

BBC – and Opposition party – think : public spending

The Director General of the BBC has asked all the BBC staff to try harder to ensure impartiality and fairness. The BBC has long favoured every kind of diversity save for diversity of opinion. It pursues its own agenda, often mistaking a one sided presentation or propaganda for the truth, as it sometimes finds it difficult to even comprehend the other side of an issue.

Today I start an occasional series of articles which I will send to the DG about unconscious bias or deliberate distortion of the arguments. The BBC in most of its comment programmes and new broadcasts accepts the proposition that if there is any problem with the quality or quantity of a public service it is owing to a lack of money. They also presume that a lot of money for any given service is a good thing, and more money is a better thing. They fall foul of the lump of money fallacy as the best descriptor of a public service. They make the often disproved assumption that more money will secure the improvements people want.

I'm sure none of them go shopping like that. They would not enter the shop and offer to pay £50 for the groceries up front without seeing what was available and what the prices were. They would not assume they had had a more successful shop if they had ended up paying £60 instead of £50. When they got home they would not say isn't it great, I have spent £50 on groceries. They would return triumphant to parade the cauliflower and the apples, the eggs and the bread. Nor would a family member turn round and say you should have spent £60 though they might complain if there were no chocolate biscuits.

The BBC should concentrate more on the outputs of the public service, and on the resources in terms of skills, people, supplies, properties or whatever might be needed to increase the quantity or raise the quality. They will need to challenge opposition and government politicians who simply assert it must be bad because it is only costing £10bn or it must be good because it is costing as much as £10bn. They need to get into more of the detail of how well managed a service is, whether productivity is rising, whether the service needs to get more right first time and work harder at quality management both to improve the experience of users and control the costs to the taxpayer. Quite often professional lobbies lobby MPs for more cash for a service yet they are unable to tell you what the current budget actually is or how it is spent. The doctrine of new money haunts the debate, yet all next year's money is in one sense new money.

How many more times will we be treated to the lazy story that the hospital treated patients badly because it was short of funds, or that School A with bad results was short of money to do a better job even though it got more per pupil than School B with a lower per pupil amount. Sometimes the true story is a lack of funding, but other times the story is bad management, absentee staff, poor training, bad buying, too much administration or whatever. The reason people do not come back from the shop kicking themselves for only

spending £50 when they could have spent £60 is they would probably have wasted the other £10. They would have bought more food than they could eat before the use by date had passed, or bought the dearer items that were no better, missing out on the special promotions and good prices.

So it is with public services. Most of us want good public services and are happy to pay a decent price through tax for them. Most of us want well remunerated public sector employees, but recognise there has to be a quality and productivity back up to good pay. Our experience of the service quality will not be swayed by whether it cost a lot or less. A good series of examinations of both good and bad examples of public service management would inform a better public debate. To many in the opposition and the BBC it seems there should be no limit on how much money is directed into some public services, and any shortcoming will always be blamed on Ministers once again failing to vote enough cash.