

Hansard of Lords Debate
BBC and Public Service Broadcasting
05 March 2020
Volume 802

(pagination added 28.4.20; Lord Foster and Lord Griffiths both referred to the VLV research; SH emphasis at [*])

Motion to Take Note

12.36 pm

Moved by

Lord Young of Norwood Green

That this House takes note of the role of the BBC and public service broadcasting in the United Kingdom's economy and creative culture.

Lord Young of Norwood Green (Lab)

My Lords, I declare an interest as a former BBC governor. I had not realised how popular this debate would be, so I ought to apologise to Back-Bench speakers. I can only offer them the advice of the late and dearly lamented Nicholas Parsons and remind them to speak without hesitation, repetition or deviation.

I left home this morning listening to the dulcet northern tones of my noble friend Lord Bragg, who was in mental combat with three professors on quantum mechanics. The podcast of that programme will be listened to by millions of people all over the world, and that will promote British culture and British values. It is another example of soft power, as it is commonly known.

It is also interesting—I had not realised that my timing was so good—that a new Culture Secretary, Oliver Dowden, has been appointed. I looked with interest at his old quotes. He said:

“The BBC needs to be closer to, and understand the perspectives of, the whole of the United Kingdom and avoid providing a narrow urban outlook.” [*]

I suppose that is a matter of opinion. I have never seen the BBC as doing that, given the range of regional broadcasters that it has. He went on:

“By this, I don’t just mean getting authentic and diverse voices on and off the screen— although ... this is important ... But also making sure there is genuine diversity of thought and experience.”

He went on to suggest that some people think that Sky and CNN are better news providers and prefer them to the BBC. There are bound to be some people who think that; it is a question of taste. He does at least end on a positive note, which I welcome. He said that the BBC has to find its place in the age of streaming and subscription sites, such as YouTube and Netflix, but he also said that,

“the BBC is an institution to be cherished ... We would be crazy to throw it away but it must reflect all of our nation, and all perspectives.”

I certainly agree with that, and I refer to our previous Culture Secretary, the noble Baroness, Lady Morgan, who said:

“We would be much less informed and inspired as a society if we didn’t have a healthy pluralistic and universally available PSB system.”

That puts it in some kind of perspective.

I shall cite one more quote. It is from a briefing I had from BECTU, a broadcast trade union, and addresses value for money for customers:

“The annual cost of the License Fee is £154.50 per household. This funds all BBC TV output, iPlayer, BBC News, BBC Weather, BBC Radio (as well as other public service broadcasters). It is a unique mix of entertainment, news and information. For comparison a standard Netflix subscription cost £108 per year and only includes access to their streaming service. A digital-only subscription to the Times costs £312 per year. It is impossible to argue that the License Fee does not represent value for money in the modern media market.” [*]

It ends on one interesting little line:

“It is also important to note that the Netflix model is based on a long-term debt of over \$12 bn.”

That concentrates the mind a bit.

In introducing this debate, I want to focus on the BBC's contribution to the cultural and creative economy, as the title of the debate states. I am an avid viewer and listener across a range of channels, including Netflix, and I recognise that we live in a global multimedia world. I cannot help reflecting that when public service broadcasting began, Lord Reith, the first director-general, coined what I believe to be one of the best ever mission statements. He said that the role of the BBC was to "inform, educate and entertain". Those criteria are still relevant to public service broadcasters in today's multimedia environment.

To put creative industries in context, they contribute some £100.5 billion to the UK economy, and public service broadcasters make an enormous contribution to the industry. The BBC is the biggest single investor in the UK creative industries. It contributes hundreds of millions of pounds to the wider sector. Every £1 spent on the BBC through the licence fee produces £2 in value through jobs, economic opportunities and expenditure. The Impact of a Change in the BBC's Licence Fee Revenue report, produced by PwC in 2015, found that every £1 increase in licence fee revenue would generate about 60p of extra economic value. Conversely, a 25% decrease in the licence fee over five years would slash GDP by £630 million and lead to 32,000 job losses.

BBC research and development alone delivers significant value to the creative community, the wider industry and the UK economy. Every £1 spent by the BBC on research and development during the last charter delivered a return of at least £5 to £9 to the UK. That equates to a total economic benefit of between £827 million and £1.4 billion in the period 2007 to 2016.

The licence fee underpins not only the BBC but the competitive environment that supports the success of UK broadcasting. When the BBC performs well, commercial broadcasters raise their game to compete for audiences, which challenges the BBC to aim higher. In other words, it is a positive feedback loop, not a zero-sum game.

BBC investment over many decades has helped to develop significant creative economies across the UK. It has major production centres in Glasgow, Cardiff, Belfast, Salford, Bristol, Birmingham and London, so it is not true to say that it is just urban—although those are urban centres. Its range is far and wide, and over 50% of the BBC's employee and network television spend is outside London. This investment has driven not just BBC creativity but

significant hubs of independent production. For example, Bristol has become an international hub for natural history production, following decades of BBC investment in its Natural History Unit, and Wales is home to BBC hits such as “Doctor Who” and “His Dark Materials”.

The BBC has announced further plans to support small and emerging independents across the UK. It already commissions significantly more small producers and out-of-London producers than any other broadcaster, and these new measures will boost the strength of UK production across the country. The measures will include a £1 million small independent fund to support small and emerging companies; bespoke deals such as tailored cash flow terms, d risk arrangements and help securing third-party funding; and tailored events to build stronger connections between emerging small companies and the BBC. Public service broadcasters employ over 500 trained journalists, and sponsor journalists for local media, and a significant number of apprentices.

On the apprenticeship front, it was interesting to see that the BBC spent over £7 million in 2017, rising to £12.7 million in 2018, on entry-level schemes and apprenticeships. It has also ring-fenced work experience placements for unemployed young people via Jobcentre Plus, and visited over 1,000 schools through the BBC Young Reporter project to help develop media literacy skills and inspire the next generation of journalists, no matter what their background, in order to give everyone with the potential to succeed the opportunity to work in the industry, and not just in the BBC. It has also launched a pre-joiner programme, Get In To Media, developed with support from the Sutton Trust and MyKindaFuture.

The next generation of young journalists, producers and directors will make a vital contribution to the creative economy. Interestingly, the BBC has banned unpaid internships, and all the work experience placements are capped at two weeks, except in rare circumstances. Therefore, a huge contribution to the creative economy environment is made not just by the BBC but by all other public service broadcasters.

In a speech by the chief executive of ITV to the APPG, she said:

“The name will need to change because”

public service broadcasting

“won’t just be about broadcasting in future.”

That is absolutely true. We are moving into an era of streaming as well as broadcasting—in fact, we are not moving into it; we are already there. She continued:

“But the job of making programmes with a public purpose, available to everyone, is essential in the 21st Century. A gold standard of trusted national and local journalism amidst the anarchy of fake news.”

That is a very pertinent comment.

I want to talk about the future. We are now in a post-Brexit environment where our flourishing creative industries will make an even more vital contribution to the UK economy. Public service broadcasters, which are the envy of the world, do much to promote UK culture and values, as I have already said. The current arrangement with the licence fee, and with advertising supporting the other public service broadcast channels, is a delicate balance. As I explored earlier, changing the **BBC** to a subscription service or making it dependent on advertising will undermine public service broadcasting.

I hope that in replying the Minister will let us know the Government’s intentions. Do they recognise the importance of public service broadcasting to the creative economy? I—and, I think, many others—dispute the idea that changing from the licence fee will be an easily achieved objective. I, along with many others, believe that, no matter what threats might emanate from the Government, there will be a fight to preserve the independence of this vital asset, which is admired by practically every other country around the world as an independent—I stress that word—public service broadcaster, and I believe that everybody in this Chamber will join in that fight to preserve the vital nature of public service broadcasting.

I have tried to restrict my contribution to this debate in the hope that a few more minutes might be available to others, but I end by quoting the words of one of my favourite songwriters, Joni Mitchell, who said that

“you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone”.

I hope that we never see the day when the BBC and public service broadcasting in the way we know it today—independent, wide-ranging and serving the needs of our nation—ever disappears.

12.49 pm

Lord McNally (LD)

My Lords, I thank the Labour Party for using one of its slots for this debate and the noble Lord, Lord Young, for the very constructive way in which he opened it. I am reminded of a phrase that has gone down the ages: “We are the masters now.” The noble Lord, Lord Hennessey, will be able to tell us whether Hartley Shawcross actually said that, but there has always been a kind of opprobrium of a new Government that comes in with a sense of triumphalism and score-settling. I must say, the way that this Government have launched themselves on to the BBC is very worrying indeed. It is worth remembering that the BBC is protected by the royal charter from the day-to-day vindictiveness and intimidation of a Government.

Looking for support in the battle ahead, I am reminded from past debates that the Conservatives have a proud record on public service broadcasting. A Conservative Government established the BBC as a public body, protected and underpinned by the royal charter. A Conservative Government introduced commercial television on a regional basis, giving it regional strengths, which ITV retains today—I still think of myself as coming from “Granada-land”—and the late Lord Whitelaw was the political inspiration behind Channel 4, with its reputation for risk and non-conformity. This record should not be cast aside lightly in abeyance to those who see the BBC as the mortal enemy. The licence fee is probably the least bad way of financing the BBC and should be protected from populist ways to weaken it. It should not be used as a bran tub from which Governments can pluck popular goodies at will.

What is now under way is a fight to preserve the unique benefits of a public service ecology, which was preserved and promoted by the noble Lord, Lord Young. It is a debate that should be conducted sensibly and with due confidence from the public that it is national, not political, ends that are being followed. Our debate would also be better informed if those

national newspapers running stories hostile to the BBC or to other public service broadcasters were automatically to spell out for their readers the commercial benefits to their proprietors of any particular course of action.

In his remarks, the noble Lord, Lord Young, spelled out the various ways in which the BBC has contributed to our national life for over a century. It has been the source that everybody turns to for the news when there is a crisis. I would like to see the alleged research that shows that people look to Sky or to CNN, good as they are. When the going gets tough, the tough turns to the BBC. Those values that the BBC has embodied for almost a century have been supported by Governments of all parties. As the noble Lord, Lord Young, warned us so well, once lost, those values brought by the BBC to our national life will never be recovered. If we lose them, Fox News, here we come.

12.53 pm

Lord Gilbert of Panteg (Con)

My Lords, I welcome this timely debate and congratulate the Labour Party on securing it and the noble Lord, Lord Young, on opening it so comprehensively. It is also a great pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord McNally, whose contribution was typically passionate and informed.

I am privileged to chair your Lordships' Communications and Digital Select Committee. We recently published a report on the future of PSBs; in the time available, I will highlight only a few of our conclusions. Last year, as chair of the committee, I attended the Royal Television Society Cambridge conference as a guest of ITV and attended a Hyde Park concert as an audience member and guest of the BBC. The noble Lord, Lord Young, is right to highlight the economic as well as the creative role of PSBs and the BBC in particular. Many noble Lords who are speaking today have made notable contributions to our nation's creative life, and I look forward to hearing from them. I will dwell not on the huge cultural contributions of PSBs but on their critical and economic role.

Our creative industries are huge, growing and world-class. We have all seen the superlatives. They are central to our economy and will provide the jobs of the future. In a post-AI world, creativity in all its forms will drive future job growth and provide satisfying and fulfilling careers for future generations as other professions and skills decline in the age

of automation. Right at the heart of our creative sector is the rapidly growing and changing UK film and TV production sector.

When we started taking evidence, I thought that we would produce a report with recommendations on how we might help PSBs simply to survive in this rapidly changing world, in which they would be bound to decline. However, witness after witness, from the SVODs investing so heavily in UK production to independent producers and non-PSB commercial broadcasters, highlighted that it was the mixed ecology that made the UK such an attractive place for them in which to invest and create jobs. So it seemed that the question was not what we could do to help PSBs to survive but how to help them to thrive and continue to play a critical role at the heart of our creative industries, nurturing talent, taking risks and reflecting Britain in all its diversity. To me, that says that these industries must be at the heart of our future industrial strategy and central to our economic policy. I hope that the Minister will tell us whether the Government take that view.

In our report, we said we would miss the PSBs when they had gone and, as I said, we highlighted what needed to be done to ensure that that did not happen. That is not down to the Government alone. The PSBs, most particularly the BBC, have to change and adapt. I agree with the Secretary of State, who said today that diversity is about more than reaching younger and BAME audiences, critical though that is; it is about having fair and broad on-screen representation across all communities and reflecting the views of people outside London. Genuine impartiality is about having genuine diversity of thought and experience.

