

From:  
Sent: 13 December 2003 03:15  
To: BBC Charter Review  
Subject: some comments

Allow me to offer a quick foreigner's perspective on the BBC. But first, here's a brief outline of who I am to provide the review with some context for the perspective I will be offering.

I'm a 49-year-old Canadian male from a region of this nation (Maritime Provinces on the east coast) that is often ignored or overlooked by the power centres of the country, particularly Toronto, and often this is reflected in our own public broadcaster, the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corp.). I am myself a newspaper journalist, at present editor of our opinion pages and editorial writer, with 22 years of experience beginning at the bottom as a junior reporter. In the past five year, due to personal circumstances, I have visited London, UK 12 times, for two weeks each time and have stayed at a private residence and thus have had considerable exposure to the BBC's UK service as well as its private competition. In Canada I receive both the BBC-World television channel and the BBC Canada Channel (which I understand is a private Canadian channel that has contracted with the BBC to air many of its programs within Canada -- a good idea, by the way). I also frequently surf the Internet and visit the BBC Web site regularly (I prefer the UK version) as well as CNN, CBC, New York Times, Times of India, Los Angeles Times and various others. Via television I also have ready access to all the major Canadian and U.S. channels and networks, news and entertainment.

Now, from this perspective, there is no doubt in my mind that the BBC is almost certainly the single best news and entertainment organizations in the world, particularly true for the news/public affairs component. Most of my comments I will confine to the news/public affairs/factual documentary arena. It is comprehensive, it covers the world (unlike North American news outlets) thoroughly, it's reporters and invited guests are invariably thoughtful, well-informed, have done their background research, and provide information that one either never gets anywhere else or would have to wait several days before others pick up on it. I particularly like what I view as its extraordinary efforts to be balanced and impartial, without sacrificing penetrating analysis and fair comment or observation. This is not an easy thing to do, as any journalist can tell you. I am aware of accusations from some quarters that the BBC is biased, or anti-government or too left-leaning, but I see no evidence of it. If one wants to see a truly biased news organization, then they ought to look at CNN (which I also like in many ways, but it can be horribly shallow, superficial, and slanted) or the Canadian CBC which is so left-of-centre that even its deliberate attempts at being "balanced" and giving counter views prominence end up being infuriating.

I paid very close attention to the coverage of the lead-up to the war in Iraq, the shooting war, and the immediate aftermath and there can be no doubt the BBC was the most balanced, fair coverage in the world. Yes, it was at times "critical" of the government, yet it gave the entire range of views across the political spectrum. And the proof of my contention, for me, was not that it asked the prime minister or other government spokespeople tough, penetrating questions that they didn't like, but rather that they asked everybody they interviewed tough, penetrating questions that they often didn't like. Not only that, unlike other outlets, particularly CNN, the reporters and anchors actually listened to the answers and had enough background and intellectual wits about them to ask perceptive follow-up questions based on the answers given. No other media outlet came close to matching the BBC for this. As well, its reporters in the field with the

troops, sometimes restricted as to what they could say, nevertheless took the same approach. It is not the media's job to be cheerleaders for anybody or anything but the truth as best it can be determined. In that, the BBC excels.

I also know that the BBC received considerable criticism from various quarters during the Hutton inquiry and the controversy leading up to the formal inquiry. Much of it was far from fair and I was disturbed that the Blair government was clearly and deliberately attacking the BBC for its own political ends. I have no doubt mistakes were made and it may not have been the BBC's finest hour, but in the end, all the testimony actually vindicates the BBC in terms of what it reported. The route to the controversial report may have been flawed, but it was essentially correct. And the government didn't like it and still doesn't. Thank goodness the BBC is at arm's length.

Very quickly, I'd also like to praise the BBC's documentaries and efforts to present often difficult subjects in both entertaining and educational ways. Walking With Dinosaurs was superb. The recent series on the Vikings was also excellent. As was the innovative idea for presenting historic figures via the search for the "greatest" Briton. And for proof, look no further than the productions ground out for American television. They are formulaic, often superficial compared to BBC efforts, even more often literally scared to actually take a stand on anything controversial which ends up in a mass of data on both sides of an issue being dumped into the viewer's lap with no good guide on how to sift through it and decide for oneself, and also often done very quickly and cheaply. It shows.

