

Five minutes with Diane Coyle: “The BBC needs to stay independent and accountable to the people who pay for it”

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In an interview with Joel Suss, editor of the British Politics and Policy blog, [Diane Coyle](#) discusses the future of the BBC and the need for it to truly reflect Britain in all its diversity. She also discusses the impact of technology and globalisation. The transcript of her recent public lecture at the LSE, ‘A 21st Century BBC’, can be downloaded [here](#).



You are now acting Chair of the BBC Trust. It is quite a critical moment in the public broadcaster’s history, with the charter renewal around the corner in 2016 and the way people consume media content undergoing tremendous transformation. How do you see the future of the BBC and its role in British society?

I hope the BBC’s role in its fundamentals doesn’t change, that it stays a universal public service broadcaster. The universality is important and essential for delivering its public purposes and its mission to inform, educate and entertain. The BBC needs to stay independent and accountable to the people who pay for it; the licence fee payers. But, as your question hints, sustaining that through a period of great change is going to be challenging. It’s partly the change in technology, the change in the media markets, and the change in the way people are looking at television, listening to radio and looking at stuff online. It also has to do with the changing nature of British society, which is becoming more diverse in all kinds of ways and whose political geography is changing as well.

The BBC needs to have true diversity in representation; in portrayal in programmes and in its workforce. I’m talking about diversity in lots of ways actually. It’s men and women, it’s people who are in ethnic minorities being properly represented in the BBC, both on and off screen. But it’s also what part of the country do you come from, what social class. We’ve become a much more kaleidoscopic country than we used to be and that’s quite a challenge for a national broadcaster who’s creating for us our shared cultural heritage.

Regarding the independence of the BBC, in a number of small ways it has been eroded over the years, including for example some things that sounds quite technical but also the fact that the BBC, both Trust and Executive, have been before parliamentary committees more than once a month in recent times and that’s much more than it used to be in the past. We need to have clear ground rules with the government in order to protect the BBC’s independence in the future.

In your view, what is the correct balance at the BBC between public service programming, such as David Attenborough documentaries, versus revenue sharing entertainment, like *Strictly Come Dancing*?

The BBC has to appeal to everybody in some way. It’s really important to have a range of programmes so that there’s something there for everybody – that includes the popular programmes. We would expect the BBC to try to be completely distinctive in anything that it does, and actually I think the examples you give shows the BBC pulling that off quite effectively. The natural history, which everybody thinks of as crunchy, whole-meal public service, is incredibly popular, and I think some of the very popular shows, like *Sherlock* or *Happy Valley*, but also *Strictly*, do have some quite distinctive public service values about them.

An individual in a house occupied by three other professionals has quite a small licence fee contribution compared with a single person household. Can a flat-fee contribution be justified in this day and age? Further to that, how do you see the future of the BBC with regards funding?

The first point is that even a single person household is paying less than 40 pence a day for all the BBC services; radio, television and online. It’s obviously important to keep it as efficient as possible and to ensure value for money,

even for single person households that you refer to. The licence fee has evolved over time as technology has changed and no doubt it will continue to evolve in the future. But you have to find a way of delivering universality, which is partly what keeps the costs down as well as binding people together in a shared cultural heritage and experience. But also need to keep it simple and enforceable, and that's a bit of a balancing act. The key thing is that support for the licence fee has actually been increasing and people much prefer that to any other option available.

Let's shift focus away from the BBC and towards some of the issues you have been grappling with at Enlightenment Economics, the economic consultancy you head. Rapid technological advancements and increasing globalisation are having a deep impact on labour markets in Britain. How can the government insulate and protect British workers from these forces?

Golly, I think any government would wish it had the answer to that question and obviously we're talking about global structural forces that are outside the capacity of any single government to do anything about. The question is really not how you can insulate people from change but how you equip them for change, and that is the responsibility of government. All economies go through these structural changes time and again – it happens constantly. The question this time around is about how quickly it's going to happen and therefore how quickly people need to be equipped with the skills they need to adjust and find work. How does any individual economy fit into those new global supply chains? Businesses everywhere are trying to figure out what mix of workers, what skills, where they want to be, what capital equipment, what robots they want to use. The task is finding things that your people and your country are good at that will fit into all that structural change.

Looking at Britain, I think the two bits come together. One of things that Britain is very good at is the creative sector, which has been growing rapidly, to around 9 per cent of the economy I think, and is a good exporter. Singing and dancing are things that robots don't do really well, so that's a great sector for economic policy to focus on in this country.

Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Interviewee

Diane Coyle is acting Chair of the BBC Trust. She also heads the economic consultancy, Enlightenment Economics, and is a visiting Professor of Economics at the University of Manchester. She received a PhD in economics from Harvard and was previously the economics editor of *The Independent*. You can read [her blog at Enlightenment Economics](#) or find her on twitter [@diane1859](#).

