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Censorship of the BBC under Prime Ministers Thatcher and Blair

And whereas in view of the widespread interest which is taken by Our Peoples in broadcasting services and of the great value of such services in disseminating information, education and entertainment, We believe it to be in the best interests of Our Peoples in Our United Kingdom and elsewhere in the Commonwealth that there should be an independent corporation which should continue to provide broadcasting services...

(Queen Elizabeth II 1/5/96)

Freedom of the press and freedom of information are two values that are theoretically shared by most of the world. But what do they mean and are any parts of the media truly free? Censorship exists in most places in some form or another. Censorship can vary from explicit threats to the media to casual and informal nudges that the government would prefer a story to be told another way. Any time the government gets involved or inserts itself in the day-to-day operations of the media, censorship is occurring. Even the BBC, one of the world's most admired news corporations, is not completely free of the stigma of government supervision.

It is in the BBC's very nature to be interfered with by the Government, as it was created by a series of governmental committees and is renewed every ten years by the Government. This gives Westminster a great deal of opportunity to interfere with public service broadcasting, and over the years politicians take more of those opportunities to impose their wills and desires on it. Though politicians have always conflicted with the media, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's conflicts have been highly publicized and both prime ministers' methods of dealing with them

were incredibly varied. Both have tried in their own ways to control the press and specifically the BBC.

Nor is this at all rare in the world. Complete freedom from government control anywhere is hard to find, as Reporters without Borders, an international public service organization that promotes and protects journalism and journalists, has found. In its annual worldwide index of press freedom in 2006, the United Kingdom ranked only 27th of 167. Tied for first in the survey were Finland, Ireland, Iceland, and the Netherlands, none of which, according to the report, had any records of threats, censorship, physical reprisals or intimidation from the government ("Press Freedom Index 2006"). These countries are the exception, not the rule.

Though the United Kingdom is a far cry from being in the same position as its neighbor Ireland, it has managed to create a very free press, above and beyond many other nations on the globe. The United States, with its famous First Amendment, only placed 53rd in the 2006 survey, down from 23rd in 2004 as a result of things like the PATRIOT Act and pressures exerted upon the press by the Bush administration to support the War on Terror. Other countries are clearly even worse; in Algeria, 126th on the list, journalists risk their freedom and lives to report stories. In Iran, number 162, a cartoonist was jailed for a year for insulting the Ayatollah Khomeini. In North Korea, which ranked last, famines and shortages are never even mentioned in any form of the media; instead, all news is filtered through the propaganda machines of the Dear Leader (Curtis and Jempson 103). When compared to these nations, the UK is a bastion of freedom.

Great Britain has a long history of freedom, especially in speech and the press. The Magna Carta set the precedent, though it dealt with little more than property and financial rights and laws. However, it introduced the idea that the powers of the government could be limited and defined to protect the general population, even though King John signed it only when forced

by his rebellious barons. Throughout English history, the trend continued and liberty became more entrenched in the culture. By 1644, with the nascent popularity of the printing press, the idea of written freedom was well defined, proven when John Milton wrote, “He who destroys a book, kills reason itself.” When William and Mary were put on the throne after the people overthrew James II, the English Bill of Rights ensured freedom of the press and printing became wildly popular after the collapse of the licensing system and expiration of the Regulation of Printing Act in 1694. These developments were followed by the birth of the first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, in 1702.

The idea of freedom of the press has, through the world’s history, waxed and waned but has never disappeared completely. Now, few nations will say that they disagree with the notion, even if they do in practice disallow it. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted nearly unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly, which urges the protection and promotion of human, civic, economic, and social rights including freedom of expression (Smith and Torres 2006). In Great Britain, such a premise was more a confirmation of a practice that has been well defined and accepted since the *Daily Courant* in the eighteenth century. Well inscribed in the practices and traditions of the nation, it is not completely watertight and safe from government interference. In the very creation of the BBC, the government so far overshadowed the practice of complete freedom of speech that it stepped in to create a medium that would, after creation, allegedly be free of government interference, though it would depend on the government for crucial things like appointments to positions of power and funding. Even though the British Broadcasting Company was created by the Post Office, a government department, it was set up to be as free from government intervention as possible to save it from becoming a machine of propaganda, like today’s media in North Korea under Kim

Jong-il. Yet the Government at the time also recognized that the company should not be dependent on the public for funding so it could maintain its integrity and live up to its goals without being hindered by the need for funding from the market.

