

We're All in this Together

2015 MacTaggart Lecture

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Thank you very much.

Staring nervously out at you all, my future sitting in front of me, my mind goes back fifteen years, when I was lassoed into a BBC Brainstorming session on the Arts, and I spent the day in a brightly-painted room at the mercy of a team of professional arts brainstormers. These were experts paid to be spontaneously positive; they had degrees in being upbeat, and had trained with some of the world's most optimistic people. 'This is a day to let your hair down' said the leader. 'It's all about having fun. We want to have fun.' And then she looked straight at us. 'If you're not prepared to have fun, get out now.'

I got out, and resolved the last thing I would ever do is trap a group of talented people in a colourful room and subject them to one-sided opinion masquerading as open debate. Until now. So, if you're not prepared to hear why I think politicians have got the British television industry completely wrong because they peer at it through a filter of their own prejudices, and that's a fact, then get out now.

To those staying, can I start by saying what an honour it is to be asked to give this James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture tonight, and in this its 40th year. Looking back to 1976 we can see how far the TV landscape has changed. Then, the big classics were Thunderbirds, David Attenborough, and Poldark; let's congratulate ourselves on how far we've come.

We were told television would by now have changed utterly. We were told that by people paid to know. They said viewing would decline and be replaced by mobile and laptop alternatives. And indeed, brash new entities such as Amazon and Netflix have emerged. Bringing streaming digital pictures, - a telecommunicated sequence of visual data, or tele-vision if you will – which immerse us in dynamic new forms of storytelling, such as the one-hour drama, and provide us with revolutionary new stories, such as House of Cards.

I suppose what this really tells us is that there are eternal verities, even in television, which time will never change. We may alter and innovate how we watch, from set to laptop to tablet and, yes, unbelievably, to a watch, but we still crave to view the same things. Basically costumes and cakes.

Ah, but wait, the experts told us wait, our attention span will diminish, and we'll hop from three-minute clip to six second vine, to nanosecond blap, tiny singularities of entertainment that spell the death of long-form viewing. Instead we binge-watch four seasons' worth of quality box set in one weekend, sitting through what is effectively a 48 hour television programme while our children grow hungry and cold.

So much for experts. Their guess is as good as yours, but more expensive. They proclaimed the death of the book, but did so in best-selling books. Economic experts failed to predict the banking crisis, but still cashed their cheques. Earlier in May, polling experts said there would be a hung parliament: they carry-on like we still think they're credible; or maybe that's what their polling is telling them.

The truth is, nobody knows anything. And that's because we're all individually full of contradictions. We're all annoyingly, deliciously, unknowable, beyond algorithmic reach, for now.

In fact, the recent General Election provides a perfect matrix of confused, contradictory information. It was the election in which the public punished the Lib Dems for not stopping the Tories and did so by voting in the Tories. It was the election in which the party advocating the Living wage decisively lost, to a party now advocating the Living Wage. It was the one in which Nicola Sturgeon became the most popular hated politician in Britain. And it reached its climax with the leader of UKIP resigning and then rapidly unresigning in a new form of statecraft which I can only describe as Bungee Politics.

This place is a mess. We are a mess. We don't know what we want. So, trying to be specific and prescriptive in this unknowable landscape is a fool's errand. It would be a fool indeed who would try to quantify precisely what, say, our broadcasters should do: he or she would be really mad if they tried to define the purposes and scope of certain TV channels. Madder still if they did it by say some sort of panel of experts, and a mad mad system that would then take these expert findings and enshrine them in law.

Oh dear.

I've called this lecture "We're All in This Together" and I hope George Osborne, the Prime Minister Regent, doesn't mind my borrowing his useful phrase for these times. Over the years, many political phrases have caught my eye. I remember particularly in 2010 noticing the Orwellian contortions language had gone through to arrive at the Tory campaign slogan, Vote for Change, Vote Conservative.

But believe me, saying tonight "We're All in This Together", I'm not being ironic. Playful, maybe, but deadly serious. British television needs to be at its strongest: with a big global fight ahead, we need to consolidate all our talent and expertise.

Yet, Broadcast and Production have grown ever more discrete and separate, perhaps rather wary of each other, and now politicians have exacerbated that division. Ministers have come to see Broadcast, those on the Executive Branch of television, as the only group to talk to, marginalizing the creative community that drives Production, and which I believe is actually the core strength of British television. If we don't do something to redress the balance, to allow the voice of the creative and production community in TV to be heard loud and clear, the politicians will become our masters rather than partners and supporters. Acting as if they alone are the experts. It will be a distracting interference and ultimately harmful to British television.

