

# ON BEING A PUBLIC SERVANT – A PERSONAL VIEW

By JAMES MOIR

THE BBC is recognized throughout the world as the focus of excellence in broadcasting. My entire working career of thirty years has been spent with the BBC, primarily on the creative side of television light entertainment and more recently in relation to the central Board of Management. Before discussing my personal experience of being a public servant in this way, I would like to look at how the whole identity, structure and ethos of the BBC are about service, primarily as service to the UK licence fee payers but with a brief reference to its international commitments.

The BBC as an entity is itself a servant of the British public. This unique relationship is laid out in the BBC Charter, the first one being granted in 1927 and the present one being due for renewal in the near future. The Charter is not granted by Parliament but is initially set up by the Queen in Council. The role of the BBC as a public servant and, by implication, the public servant role for the Corporation's employees is, therefore, one which is of serious current interest.

The BBC is funded by a licence fee, a fee which is a compulsory payment for anyone in the UK in possession of television receiving equipment. This fee establishes the nature of the contract between the BBC and the audience; the audience is being served. In exchange for the compulsory, universal licence fee the BBC must offer something over and above what is found in the market place, extending choice to ensure that it provides programming for everyone, from the masses to fringe interests.

While the licence fee is a privileged, guaranteed source of funding, the reality is that its continuation is a political gift. The government of the day is affected by the opinions of the electorate and the atmosphere they create. 'Free market forces' have been the preference of the current administration for over a decade. This has been a strong contributory factor to the debate which has been going on for the past two or three years as to whether the BBC should in future be funded by licence fee or advertising revenue. This debate has culminated in a government White

Paper, which has come out in support of funding by licence-fee at least for the next few years.

While the licence fee remains, the duty of the BBC is one of universal service to licence payers, the role of public servant being taken on implicitly by each employee in their own area of expertise. This is not necessarily a conscious role for much of the time, but it is in the nature of the job, and a source which also supports and empowers members of the BBC in their public servant responsibility. The duty of being a public servant may involve denial and restraint on the personal level for the sake of a greater good.

But the BBC's accountability is not simply the obligation of 'something for everyone'; it is about the quality of what is on offer. In everything the BBC does its purpose is to be the most distinctive, the best across the board, from drama to news, from light entertainment to documentaries. It is about excellence. In the contemporary market place, with its multiplicity of choice from among terrestrial, satellite and cable channels as sources of television, the BBC feels it must protect the licence fee payer by being distinctive and unique. Its parameters are therefore only set in part by the market place.

The role of the BBC overseas is not one which can be dealt with at any length here but I mention it because of the immensely high regard in which it is held. This international reputation is rooted in the same values and ethos which I will go on to discuss and develop in relation to British licence payers. The ethos overflows into the BBC overseas commitments but here the recipient-corporation relationship is different as the World Service is funded by a grant-in-aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Truth and integrity are the motivating forces throughout, with the domestic and overseas services mirror imaging each other even though the funding is different. Domestic services sold abroad are marked by integrity, excellence and technical skill. As John Simpson, the BBC's Foreign Affairs Editor put it recently: 'The important thing . . . to the BBC [is] to be recognizably the BBC everywhere, with the same standards and the same principles.' 'Credibility is the BBC's stock in trade.'<sup>1</sup>

The British public are also very conscious of the BBC's identity as an organization which is there to serve them; they respond with a sense of ownership. There is not always a clear understanding of why the licence fee must be paid to the BBC while ITV is apparently 'free', but the licence payers make a direct link between what they pay and what they see, and can be very vocal in their opinions about it. This sharp public

awareness reinforces the sense of obligation to serve and the desire to offer excellence in range, quality and choice. It can be a real incentive, making for a supportive and encouraging atmosphere to work in, bringing alive a real sense of altruism.

The dynamic of this close relationship is reflected in the clear structures of accountability in the BBC monitoring the quality of public service. There are open public meetings held round the country where the public can express their responses. Performance indicators are known and published, and applied by the Board of Governors, who are the representatives of the public interest, to assess the Board of Management. Assessments are carried out at lower levels; accounts are put before Parliament.

The BBC has spent seventy years working to educate, entertain and inform, moving from a situation of monopoly to one of multiplicity. During that time the public service ethos has been honed to a contemporary understanding. This ethic pervades the general atmosphere of the whole Corporation, affecting the style of programmes, forming attitudes in the process of creative programming. Decisions to proceed, modify, cancel and so on are all measured against this evolving understanding. The pursuit of excellence and of the proper range of programmes are the priorities, often without regard to the competitive edge of the television business. The recent period drama *Middlemarch*, for example, cost £6 million for an immediate audience of four million, but in fact its impact was much wider.

All this, I think, illustrates not only how clearly the BBC requires its employees to be public servants but also how highly supportive the context is in which I, as an individual, try to fulfil this role. In various capacities in light entertainment, and for several years as Head of that department in television, I have had to learn to live with certain tensions, especially those between the creativity inherent in, for example, comedy, and public expectations or taste. It is interesting to reflect on the spirituality which has developed where creativity and responsibility to the public are so closely linked.

