

Tory government launches right-wing attack on BBC

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Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries' recent announcement of a two-year freeze on the BBC's licence fee marks a significant escalation of the right-wing attack on the state broadcaster. The fee is the BBC's main source of funding, constituting around three quarters of its income.

Dorries' tweet announcing the move was bullish: "This licence fee announcement will be the last. The days of the elderly being threatened with prison sentences and bailiffs knocking on doors, are over. Time now to discuss and debate new ways of funding, supporting and selling great British content."

She declared that the immediate two-year freeze would be followed by scrapping the licence fee altogether in 2027. Speaking in Parliament, the culture secretary stated, "I cannot see a world in 2028 where individual households are paying an outdated fee established in 1922 to fund an organisation."

No one need be under any illusions about the alleged impartiality of the BBC to recognise this for a determined campaign to force the UK media landscape further to the right.

The BBC has, since its inception a century ago, been the official voice of the British bourgeoisie at home and abroad. Under a carefully constructed fiction of neutrality and impartiality, the broadcaster loyally advances the views and interests of British imperialism.

But the Johnson government is seeking its replacement with a more aggressive right-wing outlet from which even the most house-trained dissent is excluded.

These latest moves against the public broadcaster were spurred by the "Partygate" scandal gripping Downing Street, revealing the scale of media compliance being demanded by the government. Before Christmas, Prime Minister Boris Johnson accused the BBC of being "shamefully frivolous, vengeful and partisan" for having reported his flouting of public health measures during the

pandemic. It had "wasted ... public time and attention" in reporting the scandal rather than the government's COVID booster jab campaign.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, the house paper of the Tory right, Charles Moore declared, "The state broadcaster appears to be on a mission to prove that Boris Johnson is finished." He concluded, "The BBC has been acting like the Fox News of the Left."

This is obviously absurd but gives an insight into the minds of the ferocious reactionaries driving the campaign against the BBC. They want Fox News pure and simple, a more effective version of the floundering GB News launched in 2021. Moore's chief criticism is that the BBC was slow in taking up NATO's campaign over "the possibility of Russia invading Ukraine" and stories of alleged Chinese influence in Westminster.

Dorries has already indicated the government will intensify its demands that the BBC drop any veneer of impartiality, calling for investigations into the BBC's "impartiality and groupthink."

In their discussion about alternative funding to the license fee, the BBC's opponents point towards privatisation of all but the most minimal public service broadcasting requirement. There have been demands to abolish the BBC completely. Other suggestions include a universal broadband tax, a direct government grant paid through taxes, making the BBC carry advertising, and adopting a subscription model like that used for streaming services.

To maintain its current services, the BBC would need around 24 million subscribers paying £13 a month. It is also unclear how its flagship channels BBC One and BBC Two, much less its radio output, could be put behind a paywall. Praising private sector broadcasters, one of Dorries' supporters gloated to the *Mail on Sunday* that "the days of state-run TV are over," saying "It's over for the BBC as they know it."

The broadcaster has already been placed under sustained financial pressure. Before Christmas, the National Audit Office (NAO) reported the BBC had already reduced staff and improved productivity to such an extent that there was little left to be cut. Its income for UK services is 30 percent lower now than a decade ago.

In 2020 alone, the BBC announced the axing of 600 jobs in news and current affairs across the UK, mainly falling on regional programming. The broadcaster said it had to save £125 million in 2020 because of financial pressures resulting from the coronavirus pandemic.

There have been other, indirect attacks on funding. In 2000, the government took responsibility for funding free licences for over-75s. Under the Tories' 2015 licence fee review, this financial burden was passed directly to the BBC in an effective budget cut.

Facing a massive financial crisis, in July 2020 the BBC announced it would be reintroducing the license fee for over-75s apart from those receiving pension credit benefits. This allowed the government responsible for the BBC's crisis to strike a pose of outraged concern. In 2019, Johnson had said the BBC should "cough up" for licence fees for all over-75, prompting a warning that this would force "unprecedented closures" of services.

Increasingly, the BBC is being turned into a legacy broadcaster. The proportion of repeats shown on BBC One has risen 22 percent in the last four years, to 31 percent. The overall figure for BBC television is 56 percent, rising to 64 percent for BBC Two and 87 percent for BBC Four.

This can only get worse, as production costs have risen rapidly with competition from streaming services like Netflix and Amazon. The BBC estimates that the cost of making one hour of drama increased by around 20 percent between 2015-16 and 2019-20. Pandemic conditions have driven a further rise in production costs of 10-30 percent.

The bleeding of the BBC has taken place under the direction of government-installed Tory loyalists, brought in as part of a government programme of appointing reliable cronies to monitor the broadcaster.

Director-General Tim Davie, appointed in September, is a former Conservative council candidate and deputy chairman of his local Conservative Party. Taking up the post he suggested axing output by up to one-fifth, cutting channels and slashing the BBC's budget.

Chairman Richard Sharp, appointed last year, is a former Goldman Sachs banker and advisor to Johnson, closely linked to Chancellor Rishi Sunak and a generous Tory donor.

Under the new license fee settlement announced by Dorries, the BBC will receive around £3.7 billion in licence fee funding this year, and around £23 billion over the rest of the period covered. Accounting for inflation, the BBC is confronting an effective loss of around £300 million. Dorries insisted that the BBC "must... make savings and efficiencies."

Davie and Sharp are preparing to carry this out. Their statement in response spoke of "an ambitious programme of reform," while Davie told staff that jobs will "probably" be lost. He is refusing to rule out cutting channels in the process of diverting budgets to bigger productions on the main channels.

This would simply exacerbate the crisis further, as Meg Hillier of the public accounts select committee noted after the NAO report. She said the BBC "must be wary of the risk that reducing content may lead to yet more people jumping ship."

Public trust in the BBC, as with all the corporate media, has been falling for years—in recent times for its despicable coverage of the Iraq war, its blackout of the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and its participation in the propaganda campaign against former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters.

Now that the knives are out, the government and political right are seeking to manipulate this sentiment for their own ends. The *Daily Mail*, for example, reported that two-thirds of poll respondents wanted a referendum on scrapping the BBC. The poll was organised by right-wing pressure group Defund the BBC. Its "Campaign Champion," Darren Grimes, was the founder of BeLeave and BrexitCentral and subsequently a player in the far right Turning Point UK campaign against left-wing students.

At the hands of these forces, the destruction of the BBC will mean a boost to the most right-wing, militarist, anti-democratic voices in the UK.



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