Plus tonight there'll also be jokes. And half-way through as a form of half-time entertainment -- this is true -- a detailed battle sequence. So, on we go.

First off, that global fight I mentioned. It's really one centred on the extraordinary pace of change. What seemed like the white-heat of technology one day can the very next feel as old and as outdated as the phrase 'white-heat of technology.' No company is too big to fail. Netscape once looked invincible, until it went the way of CompuServe. And I bet there are some older members of the audience here tonight who remember Microsoft.

My first experience of how quickly the generations adapt their viewing habits was 18 years ago, when I took my son, who was about three, to the cinema for the first time. It was a long and execrable film called "Flubber." As we came out I

asked him what he thought, and he said 'It was good. It was like a big video you can only see once.'

From that focus group of one, I determined two things. Firstly, children are acutely aware of the limitations of their viewing environment, but, secondly, it doesn't seem to spoil their enjoyment of what they're watching. As long as the content is good, they'll put up with much.

This is good news for those who make quality programmes. People will hunt them out, by any means possible, and on whichever device is available. Hence Amazon and Netflix, and now YouTube pouring money into generating new content.

That's the good news for the creative industry. Everyone wants to make television. The bad news is, everyone wants to make television. Cheaper, user-friendly technology, means we're living in both the Golden Age of TV, and a global bucket of swill. For every Sherlock and Breaking Bad there's a billion more people filming their brother squirt baked beans from his nose and anus.

So, in this cacophony, it's more important than ever that we have strong, popular channels, highly respected for their quality, that act as beacons, drawing audiences to the best content available, and providing a confident home for the best programme-makers.

Faced with a global audience now, British television needs its champion supporters, it needs its cheerleaders.

Who will they be? The government? Not while they consistently talk of reining in our greatest network. The broadcasters? Not while most of their energies are dissipated fighting off political attacks on their impartiality or finances.

Now, of course, our friends in Whitehall would argue that, as the BBC's charter comes up for renewal, it's important to see how the Corporation can operate even more effectively. I'd argue back that starting a debate on how the BBC should be funded just days after lopping 20% off its budget without discussion, seems pretty much to me like shutting the stable door after the horse has been bolt-gunned.

But never mind. Let's assume the horse is still alive and revival is a real possibility, even though, for obvious reasons, Rolf's Animal Hospital has been incinerated. So I'm going to do some cheerleading of my own.

I'm not an expert. I don't run a network, and I've never consciously multi-platformed. I've worked with Channel 4, Sky Atlantic, and HBO, but I started with the BBC, have always had a relationship with it, and I feel I owe it my professional life.

That life really began as a listener, hooked on brilliant comedy shows on Radio 4 like 'Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy,' and Saturday Night Fry, tremendously idiosyncratic comedies that I thought were magical: I knew then that making shows like that was the only thing I wanted to do.

I started my professional career as the world's uncoolest music presenter on Radio Scotland, but given generous encouragement, soon became a comedy producer for BBC Radio at Broadcasting House, the epicenter of the radio shows that had inspired me. So imagine how I felt when my first letter from a listener arrived. It was a complaint, ending with the words "And Iannucci, what sort of a name is that for someone who works for the so-called British Broadcasting Corporation?" I pinned it to the front door of my office.

Blotted, I was quickly on the first rung of the ladder of BBC Management, becoming the LE Department's Script Editor. I lasted two months. Not because of a scandal, but because I couldn't take myself seriously in a tie. Eventually, and this is true, when the then Bishop of Oxford objected to a midnight joke about the crucifixion on Radio 1, and I was told to apologise, I felt it was time to move on. Not for me managing the BBC's tortuous relationship with the establishment. I decided life was too short to deal with bishoprics.

Management wasn't my style, but neither was business. When I went freelance, the one thing I knew I didn't want to do was set up my own company. I wanted to make comedy, not make people redundant because we weren't making enough comedy. Occasionally, as I watched friends and colleagues become Channel Controllers and multi-millionaires, I asked myself if I did the right thing. But I always answer yes. In that time, I've seen Channel Controllers go, fortunes lost, budgets slashed, and producers punched.

