

FREE Press

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LEVESON LEGACY

Regulation becomes right royal battleground

MOVES to try to establish pro-proprietary press regulation in the UK could yet provoke a full-scale constitutional crisis.

That was the warning from leading Hacked Off figure Brian Cathcart at this year's annual general meeting of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom.

Mr Cathcart told the meeting at the NUJ's London headquarters that the process of trying to change press regulation following the Leveson Inquiry and Report had been causing horrendous headaches for mandarins in Whitehall.

Although parliament – with rare cross-party commonality of mind – had agreed to one proposal that could be brought into effect by a Royal Charter, the attempt by proprietors to suggest an alternative without MPs' agreement could put the Crown in an predicament without recent precedent.

However, in order to reject proposals from the proprietors – which seek to maintain editors' supremacy in assessing complaints and papers' responses – civil servants apparently feel that they have to go through "due process" scrupulously, to try to pre-empt any and every possible challenge to their decision through the courts. Other campaigning groups have

been briefing lawyers, so that applications for judicial review can be lodged as soon as circumstances allow.

Hopes that "improved" regulation could be introduced in the United Kingdom fairly quickly after Lord Leveson published his findings into phone hacking (and other activities) now appear dashed – and those seeking reforms are trying to consolidate their positions for the longer term.

Hopes that a decision could be made about a Royal Charter of some sort in May were dashed when the proprietors submitted their suggested version to the Privy Council.

Now, the chances of a decision before the end of this year are decreasing. Even if the Privy Council feels they can find strong enough justification to reject the proprietors' version of the charter after a summer break, Christmas could be in sight before the version approved by parliamentarians reaches a later meeting.

The dilemma was further complicated when Johnston Press editor Gary Shipton wrote to the Queen.

Buckingham Palace responded, saying: "this is not a matter in which The Queen would personally intervene" and adding that the letter had been forwarded to Culture Secretary Maria Miller.

AC



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NATION'S HEALTH

More than pathogens are in the air



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TIMED OUT

Cuts to hours and costs keep voters in the dark



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HOT AIR

Dragon's fiery breath fails to ignite interest

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Diversity is wider than ownership alone

MEDIA PLURALITY is again on the agenda - with the Department for Culture Media and Sport running a consultation process that lasts until October.

However, initial documents published by the Department appear to indicate that the concept is being considered in terms of "one UK" - and within parameters that may well be too narrow to provide a practical, long-term national strategy. That a news supply chain is recognised within broadcasting is a start, but the implications are altogether far wider because, while the UK served by a plethora of media outlets, within them significant monopolies have become established.

PA has become dominant, especially in the regional media, as a central news source. Many daily regional titles have withdrawn their parliamentary correspondents as they have tried to cut costs - replacing their coverage with material from PA's political desk. That same PA feed supplies BBC and commercial local radio, directly or indirectly.

Not so long ago, the BBC ran an experiment to see if it could cut costs by only subscribing to one international television news agency - AP or Reuters. The plurality debate has to consider the number of suppliers feeding the news outlets.

Far fewer freelancers offer stories these days, because budgets have been cut. The regional news agency "sector" has been forced to "consolidate" as money chases more (cheaper) material.

Digital publishing has allowed some new entrants to appear - but most small, "hyperlocal" operations are finding it almost impossible to earn the revenue necessary from advertising to support their efforts.

Potential newspaper publishers are blocked by the lack of available presses. (Should an upturn come, the existing

publishers will have cut off their noses to spite their faces by reducing their capacity during the downturn.)

The dominance of wholesalers also makes it difficult for those willing to enter the newspaper market.

The percentage "rule" of newspaper ownership means nothing in 90 per cent of Yorkshire, for example. Leeds, Wakefield and the Calder Valley are "JP territory" where Johnston Press's *Yorkshire Evening Post*, *Wakefield Express*, *Halifax Courier* and titles such as the *Brighouse Echo* or *Hebden Bridge Times* have no real competition. (The *Yorkshire Post* may be an institution but its circulation is too small to affect this argument.)