As to some of the other issues under review, I am sure money will always be an issue. Everyone can always use more, there are always projects one would like to do. When I first learned some years ago about the TV licence system I was shocked. If anybody tried that in North America, including Canada, there'd be a second Boston Tea Party. In the US, public television is mostly funded by private foundations and public subscription or fund-raising drives. In Canada, the CBC (a very pale, anemic version of the BBC) is primarily funded by the public, but via annual expropriations from the government. And that has at times hurt the CBC's integrity. It's budget is a regular line item in our federal government's budgets and as such is subject to restraint measures, cutbacks, and political winds at any given time. It isn't nearly as arm's length in reality from the government as the BBC is. Given that even the BBC can be subject to tremendous pressure from the government of the day, as recently seen, I am changing my opinion about the TV licence system, at least in part. It does guarantee a stable budget that the BBC people can rely upon and thus it enables them to plan appropriately without fear. That is positive.

I do think, however, that the TV licence is probably about as high as it ought to go. It's very expensive today. The higher it is pegged, the more resistance the public is liable to put up, the more pressure there will be to scrap it. But what is the BBC to do if it finds its funding declining over time as inflation cuts into the purchasing power of what the licence fee brings in? One option I think merits serious attention is cutting some BBC services. Not a slash and burn approach, but a very serious and thoughtful look at everything the corporation is doing, or planning to do, and asking "is this really necessary?" As well, perhaps examining what it has been doing for years and ask "is this still relevant?" One problem with the CBC in Canada, and my impression is the BBC suffers from this to some extent as well, is that it is as much a bureaucracy as it is a corporation. And that can cause a tremendous amount of inefficiency and, ultimately, waste of money that could be better spent elsewhere or even returned to taxpayers via a reduction in the licence fee.

As but one example, if the CBC in my city decides to cover a press

conference by the national Minister of Transportation, it will send a camera crew and reporter from the English TV network to the event. Then its radio division will send a reporter and sound technician to the event. Then it's French TV station will send a camera crew and reporter to the event, and the French radio division will send a sound technician and reporter. That's four reporters and four support crews, four corporate vehicles, four editing sessions once back at the studios and. . . well, it's not a good use of manpower or equipment, particularly for most routine types of news events such as news conferences. Most of their reporters on both sides are also bilingual. Could they not do with two crews (if not one?) with a little organization and co-operation. The video footage and sound clips will be identical in any event, with translation overdubbed depending on which outlet is involved. Those giving the news conference want the publicity, getting them to stand still for two interviews (one in each language) is not a problem. They do it now, moving between crews. Yet no matter how often this inefficiency is pointed out, it never changes. Bureaucratic rules and jealousies are the prime reason. And it is obvious. The private sector television and radio covers the same events with half the staff or fewer. In fact, for English TV alone, the CBC will send out four-five people; the private TV stations will send out a reporter and camera person, not uncommonly producing a better report in the process.

Get behind the scenes and the bureaucracy is even worse. The CBC's best national news reader some years ago jumped ship to the leading private network, in part for better money but mostly because CBC rules and union contracts wouldn't allow him to change so much as a word of what he had to read on air. The private station also has copy writers for the readers, but there is no problem changing their work if somebody comes up with a line that is hard to get one's tongue around or that is perhaps not quite as clear as it ought to be. Viewers, by the way, followed the trusted and respected news anchor and the CBC has never recovered from the blow. Periodically, the CBC brass decides it ought to find out what viewers want, what it is doing wrong, and puts on a big effort to find out. . . but then as soon as people start telling them, it becomes defensive and "explains" why such and such is so rather than actually listen and address the concerns. A very bureaucratic response.