I pay tribute to the select committee that I chair. It is typical of your Lordships' House: expert, experienced and diligent. We produced a comprehensive report and I have had only a moment or two to touch on a few of our recommendations. However, I want to touch on the issue of the future funding of the BBC. We looked at the evidence and took the view that the licence fee continues to be the best way to fund the BBC. We found that the BBC should not have been asked, nor should it have agreed, to take on the funding of over-75 free licences. However, while we were critical of the Government, we were also critical of the BBC, which negotiated that settlement, which came as part of a wider package that it welcomed at the time. We felt strongly that the way in which the BBC is funded needs to be open and transparent on all sides. We called for a funding commission. The Government may not agree with that or think that it is the right way forward, but does the

Minister agree with Margot James, the then Minister, who said in evidence to the Committee that there was

“clearly a case for greater transparency”?

Does the Minister agree that the right way to have this debate is to start by asking what we as a society want the BBC to do, work out what that will cost and then, and only then, look at how that cost can be met? Does she agree that, while the BBC faces huge challenges and most certainly makes mistakes, it has a vital role in our human lives and our future economy, and that our task is to help it to meet those challenges and to thrive?

Lastly, does the Minister agree that finding someone to fill the inestimable boots of the noble Lord, Lord Hall, whom I thank warmly for his services as director-general, is going to be one tough task, and one that is for the BBC alone?

12.58 pm

The Earl of Clancarty (CB)

My Lords, the noble Lord, Lord Young, has tabled an important and timely debate. I start with a quote from a recent Radio 4 interview with the media analyst Claire Enders, who said:

“The BBC ... has a civic purpose. Netflix does not”.

This is the primary distinguishing characteristic of the BBC, implicit in its original mission statement. The BBC provides a public space for public debate through informing, through education, through the arts and entertainment. Other public broadcasters and the more commercial channels do some of this, but those who believe there should be a more level playing field misunderstand the nature of the relationship between the BBC and other services, including the video-on-demand services. As a purely non-commercial service, the BBC keeps the others honest and has done so for many decades, through being able to focus entirely on the notion of quality and now, globally, on areas other than world news. This is less a marketplace and more a richly productive ecosystem. The Government should not forget the considerable soft power that accrues from the BBC's place in this ecosystem.

Mistakes are made. I point to a recent one: the Government have taken a leaf straight out of the Trump playbook in effectively no-platforming the public broadcasters, including the “Today” programme. They would rather continue to campaign to stay in power through social media, including Twitter, than debate the issues of the day through broadcasters. This is deeply insulting to the public. In my view, “Today” should have responded immediately by interviewing shadow Secretaries of State and effectively empty-chairing the relevant Ministers. The Government would have changed their tune fairly quickly, but this is a minor quibble in the scheme of things. “Today” will now have Times Radio on its tail, although I am sure that the BBC will rise to this challenge boldly.

“Core values” as a term applied to the BBC makes me uneasy, since it suggests that you can strip back to the core. A diminished BBC would be a blander BBC and make us a considerably poorer country. The BBC echoes the wider values of society because, at its best, it speaks to and for everyone by virtue of it being a public platform. This is true even if it is left to individuals to pay for the licence fee, rather than everyone doing so through their taxes. The BBC’s ethos informs all parts of its output. There is immense value still in a commercial-free zone, including for young children. It is a choice that viewers and listeners ought to have the right to.

I am not certain that the public are properly aware of what the licence fee continues to provide, although I am sure we will hear much of this today. It should be food for thought: a nexus of broadcasting; original programming—although this should be proportionately more, in my view; creative development; events and festivals; orchestras and choirs; and much more. These are aspects of a unique culture which most people will access or be a part of, even if, at a particular time in their lives, they are not always tuning in. A recent poll shows that 79% of the public would like the Government to continue to pay for the over-75s but, if we lost the licence fee or—more to the point—the moneys that the licence fee brings, we would not have this unique and extraordinary service, which continues to be a huge creative force and a force for good in not only this country, but the world.

1.02 pm

[The Lord Bishop of Salisbury](#)

My Lords, the timing of this debate could hardly be better. I also want to thank the noble Lord, Lord Young, for his introduction. The Media and Telecoms 2020 & Beyond conference and the Culture Secretary's contribution to it inevitably inform a lot of what is to be said. I also wondered whether I need to declare an interest, having been the vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields for 16 years, given that the first religious service ever broadcast came from there, by the BBC, in January 1924. The link continues. I never made much income from it, but it is a significant relationship with considerable affection for the BBC built into it.

The debate has focused on public service and the contribution of the BBC to the economy and creative culture of the country. Other noble Lords can speak much better than I can about the economic and creative culture contribution but, given the Government's commitment to levelling up, you would think that the contribution of the BBC through Salford and all its local and regional outputs would be a significant part of what is to be considered.

I am sorry this is a bit like a sermon, but I will focus on three words to make my points: "British", "Broadcasting" and "Corporation". The Minister is right that the BBC must do more to reflect the country's

"genuine diversity of thought and experience",

but the BBC also shapes British identity; it does not just reflect it. It is a really subtle relationship, which goes both ways. In terms of the importance of public service in a country that has grown more secular, as well as more plural, the level of religious illiteracy and the lack of religious grammar is very significant for public service broadcasting.

"Nation shall speak peace unto nation."

That, of course, is an adaptation of the prophet Micah, and that is where the roots of this lie. You cannot just cut off the institution from the roots that have informed it. We are grateful for the religious broadcasting that takes place, particularly on local radio and Radios 2 and 4 on Sunday mornings, reaching audiences who otherwise would not be reached. This helps to build relationships between faith communities. It is not just a Christian monopoly, because religious broadcasting has developed.

That was about British identity and how Britain has grown and developed. There is also a sense in which broadcasting continues to be significant. It is not just narrowcasting, which happens so much through social media and can be deeply influenced, in ways unseen, from outside. This is in parentheses, for the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Salisbury to comment on: why do we not have that report on Russian interference in our previous election and referendum processes? That is of huge significance in terms of how easy it is to influence narrowcasting through social media. The BBC does a really good job of broadcasting critical debate that is robust and helps to establish, over time, an element of truth otherwise not there.

Corporations need cherishing. This is about the body, an institution. In our time, we are not good at cherishing institutions and we need to do it in a way that upholds the body of the institution for the sake of the country. This is not one of those bodies that needs to be dealt with by disruption and discontinuity. It needs to be cherished, and the Government need to know that we want the BBC to be safe in their hands.

1.06 pm

Lord Puttnam (Lab)

My Lords, I too thank the noble Lord, Lord Young, for making possible this incredibly timely debate—albeit the Roger Bannister version, as I view it. In the short time available, I hope to remind your Lordships that the current project to undermine public service broadcasting is not new. It is simply the most recent iteration of a decades-long campaign of salami-slicing and intimidation by, I am sad to say, successive Conservative Governments, many of whom have sought to take the wind out of the BBC's sails and erode the trust it enjoys among the public. It is the now-familiar Putin playbook: promote fear and distrust, and allow the consequences to multiply.

As the noble Lord, Lord McNally, has already suggested, there is something rather ironic in the determination shown by Conservative leaders to dismantle an institution of which the party itself should be rightly proud. Perhaps the Prime Minister has forgotten that it was under the leadership of his hero, Winston Churchill, that a Conservative Government passed the Television Act 1954—legislation that protected the position of the BBC while, at the

same time, introducing a brilliantly conceived system of regulated competition through a new Independent Television Authority. This system established a nationwide ecology—there is that word again—of public service broadcasting that allowed all aspects of the media to thrive. Crucially, while there was competition for audiences, the BBC/ITV duopoly did not compete for revenue.

The one-nation vision that lay at the heart of policy-making 60 years ago would appear to have evaporated and turned into something rather more sinister. There is no lack of vision in this Government's policy towards the BBC. The vision is there; it was laid out with paint-by-numbers clarity by the Prime Minister's principal adviser, Dominic Cummings, in 2004. Writing that year, he called for a campaign to undermine the corporation's credibility, suggesting that:

"The BBC is a determined propagandist with a coherent ideology."

To combat this, he argued for the creation of a British version of Fox News. He believed this could be achieved through a

"campaign to end the licence fee".

Here was a vision that represented a massive departure from Conservatism, certainly as most Members of this House would understand it. Its genesis was that of Trumpian populism, an ideology that treats contempt for institutions as a form of political weaponry and is a long way from the wisdom of Edmund Burke, who once said:

"Rage and frenzy will pull down more in half an hour than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in a hundred years."

For the past few months I have spent a great deal of my life in the Committee Corridor, chairing a Select Committee looking at the impact of digital technology on democracy. One thing has already emerged with quite frightening clarity: confusion over where to seek verifiable fact. However, thanks largely to the vision of the noble Lord, Lord Birt, who I am delighted is in his place, and as recently confirmed by Ofcom, the BBC has emerged as the digital gold standard in the provision of trusted information in an era of fake news. Surely, as we stand on the brink of a global pandemic, that gold standard of trust is more crucial than it has ever been.

This can no longer be about the wilful vengeance of politicians; it is about the very real possibility of saving lives. To paraphrase the noble Lord, Lord Hennessy, speaking in this House just two months ago, trust is the scarcest and most precious political metal we have. Sad to say, I am far from reassured by the Secretary of State's well-trailed retreat from earlier briefings. I can only repeat my belief that we are watching a well-rehearsed process of intimidation and destabilisation. Hopefully, when she comes to respond to the debate the Minister will unequivocally assure me that I am wrong, because we cannot allow an unremitting vendetta to rob us of the most valuable asset that democracy has at its disposal.

1.10 pm

Lord Lilley (Con)

My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, and to congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Young, on introducing this debate. I must declare an interest: throughout his working life, my father worked for the BBC in a humble administrative capacity, so I was brought up with a filial affection for the corporation—unfortunately, one not reciprocated by it.

My affection persists but does not blind me to the BBC's faults. Nor do those faults, which I shall discuss, make me want to end the licence fee, either to punish it or to try to remedy those faults, which I do not think it would not do—although I fear that the licence fee may be eroded by technology. The aims of the BBC, as has been said, are to inform, educate and entertain. At its best, it does all those superbly. In the current coronavirus situation, the information role of the BBC has been invaluable. On education, "In Our Time", presented by the noble Lord, Lord Bragg, is always superb; we heard this morning about Paul Dirac. To me, as a physicist, that was wonderful to hear. On entertainment, it produces some unmatched comedies and dramas.

Sadly, however, we should admit—although I think I will be the only person in this debate to do so—that people in the BBC have a certain groupthink on some key issues, notably immigration, climate change and Europe. Instead of informing on those issues, it censors; instead of educating, it seeks to indoctrinate; and instead of entertaining, it seeks to preach.

I will give concrete examples from my own experience, not because that experience is important but because I can be sure that the examples are factual rather than vague allegations.

People in the **BBC**, typical of the metropolitan elites, see migration as a key issue for virtue signalling, as well as it being in their own economic interest to oppose any controls on migration. Invariably, they cite the need for nurses, because insufficient people in this country want to train as nurses, so we have to import them from abroad. That has been sustained by the **BBC**, but it is untrue. When I appeared on the **BBC** three years ago and pointed out that 40,000 applicants that year had been turned away from nursing courses in this country, the **BBC** expressed scorn and subsequently phoned me up to demand that I prove it—clearly intending to challenge me. I was able to prove it in 10 minutes with figures from the Royal College of Nursing and UCAS, but the **BBC** has never used that information since. As a result, I doubt whether there is a Member in this House who knows that last year, 24,000 applicants for nursing courses in this country were turned away because those courses are still rationed.

The second issue is climate change. I was asked by Quentin Letts to appear on a witty programme, “What’s the Point Of...?”, about the Met Office. They invited the only two members of the Climate Change Committee in the other place who had been scientifically trained, of whom I was one. I explained that, while obviously I believe in the science of global warming—I studied physics at Cambridge—the sensitivity of the climate to a given amount of CO₂ is likely to be at the lower end of the spectrum spelled out by the IPCC, rather than the higher end which the Met Office always assumed. To illustrate my point, I pointed out that the Met Office produced a glossy pamphlet in 2004 saying that with its new computer, it could forecast accurately the future warming of the planet and that over the next decade—by 2014—it would have increased by 0.3 degrees. But 2014 had passed and we knew that it had in fact increased by between nothing and a tiny proportion of that amount.

Following this, there was an eruption from all the eco-fascists and within the **BBC**. The **BBC** referred itself to the **BBC** Trust for, in its words, “Giving voice to people like Peter Lilley”. This is the organisation that was proud to give voice to the IRA—but it was anxious not to give voice to me. It then removed the whole programme from the website and

published an apology for ever having allowed me to utter this simple truth: the Met Office had got its long-term forecast wrong.

I am sorry if I am overrunning, but I am the only spokesman for the opposition in this debate and it is normal to give the opposition a little more space. The third issue I want to raise is the EU. The debate over the last three years has focused on attempts by remainers to keep the UK in the customs union, rather than just a free-trade association.

Viscount Younger of Leckie (Con)

I am sorry to interrupt my noble friend, but the time limit is four minutes and I am afraid that applies to him.

Lord Lilley

Censorship persists, even in this House—but of course I give way to my noble friend. I shall put my views online. Those who are interested in fact rather than its suppression may read them there.

