

The Beeb at bay

David Miller

'Phone them, write to them, above all phone them on the spot - if necessary, jam the switchboards.'

THIS WAS CONSERVATIVE PARTY Chairman Chris Patten addressing a meeting at the Party Conference in October 1991. It was a signal that the latest Conservative attack on the BBC was under way. During the 1980s there has been an increasing number of skirmishes between broadcasters and the Government. In such disputes, the BBC tends to bear the brunt of criticism even when there is no clear distinction between their coverage and that of ITV or Channel 4. The BBC is expected by many in Government to live up to its name as the **British** Broadcasting Corporation and therefore to exert some partiality in the "national interest". With their complaint about coverage of the NHS, the Government were following a long precedent in confining their attention to the BBC. However, such attacks need also to be seen in the context of the immediate priorities of the Government. They often fit neatly with the broadcasting policy of the Government.

In the 1980s it was often argued that the stacking of the BBC Board of Governors with Tory sympathisers was the prelude to the dismembering of the BBC. As the negotiations over the level of the licence fee continue and the question of reviewing the BBC licence approaches, concern has focused on whether the new Director-General, John Birt, will preside over the decimation of the Corporation. The Conservative re-evaluation of broadcasting policy has led to the auctioning of television franchises and the forthcoming changes in BBC responsibilities. In combination with continued efforts at intimidation, a crisis of confidence within the BBC in the abilities of senior management has left the Corporation weakened, demoralised and barely able to mount a defence against Government pressure. Against this background, BBC news output on the NHS appears to have suffered in relation to its competitor ITN. This article examines BBC television news coverage of the health service in August and November 1991 and in February and May 1992. It also examines three key days of coverage in September and October 1991, when the NHS became a very hot political issue. BBC coverage is compared with that of ITN to assess the Conservative complaint that John Birt and his staff were "pumping out Labour propaganda" [*Sun*, 12.10.91.].

In the months leading up to the election, the apparent unpopularity of the Government in the opinion polls led to jitters in the Tory camp, some of which were expressed in the pages of the Conservative press. Of particular concern was the role the Health Service was perceived to be playing in the Labour lead in the polls. As one headline had it "NHS and Europe give Labour eight point lead" [*Daily Telegraph*, 8.11.91]. The *Sun* broke the NHS story in a front page exclusive, reporting John Major as having "hit the roof" after watching BBC news coverage of Health Secretary William Waldegrave's speech to conference. They reported a "Government source" as saying their coverage of the two party conferences was totally biased. "They are dominated by news editors with anti-Conservative views and it shows". The complaint focused on the latter part of the *Nine o'Clock News* report on Waldegrave's speech in which there were a number of critical comments. Apparently the Prime Minister's political secretary then phoned the BBC newsroom to convey John Major's "deep personal displeasure". According to Melanie Phillips in *The Guardian* "Senior editorial figures then decided that although the item was not biased it did fall short of the professional standards required" and the editor of the *Nine o'Clock News* phoned the Prime Minister's Press Secretary the next morning to acknowledge the slip. "As far as the BBC was concerned, therefore, it had conceded a lapse that regrettably sometimes occurs." However, Chris Patten's speech urging angry Tories to jam the switchboards at the BBC was released to the press that same morning and Downing Street sources were briefing some of the press about Major's reaction to the news item and about Ministers' 'rising' temper with BBC coverage [*Sun*, 12.10.91].

The BBC stated that it had not had a formal letter of complaint about its coverage of the NHS and Tony Hall, Director of News and Current Affairs, defended the Corporation in *The Times*. According to Conservative Director of Communications Shaun Woodward, this prompted Chris Patten to write a formal letter of complaint eight days after the offending newscast [*Daily Express*, 19.10.91]. A letter from John Birt appeared in the *Sunday Times* the next day replying to a story the previous week and strongly defending the BBC.

We are not in the business of publishing handouts. The next general election will be tightly and toughly contested. In the build up passions will run high. The BBC will continue to listen to complaints and to consider them seriously. But we will not be bullied by any party [20.10.91].