More specifically back to the BBC, I have been noticing it has plans or is in the process of introducing various new things, including a handful of new television channels. Is it really necessary? And if so, is there something it ought to be dropping in the same process? Bureaucracies have a natural tendency to expand and grow, but never cut. I think the BBC, to remain healthy and affordable, really needs to think long and hard about expansion. It's Internet Web site is marvellous and probably one of the best in the world. It is also keeping up with the times. That's great! But are the new television channels truly needed and are they achieving much? If the existing BBC channels are not fulfilling the public's needs, ought not it instead be asking itself why and alter the offerings on these channels appropriately? How much was the public consulted about the new channels? Did the BBC ask the public at all if they wanted these channels? And if they fail to draw significant audiences, will they be quickly axed? If I were a TV licence payer, I'd sure want to know and I'd resent the additional costs if they were imposed on me without meaningful consultation. I stress that word "meaningful." If the BBC needs protection from governments of the day, then the taxpayers (and the licence fee is essentially a tax) also need protection from the BBC. It is all too easy for governments, politicians, bureaucrats to argue that it is a cultural necessity, that it is part of the national character, that the nation would be much impoverished without it -- all

things with truth to them -- then use those arguments to unilaterally raise the tax because "it's good for you." I suspect the BBC could in fact find a significant amount of money for creative use, news or entertainment, if it took a hard-nosed look at itself with maximizing efficiencies and setting priorities as the sole focus. It can be done without damaging the product. But it isn't necessarily easy. It takes strong management and real leadership because, to some extent, it means changing corporate culture somewhat. It can be done. I've seen it happen where I work, a newspaper that was suffering and in decline turned around both financially but in terms of quality, content and public acceptance. It takes some vision, clear goals, firm but fair management, and paying very close attention to what the public is telling you it wants and needs. I'm not talking of pandering to the lowest common denominator. I am talking of finding out what is really important to the public and then satisfying their needs. It is truly amazing how many media outlets in all formats produce endless stories about various things without ever really telling the readers, listeners or viewers why they should care or why it is important to their lives, for example. Even the BBC at times is guilty of this.

For a quick concrete example, at the newspaper where I work we have changed our approach to one kind of news conference totally. When a corporation president and a politicians comes to town to announce the company is going to set up a call centre or plant that will employ X number of people and by gosh it was nice of the government to give them a small tax break and loan guarantee, all those usual facts and the bumph heard at every such news conference ever held get very short shrift. The facts are reported, of course. Most of the self-serving comments do not get reported. But we do interview the appropriate people to find out a) what does it mean to the public, why should they care? b) what will it mean to the local economy? What kind of economic spinoffs will result? c) what growth potential is there? d) what's the pay like and what skills are needed for the new jobs? e) how many employees will be hired locally, how many imported? f) why did they choose the local area, what strengths were attractive and what should local officials be working at and building upon? And other such questions. We do so because our consultations with the public told us they don't care a whit about the predictable feather puffing by the politicians and bigwigs. They want the interesting stuff. And if it is new technology or high tech things that are not well understood, they want a primer. . . what exactly is that process, how's it work etc.

That sort of positive change can be achieved without investing a penny. It does take some guidance and work with reporters to get them thinking and working in the new way, but it's not that difficult. Most reporters are reasonably intelligent people and can see the inherent logic in it. Many even welcome it as a breath of fresh air. Constant self-analysis can be quite healthy for the whole organization, particularly when done in the right spirit. And please, may the BBC ask itself why economic stories are almost invariably gloom and doom, even when they are essentially good news stories! Putting things in context can make a big difference (and the BBC does do so quite often and very well, but not always). Disease stories often scare the daylights out of people, and they need to be reported, but when it is done so in such a way that it is out of proportion to the real threat to individuals, then I believe it does a disservice to the public the media serves. The same is true of crime stories. The UK has a very low murder rate for its population and population density. Even London is a remarkably safe city, perhaps one of the safest in the world for its size. I've not once felt unsafe while visiting and walking around London extensively, using the underground and other transit. I can't say the same for Toronto with a mere four million people, a fraction of London's size. And Toronto is in reality a darn safe city; a child's playground

compared to Buffalo, New York or Detroit, Michigan where one often has to walk around armed guards just to get inside a grocery store. Been there, done that! There are place in Boston at night where you don't stop your car, not even for a red light, if you want to see the next day or your car again. Yet when I visit London, the media is full of concern about rising crime rates and violence. I have no doubt of the facts and the concern is legitimate. On the other hand, a little perspective might not hurt either. The public ought not to live in unnecessary fear or paranoia. It is far too easy to get wrapped up in one's own immediate, small little world.