I've also watched TV Executives perform a merry kaleidoscope in front of me as they've risen to the top of one thing, and then another. There's about twenty of them, whose names I've grown used to hearing over the years, whom I've never encountered, and whom I assume are very good, given they only need a couple of years to do their job before moving on to the next one. They must be essential components of the TV Industry. After all, each new initiative, each new reform or inquiry into how British Television conducts itself, throws up one of these individuals onto its committee as regularly as the dawn.

Actually, I'm being unfair. Unfair to the executives whom we in the creative sector see too often as the enemy and not as partners in the business of getting our shows made.

And I'm being unfair on myself; I am an expert. I'm an expert in what I do. As is anyone good at Lighting Design, Producing, 1st AD-ing, Script Editing, Presenting, Directing, Post Producing, any of the hundred and one professions that appear on the Cast and Crew list at the start of each production.

Our programme-making skills are not just a vague part of our heritage. They are the primary economic component of our success. When the media, communications and information industries make up nearly 8% our GDP, larger than the car and oil and gas industries put together, we need to be heard, as those industries are heard.

When so many other countries come here to work with our crews, when so many of our actors are pinched for projects overseas, we need to be heard.

When internationally, our writing and acting and directing and special effects are being recognised, when our formats and ideas are being sold and reworked worldwide as never before, when, as Culture Minister Ed Vaizey recently pointed out, Britain is ranked the number one soft power in the world, measured for its global influence through its culture, media and education, when our creative community is really being heard abroad, surely we need to be heard at home.

But when I see the panel of experts who've been asked by the Culture Secretary to take a root and branch look at the BBC, I don't see anyone who is a part of that Cast and Crew list. I see executives, media owners, industry gurus, all talented

people; but not a single person who's made a classic and enduring television show, not a presenter, a writer, director or creative producer, no Moffat or Wainwright or Mulville or Mercurio, nor do I see anyone from our world-class Post-Production industry or from Design or Drama, no-one from the enormous world-beating service of day-to-day production, to give their views, to offload their expertise on the difficulties and the joys and the challenges of making world standard public service broadcasting. Oh, and no viewers too. Just people from the Executive Branch of television. It's like a car company was looking into what car it should make next, but only spoke to the managers and not to any of the engineers. Or drivers. You cannot have a meaningful root and branch review of television, if you're only going to deal with one branch.

I wonder at this. Why do politicians not talk to us creatives? Is it because we don't wear a tie? Are they more wary of us because we deal with intangible stuff, made up stories, unquantifiable and unpredictable entertainments that make us interesting but not really serious, the sort of person it's good to be photographed chatting to at a Thank You Reception for the Arts, rather than properly engaging with at a boardroom meeting deciding how a crucial segment of the arts should be run? Maybe that's why executives, who have staff and offices and budgets and ties, get invited onto committees every year, while creatives are brought along for canapés every five.

Talk to us. No-one comes into contact more regularly with the hard economics of making a budget work than a production team. Every time I make a show, I'm a small businessman, responsible for hundreds of employees, in charge of a budget of millions of pounds. And of course if the project isn't successful, the work won't

come back. In America, the key production personnel, the writers, the First AD, senior researchers, are credited as producers. They're rewarded for their key creative input. On my HBO show "Veep," which we shot in Baltimore, we had a set visit from the state Governor, who came to thank us for the work we were bringing to Maryland. Our true, essential, role in the business of making good television was acknowledged.

I mentioned earlier viewers. If Britain is at the top of its game in TV creativity, it's because we have the best audience in the world. I think the British public yearns for good stories, stimulating argument, and original ideas. It knows bullshit when it sees it, soon tires of the same old same old and hungers for something new all the time. It takes the difficult, the idiosyncratic, and makes it popular.

That's why we in television should feel lucky to be born in this country, or to have come here to work. I love it that we think nothing of the fact that a show about baking is a key part of our primetime viewing. Or shows about antiques, or family trees, or polar bears. We don't appreciate how deeply weird it is not to be fed one cop show after another.

That's what I remember from watching television when I was growing up in the 70s and 80s. The range in front of me. I could watch smart comedy like Monty Python and Not the Nine O-Clock News, but I also had Bruce and his Generation Game, Morecambe and Wise and no-one to tell me only one type of show was for me and not the other. I loved it that I could glide from Fawlty Towers to a Horizon documentary on Voyager's trip past Saturn.

