# Preaching to the Converted

(An after-dinner address to the BBC Board of Governors and Management, Lucknam Park, May 1991)

Having made a career out of being a square peg in a round hole, the wrong man in the right place, I really shouldn’t be too surprised that I am here tonight and about to harangue an audience of highly qualified people on the subject of their own business. Almost everyone here is engaged from day to day in the administration of broadcasting. The most I ever do is broadcast, and although I have to spend a long day in the office for every minute the show is on the screen, most of the actual brain-work is done by my string of estimable producers — more than three-quarters of them women, but I don’t complain about being dominated — who understand the charts and the diagrams and actually know how to arrange a satellite interview with Sylvester Stallone’s mother. Apparently it isn’t enough to understand the engineering, you have to book the right astrologer, who might be unavailable because she’s advising Nancy Reagan on how to deal with Kitty Kelly without the strychnine leaving any traces. It all takes a lot of phone calls.

And it all has to be cost-effective, and it all has to happen. Talking about it is necessary but not sufficient. The smartest move I ever made was to realise how dumb I am at that stuff. So I got some help, and left myself free to fizz with enthusiasm, confident that someone else would steer me away from the cliff if I rode my unicycle too fast with my mouth open and my eyes shut. I have a great respect for the practical people in broadcasting. That’s you. My tribute to you this evening will be to try not to say more than I know. As a consequence I will be speaking very briefly.

Much of what I do know I learned as a critic, not because as a critic I learned a lot about how television works — a critic can’t do that, and he makes a mistake if he thinks he can — but because as a critic I watched a lot. For ten years I watched more television than anyone else There was a man in Florida who watched more than I did, but he ended up dead, when he accidentally ate the cardboard plate along with the reheated *chilli con carne.*
There were no reliable home VCRs for most of the period I was watching professionally. There was an unreliable one made by Philips that used to chew up the tape and spit it out like *fettucine,*but the Japanese had not yet arrived to save us. So I ran two TV sets at once and made notes from memory - a good aid to selectivity, incidentally. Most critics now don’t quote effectively because they quote too much. The rewind button writes their column for them. But forget I said that.

Anyway, I saw a lot of TV and still do, and I think those who are concerned with it *should,*at every level, right to the top. They should live it and breathe it. The same applies to radio, and I apologise to those concerned with radio if I say little specifically on that subject tonight. I did a lot of radio when I was starting off, and I still love being on it as a guest, although radio is more demanding in some ways than television. Television doesn’t mind dead air. You can stop and think for a while and look like Socrates. Try that on radio and they’ll think you’ve passed out. But in the early days I wrote a lot of scripts for BBC radio and Philip French and my other producers helped to teach me the difference between easy-seeming eloquence and mere rambling on. The blue pencil was freely wielded, by people who knew a dangling participle when they saw one. Time was pressing and the test was relevance. Good training.

Radio continues to be the focal point of the BBC’s effort to ensure that the language is used well. Tom Stoppard’s latest contribution, I think, was in part his homage to that sense of dedication. The voice of the BBC travels furthest without a face, and there are places in the world where it is listened to in the sheltering dark by people who have no other food for their hope. Compared to radio, TV often strikes me as a more flamboyant but tongue-tied bigger sibling, all fluorescent-framed spectacles, unstructured shoulders, acrylic tie and misplaced emphasis. But it’s the medium I know most about, although even as a critic I could never answer the most common question: ‘What’s the worst TV programme you ever saw?’ they would ask.

‘You mean which episode of *It’s A Knockout?*’was my glib reply, but the fact was that I enjoyed *It’s A Knockout,*especially when Eddie Waring was hosting the mini-marathon. I enjoyed *Ski Sunday*when David Vine was extolling the virtues of the athlete he called ‘Britain’s sole representative, Konrad Bartelski, the man with the Union Jack on his helmet.’ Konrad isn’t skiing for Britain these days but David is still up there on the mountain, and where once I found his expertise superfluous I now find his persistence inspiring. Television had all these human exotica. They were weird, but they were real. They had to be, because nobody could have made them up. I miss Barbara Woodhouse the way I miss my Aunt Dot, although the most my Aunt Dot ever did with a horse was to fall off it. Barbara Woodhouse could breathe up its nose. After that, the horse would do anything, and so would you.