1.16 pm

Baroness Bakewell (Lab)

My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lord Young for initiating this debate, which is clearly extremely timely. I agree with the many things said from these Benches about the importance of the BBC. However, limited by time I wish to address a single subject, one hinted at by my noble friend Lord Puttnam: the influence of Dominic Cummings on government policy towards the BBC.

In January 2004, with the Tory party languishing in opposition, as director of the think tank the New Frontiers Foundation, Cummings wrote that until the Conservative Party “realises that ... the BBC is a mortal enemy ... then it will continue on its current course.”

Six months later, he wrote:

“It is a mistake in general for a Conservative leader to appear on the Today programme unless he is announcing a major new positive proposal ... Effort should be diverted from Today to programmes that affect the public ... more. Today itself needs to be audited by a proper media monitoring”

enterprise. The following month, he wrote:

“The privileged closed world of the BBC needs to be turned upside down and its very existence should be the subject of a very intense and well-funded campaign that involves bringing out whistleblowers armed with internal memos and taped conversations of meetings.”

Subsequently, after a programme referring to a complaint about the “Today” programme’s coverage of Iraq, he wrote:

“Another reason why the Right should be aiming for the end of the BBC in its current form and the legalisation of TV political advertising.”

In the autumn of that year, again:

“There are three structural things that the Right needs to happen in terms of communications ... the undermining of the BBC’s credibility ... the creation of a Fox News equivalent”

and talk shows

“to shift the centre of gravity”

and

“the end of the ban on TV political advertising”.

Later that year—this is still 2004—he wrote that,

“one thing that can be done between now and the election is fire missile after missile at the BBC every time it engages in this sort of reporting”,

and that the right,

“can only prosper in the long-term by undermining the BBC’s reputation for impartiality ... and by changing the law on political advertising.”

Since then, a number of anonymously sourced and funded anti-BBC websites and YouTube channels have been set up over the past decade.

Dominic Cummings went on to run the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum. Since the 2019 election, he has been chief adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson in No. 10 Downing Street. Given that the Government have already implemented his recommended policy of refusing to engage with the BBC’s “Today” programme, will the Minister please confirm whether his ongoing agenda for undermining the BBC is now government policy?

1.19 pm

Viscount Colville of Culross (CB)

My Lords, I declare an interest as a series producer at Raw TV making content for CNN.

PSBs in the UK are under threat as never before.

“The power of British television has essentially moved”

to Los Angeles. Those were the words of Andy Harries, CEO of the makers of “The Crown”, when he gave evidence to the Communications and Digital Committee, of which I am proud to be a member. It is a series made by Netflix, one of the winners in the new world of subscription giants. American broadcasting channels and platforms are pouring money into UK-made content. It is a boom time for the creative industry in this country, but if we want public service broadcasters that reflect the UK back to itself and concentrate on UK news and current affairs, and defy the labour market by moving creative jobs from London to the regions and nations, we have to fight hard to protect them.

They have all been under attack—especially the BBC—from all sides of the political divide for biased programming and reporting. The Culture Secretary said today that the BBC has a “narrow urban outlook” and is “slow to pick up” on recent trends, implicitly questioning its impartiality. Public service broadcasters are empowered by their impartiality. In a digital world in which almost everything is editorialised and social media creates filter bubbles of

content to reinforce users' political view of the world, we need to emphasise the value of mandated impartiality. It means that public service broadcasters are regulated to be transparent and accountable, a powerful bulwark against the continued polarisation subsuming our political discourse.

I too was very glad that Mr Dowden today said that

“the BBC is an institution to be cherished”.

Yet it has been lambasted by the Government. Its financial security is questioned by significant sources threatening to turn it, or at least parts of it, into a subscription service. PSBs have the new BritBox as a small subscription service for archive and there is even talk in the press of them coming together to create a non-subscription UK PSB platform as a one-stop shop for digital audiences, which would be a very good idea. However, for the PSBs to launch themselves against what will soon be 12 US subscription services in the UK at least will be financial and cultural folly. These US-based giants are global, mostly supported by either massive deficit funding or very generous parent companies that can outspend any home-grown rival.

However, the Government are right to question the BBC's universal licence fee. It has served the corporation well, but it is decreasingly able to fund the organisation properly. Some 37,000 fewer licences were purchased last year and the forecast is for the reduction to continue. As we approach the licence fee interim settlement talks in 2022, it is a good time to start discussing alternative funding models. I am in favour of a progressive household tax, as there is in Germany. It reflects the differing wealth of households and maintains the universality of the BBC's funding, which is so crucial in allowing it to commission programmes for underserved audiences. Will this model be considered by the Government in their funding talks with the BBC?

The Government are right to recognise that the future of PSBs is online, but it is becoming ever more difficult for online viewers to discover PSB content on digital platforms. Ofcom, in its recent report on PSB prominence, said that changing viewer behaviour in this new era means that without new regulatory safeguards to maintain the prominence of these channels online, audiences will be lost. This will happen quickly and will be costly to reverse. The Government have said they are committed to these recommendations. The fast-

changing market means that it is a matter of urgency that this new legislation is brought before Parliament soon, so when might this happen?

I ask the Minister to fully support UK PSBs. Without them, our world-class broadcasting services will be subsumed by the inexorable growth and world march of US streaming giants.

1.24 pm

Lord Bragg (Lab)

My Lords, first I thank my noble friend Lord Young for calling this important debate, and for speaking so well and covering so much ground. It is a starting shot in what will be a long and, regrettably, corrosive ideological battle. I declare an interest: I work as a freelancer for BBC Radio 4.

My greater interest is that, as far back as I can remember, the BBC, one way or another, has entertained, educated and informed me and millions of others through radio and television—and it still does. For almost 100 years, it has been in the grain of our lives—and it still is. The BBC is the sum of its programmes. Its range is incomparable—from the cosmic to the minority to the eccentric—and it is envied globally. Yet it appears that this Government want to thwack—a word straight from the nursery—the BBC. The Tories have had a good record of thwacking over the years. The northern manufacturing industries, which once compared with anything in Germany and France, were thwacked by Mrs Thatcher. How else could an island that began shipbuilding in the time of Alfred the Great have totally lost its shipbuilding traditions? Local government—the proud continuation of ancient and independent regions—has also been thwacked, and on it goes. The BBC needs to be redirected because of the new television armadas storming across from America—aided and cheered on by Dominic Cummings—elegantly eviscerated by my noble friend Lord Puttnam and scorched by my noble friend Lady Bakewell.

The BBC licence fee should be examined, but the best way is to reform, not dismantle, it. I agree with the noble Lord, Lord McNally, that the licence fee, so far, is the least bad method of doing that. A means test, one way or another, might work—perhaps there are other

ways—so I agree with the noble Lord on that one. The declared policy of sending a wrecking ball through an organisation that has taken almost a hundred years to evolve and is now fine-tuned to every class, age group, creed and niche in this country is childish. The BBC is deeply intermixed and intermeshed with our culture. For many people, it is our culture, so why tear it apart? Is this the best we can do? It is depressing that the Conservatives do not understand the monetisation of the big American networks—with their many billions of dollars of debt—which are very limited in their programme spectrum and, as far as this country is concerned, are a model from hell. We do things differently here. Many Americans believe that they should learn from us, rather than we from them, in the matter of range, reach and depth of broadcasting.

Post Brexit, we have to build a new country. We have strengths in the City, which need to be affirmed, but our three modern strengths—our universities, culture and media—are all accelerating employers, capable of being even bigger earners and deeply influential for this country's good. The BBC is key to all of these—for instance, almost two million people work in the media. It has grown rapidly since the 1940s and outstrips most of the traditional industries. There is no reason why those two million should not turn into three or four million, providing skilled, niche jobs globally and in demand. The BBC is the core of this development. We could become a media island, rivalling Silicon Valley.

Link this with the strength of our universities. English universities are rated as the top universities in the world—not least the Open University—and their research departments are growing at pace. We then have the widely praised strength of the arts, in which the BBC is a huge player. This trilogy—the media, universities and the arts—could rise post Brexit, but not if we fail to see the profound, interwoven basic structures at work. The BBC is crucial to this.

What sort of country do we want to be? That is the question. The BBC is key to a transformation that will be sorely needed, not only in itself but in what it feeds and drives. Above all, it stands for and tells us who we are. That cohesive self-knowledge is increasingly necessary and energising in what is a fractured time. People in this country will march for the BBC because they know that, since the beginning, it has served them well in a democratic and equal way. For almost 100 years, they have paid for it with very little complaint. It is a public service; it belongs to them and we cannot let them down.

1.28 pm

Baroness Jay of Paddington (Lab)

My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow my noble friend Lord Bragg, who has enormous authority in this area. I hope and expect that this will be the first of many debates when we discuss again the new threats to public broadcasting, which, like my noble friend Lord Bragg and other noble Lords, I regard as one of the central pillars of Britain's unique cultural life.

In my brief contribution, I will make two points from personal experience. First, I declare an interest, albeit an historical one. In my pretty varied and rather disjointed working life, my longest and most fulfilling employment was with the BBC. For over two decades, I was a broadcast producer and journalist trying to achieve the very high standards that the corporation demanded. Those high standards of factual accuracy, objective assessment of controversial issues and rational analysis have always been bedrock requirements in the corporation. I was also proud to be part of an organisation that has been seen as a flag carrier for Britain, recognised and respected throughout the world.

However, my professional and fundamental belief in public service broadcasting is not simply the loyalty of an ex-employee. Most importantly, it is based in international broadcasting experience, specifically in the various times I have lived and worked in the United States. The vivid contrast between what the audience experiences on this side of the Atlantic compared with the other is certainly not about the respective qualities of the programme-makers. Rather, it is about what I describe as the necessarily "breathless" nature of American programming, driven by the intensely competitive environment of a profit-based system.

I have just returned from spending several weeks in the United States, and can easily illustrate this point with a very current example: the comparative coverage of the alarming coronavirus, which to me encapsulates the advantages of our public broadcasting system. From the start of the Chinese epidemic, the rich American networks poured resources into their coverage, as they always do. Every evening, the nightly news includes correspondents following the story all over the globe. However, no report lasts longer than a hurried 30 seconds before returning to New York and another lengthy commercial break. The medical

experts are allowed perhaps a minute to explain a complex issue, and when Vice-President Pence assumed government responsibility for the crisis, he simply appeared in a one-sentence clip from a Washington media conference. None of this has provided consistent, detailed information to help the anxious public. President Trump has merely contributed a Twitter blitz, blaming the Democratic Party for creating health hysteria. At the same time, the President has announced budget proposals to cut funding to the valiant but tiny public broadcast sector there to zero—zero—over the next three years.

In stark contrast, in this country, your Lordships will have seen and heard special programmes on the coronavirus from all the PBS networks. There have been lengthy, informative interviews with health experts and scientists, and Ministers have been accessible and open—even breaking the No. 10 omertà to appear on the “Today” programme.

Once again, at a difficult and potentially dangerous time, the **BBC** is the primary source for responsible news and critical information. We are experiencing public service broadcasting at its very best. It is hard to imagine any British Government, however ideologically driven, choosing this time to undermine such an extraordinarily valuable asset. Let us hope that the extremists recognise this before it is too late.

1.32 pm

[Baroness Liddell of Coatdyke \(Lab\)](#)

My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lord Young on securing this debate at such an important time. It is interesting to look around the House to see which Benches are busiest. I suspect that a lot of noble Lords on the other side of the House have not sought to come in because they agree with the position that is adopted by this debate. My noble friend Lord Puttnam made a powerful speech that sums up, more eloquently than I could, my view of where we are in this debate about the **BBC**. This is a fundamental issue about the nature of British culture and the British people.

I speak as a Scot who once worked for the **BBC**: I did not last very long, because it was in the days of received pronunciation and, as your Lordships may have noticed, I do not have

received pronunciation. However, it was one of the proudest experiences of my life, because I learned that the BBC is the gold standard, admired around the world.

I want to say a little about the World Service, because it is one of this country's most effective tools of public diplomacy, and it gets into places that no one else can reach. It is always a symbol of how useful it is that dictators the world over try to find ways to block the World Service, or indeed the BBC in general. It has already been cut but it is still very good indeed, and it should be treasured. On the issue of decriminalising the licence fee, which will cost £200 million, I worry that the bean-counters will look again at the BBC World Service.

I will spend a little time on a much more parochial issue, perhaps in your Lordships' view, although I see it as integral to the culture of the United Kingdom. The Culture Secretary is today talking about the need for diversity in the BBC and the need to be less urban. Perhaps I can politely suggest to him that he needs to get out more. One need only look at some of the broadcasting in Scotland: at BBC Alba, the Gaelic channel, and BBC Radio nan Gàidheal, a Gaelic channel. I suspect that the noble and learned Lord, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, is the only Gaelic speaker in the House. Gaelic is spoken by a small number of people but it is a valuable culture. When Gaelic broadcasting took off, the need to make programmes gave a huge boost to the creative industries in Scotland. Programmes were made and people were taught skills, and, as a consequence of that, the creative broadcasting sector has grown. We now have a very useful partnership between BBC Scotland and Screen Scotland to make movies in Scotland; a lot of it is based on the BBC and Channel 4—another public sector broadcaster—having capability in Scotland. Diversity comes in many different forms, and that kind of diversity matters. To someone like me—a Scot who is proud to be British—one of the best examples is the British Broadcasting Corporation.

