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THE FUTURE OF THE BBC – A SPECIAL 4-PAGE ISSUE

2026 is the BBC's centenary year. The long-delayed Green Paper on the BBC Charter was finally published by the Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy on 16 December last year. The widely respected media commentator Raymond Snoddy described it as a 'wretched document'. We agree. That's why we have produced this *MediaNorth* special to highlight what we can do.

THE BBC GREEN PAPER: A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

By Tom O'Malley

'The BBC is a vital British asset that plays a unique role in public life and helps define the nation. The government is committed to supporting the BBC to thrive for decades to come.' The Green Paper is peppered with supportive words like these. In reality there is much about the consultation process and the document that is seriously worrying.

Accountability

The government knows that its power to appoint members of the BBC Board has been widely criticised. Yet the Green Paper only offers to consider 'altering the structure of appointments to the Board' and 'whether there should be a change to the government's role in appointing board members'. The government is clearly not going to support having a new, independent organisation appoint Board members or make the BBC Charter permanent, thereby diminishing the power of future governments to exert additional pressure on the Corporation as the Charter comes up for renewal.

Ofcom

Ofcom is, fundamentally, designed to promote an under-regulated commercial communications system. But the Green Paper retains Ofcom's influence over the BBC. The regulation of the BBC should be given to a body solely concerned with promoting public service media.

Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy's Green Paper (left) contains alarming proposals

Funding the BBC

The Green Paper proposes to retain the Licence Fee. But it also revives some disturbing ideas. It is considering 'targeted advertising on bbc.co.uk or You Tube…. full advertising across all BBC platforms' and 'a targeted top-up subscription service … increasing to a more expansive subscription service'. It has nothing concrete to say about how it will fund minority language services like S4C.

Even if some, let alone all, of these 'options' are realised, they will lead to the BBC no longer being a universal service and will force it down the road of providing only those services that the commercial sector considers unprofitable. We pay for education through general taxation. Why not the BBC? Or, there could be a levy on the trading and profits of streaming companies (Netflix) and online mega-companies (Google, Meta).

In the USA public service broadcasting has been reduced to a tiny element of the media. That must not happen here. But it looks like the government is heading that way.

The 'Consultation'

Responses to the Green Paper are due by 10 March. That's just twelve weeks, not enough time for a proper public debate.

We need an independent public inquiry led by people who can scrutinise the range of issues involved and fully involve the public. This can be done by extending the BBC's Charter, so it expires on 31 December 2028.

Raise these issues with your MP, trade unions, local authorities, Labour Party branches, or other organisations with which you are involved. Make it clear you do not want an inadequate consultation; that you want an accountable, properly funded BBC, not one doomed to become an add-on to an overwhelmingly commercial system. Much is at stake. It is important to intervene swiftly. MN

Julian Petley on why the BBC has been relentlessly attacked for decades by those hostile to the organisation

The BBC: It's war on all fronts

Never a day goes by without the BBC coming under attack from the Tories, Reform, GB News and the right-wing press. This led Patrick Barwise and Peter York to publish *The War Against the BBC* in 2020. Since then that war has only intensified (and been joined by Donald Trump and his gang).

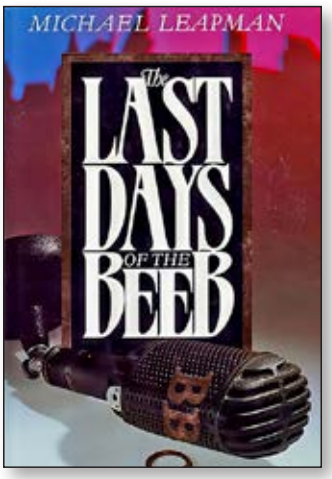
However, we've been here before, witness Michael Leapman's *The Last Days of the Beeb* (1986) and Tom O'Malley's *Closedown?* (1994). In 1985, the Thatcher government established the Peacock Committee to examine the future funding of the BBC, clearly expecting it to recommend scrapping the licence fee, thus effectively spelling the end of public service broadcasting.

Alasdair Milne was forced to resign as BBC director-general in 1987 by a board of governors dominated by Thatcher placemen that endorsed the Tory view that the BBC was a nest of pinkoes and traitors.

And in January 2004, this time under a Labour government, the BBC's chair Gavyn Davies resigned in the wake of the Hutton Inquiry into the 'dodgy dossier' affair and director-general Greg Dyke was fired by the governors.

It's always a mystery to many people abroad, particularly those who rely on the World Service or watch the numerous BBC television programmes that are shown on overseas channels, why the BBC is the subject of such opprobrium in certain quarters in its home country. The reasons for this are a mixture of the political, ideological and economic.

