

# Government

BBC's comings and goings with Government in Northern Ireland over 30 years but there were many tense moments. Critics were convinced that by giving airtime to those who sympathised with extremists we were providing the "oxygen of terrorism".

We, in BBC Northern Ireland, felt pretty uncomfortable when we realised that bombing and shooting incidents were being timed to coincide with main news bulletins - to ensure maximum publicity. Many of our journalists also felt it was a thankless task to provide fair coverage of an organisation which ultimately wanted to destroy the state of which they saw the BBC as a key part. That feeling came to a head in the early 1970s when our headquarters in Belfast was itself bombed. Significantly, the newsroom was blown apart. Many of us remained the targets of regular death threats. Nationalists believed that the BBC, by definition as reflected in its title, could only be a mouthpiece for the British Government. Pro-British Unionists strongly believed that we were letting the British side down by refusing to be partial and by employing people from the Catholic religious minority. I am immensely proud of the fact that in all my years in Belfast that I on no occasion had to discipline a BBC Journalist for any form of biased reporting. We all managed to leave our different backgrounds behind us at home at least while we were doing our jobs. The duty to be fair and as balanced as possible overcame our differences.

As Lord Reith discovered in 1926, that is how we "do more good in society". Government may not always agree with our approach but vigorous debate is ultimately healthy.

And finally we turn to the contemporary world - a world where Public Service Broadcasting must be redefined. Let's look at multi channel broadcasting first.

Multi channel broadcasting has fundamentally altered a long standing BBC device called hammocking. Difficult programmes about the Arts, or Current Affairs were often placed in the schedule immediately following light entertainment or comedy. The captive audience was thereby ushered unsuspectingly to more demanding programmes and our educational purpose was fulfilled somewhat surreptitiously. Nowadays, people graze around the schedule at will, moving from channel to channel across scores of options.

As a result, the audiences for cultural programmes and current affairs programmes have fallen by between 60 and 70% in multi-channel homes. To win an audience nowadays most

programmes have to aspire to be popular as well as significant. Those pressures are much less in the BBC although they are still present. In commercial television they are all pervading.

It's appropriate to end on the single biggest revolution in the Communications industry that any of us will ever see and that's the dawning of the World Wide Web and the proliferation of sources and voices that it brings to every user everywhere.

The cosy arrangement whereby national governments and national broadcasters could effectively manage the media consumption of most citizens is long gone. People can now get news, information and, even more readily, opinion from every perspective with a single click. A host of interest groups and blogs, relentless supply of data from all over the world has fundamentally changed the media market.

The BBC move to Online has been controversial. Newspaper groups, in particular, protest to Government that if the BBC absorbs much of the Online news and information market they will lose advertising revenue and be forced out of business. A similar debate is going on all over Europe and the heart of the problem is the fact that newspaper and television advertising has collapsed in the current economic crisis. Most pundits believe that it will never fully recover.

In response, Government has constrained the development of BBC services through the establishment of a Public Value Test and Market Impact Assessment. In short, this means that before any new service is opened, or an existing one expanded, the BBC must publicly demonstrate the value that it brings and prove that that value is not outweighed by its impact on the commercial market.

In this turmoil the wonderful thing is that there's no certainty. Anyone who isn't confused isn't well informed. Yet it is my belief that great broadcasting will always survive and prosper, provided, that is, that it retains the trust of the audience, keeps relevant to their needs and keeps offering an editorial ambition that the mass market cannot match.

## ■ Mr. Pat Loughrey

Former Director Nations and Regions for the BBC, was invited to share his views on the role of Public Service Broadcasting in the International Experts Workshop which was held on 29 Mar to 1 Apr 2010. This article is an excerpt from his speech

# Broadcasting and

All organisations bear the DNA of the period of their foundation so I'll explain the BBC's early history and then go on to my own experiences during one of the Corporation's most traumatic challenges – the Northern Ireland Troubles. Lastly, I'll look at the challenging future of Public Service Broadcasting in a multi-channel, multi-platform world.

Marconi developed short wave radio in the first quarter of the last century. Lloyds of London commissioned Marconi to work in Northern Ireland between Ballycastle and Rathlin from June to September 1898. In 1919, Marconi inspired the first transmission of the human voice across the Atlantic Ocean.

Soon the airwaves were full of music and singing. Full, that is, until they were banned by the British Government after severe complaints from the military and admiralty about interference to their important messages. A pilot seeking a weather report before landing could only hear a lady singing – entertaining but not useful in the circumstances. But even the military couldn't restrain public demand and commercial pressure here in Britain. In 1922, although the post office allowed Marconi to resume broadcasting, regulation was still in the air.

The radio manufacturers were persuaded to co-operate with each other to establish a single broadcaster. However, Marconi held much of the key technology and refused to share with his rivals. So a single, Marconi approved, company was the government's solution. There was apparently no money in content production (only in selling sets) so the commercial firms offered no resistance.

The British Broadcasting Company was formed at a meeting of representatives of more than 200 firms in October 1922. Soon, following a public enquiry, the company was replaced by a Public Service Corporation with a Royal Charter. In 1926, the Postmaster General felt that a Corporation, created by Royal Charter, was a more appropriate vehicle for British Broadcasting than a mere Company or a "Commission" as the Crawford Committee had suggested. As early as 1926, with a General Strike in the air, he realised that a clear distance was essential between broadcasting and Party Politics. The BBC should not be seen, he said, as "a creature of Parliament and connected with political activity". Any other structure would "lack" in his view "a certain amount of status and dignity". Instead of Directors, the Corporation had Governors appointed by Government. Reith became Director General, working directly to the Governors and their Chairman.

This system has its dangers. Each of Britain's main political parties, at times, appointed a chairman of the Governors to "sort out the BBC" and make it more amenable to current Government policy. In reality, however, such Chairmen tend to go native and ultimately defend the BBC's independence. Government, however, retains considerable reserve powers, and can veto any programme. This is a power which has never been directly exercised. In many ways the BBC became a model for Public Service Broadcasting around the world. Reith's succinct and very early mission statement – to inform, to educate and to entertain – still essentially describes the core purpose of many great national broadcasters.

The BBC solved many problems for Government. It kept commercial influences, journalists, programme makers and indeed its political critics at arms length. It offered a regulated and indeed controlled environment for free speech. That freedom was always within clearly defined and accepted parameters. The monarchy, the Church of England, the military, the establishment were seldom severely criticised on BBC airwaves, at least not until the 1960s. The BBC, perhaps willingly and sometimes subliminally, became an agent of patriotism. At its most obvious the BBC is almost always on the side of a British athlete or sportsperson in any competition. It supports and nurtures British writing, British performers, musicians, songwriters and actors. Programmes explore our heritage, our environment, our economy and our prospects for the future.

By the late 1970s the very words Northern Ireland led most of the UK audience to switch to a different station. The conflict seemed hopeless and the voices depressing. Yet the BBC was determined to provide News, Current Affairs and Documentaries which challenged all sides in that intractable dispute. The British Government was, to put it mildly, unenthusiastic about having its Northern Ireland policies challenged and about seeing spokespeople for "the enemy" given UK-wide airtime.

In the white heat of the IRA hunger strike in 1981, Margaret Thatcher enacted legislation which effectively banned every known member of Sinn Fein from being heard on air. Perversely, it was only their voices which were banned. Their message could still be heard provided it was read by someone else.

Time does not permit a blow by blow account of the