

# The politics in the UK suggests that the BBC is in danger, but practical considerations might protect it

Blog post by Senior Associate Joe Armitage, 18 February 2020

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Boris Johnson is no fan of the BBC. In 2012, after being elected as mayor of London for a second term, he wrote that he sometimes felt that his chief opponent was the local BBC news and that “the prevailing view of BBC newsrooms is, with honourable exceptions, statist, corporatist, defeatist, anti-business, Europhile and, above all, overwhelmingly biased to the Left.” With respect to how it is funded, he contended that it is “unlike any other media organisation in the free world, in that it levies billions from British households whether they want to watch it or not.”

His views towards the BBC do not appear to have changed now that he is prime minister. He refused to be interviewed by the BBC’s foremost political interviewer, Andrew Neil, during the recent election campaign and his Downing Street press team have placed a moratorium on government ministers appearing on the BBC Radio Four’s Today programme and BBC Two’s Newsnight. His close political advisers share his disposition towards the BBC, and they have spared no time in directing the machinery of government towards clipping its wings.

Steering this machinery will be John Whittingdale, who returns to the department for digital, media, culture & sport, which he used to be the secretary of state of, in a middling ministerial role. His negative perception of the BBC is well known and his appointment to oversee it is a clear shot across the bows of the organisation. Parliamentary oversight of any government reforms is likely to be blunted by the selection of Julian Knight to chair the Commons digital, media, culture & sport select committee, somebody who also has a negative view of the BBC.

There are three vectors that the government is likely to seek to reform the BBC through, each of these have practical limitations. Firstly, and currently the most concrete, involves potentially decriminalising the non-payment of the £157.50 household licence fee. This is being consulted on over the next few months, but it is widely considered that there is a preconceived outcome which involves proceeding with decriminalisation in favour of a civil penalty system, an approach that was rejected by the Perry report in 2015.

This outcome will bring many practical difficulties. For example, whilst it will free up a certain amount of court time, it is projected to result in a funding gap for the BBC of around 4% (£150m) based on similar reforms to Germany’s public broadcaster. In addition, if the BBC is forced to pursue non-payment in the civil courts then it will involve the possibility of bailiffs, which is arguably a far more bullish approach in comparison to the criminal courts who currently issue fines of £176 on average for non-payment.

The second vector at the government’s disposal is the appointment of the new director general to replace the outgoing Tony Hall. Johnson argued in relation to the appointment of the director general in 2012 that former prime minister David Cameron should appoint somebody “who is free-market, pro-

business and understands the depths of the problems this country faces,” and he will naturally have some sway over who’s appointed next summer. However, it is widely understood that Hall is stepping down early before the current chair of the BBC’s board comes to an end. This will likely insulate the BBC from a new leader whose interests aren’t considered aligned with the organisation.

The final vector is the expected consultation on converting the licence fee into a subscription-based model, akin to how Netflix or Amazon Prime receives payments from its users. This intention has already resulted in significant concern amongst some politicians in Johnson’s party who have questioned how such a model would enable the BBC to continue to fund loss-making national and regional news, considerable UK originated content and the BBC’s radio services that are listened to for over two hours per day by over 33m people.

Such a subscription-based model is also something that is currently technologically unviable, given that televisions in the UK do not come fitted with the modules necessary to make the viewing of BBC channels contingent on paying a fee. Rolling out the equipment necessary for this conditional access would be an undertaking similar in scale and expense to the digital switchover between 2005 and 2012.

In addition, controlling the access to BBC content through satellites or the internet is unlikely to be practical replacement option either given that the UK does not have universal coverage of these technologies. Whilst BBC iPlayer could, in theory, have a paywall, it currently contributes a mere 12% of BBC video viewing. This is to say nothing about how regional news, radio and other public service content would be able to continue under such a model.

But these practical considerations and barriers strike to the heart of what Downing Street might be intending to do. Decriminalising non-payment of the licence fee and potentially driving through blunt funding reforms that will result in partial coverage will force the BBC to compete for subscriptions by scaling back its news content - which Johnson’s Downing Street evidently finds objectionable - in favour of high-quality TV series. Whether there is sufficient political will in the Conservative party to allow this to happen is currently unclear, but the current direction of travel for the BBC appears bleak.