On the economic front, the BBC is seen by purely commercial media as a competitor that enjoys an unfair advantage in the shape of the licence fee. This attitude was present from the start, when radio news programmes were regarded by newspapers as journalistic rivals. Then in the 1980s 'deregulation' began to allow an increasing number of purely commercial players into the broadcasting marketplace, and later technological developments ushered in yet more new entrants in the form of streamers and online news sites.



Three books which, over the years, have highlighted threats to the BBC

A typical *Mail* front page attacking the BBC

Pusillanimous BBC

These developments led the BBC's new commercial competitors to complain increasingly loudly about its market impact on their own services. For example, intensive lobbying by the various newcomers led the Competition Commission in 2009 to block Project Kangaroo – a commercial video-on-demand service which was a joint venture by the BBC, ITV and Channel 4.

This left the subscription video-on-demand field wide open to vast American companies such as Amazon, Apple and Netflix until the launch of Britbox in 2019 – essentially Project Kangaroo by another name and only ten years too late. By which time the damage was done.

On the political and ideological front, the BBC is bitterly disliked by right-wing Tories simply for being a public institution. And this view is shared in spades by right-wing newspapers – particularly those such as the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* which are now throwing their weight behind Reform – committed effectively to abolishing the BBC.

Furthermore, such newspapers see the presence of the BBC as hindering their further expansion into the broadcasting and online worlds, thus fusing their ideological and economic reasons for wanting to see the BBC weakened – if not indeed abolished.

That the BBC is so pusillanimous in the face of these threats suggests that either it doesn't realise the full extent of the forces arrayed against it or is simply too punch drunk to fight back effectively.

That's why it's so important for the BBC's critical friends to support the efforts of bodies such as the Media Reform Coalition (of which CPBF North is a member), the British Broadcasting Challenge and the Voice of the Listener and Viewer in the debates around the Green Paper and beyond. MN

The 'independent' BBC: A double-edged fraud

A new BBC Charter can ensure it is truly independent, writes **Tim Gopsill**

A confidence trick has been played on the British people for 100 years. But now we have the chance to put things right, by making real the British Broadcasting Corporation's theoretical independence from government.

Everyone concerned with the BBC, from its own top brass to Google's search algorithm, insists on the distinction between state and public service broadcasters (PSB). The first must conform with the government line; the latter are free to air what they choose – and include the BBC.

It does have a charter guaranteeing its independence, yet in many areas it behaves as if under state control. This is most evident in its journalism and notably in politically contentious areas where real independence is the most strongly required.

The British state stands in support of the USA, NATO and Israel, free market economic and social policies; and is hostile to welfare, immigration, state-led investment and dissident political expression.

So it seems is the BBC. And it goes beyond reporting. Its most popular (certainly highest paid) screen performer, the footballer Gary Lineker, could be sacked for expressing a dissident view – off screen. Staff have been warned not to take part in demonstrations, notably for a free Palestine – outside the workplace.

The BBC's 2,000-plus journalists have to struggle to work in line with their own rules on balance and fairness, for they do believe in their employer's independence – unlike for instance their colleagues in commercial media.

They have fought for it continually, at times even by strike action. The most powerful protest ever recorded by British and Irish journalists, which took place 40 years ago, was to defend the BBC's independence. All British journalists – went on strike over a BBC programme the government was trying to stop.

Emily Maitlis called Robbie Gibb a Conservative party 'agent' at the BBC

At the Edge of the Union was a TV documentary, part of the BBC's Real Lives series that told major stories through the family lives of people involved: in this case those of two councillors, a unionist and republican, in Derry during the Northern Ireland conflict. It was compelling television, and it was fair and balanced; much too balanced for the government.

Bitterly disliked

The Home Secretary Leon Brittan wrote to the BBC demanding that the programme be pulled because it would 'materially assist the terrorist cause'. The BBC board of governors, stuffed with government political appointees, agreed and threatened to sack Director-General Alasdair Milne if it was shown.

The NUJ called a 24-hour strike, and on 7 August 1986 all live broadcasting was stopped throughout the UK and Ireland. The action was a triumph and the programme was shown, though Alasdair Milne still got fired by a new government-appointed chair of the board.

The power to appoint board members is one of the two powerful levers that empower governments to impose their will on the BBC. The chair and four more of the 12-strong board are chosen by the Prime Minister and in 2021 Boris Johnson picked Sir Robbie Gibb as a board member.

He was a self-proclaimed 'proper Thatcherite' Tory head of communications at Downing Street and is a member of the all-powerful Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee. This has just four full members: the Director-General, chair of the board, another senior director and Gibb.

