

TRANSCRIPT

Roger Bolton's Beebwatch

Interview with Colin Browne, Chairman, VLV

24 February 2023

Roger Bolton: Hello, the BBC's competitors have more power to influence the BBC's ability to make changes that those who pay for it. That is nonsensical. Not my words, but those of the VLV, the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, whose chair Colin Brown joins me now. I want to discuss with him how we can make the corporation more accountable at a time when it is cutting back on services without consulting those who pay for them.

But first, let's talk about the VLV itself. It's been going for 40 years. What do you think its role is?

Colin Browne: You're right, Roger. VLV has been going for 40 years. We're looking forward to celebrating our 40th anniversary later this year. Essentially it does what it says on the label. We try to be the voice of the listener and the viewer. We come at broadcasting policy issues from the point of view of viewers and listeners and, very importantly, citizens in the UK. So we respond to things that are happening in the broadcasting industry, particularly public service broadcasting. We campaign for quality, diversity, excellence in broadcasting but we're primarily a membership organisation and a charity. And I think our strength is in the way that other organisations perhaps don't have - we are literally purely focused on the interests of viewers, listeners and citizens.

Roger Bolton: Well, I know you're taken seriously by the BBC because I often hear the executives talk about you. For example, a few weeks ago, or maybe less than that, you had half an hour with the BBC Chairman. They listen to you. Do they act upon what you say?

Colin Browne: We like to think so. It's sometimes not that easy to draw a direct linear link between something you've said and what happens, but we do believe that we have been successful in the past, quite often in modifying things that might be been done, and then actually helping to inform the BBC's view so the BBC can take, we hope, more audience related decisions based on the kinds of information and the input that we provide.

Roger Bolton: Well, you've said that, you know, one of your roles is to hold the UK broadcasters to account is it more difficult than ever because looking at your latest press release, you say there's been a significant reduction of consultation with the public on behalf of the BBC and Ofcom over the past six years, and that the public find it much more difficult to have their say. What has gone wrong that in the last six years?

Colin Browne: Well, one of the big changes particularly as far as BBC is concerned, is that we had a new system of management and governance put in. You may remember Roger until about five years ago, there was the BBC Trust. And the BBC Trust - there were things that were wrong with it - it didn't always work very well with the BBC, there could be problems - but one of the things the trust was very good at was actually consulting with audiences about decisions, about changes in service, about services being started, services being ceased and about the individual genres of programming.

And the Trust publicised those consultations really well. The BBC had to carry an announcement on air telling the public if there was going to be consultation on one of these issues, and that elicited large numbers of responses.

Roger Bolton: So that's before 2017. So if the BBC, for example, wanted to close down a service, then there would have had to be a consultation. But now if I understand your press release properly, the BBC can close down any service without consulting anyone.

Colin Browne: That's right. That is one of the things that we are really quite concerned about.

Roger Bolton: Concerned? It's shocking, isn't it? I mean, it's a BBC is funded by the licence where the taxpayer has to pay for it. This is a classic case of taxation without representation, isn't it?

Colin Browne: Yes, they have to consult over the new services, but don't have to consult about closing down services. So for example, what we're seeing at the moment is the BBC, as you will know, Roger, is merging the UK news channel and the the worldwide news channel into one single service. So essentially, from that point of view, it is closing down BBC 24 hour news in the UK. They're doing that and they can do that without any kind of consultation. And they're making changes to local radio, for example, reducing the number of broadcasters from local radio

Roger Bolton: Yeah, well I think in many people's view they're cutting local radio and it's becoming regional radio for significant parts of the day.

Colin Browne: That's exactly right. And they're moving more local stuff they say online, as they're doing with other stations potentially as well, like Radio Five Extra. They're talking about moving that online only and they don't have to consult. And so we are broadly sympathetic to the BBC as an organisation. We support it and support public service broadcasting, but, and there's always going to be quite a few butts involved, we understand the funding difficulties that they are under at the moment because we believe that the last licence we said was inadequate from the point of view of having the funding they need to serve audiences well. So we're sympathetic to the fact that they do have to make cuts and they have to find economies where they can, but there is no kind of joined up plan of thinking coming out to the outside world saying how these different things fit together. So you've got the news channel changes, you've got World Service changes, you've got local radio changes, and it's all a bit piecemeal, and as I say, it is not subject to consultation with the broader public.

Roger Bolton: You see the suspicion a number of us has the BBC, understandably, is very worried about its future income and is preparing for a time without the licence fee and is concentrating on building up a big international business. Now that's fine in one way, but what about the public service element for this country? That's what concerns a lot of nurse and I know concerns a lot of us and concerns VLV members, and there seems to be few ways of expressing this. I mean, you said something else in your press release which I found quite extraordinary. The BBC's competitors have more power to influence the BBC's ability to make changes rather than those who fund it. You said it's clearly nonsensical. Well, it is but how is that the case?

