

CAN
WE
STILL
TRUST
THE

BBC

?

ROBIN AITKEN

B L O O M S B U R Y

Can We Still Trust the BBC?

Can We Still Trust the BBC?

ROBIN AITKEN

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

First published in Great Britain 2013

Copyright © Robin Aitken, 2013

The moral right of the author has been asserted

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the Publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. Every reasonable effort has been made to trace copyright holders of material reproduced in this book, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the Publishers would be glad to hear from them.

A Continuum book

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square
London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and
Sydney

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781472900913

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk
NR21 8NN

Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	vii
<i>A Confessional Preface</i>	ix
<i>Prologue</i>	xv
1 Cultural War	1
2 The Nightmare on News Street	15
3 Sex with Auntie	35
4 The Best Broadcaster in the World	45
5 A Reporter's Progress	55
6 Blowing the Whistle	73
7 Who are these People?	99
8 The Best European	117
9 The Despised Tribes	139
10 <i>Today</i> at War	159
11 The Moral Maze	185
12 Testimonies: 'A Foghorn Bellowing at the Nation'	219
13 Conclusion	229
<i>Index</i>	243

*Thank you to all those who helped
me research this book.*

*And especial thanks to my wife Sarah
for her constant support.*

Abbreviations

BBC NI	BBC Northern Ireland
CFFC	Catholics for a Free Choice
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
EEC	European Economic Community
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
IRD	Information Research Department (Foreign Office)
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
TVE	Television Trust for the Environment
<i>TWTW</i>	<i>The World this Weekend</i>
UNAIDS	United Nations AIDS programme
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
<i>WATO</i>	<i>The World at One</i>
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

A Confessional Preface

Any author who writes a book which poses a question in its title risks getting an answer they didn't particularly want to hear. So it was when I wrote and had published my original book *Can We Trust the BBC?* in 2007. The BBC itself comprehensively ignored it. After a short flurry of interest, things went very quiet and I concluded that the answer to the question was clear enough; Yes, most people did trust the BBC. My strictures were of little or no concern to the majority. The BBC sailed on majestically, still the most important news source of the nation, still its favourite entertainer, and still overwhelmingly, the most important cultural institution in Britain.

In the years following publication I reviewed my own position and decided that I should move on: I had had my say, given my honest opinion but few people seemed interested and no grand debate had ensued. I decided it was time to get on with life. I didn't want to become obsessive about the BBC (some friends had gently intimated that perhaps this point had already

been reached). Nothing more embarrassing than a man riding his hobby horse in a theatre the audience has vacated. And so, disappointed and somewhat sadder and wiser, I turned to other matters: I remained a more than averagely interested spectator in matters BBC but I relegated it to the mental drawer marked 'historic interest'.

But my book turned out to have an unexpected afterlife. In 2012 I was contacted by several BBC people – once to take part in Radio 4's *The Moral Maze* – to talk about public service broadcasting and once to give evidence to an internal inquiry into impartiality. It seemed that, after all, not all my criticisms had been had been dismissed out of hand.

And then, in the autumn of 2012, the BBC found itself embroiled in fierce controversy and the thought occurred that some purpose might be served by revisiting the subject. I do so with trepidation but what gives me some confidence that the exercise is not entirely without merit is that this time I am writing against a background where the BBC's reputation and standing – and the trust that the audience places in it – suddenly loom much larger in the public debate. We cannot foretell, at this juncture, what consequence the various scandals will have but I think – even at this stage of the drama when we have, as it were, had Act 1 and are awaiting Acts 2 and 3 – that the BBC will not emerge unscathed. Public trust has been jeopardized and in ways that I, for one, never foresaw. For who would have

predicted that – of all things – it would be a sex scandal that rocked the foundations at Broadcasting House?

