

**'The BBC could destroy what it seeks to protect' HOLYROOD
COMMENTARY; [Final Edition]**

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'IM mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more." So cried the suicidal anchorman in the 1976 film *Network*. After nearly 1000 live political TV programmes, I was feeling much the same.

Every TV presenter has the same fantasy of going berserk live on air, even when your audience is a daytime handful of students, hacks and old age pensioners. Not that I have anything against retired people. The viewers I didn't have a lot of time for were the Scottish Labour MPs in Westminster who spent an inordinate amount of time and taxpayers' money lobbying to have me removed from the screens on the grounds that I was nationalist/antiwar/anti-Labour. None of which I am.

Odd that it was Westminster Labour MPs who found my presence on the box so obnoxious. Since I was presenting Holyrood Live you might have thought it would be MSPs who'd be writing the poison pen letters to the director general. But in seven years of Holyrood coverage, in which I have not been wholly uncritical, there was scarcely a murmur from Holyrood. Or rather there was, but MSPs tended to take matters up with me face to face. Perhaps they're just too busy in the Scottish parliament to bother trying to do the BBC's job.

You'd also have thought Westminster Labour MPs would have targeted my Westminster equivalent Andrew Neil, who presents (brilliantly) *The Daily Politics*. After all, Neil is a prominent right-wing Conservative, who has repeatedly expressed his views in columns and through the editorials in *The Scotsman* and *Scotland on Sunday*, when he was editor-in-chief and publisher. A greater Labour hate figure would be hard to imagine.

But hey, I'm not bitter. BBC Scotland's bosses resisted these malign political representations on the grounds that it was their job to decide who to put on the telly, and if they had no problems with my professionalism and impartiality, then they were not going to be told otherwise by politicians.

I hung up my microphone in a wholly amicable separation from the BBC last week to pursue what has always been my real interest - writing political commentary. Indeed, I only recount this story because of what it says about the condition of broadcasting in Scotland.

There is an obsessive sensitivity, verging on paranoia, in London Labour about what goes on at Queen Margaret Drive.

MPs seem to believe there is a deeprooted nationalist conspiracy at the heart of BBC Scotland. There is not - although there might be a Gaelic one (that's a joke, honest). It really isn't a hotbed of separatism. But neurotic attempts to suppress this nationalist phantom are in danger of making it one.

The present state of impoverished dependency to which BBC Scotland is consigned - a kind of cultural house arrest - is the surest way to generate political resentment. The hostility to the perfectly sensible proposals for a Scottish Six O'Clock News has, I believe, ensured that within a few years Holyrood will wrest control over broadcasting from Westminster. Not because it wants to, but because it has no alternative.

Consider the absurdity. Up to 60per cent of the main evening news bulletin is now of secondary importance to Scotland.

I'm thinking of the recent troubles in the English health service. These deficits and ward closures are a by-product of market reforms which have not been introduced in Scotland. It doesn't mean that NHS Scotland is better, just different. However, it does mean that the Executive is being blamed for problems which aren't actually happening here.

This is because it is not made clear that these health stories are about England.

One need hardly add the lunacy of turning the national UK news into an intoxicated, hyperventilating cheerleader for the English football team in the World Cup. This indifferent squad was accorded the coverage of heroes, much to Scottish irritation.

And it happens the other way round too. Such is the metropolitan myopia that the Shirley McKie fingerprint affair was given minimal coverage - even though it is the single most important case in the 100-year history of fingerprint evidence.

The Six O'Clock News misrepresents the priorities of Scottish public life.

What Scotland gets instead of a proper service are patronising "opt outs" from programmes such as Newsnight and the Politics Show, as well as more and more local news. Oh, and the programmes I used to present, such as Holyrood Live.

However, having presented the equivalent BBC network programmes in Westminster before I returned to Scotland in 1999, I am acutely aware of how miserable the budgets for Scottish political programmes are. They get a tiny fraction of the resources that go into equivalent Westminster programmes.

When I asked why, I was often told:

"Scotland has a 10th of the population so we get a 10th of the money."

This is a grotesque argument. If programmes are worth doing, they are worth doing properly. You don't give a Scottish hospital patient one 10th of the care or Scottish schoolchildren one 10th of the books. This patronising centralism is doing the SNP's job for them.

I have great respect for the people who work in BBC Scotland, but they are ground down by relentless and mindless cuts. What BBC Scotland manages to put on the screen is amazing, given the constraints. But it eats people up, destroys commitment and drains creativity. It can't go on.

The BBC is in serious danger of destroying what it is trying to protect - the unity of the UK broadcasting culture. It's time for Scottish viewers to get up and say they're mad as hell too.

Credit: Newsquest Media Group