

Time for change at the BBC

I wrote this last week for Free market Conservatives and am now reproducing it here:

The BBC are their own worst opponents. Their recent cancellation of a couple of much loved old songs that are famous worldwide and have not before caused protests led many of their former BBC news/Radio 4 audience to anger or despair. They are so dominated by the fashionable global political correctness and by the briefings from the EU and international bodies that they can no longer relate to the many in the UK who like our country, are at peace with most of its past and just wish to be entertained. They are ready to run any cause which wants more government, higher taxes, more spending by the state, more submission to international treaty rules and more dependence on EU suppliers. They revel in allegations of inequality and unfairness, whilst seeking to remove their own high payments to some talent from the full public gaze. Their constant cry is government should do something. They tend to see business as a source of stories of overpayment and possible corruption, and show scorn for anyone who does not share their corporate values.

Last Saturday morning I made the mistake of listening to the Radio 4 Briefing Room programme about the EU/UK talks. For half an hour they paraded so called experts and BBC correspondents who gave us yet another tedious version of Project Fear. There was no attempt at any balance. No-one spoke for the UK and no-one spoke of the many advantages Brexit can bring. The overarching perspective was that supplied by the EU. There was no attempt to cross examine the EU position and ask about the risks to their big export trade into the UK and our opportunity to substitute UK produced product or cheaper rest of the world product with freedom from EU tariffs. There was no attempt to explore the big upside possible for more food grown and reared in the UK, nor of the way world competition will also affect EU suppliers where we do not have a domestic industry to protect. The importance and opportunity for our fishing industry was dismissed, though they did think fishing was important totemically for French and Spanish fishermen! It was as if they had joined the EUBC and had decided not to bother about the views of a majority of the UK licence payers.

The BBC's charter requires the BBC to be neutral and to allow a wide range of views and arguments to be put. Their news coverage does seek to give most political party representatives a hard time, and during elections in particular they are careful to observe the rules over representation. That does not make their overall output balanced. For years studies showed the BBC gave plenty of easy airtime to those who wished to make the case for the UK's membership of the EU, but gave far less time to those who wanted to leave. Those who did get on were interrupted, heckled and often presented in an unfavourable way as if their democratic cause was unworthy or absurd. Once the people had voted to leave the BBC would still not accept the verdict, and delighted in giving maximum exposure to the minority representing the global political establishment who wished to undermine or reverse the decision. Many

of their storylines come from the Guardian and from Labour and Lib Dem research. They do not offer a similar range of stories for all those seeking to reduce taxes, expand prosperity through enterprise, query the conduct of nationalised monopolies and challenge the global consensus on major issues. To many in the BBC President Obama's substantial bombing campaigns were fine, but some of President Trump's tough or one sided statements designed as a substitute for military action are unacceptable.

It means reform of the BBC is in the air. This will be necessary anyway, as we thunder towards a very different media planet where people download much of their entertainment, get news from a range of worldwide instant services, and spend more time on social media than conventional media. The immediate issue is should the licence fee be a normal charge where payment is enforced by civil and not criminal means? How much longer anyway will the licence fee serve their needs, given the way many people can avoid live tv and so claim they do not need to pay it. A simple first reform would be to decriminalise the licence fee and unclutter the courts of the licence fee criminal cases. In other guises the BBC would be against a poll tax. They should think again how best to finance their activities going forwards. What is good public service broadcasting and how much if any should be taxpayer financed?

Let's have a modern proposal. Shouldn't some of the BBC's current more commercial activities be paid for by the audience they can command as for other media outlets? We need a new settlement, with the majority of the country that did vote for Brexit feeling we can be included. The BBC should not offer unfair competition to other media outlets financed by their unique access to a dedicated poll tax.