In 1922, when radio was still a brand new technology, the government decided it was a precious resource and thus should be regulated and used with the nation's best interests at heart. This, according to the government, necessarily translated into a mission to inform and educate the public rather than keep it entertained. So Parliament took it upon itself to see that this mission was carried out. The Sykes Committee was the first inquiry the Government launched into the issue of radio news and its potential. The committee reported in 1923 and recommended that radio should remain free from government control because of its huge potential, which was just beginning to be realized. Sykes was followed by the Crawford Committee in 1926, which called for broadcasting to be free from commercial control on the grounds that it would demean the medium's potential. These and other committees set the stage for the BBC, though problems arose in the creation of the corporation: one of funding, the other of accountability. For the first, the idea of the licensing fee was the best solution. This way, all of the public who owned a wireless (or today a television set) paid the same flat rate which then went to the company to create programming, without creating competition among advertisers or having to rely on the whims of the capitalist market. For the second, the government decided that there would need to be a non-governmental body to protect the BBC from government interference that was not accountable to government, though it would be appointed by it. This body would consist of qualified people, or those deemed qualified by the party in power.

Thus the BBC was to act as a service to democracy, telling the story and covering the issues of the day without bias or political agenda. "Its journalism would be put to the service of

democracy, informing audiences about public affairs from a standpoint of political impartiality and balance. For the BBC, unlike the newspapers with their openly declared biases, there was to be no taking of sides” (McNair 82). Thus, the BBC was to be the one outlet of the media that had no bias and took no positions. It would strive to tell the Truth and not be put off from telling it by a personal preference of a writer or an editor, to make the nation as informed as it possibly could be. It was to be a totally new source and use a new method for covering national and international news, and as such, it would require a completely different setup and organizational structure.

The corporation was set up in 1922 by a charter which would be renewed every decade to keep up with changes in the times and circumstances, and the government would adjust the licensing fee as necessary in accordance with the annual budget. For most of its history, the BBC was monitored and run solely by a Board of Governors. The Blair Government, in its 2005 Green Paper on the BBC, decided that this practice should not continue because of fears of conflicts of interest. The Green Paper set out a plan for dividing up the Board of Governors and creating the BBC Trust as a separate entity from management, which would be responsible for the license fee and be accountable to the paying citizens. Accountability to the public was the main focus of the Paper, and the BBC Trust was the main tool to see that the public had a say in the kinds of programs put out by the BBC. For example, the Trust would have detailed documentation about quality and control over the measurement of worth of any single program, though those standards were developed by the executive. It would be responsible for approving any “significant change” to programming after subjecting it to a “public values test” and would have its own staff, appointed by the Queen on recommendation of the Prime Minister, to see its

responsibilities were carried out (BBC Green Paper 2005). A formal executive board was also outlined in the Paper to be accountable for the delivery of the BBC's services.

The charter also sets out the funding circumstances for the BBC. As mentioned above, it is financed by a licensing fee, which all citizens of Great Britain must pay annually if they own a television. Though the government has no say over how the money allocated to the corporation is spent on programming or development, it does control the levels of the fee. This is one of the most obvious problems with government regulation of the BBC; in the past, the fee has been used as a lever to get programs altered, to subtly change the tone of a piece, or even to drastically change programs or departments.

In reality, public service broadcasting stifles the representation of individual needs and concerns. [...] These bureaucracies are involved in the continuous vetting of schedules and programmes, and they exercise long-term power to dissolve contracts which displease them. Public service broadcasting involves systematic and arbitrary censorship of consumers' choices. (Keane 57)

All of this can be affected and altered simply by hints that the corporation will not get the funding it needs in the future unless certain things are changed according to the government's wishes. Though this perspective is fairly harsh, and Westminster's control over the BBC is not used as frequently as Keane would here have us believe, it leaves no doubt about how strongly some feel about public service broadcasting and what the potential dangers and pitfalls of it are for the public. If the purpose of journalism is "to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self governing" (Kovach 10), and the government is involved somehow in determining policy for the journalists, it is not hard to imagine how things can get distorted easily and thus confuse the voting public.