Now back to funding. I think the BBC could do a better job raising its own funds via sales of various items, particularly DVDs and CDs. And it could perhaps benefit more from more competitive pricing and catering more to the world market. I can't order BBC DVDs from it directly over the Internet because they have an incompatible region coding that means they won't play on a North American DVD player. I do occasionally see BBC DVDs in local stores, made for our market, but there are two difficulties. . . availability is limited and sporadic (it took me 18 months to just find the four volumes of the Absolutely Fabulous series, for example); and secondly, they tend to be overpriced compared to everything else. A standard North American, non-discounted DVD of a TV series in my city will sell for \$25 Canadian; Absolutely Fabulous sells for \$30-35, depending on the store. One really has to want the product badly to put out that kind of money, especially when it isn't uncommon to find the other DVDs discounted anywhere from \$5-10; to such an extent many consumers think you have to be a dupe to pay the undiscounted price. In short, it'd be nice and I personally would be buying more BBC product if it were more competitively priced (and more readily available). And how about being more aggressive in arranging deals in some instances, including with other recording corporations? A series of CDs, for example, containing the best performances over the years on Jools Holland's music show could be steady and good sellers, but arrangements would need to be made with the firms who hold the rights to issuing product by those artists. It's not impossible and could be mutually beneficial. Why not go for it? At least give it a good try.

Put another way, and succinctly, turn the BBC's marketing division into a really competitive, full-blown, no-nonsense, aggressive corporation just as if it were a private entity. Profit, profit, profit. Sell, sell, sell. Why not? If it brings in the needed money to make the product? There's nothing wrong with not only giving consumers what they want (t-shirts, hats, scarves, coffee mugs, DVDs, CDs, bookmarks, underwear. . . whatever sells), well designed and branded. It not only keeps the corporate name in the public eye, it brings in money and it fosters a consumer connection to the corporation. If there is a big budget production like Walking With Dinosaurs, why not tie it in with all kinds of promotional efforts -- contests with significant prizes, even co-sponsors. Get Air Canada or BA to provide, for mention in the promotions, a pair of tickets for some lucky winner to visit the badlands of Alberta and real digs where real dinosaur skeletons are being unearthed. Get a hotel chain involved etc. It works. It creates interest. Borrow a little bit from Hollywood. Just because the BBC is a publicly financed outfit, it doesn't have to be snooty and there's no reason it should be above such commercialism in promoting and sustaining itself. It has nothing to do with "dignity" and everything to do with being responsible to the public that pays its way. Unfairly competing with the private sector media is one thing and ought to be avoided; but merely aggressively promoting one's own offerings and recovering costs in the process is entirely justified. Why should the public pay one pence more than is necessary? I suspect most strongly that if the BBC were seen to be doing all it can to keep TV licence

fees at present levels, perhaps even reach the point where they might be reduced a little, then the public perception of it would be more favourable.

Also, has anyone ever considered making the TV licence fee more flexible? I'm thinking of perhaps instead of sending people a bill once a year, arranging for it to be paid in monthly installments, perhaps by having cable and satellite TV providers tack the appropriate amount on the monthly bills (itemized of course, so people can see that is what is being paid). And give them a choice to do this or pay once a year in one installment. It is a big bill and for the sake of avoiding the impact of the one bill many might well choose to even pay a small service charge of say 50p a month that would compensate the cable/satellite providers for their role. Such arrangements are common in North America for all manner of things and work well. And what would be the impact of changing the fee from being per television set to per household? Despite changing my mind about the fee, the per set provision still seems excessive to me.