ITV has just been allowed by Ofcom to reduce its regional news coverage. The BBC's local radio stations - and websites - still do stalwart work, but with far fewer staff and larger coverage areas, they should never be considered rivals (even to understaffed and under-resourced) local papers. In Leeds, the imminent local TV station has said it will take news bulletins from the city's Bauer-owned commercial radio station.

In Norwich, Archant owns both the *Eastern Daily Press* and Mustard TV. In London, the Ledbedev-controlled *Independent* and *Evening Standard* will work alongside their local TV station, London Live.

From the dark outposts of regional England, this exercise looks all too familiar - a Londonist approach to national outlets that bears little resemblance to life outside the M25 and one of trying to close a stable door after too many horses have bolted. A quick scan of the consultation document failed to find more than one appearance of the word "regional" and no mention of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Media policy decisions taken in 2014 will affect what is available in 2044. The reference point should surely not be the legislation of 2003 but that of the 1980s. AC

Join the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

THE Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom depends on its membership for day-to-day operating funds - including the production and distribution of *Free Press*.

Taking out - and maintaining - membership will allow the Campaign to maintain its work, strengthen its voice and enhance its profile at a time when the media industry is facing more repressive political and commercial constraints than for generations.

If you're interested in a media and journalism that contribute to an informed electorate, then please join the Campaign or renew your membership now.

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Bringing the health of the nation into focus

HEALTH and broadcasting may rarely be mentioned in the same breath – but Bournemouth University media academic **Pat Holland** has found a worrying similarity – going back 30 years. Here, she explains how her latest book, exploring those parallels, came to fruition.

WHEN Margaret Thatcher scornfully declared “there’s no such thing as society”, it seemed to encapsulate contempt for public service and a rejection of any motivation apart from financial gain.

So when a group of broadcasting historians at Bournemouth University got together to do a project about public service in the 1980s we called it “There’s no such thing as society”? – with a very definite question mark.

One of our members, Sherryl Wilson, had been a nurse at the time and had worked through those turbulent years, so we decided that, as well as broadcasting, we would trace the parallel fate of the NHS – and we would do it through the broadcast output.

I had recently published a book on current affairs television, but had always believed that political ideas were not confined to political slots, so we agreed to look across the genres. I checked out my collection of dusty VHS cassettes, recorded off-air a quarter of a century ago (many of them I’d never even watched!) and I’ve spent the last few years viewing comedy, popular drama, angry documentaries and whatever else I could track down from the Thatcher era.

The resulting book re-visits the ideological conflicts of the decade, from neoliberal guru Milton Friedman bouncing



WHY OH WHY: Producer Nick Fry’s contribution to the book helps explain how Thatcherite media policy killed one of the biggest and best public service broadcasters in the ITV network.

around the world declaring that “human greed and self interest promote welfare”, which came from the BBC *Free to Choose* programmes of 1980; to the series that became the longest running hospital drama in the world. Paul Unwin and Jeremy Brock’s pitch for the popular and long-running hospital drama *Casualty* began: “In 1948 a dream was born: a National Health Service. In 1985 the dream is in tatters”.

The programme has been regularly filling the schedules since 1986.

However the pressures were on the broadcasters too, partly because of developing technology, but also because, despite intensive campaigning,

monetarist approaches and privatisation became embedded in public policy. In 1982 the arrival of Channel Four had enriched the public service landscape: but the 1990 Broadcasting Act changed the priorities.

Two decades later the trends which began in the 1980s have intensified. We hope that revisiting the past will contribute to understanding and combatting the challenges we face today.

■ *Broadcasting and the NHS in the Thatcherite 1980s: the challenge to public service*, Patricia Holland with Hugh Chignell and Sherryl Wilson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

■ www.nosuch-research.co.uk

Jimmy’s presents TV as care regulator

A CHAPTER in Pat Holland’s book by Nick Gray, the former Yorkshire Television producer who devised *Jimmy’s*, the programme that not only invented the “docusop” but opened the doors of the NHS, provides a damning assessment of the dual legacy of that time.

Mr Gray describes how the programme came into existence – largely under the radar of ITV bosses at the time – but then also seems to have been a greater monitor of care practice than the Care Quality Commission and all today’s

knee-jerk regulators put together. He also reveals how legislation that put money became a “care pathway” that deprived ITV of the nutrition it needed to avoid the morgue. **AC**

■ A MEETING discussing the current situation *Challenging public service: the legacy of the Thatcherite 1980s* is due to take place at the Frontline Club in London on Thursday September 12 starting at 6.30pm. Confirmed speakers include Tom O’Malley, Colin Leys and Tony Stoller.