However, Keane's is by no means the only possible point of view on the issue of public service broadcasting. Others say that it is important because public service broadcasting "would enjoy constitutional independence from the politicians, standing aloof from their partisan debates and self-interested policies" (McNair 82). In this respect, it is true that public service broadcasting does remain detached from the government, though not completely so. There is also very little influence of the free market in the BBC, even today. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the BBC has the reputation it does for a reason. It is by far one of the best sources of news in the UK because it simply does not need to worry about circulation statistics the way the rest of the media do. The BBC is one of the best because it is under the shield of government protection; it can concern itself with its stated purpose of informing, educating, and entertaining citizens. Without worries about competing for advertising or audiences, it can get on with the business of telling the news that matters rather than the attention-grabbing celebrity gossip that so many news channels and newspapers have to resort to so they keep their viewership up.

Doubtless somewhere between these two polar views lies the truth about public service broadcasting and the importance of government intervention therein. Not only does the government have control over licensing fees and the appointment of members to the governing boards, but it can subtly influence the corporation in other ways. It can threaten that the charter will not be renewed, pass laws about what information can and cannot be shared publicly, and appoint special advisors to deal with journalists, people who have become known as the infamous spin doctors. The threat of not renewing the Charter is an empty one; it would cause far more problems than it would solve. The other methods have been used often in the past.

Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair have obviously used them most recently and with great success, though each had a very different approach.

Politicians and journalists have always butted heads, and the history of their interactions in Britain is no exception. “Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Wilson were all in their time persuaded that the BBC was insufficiently deferential to government and should be brought to heel. None succeeded in doing so...” (McNair 84). They never succeeded in making the BBC properly sycophantic, at least according to their personal definitions, but they did manage to protect themselves a bit. Each used a press secretary to get the messages of No. 10 Downing Street across to the media and also to clarify and solidify the message of the party in front of the world. In another, earlier effort to protect the government from the ravages of the media, in 1911, Herbert Henry Asquith started the D-notice system, which would allow the government to keep military secrets. On the grounds of national security, Westminster permitted itself to keep information that it deemed could be helpful to the enemy if they were publicized by the press. However, there is evidence that the committee, which still meets twice a year, suppresses not only sensitive information, but that which can embarrass the government as well (Franklin 33).

Hardly uncommon, other prime ministers have tried to do the same and follow in Asquith’s footsteps. Margaret Thatcher and her Conservatives were proud of themselves and their self-made images, reputations, and suspicious of the traditionally elitist journalists of the BBC (elitist because it was their affirmed job to promote and determine the best of British culture and hold the news to its highest standard). As self-made men and women, Thatcherites naturally distrusted the public school and Oxford-educated BBC reporters, and they feared the journalists were inherently set against them and their desired reforms. In the Thatcherites’

polarizing “us versus them” mentality, they did what they could to bring the journalists under more governmental control and force them to be more amenable to the Government’s plans. They also tried to fit the media in with Mrs. Thatcher’s policies in other areas, where she was constantly striving for a freer market and for less government intervention across the nation. She strove to make the BBC less public, even going so far as to threaten to drastically alter the funding regulations and introduce more commercial aspects into the corporation. Even she, it is important to note, as angry as she often was with the BBC, never threatened to not renew the Charter; she only went so far as to threaten to significantly change it.

During Mrs. Thatcher’s premiership, the BBC was constantly in a state of tension and occasionally one of outright hostility to get the licensing fee increased, and not only because she had many complaints with the way the BBC covered the news. She felt that with the ever-increasing number of satellites, and therefore satellite television stations, there were more choices available to consumers, and the forty other channels offered to consumers could perhaps well make up for less funding for programs on the BBC’s four channels. While Mrs. Thatcher was in No. 10, the BBC’s license increased the least throughout the entirety of its history (Franklin 35). But battles over the license fee were not enough for the Government. People with a vested interest in the commercial market of broadcast journalism, like Rupert Murdoch, began to demand an end to the BBC’s control over the news and the privileges it had. In 1985, the Home Secretary announced there would be an enquiry into the future of public service broadcasting, with special attention paid to the interesting area of funding, which would be known as the Peacock Committee. “Few within broadcasting or observing it from outside doubted that the Peacock Committee’s job was essentially to be one of finding a convincing rationale for ending the license fee system and fundamentally changing the status of the BBC as