For a comedy and a space geek, that was satisfying, even if it seems a little embarrassingly sad talking about it now. But what I take from then is that British

television said this: that everything, the whole world of knowledge and of creativity is on offer, is for you, all of you. No matter what your background, you were all equally welcomed to the most varied content the world's best programme makers could deliver. Yes, there were limits on the number of channels, and hours, but you didn't feel a limit on ideas and ambition.

That pride in what we made has stayed with me. All I can do if I want to be any part of that tradition is make sure I make the best shows I possibly can. And treat my audience with respect and intelligence. So, recently, it's been the biggest source of pride to me that *Veep*, a show made primarily for an American audience, that this show was very much a British production. It was written in the UK, edited here, scored here, post-produced here, and using British directors. Our editors were awarded by their American peers with the ACE Award for Best Edited Half Hour of US TV. Our writers won the Writers Guild of America Award. We've received Emmy nominations across all departments. This comes as no surprise to me, there's no magic secret and it's certainly not my doing. I simply trust British talent, as I've been trusted. I believe we are the best in the world at what we do. And am prepared to act on that basis.

Actually, my biggest surprise about working for HBO was that it seemed very familiar. It's quite a small, tight unit where I only had to deal with one, sometimes two, executives. They placed the creative voice front and centre of what they did. Notes were intelligent, and offered as suggestions only: if, very rarely, I said 'No, I don't feel that will work' they came back with good grace and said literally 'Armando, it's your show. You decide what's best.'

This is the secret formula. But here's the thing: that's exactly how the BBC worked some fifteen years ago. The best US shows are modelling themselves on what used to make British TV so world-beating. To have a broadcaster have faith in you and leave you to get on with it, was the very essence of British television, not just under the public service remit, but in the commercial field as well. ITV, and then Channel 4, and now Sky, are channels that have hoovered up not just the BBC's executives to run their own channels, but its template. Quality. Because quality brings audiences.

Look where that faith brings rewards now all across our domestic output, from BBC1 to Sky Atlantic, Happy Valley, The Tunnel, Broadchurch, The Fall, Line of Duty, shows that place trust in the creative process. And the viewer. UK television is copying the US formula that was copied from UK television.

US primetime schedules are now littered with those quirky formats from the UK, the Who Do You Think You Are's and the variants on Strictly Come Dancing, as well as the single-camera non-audience sitcom, which we brought into the mainstream first. We have changed international viewing for the better, and I think sometimes our political partners forget this.

Here's one instance. George Osborne recently said in an interview that there should be more TV dramas that have extended runs, so we're not left behind in the increasing habit of people watching US box sets. I agree. But what he fails to realise is that the best of those US dramas, have been the ones that have taken a leaf out of the British playbook: limiting their runs to 13 episodes instead of 22 or even, with shows like Game of Thrones or True Detective, 10. It's the refusal to

dilute quality for quantity that has made these series so good and, by the way, not so long that viewing them in one binge is totally unrealistic.

No, let's be more assertive; the international market flatters us with imitation: now's the time to strike out not huddle down. If the licence fee is under strain, then let's supplement it not carve it up, by pushing ourselves more commercially abroad. Use the BBC's name, one of the most recognized brands in the world, and use the reputation of British Television across all networks, to capitalise financially overseas, be more aggressive in selling our shows, through advertising, through proper international subscription channels, freeing up BBC Worldwide to be fully commercial, whatever it takes, frankly, let's not be icky and modest about making money, let's monetise the bezeesus Mary and Joseph out of our programmes abroad so that money can come back, take some pressure off the licence fee at home and be invested in even more ambitious quality shows, that can only add to our value. Protect public service broadcasting at home by displaying the arrogance of our convictions abroad.

Instead, what do we get?

Dawn.

An eerie silence settles on central London. Then, Bang!

Tanks and troops move into Broadcasting House. Their instructions: close down the BBC. A cyber-attack obliterates its websites, while all local Radio stations and DJ's are evacuated and pulped.

In London, the army handcuffs Lord Hall and escorts him off to a museum. By noon live atrocities can be seen taking place behind Fiona Bruce. Salford takes a

little longer to subjugate, as 4 army squadrons land in Manchester and then have to take a shuttle bus. In Glasgow, Nick Robinson is tied up and fired by canon into BBC Scotland: it only takes a few minutes to tweet his whereabouts, throw open the doors and let locals do their worst.

Meanwhile, In London, ruthlessly, remorselessly, a lone, masked figure moves through the BBC's confusing corridors, killing off the presenters one by one. Dimbleby is down, Norton eviscerated and Mary Berry is cut through like one of her delicious sponges. Meanwhile, Simon Schama is history.

