

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Little reason to smile as Iannucci lays bare the tension between BBC and Tories

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'Are you listening, John Whittingdale?' Danny Lawson/PA

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We are all in this together.

That, according to Armando Iannucci, was the theme of his MacTaggart lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival. It was his rallying cry to a hall packed with TV executives, directors, commissioning editors, producers and – yes – politicians. It was a speech aimed at unifying the UK TV industry behind a single goal: to save the BBC from the politicians. Said Iannucci:

We have changed international viewing for the better, but sometimes our political partners forget this.

When Zai Bennett, director of Sky Atlantic, introduced the Glasgow-born creator of *The Thick of It*, *I'm Alan Partridge* and *Veep*, he said that the MacTaggart lecture “sets the tone for the TV festival”. In truth the tone had been set long before that moment. John Whittingdale, the UK culture secretary,

had done a question-and-answer session earlier in the afternoon, while the future of the BBC was bubbling just under the surface during almost every debate in the day.

This theme of “the BBC under siege” picked up where the Edinburgh Book Festival had left off when outgoing BBC political editor Nick Robinson turned his appearance into a platform for his spat with former Scottish first minister Alex Salmond over the neutrality of the BBC during the Scottish independence referendum.

In reality, of course, the power and scope of the BBC has been a central theme to MacTaggart lectures over the past 30 years: from Rupert Murdoch (1989), to Janet Street Porter (1995) to , from James Murdoch (2009) to Mark Thompson (2010).

What makes this year different is that Britain has a Conservative majority government (for the first time in 18 years) at the same time as the country is going through the BBC Charter review.

Laughing gas

“We do, do we not, feel under attack?” Iannucci said. His plan for counter-attack? Satire of course. Iannucci is well known for turning his barbed tongue to politicians and the media alike. He’s also famous for creating phrases like Malcolm Tucker’s “omnishambles” which have now entered the political lexicon. True to form, he invented a few more in this MacTaggart speech. Nigel Farage’s resignation and rapid reinstatement after the election was “bungee politics” and George Osborne was called the “prime minister regent”.

Osborne launched the government’s first salvo in his recent budget by requiring the BBC to fund free TV licences for the over-75s. The BBC said this effectively takes 20% out of its operating budget. Earlier in the day John Whittingdale described this as the BBC “being asked to make a contribution” to £12bn of welfare savings. Yet this happened before the government had embarked on its consultation into the future of the BBC. Iannucci described this as “shutting the stable door after the horse has been bolt-gunned”.

In his session Whittingdale also raised the issue of BBC entertainment show The Voice, saying it had been “contested between the BBC and ITV”. He questioned if the BBC should get into a bidding war with another brand and “whether that’s a good use of licence fee money”. But ten minutes later, he was put straight by a lone voice from the audience who worked for Wall to Wall, the producer of The Voice: the BBC didn’t offer more money than ITV for the programme. Wall to Wall chose the BBC “on the grounds of creativity, not price”. That got a round of applause from the audience.

Just before the MacTaggart speech, Whittingdale was outside posing for



photographs with members of his new TV advisory panel. This group of people appointed to help guide the consultation process over BBC charter renewal has been criticised for apparently lacking pro-BBC voices. Lord Patten, the former chairman of the BBC Trust, has called them a “team of assistant grave diggers”.

Iannucci turned his ire on them for a different reason, though, saying they included “not a single person who has made an enduring TV show”. Instead they were “just people of the executive branch of television”. “Why do politicians not talk to us creatives?” he asked, “is it because we won’t wear a tie?” He added: “Politicians have got TV wrong because they peer at it through their prejudices”.

Armando’s answers

Iannucci has just spent the last two years making *Veep* for HBO in Baltimore. As he said during his Thursday morning session ahead of his *MacTaggart*, one episode of *Veep* costs the same as a whole series of *The Thick of it*. As one of few British players to have cracked the US market to become one of our most successful television exports, his solution is to give the BBC the commercial clout outside the UK so it can make money from its content. He, obviously, puts it much more succinctly: “Let’s monetise the Bejesus, Mary and Joseph out of our programmes abroad”.

When Iannucci said “we’re all in this together” – parodying David Cameron’s well worn phrase of course – he wanted politicians included in his plan for securing public broadcasting too. Not realising that Whittingdale was in the audience, he called on them to be “partners” and “supporters” of the TV industry. He said:

If the BBC was a weapons system, half the cabinet would be on a plane to Saudi Arabia to tell them how brilliant it was ... British TV needs its champion supporters.

Iannucci got a rousing standing ovation for his speech. The delegates here seemed to revel in it. But



The Voice star Will.i.am. Ian West/PA



Beeb Bogeyman: Whittingdale. Dominic Lipinski/PA

what did John Whittingdale think? The culture secretary was asked this question later and apparently simply replied: “it was funny”. What we can read into that may only become apparent in the coming weeks and months.



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