Is the BBC accountable enough to Parliament? Yes. In fact, if anything the government should be put out of the picture entirely. Let the board of directors choose their own successors. Let it be run like a private enterprise, merely funded by the licence fees and what it can earn itself. The government should be made to understand that it does not "own" or "fund" the BBC. The British public owns and funds it. Yes, government is elected to act on behalf of that public, yet that does not include interfering with the BBC out of fits of personal or political pique. Overall, as an outside observer, I've been fairly impressed with Prime Minister Blair, even if I haven't always agreed with all his policies. No doubt he is an intelligent and talented person and his heart is in the right place. Yet his pique and actions regarding the BBC have been disturbing and, I think, one of his less noble moments.

As to the public, they are the real shareholders. Perhaps there should be mechanisms developed for constant/continual public feedback and input. Perhaps ordinary, unexceptional citizens ought to be give some considerable presence on the board of directors. It is obvious to me, when visiting, that the old class system still has a strong lingering presence in many parts of the UK, including the BBC. Just read the gossip columns in the tabloid newspapers! A fair number of managers and decision makers are sons of Lord so and so or . . . and often they are miffed because the son of a different Lord so and so got the plum posting that they'd been jockeying for. . . With all due respect to such employees, many of whom are surely talented and earn their salaries, this is still not an ideal way to run a modern corporation. Lineage and name ought not to matter one whit. Why is any Lord anywhere managing to influence some hiring decisions? And how much deadweight is there internally as a result? Let the BBC put in place a firm and democratic policy -- hiring on the basis of talent and merit alone, no matter what name is involved. No favours, no strings capable of being pulled. In fairness to the BBC, I notice this sort of thing goes on even in the private media and also in other corporations, so it isn't unique to the BBC. Still, the BBC has an opportunity to show some leadership and help itself at the same time. It may be a reflection of my North American heritage, but it is also no secret that nepotism and cronyism are not generally positive for any corporation, public or private. If it is excellence -- even more than it already displays -- the BBC wants, I think it would do well to put an end to the deference to an outmoded and even offensive remnants of the old ways. Such an effort might even have surprising revitalizing effects, including taking a bit of the "stodgy" edge off its presentations. Haughtiness doesn't sell well.

So there you have it! My views. As I stated, overall, the BBC is an

excellent service and certainly merits fair treatment and reasonable funding -- even funding on the generous side, based on its merit. But it isn't perfect and it could be more responsive to not only what the public wants, but what the public is feeling in terms of value for money taken from its collective pocket. Taxes are already high and widespread in the UK. Given that, it is essential that the public be given, and sees it clearly, good value for its money. Otherwise, sooner or later the tax revolt will occur and the temptation will be the less wise and more damaging slash and burn approach rather than a logical, intelligent approach this review is seeking to achieve.

I am also aware that as a foreigner, in many ways this is none of my business at all. I thus want to make it clear that I offer the above comments as an outsider's perspective in the hopes that perhaps there may be something somewhere in them that will be useful and positive. I do so not to be critical, but rather because I like the BBC very much, have great admiration for it, care about it, watch its shows and new regularly and visit its web site virtually daily. I'd miss it if I did not have the access and it would sadden me greatly if it were to be radically altered in such a way that it was significantly diminished. And if I've been off-base or wrong with any facts, my apologies. I'm not an expert on the BBC or the details of British society.

Thank you for listening!

Norbert Cunningham,

P.S. Any questions or want elaboration or

clarification? Don't hesitate to reply and ask!

PLEASE NOTE: THE ABOVE MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED FROM THE INTERNET.

On entering the GSI, this email was scanned for viruses by the Government Secure Intranet (GSI) virus scanning service supplied exclusively by Cable & Wireless in partnership with MessageLabs.

GSI users see <http://www.gsi.gov.uk/main/notices/information/gsi-003-2002.pdf> for further details. In case of problems, please call your organisational IT helpdesk