

THE BBC AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

CREATIVE LECTURE BY STEPHEN FRY
LONDON – MAY 7, 2008

Chaired by Kirsty Wark

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

The following is an edited version of the discussion following Stephen Fry's speech on May 7, 2008. To hear the whole discussion please go to the audio recording of the event.

Kirsty Wark (KW): Can I just ask you first of all, the slight conflict of interest you were talking about at the end, about yourself now being an independent producer. You know that Ofcom is looking at various models and some of these models would include, for example, giving Channel 4 public service money for particular genres. You made a very strong case for comedy being a public service. So why shouldn't Channel 4 get money for particular genres if one of them is comedy, because what Ofcom seems to be saying is that the way to keep the BBC sharp is to make sure it's got competition.

Stephen Fry (SF): I wonder if it is saying that. I think what it's saying is the only way to save Channel 4 and keep its strange remit is to do something like this slicing, but it seems to me the other way to do it is to change Channel 4's remit. It is, it seems to me, a push-me pull-you remit. It's being asked on the one hand to be all the things that it started out being – appealing to minorities, young, punky and exciting – but it's also being asked to make money in the commercial sense, and the pool of money has gone down. And if we want a Channel 4 that is the way it is, then it can be publicly funded, but I don't see why money should necessarily be reduced for the BBC in order to do that. I don't see how the BBC will have better competition simply by cutting off its legs at the knees.

David Quantick (broadcaster/writer): I believe you used the phrase 'the BBC when it's gone'. Do you think the BBC is ultimately doomed?

SF: Well all things are doomed. I hope not in my lifetime, David. I've been as careful as I might to not necessarily be nice about the BBC, but it was very revealing wasn't it? And I know there are some broadcast journalists in the room, and I know it's not their fault, it's not an attack on you, but it was a very revealing and immensely thoughtful and interesting speech that David Attenborough made in which he made a small, gentle, slighting, little slap about celebrity chefs and reality television, and that was all that was covered. Nothing else was reported. So I had to make this speech thinking extremely hard about what possible phrase I could use about the BBC that then would be taken by the press to be construed to imply the BBC is going tomorrow! I am sure that is not what you meant, David, you are a very responsible journalist of course, but of course it will go. All institutions pass, but as I say, I hope not in my lifetime. Time passes very quickly. The

Allen Report was '77 I think, and the Peacock Report was only nine years later, and it's now 22 years since that report and the landscape is immeasurably different. No one can deny that, and although I was tasked to talk about the future, and I'm very interested in the future, particularly in the technology, I've always been aware that broadcasters oddly enough are surprisingly uninterested in technology. It took an enormous number of conferences at expensive country hotels for the BBC and other executives to be told precisely what 'digital' meant during the '80s. I can remember friends of mine who worked for the BBC having to go off to another weekend where someone tried to explain what a digital service was, and they still haven't the faintest idea! They came back and said 'Did you know if you make a digital copy of something it's exactly the same?' Well, yes. 'Oh, I went away on a weekend to be taught that. Fair enough.' And similarly with this marvellous idea the BBC has that the iPlayer is somehow secure or the digital rights management on it is secure. It is anything but secure. I don't think the BBC have quite noticed how annoying it is when you look at iTunes in the UK trying to keep its prices as low as possible and being criticised for having them high in the UK as opposed to other European countries and America. Which is not their fault but the record companies' fault. When you see other companies like Juiced and various other online TV companies that are legal, trying to keep their cost down when they see a sort of amateur like the BBC paddling around in the online waters throwing out real content. Really valuable content that they think is only streamed – in other words 'only watchable while you're at the screen in front of it but not recordable'. It shows an incredible naivety about how the Internet and digital devices work. I've recorded dozens. I recorded one yesterday, it's on my iPhone now.

KW: What is it?

SF: It's actually a documentary, just because I didn't have a chance to see it! I would of course have burnt it and destroyed it because it's an illegal act but it's an illegal act that is preposterously easy. It's like it was, of course, [with the] first micro cassettes. Anyway, that's a – if there is a criticism of the BBC – but it's a criticism of the broadcasting profession in general. They don't really grasp what it is that they've got in terms of material and in terms of the spectrum and the bandwidth and basically the kind of devices into which programming can go. And if they don't, then content may go elsewhere, that's my only worry.

Nicholas Kenyon (Managing Director, Barbican Centre): Can we just go back to that phrase you used, Stephen, about 'the nation's fireplace'. Was there actually a cultural consensus back then and is one of the problems for the BBC of the future that the country is now so culturally diverse and divided that one organisation can't possibly provide everything?