It is the question of trust that lies at the core of the current crisis. The Corporation has been quite explicit about the central importance of trust stating that its aim is to become the most trusted broadcaster in the world. Indeed by many reckonings the BBC has already achieved this lofty ambition. More people listen and watch more BBC output around the world than can be claimed by any other broadcaster; what is more this output is held in high regard by most of the audience. The BBC is the greatest cultural export of the modern British nation. So the question which must now be exercising the Corporation's top managers is whether the current scandals are likely permanently to damage that trust – or is this a little local difficulty which will fade with the passage of time leaving little trace? Furthermore – if trust has been damaged how can it best be restored?

The justification for this book is that in some way it clarifies and aids what is a crucial debate both for the BBC and for us, its audience and paymasters. No one who cares anything about the BBC should be indifferent to this. My aim is to put the current problems at the BBC in some context. I will endeavour to explain how the BBC got to where it is. My original book concentrated on the lapses and shortcomings of the BBC's doctrine of impartiality. It was heavily infused by my own belief that certain strands of opinion,

certain groups, do not get a fair hearing from the BBC. In the light of current developments that might seem a somewhat quaint, even irrelevant side-issue. But it remains an important – I would argue the most important – question in relation to trust in the BBC. In that first book I criticised the way the BBC reported some of the major issues and stories of the past three decades. Most of this material is included in this book but I have excised some which no longer seems relevant or has been overtaken by events. In addition I have included at the end of each chapter short contemporary appraisals of how things have changed, in my opinion, since the book first appeared. For change there has been and the BBC now, in my view, does a somewhat better job of representing a broader range of opinion.

Here I must enter a caveat. Proving bias, or lack of even-handedness on the part of a broadcaster is a task that is not amenable to statistical analysis. Hard facts and figures are almost impossible to come by. Proof – in the sense that a mathematician or scientist would understand the term – is not available to us. The subject relies on impressionistic judgements which will always be open to dispute; the reader may object that personal judgement, anecdote and hearsay are a poor substitute for facts and figures. I agree but unfortunately it is, mostly, all that are available.

In the conclusion to this book I will attempt to draw some of the strands together and look to the future. The BBC is not in existential crisis: we will not awake

tomorrow to find it disappeared from the scene. It will continue to play a leading role in national life. But it has been damaged. The task for it now is to react constructively to the problems that have come to light. There has to be some process of renewal – but this is a permanent task facing every human institution. And that sage advice ‘never waste a good crisis’ is especially pertinent in this case. The Corporation has just appointed a new Director General – a man who, providentially, seems in possession of a rare range of qualities. All his skill will be needed to restore confidence and stability to an organization deeply troubled by recent revelations. However if the BBC can emerge, humbled probably, but determined to regain its lost good name then its current travails might even be put to good use.

Oxford

March 2013

Prologue

The British have a deep reverence for institutions and take comfort in the notion that the nation is built upon solid institutional foundations. There is the monarchy, parliament, the armed services, the Church of England, and so on; and there is also the British Broadcasting Corporation, which is the subject of this book. A relative newcomer – only 80 or so years old – it is, in many ways, the most familiar of all. The BBC makes and shapes us as a nation in a way no other institution can. For many it is an ever-present companion: from breakfast-time to bedtime, from childhood through to old age, there it is telling us about ourselves and the wider world, amusing and entertaining us. No other institution in the country – not even the NHS – can claim to be so deeply embedded in so many lives; in any one week more than 90 per cent of us use some part of the BBC's output.

Because of this ubiquity, and because it is generally admired – loved even – it is difficult to see it as it really is. And yet it is essential that we do so. The BBC is the

main conveyor of the national debate and it dwarfs every other media source in the country. If it were one day suddenly to fall silent, think of the gap there would be in our national life; an end to a host of ‘virtual’ institutions – from pap like *The Archers*, *Dr Who* and *EastEnders*, to serious news-fodder like *Yesterday in Parliament*, the *Ten o’Clock News* and *Today*.

These programmes have worked their way into our hearts and minds, and the BBC thereby has become a great power in the land. Which raises the question can we trust it? And this is a particularly difficult question to ask about the BBC because it is the organization that we expect to hold *other* institutions to account; no government minister or private corporation or public body can consider itself immune from investigation by BBC journalists. This function, of holding people and organizations to public account, is the most important thing the BBC does. But who holds the BBC to account? Can we expect it to ask hard questions of itself? *Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (But who is to guard the guards themselves?) – Juvenal’s question is as pertinent as ever.