In various guises in my past, I have complained about bias in the BBC. The noble Lord, Lord Lilley, complains about bias in the BBC. The SNP had hundreds of people outside the BBC studios during the referendum campaign, complaining about bias in the BBC. I am sure that the Lib Dems have done it as well at some point. If we are all complaining, it must be getting something right. If we are all unhappy about bias, something must be working. We have a great opportunity to take the BBC into its next century. Let us not be myopic; let us not see Fox News as our ambition; let us be proud of what we have got. We are not good at doing that—this is a chance to do it.

1.36 pm

Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB)

My Lords, I draw your Lordships' attention to the Members' register of interests and declare that I am a board member of the BBC and work as a freelancer, mostly in sport. I will extend this debate on creative culture to sport and elite women's sport, and want to take a short time to describe the impact that sport has had on my life.

Watching the London Marathon in 1981 gave me the opportunity to think that somebody like me could do wheelchair racing. In 1990, when the BBC took a brave decision to put Helen Rollason on "Grandstand", as its first female presenter, that was a special moment. The public debate was, "How dare they allow a woman to be on television, talking about sport?"—because obviously none of us know anything about it. She was incredible; she changed the dialogue around women's sport and the Paralympics, pushing hard to move away from the very patronising coverage that we had experienced beforehand. That had a huge impact on my life.

Last year, BBC Sport set out to try to "change the game". The ambition was pretty simple: to make a huge commitment to women's sport. While in 2019, it accounted for only 3% of UK TV sports hours, the BBC delivered 33% of sports viewing figures and is the most popular destination for sports fans in the UK across all platforms. It is amazing to think that the continual investment in showing women's games is changing the conversation. I am glad to say that I do not often have to have the conversation any more about the fact that "Women don't play football like men". No, they do not, and that is why it is exciting; it is about giving young women the opportunity to see others.

Having the Women's FA Cup final, the Women's Football World Cup final, and the Netball World Cup on the television changes the conversation. In a changing world that is not easy, when sports rights can be expensive and there are funding limitations. Some 45 million people watched, listened or read about Change the Game, and it has 30 million followers on social media; 11 million people watched the TV coverage of the Netball World Cup.

The Women's Sport Trust did some research during the summer looking at the proportion and prominence of women's sport stories put out by different media companies. Of the top 10 stories on the BBC Sport homepage each day, 46% featured women's sports. If we look at the World Cup, 28 million TV viewers tuned in, with 11 million watching the semi-final between England and the USA. I am very proud to say that that made it the most watched sporting event of the year, bigger than the likes of the Rugby World Cup, Wimbledon and the Six Nations. It has been proved, again and again, that people want to watch women's sport.

The FA has stated that from September onwards, there were more than 850,000 committed participants playing 11-a-side, or small-sided football competitively, with a retention rate of 23% among existing adult female participants. That is a direct impact of being able to see women's sport on television. There is also more money flowing into the women's game because of this. Barclays paid £10 million to sponsor the Women's Super League—I never thought I would see that happen—SSE sponsors the Women's FA Cup, and Gatorade extended its global sponsorship of Manchester City to cover the women's team.

We should never underestimate the impact on young women of being able to see other women play sport at elite level.

1.40 pm

Lord Monks (Lab)

My Lords, I very much welcome the initiative of my noble friend Lord Young of Norwood Green in bringing this debate to the House. Now is the time for the many friends and admirers of the BBC to get into campaign mode, not just to save it from the attacks it has been experiencing, but to press for its expansion and development in order to put it on the best possible footing to face the future.

The UK does not have many national institutions that command widespread international regard and respect. The BBC does command that respect and also provides some much-needed glue for the relationships of the four nations of the UK. The concept of Britishness has diminished as Great British-labelled companies have shrunk or disappeared. Even BT

and BA prefer to downplay their full names. The BBC and the NHS remain proud and strong flagships of the best of Britain, shaping as well as reflecting the nation. The BBC in particular, as others have said, is regarded as the gold standard, setting a very high bar for the rest, including ITV and Sky. But the BBC has powerful enemies, and they are mobilising. The enemies are not the public, of whom 40 million use the BBC every day; they are not the young audience, 76% of whom support the BBC's mission; they are not the regions, where 50% of the BBC is now based; and they are not the many who regard the BBC as the most trusted source of news and the enemy of fake news.

The enemies, understandably, include rival media organisations, but they now include many in the Conservative Party and Government, who regard the BBC as being full of metropolitan lefties. This has led them to engage in a campaign against the licence fee and to the childish boycott of the "Today" programme. For the sake of fairness, I must say that the critics include some on the left who regard the BBC as a timid creature of the establishment—witness the unpleasant and disgraceful reception that Laura Kuenssberg has had to endure at times. My admiration for the BBC does not blind me to its weaknesses; the muddle on equal pay has been morale-sapping. More strategically, the competition now comes from deep-pocketed rivals, mainly from the United States, and the trend towards social media use—streaming and watching programmes at convenient times. This is a major challenge. However, the BBC can rise to these challenges. It has risen to previous ones and I am confident it can do so again.

Let us not assume that all is well on the other side of the Atlantic. As has been mentioned, Netflix has a long-term debt of \$12 billion. So instead of sniping and weakening the BBC, now is the time to strengthen it and public sector broadcasting in general. For me, this means keeping the licence fee, enforcing its collection and finding an alternative source of funding TV licences for the elderly. Public sector broadcasting is a jewel in the UK's crown—fight off its enemies and get behind a re-energised and strengthened BBC.

1.44 pm

[Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws \(Lab\)](#)

My Lords, as others have said, media freedom is a foundational value in a democracy. It is rather interesting that this Government, through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, are at this very time promoting media freedom around the world in a great project which I am involved in. This includes an expert legal panel of lawyers from around the world, and Britain—with Canada and other nations under the umbrella of UNESCO—is promoting media freedom. Yet it causes me some disquiet to say that, at the very same moment, the Government are not engaging with the BBC, trying to limit senior politicians taking part in BBC television debates and limiting their attendance at press conferences. That does not seem to fit with the idea of media freedom that we want to champion.

The BBC is recognised around the world as one of the jewels in the UK's crown. Here, I disagree with my noble friend who has just spoken, who said, "It's the one institution that's admired." It is not: our senior judiciary is also admired, but that too is under attack. Our Civil Service is greatly admired, and it is also under attack. We should be worried that these institutions, which are greatly respected around the world, are somehow at the receiving end of the attentions of Mr Cummings and the hard right. It also amuses me that the hard left is a source of great anxiety to many in your Lordships' House; the hard right should be just as alarming, if not more so.

All Governments get irritated by the BBC, as my noble friend Lady Liddell has said. Of course, the coverage, at times will be an unhappy criticism of those in government, but the current assault on the BBC has a more sinister and calculated provenance than anything that has gone before. Dominic Cummings has been mentioned a number of times and I am sure it will be a great source of delight to him, because we hear in the press that he rather likes being seen as the sinister author of so much that is going on. He is our Steve Bannon, and we should be clear about that. He is an ideologue and has great influence currently, and we can see from his writings what his ideology is. He is someone very much from the fringes politically, but unfortunately, he and others like him of the extreme right wing have captured the castle. Many on the Opposition Benches should be alarmed about that, because of the consequences that may come to pass.

Dominic Cummings and his friend James Frayne, and Frayne's wife Rachel Wolf, were all part of the think tank New Frontiers Foundation, which has already been mentioned. It has always been opaque regarding the source of its income, as indeed are some of the other

organisations around them. Frayne and his wife Rachel Wolf had both worked for extreme right-wing lobbying companies in the United States before they worked with Cummings. They had learned, before any of us even knew about any of this, how to install fake monitors and protesters on social media and how to create online smear apparatus. We should be very clear about what is going on: when he talks about going after the mortal enemy that is the BBC, he really is thinking about the Americanisation of our media ecology—a phrase others have already used.

I call for noble Lords to be alarmed about what is happening. Our institutions are under assault because the Conservative Party, with its long tradition, has been captured by sections of the hard right who want to deconstruct many of the good things about our society that hold us together. It is a scorched earth policy—beware.

1.49 pm

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP)

My Lords, I thank the Labour Party for securing this debate and the noble Lord, Lord Young, for the ringing conclusion to his introduction.

In a world of floods of dodgy or fake information, where commercial imperatives push broadcasters and publishers, driven by the profit motive, to even further extremes, where the nation needs reliable sources of information that bring together common understandings of the condition of itself, we need public service broadcasting, particularly the BBC. As the Green Party's long-term vision for the UK's future puts it, we need

“a d space for all citizens”

in which

“information and education are given equal precedence to entertainment.”

When there is a massive, pressing issue of coronavirus or flooding, the BBC should be there, providing immediate, authoritative, often local information that serves its communities and the national interest. When the topic is contentious and contested, immigration or

economics, it should provide thoughtful, accessible information able to support informed, careful debate.

As many noble Lords have said, visible pressure is put daily on the BBC by the right-wing commercial media, which has a clear interest in knocking down a competitor, and by the right-wing politicians who support it. The Green Party has many criticisms of the BBC's approach but, rather than using that as an argument for allowing decline, let us make it an argument for improvement. The principle of a public sector broadcaster is sound and must be defended. We have heard many noble Lords doing that already today, but there is a problem with the approach that many are taking. Defence of the BBC has been equated with defending the licence fee, and that means defending the undefendable, the already damaged and the outdated.

Why is the licence fee undefendable? It is now officially classified as a tax, and it operates as a deeply regressive, flat poll tax, one that falls at exactly the same level on the poorest bedsit in Wigan and the largest mansion in Chelsea. It has ludicrous anomalies, so that, depending on the tenancy agreement, one five-bedroom house in multiple occupancy can pay £154.50, while its identical neighbour can pay £772.50. It will now also fall on the over-75s who are not in receipt of pension tax credit. This is a situation for which the Government should be squarely blamed, not the BBC. We know that many pensioners who are eligible for the credit—about 1.3 million households—do not claim it. They will be forced to pay what they cannot afford.

Why is the licence fee damaged? It is politically damaged. Non-payment can result in individuals being sent to jail. Certainly, that is rare, because the courts try to avoid it, but some individuals are jailed and a much larger number live in fear of jail as a result—and that for non-payment of a sum that many of them simply cannot afford. I think that is impossible for those concerned about the vulnerable to defend.

Finally, the licence fee is outdated. As the noble Viscount, Lord Colville, said, the whole media landscape is changing. Almost half of UK households now subscribe to a subscription video-on-demand service—Netflix, Amazon TV or similar—and the very idea of the TV as a box in the corner or a screen on the wall that collects signals is going fast. By the time the current BBC charter ends, in December 2027, we will certainly be much further down this

road. This is not the way forward. We have to maintain funding for the BBC, but instead of the poll-tax funding model, we need a secure, hypothecated slice of general taxation for the BBC in the future, perhaps established by the mechanism of a funding commission, as your Lordships' Select Committee recommended.

1.53 pm

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op)

My Lords, I am grateful to speak in this debate and I join in the justifiably effusive congratulations to my noble friend Lord Young. This has been one of the most impressive and informed debates I have sat through in this Chamber, and we have many impressive ones—it has been really tremendous.

The role of public service broadcasting is a crucial issue. I highlighted it recently in a report I was privileged to prepare for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on threats to media freedom throughout Europe. As I reported, public service broadcasters are under increasing threat from the growing number of authoritarian Governments in Europe today, and now, sadly, we see it happening here in the United Kingdom, as my noble friends Lady Liddell and Lord Puttnam said. As was made clear to me by MPs from all over Europe at the parliamentary assembly, the BBC is seen as the gold standard in public service broadcasting.

As my noble friends have said, the BBC is under attack in different ways: the principle of funding through the licence fee, in particular; but also, as others have said, in the despicable way of passing the buck for free TV licences for the over-75s, which is and ought to be the responsibility of the Government, and the Department for Work and Pensions in particular. It is disgraceful that that buck should be passed to the BBC. It will have a huge impact on vulnerable pensioners up and down the country, particularly those who fall just short of qualifying for pension credit but are by no means well off. It is those people who will be hardest hit by the changes, contrary to what was in Tory manifesto, which promises older people

“the security and dignity they deserve”.

Loneliness is a critical issue facing older people. It is an issue I have raised previously, in this Chamber and in my work as chair of Age Scotland, and it is one that the Government pretend to be concerned about. Research by Age UK found that more than 1 million people say that TV is their main source of company, yet the lack of responsibility from the Government to honour their promise to support older people who rely heavily on TV has been rightly met with overwhelming dismay and disappointment. That 2019 manifesto said: “We recognise the value of free TV licences for over-75s”,

yet the Government still continue with the nonsense that their licences should be funded by the BBC, despite the widespread opposition.

