

## **ASTONISHINGLY STUPID: THE 'PANORAMA' AFFAIR**

*John MacInnes*

I don't believe the subject of Scotland was raised in the interview... That speaks for itself.

*John Major 4 April 1995*

*Jeremy Paxman* Would you have transmitted a similar interview 3 days before a local election in England or Wales?

*Tony Hall* Yes yes we would have done.

*Jeremy Paxman* Can you recall the last occasion on which you did?

*Tony Hall* I can't as it happens...

*Newsnight 3 April 1995*

### **INTRODUCTION**

At first sight it seemed scarcely credible. When the BBC proposed to broadcast an interview with John Major on Panorama just three days before the Scottish local elections on 6 April this year, a single programme delivered a public relations bounty to Scottish Television (by confirming the BBC's metropolitan centralism and the impotence of its Scottish 'National Region'); brought defeat in the courts (something the BBC has carefully tried to avoid in the past); set a dreadful legal precedent (inviting the courts to routinely interpret balance); produced transmission chaos (England as far south as York got an old repeat along with Scotland); fuelled allegations of craven favouritism towards the government; reaped criticism from the press (the **Yorkshire Post** was as indignant as **The Scotsman** about metropolitanism) and scorn from former senior BBC staff ('bizarre and dim

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witted, ... crass idiocy' opined Alasdair Milne). It left Tony Hall, editor of News and Current Affairs, being subjected to just the sort of mauling on Newsnight for which John Birt had recently criticised his journalists. Yet Paxman's performance probably did more than anything else throughout the affair to repair the BBC's reputation for independent journalism. Within a fortnight the BBC had backed down from its high moral indignation about broadcasting freedom and admitted its mistake. But on longer reflection, this spectacular debacle was the inevitable product of the substantial changes pushed through the BBC over the last 15 years: changes which have been consonant with the politics and pressures of London, but which sit quite awkwardly with the very different political, commercial and cultural pressures in Scotland.

### **THE BBC AND THE BRITISH STATE**

The BBC has been expected to be politically independent of the government of the day, but accountable to it as a public service: a notoriously contradictory position which partly explains why it 'sees itself as perpetually beleaguered' (Burns 1977, p. 32). In the first half century of its existence a typically British pragmatic fudge came to order its relationship with the government. The latter would not use its authority directly to determine what material the BBC broadcast and was not to be seen applying public pressure. But it could exert private influence and expect the BBC to be 'responsible'. John Reith, the virtual creator of public service broadcasting, noted how in the General Strike the Cabinet 'wanted to be able to say that they did not commandeer us, but they knew that they can trust us not to be really impartial' (quoted in Eldridge 1995). Most prime ministers preferred the authority which this autonomy gave the BBC's pronouncements to the insulation from criticism which a less independent, but thus less credible, broadcaster could have delivered. Barnett and Curry (1994, p. 14) recall how Harold Macmillan's Postmaster General reacted to the new satirical programme 'That Was the Week That Was' by announcing 'I'm going to do something about it'. The prime minister sent him a simple note: 'Oh no you're not.'

The foundation of the BBC's credibility, and of Reithian public service broadcasting, was its organisational autonomy. It was directly answerable neither to advertisers nor to politicians. The Governors were not partisan political appointments, and were there to 'review' not manage, which was the job of the Director General. The DG's remit was clear: to deliver a public

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service funded from taxation via the license fee. 'Balance' and impartiality in the broadcast media became a series of compromises heavily influenced by the political parties themselves. It boiled down to time exposure for the parties roughly proportional to their parliamentary support (though whether this is measured by votes or MPs has been fudged) and a commitment, in most current affairs reporting, to representing opposed views within a single programme. These concepts are vague: what matters is public sentiment, and the ability of politicians to mobilise it, especially through the press.

### **THE 1980s**

The definition of 'balance' was the only element of this structure which the Thatcher governments did not change. Hostile to public services funded by taxation and convinced of the merits of market forces, the government used its control over the Charter and licence fee to require the BBC to revolutionise its internal organisation and redefine its aims. Appointments to the Board of Governors of the BBC were politicised: belief in market forces was more important than broadcasting experience. The Board was encouraged to become directly involved in management. In 1987 Marmaduke Hussey, chairman of the Board of Governors, sacked the then Director General, Alastair Milne, replacing him with Michael Checkland (the first accountant rather than programme maker to run the BBC) and John Birt as his deputy. In 1986 the Peacock Committee rejected advertising but recommended a quota system for the purchase of independent productions and 'bidding' for regional commercial franchises. This led inevitably to the 'Producer Choice' reforms, the attempt to create an internal market in the BBC, and much more focus on the bottom line in both BBC and ITV. In order to secure these changes, which senior BBC staff believed were the only way to ensure survival, line management authority became more important than the toleration of dissent. In 1993 a veteran correspondent, Mark Tully, asserted that there was 'a real sense of fear amongst staff which prevents them from speaking their minds'.