I found almost everything instructive in some way. To find a TV programme I really hated, I had to wait until June 1989. I was filming in Shanghai, not Peking, but the quiet rebellion was happening in Shanghai too. For a few sweet days Shanghai Television broadcast the truth. I was watching when things got back to normal. Li Peng came on and spent a couple of hours or so denouncing the student leaders as counter-revolutionary terrorists. You didn’t need a translator to get Li Peng’s drift. That deadly voice of his droned on and on like a mandarin meat-grinder. On the Bund the previous night I had seen three hundred thousand people all keeping their silent, hopeful, doomed vigil, and most of them weren’t even students. There were school teachers, factory workers, proprietors of chicken-claw soup take-aways, everyone except those suspiciously well-groomed party hierarchs like Li Peng. His one-man show was a truly awful television programme. Now, when people ask me what I think of Jeremy Beadle, I’ve got my answer ready. I know a TV station that’s got a presenter who *really*gets on your nerves.

On the night Chinese television was plugged back into the mincing machine, I learned all over again that the one positive thing evil can do for us is to help define the good. If you want an example of TV that is absolutely regulated, Chinese TV is it.

Somewhere out at the opposite pole of human experience there is American television, which, despite all the evidence, we are still sometimes asked to admire — in fact some people now ask us to admire it more than ever, because, they say, it is increasing the range of choice. The American networks are indeed losing their combined share of the audience, and not before time. Cable and the other ancillary channels are making inroads. The whole American system is on its way towards the commercial ideal of niche marketing, where every programme is targeted at a specific audience who will buy the sponsor’s or the advertiser’s product. Nobody will see *Rigoletto*except people who will buy the Rolex. Serial killers will get their own serial. An infinity of channels, an infinity of choice, and the whole thing self-financing, with even a conciliatory smidgin of PBS so that the few remaining hopeless idealists can see the occasional series about the Civil War and be reminded what happened the *last*time anyone tried to secede from the Union.

I exaggerate, of course, but not by much: and only to sketch the position we might call absolute deregulation, when the free market holds sway. Such a system, or lack of it, has its merits, but the one thing it can’t have is a common audience. With absolute deregulation, there is rarely a time when everyone watches the same programme and talks about it next day as a shared experience. With absolute regulation, the same applies, because the programmes are too boring, although I suppose Li Peng’s speech was a kind of shared experience for the Chinese, pity help them.

Somewhere between absolute regulation and absolute deregulation is us: the British duopoly which, I think, offers, when it is working, just about as much choice as you can have while still retaining something most people can share. And my point is that this is a national achievement; one to be proud of; a *good*compromise which though difficult to justify in isolation is positively and precisely defined by what we know of the bad.

It can be said cynically that the BBC keeps ITV honest and ITV keeps the BBC human. Many things can be said cynically. But it should be said roundly, and more often, that the broadcasting system is an occasion for national pride, a creation — partly willed, partly accidental, perhaps modifiable, but certainly cherishable — possessed in common.

It should certainly have been said at the Edinburgh TV Festival in October 1989, when Rupert Murdoch made a speech characterising the British TV executives as an elite dictating to the public what they should watch — telling the people what is good for them instead of giving them what they want. The answer should have been that to impose your taste and to give people what they want are the same thing if you and the people are the same people. The answer should have been that the elite was all in Rupert Murdoch’s mind. But the answer wasn’t made: not that day, anyway, or not very loudly. Young Jaci Stephen of the *Evening Standard*asked Murdoch why he thought that being proprietor of the *News of the World*qualified him to talk about the health of the British media, but her lead wasn’t followed up. There was a stunned silence from which the distant onlooker deduced that it had somehow got about that Mr Murdoch might have something apart from Mrs Thatcher’s unqualified admiration; that there really was something called élitest establishment broadcasting; and that a brash piratical satellite alternative might be a corrective, a cure, or even a replacement.