VACANT POSSESSION: Newspapers such as the *Yorkshire Post* are not only leaving buildings empty, they are leaving desks in their newsrooms empty too - without thinking about the consequences for their readers.

PICTURE: Adam Christie.

How many journalists does it actually take to produce a newspaper?

Do we know what we do not know? Such questions may appear metaphysical – but they are increasingly real for journalists and journalism. **Adam Christie** takes a personal trip down memory lane.

WHY – when the world has more news outlets than ever before – do I (as a 50-something) now feel less well-informed than I was as a child?

The answer, quite simply, lies in money. News costs – and takes time.

Despite having more outlets, less news is being reported. Cyberspace is spewing out comment and “analysis” as never before, but commercial interests and pressures mean that fewer events are being covered by (trained) journalists.

The effects for civil society and an educated electorate are just starting to become apparent – and they look set to get much worse before they get better.

In his prescient book *The Newscasters; The News Business as Show Business*, first published in 1977, Ron Powers highlights the journalistic imperative of appreciating the difference between what audiences and readers “want” and what they “need” to know.

As a “child journalist”, three decades

ago, I worked with an older colleague who instilled in me the importance of recognising that the minutiae of a district council policy-and-resources sub-committee meeting may not be what the local citizenry thinks it “wants” to know, but it does “need” to know – because such decisions affect our day-to-day lives. My responsibility was then not only to report what the councillors had chosen to do, but explain the relevance, within about 150 words, usually fewer. (And people wonder why “citizen” journalism is frowned upon by those who try to make such work their livelihoods.)

The simultaneous cutting of costs across (commercial) news operations with the need for “content” to be available “across platforms” has come at a price – of basic news coverage.

In West Yorkshire, for example, one coroner has already complained that reporters are no longer appearing at inquests. One major regional daily paper this summer included the outcome of a court case that came from a press release initially published on a police website – a week after sentencing. Some campaigners are getting exercised about coverage of the family courts. Why bother? Probably only the BBC, if the story is big enough, could now even think about sending a reporter to cover such hearings.

By June, the daily title covering one of the 10 largest metropolitan areas of the UK had just seven full-time reporters, a part-timer, a part-time feature writer, a business editor and a news desk assistant – the equivalent of nine whole-time staff. They were trying to provide at least 18-hour-a-day coverage, producing videos and writing for a website as well as filling many pages of newsprint six days a week.

The father of the NUJ chapel at the paper wrote to the chief executive of the holding company to say: “The pressure to pump out news has led to a number of high-profile mistakes going into print.

“It is also notable that one manager felt unable to take up the offer of a secondment to (a national title) for fear of placing colleagues under unsustainable pressure.”

One-man ‘team’

At another daily paper, covering two major cities in the North of England, the NUJ father-of-chapel reported that: “excluding specialists and those with responsibility for the newsdesk, we now have only five general reporters, sometimes producing a paper in excess of 35 pages.

Due to holidays, for the first two weeks in August, the entire features ‘team’ consists of one person, in charge of overseeing the production of four supplements, the usual dedicated run-of-paper pages, *Metro* and, oh, possibly finding and writing some good features too.”

At that title, the latest round of redundancies means that two titles are between them set to lose two news editors, a night shift editor, an experienced sub-editor and their top investigative journalist. Additionally, a senior reporter, a highly-experienced feature writer-cum-columnist and a third, seasoned, reporter had left within the previous month.

While those individuals had found other work, management had said nothing

about replacing them. A further reporter was on maternity leave while another colleague was on long-term sick leave.

A few miles away, those at another title noted: “While, as a company, we claim we want more members of the community to read our papers, our actions seem to suggest we actually want them to write for it, for free.

“Again, we would suggest that there’s a problem. User-generated content is not balanced, particularly when it comes to sport, and generates more problems for already overworked middle managers, in the form of complaints about inaccurate and unrepresentative articles.”