John Birt then wrote to Patten without apologising, prompting a further exchange of letters in which Patten said he found the BBC's position 'unacceptable' [*Daily Telegraph*, 24.10.91] and Birt, again refusing to apologise, argued that the Tories should "look at the overall BBC coverage of the NHS debate over the past months" [*Observer*, 27.10.91]. Finally, Birt and Patten met on 4 November to thrash out their differences. They agreed that the BBC would appear to climb down publicly by admitting that a mistake had been made and allowing Patten to claim a victory. They would not however

formally apologise as Patten had demanded. Their admission was in fact nothing more than the one made three weeks previously to the No. 10 Press Secretary. Nevertheless, as planned the press reported the agreed version. For example, "Birt admits error over Tory report" [*Daily Telegraph*, 5.11.91], "Birt backs down in BBC bias row" [*Daily Express*, 5.11.91] and "Tories claim BBC victory" [*The Times*, 5.11.91]. The public humiliation of the BBC was thus the price for a temporary cessation of hostilities with the government.

The Government seemed undecided about the precise nature of their complaints. Downing Street sources viewed the *Nine o'Clock News* item as the last straw in a succession of BBC "blunders". Others singled out the *Nine o'Clock News* and Radio Four's *Today* for special criticism. "Sources close to Chris Patten" tried to dampen the attack by emphasising that his speech "was not meant as a generalised attack on the corporation but on the way that certain programmes had handled the news". Perhaps the clearest indication of the uncertainty in the Tory camp was that there was even some division over the reason for their poor showings in the opinion polls. The *Sun* reported that some Ministers were putting the blame on the Conservative head of Communication, Shaun Woodward. One reportedly said: "You can't put all the blame on BBC lefties. Shaun Woodward should know how to deal with them. He is not doing his job properly. Some Ministers say Woodward should be replaced". The fact that such tensions and rivalries surfaced at that time is an indication of just how seriously the Government took the Labour lead in the opinion polls. But what of all the allegations of bias at the BBC? Was the BBC running consistently or even occasionally biased news items about the Conservatives in general or the NHS in particular? Is BBC reporting markedly different or "worse" than that of ITN? The next section analyses the offending BBC bulletin and compares it with a total of four months' television news coverage on both BBC and ITN.

Waldegrave

The specific Conservative complaint focused on the reaction to William Waldegrave's speech which, according to John Major, "questioned what Mr Waldegrave said without an adequate counter view" [*Guardian*, 12.10.91]. Major's press secretary, Gus O'Donnell said: "A procession of people were wheeled on to say Mr Waldegrave was nasty and wasn't telling the truth" [*Sun*, 12.10.91]. What these accounts fail to mention is that as well as showing several extracts of Waldegrave's speech to conference plus a total of 38 seconds summarising his speech, the report featured four Tory delegates, two speaking to Conference and two reacting to Waldegrave's speech. The first of these delegates says to Conference: "These reforms are about modernisation, not privatisation". It is not therefore true to say that Conservative views were not given space or that there was nothing to counter the criticism. Indeed this part of the report including the headlines lasted over three minutes. The total time allotted for comment from others was just over two and a half minutes.

We should note this is the only example we can find of such views being given air time by non-party representatives on either channel in the sample period we looked at. Certainly, at no point did we find any television reporter endorsing such a view. Yet such views are hardly a rarity in contemporary Britain. On the other hand, we did find a number of examples where journalists endorsed the Government view on the health service on television.

We found no evidence that the BBC was biased against the government. Both BBC and ITN appeared to be scrupulously trying to maintain "balanced" coverage. If anything our evidence points towards a heightened caution in BBC news bulletins as compared with ITN. We found a small number of examples where the emphasis of BBC news bulletins favoured government views of the Health Service. When reporting one of the earlier skirmishes in the waiting list saga the BBC reported Government figures as if they were facts; only later did they go on to feature the Labour view that the figures had been "fiddled". The headlines on the BBC's early and main evening news bulletins were as follows:

Hospital waiting lists are down, but there are fears of a growing cash crisis in the Health Service. [BBC1 1800, 19.9.91]

The number of people waiting for hospital treatment has fallen, according to figures from the Department of Health. Overall waiting list numbers are down by 1 per cent to a little over 900,000. But the number of patients waiting over two years for treatment is down by nearly 40 per cent. [BBC1 2100, 19.9.91]

At 1800 the BBC are unequivocal – the waiting lists are down. By 2100 the figures are attributed to the Dept. of Health but then stated as if they were a fact. There is no mention of the Labour allegation that the figures are misleading or out of date. Compare this with ITN's more even-handed presentation:

And waiting lists are shorter say the Tories. No, longer, say Labour.

