

News as propaganda

One of the reasons many people now do not listen to mainstream media news and commentary is the way that factual reporting coupled with expert and insightful balanced analysis has been replaced by a kind of campaign based activity. The BBC in particular has two regular campaigns running. One is to explain why the Remain campaign was really right and should not have lost. The other is to stress the need to cut back on carbon dioxide to avoid serious problems in the future.

I have no problems with political parties, individuals, company shareholders, research institutes and others running campaigns about things they feel strongly about. I do not think this is in any way the task of an independent broadcaster paid for by taxation of all tv users in the country whether they watch the BBC or not, operating under a Charter to observe impartiality and to set high standards of journalism. It also makes for very tedious programmes.

In the case of Brexit I have lost count of how many times we have had the same old stories recycled as if they were news. They are not factual reporting. They are commentaries on various people's forecasts and opinions. We get recycled opinions that we will be short of food, planes won't fly, short of medicines, that supply chains will be disrupted etc. All it needs is one quote from a Remain oriented think tank or business lobby group and we go round the same old scare story again. Rebuttals never attract the same attention. There is then the perpetual reuse of the Treasury 15 year forecast of a bit less growth on different scenarios, with no proper debunking of their base or of the whole idea of a 15 year forecast!

Where is the factual reporting of what airlines, pharmaceutical exporters from the continent, farmers in France and others are actually going to do on March 30th? Where are the balancing experts to offset the Remain "experts". I have never been invited on and introduced as someone who correctly predicted the damage the ERM would do, or as someone who has written extensively on the Euro project explaining its dangers and predicting the various Euro crises, nor as someone who has in the past led UK based international businesses with complex supply chains. If I had voted Remain and held the opposite view I bet they would have mentioned that all the time.

We now see reported dozens of rumours about what deal might or might not be on offer, whilst it looks as if there is still no agreement on the Irish border issues or the wider issues of customs and goods inspections. The media that reports these things ignores the much bigger issue of why should we agree to pay them so much money anyway? What linkage would there be between the Future Partnership Agreement and the Withdrawal Agreement, given that such linkage was thought to be fundamental to the UK negotiating position as defined by Mrs May in her Manifesto. If the EU in a couple of years time has in mind the UK should sign an Association Agreement along the lines of Turkey or Ukraine that would be the final denial of Brexit. Sensible MPs will not vote for the draft Withdrawal Agreement as it is a big payment for more

talks, which would simply prolong futile negotiations and leave the UK in a weak position.

No wonder many are turning off and being turned off by this approach. Let's go back to news gathering, to reliable sources, to genuine experts or to clashes of experts where they disagree. We could also do with fewer reported briefings of sell out agreements when there is still no firm date for a November meeting to resolve the impasse, nor any leaked text of what might be agreed in such an event.

Remembrance week-end

I will be laying wreaths at St Mary's Church Burghfield at 11am on Sunday and at the War Memorial in Wokingham Town Hall after the service in All Saints on Sunday afternoon.

5 November

Today we remember the Gunpowder plot. This planned terrorist attack on the British establishment 413 years ago was fortunately thwarted, unlike the one in 1984 which I lived through. It is curious that we still commemorate the former.

What was it about 1605 that causes it still to resonate today? I suppose it is because the outrage was planned on such a huge scale, aiming to blow up the King, his government, and all other people of whatever opinion in Lords and Commons. It left the establishment shaken, but also relieved that their intelligence networks picked up the mistakes of the terrorist group in time. The country had just got through the potentially difficult business of passing government from Queen Elizabeth to King James, when there was no clear single heir with uncontested title. Elizabeth died with no son or daughter, brother or sister to take over. It was a reminder that there was a strong minority in the kingdom that could not accept a Protestant succession and would murder on a mass scale to overturn it.