Broadcasting has not escaped such pressures either. Not only has the BBC’s income not increased for several years, the Corporation has had to bear the costs of losing Foreign Office funding for the World Service, the moves to Salford and New Broadcasting House in London as well as compensating executives that were losing their jobs.

Due to holidays, for the first two weeks in August, the entire features ‘team’ consists of one person

The BBC costs about 40 pence per household per day – and remains one of the biggest employers of journalists (and actors *and* musicians) in the country. Fuss is made about the licence fee of £184 a year while, at the same time, in the middle of a period of “austerity” many households consider paying £500 a year, or more, for Sky subscriptions to be a priority.

Listeners complained to *Feedback* on Radio 4 over the summer about “incessant” speculation before the birth of Prince George of Cambridge, but – having been deprived by politicians of the opportunity to pay slightly more for the BBC, so its journalists can increase the story count in their news coverage – they seemed totally unaware of the tacit financial pressure facing programme editors.

ITV has had Ofcom clearance to further reduce its regional news coverage. Even before the formal approval, changes to some regional programmes, including *Granada Reports* and *Calendar* in the

Yorkshire region, were visible on screen. To those who know what to look for, more footage had clearly originated in London, being “topped and tailed” with local cue material.

Staffing levels at national titles are being cut too. Jobs have gone at the *Telegraph* and *Independent*. One person at an NUJ event discussing sexism in the media over the summer raised a question about the coverage of a trial involving the alleged abduction of a schoolgirl by a teacher.

Commercial constraints

She asked why the reports had no context. Again, the answer lies in the commercial constraints on journalists. Reporters have to file copy from the courts, often using Twitter, then produce a piece so quickly for website publication that they don’t have time to make follow-up calls to broaden or deepen the coverage.

Once the police or lawyers have provided a comment – for the live TV news channels – on the steps of the court building after sentencing, everyone scarpers, because they should have been somewhere else two hours earlier.

News takes time to collect and process. “Breaking” news is not whole news. What the commercial interests perceive as a demand for speed has already started to damage the quality of news coverage.

The arguments about council newspapers – which so exercises the mind of communities secretary Eric Pickles – adds a further dimension to this. Many local authorities are obliged to produce their own publications to keep the residents of their areas (not all of whom are either registered to vote or bother to do so) informed about what is happening in their areas and how the (more limited and constrained) sums they are “granted” by Westminster are spent. Why? Because local papers editors are deprived by their proprietors of the money needed to hire skilled reporters who can not only cover councils, but explain the relevance of such decisions to their readers. The thought that complex strategic planning decisions can be reported in 140 characters cannot, surely, raise serious doubts about either the intelligence or motives of some of those earning their livings in Whitehall and Westminster.

Curtailed coverage, either deliberately or commercially accidentally, means that voters are less well-informed. Ian

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Burrell in the *Independent* may have said that papers' websites are less politically "colourful" than the printed leader pages, but time bodes against reading some tabloids sufficiently carefully to notice (and ignore) the emotive adjectives and adverbs that characterise their approach. So, taken together with the closure of the COI and a (small p) political increase in the way government decisions are publicised, the effects – on changing attitudes

towards, for example, welfare and benefits or immigration, should surprise no one. And, as the political elite knows all too well, if you repeat something often enough, people will come to believe it.

User-generated content is not balanced, particularly when it comes to sport, and generates more problems for already overworked middle managers, in the form of complaints about inaccurate and unrepresentative articles

'Baked bean tax'

Playing the "fourth estate" card as a journalist may seem high and mighty, but this trend – perhaps even crisis already – means that political decisions are not being reported, let alone questioned. If the citizenry does not know what is being done in their name, then how, as voters, can they challenge any policies at the ballot box?

As with so much in life, we get what we pay for. Until we learn that the "baked bean tax" that supports free-to-air commercial broadcasting, freesheets or "freesites" is doing us a disservice because it cannot support the news reporting that we need, we will continue to be deprived of the information we need to do our jobs as voters properly.

Newspapers and news are sustainable – but they cannot provide the profits that major conglomerates (and investors who have had their expectations raised so

misleadingly) have believed over the last few years.