The Government's published figures showing that the number of people on hospital waiting lists has fallen. Labour says the opposite is true. Who's right? A report coming next. [ITN 2200, 19.9.91]

Channel Four News was even more non-committal, delivering an implicit critique of both parties:

The emotive electoral issue of hospital waiting lists. The Government proves they're shorter. Labour proves they're longer. [C4 News, 19.9.91].

Channel Four was the only bulletin to attempt to make some kind of sense of the debate over the lists by doing more than reporting the opposing views of the Government and opposition and pressure groups. They had done their own investigation and were willing to state as a fact that at least some patients were being forced off waiting lists:

Much of the row centres on how the Government arrives at its figures for waiting

lists. Some family doctors concede list sizes have been cut at a number of hospitals, but only at those hospitals refusing to take on patients if the waiting time is over a certain limit, often a year. This can mean patients having to go privately if they want their operation done at all. Last week Channel Four news reported on how one health district – mid Essex – had shortened its waiting list by simply dropping certain types of treatment unless very urgent, such as hospital surgery for varicose veins and wisdom teeth. [Channel 4 News, 19.9.91]

Some BBC reports indicated that the reforms were going well and that at least some NHS staff supported them. The following item, for example, was clearly supportive of the reforms:

Epsom Health Care was one of the first 57 hospitals to become NHS trusts six months ago. Here they say they have already treated more patients, cut their waiting lists by a quarter, hired more doctors and opened two new wards. All this without running into debt or getting extra money. It's all been done, they claim, by managing their resources better than the Health Authority. [Our emphasis]

A manager of the trust is then interviewed and comments on the change from "bureaucratic" decision making to managing their own budgets. The reporter then, remarkably, concludes that:

There appears to be absolutely no dissent in the hospital. Even the unions could find no-one to oppose the trust. [BBC1 2100, 16.10.91]

It is interesting to compare this report with the coverage of William Waldegrave's speech to conference the previous month. In that report there were two excerpts from Waldegrave's speech and the comments of a total of four Tory delegates. Following this there were clips of a doctors representative and a Health Authority manager and then finally three comments from staff in a London hospital. In the case of the Waldegrave speech there were a total of five speakers putting the Government's case and five against. In the report from Epsom, as the journalist concludes, there was "no-one to oppose the trust". Consider a BBC report on the day Labour launched their NHS proposals. The journalist reports the Labour view and then there are sound bites from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and from two doctors – one in favour and one against the reforms. Before going on to interview William Waldegrave the journalist sums up the Labour position and contrasts it with that of the Tories:

Labour claims the NHS is underfunded but gives no figure. They pledge to restore the missing money over a Parliament, paying for it as and when growth in the economy allows. Meanwhile the Health Secretary indicated his confidence in the present system by telling budget holding GPs that they'll now get more power. He attacked Labour plans. [BBC1 2100, 20.2.92]

This type of reporting can be compared to that on ITN the same evening. *News at Ten* simply reported the contending views of the two parties:

The Tories believe they've neutralised the Health Service as an election issue; that few people will want to see another round of upheavals in the NHS. But Labour is convinced it's an Achilles Heel for the Conservatives that may well cost them a decisive number of votes. [ITN 2200, 20.2.92]

Channel Four news was critical of both parties with the reporter arguing:

Labour has been at pains to remove anything that smacks of buying and selling health care, no matter how it is managed... Not surprisingly the Health Secretary William Waldegrave was quick to attack Labour's plans... In the end according to Health Policy analyst Chris Ham, the approach of the two main parties reflects their ideologies. [C4 News 1900, 20.2.92]