All that's left to defend the battered Corporation is one man, Professor Brian Cox. The masked destroyer goes for him and it's quickly apparent that Brian Cox may be clever and good looking but, as we've long suspected, is rubbish in hand to hand combat.

Cox flees to the canteen area, hoping to barricade himself in. It's no use. The automatically opening safety doors are no obstacle to the hooded assassin, who steps through, and destroys Cox with a single punch to his beautiful clever face and with him, all hope of the BBC remaining in its present form. The assailant stands in the canteen and removes his mask. There, revealed is Jeremy Clarkson, laughing at the irony of destroying the BBC in a roomful of readily available hot meals.

I exaggerate of course. But if you're all laughing (I've written here) at this entirely fictitious conspiracy theory then you must recognize something that rings true. Because we do, do we not, feel under attack? Foreign owners are now buying into our networks, when we should be beating the world with our shows.

And if public service broadcasting, one of the best things we've ever done creatively as a country, if it was a car industry, our ministers would be out championing it overseas, trying to win contracts, boasting of the British jobs that would bring. And if the BBC were a weapons system, half the Cabinet would be on a plane to Saudi Arabia to tell them how brilliant it was.

And yet, it's quite the reverse. They talk of cutting down to size, of reining in imperialist ambitions, of hiving off, of limiting the scope, with all the manic glee of a doctor ever so reasonably urging his patient to consider the benefits of assisted suicide.

At its mildest, this talk is a background hum in the form of Government ministers telling us what shows we should be making, as if they were television's chief commissioners of programmes; for example, the Culture Secretary John Whittingdale recently saying in an interview that "Arguably, I'd keep David Attenborough.' (I'm not sure how practical that last wish is, given the natural life cycle of the human presenter. Unless we're prepared to preserve him like the Russians do Lenin).

But then there was Ministerial confusion on the subject of Strictly Come Dancing. Osborne called it 'fantastic' on the 5th July, only to clash with Whittingdale who called the show 'debatable' on 14th July, but who then, no doubt under pressure from his Chancellor, swiveled, calling it 'admirable' by the 19th. And then shuffled back to slightly to 'absolutely appropriate' this lunchtime. It was such an elegantly performed U-turn, he really should go on the show.

The point is, even on just one programme, it's very difficult to get a clear idea of what they're really thinking. It's just like dealing with actual TV commissioners. But commissioners in direct control of the Treasury.

What worries me is that a) politicians now intend to act on their extremely subjective opinions and b) they are increasingly falling into the trap of thinking that because they have won a parliamentary majority, they know how a majority of the public thinks. It's a dangerous path in itself, a creeping imperial ambition that's doing international harm to our stock. Variety and Hollywood Reporter now daily feature stories about our television service powering down, BBC Four becoming a shadow of what it was, BBC Three destined for on-line, proud boasts about redundancies, acceptance of cuts, Channel 4 toyed with over privatisation. Doubts over it not fully answered at lunchtime today.

To quote a question I've been repeatedly asked by the US TV industry, "what the hell are you guys thinking?" To them it looks like we're going mad. This is toxifying something that could otherwise make more money internationally. Simply put, it's bad capitalism.

As I said at the start of this talk, I collect political phrases. And the one I return to again and again is a sentence from Tony Blair in 2004, one year on from the invasion of Iraq, and in defence of his decision to invade.

He said:

Do I know I'm right?

Judgements aren't the same as facts.

Instinct is not a science.

I only know what I believe.

That concluding phrase, I Only Know What I Believe, is a stunning reversal of about two-and-a-half-thousand years of rational inquiry. Normally, we believe what we know. Normally, we seek evidence, and form conclusions on the basis of what we find. Instead, Blair turns belief, self-belief at that, into an absolute, a fact, and knowledge into something a lot more qualified and imperfect.

We have to ask of any political decision, is it being made under the 'I only know what I believe' doctrine? Is it being made because the hunch, the gut feeling, is considered more definitive than the evidence obtained? That the political opinion is more valid, will become truth and has already become law, prior to actual investigation and proper inquiry?

So, today, does it explain the one-sided nature of the appointments to the panel of experts looking at the BBC? Or the extremely manufactured set of question marks against public sector broadcasting? I say manufactured because I really can't hear from the general public a groundswell of opposition to the BBC's outrageous Saturday night scheduling. There are no on-line petitions to shut down the BBC's on-line cake recipes, or public demos to close its apparently left-wing news. A news service by the way that has higher levels of trust in it than in any newspaper.