News requires continual reinvestment in the "product", imaginative marketing to attract new addicts – perhaps Simon Fox at Trinity Mirror and Ashley Highfield at Johnston Press should be asking the tobacco industry for guidance? – and an acceptance that sustainability means returns of no more than a percentage point or two above the rate of inflation.

If we want a "free" media, able to tell us what is going on in the world with

a reasonable degree of accuracy and balance, then providing journalists with sufficient resources (in working time and staffing levels) to do the job is as important as any argument over regulation.

However, until more money enters

this particular food chain, be it from less greed, more sensible selling of advertising, or the end users either paying (more), then journalists will increasingly be unable to do what they should be doing – telling us what is happening, where, involving whom, and when, and, if a little more cash becomes available, how or why too.

Commercial but far from democratic

THE word is "newsjacking" – and it's being championed as a latest fad in trying to attract visitors to websites.

The underlying idea is that by replication material that is already attracting hits to one site on others, the "eyes" will follow.

According to journalist Joe Elvin, writing on the *Business2Community* website, "fluffier content is great for these sorts of consumers.

"Hard-hitting informative articles have their place," he adds, "but can often be a bit too salesy for readers at this stage of the buying cycle."

The technique is being promoted for organisations who can potentially benefit financially by having their products and services compared with others.

Arguing against the approach, Dai Howells says: "There is little that annoys me more than blogs riding in on the coat tails of a breaking news story in the hope of piggybacking some of its hits."

If blogs really do add long-term credibility to an organisation, then such approaches should be used with care. One aspect is that more frequent replication of the same wire service copy dilutes its impact.

Perhaps attitudes towards digital publishing reflect age and scepticism. What point is there in looking for anything online if every website is publishing the same material?

The approach may have some appeal, but without careful thought, it does open those using such material to great ridicule at a time when reputation is becoming all-important.

Newsjacking by its very nature seems to represent a further diminution of media plurality – because such "content" comes cheaply from wire service sources, "consolidators" or syndication. Comment is once again free, while original reporting is marginalised.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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Welsh dragon struggles for breath over Assembly's role

DO POLITICIANS make an already difficult situation even harder for journalists?

That question has been raised in relation to coverage of the Welsh Assembly – and it is not going away.

Jenny Sims, pictured, a freelance journalist and member of the NUJ's national executive council, described the situation in a letter to Rosemary Butler, presiding officer of the National Assembly for Wales, following discussions about the "democratic deficit" there.

The media industry in Wales is largely managed from England – further adding to perceived problems.

Trinity Mirror is the dominant newspaper publisher – and the country has no truly "national" title of its own.

Ms Sims believes "there is no likelihood of London-based national newspapers ever again having Welsh correspondents or Assembly-based political staff.



"It was said," she adds, "that Assembly proceedings are often extremely boring. AMs themselves look bored, constantly having their heads lowered looking at their computers, not appearing to be 'engaged' with speakers. Ministers do not answer questions and are reluctant to take interventions. People are too eager to read prepared speeches and not engage with debate."

The resource dilemma – see pages 4-6 – applies here too. "Welsh newspaper editors," writes Ms Sims, "say they do not have the resources to send staff to cover more than they already do, which, in the case of the *Western Telegraph*, is not at all.

"People," she adds, "are interested in politics 'as it affects their daily lives', but not in the process – which they mostly find complicated and boring."

The presiding officer Rosemary Butler said Assembly Members (AMs) were keen

to move on the debate from "traditional local media platforms" to "seek to explore whether Wales's flourishing hyper-local movement of community and citizen journalism, (Welsh-language community paper) *papurau bro* and prolific political bloggers is more adept at engaging people in civic and democratic issues than mainstream journalism."

Ms Butler does however seem to answer her own question – by saying that the Welsh Government funds a Welsh-language news website, an observation that confirms that community and citizen journalism are not financially sustainable.

Ms Butler also admits that she does not expect UK newspapers to have correspondents based at the Cardiff assembly, but "I would," she adds, "expect them to clarify to their many Welsh readers that when they report on health and education issues that don't apply to Wales, they make it clear that they only apply in England.

"This is the crux of the issue, and what I mean by the 'democratic deficit'."

Tomorrow's world?

ARE you a media or journalism student aged 25 or younger? Are you looking for a career in the industry?