a public service organization” (McNair 90). The committee did inevitably report what Mrs. Thatcher more or less wanted in 1986. The report it issued said that the BBC’s duopoly on radio and television had been outdated because of new technologies and pointed out that the licensing fee was not keeping up with the financial requirements of the corporation. Thus, restructuring was necessary. The report recommended setting up a pay-per-view system, and while it would not be a completely free market, such a plan would allow consumers more choice. Unfortunately for the Committee and Mrs. Thatcher’s wishes, however, the BBC Charter was not up for renewal until 1996, and so nothing further could be done at the time.

Failing to completely rebuild the BBC from scratch, Mrs. Thatcher did everything she could to increase her control over its output. She had an ongoing war to try to control the programs the BBC aired. Almost from the moment she entered office, she entered into conflicts with it. The Carrick incident welcomed her into the office of prime minister nicely. Just after she declared a war on terrorism, she discovered that a BBC news team had gone to Northern Ireland and filmed an IRA protest without telling anyone, much less waiting for permission to go there and film. Though there was never any intention on the part of the editors of showing it, word got out and the BBC was accused by the print media of colluding with the Irish Republican Army. Though Mrs. Thatcher never went further than going berserk, the BBC did launch an internal inquiry, which found the team guilty of violating clearance procedures. There procedures were then changed, however, after a reprimand from editors to the team. This altercation merely set the tone for the rest of Mrs. Thatcher’s years in 10 Downing Street. The BBC’s coverage of issues of the day continued to upset her; she continued to try to rein in the BBC and force them to cover stories the way she felt they should be covered, using the words and phrases she felt were appropriate. Though she never tried to force them to say things one

specific way, she did not hesitate to complain when they said something in a way she felt was not properly patriotic, as she did during the Falklands conflict. On *Newsnight* one evening in 1982, Peter Snow began a sentence, “If we believe the British...” (“Treasonable”). That clause was enough to set off the Prime Minister and her Government. The comment was described as “almost treasonable” by John Page MP, but in spite of the pressures from Parliament, the Director General at the time, Sir Ian Trethowan, defended the BBC saying it had to “guard its reputation for telling the truth” (“Treasonable”). Though it amounted to little more than a shouting match in a committee room in Westminster when two BBC officials were called there for a meeting, it showed how much the Government cared about friendly coverage of its policies and how willing the corporation was to stick to its guns and stand by what it felt was right for the culture of the nation and the news.

The year 1986 was another eventful one for the Thatcher Government and its seemingly unending battles with the BBC. The first was in April over the American bombing of Libya. The United States had been allowed the use of British air bases to launch a retaliatory attack after terrorists attacked a night club used by American troops. The BBC termed it bullying and the Conservative Party Chairman, Norman Tebbit, lodged a complaint and in a report accused the BBC of being “riddled with inaccuracy, innuendo and imbalance” (qtd. in “Calls”). The Tebbit dossier, as his complaint was known, also called for a restructuring of management and editorial standards, but Marmaduke Hussey, BBC Chairman, refused to be intimidated and did not give in to Mr. Tebbit’s demands. Also in 1986, the Special Branch raided the BBC Glasgow offices for fears over security breaches about the Zircon spy satellite. The satellite had cost 500 million pounds and the BBC did a program on it that argued the money had been spent without proper transparency and without properly informing the nation of what the money was being used to do.

The Special Branch questioned people for hours and confiscated documents and footage during its time in the Glasgow offices. The program was shown, but only after two years had passed. Another program in the same series, whose subject was secret Cabinet committees, has never been shown. These isolated incidents were not the only times the Government and BBC were in conflict; there was an ongoing legislative battle throughout Mrs. Thatcher's premiership.