We seem to be in some artificially concocted zone of outrage that emerged fully formed around the time of the election, a strangely choreographed set of editorials and columns, and private briefings. These opinions have taken on a

momentum of their own, that they acquire mass, they appear almost like solid fact or at least enough like it that even our dear BBC news service is obliged to report them. Taking us to the exquisite irony that we start to believe the BBC is not to be trusted, because we heard it on the BBC.

Where does it come from, this spooky force bending the ear of Chancellors and Ministers and civil servants and asking them to cull the BBC?

Let's for the sake of argument call this force M, for Mysterious.

What does M say?

M says, the BBC is doing too much across too many media outlets. It's a broadcaster, so shouldn't have a web presence so dominant it crowds out the competition.

And yet, look at the times we live in.

'What were once separate forms of communication, or separate media, are now increasingly interconnected and exchangeable. So we no longer have a TV market, a newspaper market, a publishing market. We have, indisputably, an all-media market.'

I didn't write that paragraph, James Murdoch did, in his 2009 MacTaggart lecture.

'We no longer have a TV market, a newspaper market, a publishing market. We have indisputably an all-media market.'

This is so true. Newspapers now pod and vodcast, radio goes interactive, even cinemas and theatres beam in live networked events. For any cultural or news

organisation to survive, it has to adapt across all platforms. So why does M criticize the BBC for wanting to do so, and for doing it well?

It would only make sense if the BBC's web presence was pointless and amateurish. But in fact it's in the top 100 websites in the world, currently around 60th I think, and the only British-owned one in that list. It makes no economic or cultural sense to tell this country's best on-line media presence, one that serves the public freely, that projects our cultural impact globally, to make itself a little bit worse.

We deserve to be at the top table, but instead, we're being told to break our table up for firewood.

Capitalism is pursued where it helps the BBC's competitors, and a most peculiar form of Maoist state control is advocated when it doesn't. Facebook and Google came along, and ate up all newspapers' classified ads. Yet it's the BBC, who run no ads, that gets the blame, while it's Google and Facebook that get the helpful tax arrangements from HMRC. Will the root and branch investigation be looking at this rather twisted-looking root?

But M, this mysterious force arguing for change, won't stop there. The cognitive dissonance it emits now hits programme making, with, it says, a perfectly reasonable proposition; don't spend licence money pursuing ratings grabbing projects that the commercial sector could just as easily do. Can you instead, be a little less populist?

But how do you predict the popularity of a programme? Maybe a panel of Whitehall experts will be set up to hear each programme idea in advance and determine whether it sounds like it'll be a hit or not, like some perverse imitation of the successful talent shows that same panel is currently being asked to restrict. Though if the Ministry of Culture were to find a way to predict the future, I'd suggest it doesn't spend all its time on tv shows.

No, programmes like *The Great British Bake Off* and *Who Do You Think You Are* strike me as shows that started off niche and became popular. *Gavin and Stacey* started on BBC 3, *The Office* on rather obscurely scheduled slots late on BBC2. *The Thick of It* was on BBC Four to begin with. The fact is, no-one knew these shows were going to be so popular. They were allowed to grow in the public consciousness, get nudged into the mainstream, in a way we simply couldn't do now if the BBC was creatively restricted as is being suggested. Popular and niche are points on a continuous and evolving spectrum: to cut this valuable resource up is to damage all parts of it. How is that productive?

But *M for Mysterious* is nothing if not resilient. It focuses its dissonant noise ever more tightly, into a numbing wail targeted at human thought itself; for, it asks, is it not reasonable that we look to see if the BBC is too left wing?

The Culture Secretary said today it's not coming from him but why does this question hang in the air like a thick Edinburgh haar.

Full disclosure. I, a product of the BBC, stand before you as a Guardian reader. I also do so as a Telegraph reader. One of my first jobs was producing *The News*

Quiz. Scanning every newspaper every day for weeks on end made me instantly aware that no one newspaper told the whole story. The closer I peered at the page, the more holes I looked through. So it's become a habit to get the Guardian and Telegraph every day, to get something approximating to both sides of the story.

And our favourite game each morning over breakfast is to compare the photos on the two front pages. The Guardian frequently has something uncompromising, a picture of sludge or an abattoir, while the Telegraph goes out of its way to feature a photo of a smiling blond woman in her twenties, even if it's under the headline 'The sister of the man who died.' You soon recognise their tics.

