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# ISLAND GARDEN / ISSUE 1

*Criticism / Bias-Cuts: The BBC at 100*

*Photography / Tunnelling*

*Drama / Fourpoundnote*

*Drawing / John of Faversham*

## ***Editor's Letter***

Looking for an escape hatch? A way off the rock? Your navy blue passport won't work anymore so alternative methods are required. Island Garden is here to help. Let us lead you in a waltz as we cut our eyes at a country in decline and dream of something new.

Today, we look back on a century of the British Broadcasting Corporation, reviewing how its pursuit of pseudo-impartiality has created deep cracks in its imperialist platform. Auntie is drunk. In visual art, we present new photographs focusing on the allure and abject promise of the tunnel. I'm verklempt...get me out of here! A meditation on love, secrets and hopes for a different future are explored in a new piece of drama. And we honour your neighbour John, everyone's neighbour John, in a new drawing.

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## BIAS-CUTS: THE BBC AT 100

In March 2023, the BBC Sports presenter Gary Lineker compared the UK government's latest immigration policy to the political culture of Germany in the 1930s. For this, he was found guilty of breaching his employer's rules on impartiality and was temporarily suspended from his job.



In October 2022, the BBC News presenter Martine Croxall couldn't hide her delight at the news that Alexander (call me Boris) Johnson, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, would not be throwing his hat into the ring in the next race to become leader of the Conservative party (again). She vocalised a personal opinion live on air and for that, was admonished by her employer and relieved of her duties for eleven days.



For the past 100 years, the tone of the country has been both directed and reflected by arguably its most dominant cultural institution - the BBC. Founded on the 18th October 1922, the British Broadcasting Corporation has led the way through the oceanic currents of 20th century traditional media flowing upstream to today's Tweets and Instagram Stories. BBC content now engages people in almost every country on earth, at every moment of the day. With this immense cultural power comes certain tenets of its privileged position; rules of order that it must follow. As a mostly publicly funded institution, the BBC must keep its audience and perhaps more

importantly in the current climate, its (ever-changing) government, on side. Indeed, in recent years the conversation about cutting its main source of funding - the License Fee - has picked up steam and the BBC now faces significant existential threats. Its mission to survive in this climate has largely been expressed through its OFCOM-mandated impartiality. But it is this tenet of impartiality and its interpretations of this loose concept, which has caused the BBC to find itself in the eye of a very modern storm. In an era of polarities, of spectrums-without-the-middle-area, as 'Auntie' celebrates her 100th birthday, she and us can reflect on her century of power and persuasion over her audience. She now finds herself asking who exactly is the BBC for? And can she hope to make everyone happy? (TLDR: Almost certainly no, of course not).

### **Partial? Your Favourite (Tipsy) Auntie**

From its inception, the BBC has played a pivotal role in projecting British ideologies across the world, working hand-in-hand in this pursuit of soft power with other key British power structures, namely the U.K Government and the Monarchy. And within this British Imperialist framework, that the BBC is colloquially referred to as 'Auntie' is telling. I had a favourite auntie, perhaps you did too. Your favourite auntie is kind and generous, she almost certainly gave you your favourite birthday gifts, taking note of what you really wanted. But she's not afraid to put you in your place either, albeit with a gentle, humorous touch - the lightest of scoldings. It is said that the BBC is known as 'Auntie' due a common refrain spoken by both its staff and its critics in the 1950's when questioning its position of authority: "Auntie Knows Best". The holder of power must be absolutely confident in their capital, assuring their audience, the user-base, that they should be trusted. They must edict. Any

rumblings of self-doubt can disrupt authority, allowing a window through which to be undermined or wrong-footed. At times though, times like this, such authority figures must reckon with their power whether due to internal soul-searching or external pressures; debating their decisions, reassessing their product, their taste. A century is a long time - it's been a century of competition, of innovation and invention. After a succession of governments who accuse it of oppositional bias and a media class who accuse it of pandering to those very same critical politicians, the BBC is discombobulated. Where it once set the tone, it now frequently follows. In an era of culture wars and division, of gas-lighting and fake news, the BBC is trying to produce content for the broadest of churches, for an audience comprised of all political persuasions in a time of user-specific content demands.