The government added high profile public campaigns about 'bias' on the BBC to private influence, using the support of a frequently hostile press which had little sympathy for the BBC's older traditions, often because of its own stake in satellite or terrestrial commercial broadcasting. London papers owned by Rupert Murdoch argued that the BBC cost too much, was politically biased and not populist enough. These pressures reversed the previous relationship whereby the BBC had set public service standards

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which commercial television was forced to emulate. As Michael Grade, Controller of Channel 4 put it (in his 1992 MacTaggart Lecture in Edinburgh), 'It is the BBC which keeps us all honest'. Now the commercial companies, themselves bidding for franchises, were to be the model for the BBC to prove its commitment to private sector efficiency.

The old fudge about public accountability and political independence was pushed well beyond its limits, because for the first time the BBC faced a government happy to contemplate its demise. It has to be remembered that the renewal of its Charter in 1994 was an open question: Birt was credited with having saved the BBC. The debate concerned whether the reforms undertaken had destroyed public service broadcasting in the process. Taken together with the weakness of the political opposition to Thatcherism, these developments exposed news and current affairs journalism in the BBC to new pressures. Makers of programmes critical of the government or Conservative Party knew they would be subject to intense scrutiny at a time when the BBC was dependent on the approval of government ministers for its plan to reorganise itself along commercial lines and thus ensure its survival. It is probably factors such as these which explain why since the early 1980s (in annual surveys conducted by the Independent Television Commission) between 1 in 4 and 1 in 5 viewers have rated BBC1 as biased towards the Conservative party, compared to 1 in 15 who think it is pro-Labour.

### **PANORAMA**

As a flagship current affairs programme since 1953, Panorama has often illuminated the state of the BBC. It was the first BBC programme to cause conflict with the new Conservative government in 1979, when a Panorama crew filmed IRA activity in Carrickmore. The film was never shown but the fact of having taken it was condemned. In 1982 its edition on the Falklands prompted Mrs Thatcher to assert that 'the case for our country is not being put with sufficient vigour'. In 1984 'Maggie's Militant Tendency' - a programme about alleged far right connections of some Conservative MPs - led to a court action which the BBC settled in 1986 before court proceedings finished, on the orders of the Acting Governor.

In 1975 John Birt and Peter Jay had argued that television journalism produced 'a bias against understanding' through its reliance on the soundbite and combative interviewing. What was needed was more 'contextualisation':

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exploration of the issues behind the news at greater length as part of a 'mission to explain'. This is a theme Birt has returned to often. His critics have argued that while 'exploring the issues' is laudable (what academic, of all people, could disagree) it risks producing a 'bias towards authority' by substituting dispassionate discussion for probing disputation, and losing sight of the connection between the merits of the issues and the everyday political warfare.

Certainly Panorama appeared to become more cautious after Birt's appointment as Deputy DG. In 1990 'Who Pays for the Party' on Conservative party funding was pulled because of concern about the reliability of its evidence. In 1991 Birt blocked a programme on the Iraq Supergun affair. Its evidence was utterly sound; but its timing would have been embarrassing for the government and cut across 'the case for our side'. In 1992 'Sliding into Slump' was pulled just before the election. Its criticisms of Conservative economic policy in the late 1980s were to become part of the political consensus between the two main parties. In 1994 an edition on corruption in Westminster local government was delayed, until after the local elections, by a legal technicality. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Birt's arrival at the BBC, and the implementation of his ideas about responsible current affairs journalism, led to greater caution in the transmission of programmes. What is less clear is what exactly this caution comprised. Concern about legal challenges? This would account for 'Who Pays for the Party' and (stretching a point) the Westminster programme. Fears about 'balance'?: 'Sliding into Slump' and 'Supergun' were both balanced in the sense of the integrity of their evidence and discussion. Fears about government hostility when the BBC could ill afford to provoke it?

### **THE SCOTTISH DIMENSION**

If we compare this record to the interview with the Prime Minister it does not look good for the BBC. The programme did offer 'contextualisation' of the news: interviewer David Dimbleby probed Major's ideas and record competently. As such it increased viewers' 'understanding' of the Prime Minister's world view. But it also, inevitably, regardless of the content, regardless of how viewers might interpret that content, gave 'authority' - in the shape of the leading representative of the party of government - a 45 minute platform to air his views three days before the local elections. It was not 'balanced', either within itself or in relation to other programmes in the election period. It clearly ran against both the spirit and the letter of the

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BBC's own guidelines. There was a successful legal challenge, setting an unwelcome precedent that any responsible broadcaster would have been concerned to avoid.

Moreover, it is difficult to imagine, even allowing for 20/20 hindsight, that neither the BBC nor 10 Downing Street expected the controversy and depth of opposition the programme would provoke. Perhaps the Panorama team forgot that the Scottish elections were early (the English and Welsh elections this year took place on 4 May): perhaps the infamous leaked memo - a Panorama insider warning of the dangers - was composed only when someone realised. But could Downing Street conceivably 'forget' about the Scottish elections? It is scarcely less thinkable that they did not foresee the row that ensued, or that they expected to benefit from it. What is clear is that BBC Scotland management lobbied furiously to stop the broadcast once they knew about it, possessing a cannier sense of Scottish law and politics than their London superiors.