The dusty institutional answer is that the BBC Trust makes sure the Corporation does its duty under the terms of its Royal Charter. The charter ordains that the BBC must operate without bias or favour towards any individual, organization, or group. This is the *quid pro quo* for the licence fee – that extremely valuable privilege which frees the organization from normal financial pressures.

The BBC had an income in 2011 of just over £5 billion £3.6 billion of which came from the license fee. No other UK media organization – and few in the western world – enjoy such a stable, predictable and generous income. But because everyone pays for the BBC, everyone has the right to fair treatment. The BBC Trust, under the chairmanship of Lord Patten of Barnes is supposed to be the guarantor of fair play but the Trust already seems to be suffering from the same problems as the body it replaced – the BBC Governors.

The Trust was breathed into life by a White Paper published in 2006 in the aftermath of the confrontation between the government and the BBC over allegations made in 2003 by *Today* reporter Andrew Gilligan. The thinking behind this change seemed to be that the old Governors had become cheerleaders for the Corporation, not guardians of the public interest. But in this regard the Trust has been something of a disappointment because during the crisis over Jimmy Savile in the autumn of 2012 it seemed to be suffering the exact same confusion as did the governors: did it speak for the BBC or the public? At one moment it seemed to be speaking for the BBC, the next as its regulator. But to act effectively in the latter role would require there to be a more obvious separation in the public mind between the two things. The Trust would, in other words, have to be much tougher on the BBC. The establishment of the BBC Trust was supposed

to mark an important reform – but now looks more like ineffectual tinkering with the governance of the institution.

All institutions benefit from time to time from a bracing overhaul, but reforms must get to the heart of the problem to be effective. As Alcoholics Anonymous say, the first step is to recognise that you have a problem. For many years the BBC adamantly refused to acknowledge there was any truth in the claims of critics who said it was not impartial. But in 2005 the BBC grudgingly admitted that its coverage of the European Union debate had fallen short of its advertised standards. Since then there have been signs of a real effort to correct that pro-EU bias and the BBC's coverage of the debate today seems better balanced than it was. But in many other parts of the BBC's output the old doubts remain about whether the BBC is living up to its charter obligations. Now, overlaying these concerns, there is the Savile affair which has opened up for scrutiny other aspects of BBC culture – scrutiny which is likely to be very uncomfortable for an institution whose claims on public trust have always rested on its manifest decency. These two things – Savile and impartiality – might seem to be completely separate but public perception will not necessarily make the distinction. The BBC might well discover that public trust is indivisible; the stain of the Savile scandal will make it harder for the Corporation to dismiss criticism that it has fallen short of the ideal of impartiality it espouses.

1

Cultural War

By and large Britain's intellectual classes don't prosecute the culture war with much vigour; at least not in comparison with their American counterparts. Since the 1990s the 'culture war'¹ has been a staple of American political debate where the division between left and right on a broad range of social issues is held up for examination and clearly seen for what it is. In many ways the culture war is the heart and guts of US politics. This has led to two decades of rancorous disputes and entrenched positions where consensual progress has proved all but impossible. Not so in Britain. Though the term is sometimes deployed by British commentators, our version of the war is muted – more of a skirmish with small arms fire than the clash of armies with heavy artillery. This has its advantages of course. It keeps the tenor of our political discourse more civilised – and gives us another opportunity to think ourselves superior to the brash verbal bellicosity of the Yanks. But appearances can be deceptive; the struggle for supremacy in the cultural debate in Britain is also fierce

– though often cloaked in euphemism and camouflaged by courtesy and public good manners. And in the autumn of 2011 there was a major engagement in Britain's Culture War which proved irresistible to the political classes in general and the BBC, in particular.