Colin Browne: It happens because we've talked about the BBC but we also need to talk about Ofcom as well. And Ofcom took over some of the powers of the BBC Trust, so Ofcom do need to consult

with what they define as stakeholders, but they're not defining stakeholders as including the general public, and the general public often don't know that these consultations are going on.

Roger Bolton: But it's the stakeholders that are likely to be as again, you pointed out the majority of stakeholders are competitors of the BBC.

Colin Browne: Precisely. And certainly those who respond to these consultations are predominantly the competitors of the BBC.

Roger Bolton: So Ofcom get all these submissions from BBC critics, and those who wish to fundamentally support the BBC and those who pay for it is not given really the opportunity of doing so.

Colin Browne: Exactly. It's largely because these consultations are not advertised as they used to be. So you've got this two pronged whammy. On the one hand, the BBC has stopped consulting to the same extent, it relies more on audience research and that's fair enough to a point, but that should not exclude going out and engaging with the broader public as well. And then on the other hand, you have Ofcom having a much more limited approach to advertising its consultations as well. Often, Roger, we're the only the only non-industry body that actually responds to these consultations.

Roger Bolton: Before the system changed in 2017 how many people responded, how many organisations responded to this request for consultation?

Colin Browne: Well in 2015, for example, at the time of the Charter review, more than 40,000 people responded to the BBC Trust on its consultation on the Charter review. That's 40,000. The latest BBC consultation, I think there were something like 25 responses, because people didn't know about it.

Roger Bolton: Sorry. 40,000 five or six years ago and 25.... Oh, Lord. Can I ask you about another thing that's happening - there's a proposal, a consultation going on now from Ofcom, which is giving broadcasters if you like great degree of freedom about what they choose to produce ie, the quotas that are there to protect as it were some would might say threatened species like religious broadcasting or children's or even some news in certain circumstances.

Colin Browne: Once again, I think not very many people are aware of that consultation. We have responded and made it clear that we don't support the relaxation of the quotas. It's all very well in theory. But the fact of the matter is that if you actually don't have a quantitative measurement, as opposed to just a qualitative measurement, of what has been provided history over the last 5 or 10 years shows that, for example, in children's programming, which you mentioned, you just don't get the same amount of programming made for that for those audiences.

Roger Bolton: There have always been enough examples for them to put in a press release but actually, the numbers, the volume of hours, the amount spent, all of these crucial things... my experience working in the BBC and, and elsewhere, was that if you don't have time, hours committed and you don't have money committed, that thing disappears. If you look at Channel Four, for example, 10 years ago, it had to do religious programmes and it did really serious, really interesting religious programmes and there was a commissioner whose specific job was to do that. There is no commissioner now. There's no direct requirement. So it goes. If you don't have quotas to

protect.... People don't realise also how important these areas are, but also they're wonderful areas to make programmes about. But unless, you know, a producer is directed towards them they sometimes don't realise that.

Colin Browne: Absolutely. And the other thing linked with that is Ofcom will say, the BBC will say what it is going to do about certain genres in the year ahead. The BBC will then make a qualitative assessment of how well they have performed and then they report to Ofcom so to that certain extent it is the BBC marking its own homework.

Roger Bolton: So that is remarkably convenient and doubtless they will not get 2 out of 10 in their own marking.

Colin Browne: And by the time Ofcom are involved, looking back to see how they're done, quite a lot of time has passed by them. And that is a problem. I come back to what I said, we are sympathetic towards the broadcasters, in particular, the BBC in these difficult circumstances, trying to get as much freedom as possible, as much space as possible to use its money well, but nevertheless, you've got to remember that the fundamental purpose is to serve society, citizens in the UK, and there needs to be better a mechanism for giving those citizens a voice in these big decisions.

Roger Bolton: When you go to the Chairman of the BBC, and you put these concerns to them, do you get the classic BBC, 'We're really sympathetic. We understand your position' and then you leave and nothing happens? This is such is such a transparent betrayal of the concept of public service broadcasting, because public service broadcasting without public consent is a deeply flawed idea. So when you talk to the Chairman, what did he say?

Colin Browne: Well, he is sympathetic. And he would argue the BBC is trying to do more of this. It's doing more of it, as I said, through market research, qualitative analysis they're getting from people's viewing habits, the kind of responses they get to programmes and so on. And then of course, is the other issue which is back to the funding. This all costs a bit of money as well.