The political and commercial pressures on BBC Scotland are altogether different to those faced by London. The Scottish Office, and Conservative Party in Scotland, have generally eschewed accusations about anti-Tory bias, because, as Michael Forsyth's brief essay in 1989 showed, the discussion would turn to the 'balance' of MPs and party support in the Scottish electorate. Satellite competition is less important because only terrestrial TV can broadcast regionally. BSkyB is never going to focus its sports coverage on the Scottish Premier League. Its main competitor, Scottish Television, runs press adverts which simply report poll findings about how Scottish its viewers perceive it to be. Few newspapers in Scotland had much sympathy for Thatcherism and its works: they were not inclined to condemn the BBC by virtue of its public ownership. Criticism from the press does not take the form of satellite promotion or allegations of anti-Tory bias. On the contrary BBC Scotland's challenge has long been to carve out enough autonomy from the London dominated network to prove its relevance to a Scottish audience which significantly still relies more on the separate Scottish print media for its news than the rest of the UK (as table 1 shows).

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**Table 1**

**Viewers' main source of news in their region**

Scotland	UK
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Television	49%	59%
Radio	14%	13%
Newspapers	34%	24%

*Source: Independent Television Commission*

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The press reaction to the event split clearly along national lines. While **The Herald** and **The Scotsman** seethed about bias, political and cultural metropolitanism and the BBC's arrogance, **The Times** complained that

The Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties did a deep disservice yesterday to the cause of independent broadcasting ... freedom to make bad editorial decisions ... political censors have won the battle ... Given the great sensitivity of the Scots to London's say over programming, the BBC's political antennae should have been more alert

Even Andrew Marr in **The Independent** argued that local elections should not become an excuse for restricting broadcasting of national political debate. The credibility of BBC Scotland north of the border was only safeguarded by the fact, widely reported in the Scottish press, that its staff was in open revolt about the affair.

## CONCLUSION

The Panorama incident illustrates the pressures within which public broadcasting operates. In a London context interviewing the Prime Minister at Downing Street's invitation could produce an attractive current affairs programme for viewers, with the added benefit that it might improve the Corporation's stock at No. 10 at a time when three senior Conservatives (Michael Howard, Jonathan Aitken and Jeremy Hanley) were complaining vociferously about bias in the 'Blair Broadcasting Corporation'. Elections were a month away, stress could be put on Major's government rather than party position, and so suggestions of partiality or imbalance were not a major problem. The press would most likely give extensive coverage to the interview, another plus. In Scotland, as we know, it all looked so different: a 45 minute platform for a party about to be humiliated at the polls. The management of BBC Scotland, and the National Broadcasting Council for

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Scotland, made the prospects clear to London and were ignored. Frantic efforts to organise some political balance for the Scottish context were fruitless.

At its post mortem, BBC Chairman Marmaduke Hussey suggested that 'insufficient regard had been paid to the Scottish dimension' but the decision to proceed had been 'finely balanced'. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that in their own ways both Downing Street and Broadcasting House decided Scotland was not important - at least not important enough to upset a timetable appropriate to England and Wales. This timetable was of Downing Street's making, so presumably it simply wrote off Scottish political reaction. (Asked three times by Paxman about who set the date of the Panorama interview, Tony Hall declined to answer; invited twice to deny that Downing Street set the date, he failed to do so.) The BBC in London wrote off Scottish political reaction too, but in Scotland, pulled by its audience, competition from Scottish Television and the print media, the BBC had no choice but to emphasise its Scottish distinctiveness and oppose the London deal. But in its relations with the network and senior BBC management it had less power than the 61 opposition Scots MPs. In London it didn't count. Just as in politics, conviction management had little time for dissent: it was treated as treachery rather than worthwhile (if awkward) advice. The price to the BBC of its own hierarchical centralism was an astonishing inability to understand just how different civil society in Scotland is from the metropolis where most television is made, and where there is no mechanism for feeding any such understanding into the decision making process. Under other circumstances the BBC might have been saved from its own folly by the very politicians it sought to impress: but it forgot that the Conservative party has a much lower 'audience' in Scotland than the BBC. Once the error was made it was compounded rather than corrected because of the longstanding centralism of the BBC's management structure, the authoritarian style of its reforming management and its far too conciliatory relationship with the government.

Hussey suggested that the lesson of the affair was that management consultation procedures with Scotland ought to be strengthened. Hopefully this was an ironic understatement. 'Introduced' might have been a better term. For the true lesson of the Panorama incident is the parallel between the centralism of the British state and the BBC. Both are outdated, and, until they are reformed, both will continue to crash spectacularly into the modern diversity of British civil society. Fine words from the BBC about decentralisation will mean little until BBC Scotland has not only the resources to make programmes, but the managerial clout in a properly multi-

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national management structure to help produce a network schedule which is aware that life beyond the M25 is not synonymous with life within it. Meanwhile 'management consultation procedures' with Scotland might smooth the running of the political system too.

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