

The contrast between BBC Scotland and England

The BBC has a clear website presentation for BBC Scotland. It tells us about its flagship nightly News programme, the Nine. That takes “a global view on the news whilst maintaining a distinctive Scottish voice”. There are plenty of advertised Scottish news specials and supporting cultural programmes and events. There is no such statement about an English news programme, no news presented with “a distinctive English voice”. English viewers and listeners seeking BBC England on the website are invited to share their post code to be sent down a regional and local rabbit hole on the site, palmed off with phoney regional loyalties to regions that do not want elected assemblies. We have no need of mock declarations of loyalty and cultural harmony to South easternness or to Rest of the south-eastness or to Thames Valleyyness or to South westernness or whatever. England gets the UK news product, complete with plenty of exposure to Nicola Sturgeon, a person we cannot vote for nor remove from office. I have never heard a satisfactory explanation from the BBC of why they treat England so differently from Scotland, and why they always seem to have shared the old EU wish to balkanise England into regions which fail to resonate with voters and have no place in our history to draw from.

The BBC is particularly weak about following France, Germany and the EU. It gives little airtime to considering the twists and turns of their politics. It rarely reports the extensive legislative work of the EU Commission government, and views all things EU through its anti Brexit prism, using pro EU UK establishment figures to give their inaccurate minimalist and positive account of EU ambitions and actions. Where the BBC is rightly ever ready to criticise the UK government, and has just spent four years attacking every feature of the Trump administration the Democrats disapproved of, the BBC has been almost completely silent when it comes to criticisms of the government of the EU or of the leading countries on the continent that are our immediate neighbours. It rarely comments on the small shares of the vote most of the leading parties in continental democracies now command and ignores most of the struggles to lead Germany after Mrs Merkel or to control the Italian government. In the battles over the pandemic the BBC has nearly always sided with the pro lockdown arguments, giving plenty of airtime to SNP and Labour criticisms of the UK/England response when the Scottish and Welsh governments took a slightly tougher approach. Understandably it has proved to be a robust defender of the UK government’s vaccine strategy because it commands cross party support. The BBC looks to some as if is helping Scottish independence, regularly making it a topic on its broadcasts. It ranks Nicola Sturgeon’s news conferences alongside the Prime Ministers and airs them regularly in England though they are nothing to do with policy in England. The BBC scarcely recognises England and when asked about it usually turns to trying to break it up into artificial and unpopular regions or explores local government matters.

As we enter a new phase in the arguments about the Union the BBC needs to revisit what is fair, and see that the different ways it treats different parts of the UK is a live part of the debate itself.