

Put British back into the BBC

The BBC is meant to be a U.K. institution. It should help create a sense of common culture and shared democratic conversation for citizens anywhere in our Union who want that. Instead in recent years the BBC has fanned division. It has helped nationalist movements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland gain more voice for protest and grievance. It has stood for the continuing submission of our country to government from Brussels against the pro Brexit majority. It has belittled and ignored England, perhaps with a view to building an English backlash to nationalisms elsewhere in our Union as the SNP and others want. By highlighting the differences and the better deal Scotland has over funding per head, access to higher education and social care the BBC has done the SNP's work for them in trying to create English grievance.

The U.K. is a complex country. Many cannot describe the subtle differences between UK and GB, or explain the relative powers of the UK and Scottish Parliaments or even remember the different voting system used in devolved elections. There is no adjective to describe U.K. ness. Pro Union citizens of the U.K. in Northern Ireland are happy to be called British even though technically our country is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The BBC seems less keen to be called British, using Scottish and Welsh branding in those parts of the Union whilst trying to break up England with regional branding that fails to resonate with most English people. The BBC often seems better disposed towards the EU/Republic of Ireland approach to Northern Ireland than to the view of the majority community in Northern Ireland it is meant to serve.

The BBC's decision to encourage and allow a journalist to use illegitimate means to gain an interview with the Princess of Wales was bound to disrupt her marriage, and harm the family and monarchy that stood behind it. It was not just wrong in itself, but symptomatic of an institution, the BBC, which wanted to use its special place in our nation to disrupt our constitution. They were cruel on the children of the marriage with the interview and its questions, and wounding to the monarchists in the wider nation. This is why this dispute about journalistic techniques has such resonance. It sums up a characteristic of BBC journalism in recent years that wants to go beyond acting as a faithful mirror to the varying views within our nation to being a player seeking to make news. BBC journalists often go beyond their welcome task of reporting accurately and in a balanced way what people are saying, to adopting a tabloid opinionated approach seeking to put words into people's mouths. They to get people to do ill advised interviews where they can try and make them say something disruptive, or can create a new division or split where it scarce existed before or where the plan is to make one worse.

The BBC's treatment of England is a disgrace. It is as if our country did not exist. We are treated in England to a regular diet of commentary on the words and deeds of the SNP government in Scotland. The BBC gives Scotland its own Scottish news then muddles the national newscast with English news because it cannot bring itself to have an English news to match the Scottish news. We

are told the Scottish covid regulations in the main news, their continuing opposition to Brexit all the time, and often see the SNP used as a displacement for the official opposition in challenging the UK government. We are not told what the Mayors of London, Birmingham and Manchester are actually doing with the powers and money as we are with the SNP occasionally. The Mayors are usually only heard when they talk about matters decided by the national Parliament.

The BBC is respectful of Scottish and Welsh culture and identity but stumbles over UK and English identity. They love pictures with plenty of Scottish saltires and Welsh dragon flags but make a joke of the Union flag and repress the English flag most of the time. Most national broadcasters would be happy with their flag over their websites and close to their newsreaders, but you could not see the BBC ever wanting to do that. The BBC website is largely devoid of symbols, colours and familiar favourite history of the UK, and carefully screened to remove anything that could reflect well on England. The choice of topics and references to our history seems keener to reveal the flaws of the past which the UK usually shared with many other nations, rather than the exceptions where England and the UK made unique contributions to the advancement of freedom and prosperity through bold moves and radical movements. It is a great irony that an institution that is so keen to encourage and help many people to come as migrants to our country can never think of all the good things about the UK which means so many of them want to come.