He certainly throws his weight around and is regularly criticised inside and outside the Corporation. Top TV presenter Emily Maitlis cited his influence as a factor in her departure for commercial radio in 2022.

The other even stronger weapon in government hands is its absolute power to control the BBC's income by setting the Licence Fee. Since the Tories took power in 2010 its value has depreciated by 40 per cent, according to research by the Media Reform Coalition.

It is a rotten system in many ways but there is now a chance to get shot of it. The BBC Charter must be renewed every ten years, and a new one will take effect on January 1 2028.

There is a lot to change but two priorities must be to end the powers to appoint directors and dictate the BBC's income. There are plenty of safer alternative models of funding public broadcasting from other countries. MN

The right wing press regularly attacked Lineker for his social media posts

Respond to the BBC Consultation

An essential read to understand what's wrong with the BBC Green Paper is the Media Reform Coalition's (MRC) blog *A blueprint for permanent decline: the DCMS Green Paper on BBC Charter review*.

It is a clear analysis of what's wrong with the DCMS document and the flawed consultation document, and its alarm over proposals for BBC reform, especially its emphasis on commercialising the funding model, questioning the principle of universality of service, and lack of commitment to democratic accountability.

The MRC also criticises the 'limited, confusing and rushed consultation on Charter review, which excludes the public from having a meaningful role in deciding the BBC's future'.

"The Government's choice to launch a 12-week consultation in the middle of December – days before many will take time off for the Christmas holidays – shows a lack of concern for the importance and value of public participation in policymaking, which undermines the democratic quality of any potential outcomes," it states.

What the MRC blog then goes through in detail are the proposals in the Green Paper. The blog concludes, "Without a coherent philosophy in support of public media, or any authentic and consequential mechanism for allowing the public to make this case themselves, it is difficult to see how a renewed Royal Charter will ensure the BBC survives the next decade, let alone sets it 'on a path to thrive well until the latter half of this century' as the Culture Secretary wishes."

***MediaNorth* urges people to respond to the Green Paper consultation, but read the MRC blog first because it dissects what is wrong with it. Read it here: https://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/dcms-bbc-green-paper-2026#intro**

Also visit the MRC's https://www.mediareform.org.uk/key-issues/bbc-charter-review-2027 MN

Crucial evidence to inform debate on the BBC Charter

In early December last year the British Academy report *Public Service Media: Funding and Governance Options* was published. It deserves to be widely-read.

It draws together the essential evidence to help us have an informed debate on what reforms we really need to ensure the BBC's survival.

The editors of the report, Professors Georgina Bourne and Justin Lewis, point out, "The government's challenge is an unenviable one in today's transformed media landscape. Decision-makers face new questions: is the license fee fit for purpose? How can the BBC be sustainably funded in a competitive market dominated by global tech giants? What role do public service media play in 21st century democracies? And how can the public be engaged as media habits change?"

Contributions to this volume come from Europe, Australia and Canada, and include three comparative international studies. Together they highlight what we might learn from around the world about the best public service media (PSM) models.

Bourne and Lewis point out, "How decisions are made, and by whom, is another key factor in generating support for PSM. The current model means the BBC, built over 100 years, could be dismantled in one Parliament by one political party.

"Our evidence suggests that putting funding decisions, governance and key appointments in the hands of democratic but independent institutions and experts increases trust and support – as does creating genuine forms of citizen engagement."

Also, "On funding, the licence fee is unpopular and no longer raises enough money. Most countries we looked at have scrapped it, favouring either a household levy (with exceptions for poorer households), as in Germany, or general taxation, favoured by the Scandinavians."

The report contains fresh thinking and its evidence needs to be drawn on in the crucial debate we are now starting on reforming the next BBC charter. **You can read the full report here: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/future-of-public-service-media/**

Also highly recommended is Roger Bolton's *Beebwatch* podcast where he discusses the report with its two editors: https://podfollow.com/beebwatch/episode/ec5d14bf41a5bce538ab3861e558db03e28e3115/view MN

Freeview TV is under threat – time for action to protect it

There has been limited media publicity to the fact that the BBC is leading a campaign to scrap Freeview as soon as possible, despite the implications for older and disabled people, and those on low and modest incomes.

If they succeed it would mean the end of a near universal free to air service, currently reaching 98.5% of households, where national moments of celebration and crisis can be shared.

Silver Voices, a web-based membership organisation for the over sixties, provides a platform for campaigning on current issues and has launched a petition at https://www.change.org/p/save-freeview-tv-for-lynette-and-millions-of-others-who-depend-on-it MN

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