If you are, then FREE Press would like to hear from you.

We hope to run a series of pieces from those starting out about the industry that they would like to see in the UK (or worldwide) in 20 or 50 years' time.

Contributions should be between 500 and 1,000 words.

Selected articles will appear in FREE Press while others will be published on the CPBF website.

So, if you're interested, please contact the editor, Adam Christie, by e-mail: adam_christie@journalist.com.

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The deadline for the November/December 2013 edition is Friday October 4.

Bring back governors to help Hall rescue the BBC

CHRIS ASPINALL offers some personal – and potentially controversial – thoughts about how to restore public confidence and protect the Corporation from the bullies.

THE BBC may have a place in many hearts, but how can the Corporation be defended in the face of its performance over the last few years?

Some may have sympathy and understanding for Lord Hall, the latest director general, as he tries to pick up the pieces from a catalogue of disasters that some see as starting just after 6am one day on May 29, 2003 – when duty *Today* programme presenter John Humphries invited then defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan to comment on the death of government scientist David Kelly.

Anyone with public or corporate affairs experience awake enough at that time of the morning could hear the sound of a naked flame being applied to the blue touch paper.

Somehow, in the circumstances of the day, it seemed inevitable that – whatever hopes one may have had that someone would get there in time – an explosion was inevitable.

That the then director general, Greg Dyke, was a casualty of the consequent Hutton Report was regarded by many with dismay. Mr Dyke was seen as approachable, accessible and responsive by BBC employees, especially outside London. His departure can be seen as the start of a trend that led to a diminution in the calibre of BBC management that may only have been halted by the arrival of Tony Hall. More senior BBC figures were left trying to find not only a new DG at short notice but also a replacement for departing chairman of the Governors Gavin Davies.

Mark Thompson's tenancy of the DG's office has attracted widespread censure, and understandably so.

Clearly, the politicians cannot deny all responsibility, as former BBC chairman Sir Christopher Bland has said.

The "separation" of the executive

board from the BBC Trust should be regarded as an experiment that has failed. That Trust chairman Lord Patten was left so embarrassingly exposed in front of the House of Commons Public

CAN YOU ADD TO THIS DEBATE?

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Accounts Committee by his lack of knowledge of executive pay-offs alone reveals that this separation of powers has not been an effective replacement for the board of governors.

Looking around the world, it becomes evident that – for a democracy to be healthy – a news organisation is needed that is protected (by statute) from as much political and commercial influence and interference as possible.

The legal requirements for balance which have characterised the BBC's output for decades and which were also enshrined in UK commercial broadcasting have provided the country with a healthier media than many others.

The democratic ignorance of much of the US can be directly attributed to the conflicting commercial interests of the conglomerates that dominate the media across the Atlantic. The "commercial model" is, by its very nature, too flawed to serve a representative democracy if corporate interests can outspend and out-shout individual voters' opinions.

The BBC – per se – is a great institution. Expecting it to do as much as it does

for the nation for just 40 pence per household per day is no longer realistic; the austerity argument against a licence fee increase has been totally devalued by viewers' willingness to pay more than £500 a year for alternative subscription services.

I can not defend the decisions of Mark Thompson. Indeed I will not defend the decisions of Mark Thompson. I will however defend the BBC.

Some BBC managers – past and present – do not merit any defence. Their failure to appreciate and protect the organisation's importance increases perceptions of incompetence that cannot and should not be excused.

They were employed on salaries sufficient to compensate them for public exposure – and many of them clearly failed. That they were then paid-off so handsomely further emphasises their failure to recognise the indefensible.

Politicians have long sought to undermine an organisation that every side sees as unaccountably critical. Recently, through financial strictures, they may be succeeding – aided by previous senior executives.

Chris Patten seems to have found himself as the fall guy for political positioning that was not sufficiently thought through.

Tony Hall is just a few months into the job – but his actions (both public and less public) suggest that he is aware of the legacy he has inherited and what he needs to do to re-establish an organisation that is strong enough to resist political and commercial interference.

Of course, that cannot be without accountability – which means that the most important and immediate problem is to try to find a practical replacement for the BBC Trust. Perhaps that's a job for Greg Dyke and Sir Christopher Bland?