Another worrying aspect of this approach is that asking the BBC to take on this responsibility must be incompatible with data protection laws, as well as being a time-consuming and costly exercise. Above all, I fear that some pensioners who will, in fact, remain entitled to free TV licences will nevertheless pay the fee for fear of prosecution, the resultant fines and even the threat of imprisonment if this remains a criminal offence. It is outrageous that the Government should put the most vulnerable people in our society in this position.

1.57 pm

Lord Tugendhat (Con)

My Lords, like other noble Lords, I regard the BBC as a great national asset. I support the values on which it is based, I approve of the standards to which it aspires, I value its contribution to our national economy and I believe that it enhances the country’s reputation and soft power. At a time when all eyes are turned on Hilary Mantel and her great new book about Thomas Cromwell, I urge the BBC to look at another historical novel, namely Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s great work *The Leopard*, and in particular the words of the Prince when he says:

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

The Prince saw that in the turmoil of Risorgimento Italy, his family could maintain its position only if it was willing to adapt and change. I think the same applies to the BBC. I do not believe that it can go on, either in terms of financing or reach, in the way it has up to now. I think it must decide, for both, how best to preserve its essential interests and promote its mission and its core values in a changing world.

I turn first to financing. I thought the noble Viscount, Lord Colville, was quite right when he said it is unrealistic to expect the licence fee to be increased at anything like the rate that the BBC will need. I agreed with the noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, who spoke a few moments ago, when she drew attention to some of the deficiencies of the licence fee, which make it unrealistic to expect it to increase as much as the BBC requires. It would also be unrealistic for the BBC to expect non-payment to remain a criminal offence, in quite a different category from the non-payment of utility bills. I think that it will be necessary to find alternative and/or—I emphasise “and/or”—additional sources of finance. Whether the BBC itself should come up with proposals is a tactical decision for it to make. It is up to the BBC to be clear on how it will respond to proposals put forward by others, and to be clear on the terms that it believes are consistent with the principles and mission at the heart of its operation.

I turn to the question of reach. My old friend Sir David Clementi recently made a very important speech, dealing with a number of aspects of the BBC. He said:

“Everyone pays, everyone gets something they value in return.”

The problem is that, in a world of constant technological innovation, that means constant expansion. It means moving into more fields as they open up. That too is, like the licence fee, simply not practical. Constant expansion and diversification inevitably lead to the dilution and contamination of an organisation’s core activities. We have seen that in many different fields; I think there are signs of it in relation to the BBC at present. It also leads to diseconomies of scale, and to problems beyond the abilities of management to manage, and certainly we have seen signs of that in the BBC.

If one values the BBC, wishes it well and wants it to prosper in the future, it would do very well to take a leaf out of the book of Giuseppe di Lampedusa.

2.02 pm

Baroness Wilcox of Newport (Lab)

My Lords, I also thank my noble friend Lord Young for bringing this timely debate to the Chamber today. For almost two decades I taught media studies and the media industries, at GCSE and Advanced Level. At the core of every syllabus, at every level, was a deep analysis and evaluation of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Media studies grew out of literary criticism and early cultural studies; indeed, it is concerned with the popular. That is one of its strengths. It is firmly grounded in society: in the communication, cultural understandings, concerns and sometimes even manipulation of the mass of ordinary people. Long before anyone else, media studies questioned the once utopian view of the internet, examining race and gender representation and analysing the economic and political power of media moguls.

I tried to demonstrate to my pupils the essence of the BBC and why it is still so important to us in our multichannel, online media culture. It is a British cultural institution, held in highest regard across the world, in fierce competition with other broadcasters.

I will mention the programme “Blue Planet II”, an eight-part documentary about our oceans, which took four years to produce but ultimately profoundly changed the world’s understanding of two-thirds of our planet’s ecosystem. Commercial and satellite operators could only dream of such influence and reach. Moreover, I am sure that the unconfirmed proposal that the Six Nations is to go to paywall TV would be an unmitigated disaster for the sport.

Some of the BBC’s key content, such as documentaries, children’s programming and extensive news coverage, would not be prioritised in the commercial demands of the free market. Advertising revenues are shrinking, and the broadcast marketplace is expanding. The BBC under commercialisation would run the risk of being squeezed both financially and in terms of the high standards of its production quality. One example is BBC Bitesize, the educational website. It is outstanding, and there is no way that content such as this could be funded without the licence fee.

According to reports, the BBC is to be massively pruned back, and the licence fee scrapped and replaced with a subscription service. Senior government sources insist that they were “not bluffing” about changing the way the corporation is funded: in her excellent speech today, the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, called their bluff. Plans being drawn up include forcing the sale of the majority of 61 radio stations, reducing the number of television channels and scaling back the BBC website and the very important World Service. It must be protected. The BBC offers more services, across more platforms, with greater longevity and choice for viewers and users, at a lower cost than ever before. I would often ask my students to compare the cost of the licence fee with subscription services, and they were astounded that it was less than half the price.

The BBC is not perfect: in my political roles, I have been dragged around the houses by many a political journalist, from both television and radio—mainly in Wales, of course. But I defend their right to do so in our open democracy. I have yet to make it on to “Newsnight” or be interviewed by Andrew Neil, as many noble Lords have, but unlike some elected politicians, I certainly would not turn down Andrew Neil’s request if that opportunity arose in the future.

Well over 90% of the population consumes BBC programming and content every week. Despite its faults, the BBC remains the gold standard in multiplatform broadcasting. My noble friend Lady Morgan of Ely, in her role as the Welsh Government’s Minister for International Relations, has put a strong focus on the creative industries, and we have huge productions going on in BBC Wales—“Doctor Who” and “Sherlock”, to name but two. Despite its faults, the BBC remains the gold standard. It is a basic universal service, and if the Government make it a subscription service, then health and education could be next.

2.06 pm

Lord West of Spithead (Lab)

My Lords, I too thank my noble friend Lord Young of Norwood Green for tabling this very timely debate. To start, I ask the Minister to confirm that, in 2019-2020, the licence fee was £12.54 per month, whereas Netflix—cited as a comparator by those who would like to see the licence fee abolished—was £11.99 per month, or 55p less; and that £5.29 of

that BBC monthly fee went towards the World Service, BBC Monitoring, 40 local radio stations, orchestras, choirs, BBC News online and a host of other services that Netflix does not and would never provide.

I intend to focus on the World Service and BBC Monitoring, as both impact on the security and strategic posture of our nation. The global soft power index for 2020 puts the UK at third place in the overall rankings, after the United States and Germany, and states that arguably one of Britain's greatest soft power tools is the BBC, which reaches a colossal 426 million viewers and listeners abroad every week.

The BBC is, without a doubt, the world's most trusted international news broadcaster, with correspondents on location in more countries than any other broadcaster. It is available in 42 languages and is globally recognised as being committed to accurate, impartial and independent news. Independent surveys show that there is an exceptionally high association between awareness of the BBC globally and thinking positively about the United Kingdom.

As the Government set in train the biggest review of our foreign, defence, security and development policy since the end of the Cold War—let us call it the “Johnson review”—we should not be risking our greatest soft power tool. BBC Monitoring scrutinises the world's media, from state broadcasters to streetwise social media. Its expert journalists and linguists provide vital information from all corners of the globe to our Government, charities, NGOs, think tanks, security groups, businesses, the OECD, the UN and universities. I found it extremely important when I was Chief of Defence Intelligence and as a chief of staff. It remains as relevant today as it was at the height of the Cold War.

As the UK faces uncertainty following Brexit, as tensions between Russia, China and the West increase, and as the Middle East and the Gulf are a powder keg, the work of BBC Monitoring is more important than ever. BBC Monitoring works in close partnership with the equivalent American organisation, the Open Source Enterprise, but if we continue to run down our service, as we have over the last years, we cannot be certain that the USA would want to continue to information. The current agreement with the Government is that BBC Monitoring should be global, sufficient, adaptable and flexible. This should not be put at risk.

Constant exposure to Netflix might drive our enemies into a catatonic state of lethargy but hardly matches the significant importance of the World Service and BBC Monitoring to our nation's security. We really should not put them at risk.

2.09 pm

Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield (CB)

My Lords, I declare a pair of interests. First, since the early 1980s I have made a number of programmes, mainly for BBC Radios 3 and 4, working with as gifted a set of producers as any broadcaster could wish for. Secondly, the BBC has escorted me through my entire conscious memory, broadening the maps in my mind and changing what makes me laugh as a constant enriching presence. It arouses an intense loyalty in me when it is attacked, as it is likely to be throughout the early 2020s, by those who see it as a standing affront, a self-serving liberal confection funded by a form of taxation without representation. In Michael Frayn's neat distinction, the attackers are the carnivores; I am an out-and-out herbivore.

As a lifelong ruminant, what would I bring to the BBC's long-term defence? Throughout my life the BBC has fulfilled the mission set for it by the great Huw Wheldon of making "the good popular and the popular good".

We have two dazzling exemplars of that in this debate in my noble friends Lady Bakewell and Lord Bragg. As many other noble Lords have said, it has set a gold standard for public service broadcasting—not just here but with the rest of the world, which recognises this even if sometimes we do not. It is a very British distortion: we tend to turn on those institutions that are regarded as world-class by the rest of the globe. The BBC has created a bounteous multiplier effect across the length and breadth of British culture.

Now for the short-term defence. I am deeply worried by the cuts already planned to news and current affairs. In a decade that will see at least a serious stress-testing of the very UK that has nurtured and shaped us, with the real risk of a Scottish separation, this is not the time to weaken a crucial ingredient in our national glue or to diminish the best instrument we have for furthering a serious national conversation as we seek a new equipoise within our home islands and a refreshed post-Brexit place in the world. Nor is this the time to blur

the distinctiveness of the bespoke “little platoons”—as Edmund Burke might have described them—of the BBC Radio 4 sequences, as “Today”, “The World at One”, “PM” and “The World Tonight” are known in the trade.

Speaking of the “Today” programme, which seems to enrage certain people in Downing Street beyond all belief, I wonder whether they know the special role it plays in the last line of national defence. My noble friend Lord West knows this very well. Only when researching a book a few years ago on the British secret state in the Cold War did I discover that failing to pick up the “Today” programme for several days in succession—allowing for Sundays, of course, although Paddy O’Connell’s superb “Broadcasting House” should do to fill the gap—is one of the tests the Royal Navy Trident submarine on patrol applies to check whether the UK has been reduced to a smoking and irradiated ruin by a pre-emptive nuclear strike. The argument is that there cannot be a Britain if it does not have a “Today” programme. Only then do the captain and his number two reach into the boat’s inner safe to open the so-called “last resort” letter from the Prime Minister, conveying his instructions from beyond the grave on whether to retaliate or not. Carnivores, tamper with the “Today” programme at your peril.

2.12 pm

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe (Lab)

My Lords, I make my remarks as a great fan of the BBC, although, as an avid Radio 4 listener rather than TV watcher, I realise I am not a typical viewer. This does not stop me feeling strongly about the benefits of the BBC.

As others have highlighted, Britain is a world leader in creativity. Our creative industries are worth over £100 billion a year and employ more than 2 million people. I believe that the BBC’s Chairman Sir David Clementi is right to describe it—the biggest single investor in the UK’s creative industries—as

“an engine of ideas, risk-taking and ambition that powers the whole of our creative industries.”

I am sure that the 14 million people who watched “Blue Planet II” in 2017, the 11.7 million who watched the England women’s football team play against the USA in the World Cup last year, or indeed the 11.6 million who watched the broadcast of “Gavin & Stacey” on Christmas Day, will agree with me that the BBC is continuing to inform, educate and entertain to a high level. These BBC broadcasts are so-called “event television”, providing moments that bring the nation together.

From documentaries to dramas, talk shows and news, the BBC raises the game for competing commercial broadcasters, while its commissioning and support for independent producers, writers and directors encourage innovation and experimentation in its programme making. Its research and development deliver significant value to the creative community and the UK economy. As others have said, every £1 spent by the BBC on R&D during the last charter delivered a return of at least £5 to £9 to the UK.

But, as Ofcom and our own committee report highlighted, our viewing and listening habits are changing. While the total time we spend watching TV programmes and films has remained broadly stable, we are increasingly watching them via on-demand and online services. Indeed, some 42% of adults now consider online video services to be their main way of watching TV and film, while 38% of users of subscription video on-demand services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime say they can imagine not watching broadcast TV at all in five years’ time. For children aged 12 to 15, brand awareness of Netflix and YouTube is now higher than that of the BBC. That does not bode well for growing future BBC audiences.