Roger Bolton: Yeah, I know, you can't have cuts by committee and everybody understands that. And everybody understands that somebody's got to take a decision. But the idea, this is my experience, and you've worked inside the BBC at a very senior level as well.... In my experience, the BBC has never been cutting services to this extent and has never faced a bleaker financial future, certainly over the next two years. So we are about to see further cuts inevitably down the road. And yet precisely at the moment when these crucial decisions are being taken, the licence fee payer has been almost cut out of the debate. Now if you do market research, as you know, backwards, a lot of the answers depend on the questions you ask. And companies tend to ask the questions that will elicit the answers they want. There's a vast difference between that and having independent outside people able to put the questions and concerns that they've got.

Colin Browne: Yeah, the kind of dilemma we face in raising these issues is that BBC is very good at consulting us - we are one of the organisations that it will go to directly - but much as we try to represent the public as a whole, obviously, that is not the same thing as going out directly and building a two way relationship with your viewers and listeners. That is what's not happening.

Roger Bolton: But you have got plans yourself. I mean, you are planning what you call citizen forums. Now, how many of them are they going to be? Where would they be one of that forms?

Colin Browne: We're developing that at the moment. What we have been working on in the last year is working with other civil society groups who have an interest in broadcasting or should have an interest in broadcasting. Sometimes they didn't realise they should have until we really talked to them. And we've set up a steering group, for example, involving those organisations to work together and bringing together different organisations across the UK that have this interest in a free, open, quality debate about broadcasting and the importance of good quality broadcasting to the society in the UK. We're also now trying to develop plans for a citizens' assembly and we're just working on that at the moment. But those are still early days. So what we're trying to work hard with other like-minded or potentially like-minded organisations, but this is part of a bigger picture as well. We're focused on the BBC and Ofcom not communicating. But the other big issue is with government as well. I mean, at the moment, as you well know, this is a time of great importance, great difficulty and danger for broadcasting.

Roger Bolton: Yes. Peter Bazalgette said at one of your lectures that public service broadcasting faces, I think he said, an existential threat. And he said that, for example, ITV might decide it's no longer in its interest to remain a public service broadcaster, and we've also had the big debate, well, a big argument, about Channel 4 privatisation. So it's across the board these issues and these concerns.

Colin Browne: Yeah. And once again, the question is where is the public debate, particularly if you come back to the BBC in this context. As you know, the current licence fee, current funding arrangement, is due to end in a couple of years' time. And the government or the previous Secretaries of State, as you know, it's a bit difficult to keep up with the numbers of Secretaries of State, talked about setting up a panel with a leading figure to review various possible means of funding the BBC - to have a proper review of that. There was no indication given as to whether that would involve a wider consultation of the public, of the viewers and listeners, no indication as to how it would operate. And with all the changes that have happened in government, there's actually no indication as to whether we'll have this panel at all. So really important things like the way the BBC is funded, could easily be decided with almost no public engagement at all. And that is just not acceptable.

Roger Bolton: And also situation as you say, the DCMS doors seem to about twice a year with a new minister going through, we just got a new minister who presumably has hardly read the brief. They haven't got a permanent secretary because the government decided to move the Permanent Secretary elsewhere. So they've got a stand-in Permanent Secretary. They've got a delayed broadcasting bill that everybody's waiting for and hasn't been delivered. It is a chaotic situation precisely at the moment where as you as adjusting vital decisions are being made. I mean, it's almost a breakdown in regulation. So you look to Ofcom in these circumstances, as the regulator, to take a lead. I haven't heard from the chairman, Michael Grade, on these issues. Have you?

Colin Browne: Ofcom as the regulator, to be fair to Ofcom, it can't set policy in some of these big areas. That is a matter for government. If you look at the Channel 4 privatisation proposal, which came from government, that was obviously very much reflecting government policy, and actually there was consultation on the proposal to privatise Channel Four.

Roger Bolton: And everybody said no, don't do it.

Colin Browne: Almost everybody said no, but the government under the then Secretary of State more or less looked like it was going to disregard the consultation and carry on anyway. And I think was only with the changes within government and the various other pressing issues and problems they faced, that the Channel 4 privatisation was dropped. Actually it was a classic example of there being a consultation and the government then choosing to ignore it.

Roger Bolton: But at least in that period, when there's a consultation, people can put their point of views, they can rally around before a decision is formally taken. And government is faced with the embarrassing position that about 97% of the submissions said don't privatise Channel 4 then they've got a big problem.

Colin Browne: That is true. But Channel Four was something where they did actually consult on. To an extent this is not new, Roger, because if you go back over the last numbers of BBC licence fee settlements, funding settlements, it's always been done behind closed doors. And people always say it'll be done differently next time, but it's always been a behind closed doors deal between the government and the BBC, with basically the government imposing a particular funding settlement on BBC. Now we have argued very strongly that at the very least, there has to be a full debate in Parliament. Ideally, that should be a public debate. That should then be a full debate in Parliament before these kinds of decisions are taken. Ultimately, it will be for the government to decide. But the government have to give a wider part of society the opportunity to state views, to come in and actually have some influence on the way that decision is taken.