SF: It's a very good point, Nicholas, and I would be the first to concede that we are or appear to be a more fractured society than the one in which I grew up. It's interesting that the Latin for fireplace is 'focus' and whenever we use the word focus we are using it in a kind of metaphorical way, and indeed the word 'hearth' and the word 'heart' cognate in the

same fashion. So the word fireplace is a very interesting one to think about for television. Can there be such a thing as a focus or a heart to the British nation anymore? Are we a totally divided country and would the ghettoised, balkanised version I describe – the Barry Cox vision of the electronic bookshop – would that hold? Do you remember it was actually true of bookshops in the '80s, and this is when I first thought, Nick, like you, that maybe we are breaking up. The general fiction table in bookshops in the 1980s was radically reduced and suddenly it was women's fiction, Virago Press, gay men's press, it was various kinds of ethnic press. Because it was argued that the chances are that 90 per cent of gay men might buy a gay novel of a particular kind, but something on the general fiction table – it's just a novel. It isn't a woman's novel or a man's novel or a Hampstead novel. It isn't categorisable. That has a lot harder chance of doing anything, and people are beginning to reinvent themselves according to the identity they affix to themselves. Whether it is their sexuality, their race, their income, their region or their football club. And it's a real issue, but all I would say is what vestiges there are of a national identity are things that politicians of all stripes are very anxious to attain.

Because I think we believe in the idea of sovereignty without having to have a St George's flag painted on us and shaving our heads. There is nothing intrinsically right-wing about believing in your nation. In wanting it to be better, criticising it, being frustrated by it, maddened by it, but also being able to weep at it and to love it dearly. And I think the BBC provides precisely the kind of space in which all the ambiguities and comedies of identity can be played out – as they were for example in *Goodness Gracious Me* – in a way that, again, could not have been done elsewhere. So I don't know the answer, Nicholas, but I think the BBC can come closer to a glowing ember in a fireplace than anyone else.

Jon Plowman (Television entertainment producer/former BBC Head of Entertainment Comedy): It feels sometimes from the inside as if the BBC's rather bad at defending itself, as if it gets rather apologetic. Does it feel like that from the outside? How could it get better?

SF: It's a very good question, John, and I remember after Peacock there was this extraordinary scrabble on the part of the BBC to go round the nation with huge placards saying 'It's your BBC' and erecting little tents in which people were invited to come and participate in local debates about the BBC. And all it meant was a whole load of Linda Snells saying 'I don't like that man who does the weather, get rid of him. Well, you said it's my BBC, I don't like him, I think he's got awful adenoids'. Democracy you suddenly realise is a horrible idea. It's just the Greek for mob rule after all. It has no particular value. And the BBC is bad at defending itself, I think. Maybe there's good reason for that. I think it is such a complicated and weird structure the BBC. It has grown up in an odd shape and in an odd way and no one would get to this place if you started here. But that's true of Parliament and it's true of the royal family, it's true of any other institution. Then you can be, of course, opposed to those institutions.

KW: But should there be somebody that's for the BBC from within the BBC?

SF: It's an interesting point. There have been people, executives, who have often been moved sideways for a while and been given precisely that job of sort of public cockerel for the BBC, and it's not an easy one or an enviable one. I think the programming is always going to be its best defence, and a certain amount of pride in the way it plays its back catalogue. I personally think it an enormous shame that it sold so much of its back catalogue to other companies on the digital and satellite front because I think it could have kept them itself and kept a kind of continuity with them.

Lorraine Heggessey (CEO, talkbackTHAMES): I wonder whether you think the word 'service' in public service is starting to become a millstone around the BBC's neck?

SF: That's a very good point. I think you're quite right. It's a strange word to put in there. Service is – I suppose what one naturally thinks of is a bus that sticks to a route which makes it no money because it is deemed useful to the particular rural community it is serving. And we all laughed, didn't we, when trains started to become called services rather than trains. There is a sort of built-in sense of failure and worthiness about the 'service'.

KW: You made a point that it's public 'sector' broadcasting.

SF: Oh, did I? Whoops a daisy!

KW: Again, it's the same sort of idea.

