



CURRENT ISSUES

Save free TV licences

I wrote, back in March, of the likelihood of the BBC withdrawing the concessionary TV licence from those over the age of 75. That prediction has now become a reality and has resulted in a storm of protest stimulating a petition signed by somewhere in the region of 500,000 people. In her own inimitable way 'Auntie' has scored a spectacular own- goal.

The Beeb complains that it cannot afford to give away the 'free' Television licence without cutting back on programmes. The corporation cites, first, the already under-funded pauper of broadcast services, local radio, as being at risk and then lists other 'much- loved' channels and programmes that could not continue without the considerable sum paid out, or to be more exact not collected, from pensioners. This sleight of hand ignores two major considerations.

First, when the Government of the day transferred responsibility for the concessionary licence - it is not, of course, 'free' but is paid for by other TV users - from the Department for Work and Pensions to the BBC it did so as part of a not ungenerous licence fee increase and settlement designed to fund public service broadcasting into the future.

Second, it overlooks the fact that, as I said in March, there are some cost- centres within the Corporation that appear to be financially incontinent. The salaries of some senior management, a significant number of whom are paid appreciably more than the Prime Minister, and of many 'stars' of screen and radio, are legendary as is the transport and hospitality bill run up in some quarters of The Salford Media City and Broadcasting House in London. There is also the fact that an organisation that, when I worked for it, boasted a couple of TV channels, four national radio streams and a network of local stations all supported by some excellent regional production centres

has grown like Topsy into an empire reaching out into e very nook and cranny of digital platforms and a myriad of broadcast and online outlets. Is this seriously what Public Service Broadcasting was intended to be or has it become an institutionalised job- creation exercise at a time when there is so much other excellent unsubsidised material available?

I have great sympathy with the proposition that people like myself or, to pick a name out of the hat, the Radio Four Today presenter, John Humphreys, do not deserve or need or should receive 'free' TV licences any more than we should be entitled to 'free' bus passes or Winter Fuel Allowance and I don't doubt that John H would agree with that. Similarly, I see no reason why those over retirement age but still in full- time employment should be exempt from National Insurance Contributions. There are many people, and not only those over retirement age, who require assistance and given finite resources benefits should surely be targeted where they are really needed rather than handed out indiscriminately on the basis of age?

Granting 'free' TV licences to those in receipt of Pension Credit only, which is the Corporation's proposal, is not the answer. First, there is a whole raft of benefits that should not be handed out to higher rate tax- payers at all and second the National State Pension needs to be set at a rate that allows the government to roll up all age- related benefits into that state pension. That, of course, would mean removing not one but a number of what are offensively regarded as 'perks' in the interests of allowing people to decide for themselves how they want to spend their money. And you can bet your sweet life that that, also, would generate howls of protest and be another political hot potato!