So, like at the end of classically dysfunctional Christmas dinner scene from an old BBC sitcom, Auntie has become dismayed. She's not making sense, trying to keep the peace with her critics but with lessened confidence. She's fallen out with her sister over a supposed slight, arguing with her Dad about things long settled and confusing the kids who don't know what to make of it all. The BBC is feeling drunk.

### **Imbalance: Left Foot, Right Shoe**

*"A biased Left-wing organisation which is seriously failing in its political representation"* - Nadine Dorries, Conservative MP

*"It's the BBC's rightwing bias that is the threat to democracy and journalism"* - Owen Jones for The Guardian

In August of this year, the former BBC journalist Emily Maitlis delivered the James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture at the Edinburgh TV Festival where she sounded the alarm on the emerging fractures eating away at the BBC's position of cultural authority. Maitlis titled her lecture "Boiling Frog: Why We Have to Stop Normalising the Absurd" and in it she described a country, a world, where democracy is being actively sabotaged by self-serving state actors and that the news media is at best failing to challenge these practices and at worst, being passively complicit in these pursuits. And throughout the lecture, Maitlis explored the crux of the BBC's current hangover-induced headache; its political position. Like its symbiotically-connected institution, the British Monarchy, the BBC will never transparently back a political party for fear of breaching its mandated impartiality. But unlike the monarchy, the BBC is a news provider, and a big one at that, and in 2022 the landscape of news media has changed. Much of journalistic content across the world is now biased. Editorialised. And the audience knows this. They like this. With the advent of digital news, social media feeds, doom-scrolling and memes, the audience inhabits an echo-chamber of information where their views are both informed by what they consume and reflected back towards them, with few counterpoints illuminated in the prism.

BBC News is revered for its deference and frankly, its nobility too. Received pronunciation and black ties, tasteful tailoring and sombreness-tinged neutrality. In this respect, it utterly recognises its authority and cultural persuasion. But to maintain impartiality in recent years the BBC has moved the needle of their position to one of balance. There's a distinction between these two gestures though. Impartiality suggests holding yourself above the conundrum, interpreting the discourse from a safe distance. Balance is getting

stuck in, presenting an argument for a cause and an argument against; with equal weighting to both. Within this framing on BBC television, this is often exhibited as a simple split-screen style cultural debate; two newspaper columnists pontificating on taxation levels say. Two scientists battling over vaccines. Two flounders floundering on the meaning of truth. Because of course, there's the rub. To give 'balance' to everything, to give equal weighting to all positions, is to perhaps stand for nothing in a time of strong convictions. And to potentially give oxygen to contrarians for the sake of this supposed balance betrays a lack of assumed authority. A dangerous game can be played, with outcomes unforeseen perhaps but glaringly obvious when viewed in retrospect. Maitlis explores the BBC's desire for balance with a piercing anecdote about the corporation's output on Brexit for 'Newsnight' in 2016, the current affairs television show she was presenting on BBC2 at the time. She states:

*"I'm going to take you this time to early 2016. The UK is beginning to debate the big questions around Britain's potential exit from the EU. It's complicated stuff, we're trying to offer our viewers both sides of a fiendishly difficult debate and that intention was right. But we still got it wrong. We fell into what we might call the Patrick Minford paradigm. In other words, it might take our producers five minutes to find sixty economists who feared Brexit and five hours to find a sole economic voice who espoused it. But by the time we went on air we simply had one of each. We presented this unequal effort to our audience as if it was balance. It wasn't. I'd later learn that the ungainly name for this myopic style of journalism was both-sidesism which talks to the way it reaches a superficial balance whilst obscuring a deeper truth."*

As Maitlis concurs, the allure of both-sidesism for the BBC in a time of social unrest and division is understandable, perhaps even noble in its naivety. But like the nobility of a by-gone era (well, perhaps not so by-gone at all), the BBC is out-of-touch here with little coherence or a reluctance to own up to the tone it is setting for its audience. As a leading cultural institution, one that is publicly funded no less, the BBC does have a civic responsibility. And on the topic of Brexit and the potentially seismic implications of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, arguably the BBC should have done better. Auntie Knows Best after all.