Given the fast-moving competitive environment and its responsibilities to serve all audiences, the BBC needs to be properly funded. I support the view of other noble Lords that the licence fee still represents good value for money. I believe that it is currently the best mechanism we have to ensure the provision of universal and freely available content—the principle underpinning the value of public service broadcasting. Can the Minister tell us whether any further thought will be given to the recommendation that there should be an independent and transparent process for setting the licence fee, along the lines of a BBC funding commission?

The funding question is vital, because I want to see the BBC do more to attract a wider audience—not just to counter the criticism that the levy payment is unfair, but because it is in clear danger of losing its future audiences right across the regions and the generations.

More internal co-operation within the BBC across TV and radio, particularly on news programmes, would help viewers and listeners feel that they are getting value for money. It is surely inefficient to have multiple teams of journalists from similar programmes working on the same stories or flying en masse to cover the same events. Having said that, cutting 450 journalists' jobs seems questionable given some of the eye-watering salaries paid to top presenters and executives.

The new director-general will have a lot in his or her in-tray. I wish them the best of luck. The BBC cannot afford to stand still or arrogantly ignore criticism, but any reform of its funding model must recognise that the BBC serves a unique purpose. I believe that reform should be pragmatic, not political, and focused on how to safeguard and upgrade a hugely valuable British asset in our fast-moving digital world.

2.17 pm

Lord Birt (CB)

My Lords, the BBC is the most potent institution created anywhere in the world for reflecting every aspect of a nation's culture and affairs. It weaves a tapestry of national types echoing all our many idiosyncrasies as a nation: Captain Mainwaring, Alf Garnett, Basil Fawlty, the louche Patsy in "Ab Fab", the nightmarish David Brent, the wickedly knowing Fleabag.

The BBC captures our brilliance in popular music as a nation—witness the extraordinary sessions recorded by the BBC over 60 years, daily paraded on BBC 6 Music. It has enabled Simon Schama and Lucy Worsley to tell our eventful national story and Brian Cox to explain the planets. It has commissioned 54 series of BBC Science's "Horizon". "In Our Time", presented by the noble Lord, Lord Bragg, and Laurie Taylor's "Thinking Allowed" offer unsurpassed insight into the work of the UK's finest scholars. Possibly the BBC's greatest gift

to the modern world is its natural history programming, with David Attenborough at the prow. I could go on and on.

The BBC is peerless, but of course it is not perfect—not in my day, not now. We must engage with and not dismiss the concerns of the noble Lord, Lord Lilley, and other considered critics. But let us nail the Netflix myth: that new subscription services are making the BBC less relevant. The BBC has a significant but no longer dominant position in UK media. Currently it enjoys 26% of all UK TV, radio and online consumption. I am an enthusiastic Netflix subscriber, but Netflix currently represents something like 2% of UK consumption—a thirteenth of the BBC's. The two organisations are not remotely comparable in either their purpose or popularity.

How has the BBC been able to develop, over a century, a most extraordinary range and array of programming? First and foremost, because the licence fee has enabled the BBC over and over again to take risks and innovate in a way that the private sector never can. Secondly, because, almost uniquely among the world's publicly funded PSBs, the BBC is truly independent of government. Thirdly, because it has enjoyed enduring cross-party support from John Major, Tony Blair, Willie Whitelaw and—whatever her reservations, newly resurrected in recent weeks—Margaret Thatcher, as I can personally testify. I do not believe for one moment that our new Prime Minister really wants to “whack” the BBC, to quote No. 10 sources in the Sunday Times. He is a feisty career journalist, gifted of expression, and the child of a notably erudite, public-spirited and liberal-minded family. I do not believe for one moment that he would want to celebrate the BBC's centenary with its destruction.

Let us reboot the debate about British broadcasting. Let us focus on the real issues: the 10-year assault on the BBC's revenues, ITV's and Channel 4's revenue decline and the slow draining away of original British programming from all our screens. They are the issues that really matter.

2.21 pm

Lord Lea of Crondall (Non-Afl)

My Lords, I too congratulate my noble friend Lord Young of Norwood Green on introducing this wonderful debate. It ought to be compulsory reading for Ministers involved in the emerging debate. I am one of those who is astonished by the things on the BBC that one gets hooked on. On a Thursday night, my noble friend Lord Bragg gives me the impression that I can get my brain around Plato, the evolution of the dinosaur, astronomy, every subject under the sun. He might say that it is nothing to do with him, but it is amazing, and one of a range of examples. My radio is usually on Radio 3. When its controller came to one of our all-party groups, my only criticism was that there was too much talk. This is a good example of one person's bias being cancelled out by another's, as happens in theology.

This is an important political point. Would the Minister say that this is the spirit in which the Secretary of State is approaching this? His speech yesterday bore signs of a more reflective approach. I hope she picks up that none of us mind a debate, but not a debate in which Mr Cummings has got his retaliation in first. Whether that is done by the noble Lord, Lord Lilley, or any of my noble friends who have worked at the BBC, it is not a debate.

One of the quotes that struck me in yesterday's speech by the Secretary of State was about the BBC's impartiality in an era of fake news. He is right to raise that problem, but the BBC is trusted by the public. Should not the Minister be looking at ways to support this independent, globally respected broadcaster in this age of disinformation?

There is this notion that the licence fee is patently out of date and that there is an obvious alternative. Many noble Lords have spoken about this, including the noble Viscount, Lord Colville. What is the alternative? I think we would all agree that it must be looked at very coolly. Take the business of the decriminalisation of the licence fee. What do we think will happen if we decriminalise non-payment of the licence? Surely it is obvious. We may as well decriminalise non-payment of council tax. There are no simple alternatives and the Treasury under any Administration would certainly say that hypothecation has its problems as well.

Right around the world, at every level, in villages in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, they say, "I heard it on the BBC, so it must be true."

2.26 pm

Lord Haskel (Lab)

I welcome this opportunity to speak up for the BBC and thank my noble friend for moving this debate. Like other noble Lords, I am appalled at how this Government seek to undermine the BBC to get obedience and conformity, as my noble friend Lady Bakewell put it. Yes, there may be a need for change at the BBC. The world is moving on. The BBC must find its place in our digital future but let us not just complain. Above all, let us keep all the good things that every speaker has told us about. Other noble Lords have spoken about how they value the BBC's independence in producing news, comment, current affairs, entertainment and humour. I too value its independence, and I say to the noble Lord, Lord Tugendhat, and others, that the licence fee enables this all-important financial independence.

I mention one aspect of the economic and cultural value of the BBC of which I have personal experience: soft power. Before I entered your Lordship's House, my main work was developing a business in a sector now called "technical textiles"—products made to high standards of safety, hygiene, stability and reliability. The key to selling these products was getting the standards accepted, and we were successful in many countries—in Europe, in Asia, in the People's Republic of China—and in each of them, without exception, people associated me, coming from Britain, with the truthfulness, honesty and reliability with which they associate the BBC, as explained by my noble friend Lord West. This soft power was of enormous value to me. I am sure that it continues to be of value to many UK endeavours overseas, economic, cultural and political; now, we are going to need it more than ever.

This soft power takes years to establish and can easily be dented or destroyed by ill-thought remarks from members of the Government or by taking unwise action motivated by a perceived wrong. The inevitable consequence is a national loss of influence in business, in defence and in political negotiation. We can ill afford this pointless collateral damage.

Equally childish, thoughtless and irresponsible is the absence of government Ministers from news and opinion programmes such as "Today" and "The Westminster Hour". It has taken the seriousness of the coronavirus to get a Minister to react to our concerns by participating in these programmes, as my noble friend Lady Jay explained. The inevitable conclusion is that the Government do not care about the damage that they are doing. All they want us to hear from the BBC is what makes the Government look good—and that must not happen.

2.30 pm

Lord Hunt of Chesterton (Lab)

My Lords, I strongly support the Motion introduced by my colleague Lord Young of Norwood Green. As other noble Lords have said, it is good to speak about a great British achievement in the amazing cross-fertilisation between the BBC and public service broadcasting on the one hand, and most British walks of life, on the other—even extending, as we have heard, to new kinds of sporting activities.

As other noble Lords have emphasised, the BBC is extensively appreciated and trusted abroad. The change before us is that UK broadcasting could become a commercial commodity, so that we may not see in future the coverage of new developments in science, technology and culture. Which organisations will provide the brilliant and innovative programmes in these fields, and who will grow the future links between media, technical and education organisations?

The BBC has explained and publicised advances in science and engineering to schoolchildren through its Christmas lectures at the Royal Institution, which are now also available in other countries. How will these be continued in future? Every year those lectures are given in exciting and different ways, which schoolchildren really appreciate. The BBC's TV programmes have covered clearly and visibly the hottest issues in science and the media, as we have seen in the past month with the coverage of coronavirus.

Of the greatest importance has been the BBC's explanation of the science and economics of climate change. Of growing importance have been the innovations in public involvement at all ages, with all organisations—from 17-year-old Scandinavian schoolgirls to leading financiers and industrialists on the snowy slopes of the Alps. This has required the BBC's scientific presentations to be very diplomatic, as I saw when I was chief executive of the Met Office, but also to avoid unscientific discussions. I would say that the BBC has succeeded in that, despite the questioning of it by some. There are sceptics; that makes the debates healthy. I believe that the comments of the noble Lord, Lord Lilley, can be criticised, but this is not the time for that.

Another innovation in collaboration took place in the 1960s, between the BBC and the newly formed Open University, with excellent instruction for students and the public. Sometimes, as other noble Lords have said, the programmes provided information for the general public. Conversely, sometimes entertainment programmes were brought into the OU set of programmes; that has been very effective.

On a visit to China, I was very interested to see how the information was spread around the world. There they took a programme that I had made with the Open University and incorporated it into a local Chinese programme in the university. Formally, that approach rather breaks the usual restrictions on data exchange, but it was remarkable to see Chinese students take an OU programme that we were exploring in the morning, and by the afternoon turn it into something extraordinary. That kind of innovation in using data is currently very difficult, but it is important.

The future of public service broadcasting is extremely important. There are new and innovative ways of doing things, and one of the areas in which more still needs doing is local government.

2.34 pm

Lord Judd (Lab)

My Lords, I warmly welcome this initiative by my noble friend Lord Young. I hope that he is pleased with the calibre of the response in this debate. For a thriving, open, free democratic society there is a high dependence on the information, the quality of analysis and the stimulus that comes from the media. There is a historic tension between the high calling of the media in a democracy and the commercial pressures that inevitably operate.

I am sad that so much of the media has succumbed to commercial pressures, and also to the political and vested interests bias of the ownership to which it is subjected. Public service broadcasting has always risen above that. In making that point I am thinking very much of Channel 4, not least its news, and ITV. But the guarantor of that standard has always been the BBC. Long may it remain so.

The BBC has become part of the fabric of British society. When I think of the profile of the Britain in which I want to live, the BBC is salient as a leader of what that society should be about. I think of the years of Lord Reith, the standards he set, the integrity he brought, and the influence that has lasted ever since. I think of the war years, when I was growing up—sitting with my father during an air raid and listening when, at the end of broadcasting for the day, the national anthem of every occupied country was played by the BBC. This is the significance: it was emotional, but what it said about the BBC and its role in society was real.

The overseas service has been very important in my life. I think of myself overseas, sometimes in quite difficult situations, waiting to hear the news, and the authority that it brought. I think of all those people, in too much of the world, where oppression, cruel warfare and tyranny are the order of the day. The BBC is a vital link to keep the idea—the ideal—of freedom, and of a future, alive.

We should never underestimate that. It literally has been the saving of many people in desperate situations, because they can cling to that vision of what society could be. What is it that has been central to the BBC's standards? The courageous integrity of its journalists, no doubt, and its representation of cultural diversity—but above all, its relentless and total commitment to truth.

2.39 pm

Lord Foster of Bath (LD)

My Lords, I congratulate the Labour Party on choosing this timely topic and the noble Lord, Lord Young, on introducing a powerful, well-informed and, as the noble Lord, Lord Judd, called it, high-calibre debate.

The noble Lord, Lord Lilley, claimed that he was the only speaker on the government side here today. I am delighted that your Lordships' House, on this occasion and on many others in the past, has given him a voice—even if the BBC does not want to do so. I associate myself with the noble Baroness, Lady Warwick, and the noble Lord, Lord Birt, and consider that the BBC should look again at the way in which it has treated him. Like him, I am a supporter of the BBC—he claimed still to be so—but I am a critical friend of it. Neither he nor I have demurred—nor has anyone today—from the simple premise of the debate: that there is little doubt that the BBC and other public service broadcasters play a vital role in our economy and our cultural life.

Many examples have been given. The noble Baroness, Lady Wilcox, spoke about the educational role of the PSBs; 75% of school pupils, for instance, use **BBC** Bitesize. We have talked about research and development and job creation, but no one so far has mentioned its important role in exports of both programmes and formats. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Salisbury spoke about another important role—levelling up—which is relevant at the present time given the Prime Minister’s desire to see it. That is being done by the PSBs as more of their staff and programme spend are outside London.