### *Faith*

If I am asked what, in terms of faith, gives life to and underpins my life as a public servant, I would point first and foremost to my spiritual formation at school with both its richness and its limitations. I was educated in Roman Catholic schools in west London in the 1950s and this education gave me a thorough grounding in faith. It put into my hands the key to unlock some of life's conundrums. To be taught by

intelligent teachers to what for seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds was a high level of sophistication in social ethics, apologetics and the beginnings of theology, to be given the means of expressing Christian beliefs and of seeing how they enmesh with everyday life – to this day I still see these as some of the greatest gifts of my school education. I am privileged that, as part of my education, I came away from school not only with knowledge of the catechism but also able to debate from a position of proper knowledge the issues which affect human life. I had a proper grounding; I knew what the basics were.

Faith is about the love of God, about Christ and reverence for Christ's ministry. Faith also triggers one's conscience, brings conscience into play early on in a situation; it leads one to protect some things, some people; it suggests boundaries beyond which one should not go. Faith then is a dimension in the exercise of conscience in management; it sets before me the need to act justly, to provide the best advice possible, to work for the deal which is most just. I have always tried to deal fairly in the workplace. I have never knowingly put anyone in the position where I have taken away their dignity. Even when terminating employment, I have always left them with a reminder of the good things they have done. I see this as a particular instance of 'doing the truth'. Faith means, too, that I recognize God's gifts in my colleagues and those over whom I have authority, so that their human dignity is fully respected and I am in a position to help them to flourish, to fulfil their potential and their heart's desires.

### *The Church*

I have to say that it is this faith, formed in the 1950s, rather than an awareness of more contemporary developments or creative potential in the Church, which sustains me now. For me, in terms of my experience, 'the Church' is only the institutional Church. I have been to many places in the world. I know Germany well, and in Munich, for example, there seems to be a confident church, secure of its place and secure in its place. I am not sure that in Britain we have the same confidence. As a boy in the Blessed Sacrament procession round Ruislip I always felt that somehow I was different. However, I find the universality of the institutional Church very comforting and attractive: each of Christ's servants is being dealt with in the same way. I also have great reverence for priests and religious, partly because of my working-class background, which gave me a certain attitude towards professional people. That perspective has changed, but I still see them as people called, 'higher', different.

It does seem to me, however, that this Church has failed to grasp the challenges of one of the most important features of human life today, namely the power of the broadcasting media and their role in both forming and reflecting popular culture, which is the culture most people inevitably live with. The institutional Church should seriously consider what it offers from the pulpit. While there is a limit to any human organization – and the Church is a human organization – the people who fill the churches on Sundays are not served well. Of course they are offered the sacraments. But generally speaking, what the Church does not offer – and I would include our great churches here – is anything other than some usually mediocre commentary on the gospel. I do not know exactly what the priest and congregation can do in a ten-minute homily slot, but if my theology is from the stone age, so too is the instruction offered in church to its capacity Sunday audience. There is little recognition in the homily of how educated and informed people are these days. We want and need pointers about how to live today as disciples of Christ, and in order to do this, the institutional Church has to listen to us speaking about the world in which we live and work. Every Sunday the preachers have a captive audience of tens of thousands and they fail them. It worries me greatly that I have never heard debated in the parish some of the great issues of the past thirty years such as abortion and contraception.

I suppose that the likes of me should be looking for education, but where are we to go? Education is a two-way process. Much is expected of the learner, but much is also expected of the teacher, and the teaching Church is not doing enough to form a thinking, intelligent, questioning people. All that is happening, it seems to me, is that the institutional Church is reserving the debates to itself and allowing the people only to participate in the sacraments.

Broadcasting does more to explore live issues, to teach and to inform than the institutional Church does. Joan Bakewell,<sup>2</sup> for example, rather than figures in the Church's hierarchy, will be remembered as the instigator and moderator of debate on the great Christian questions of today. Why does the teaching church not get to grips with modern communication methods, with the culture that people are used to learning in, and make audio-visual experience part of the normal pattern of faith-learning? For me personally, in the face of this paucity of support from the institutional Church, what saves me is the experience of knowing the greatness of the gift of faith itself, which I learned from my mother, and knowing that it transcends the weaknesses of education and understanding. But that is not to let the teaching Church off the hook.

I am probably like most people, part traditionalist part reformer. In particular, when it comes to how ordinary people in their ordinary families are obliged to live their lives, the institutional Church needs to listen more. Pastors and theologians can learn from the laity, who have to live Christ's love and faith in the real world and sometimes under the most difficult circumstances. The Church has to trust us more.

*Corporate ethos and personal spirituality*

We are using the term 'public service' and I am described as a 'public servant'. When I express that in Christian language, I see it in terms of Christ and the Incarnation. Christ came to serve humankind; that was God's purpose in sending him into the world. His whole life was dedicated to that. I am sure he was humble and went out of his way to show people service. But it was magisterial service, and that is how I try to serve. When you serve someone, you give them something of yourself.

