

A big moment for the BBC but not quite yet

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BBC DG Tony Hall in front of the Select Committee

BBC boss Tony Hall has outlined [his vision of the BBC's future](#) including the idea of everyone having a personalised platform of BBC content, partly in response to the [Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport](#) which [has published its report](#) on the future of the most important news media organisation in the UK – the BBC. It's a journalistic and cultural institution with significance around the globe. Recently it has been plagued by scandals such as Savile and rows over pay and waste. But more importantly it is at a crucial phase where technological, social and global media industry changes raise questions about its form and function. This report will not decide anything, but it will shape the political debate as the

BBC approaches the latest Charter Renewal deadline in 2017.

The Committee has said there should be significant change in the BBC's funding and its governance. But look more closely and I think that the MPs have created a fairly moderate report, perhaps the inevitable result of a collective effort made so close to an election. But even though they put off the moment for radical change they do set out a discernible and achievable path. I find little to disagree with in their conclusions (and from a personal point of view I am delighted that they cite [my evidence to them](#) at several important points).

They back a household levy to replace the licence fee at some point in the future and I think this is a good place to start. The Germans have something similar and that seems to work although as technology develops there may be other options for revenue collection in a post analogue channel world.

They also call for a new governance structure to replace the BBC Trust. The [recent speech](#) by the new Trust chair Rona Fairhead exemplified the problem with the current Trust set-up. She will be an excellent Trust chair but how can she be both the 'voice of the public' and 'protect the BBC'?

Universality Challenged

More importantly perhaps, the Committee challenges the BBC's cornerstone of universality: the idea that the BBC must do a bit of everything for everyone all the time. This is vital. No-one likes to lose the bit of the BBC they like (especially BBC managers) but until the BBC cuts certain functions then it will not prioritise its strategy and provide the resources for innovation that is needed. It has now got to the point where its size means it is not addressing market failure, it is distorting the media economy.

The committee suggests a review of the BBC's 'public purposes'. And it's true, this wish-list of what the BBC must do has become so all-encompassing that the criteria are almost meaningless when used to measure the value that the BBC delivers. Unless the BBC's is asked to think self-critically about why it exists, then it won't think thoroughly about what it does.

By suggesting the creation of a proper board to run the BBC and a separate watchdog to oversee it, the MPs have posited a governance structure where real reform is more likely. Unleashing the National Audit Office and Ofcom would also keep up the pressure.

Serving Britain

There was a clear message that the BBC must be more diverse in its make-up and better at serving Britain as a

whole including leading a rescue mission for local news. The MPs were less clear on how that kind of thing would be achieved, but that's a job for the managers.

Likewise, they strongly backed Tony Hall's partnership proposals but insisted they go much further in a more open and equitable way. I am delighted that they quote the wise words of a Professor Beckett from the LSE (ahem...) who suggests that opening up BBC content production more would make it more diverse, efficient and accountable:

"If more people participated in production in this way and more organisations had a stake in the BBC, then the Corporation would become more accountable and responsive."

The timing on this around Charter Renewal is critical. The MPs have suggested that rather than go straight to another 10 year period in 2017, the BBC should only get a two year extension to allow for deeper and wider debate about options. That opens up the prospect of quite a frantic short term melee to be followed by an even more fundamental battle to define the next decade for the BBC midway through the next parliament. That makes the appointment of the next BBC DG even more important. That is all great news for those who comment on BBC politics, less happy news for BBC managers trying to get on with their long-term plans.

The MPs have gone for the St Augustine strategy: 'make the BBC reform radically, but not just yet.' I think that this is wise. The BBC needs the full confidence of parliament and the wider public in its vital contribution to national life and the creative economy in a world where its cultural value, its liberal, democratic ideals and its commitment to public service and quality are more important than ever. But it also needs to be pushed to unshackle itself from the turf wars, self-protectionism and under-confidence that have plagued it recently. Tony Hall has done a very good short-term job in stabilising the ship and pointing it in a sensible direction. However, what it will have to do over the next decade is to reshape itself as an organisation to suit the digital era.

[I have given my detailed view on the future of the BBC in a lengthy submission to the committee that you can read [here.](#)]

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