality policy that require programme makers to question their own assumptions. This does not mean that there can be no impassioned, personal polemic from time to time (though it would be refreshing if it didn't always come from people like David Hare), just fewer lazy assumptions and cheap shots.

If the BBC felt it could not do all this with its existing 300+ team of screenwriters, then here is a suggestion. As the creator of *Midsomer Murders* and *Foyle's War*, and the writer of many of the Hercule Poirot adaptations, Anthony Horowitz has a proven record of luring away great swathes of the BBC's audience to ITV. In November 2011 he complained:

Lamentably, there seems to be no hope for me on the BBC, where even getting a phone call returned is a triumph ... I did get a meeting about a year ago and pitched an idea to a very senior person at the BBC. I wanted to dramatise the role of the SOE, the Special Operations Executive – a sort of sister programme to *Foyle's War*. The executive looked at me blankly. 'The SOE?' he quavered. 'What was that?' I'm still waiting for a yes or no.<sup>49</sup>

Horowitz's anecdote illustrates a further dimension of the problem that the BBC needs to address. A cultural bias generates ignorance, and that ignorance perpetuates the bias. Here is (in abbreviated form) the current commissioning brief for BBC One documentaries. It tells documentary makers what the channel is seeking to buy:

All titles ... should also be rooted in the present tense and the national mindset ... they shouldn't be afraid of tackling important, gritty issues or of innovating with modern new shapes and concepts ... [We want] issue-driven formats with a topical or entertaining edge about modern

Britain ... All singles and series should grab the attention with compelling stories and central characters, and engage the audience from start to finish with modern stories and discoveries that feel present tense.<sup>50</sup>

Note the key concepts: gritty, edge, modern. Irrespective of what their subject matter might be, these programmes have half made themselves before anyone has started shooting. Both past and future are irrelevant: we all live in the fierce urgency of the present tense. And what, by the by, is the ‘national mindset’? Again, this was an issue that was recognized at the 2006 impartiality seminar, where (once again) it was Andrew Marr who pointed out that ‘the problem that we have to ... remember [is] that out there, there are great swathes of opinion that ... feel that something slightly urban, edgy, youthful, alien and sometimes distasteful is being shoved at them’.<sup>51</sup> It still is.

Another perennial source of irritation to ‘the 32 per cent’ identified in the introduction is *Question Time*. One rarely meets a Conservative these days who does not hold it up as an example of BBC bias. Many are convinced that the whole thing is a conspiracy, and point to articles that its editor once allegedly wrote (before he joined the BBC) for some obscure Trotskyite journal. True, the programme has had its terrible moments: the post-9/11 special was a disgrace (for which the BBC had publicly to apologize), and the edition that included the BNP’s Nick Griffin on the panel at times felt uncomfortably like a Thought Crimes trial. But it is hard to see how a programme of this sort can have any consistent bias.

Some people insist that *QT*’s panels are unfairly slanted. A few years ago, the BBC’s College of Journalism produced an online training aid to school BBC News journalists in the techniques of impartiality. It required the trainee to cast an edition of *Question Time* by selecting and dragging photographs from an extensive gallery of possible

panellists, then dropping them into a box. The computer programme would then, through some complex algorithm that took account of various objective evaluations of the potential panellists’ political position and outlook, declare whether the choice was a hit or a miss. It is an incredibly difficult game to win, proving sometimes as frustrating as a Rubik’s Cube. In real life, the job is complicated by who the various parties are willing to put up for the programme, and by the fact that the finest calculation of balance can be utterly thrown out of kilter by one guest dropping out the night before the programme is broadcast. On the whole, the casting of the programme amounts to the best of intentions thwarted.

Others complain about the way the programme is chaired, saying that sometimes guests are cut off or silenced. I have watched almost every edition of this programme in recent years, and have pored over transcripts of at least a dozen, where a stop-watch has been run on each contribution. The only pattern to be discerned in David Dimbleby’s interruptions or over-rulings reveals a consistent impatience with panellists who try to say again something they have already said just a moment or two before. One of Dimbleby’s roles is to be the agent of the viewer at home. His refusal to suffer repetitive bores gladly spares us the need to shout at the telly.

And yet very frequently there is something awry – the audience. In theory, the audience is self-selecting, made up of people who respond to the frequent on-air invitations to apply for tickets. But who are all these stropky public sector loudmouths demanding ever higher public spending? Where do they come from? Have they been bussed in? Are the unions and the left adept at playing the system? Sadly, quite who they are and how they got onto the show is beyond the reach of the Freedom of Information Act. But it is certainly an issue that the BBC ought to review frequently. It might be persuaded to do so if critics of the programme

were a little more temperate and focused in their complaints.

**“We should listen hard to those who accuse us of drowning our viewers and listeners in a small metropolitan pond of stereotypes and prejudices, what Flaubert called ‘received ideas’.”**

Lord Patten, Chairman of the BBC Trust<sup>52</sup>

So how should people who are fed up with what they perceive to be an institutional cultural bias within the BBC go about trying to correct it? Why would commissioners and producers listen, if they are part of the problem, too? How can the BBC be persuaded that the cultural bias it acknowledges – the inevitable consequence of having a younger than average, lefter than normal, metrosexual staff – is also something that affects and vitiates its output?