The Leveson inquiry² was of all-consuming interest to parts of the media; a journalistic *smorgasbord* which brought together a cast list of politicians, policemen, celebrities and low-down tabloid hacks. With its overtones of the corruption of power and the casual trading of that power between the various players it was an Eldorado for the BBC. It would be crass to say that the Corporation's reporting of Leveson was a settling of old scores but the relish with which proceedings were reported, the prominence afforded to each new witness testimony and the unflagging devotion to the story over months of hearings could have left no viewer or listener in any doubt that the BBC considered Lord Leveson's inquiry to be of the very highest importance. Whether the average person agreed with that news judgement is debatable and anyway irrelevant: in news the professionals – not the audience – call the shots.

It is not difficult to understand why the Corporation was so happy to be reporting those proceedings from the Royal Courts Of Justice. A succession of witnesses – some prominent actors and performers, others private individuals only known to the rest of us because they got caught up in big news stories – went into the witness box and pointed the finger at the journalistic practices

of News International. And in Britain's (never openly declared) culture war, the BBC and the company Rupert Murdoch created stand clearly opposed to each other. The history of this antagonism is long and complicated but it is a fact that in the four decades during which Murdoch became the dominant force in British print media his papers have proved themselves time and again hostile to the BBC. Any failing, or perceived failing, by the Corporation, any scandal involving BBC people, has routinely attracted maximum coverage, some of it hypocritical. The thing which galls Murdoch's empire most, it seems, is the underlying centrality of the BBC in the British media – a position guaranteed by the solid financial underpinning of the license fee. For self-interested reasons to do with the wish itself to become the biggest player, Murdoch's empire would like the Corporation cut down to size.

The BBC's response to Murdoch's challenge has, of necessity, been muted. Unlike News International the BBC cannot explicitly repudiate a competitor, nor impugn its motives, nor be seen publicly to engage in a wrangle over the rights and wrongs of BBC funding. That is not the BBC way. But for anyone who has any insight into the Corporation's secret life, and who understands its institutional thinking, it is clear that the antipathy of the Murdoch press for the BBC is reciprocated in full measure. The BBC does not like Murdoch, does not like his papers and considers him, and them, to be a negative influence on British life.³ Given this

background it is difficult to envisage a more satisfying turn of events – from the BBC’s point of view – than the establishment of the Leveson inquiry. And when it got going it proved to be the gift that goes on giving. Day after day the hurt, the wronged, the calumniated went into the witness box and the dirty, underhand and shameful practices of News International’s hacks were made public. As an added bonus, conspiracy theorists were delighted to have published the details of embarrassingly chummy communications between politicians and journalists suggestive of improper influence peddling in the highest reaches of the establishment. The BBC had a field day. And why not? Here were the wrongdoings of some of Murdoch’s journalists being exposed, in forensic detail; by comparison the BBC could hold its head up high. None of *its* journalists had hacked phones, *it* had not cruelly pursued individuals who, through misfortune or bad judgement, had been offered up for public scrutiny, *its* managers were not revealed to be in anyone’s political embrace. On the contrary its journalistic hands were clean and it was only too happy for the comparison to be made between its practices and ethos and those of News International.

As the Leveson inquiry hearings continued into the New Year the comprehensiveness of the BBC’s coverage hardly slackened. Even for those of us fascinated by such things (and the suspicion was always that the most assiduous followers of events were journalists themselves) there was a feeling of surfeit. However over

the Christmas and New Year period at the end of 2011, in one of the Corporation's many newsrooms, something was afoot that would dwarf News International's transgressions and trigger the worst crisis in the BBC's ninety year history; something that imperilled the Corporation's reputation and jeopardised the trust of its audience. The editor of *Newsnight* – the programme which for 30 years has been a prominent standard bearer of the BBC's current affairs television output – decided not to run a story about the recently deceased Jimmy Savile. To those in the know this must have seemed, at the time, fairly unremarkable. Story ideas on busy programmes get spiked every day. What turned this from being run-of-the-mill to scandalous was what happened next.