I find that the relationship between the corporate ethos of the BBC and my personal life of faith is a creative partnership. The corporate ethic gives me the track on which to run my train. And the corporate ethos, as I interpret it, is such an appealing one: the pursuit of excellence, the pursuit of truth, not in a business context or for profit, without the pressures of the market place – it is difficult to object to that! However I find it difficult to isolate and express what is specifically 'Christian' about this. That may be because in terms of faith I am rooted in the 1950s, as I have said, and my language is that of the infant Christian rather than the adult. It seems to me that there is something intrinsic to the human condition that makes it want to speak of the truth, even when that means the loss or denial of more immediate advantages. Recall again the words of John Simpson that I quoted earlier. That kind of pursuit of truth, involving as it does restraint and self denial for the sake of a greater good, has a definite Christian dimension to it. Many people would surely want to live this pursuit of truth; to me it is demonstrably the higher goal.

I feel committed to exercising proper stewardship over the resources provided by the public. When I reflect, I realise that I had a vocation in this field of light entertainment, in the way in which I can deal with people, lead, influence, draw out, improve, enthuse. I am good at it for no discernible reason other than that I am gifted for it, gifted by God. I had a calling for that: I knew it from being a child.

I am aware that my job at the BBC also has other rewards, very human rewards. It is engaging to be working alongside very creative and highly talented people as they exercise their gifts to the full and to be in a position really to appreciate them. I am privileged to be surrounded by talented colleagues and to recognize that the source of those gifts is God.

Exploring these questions has made me realise that I do not in fact separate my human condition from my Christian condition. Of course I often act out of my human condition of frailty in a way contrary to my Christian understanding. But when I am thinking about what is good, what is right, what is true and about what matters in the pursuit of those things, I do not separate the two.

*Faith and professional judgements*

As an example of how my faith works in practice we could look at judgements I have to make about humour. Some people would say that as Head of Light Entertainment I have immense and even a corrosive power to affect standards in society and therefore the health of society by allowing, as some would say, the lowering of standards in humour. One has to remember, however, that humour has to do with taste and most boundaries of taste are not fixed: they are very shifting. What was inappropriate in the nineteenth century is appropriate in this century. The 1947 BBC directive on what were then considered proper subjects for humour in variety are now regarded as risible. There were to be no references, for instance, to 'Winter draws (drawers) on' or to effeminacy in men or to lavatories. Boundaries shift inexorably down the ages. Some boundaries are unchanging in that certain material will always shock some people – so for example misuse of the holy names and coarse and profane language are a permanent source of offence to many people, though clearly not to all. They always provoke complaint.

Where I have to make a judgement or resolve a difficulty about such matters, however, my faith rarely explicitly enters into the process. I do not have to keep referring explicitly to my faith. I draw more on the wisdom of the world, on the practicalities of being a professional in this particular field. People are allowed artistic freedom, new ways of making audiences laugh. My judgement has to do with the issue of whether it is in the pursuit of excellence to take a particular course of action. That is the link into my 'spirituality', not some consciousness at that point of making a 'Christian' judgement.

*Love*

This sense of care and honouring of the dignity of people are rooted for me in love, love of my fellow human beings, and also partly in experiences in which I believe people could have handled me better. I live and act in this way because of my awareness of the reality of God, of Christ and of what Christ's teaching, as expressed in the church, implies and does. It is as if these form a series of fronds hanging down and my life filters through them.

The only interpretation of God that I have is the human form of God, Jesus Christ. And when I ask who Jesus Christ is, I keep coming up with the answer 'love'. Why would God wish to create the world except to enjoy it, to love those who are in it, just as we love our children? And I sense this through human agencies, in the loving kindness and courtesies one receives from family, friends, strangers. I am particularly aware of family blessings. In my family life, we experience both joy and pain because of the great love that is there. I see this love, too, in the ways in which people deny themselves for the love of others. There are so many examples of this throughout life.

I received my first experience of love and faith from my parents. My mother was a simple woman who exercised her faith through ritual practice. She was both a prayerful woman and an ordinary 'mum', with those two sides of her character combined quite harmoniously. And that is how I find myself: ordinary and rough on the one hand, but with this spiritual, prayerful dimension within me as well. God has given me such wonderful gifts: my parents, my children, the way in which I earn my living. That is a generous thing for God to do. With all that I have been given I have only a 'Harrods' view of God!

In the dark patches of my life I draw on Christian images to sustain me, particularly the image of Christ suffering on the cross. The knowledge which flows from this image is that in the human condition even Christ was sad and did not want to face what was before him. Speaking about all this creates great emotion in me, and I am not sure where all that comes from. A recurring theme in my thoughts is this: if we do not love in this world, there is really not much point in being here at all.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Simpson addressing the English Speaking Union, 23rd May 1994, referring to the BBC's aim to be the world's foremost international broadcaster in world television, as it already is in radio, by the year 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Bakewell is the presenter of a distinguished BBC series of programmes, *The Heart of the Matter*, produced by the Religious Department, exploring religious dilemmas of all faiths, but particularly those in the Christian sphere.