**“By and large, people who work in the BBC think the same, and it’s not the way the audience thinks.”**

Richard Klein, Controller BBC Four<sup>53</sup>

To some extent, I believe critics would be pushing at an open door. The chairman has subtly signalled that he ‘gets it’. Plenty of senior executives have had a bellyful of priggishness and political correctness, too. Some controllers have already demonstrated that they take their wagon-wheel obligations seriously. Richard Klein, the controller of BBC Four, is known for actively commissioning programmes that challenge any established consensus, particularly the left-liberal one. BBC Four’s 2011 ‘Army: A Very British Institution’ season – especially its series on the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst – was entirely free of the false assumptions and sneers that attend so much of the BBC’s coverage of the armed

forces. Suggesting that the BBC should mainstream across its more popular channels the best practice already established within BBC Four would not be such a big ask.

Besides, although market research consistently tells the BBC that it is loved and trusted, and that most of us would miss it if it wasn’t there, it also alerts the Corporation’s executives to rumblings of discontent. Above all, the BBC knows it has to listen more to its audiences, and technological change will compel it to listen even harder in the future. In these circumstances, ‘the 32 per cent’ will count.

There are some key rules to observe:

- *There should be no heavy-handed threats or pressure from government.* The BBC will always dig its heels in and defend its independence from the state if that is ever publicly put in doubt.
- *There should be no organized campaigns by interest groups.* The BBC is just as sensitive about attempts to interfere with its editorial independence by non-state bodies, and would be reluctant to be seen to cave in to pressure from any interest group – even if that interest group had an unassailable case or a sensible proposition.
- *There should be no increase in compliance obligations.* The form filling and agonizing over compliance issues since the Jonathan Ross–Russell Brand affair is already stifling and, if anything, needs to be reduced.
- *No reliance should be placed on the BBC complaints system – it is of little use.* The BBC has recently streamlined and modified its complaints system, so that complaints will be dealt with in a simpler and speedier way. But formal complaints will not change the culture. The complaints mechanism is inherently legalistic and, as we have seen, cultural bias does not always involve breaching any rule or guideline.


Shifting a cultural bias requires, above all, a conversation. It is not enough for people who find some aspect of a programme annoying to be sent an email from BBC Information, telling them that their point has been added to a list of observations that will be circulated to managers and producers. Everyone knows that managers and producers pay scant attention to these message logs – if indeed they bother to read them at all.

But the BBC can and should learn from its audiences. It should want to know not only what moves people to lodge a formal complaint, but also the little things that make them exasperated, want to throw things at the television set or the radio – or worse, switch off; the little things that, over time, build perceptions of bias. If it is to carry its audiences onto new platforms, it needs to get to know them better. Polling and surveys can be a false friend in this. Like exams with a low pass mark, they can encourage complacency amidst mediocrity.

To some extent, with programmes such as *Feedback* and *Points of View*, the BBC already does this, but on too small a scale: the levels of accountability and interaction need to be far higher. It is right that the Corporation should jealously guard its editorial independence from government or organized lobbies. But it can afford to be more open and inclusive in allowing licence payers to shape its decisions.

The BBC should learn from newspapers, which are developing closer, tighter relationships with the public through the use of readers' editors and online comment boards. The BBC could throw every programme's web page open to viewers' and listeners' feedback. Comments would need to be moderated, and strict rules set to deter the electronic equivalent of green ink; but the aim should be to open a dialogue in which audiences and programme teams interact directly. The BBC should appoint viewers' and listeners' editors for each significant genre, in order to further facilitate a conversation about quality standards and perceived bias.

A wider engagement with the centre-right audience might take the form of regular reviews and consultations. Organizations such as Conservative Home and the New Culture Forum would be ideal facilitators of discussions designed to help the Corporation develop a fuller and more sophisticated understanding of the centre-right's cultural, social and philosophical perspectives. While the BBC has a natural and instinctive understanding of liberal ideas and values, its grasp of conservative ideas and values is far less assured. It seems unlikely that it could acquire a fuller and more nuanced understanding purely through its own resources. It will require work. It will also require some measure of guidance. A willingness to listen to representations or to take advice from time to time need involve no compromise of independence.

There will be those on the centre-right who will scoff that these measures will never change an ingrained culture, saying that only breaking up the BBC or cutting it off at the knees will achieve real change. But true conservatives, who place a special value on preserving institutions and who understand that worthwhile change tends to come through small increments, will perhaps have more faith in a slow process of amelioration, the aim of which is steadily to shift influence from a remote bureaucracy to ordinary licence payers. Just as the BBC often has trouble understanding conservative attitudes, so conservatives frequently underestimate the extent to which those who work at the BBC subscribe to a public service ethos constructed around the idea of fairness, and hold more tightly to it than they do to their own political opinions. Let the conversation about how fair the BBC is towards 'the 32 per cent' start now. Be prepared for it to be a long one. 

## Endnotes

- 1 *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century*, Appendix D, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/other/century21.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/other/century21.shtml)
- 2 *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century*, main report, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/other/century21.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/other/century21.shtml)
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 See [www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/ethics-and-values/impartiality/seesaw-to-wagon-wheel.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/ethics-and-values/impartiality/seesaw-to-wagon-wheel.shtml)
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