During her time in Downing Street, one of Mrs. Thatcher's main issues was her war on terrorism, specifically with reference to the situation in Northern Ireland. She was quoted over and over again as saying that any coverage of terrorism or the terrorists' side of an issue would only give more fuel to their cause and empower them further. She subscribed to the idea that no press was bad press for a terrorist. When she heard about the program 'Real Lives' that the BBC was planning to show, where journalists interviewed two radical members of the IRA, she felt she had no other alternative than to try to pressure the BBC into at the very least changing parts of the program. This conflict ended with Mrs. Thatcher on top; though the program was televised, it was shown in a truncated form to appease the Government. After the program was aired in 1985, Parliament began work on a bill that would make such a program nearly impossible to create in the future. In 1988, it passed a broadcasting ban on statements "by members of proscribed Northern Irish organizations and their supporters, including democratically elected members of legal political parties such as Sinn Féin..." (McNair 86). The ban extended only to the voices of extremists; their beliefs could still be broadcast. In all, eleven organizations were banned from radio and television, though not from newspapers. The ban remained in place until 1994 when a ceasefire dramatically improved relations and it became expedient for the voices of the "terrorists" to be heard again on television and radio.

Mrs. Thatcher had more changes in mind than simply banning a few “terrorist” groups from television and radio, however. She replaced the Official Secrets Act that was instituted before the war and made it even more powerful. Similar to the D-notice system, the Act specified four categories of information about which nothing can ever be published; information obtained in secret from a foreign government or international organization; disclosures by former agents and even certain journalists about security concerns; and intercepted communications. The Official Secrets Act did not go far enough for Mrs. Thatcher and her Conservatives, however. In 1990, when her power was quickly waning, Mrs. Thatcher pushed through the Broadcasting Bill. The bill began innocently enough; it would only commit to a new system of allocating licenses, but this system would keep the ITV services competitive in the face of a growing range of satellite stations. However, after a consultation with Mrs. Thatcher, Woodrow Wyatt, a Conservative member of the House of Lords, added a crucial amendment stating that any programs that were determined to be unbalanced would have to be balanced by a discussion on the air after the program’s end, or even by another program that offered the other side of the argument.

Though some of the Wyatt provisions that so alarmed the broadcasters were watered down in the clause which was eventually incorporated into the act, it still represented an unprecedented degree of legal intervention in an area which had traditionally been left to the broadcasters themselves to police. Henceforth, due impartiality would have to be achieved, not in a single program, but with “a series of programs considered as a whole.” (McNair 101)

The fears and potential interference that this amendment could have caused would have given the government far more power in public service broadcasting than the founders of the BBC ever

intended. Before this bill, it was always left to individual editors to determine what was considered balance and to keep biases out of the agenda. The inclusion of this amendment left the BBC open to attack from all sides, including ideologically based groups. With the new threat of having to create a second program on the same topic to satiate the Government or some other group, the composition and independence of the BBC would necessarily be changed dramatically. By the time the bill came to be law in 1991, the Wyatt Amendment, as it came to be known, was watered down further. As stated in the program code, which was to be in keeping with the new stipulations of the bill, “Due impartiality [...] should be interpreted as meaning adequate or appropriate to the nature of the subject and the type of programme [...] It does not mean that balance is required in any simply mathematical sense or that equal time must be given to each opposing view” (qtd. in McNair 102). This helpful little caveat put the power back into the hands of the editorial board, returning most of its powers at least in determining what balance meant to the world of journalism. However, the need for such a clause obviously showed just how much power had been lost to the government during Mrs. Thatcher’s premiership.

So much power has in fact been lost that an international study of censorship in the media across Western Europe, Canada, and the United States found that Great Britain’s levels had grown most rapidly and were now far above any other nation that was included in the survey. The survey, released by Newton and Artingstall in 1992, also found a steady increase in levels of censorship since 1986 as well as a proportional and corresponding increase in censorship from non-governmental bodies like the broadcasters themselves, which they termed the “spiral of censorship” (qtd. in Franklin 35). The ever-increasing levels of control under Thatcher only created uncertainty and a lack of confidence within the BBC. In fact, in some circles, the acronym for BBC came to mean Be Bloody Cautious. A changed environment came into

existence, one which was hostile to investigative reporting and created a culture of self-censorship. Journalists would choose to err on the side of caution and not include something controversial simply to avoid attracting government attention and involving the corporation in yet another battle.