### **Scratching Backs and Shaking Hands**

We like the idea of the BBC being impartial, in a world of Fox News and Russia Today, how refreshing that this Great British Institution retains a sense of diplomacy and neutrality. V.British. But we also seek out biased opinions to validate our own positions. And so, the BBC continues its balancing act. As it attempts to fight off the barking dogs of government, those who threaten to slash its budgets if it doesn't change its tone and treat it more sympathetically, perhaps Auntie's drunken position is all too understandable. Maitlis resigned from the BBC, alongside many other high-profile staff. For greener pastures with more money yes, we are discussing the workings of the media ecosystem after all, but seemingly these workers left to create works of personal opinion, of criticism, away from such murky concepts of impartiality and balance. In trying to please everyone, the BBC finds itself in a state of almost paralysis and as one of Britain's leading cultural producers, how tragic this ultimately is. Fawning for a hostile government, freezing in their reportage of important conversations for their audience, fighting for their survival but continuing to flee from the weapons aimed at their back.



# TUNNELLING









# FOURPOUNDNOTE

## *INT. FOURPOUNDNOTE'S CAR*

*An all-black everything 4x4 is parked in isolation in a sprawling car park on the outskirts of London. Gold lights flutter from street lamps above. Inside the car, FOURPOUNDNOTE is sitting in the driving seat with YUKIO next to him. They are eating. The murmur of their conversation just floating above the background hum of a motorway beyond.*

## **FOURPOUNDNOTE**

(Mouth full of rice)

Like the wrap?

## **YUKIO**

It's a burrito.

## **FOURPOUNDNOTE**

The burrito.

## **YUKIO**

It's...a burrito.

(Beat)

It's fine. Good. It'd be a rare treat to eat a burrito with you in an actual restaurant.

**FOURPOUNDNOTE** places his dinner on the dashboard. Wipes his mouth with a white paper napkin. He looks out of the tinted windows into the abyss-like parking lot beyond.

***YUKIO (CONT'D)***

With plates and a drink in an actual glass. Some music and people. A waitress smiling and making smalltalk.

***FOURPOUNDNOTE***

And that's why we can't be eating in some Mexican chain restaurant.

***YUKIO***

Because of the small talking waitress?

***FOURPOUNDNOTE***

Because smalltalk is never small with me. It's... an inquisition. Because that waitress will tell her friends, who'll tell their friends, who'll post shit on some gossip account which will get picked up by the tabloids.

***YUKIO***

I get it.

***FOURPOUNDNOTE***

Do you?

***YUKIO***

Sure I do. But the joys of black beans and guac falling in my lap has begun to lose its charge.

FOURPOUNDNOTE places his hand tenderly on the nape of YUKIO'S neck. Massaging the area gently. Holding it there like this neck is his totem.

***FOURPOUNDNOTE***

I'm sorry man. It won't always be like this.

YUKIO says nothing.

***FOURPOUNDNOTE (CONT'D)***

Do you think I want it to be like this?

FOURPOUNDNOTE removes his hand from YUKIO's neck.

***FOURPOUNDNOTE (CONT'D)***

Fuck man. You say you're over eating dinner with me in the car? I've literally been hanging with dudes in my car for ten years man. I'm tired too man.

***YUKIO***

So what's the plan? Ten more years of secrets and threats?

***FOURPOUNDNOTE***

You're wearing me out. Not everyone has to throw a parade.

***YUKIO***

No-one's calling for a parade. Don't be so nineties.

FOURPOUNDNOTE smiles. He fiddles with the car stereo system.

***FOURPOUNDNOTE***

You wanna hear my new track?

FOURPOUNDNOTE presses play on the stereo. A heavy beat rattles the car.





# JOHN OF FAVERSHAM



Dancing with a country in decline.