The BBC is not allowed to have tics. It has to remain impartial. But impartiality shouldn't mean dull. It has to feel fearless, questioning, pushing against the establishment view, from whatever party. That's why Nick Robinson, Jeremy Paxman, Andrew Neil, are so good at what they do. But hang on, Nick was once Chairman of the Young Conservatives, Paxman has since outed himself as a one-nation Tory, and Andrew Neil has had a very close association with Rupert Murdoch. Add to that former Chairmen like Lords Grade and Patton, two Conservative peers, and you have a very convincing case, if you want one, there's a pretty clear, very deliberate right-wing bias in the BBC.

Except I don't see it that way. Because Robinson, Paxman and Neil are professionals, they hold to the highest professional standards. For my money, Andrew Neil gets more surprising admissions and squirming revelations out of politicians on a daily basis than anyone on television, and long may he do so.

The question shouldn't be, do these people have a political past, but what do they do with their knowledge and experience of politics? Anyone with a passion and understanding of the subject, is bound to have engaged with it: the alternative is to have a parade of political eunuchs on our screen, just reading out what's put in front of them, with no personal connection to the subject. You'd might as well have Siri read the news.

And just as, when I see Michael Portillo present Great Train Journeys of the World, I don't look out for him making subtle suggestions that the journey would be a lot better if the line were privatized, so too should we stop assuming that any presenter who has historically come from the political left would be equally bias. To view those who privately have left-wing views as more prone to bias than those who privately hold right-wing ones, is itself a bias, and an insult to the professionalism of all.

We see bias and imbalance from our own prejudice. We can have fun charting an exaggerated right-wing history of the BBC as easily as a left-wing one. For every 'Boys from the Blackstuff' there was a 'Dallas' glorifying capitalism, a 'Trooping of The Colour' and 'Songs of Praise' re-asserting the permanence of old establishment ideals and bishoprics. For every drama about homelessness, there's 'Antiques Road Show' weekly and literally enforcing the Thatcherite principle of selling off the family silver. For every left-wing comic, there's an army of business and economic experts reinforcing the views of the banking community and market as accepted fact. And by God, how can a Corporation be left-wing when it has perpetuated the career of Ann Widdecombe?

The wisest words I've read on all this, come from Toby Young, who wrote recently in *The Spectator*, prior to appearing on *Question Time*

"I've often heard conservatives complain that the BBC packs the audience with lefties. Not true. The makers of the programme bend over backwards to try to ensure the audience contains a broad cross-section of political views. By definition, a majority of them won't be Conservative voters.. But that's the country's anti-Tory bias, not the BBC's."

That's the point. The BBC is funded by and speaks to the country. The country is not the Government. More people pay for the BBC and watch it than vote for any one political party. And politicians convinced that, because they are in government, their views and values are the majority opinion of the day, are slaves to an illusion.

I'm sorry to go on about this, but I think this takes us to the fundamental problem. The problem of 'I only know what I believe' which is now putting pressure on public service broadcasting to conform to the political norms of the party in power, no matter how slim its majority, or how low its share of the vote. The Government has recently 'warned' the BBC to be balanced in its coverage of the EU Referendum. Why? If there's a clear cause for this warning, the Government should point it out. If there isn't, why the need for a warning? And how now are BBC reporters to proceed, subconsciously cowed into a fear that any too probing an analysis of a sensitive point, say, the economic advantages or disadvantages of immigration, will lead to censure, or reprimand?

The BBC is a mirror into which Britain gazes every day: it reflects the country, sometimes flatteringly, but also truthfully. It must surely keep asking questions

about that country, digging around, startling, annoying. There is a disruptive element to creativity as well as an affirmative one, not necessarily political, but born from a keen sense of duty to make society and community stronger through analyzing it and probing outside its comfort zone.

Meantime, politicians should say openly what they believe. If they distrust the BBC, they should say it. If they just don't like it, they should say it. Not commission charts and experts to arrive at that conclusion for them, filleting information and statistics down to look like incontrovertible fact.

To take one example, Page 24 of the Government's Charter Review document is taken up with a massive chart showing how the BBC has expanded from 2 channels in 1994 to 9 in 2014. I think it's meant to look chilling. What the graph doesn't show is how much every other broadcaster has expanded in that time, nor does it mention that in 1994 there were 61 channels available in the UK, and this expanded by 2014 to 536. So, you could say that the BBC has gone from having 3.2% of channels in 1994, down to 1.6% of them today. Conclusion, to get the best value for the licence payer the BBC ought to have more channels.