Well, Mrs Thatcher has moved on, Sky Television absorbed BSB to prove that a shark’s ability to swim isn’t necessarily improved by swallowing a barrel of cement, and Mr Murdoch is in debt like Mexico. The broadcasting bill was tamed in its wilder proposals; even the government is acting older and wiser; and once again the great and the good, the back-room boys, the havers a quiet word, the People We Know, all those shadowy well-connected manipulators who figure as villains in the television of Kenneth Trodd, have had their way, as I think they should, when they are needed. I never knew how I liked the old Establishment until Mrs Thatcher almost succeeded in exterminating it. Her egalitarian aspect always was the most frightening thing about her. It certainly frightened the Labour Party. Nothing ever scared Neil Kinnock more than the spectacle of that woman actually acting on his principles.

Still, the broadcasting institution has been protected, and especially the heart of it, the BBC. Or maybe that analogy is inexact, and in our broadcasting system the BBC is a giant bronze bell, of which commercial television is the clapper. But leaving that aside, I still wonder if the point was fully grasped about how close we came to a real crisis — the worst possible crisis, a crisis of confidence, an irreversible erosion of belief.

The crisis of the Church of England is that too many of its bishops, and some would say of its archbishops, don’t quite realise that they are atheists, but have begun to suspect it. The BBC is an institution which would be in the same state of crisis if its administrators were to doubt their right to decide what should be made and broadcast. But there should be no question about that right, because it is a duty. Nor should there be any question about those in charge bowing to market forces, because they should already be listening to the public. How best to do so is always a question, but following the advice of hucksters is not the answer.

And in television, I am sure, the best way to maintain touch with the consumers is to be one. The really worrying aspect about the acquisition of responsibility is when it turns to power, and power turns away from the forum, into the cloister. We should be aware of that threat and beware of it. I am very conscious while I am sitting here that I am not watching television tonight. Thank God *Inspector Morse*isn’t on. But *Sleepers*is, and I don’t like missing that, either. Well done BBC for *Sleepers,*and well done ITV for *Inspector Morse,*and that’s all the competition we need, I think. The talent pool can be spread only so far before it runs thin. Ten channels will give you ten car-chases, make no mistake.

One of the defences of properly scheduled network television intended for the whole family, as against a 50-channel remote control unit operated from a lonely bed full of crumbs, must be that a well-planned evening of television is a good night out you can spend in. I think that those involved in administering and making public service television should be suspicious of every week they spend in Edinburgh, every afternoon they spend at Ascot, every evening they spend in a conference centre like this one, and above all every holiday they spend stretched out on the deck of anybody’s yacht. When the time comes for the renewal of the great charter, which I for one regard as nothing less than the Magna Carta of the modern intelligence, we must be able to defend the BBC with a whole heart.

Charges of non-profitability are easily warded off. I went to the BBC Enterprises Showcase in Brighton this year, and if that wasn’t a profit centre I would like to know what is. Buyers were queueing up from all over the planet. BBC exports would be a profit centre for the country even if they only broke even. They bring the prestige that De Gaulle said was more valuable than anything; the prestige that is beyond the power of government; the prestige of the national spirit.

Even charges of elitism — whether levelled from the Right, or from the Left, should it ever rise again — can be warded off if the administrators are able to show that they are not a separate caste but the representatives of both the producers and the audience, doing their best for both sides, squaring the circle, living out the dilemma, the balancing act between the two separate forces neither of which is fully resolvable in terms of the other — the desire to entertain and the obligation to instruct.

But to lose confidence in the BBC’s initial, and I think enduring, sense of mission would be to sell the pass. That marvellous series about Charles Darwin sailing in search ofknowledge was made out of *belief*— belief that who didn’t know should be told. The several marvellous series by David Attenborough about nature were made out of the belief, and the joy, that among those watching would be another generation who didn’t know and should be told. One of those who didn’t know, and was told, was my own elder daughter, who is now, partly as a consequence, studying zoology at university. Her life wouldn’t be the same without the BBC. Nor would mine or anyone’s here this week, or anyone’s in ITV, or anyone’s in the country. Institutions are valuable beyond governments and, good governments realise it. Bad governments do too and pull the plug out of the wall, which I suppose by now is what some of you would like to do with me. But if any of my glib summaries have raised questions, I’ll be glad to elaborate further if I can. If I can’t, I hope the outbreak of a general discussion will enable me to submerge again after first thanking you for the honour of the invitation and the flattery of your attention.