

# It doesn't matter who is the boss at the BBC. And yet, at this time it matters more than ever.

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/03/20/it-doesnt-matter-who-is-the-boss-at-the-bbc-and-yet-at-this-time-it-matters-more-than-ever/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/03/20/it-doesnt-matter-who-is-the-boss-at-the-bbc-and-yet-at-this-time-it-matters-more-than-ever/)

2012-3-20



He's off

BBC Director General Mark Thompson was the consummate BBC suit who was promoted quickly, did much, but left little substantial legacy that can be attributed directly to him. He was an adept politician, a hard-working and dedicated servant of public service broadcasting who has left the BBC in relatively good shape considering the challenges it has faced.

Overall, the BBC now produces better material and more of it than ever before. But at the same time BSkyB, Channel 4 and latterly ITV have smartened up their acts, too, and without the benefit of a massive licence fee income. Thompson should be proud of that record but he's not a visionary or a strong leader and so his legacy is 'safe, but dull'.

It may be that the BBC is now too big to be changed by one DG. It is a vast empire of competing provincial proconsuls who defend their turf and their revenues. If someone suggests cutting something then both staff and audiences rise up to defend their corner. This is sort of democratic, but it's not necessarily the best way to run a modern media behemoth.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. Like the NHS, the BBC sails on. The Daily Mail and the Media Guardian get over excited about what were essentially trivial rows such as Miriam O'Reilly or Sachsgate. But despite serious cutbacks it still produces an extraordinary range of journalism, for example, that makes it one of the world's most respected brands. DGs come and go but shows like Panorama or Newsnight continue. Indeed, those two are good examples of how it takes determined editors, not a DG to make the best out of worn out and resource-depleted editorial offerings.

The BBC is as slow to change course as an oil tanker, but a better nautical analogy would be an armada. The problem for any DG is to keep a varied collection of vessels on the same course. Some are speed-boats, others are chugging trawlers, some are pedalos while others are cruise ships. All of them have captains who care more about their own hulks than the destiny of the flotilla.

Yet, the leadership has never been more important. Chris Patten is potentially an historically significant BBC Trust Chair who combines his emollient Establishment experience with a raffish intellectual interest in risk-taking. A weak DG will be able to rely on Patten for cover, but a strong one would be able to use him as a shield to protect a bold strategy.

Unfortunately, I suspect that economic circumstances and a lack of outstanding candidates mean that we will end up with a technocrat who spends their time keeping things together. They can be filed under 'DGs who managed rather than led'. But what if we got a Birt?\*

John Birt was much hated at the time and subsequently oft-derided. He was mocked mainly for his robotic speech and his penchant for a kind of jargon that still characterises the half-baked management consultancy style of BBC internal communication. But Birt was that rare thing, a BBC DG who changed the culture, working practices, structure and most of all, the direction of the BBC.

Birt took the BBC up market and into new areas without losing its populist strengths. He made its programme-

makers accountable and he stopped the privatisation of the BBC by demonstrating it could reform itself. Most importantly, he committed it to the digital path in a serious and thorough-going way, long before any other UK media organisation. The BBC is still reaping the rewards in terms of online audiences, skills and brand-recognition from that decisive act of visionary leadership.

In the next 5-10 years the BBC's leadership will again prove crucial. In journalism in particular we are increasingly dependent on the BBC as the commercial broadcasters and newspapers struggle to maintain their resources. I have long argued that if the BBC is to continue at this scale then it needs to be much better at networking with other professional and citizen news producers to support and enhance our public sphere.

Internally, the BBC needs someone to give it strategic direction in an age of austerity. I agree that BBC staff need regular ass-kicking but in return they deserve a sense of what their hard work is for and reward for creative innovation.

Externally, the BBC needs a leader who can explain to the country – and the world beyond – what the BBC is there for? Under Mark Thompson the case it made was too broad, universal and generalised. Of course, the BBC's actual output speaks most eloquently for the corporation but it would help if the DG could talk to the troops as well as the licence-fee payer in a language they can understand and feel inspired by. So let's hope the next DG has their own voice, not the sort of advisor-written automatonese that some BBC managers are prey to.

And it needs someone with ideas – innovation – aspiration – not just painting by numbers. Of course, that's the tough bit. If I had any detailed explanation of what those ideas were then I would be writing a job application letter instead of this blog. But for me the BBC has to get back out there at the front of media creation, instead of trailing in the wake. That might mean making some tough choices to back winners and retreat from losing battles. Despite the obvious quality of the internal candidates, that makes me think it needs an outsider.

[Here is a good article on the [recruitment process with the job description](#)]

\*Declaration of interest. I joined the BBC in the early days of the Birt revolution. Yes, I came from LWT, but not the posh Birtist bit of Weekend World. I had been a researcher on the London Programme. I remember when I first entered Lime Grove how I was told by BBC veterans that 'the game was up' and that it would be privatised within 12 months. They were outraged that editors now expected them to plan both the production and budget of a film before hitting the road. To me Birt's rational approach to management and journalism seemed quite sensible.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science