Furthermore, the increased powers of the government were not limited to the legislative powers of Parliament. Though the position of press secretary had been official since 1931, Bernard Ingham took the role even further while he held the position under Mrs. Thatcher. He centralized power around himself; nothing was told to the press that he did not approve. Thinking of himself as a bridge between Government and media, he determined who said what to whom, and he gave the Prime Minister all of her news, as she hardly ever read a paper herself.

When New Labour came into power in 1995, Mr. Blair did nothing to halt the trend and give more power back to the BBC. Alastair Campbell only continued in Mr. Ingham's footsteps. He was far more than a press secretary; he was the voice of Government on a daily basis and possibly the most powerful unelected politician in Westminster (Franklin 39). Mr. Campbell was the one, until his resignation in 2003, who met with the lobby twice a day and told the 220 journalists based in Westminster what was going on. These journalists then simply relayed back what they were told to their organizations, and there was little investigation to verify the information fed to them by the government machine. Furthermore, Mr. Campbell and Mr. Blair together determined which journalists got which scoop, and this accounts for the main difference in how the two Governments related to the press. The Thatcherites attacked the BBC as a whole by creating laws and policies that affected the whole. Mr. Blair and New Labour are far more subtle; they scrutinize the journalism industry, and based on their observations they focus on individual journalists and the personal relationships between the government and the media.

This is not to imply that Mr. Blair has never had any tangles with the BBC similar to the ones that characterized Mrs. Thatcher's time in office. The main dispute was over the Hutton Report. When President Bush and Prime Minister Blair were getting up support at home for their war in Iraq, one of their main selling points was the 'knowledge' that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Therefore, in 2003, when it came out into the open that there in fact were no WMD, BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan suggested that the nation had been deliberately misled to further Mr. Blair's goals. Mr. Campbell demanded an apology, which was refused. Dr David Kelly, who was the source of Mr. Gilligan's story, was forced to go on television and explain himself, a week after which he committed suicide, prompting a government inquiry. The inquiry found that the Government had been negligent, but was overwhelmingly critical of the BBC. The report resulted in both the BBC's chairman and director general resigning within 24 hours of its release, and complaint procedures and journalistic training within the corporation were both overhauled. Unlike Mrs. Thatcher, who had many such conflicts with the BBC, this is the only altercation to date that the Blair Government has had to the same scale as Mrs. Thatcher's regular conflicts.

Mrs. Thatcher wanted to control the media; she longed to tell them how and what they could cover. Mr. Blair is far more nuanced. His mission is one of centralization around No. 10 under his press secretary. In this way, the government can determine and define which policies are discussed in the media and what kind of coverage they receive. Blair's centralization went almost too well for him and he gradually lost the trust of the media, developing a reputation for spin. One of the more damning examples of this is Jo Moore's infamous email that was leaked to the media, claiming that 11 September 2001 was a good day to bury bad news. Moore knew that no media outlet would cover anything but the disasters unfolding in the United States and so

sought to manipulate tragedy in a way that would benefit the Government. When that email was revealed publicly, open warfare between the media and the Government necessarily followed. The war grew further apace after Stephen Byers, former Transport Secretary, stood by Ms. Moore. Add the story of Cherigate, where the Prime Minister's wife bought property with the help of a conman, and the media were having a field day; the distrust between the Government and media solidified. The controversies prompted a spin inquiry committee which would cover over 50 questions on topics including the role of special advisors, their training, and their relationships with the press. Labour's brilliant centralization tactic only ended up back-firing spectacularly. According to *The Guardian*:

After nearly a decade the British public now mistrusts the government machine to a degree unmatched in the democratic era. In 2004, a survey for the committee on standards in public life found that a mere 24% of the public trusted government ministers to tell the truth (only estate agents and tabloid journalists were more mistrusted). ("Cast the first stone")

When the prime minister learned that his Government was so mistrusted by British citizens, policy changes had to be made. All the bad press forced Mr. Blair to try to redeem himself and reform his party's reputation from one full of spin doctors and liars. In an effort to rebuild Labour's reputation, he opened the lobby briefings to all interested journalists, put them on the record, and encouraged journalists to identify as specifically as possible who unnamed sources were to maintain credibility.