In January and February of 2012 the story of *Newsnight's* change of heart appeared in a couple of newspapers. In March a longer, better informed and more detailed account appeared in *The Oldie* magazine. Still, on the face of it this was one of those media insider stories which are of limited interest to the wider world. This one, however, turned out to be the exception to the rule; those few short paragraphs set in train events which culminated in the avalanche of problems which later in the year rained down on the Corporation's head. Many people, I suspect, have become inured to the phrase '*crisis at the BBC*'. I can imagine it eliciting a groan from the audience thinking to themselves '*there they go again – gazing at their navel*'. And in recent years

the scandals have come so thick and fast that it has sometimes seemed that crisis at the BBC is a permanent condition. However it is worth remembering that there was a time when the BBC was not controversial in any major sense; halcyon days when the words '*BBC*' and '*crisis*' did not go together like a horse and carriage.

If you were to plot a graph of controversies involving the BBC through the nine decades of its existence it would flatline for about two thirds of the timeline. The Corporation was – in the main – determinedly un-controversial. From the 1920s through the 1970s there was remarkably little in the way of noteworthy public debate about BBC wrongdoing. Of course the BBC was constantly 'in the news' but looking back through the archives most of the stories concerning it were about fairly routine matters; sometimes programmes that tested the boundaries of public taste or the occasional BBC star who strayed or intermittent political criticism that the BBC had breached its own impartiality rules. But the striking thing is that the BBC *itself* was not, to any substantial degree, subject to heavy criticism either by politicians, or statutory authorities or by newspapers. Its status and position – as a trusted and even loved – mainstay of British cultural life and wider society was largely unquestioned. It is true that from the sixties onwards there was a steady drumbeat of criticism (mainly from the right-wing press) about the BBC's role as a promoter of what was then termed the 'permissive society', but the Corporation shrugged

it off and as underlying moral attitudes changed that criticism died away. But from the 1980s onwards the graph starts taking off and, it seems, at an ever steeper level of incline.

In the 1980s there began a series of controversies which pitted the BBC publicly against the government of Margaret Thatcher. This was not coincidental because – as I recount later in this book – the great majority of BBC people felt an instinctive hostility to her and her ‘project’. In that atmosphere a series of programmes were commissioned which challenged the government in spectacular ways. There was, for instance, a *Panorama* in 1984, *Maggie’s Militant Tendency*, which accused several Conservative MPs of links to far-right, neo-fascist, organisations. [Two of the MPs* named sued for libel – and won.] Then came a very public confrontation after the BBC commissioned a series of documentaries by the left-wing investigative journalist Duncan Campbell. Remarkably this climaxed in a police raid on BBC offices in Glasgow and the offices of the *New Statesman* in London. By this point relations between the Government and the BBC were very poor and the era culminated in 1987 when the Director General Alasdair Milne was sacked by Marmaduke Hussey, the newly appointed chairman of the BBC governors. The government had struck back.

*The MPs were Gerald Howarth and Neil Hamilton.

The nineties, by comparison, were a time of relative calm. Certainly any quarrel between the BBC and the government was conducted in a lower register. However within the BBC itself it was a time of upheaval thanks in large measure to the ministrations of John Birt who had been appointed Deputy Director General in 1987 after Milne's sacking and then got the top job in 1992. Later in this book some of the consequences which flowed from what came to be known as 'Birtism' are analysed but there is one toxic legacy from his time in charge which has grown into a long-running scandal. When Birt took over from Michael Checkland (Director General 1987 – 1992) salaries paid at the BBC were modest – at least by today's standard. In those days the BBC did not publish the pay of senior people but when Alasdair Milne was DG his salary was about £80,000. Lower down the ranks the pay offered to editors, producers and reporters – the Corporation's foot soldiers – was sometimes *very* modest. However this was in a long BBC tradition and most accepted the trade-off: work for a decent organisation but don't expect a big pay packet.

By the 1990s this trend had gone too far and it was John Birt who sought to rectify what had become a clear unfairness where people were not being properly rewarded for what they did. During the 1990s salaries in the BBC increased across the board and brought the Corporation more into line with the rest of the industry; this was right and proper. But what subsequently