



## WHY MY ACHING HEART FOREVER BELONGS TO “AUNTIE BEEB”

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Back in the US, Mr Trump has renewed his threat to cut funding for both the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). And once again it set off a howl of protest from the bi-coastal ‘liberati’ and ‘literati’ (i.e. the educated class, intelligentsia, and/or persons interested in literature or the arts). Yet as but the latest Tweet in a seemingly never ending cascade of incendiary pronouncements, one can only ask what purpose did he hope his threat would serve this time. Other than, perhaps, to remind everyone he can shake the ‘news’ tree at will.

It did set me thinking, though. What is it about a well-informed public that Mr Trump—and what passes for the Republican Party these days—can’t countenance? When for the 16th year in a row, Americans named PBS and its 350 member stations across the country ‘No.1 in Public Trust’ among nationally known institutions. Especially, when the same survey also

revealed that, in terms of value for taxpayer dollars, Americans rank PBS second only to the country's military defence. Fighting words, indeed.

Heaven forefend we should ever have need, here, in the US, to lament: "Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone," as the luminous Joni Mitchel first sang back in 1970. Recorded, somewhat ironically, around the same time PBS (1969) and NPR (1971) first began broadcasting. Yet the very idea of disabling such trusted news and information sources; even if only in a renewed threat of doing so; gave me a severe case of mental and emotional heartburn; made me want to start counting my blessings anew.

Not unnaturally, my thoughts turned to "Auntie Beeb." The affectionate diminutive I still use for the truly sterling service the BBC offers the United Kingdom and, via its World Service, much of the rest of the globe. And, yes, dear Alice, I'm fully aware that some in the UK may still complain that their annual broadcast license fee disappears down into the proverbial rabbit hole, but believe you, me, the BBC not only speaks to all of the UK, she also speaks of all that is the best of British to the rest of the world. And a most excellent job she does of it, too. BBC TV and Radio, quite unmatched, anywhere, in the scope of what it offers as "guide, philosopher and friend." While, for everyone else, the BBC World Service has ever been far more than a mere radio beacon; and long the most trusted news source, even a lifeline of reason and sanity, for countless people the world over.

The vast amount of top quality programming the BBC makes available; current and archival; world, UK, regional news; its cornucopia of entertainments, whether hi-brow, mid-brow, lo-brow, or no-brow: Arts. Culture. Politics. The Media. Music. Drama. Comedy. Documentaries. Docudramas. Discussions. Talks. Stories. Science. Nature. Health. Travel. And Sport. Let's not forget Sport in all its myriad forms. An astonishing array of offerings, made all the more 'gob-smacking' by the fact it's all freely available.

Which means I can access every one of BBC Radio's main channels: Radio One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, and Seven, et al, plus all 40 Local Radio stations, if I so choose; and, yes, the BBC World Service, too. And that's even before I start banging on about the wealth of information provide by the BBC News multi-feature, multi-issue website. An infinite variety and all of it accessible, at any time, from anywhere in the US, courtesy of a mobile phone and WiFi enabled Internet. And all of it, at least, to this avid news consumer, nothing but "manna from heaven."

In light of which, for anyone at all interested in journeying deeper into the past, present, and future of the BBC, I can't recommend highly enough the series of articles Charlotte Higgins wrote for The Guardian back in 2014; all of them worthy of being bookmarked then and reread multiple times since; and all as relevant as the day they were first published. And, here, in unabashed admiration, I quote directly from her: "...the BBC brings us ideas of which we have not yet dreamed, in a space free from the hectoring voices of those who would sell us goods. It tells seafarers when the gales will gust over Malin, Hebrides, Bailey. It brings us the news, and tries to tell it truthfully without fear or favour. It keeps company with the lonely; it brings succour to the isolated. Proverbially, when the bombs rain down, the captain of the last nuclear submarine will judge Britain ended when Radio 4 ceases to sound."

The presumed judgement of the last nuclear submarine captain, as chilling a thought, today, as it was when I first read it five years ago. In which light, the cold-hearted and continued war of attrition by Mr Trump and his army of cohorts to defund PBS and NPR, in the US, a reminder of what yet might be the shape of things to come. More than enough to send an unwelcome shiver up this writer's spine, even if, as dear Alice once asked in Lewis Carroll's utterly inspired 'Through the Looking Glass': "Suppose he never commits the crime?" And nothing for it, then, but to take a cue from what the White Queen declares to Alice: "It's a poor sort of memory that only

works backwards.” And not only call to mind the motto adopted by the BBC to signify its purpose on 1 January 1927: 'Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation', but also at one and the same time posit a future devoid of such trusted news sources as the BBC, PBS and NPR, and the many others that, still, thankfully, exist around the globe.

Or ponder a world without journalists tirelessly working to shine light into ever darker places; down into ever more labyrinthine rabbit holes; all to make what would prefer to remain opaque, transparently clear; all to help keep us more fully informed and “in the know.”

I salute them all, but none more so than the BBC.

Me, who grew up truly blessed by the benevolent presence of “Auntie Beeb” always being there within arm’s length; “bringing me succour, bringing me news, bringing me ideas of which I had not yet dreamed.” And, me, now, almost a third of the world away, moved to publicly express my gratitude for the profound impact she’s had on my life and continues to have on me. My fervent hope that the ship of stated grace that is the BBC long continues to sail on and on over the world’s airwaves.

And may God bless her and all who sail with her.

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