Many noble Lords—including the noble Lords, Lord West of Spithead, Lord Young and Lord Haskel, the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy of The Shaws, and the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty—have spoken about the important soft power of the PSBs helping in many ways, including, more importantly in the future, in international trade. The **BBC** is one of the top four most-recognised British brands internationally. It is known, as the noble Baroness, Lady Liddell, put it, as the gold standard; or, as the noble Lord, Lord Monks, said, it is known for its widespread international regard and respect.

However, the biggest contribution that the PSBs make is to our extremely successful and growing creative industries, which are creating employment faster than any other sector. In passing, as it has not been mentioned so far, I ask the Minister—she will say how important the creative industries are; I know that it will be in her brief—to reflect on, if that is the case, why the Government fail to address the concerns of the creative industries, including on the apprenticeship levy, which is not suitable for their use, and the concerns that have been expressed about the post-Brexit immigration scheme that is now coming in and which is irrelevant to them. Also, as we will come on to, why do they not stop trying to cause damage to the **BBC**?

I recognise that the Government accept the crucial role of the PSB and support it. As I said, there is a great deal of data. For instance, the noble Lord, Lord Young, in talking about research and development, reminded us that for every £1 the **BBC** invests, we get a return of between £5 and £9. It is worth reflecting that the PSBs collectively are seeking to do more in all of those areas by commissioning more from independent production companies and providing even more support. It is therefore hardly surprising that many people who work in the creative industries have seen real benefit from the PSBs.

One interesting example I discovered yesterday is that, last year, the BBC received 16 BAFTAs and 16 Emmy Awards and, earlier this year, four Golden Globes, and every single one of the British winners of those awards had worked in the BBC at some time in the past. No wonder Philippa Childs said that

“it is the PSBs that are providing the training and skills that the likes of Netflix and others are then happily accepting.”

But, of all the PSBs, as has been pointed out by many, the biggest single investor into the creative industries is the BBC. It is the guarantor of the standards of the other PSBs, as noble Lords have mentioned.

It is worth reflecting—the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, pointed to this with his phrase “salami slicing”—that, since 2010, the BBC has already had to tighten its belt. Only yesterday, the Voice of the Listener & Viewer research was published, showing that, since 2010, the amount of money in real terms that the BBC has for the production of its products for viewers and listeners in the UK has gone down to 70% of what it was in 2010. Now it looks as though the situation is going to get worse.

I have had an opportunity to see an advance copy of an article by Professor Stephen Barnett, which is to be published shortly. It states:

“Not since the election of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979 has the future of the BBC been seriously threatened by a powerful and deeply hostile government with a massive majority intent on doing it serious damage.”

My noble friend Lord McNally described it in another form by saying that it was score-settling against a mortal enemy.

Professor Barnett goes on to say that the origins of this are clearly in some of the things that have happened in the past. The noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, for instance, reminded us of some of the quotations from the New Frontiers Foundation document in 2004 at the time when it was directed by Dominic Cummings. It is worth reminding the House of a couple of the examples she gave. The NFF said that

“the Right should be aiming for the end of the BBC in its current form”.

It went on:

“There are three structural things that the Right needs to happen ... the undermining of the BBC’s credibility ... the creation of a Fox News equivalent—

my noble friend Lord McNally warned us about that—and

“the end of the ban on TV political advertising”.

It was therefore hardly surprising that, with Dominic Cummings in tow, the Prime Minister went into Downing Street soon after the election and, as Professor Barnett says:

“Even before the Downing Street boxes were unpacked, the Prime Minister was announcing a ‘consultation’ on whether non-payment of the BBC licence fee should remain a criminal offence—despite a comprehensive, independent review ordered by David Cameron and published less than five years ago concluding that the current arrangements were fair and proportionate.”

I should point out to the noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, who was concerned about people being put in prison, that you can be put in prison for the non-payment of a civil fine as for the non-payment of a criminal fine.

Professor Barnett—I his view—went on:

“This was the first shot by a government which knew well that decriminalisation would cost the BBC well in excess of £200 million while actually making life more difficult for poorer households which would simply be pursued with higher fines through the civil courts.”

Worse, we subsequently heard government sources saying that there should be consultation on the replacement of the licence fee with a subscription model, that the BBC should be reduced to a few TV stations, a couple of radio stations and a massively curtailed online presence, and that,

“the Prime Minister is firmly of the view that there needs to be serious reform. He is really strident on this.”

I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Gilbert of Panteg, and many others that there are many things the BBC could do better—not least in diversity—but, as the noble Lord, Lord Bragg, said, it is childish to send a wrecking ball to the BBC. It is crazy to pray in aid the subscription model of, say, Netflix and Amazon. As the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, the noble Baroness,

Lady Wilcox, the noble Lord, Lord West of Spithead, and others have already pointed out, given what you get from Netflix for £7.99 and what you get from the BBC's range of output and services for £13 a month, the two do not compare. A simple figure worth reflecting on is that, last year, the BBC, along with the other PSBs, invested £2.6 billion in the UK to deliver 32,000 hours of original, home-grown content compared with only 210 hours of content provided by Netflix and Amazon Prime combined. There is a huge difference.

The noble Lord, Lord Tugendhat, is right that many issues need to be debated but within the context of being supportive of our public sector broadcasters. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Salisbury said that the BBC should be cherished. Only today, the Secretary of State said that all the PSBs should be cherished. However, the evidence before us is that that is not the plan of the current Government. The noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy, said that we should all be alarmed; the noble Lord, Lord Haskel, said that we should be appalled. I ask the Minister a simple question: does she believe that the BBC is the mortal enemy, or does she believe, like many of us, that the BBC is the best broadcaster in the world and one of the best gifts this country has ever given to the world?

2.50 pm

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port (Lab)

My Lords, this has been a truly remarkable debate. It would do us all well to read it in Hansard when it appears. I suppose that I should express some kind of a conflict of interest since, like the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Salisbury, I have had a working relationship with the BBC for more than 30 years and have been paid much less than he ever was. I still do my little bits now and again. I have read all the briefing material that has come my way. As often happens, the noble Lord, Lord Foster, has stolen a bit of my thunder, but it is the rolling kind of thunder and so there is a bit of it left.

Some of the original research I did was in the Radio Times. I thought that it was not a bad idea to look in it to see what is on today. All I have done is choose half a dozen things. There is women's football, for example; women's sport has been mentioned. There is "Villages by the Sea" on Clovelly; this programme was done regionally at first but it is showing across the network now. There is "MasterChef"; on my honeymoon, I took a book with a perfectly produced picture of the meal I was going to cook for my beloved, but it did not look like that when it got on the plate, and "MasterChef" does that for me too. Across the PSBs, we have

“EastEnders”, “Emmerdale” and “Hollyoaks”. Informing, educating and entertaining is exactly what is being done. By the recommendation of the Minister herself, this evening we have “Noughts + Crosses”. We all ought to watch that to show the capacity of the BBC to look imaginatively at British society from a curiously upended point of view, following the novels of Malorie Blackman. I shall be watching because of the Minister. I want to say a nice word about her because where have all the Tories gone? Where are they? They are shy violets, every one. How will they ever learn?

In this debate, we have heard authoritative voices. We have the experience of my noble friends Lord Puttnam, Lord Bragg and Lady Bakewell, the hands-on experience of the noble Viscount, Lord Colville, and the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, the vast experience of an entirely different kind of the noble Lord, Lord Hennessy, who I shall now think of as a ruminant and who has an insightful take on all these things, and the hands-on experience of the noble Lord, Lord Birt. That is just picking some names. Of course, I cannot do that for everybody, but this is an authoritative body of people sharing their views about a matter of great concern to all of us, and we hope that we are articulating a voice out there in the country, which would be glad to think that people such as the noble Lords I have mentioned are bringing their voices to a debate of this kind. It matters to us but it matters much more to them, and that is what we are here for.

I would also mention a Conservative who spoke in a previous debate on this subject and who is not in his place: the noble Lord, Lord Dobbs, a leading journalist who wrote a much-quoted article after the general election in which much criticism was offered of the BBC’s coverage. Of course there are things that go wrong and could be better. Who can think of an organisation the size of the BBC that does not sometimes put its foot in it in a big way? To answer the noble Lord, Lord Tugendhat, there must be change. If we do not embrace change and anticipate and study where developments have to be made, the BBC will increasingly become part of our archive rather than an ongoing, vibrant part of the national culture.

Much has been said about the licence fee and continuing funding. The licence has been called the least worst solution, and many people have advocated it. It is worth picking up a comment from across the Chamber that it is worth looking at a progressive household tax as a possible alternative. We will certainly need to raise money; the noble Lord, Lord Foster,

quoted the Voice of the Listener & Viewer statistics that there has already been a 30% erosion of the funding base in the past 10 years. We will have to look for a model of funding if we believe in the BBC and believe that it should be publicly funded. Everybody seems to think that and I suspect that if we took the noble Lord, Lord Lilley, out to a good lunch, he might think that too—well, I hope so.

We need to look more critically at alternative ways of achieving better funding, but the BBC gets everywhere. I have sat in studios all over the United Kingdom; nobody can tell me that the BBC is dominated by this elite in London. There are fast-moving BBC radio and television stations across the country. Where Welsh coverage would be without public service broadcasting, I do not know. The noble and learned Lord, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, is not in his place. I did not know that he speaks Gaelic. It is said that there are probably only about two people who do, but there is something for them. In Wales, the resurgence of the Welsh language can be attributed almost directly to the reach of the BBC and public service broadcasting. As the right reverend Prelate said, the BBC is not just descriptive; it is shaping the public with proactive involvement in a culture that is always on the move.

I have found this debate extremely insightful and I have enjoyed it very much. I will certainly read Hansard, particularly to get my noble friend's comments about the lean and hungry man in No. 10 who thinks too much; the power behind the throne; the *éminence grise*. I will not call him Rasputin because I believe that he likes that, but for all that, there is something curious and weird about policy being made about an institution so integral to the British identity as the BBC by someone who has never been elected and who never has to stand and face an audience such as this.

Incidentally, I have a word for the Minister. The Prime Minister did not have the bottle to face Andrew Neil in the course of the election campaign; this kind of displacement on the part of the Conservative Party has put the noble Baroness almost on her own to face a collective body that might be rather like Andrew Neil. How she is going to deal with it, I simply do not know, but we look forward to her remarks. The debate will convey to the Government of our day the importance of this institution and the necessity of us contributing to it our support and confidence as we look forward to its ongoing influence in the years ahead.

2.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Baroness Barran) (Con)

My Lords, I start by echoing the comments of other noble Lords in thanking the noble Lord, Lord Young, for securing this important debate on the role of the BBC and public service broadcasting in the UK's economy and our creative culture. I also thank the noble Lord, Lord Griffiths, for his sympathy. The more noble Lords remarked on the quality of the debate, the more my knees began to shake. As for Andrew Neil, I confess that, during the election campaign, I had a dream that I had been rung up and asked to do the interview, so be careful what you wish for. We have had some extraordinarily well-informed, eloquent and passionate contributions this afternoon. I will do my best to respond to them, but if necessary I may have to follow up in writing if time does not permit.

I start—I hope that this language is not too strong—with some of the accusations that have been made about this Government's attitude towards the BBC. Noble Lords used quite strong language. The noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, talked about an unremitting vendetta and the noble Lord, Lord Foster, asked me to confirm that we do not see the BBC as a mortal enemy. I repeat what the Prime Minister said recently, as was echoed by my right honourable friend the Secretary of State: the BBC is a “cherished British institution” and a great source of national pride. Almost every noble Lord who contributed to this debate gave examples of why we should be so proud of the BBC, and why it is a cherished institution.

All our public service broadcasters play a vital role in not only our media ecology but our economy and, crucially, throughout our lives. The noble Lady, Baroness Bakewell—

Lord Birt

I welcome the Minister's remarks, but perhaps she could help us understand something. Two weeks ago Tim Shipman, a most reliable and professional journalist, ran a piece on the front page of the Sunday Times about the BBC, sourced from No. 10. In it, the source said that the Government would “whack” the BBC, cut it back, scrap the licence fee, and appoint

a new chair to sack the new DG if he or she was not to their liking. Are the Government repudiating that statement?

Baroness Barran

I do not want to play “quote wars” with the noble Lord, but he will be aware that my right honourable friend made a speech on this. I have it here somewhere—I apologise, it is hiding in my pile of papers. This morning the Secretary of State confirmed our commitment to the BBC, and I am sure that the noble Lord has read that speech.

On a similar theme, the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, talked about an agenda to undermine the BBC. Obviously, the Secretary of State works closely with the Prime Minister on these issues, but the Government remain clear that it is for advisers to advise and for Ministers to decide. That is what we continue to do.

The noble Baroness, Lady Jay, and the noble Lord, Lord Monks, referred to ministerial appearances on the “Today” programme. Ministers talk to the public through many different channels, including the BBC. That has always been the case and will continue to be so.