SF. Yes, well, that's right. Famously didn't Hugh Carlton Green... (it's funny with broadcasters how all people like that – you get Graham Green and his brother Hugh Green, and David Attenborough and his brother Richard Attenborough! I just picture them growing up. Richard Attenborough striding around while David is looking at worms on the lawn! 'Darling, darling, listen to my speech.' 'No. I'm just watching this.') Anyway, it was Hugh Carlton Green who refused to call the Independent Television Company – ITV – 'independent'. He called it 'commercial' all the time. Refused to recognise the word 'independent'. 'Independent of what?' he would growl fiercely. And maybe yes, service is a strange word. As I say, I would like there not to be a distinction. I don't know how you would constitutionally enshrine in statute a new charter for either the BBC or any of the other currently terrestrial channels because let's remember we are talking about a period leading up to very soon the digital switchover when the idea of a terrestrial channel will no longer have much meaning, to be honest. Because everyone will have their digi set and their Freeview and whatever. But maybe there is a new way of expressing, not the obligation, but what the desire of the consensus – if there is such a thing – what the desire of British people is to have in the garden of broadcasting as it were. We like our parks, we like our wild spaces, we like them to be well tended and well kept. We don't expect the Lake District to make a profit, we don't expect Scottish lochs to make a profit. We don't expect the Broads to make a profit. We don't expect much that is valuable and important

and nourishing to us to make a profit. And I don't see that necessarily we should expect broadcasting to make a profit. It so enriches us that that is our profit.

Matt Paice (Executive producer, Diverse Productions): Do you think the BBC should continue to make its own programmes?

SF: It's an interesting point. It would have been unthinkable to ask that question 10 years ago, 15 years ago, wouldn't it? But now there's another kind of licence fee, as you will know as an independent producer; the licence fee that the member of the public pays in order to have a television and there is – as it were – the licence fee that BBC pays to the independent company for its hour, or hour times six that's providing the content. Should BBC make content? I believe it should. I think it would be very hard for it to regard itself as the full entity that it is without making content. This is a really important point it seems to me about broadcasting: there are executives and there are programme makers. And this is a model, if you want to use that word, that was familiar all the way back to the early days of the BBC when almost everybody had been in the army. There was a natural problem in the army of morale when you have field officers, field soldiers, who are good in the field at fighting, if you like – at moving around and at tactics. And you have the staff officers that tell them what to do. If the staff officers are the Melchett-type characters, the Darling-type characters [characters from TV comedy *Blackadder Goes Forth*], if they had never been in the field, nobody trusts them or likes them. But if they are brilliant field officers, why would you take them out of the field and put them behind a desk? And this is the problem in the BBC. If someone is a good programme maker, why take them out of programme making and assume that they will be good at guiding something as huge as a corporation. On the other hand, if you are a programme maker and you had been told how to make programmes by someone who has never made a programme, it's incredibly irritating. So we rely on five per cent of programme makers accidentally being good executives. And it will occasionally happen. Usually the Peter Principle will prevail and they will just be promoted beyond their competence and then settle down. That is not a criticism of anyone in particular – it's just the natural problem with institutions, large institutions. It wouldn't happen in a small company like yours. I don't know what the answer is. I think programme making is central to the BBC, yes I do. I mean, it is inconceivable to me to imagine it not making its own programmes, particularly news.

Robin Ince (Comedian): You were talking about the patriarchal nature of the BBC in the past and I just wondered whether to an extent with all TV now it is still patriarchal. It's just decided that the children are half wits, and it's just going to give them a glitter ball to play with, and it's just a presumption of idiocy amongst the population.

Stephen Fry: Oh that's a tricky one. I personally meant the opposite of presumption. I'm not claiming to be grand or important or clever because of that, but I always assumed that the audience is a great deal smarter than anyone who's making [the programme] and therefore that the smallest mistake or the smallest evasion of truth, the smallest compromise that insults the intelligence of the viewer is an instant failure and will be seen.

It may not always be the case and it may be that I am entirely deluded but as someone who does *The Times* crossword very quickly if, I was to go into an average British pub there would be someone who did it more quickly than me. I know a lot about cricket, say, or chess, but I believe if I went into the average British pub there would be someone there who knew more about those things than me. I do believe that the country is both full of talented and extraordinary people who happen to watch television and full of people with an extraordinary thirst and appetite for knowledge. It may be that if you were to throw a stone in Basingstoke market place it will land on the head of someone who is more or less functionally an idiot! But, that person probably isn't going to be watching television. He'll be in the pub throwing up after his seventh shooter very quickly. That's if one wants to characterise Britain in that way, but I am genuinely much more optimistic about it than you, I think. Nothing is all or nothing. It is perfectly possible to watch a charming piece of Saturday evening entertainment and to watch a very challenging new play on BBC4 or to listen to Radio 3 and then go and listen to Radio 2. I don't think people are as ghettoised as everyone insists they are. I personally can eat a hamburger one day and go to a three star Michelin restaurant the next if I'm lucky and expensive enough. I don't see that as a contradiction. It's being human. We are none of us such connoisseurs that we can only watch the most high-flown thing. Nor are we, none of us, so sunk in lack of self-respect and sloth that all we can watch is something that never challenges us. Most of us want a mixture and that is precisely what the BBC has been good at providing.