The other reason is probably that the combination of a bonfire and fireworks makes a great evening out for many. It is seasonal, with colder dark evenings a suitable backdrop for a great warming fire and for a colourful display. Some now find the idea of burning a Guy in effigy distasteful, as we remember the best known criminal of the plot. Others worry about the noise of fireworks affecting animals, or fret about the safety risks of so much modern

gunpowder. The trend to more large displays makes sense. You can pool the costs to get better fireworks, and more care can be taken in setting up the show and letting it off. You can hold them away from homes, with strong emphasis on avoiding fire hazard.

I think it is a tradition that fulfils a need for a November event. We can all come together to be glad that different strands of Christianity now live in tolerance of each other, and to celebrate that on this occasion in 1605 terrorism was thwarted. It is a good reminder that settling political difference by arguments and votes is a much better approach.

Bad deals

Versions of a possible deal for the UK with the EU have today been denied by the government. That's sensible of them. All the versions I have seen are not Brexit. Let's just leave, spend our own money, and negotiate a free trade deal once the EU has realised we are out. There's nothing on offer worth £39bn.

In praise of good experts

When I criticised so called economic and business experts on the BBC someone wrote in here to say if I were ill I would want an expert doctor to help. Yes, of course. I am all in favour of genuine expertise. I have spent a lot of my life reading and listening to people with expertise to widen my understanding. I admire learned people who improve our knowledge and make accurate predictions and diagnosis.

Were I ill I would of course turn to well educated qualified doctors who know far more than me about illness and treatment. I would however want an expert who was likely to get both diagnosis and treatment right. The first instruction for any expert must be, do no harm. The second must be to know the limits of your knowledge and craft, and learn each day from experience. I do not usually write here with critical comments about modern medicine as I am not qualified to do so.

I am qualified in matters financial, and have studied economies and public policy for many years. That is why I feel confident enough to criticise and disagree with so called experts in these areas who lack basic knowledge and with experts whose judgement is faulty. In the recent Today programme case both so called experts were commenting on the simple question of what the

Bank of England was going to do on interest rates. Both wrongly stated the current interest rate, thinking it was one third lower than it is. Why should we then value their opinion?

An apologist for the BBC said it was just a simple mistake. I of course accept we can all make mistakes. I go to considerable lengths to check facts and figures for this blog, but agree I could make a mistake. If I did I would move rapidly to amend it. I have not heard Today amend this mistake. Whilst I could accept one of them could make a mistake I find it difficult to believe two genuinely independent experts could both make such an elementary mistake on the same occasion. Surely the outside expert is used by the BBC to avoid just that sort of error or lack of knowledge by the in house expert? The outside expert did correct the BBC man when she thought he was wrong to say the Bank was forecasting a recession on a WTO exit from the EU. She quoted the wrong interest rate as well as the BBC man.

I am returning to this because the Today Business correspondent regularly turns one of the few decent business slots on the mainstream media into an anti Brexit story. Following the interest rate howler he rushed on to try to explore how and why a no deal Brexit might cause a recession. His guest helped him, by agreeing that there were unnamed forecasters who hold this view though she did not think that included the Bank of England.

He asked her why these nameless forecasters thought that. It was surely a factual question which you could only answer as an expert if you had read these forecasts and could name them. If you answer speculatively and in general terms, as she seemed to do, you should as an expert balance the answer with why others presumably in her view including the Bank of England do not think there will be a recession just from a no deal exit.

The following morning a different BBC person introduced the business slot. This time we were told – with support from another “expert” interview – that the pound had risen owing to rumours of a financial services deal between the UK and the EU. They made heavy weather of explaining this would be a one sided affair with the EU in the driving seat, without mentioning that the EU wants access to London and has more passports into London than London has into the continent. The government had denied there was any such agreement, and there is no official draft or agreed text allowing an expert to tell us what they have in mind. More importantly during this section of the business slot there was no mention of the fact that the Governor of the Bank of England had added another possible two interest rate rises to his forecast, which most people think was the main reason the pound went up! They got around to mentioning this as an also ran possibility after this story about Brexit.

This is not serious journalism based on texts, statements and sources. Most days this section of the Today programme is just used as a way of attacking WTO Brexit.