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Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Bad news week for BBC as Murdoch press sharpens claws

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Comfortable? Sang Tan / AP/Press Association Images

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It's to be yet another week of crisis, inspection and introspection for the forever under pressure BBC as the government is set to publish a green paper on Thursday, which will, the Guardian says, signal the next stage in the political battle over the broadcaster's future size and funding.

As part of the process for charter renewal (which expires at the end of 2016) the culture secretary, John Whittingdale, has recruited eight experts, among them former Channel 5 chair and chief executive Dawn Airey and Dame Colette Bowe, the former chairwoman of the regulator Ofcom, to oversee a "root-and-branch" review of the public broadcaster.



Campaigning front page from Sunday Times.

According to a front-page report in the Sunday Times headlined: “Tories give BBC reform ultimatum” the Green Paper will, among other things, urge the ditching of the BBC Trust (which is responsible for governance), question impartiality and discuss whether production facilities should be privatised.

Elsewhere in the Sunday Times, the front page of the News Review has an article discussing what the BBC might lose under the headline: “Taming the BBC beast” while on page

two, the former Today programme editor, Rod Liddle, writes under the headline: “Oh dear. Auntie’s forgotten why she’s even here.”

This sort of thing will make familiar reading for anyone in Murdoch’s home market of Australia where the mogul’s flagship newspapers have kept up a barrage of criticism against the ABC – questioning its funding, its scope and, regularly, its bias.

Murdoch papers campaigned vociferously for the incumbent prime minister Tony Abbott, whose hostility towards the public broadcaster recently culminated in imposing a ban on his frontbench ministers appearing on its flagship Q&A debate show.

Setting the agenda

One thing you can be sure of, historically, is that when the BBC is the up for discussion, it’s The Times and Sunday Times which like to believe they are setting the agenda.

This is best illustrated by examining the relationship between the Thatcher government and the Murdoch-owned press in the 1980s. As Horrie and Clarke have pointed out:

Rupert Murdoch’s News International was a shining example of the new age of enterprise Mrs Thatcher had ushered in. It was union-free, dedicated to giving the punter what they wanted and hugely profitable. Murdoch’s papers had cheered on the prime minister all the way and savaged her critics, including the BBC.

The British press gave open and widespread support to a wide range of policies adopted by the Thatcher governments of the 1980s, but it was the Murdoch press which became her closest allies in attacking the BBC – since News International had a commercial interest in a change in the broadcasting system. Thatcher opposed the BBC ideologically, while Murdoch was interested in a solely commercially funded media.

Thus, in order to attain a major footing in British broadcasting, Murdoch needed to attempt to weaken public service broadcasting. Every opportunity to criticise the BBC was seized upon – with Murdoch using his substantial media concerns in this country to support the prime minister, while his companies received direct benefits as a consequence of policy decisions taken by her government. As Tom O’Malley states:

The Sunday Times and The Times promoted the liberalisation of broadcasting regulation in order to open up the UK market to greater commercial exploitation.

In order to achieve this “liberalisation of broadcasting”, various techniques were employed to undermine the BBC. The two newspapers commissioned and published opinion polls which suggested apparent dissatisfaction with the existing broadcasting landscape and support for the use of advertising to fund the BBC.

They also supported specific changes in broadcast regulation and the management of the BBC based on the proposals of Tory think tank groups such as the Adam Smith Institute and the Institute of Economic Affairs. They also gave a favourable reception to governmental criticism of the BBC on any level.

High-level back scratching

Rupert Murdoch’s closeness to the Thatcher government yielded mutual benefits. During the 1979 general election The Sun and the News of the World campaigned vigorously for the Tories. Two years later, when Murdoch wanted to buy The Times and the Sunday Times, he received considerable political assistance – as Harold Evans recounted to the Leveson Inquiry in 2012, it was decided by John Biffen – then trade minister – that his takeover of the papers should not be referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission.

I was told by someone I knew that Mrs Thatcher had determined [the bid] must go to Mr Murdoch because she valued his support. In this belief I was supportive of Mr Hugh Stephenson at the Times, who had it from a friend in the Cabinet Office that Mrs Thatcher’s real debt of gratitude was the crucial factor in doing this.

Once Murdoch had established himself at the forefront of the British newspaper industry, he had greater opportunity to support the government – provided he got what he wanted. It so happened that he and Thatcher desired the same thing: the deregulation and commercialisation of British broadcasting.

The Times believed that it had a direct influence on broadcast policy, claiming that the proposals put forward in the newspaper in 1983 were present in the 1988 White Paper on broadcasting:

It is only five years since torrents of outraged abuse followed a call in these columns for an end to the duopoly of BBC and ITV, auctioning of franchises, the phasing out of the licence fee, an enquiry into alternative methods of financing and a tighter definition of public service broadcasting.

Hostility then and now

At the BBC, press hostility was taken very seriously. Alasdair Milne the BBC director general from 1982 to 1987 wrote in his memoirs that:

January 1984 was the month the press decided to turn on us, in a campaign sustained for 18 months or more and I believe unprecedented in the history of the BBC.

By January 1985:

We had taken a drubbing and some of the mud stuck. I must say I was ... incensed by the behaviour of The Times.

Horrie and Clarke describe the feeling inside the BBC at the time:

Inside the BBC the campaign was having a catastrophic effect. Producers and executives felt they were living in a bunker having the stuffing knocked out of them. If the BBC's management had defended itself, as Milne had done during the Falklands war, that would have been reported as evidence of a 'New BBC row' and thrown back in their faces. They just could not win.


Press coverage then as now was important – it increased the BBC's sense of beleagueredness. In promoting the restructure of British broadcasting, the Murdoch press was in tandem with the government. The BBC faced a two-pronged attack, which, many employees believed, threatened its very existence.

So here we are in 2015 where **Stephen Pollard** wrote in the Times:

The BBC is a behemoth that needs to be cut down to a realistic and affordable size. It must then stop behaving like a competitor rather than complementary to other broadcasters and media outlets.

These words mirror almost exactly the position of the Conservative government. And as James Cusick wrote in the Independent, when George Osborne spoke last week of the BBC's "imperial ambitions", he could have been channelling the spirit of James Murdoch in his 2009 Edinburgh Television address. Then Murdoch spoke of the "chilling ambition of the BBC" with its "land-grab" mentality.

In this sense it really does seem as if – with Leveson and the phone hacking scandals fading into history – that the cosy relationship between the Conservatives and the Murdoch press is gradually returning to normal.

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