Balance

Much of the news in this period featured a scrupulous "balance" between the contending party views on the NHS. There was little on the main evening programmes [*Nine o'Clock News* and *News at Ten*] which was critical of either party. One reason for the careful balancing act evident in much coverage is that in the debate on the health service the major political parties are associated with quite distinct policies and views. Dissent from or opposition to the Government view is perfectly "respectable". Indeed, it is widely recognised that the NHS is one of the opposition's strongest suits with the public. In other controversial areas, such as defence or Northern Ireland this is not so clearly the case and the boundaries of the "consensus" are more tightly drawn. This makes it easier for the broadcasters to represent opposing views on the Health Service than on other sensitive topics. Yet even here the BBC tended to report developments in the NHS with more caution than ITN and occasionally news commentaries would favour or endorse Government perspectives and downplay those of the opposition. A further reason for the balancing act is the constant pressure from politicians. Reporting the real world gives way to what Roger Bolton has called a "balance of propaganda". Such sanitised coverage is unlikely to look for, or broadcast, simply factual reports about the Health Service since they are likely to annoy the major political parties. The appearance of ordinary members of NHS staff on the BBC coverage of Waldegrave speech was a departure for news coverage in this period. That their views were critical of the Government is without doubt. That they are quite common in contemporary Britain might surprise those who relied on TV news bulletins for information. Yet it seems that the Conservative leadership objected most strongly to the fact that members of the public should have been allowed to "to cast any blight on the majesty of William Waldegrave's Blackpool performance" [*Guardian*, 21.10.91].

There is no evidence that BBC coverage was in any sense "biased" against the Government. Yet the BBC still felt obliged to apologise for the quality of one of their broadcasts. As we move towards the 1996 renewal of the BBC licence, we can expect further skirmishes between the broadcasters and the

Government. These may be triggered by genuine worries about the popularity of the Conservative Party, but they will also serve as a vehicle for the BBC bashers in the Government. How far the BBC is able to resist such pressure will depend, in part, on the strength of the social constituency it can build as well as the confidence and coherence of the Government. It is a testament to the effectiveness of political pressure on broadcasting during the 1980s that the BBC could state that a part of its health service coverage was "not up to its usual standard".

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David Miller is a Research Fellow in the Media Unit at Glasgow University. He is currently writing a book on the effectiveness of news management in relation to the conflict in Northern Ireland entitled Don't Mention the War.

Parting of the ways?

Tony Hall

THERE IS NO escaping from debates about the BBC. Yet no matter how diverse the views about the way the BBC should go, it is the case that a great deal still unites broadcasters in the UK. Much of what we have in common centres on the values and definition of good journalism. But in today's broadcasting environment, current pressures will have an undoubted impact on those values. I would argue that, while we share a common view of the principles of good journalism, certain factors are leading to a parting of the ways. This article offers an overview of both these shared beliefs and mounting pressures, and predicts something of the new broadcasting scene which is likely to emerge.

In my own area, there is widespread agreement about the journalism to which broadcasters aspire. Good journalism is underpinned by certain qualities. It must be accurate and truthful. It must be based on observation and enquiry in the field. It must seek out and test views. Above all, it must be impartial and objective and fearless. Only with these qualities can it make sense of events as they happen and in their immediate aftermath. Broadcasting practitioners and audiences all know the importance of television and radio journalism. Our viewers and listeners are clear that we are the most trusted source of information and news in Britain. Over last summer the impact that pictures, in particular, can have become painfully and graphically apparent. Scenes of prison camps in the former Yugoslavia, of "ethnic cleansing", the random bombardment of bread queues, of people burying their dead: all of those very directly led to action by governments. The French Minister for Humanitarian Affairs, Dr Bernard Kouchner, specifically commented during a visit to the former Yugoslavia: "The enemy of oppression is photography, the camera, the press, and information." He was speaking about Yugoslavia; but he could have been talking about the appalling scenes in Somalia or other parts of Africa and the world. Similarly, it was not just economic weakness that led to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. It was also the availability of free information on radio and television, in particular.

The broadcaster's job is to bring an understanding of these events to our audience. First-hand reporting is a critical duty. Good independent journalism underpins a free, democratic society. Fast, accurate information is the lifeblood of the economy, of politics, and of society in a way never seen before. Good journalism can expose wrongdoing, evil and corruption. It can