Turning to the economy, public service broadcasting has proved to be by far the largest driver of the UK production sector, as we have heard. Each year, the PSB system invests around £2.6 billion in original programming, of which around £1 billion is spent outside London. The BBC alone spent approximately 94% of its £1.3 billion of content spend on first-run UK-originated programming, making it the single largest investor in British TV content.

As many noble Lords said, public service broadcasters sit at the very heart of the UK’s creative culture and industries, which are renowned worldwide. I thank the noble Lord, Lord Griffiths, for the shameless plug for “Noughts and Crosses”—I commend it to your Lordships. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Salisbury, the noble Baroness, Lady Wilcox of Newport, the noble Lords, Lord Hunt of Chesterton and Lord Bragg, and my noble friend Lord Lilley noted the breadth of offering that the BBC gives us. Our public broadcasters produce world-class content that stimulates our interest in arts, science and history, and broadens our understanding of our own culture and the world around us. As the noble Lord, Lord Birt, said, it is the quality of that content which is so important—I hope I have caught his point accurately

A number of noble Lords, including the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, and the noble Lord, Lord West of Spithead, talked about the BBC as a bastion of British culture around the globe. It reaches around 426 million viewers and listeners each week, and—as we heard—it is a trusted British brand that is invaluable for our soft power and influence.

But clearly the key issue is that times are changing. Improving technology and greater consumer choice mean that people are moving away from traditional ways of watching TV and towards streaming and on-demand services. Our audiences are being served by many different companies, which have been mentioned this afternoon. In this context, the PSBs must work even harder to make sure that all nations, regions and people of the UK are represented, both on and off screen.

Our public service broadcasters are best placed to create programming with British viewpoints and identities that meet both British audiences' needs and global audiences' appetites. They need to utilise and evolve their unique platform to help strengthen our cultural identity, and make sure that they work for all the UK audiences that they serve. In this changing landscape, both industry and government need to change to keep that which is so precious to many of us.

I turn now to the future of the licence fee, which was raised by many noble Lords, including the noble Lords, Lord Young, Lord McNally, Lord Haskel and Lord Foster, and the noble Baroness, Lady Bennett. Noble Lords will be aware that the current licence fee settlement is agreed until April 2022. That includes the licence fee rising by inflation each year.

Negotiations for the next licence fee period, from April 2022, will take place in due course, but the Government are committed to maintaining the licence fee model for the duration of the 11-year charter period up to 2027.

Lord Foster of Bath

On that point, and very quickly, can the Minister confirm that, as the charter continues until 2027, the Government could change the quantum of the licence fee between 2022 and 2027? Can she assure us the Government have no plans to do that, and that they recognise that the BBC's scope and remit should remain constant until 2027?

Baroness Barran

I am going to cover the noble Lord's point in just a second. The Government are committed to ensuring that the BBC and all public service broadcasters adapt to the fast-changing market, keeping them at the heart of our world-class TV sector.

In terms of other options for funding, raised by the noble Viscount, Lord Colville, and my noble friend Lord Tugendhat, the former Secretary of State for the DCMS noted that the Government were open-minded about how the BBC would be funded in the future and said that this would require a great deal of further discussion and evidence from all sides before a decision was made.

I was asked about the mid-charter review—a matter touched on also by the noble Viscount, Lord Colville. It will take place between 2022 and 2024. The BBC charter is clear that the mid-term review will focus on governance and regulatory arrangements and will not be able to consider mission or public purpose. I hope that that addresses that point.

My noble friend Lord Gilbert of Panteg and the noble Baronesses, Lady Bennett and Lady Warwick, asked about the transparency of the licence fee settlement and the potential introduction of a licence fee commission. The government response to the Lords Communications and Digital Committee report on public service broadcasting made it clear that we have no plans to introduce a licence fee commission. We believe that it remains appropriate to determine the level of the licence fee in discussion with the BBC. My noble friend asked whether we felt that greater transparency was important. We absolutely agree with that point and with the comments made by Margot James to my noble friend's committee.

The noble Lord, Lord Puttnam, talked about the importance of prudence and deliberation. Obviously, 2022 to 2027 is not the 100 years that he referred to, but I hope that it goes some small way towards reassuring noble Lords that we are at the beginning of a long conversation on these matters. My noble friend Lord Gilbert summarised three key questions: what we want the BBC to do; what it should cost; and how we should fund it. I absolutely hear noble Lords' anxiety, which comes from their great experience, but surely the form of the funding should follow the function that will be agreed in discussions over the next few years.

A number of noble Lords talked about the importance of the independence of the BBC. I reiterate that the BBC is operationally and editorially independent of government. Government cannot and should not intervene in the BBC's day-to-day operations.

My noble friend Lord Lilley, the noble Lord, Lord Lea of Crondall, and the noble Baronesses, Lady Kennedy and Lady Liddell, talked about impartiality. The BBC obviously has a duty under its royal charter to deliver impartial and accurate news, and it is not for the Government to make judgments about any perception of editorial bias.

Lord Lilley

Does my noble friend not think it odd that the BBC puts such emphasis on diversity of race, sex and sexuality but no emphasis on diversity of opinion? I am sad that today no noble Lords have addressed whether there is a single mindset that deals with certain issues such as immigration, climate change and Europe—what the French call “la pensée unique”—and which forbids other views to be expressed on the BBC.

Noble Lords

Oh!

Lord Lilley

It is not for the Government to put it right, but this House should be more critical than it has been today.

Baroness Barran

I thank my noble friend. I have now found the Secretary of State's speech. As he knows, the Secretary of State said this morning that we need to ensure that there is

“genuine diversity of thought and experience”

and to be able to raise that in an open and balanced way. Indeed, in his memoirs, John Humphrys touched on some of the points about bias within the BBC. We do not have to agree with him but it is a valid view.

Lord Lea of Crondall

Is it not the case that the same John Humphrys in effect ran the “Today” programme for donkey’s years and is now writing for the Daily Mail? That is perhaps relevant to the idea that the BBC has bias.

Baroness Barran

I am not clear why those things are linked, but perhaps scarcity of time means that I should move on. The noble Lord, Lord Monks, and the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy, highlighted the importance of supporting journalists who are harassed both in their work here, as was referenced in connection with Laura Kuenssberg, and internationally. We echo that.

The noble Lord, Lord Foulkes, asked about the over-75s concession, and commented on loneliness. I cannot help but feel a little defensive. As Minister for Loneliness, I reassure him that we take it extremely seriously.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock

We are now into March. This scheme is supposed to come into operation in a couple of months, yet we do not know how it is going to operate, who is eligible or whether the data protection laws will come into it. The last time I raised this, the noble Baroness said that she was disappointed that the BBC had not taken the funding on board. What is happening in relation to sorting this out?

Baroness Barran

If he will forgive me, in the interests of time I will write to the noble Lord with some of the detail. He raised a point about data sharing and the over-75s concession. The BBC's decision document sets out that the BBC will operate a self-verification model. Therefore, the issues that he has raised should not arise but I am happy to write to him in detail about this.

A number of noble Lords, including the noble Lords, Lord Judd, Lord Hennessy and Lord West, raised soft power—a matter that I have already touched on. The Government strongly support the BBC's mission to bring high-quality and impartial news to audiences across the world. The noble Lord, Lord West, had done some clever maths on expenditure.

Lord Puttnam

I apologise to the noble Baroness and I do not want to delay the House but there is an elephant in the room and it needs to be shot. This morning the Secretary of State said that the BBC was

“an institution to be cherished.”

Words matter. I know what cherished means, as does the noble Baroness, but it is not in any way possible to square that with the supposedly informed comments that come out of No. 10. The noble Lord, Lord Birt, referred to the Shipman piece. Would she like to use this opportunity at the Dispatch Box to totally repudiate the continual comments about wishing to destroy the BBC that are claimed to emerge from No. 10? [*]

Baroness Barran

I can reiterate with confidence what the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have said, but I am sure that the noble Lord will understand that I cannot respond confidently about leaks to the newspapers; I can deal only with the facts before me. My noble friend has whispered in my ear that I have a minute or two more, and I would be grateful if I could go through the important points that other noble Lords have raised.

On soft power, the royal charter is clear that the BBC must spend at least £254 million a year on the World Service until 2022, and in 2017-18 that figure was £268 million.

Lord West of Spithead

BBC Monitoring is crucial if we are to understand these countries that are a real danger to us. Will that be covered as well?

Baroness Barran

I will write to the noble Lord to clarify any other points that remain unclear.

I want to take the last minute and a half to talk about the creative industries. My noble friend Lord Gilbert asked if the BBC and the public service broadcasters are considered as part of the Government's industrial strategy, and that was also touched on by the noble Lord, Lord Foster. The Government continue to support the wider broadcasting landscape by having developed the creative industries sector deal, which came from the industrial strategy, and in 2018 the Government and industry agreed a landmark £150 million deal to promote the creative industries. The deal set out a number of measures, including rebalancing growth between London and the rest of the country. The noble Lord, Lord Foster, asked about the apprenticeship levy and we recognise that some employers in the creative industries experience challenges in using the apprenticeship levy to support their business, and we are working very closely with the sector to try to address this.

We have had some very passionate speeches and I want to try to close on a slightly more positive note and pick up what the noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, said in talking about change as an opportunity for improvement. Change is not a choice in a landscape that is moving very rapidly, but we want to see it as an opportunity to build on and enhance the strengths of both the BBC and the creative industries. Both are success stories of the British economy and, as noble Lords have highlighted today, public service broadcasters have contributed to the success of the creative industries but have also benefited from that success. I have no doubt that in the next seven years there will be a very important debate

continuing about how public service broadcasters should evolve in a rapidly changing broadcasting landscape, and that debate should and will ensure that both our public service broadcasters and our creative industries remain world-class.

3.22 pm

Lord Young of Norwood Green

My Lords, I thank everybody who has contributed to this debate. Perhaps it did not quite go the way that I wanted it to go. In my contribution I decided that I was going to accentuate the positive because I knew that there would be many others who would point out the strange decision of the Government not to appear on the “Today” programme—certainly until recently, when, feeling either inspired or compelled by the coronavirus, the Secretary of State for Health did appear on there. I hope that is an omen. The Minister was saying to us, “It is not true, all this”, and then, “I cannot possibly comment”, which is slightly different.

What I really wanted to get across in this debate, because I thought it was vital, was the fact that—as quoted from *The Leopard* which the noble Lord, Lord Tugendhat, referred to and which is one of my favourite books as well—if we want things to stay as they are, there will have to be changes. That is a much-used quote but an appropriate one in the circumstances. We cannot say in this digital streaming environment that everything will be the same. If we look at the listening and viewing habits of young people, who have been referred to one or two times in this debate, we know that they are not necessarily the most avid consumers of public service broadcasting. That is not to say that they do not use it at all; they do, which is why the BBC has focused on things like iPlayer, BBC Sounds and podcasting. Those are signs of change.

My intention in this debate was to signal how fundamentally important to the future of the economy of the UK in what I described as the post-Brexit environment the creative economy and the creative culture is. The BBC and public service broadcasting, as we have heard today, is demonstrated in a vast array of wonderful programmes. We only touched on a few. One of my litmus tests is whether new dramatists emerge—the likes of Phoebe Waller-Bridge or my other favourite, Sally Wainwright, whose next few episodes of “Last Tango in Halifax” are coming up. There is such wonderful content but, as the noble Lord,

Lord Birt, said, if we are serious about the future of public service broadcasting and its ability to survive in this rapidly changing environment, then somehow it has to have funding. All I ask is for a coherent, evidence- based debate.

When the Government say that they want all nations represented, I would like to see demonstrated how all nations are not represented in public service broadcasting. It is not good enough for the Government to just allege that is the case. As for impartiality, I attach an awful lot of importance to that and I want to go away and look at that. I do not think we can dismiss it. I certainly would not agree with the view of the noble Lord, Lord Lilley, on climate change, but that does not mean to say it should not be represented. As to the future of the licence fee, I do not necessarily the views of all my colleagues. I think there is a sort of bargain to be struck—what I call the intergenerational bargain—between what we offer to young people and what we offer to the older generations. I sometimes feel the pendulum has swung the other way. I do not want to go into decriminalisation because that is another debate.

I thank all noble Lords who have taken part in this debate. I shall read it, not least to go through the Minister's response. One thing we can say is that there seemed to be a united view across this Chamber about the importance of preserving public service broadcasting, not in aspic but in a way that ensures that it is vibrant. In a partial defence of the opposite Benches, there were at least three people who said to me that they would have taken part in this debate had they been able to, but I am not going to name them because I do not think that would be appropriate. Once again, I thank everybody. We have made an important contribution to the future of public service broadcasting and, as they say in the theatre, I think this one will run and run.

Motion agreed.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2020-03-05/debates/C4F7EC1E-8D82-4205-8F6B-543355DC80C8/BBCAndPublicServiceBroadcasting?highlight=bbc#contribution-78FFD9D4-9799-4197-8E6B-D04EECE53D70>