Now, I could stand here and keep batting back Government statistics until the Chilcott Report comes home. I could point out how they continually paint the BBC as a bloated monster, but don't show how it's dwarfed by its commercial rivals, who spend more on the rights to Premiership football alone than the Corporation spends on all its content. But, really, what's the point? Numbers will be pummeled into whatever conclusion needs reaching.

Many of the arguments from the experts in Whitehall turn out to be fictions as imaginative as the ones we in the TV industry get prizes for, or as false as the

people in leaflets issued by the Department of Work and Pensions. So let's stop playing games, let's talk properly, and honestly, about what we value and want to preserve in the BBC.

In the end, it comes down to our personal experience of the Corporation, as viewers and listeners.

Here's one of mine.

I mentioned at the start I was a bit of an astronomy geek, so of course I was disturbingly excited when the New Horizons satellite shot past Pluto a few weeks back. Discovery did a very good doc days later: fast paced, high tech, lots of graphics and photos, entertaining. I just felt I was missing something, perhaps a little more uninterrupted time with the science, so, happily, there was the one hour Sky at Night special. It was passionate but patient. The emotional pull came through watching the two scientist presenters, Chris Lintott and Maggie Aderin-Pocock, be present at the New Horizons HQ in Maryland and react in real time to the data. As it came through we watched their enthusiasm, their relief, their puzzlement at some of the photographs. Because of their expertise they were able to talk us through why it was so surprising not to see any impact craters on Pluto, why everyone was so amazed at the shots of mountain ranges bigger than Everest made of compacted water-ice that told us this world we'd all written off as a cold dead rock at the edge of the solar system, was a living, active environment overturning the views of all the experts.

The programme was unrushed, intelligent, and ambitious. And I thought of how it connected to the wonderful Stargazing Live on BBC 2 where the schedules, unhampered by commercials, are cleared yearly for three live ninety-minute

programmes on space and astronomy. Of how the expertise of the 'The Sky at Night' team is turned on a mainstream audience, brought there through Stargazing Live's own presenters, Brian Cox and Dara O'Brien. Of how Cox and O'Brien have had careers and audiences nurtured on the BBC, through successful documentaries like Wonders of the Solar System and seasoned comedy like Mock the Week, of how these different audiences are then plugged into an ambitious format that relies on the BBC's scale and expertise in live, outside broadcasts from around the country. And so it ripples out, to the work in the Independent sector all these and similar shows bring, to the training it gives researchers and producers who go on to work for other networks, and most importantly in this instance to the schools, where these shows and on-line projects such as the BBC's Year of Science, have led to a huge jump in those choosing Science GCSE and A Levels.

This is what the BBC is there for, connecting, connecting highbrow and mainstream, knowledge and entertainment, connecting you with the world, the whole country with to culture. For all its faults, it's a pretty good alignment of the planets.

Tampering with it is madness. The question shouldn't be, how do we cut it down to size, but why should we?

"In future, the ascendant nations with the highest living standards will be those who master not land and material but ideas and technologies."

Not my words, but the words of Rupert Murdoch in his 1989 MacTaggart lecture. We should heed them.

The British are very good at calling out nonsense. So if the British public feel they're being bullshitted at, if they get the slightest whiff that what's being done to the BBC is purely political, then I urge the relevant Ministers to leave the country, get out now, for they really don't know what's about to hit their fan. The anger won't be divided on party lines, it will swell beyond Guardian readers and Telegraph readers to all in between and beyond, who regard the BBC as one of the best fixtures of British daily life.

Politicians, say what you mean. Broadcasters, argue back; don't adopt a position of automatic compromise that concedes everything. And to those in Production, we owe the public a duty to defend, whether by continuing to come up with challenging, provocative shows, disruptive and eccentric, the sort the world expects from us, or by reporting flaws in political logic, forensically analysing any weakness in argument, or by going out there into the wider world and winning the praise and the prizes we deserve, to make the point that a significant British industry, of global standing, is being harmed by wooly thinking, thinking that simply isn't good enough and that doesn't meet the quality standards the country expects from this industry.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's been a tremendous honour to be invited to speak to the UK television industry. It's an even greater honour to work in it. Let's all defend it. Thank you.