Roger Bolton: There are some people who would argue we don't need public service anymore. And when they do, they say, 'Hey, look at Netflix and look at the amount of drama that's available' and so on. And they think the market will now deliver, but the market doesn't deliver as we now know local journalism - we've had impressive attrition going on there - the market doesn't tend to deliver an independent news service, the market doesn't deliver a World Service, the market doesn't on the whole produce original children's programming. All of these things the market doesn't do and yet scanning the horizon, there doesn't seem to be anybody articulating a clear vision of public service broadcasting for the next 20 years. What's your vision of public service broadcasting? What what do we need both to retain and develop?

Colin Browne: We have to start by asking ourselves what it is we want to end up with. And the real value of public service broadcasting is regulated in a way that ensures the programming is geared to UK society. It is reflecting the UK to itself. It is looking at the interests of UK citizens, which goes beyond just entertainment and good drama. Because you say as you rightly say the global companies or streamers didn't produce some really, really good programming and one has to welcome that. But we need to make sure that there continues to be material and content that reflects the UK to itself, and that's partly the news and current affairs that you talk, about Roger, but it's broader than that as well.

Roger Bolton: It's about minorities as well. International broadcasters, they're doing great stuff, but they're commercial broadcasters and they have to make a profit. There are a whole range of people in this country who aren't being heard or think they aren't being heard and they won't be heard in a purely commercial system. But the other thing which fascinates me is that in order to know who we are, we have to know who we were. We have to know about our past, we have to know I would say, for example, the role Christianity has played in shaping this. In order to understand new

communities we need to understand what they believe and their systems of belief. We need to know about Islam we need to know about Judaism, Buddhism and so on. That knowledge which needs to be shared and discussed amongst us all. is not going to happen outside the public service broadcasting system is it?

Colin Browne: That that's absolutely right. That kind of - reflecting UK society, UK beliefs back to the UK, it is vital. You mentioned earlier, Roger, that the financial pressures on the BBC would force it to be successful internationally, earn money internationally. And that's that's fine. Our concern is that makes all the pressure on the BBC to produce more commercial programming, which is sellable on the international markets. And therefore, back to the fundamental point, who was serving the UK and providing the kinds of services, programmes, cultural input that is so important? And to be fair I think the BBC do recognise this. They're stuck between a rock and a hard place to an extent.

Roger Bolton: They are, but this is my observation, I don't know if it's your observation, that – and I am an admirer of the Director General who's got a really tough job - but it seems to be it's a classic sort of business management style. You decide what your policy is, you get your management team around you and you say, 'This is the policy, now go sell it.' I understand why you do that. But public service has to be a little different from that. I can see a really well tooled up, experienced BBC board in business terms, and actually the Director General is a really good manager. What I don't hear and I don't see is someone at the top table who's got a clear vision of public service broadcasting they will articulate and which will influence the decision making in terms of the cuts that are made. So they will be able to say when there's a big push to sell abroad and make those sorts of programmes, 'Hold on, what's our real purpose?' That's my worry. Do you share that?

Colin Browne: Up to a point but in the direct conversations of the top level in the BBC, I think they do understand that and they've gone to some lengths to explain why building a successful commercial business or a business which gets them a lot of commercial revenues does not mean deserting the kind of material, the kind of UK focused stuff that you and I've been talking about. So I think there is an understanding to be fair.

Roger Bolton: But that understanding would be assisted if they consulted the viewers and listeners and your organisation a little bit more I would have thought. If people wanted to join the VLV what do they have to do?

Colin Browne: We've got a website. Go on the website.

Roger Bolton: Is it going to be very expensive for them?

Colin Browne: 30 quid a year.

Roger Bolton: Well that's a good deal. So just go to the website clearly and you're not just London based are you? You really want to do - when you're talking about the consultations and citizens forums, you are determined to get round the UK.

Colin Browne: That is absolutely right. And to encourage the broadcaster's to do that as well. And as you know, we have two or three conferences a year. We have major speakers. We're well supported by the broadcasters and the politicians from that point of view. And we have our annual awards ceremony and we have a bulletin that goes over three or four times a year. So we work very

hard to try to keep our members involved. And what really heartens me in all of this, Roger, is a lot of our members – I really hate the word ordinary – but they are not media people. They're just concerned citizens who understand the importance of these issues, and are coughing up the £30 a year to be a member of the the VLV.