But before things got so bad, Mr. Blair's government was a brilliant machine for manipulating the press. Rather than focus on the entire media, Labour focused on individual reporters, offering exclusives and special information to those who toed the line and accepted

and reported on what the Government told them. Taking the rewards system even further, those who did not do as Downing Street wanted would find themselves denied when they put in requests for interviews and without the tips and leaks that politicians often leave for journalists to find and make into a story. However, even this practice got Labour into trouble when an internal Cabinet memo was leaked to *The Guardian* revealing that the Government actually kept a written dossier of journalists, their political leanings, and their reliability and perceived influence (Franklin 29). This dossier was a way for Westminster to remember who was who and thus determine which reporter would take tips and leaks and write the story the Government wanted to see written. Mr. Blair's approach to manipulation of the media is very different from past prime ministers, but equally effective.

Even though Mr. Blair's media focus shifted drastically from that of Mrs. Thatcher's, he is still not above using threats and taking stances on the administration of the BBC, like his predecessor's party. He has continued with the practice of removing journalists who are seen to be critical of Government policy. Though the Prime Minister cannot remove reporters directly, he can make demands on the Board of Governors and so can have them indirectly fired. Thus, reporters who know they are pushing the limits of governmental patience are more likely to play it safe and self-censor to keep their jobs. When the Charter was up for renewal, after Margaret Thatcher and John Major left office, there was even more direct pressure applied to the BBC because of the Peacock Commission, which had threatened to substantially privatize public service broadcasting. The BBC, afraid of being dramatically altered with the renewal in 1996, did everything in its power to change itself to meet with Government expectations, and so instituted many changes that Westminster would have had it been given the chance or powers to directly intervene in administrative matters.

In the mid-to-late 1980s there had been a real chance that the BBC might be substantially privatised and eventually left with a narrow range of services....The BBC's objective was to win renewal of its Charter in 1996 by reforming itself beforehand along lines which the government was likely to approve....At the heart of the reorganisation simultaneously put in place—accompanied by morale-sapping job cuts, one day strikes, external recruitment to senior positions and jarring private sector management-speak—lay 'producer choice'. This was a free-market system of programme-making introduced in 1993, in which producers shopped around for their needs within the BBC and outside. (Seymour-Ure 72)

Though these changes were made more as a reaction to Margaret Thatcher and John Major, Tony Blair did nothing to stop them, most likely, at least according to Labour, because it is not the job of the Government to actively interfere with public service broadcasting. Because of the pressures put onto the BBC by Mrs. Thatcher, and to a lesser degree by Mr. Major, the corporation felt the need to drastically change its composition. These new changes were in addition to the many other times the BBC had been forced to accommodate the Government previously. With the influence of the government clearly visible on public service broadcasting, there are necessarily concerns about the worth and reliability of the reporting that goes into the programs it puts out.

The pressures exerted onto it by Westminster raise questions about the integrity of the BBC's reporting; if it can be led by the government on the sly, with little or no transparency about what is actually going on, can the reporting and the quality of the stories put out by the corporation be trusted? Not only is it an issue of which reporter gets which story and how s/he reports it, but the potential for conflict goes even further. The Government has the power of

patronage over the BBC; it can determine who gets a job on the Board of Directors, and this has, in the past, been a problem for both the Government and the BBC. For example, Greg Dyke was appointed Director General in 1999, after contributing 55,000 pounds to the Labour Party. Another is Gavyn Davies, who was appointed BBC Chairman in 2001. His wife runs Mr. Brown's private office and the two families are very close, not to mention the Davies' history of giving financial support to the party. On the other hand, there is evidence that once someone has been appointed to the BBC, they will forget what they once were, taking the side of their job and not being conflicted by previous interests. Under Mrs. Thatcher, at the time of her battle with the BBC over the Falklands Crisis, Sir Ian Trethowan took the side of the BBC, defending the corporation and its right to guard its reputation for telling the truth, in spite of being new to the job. Though he had been appointed by the same government which was attacking his company at the time, he chose to side with the corporation. Similarly, during the Libyan bombing conflict in 1986, Marmaduke Hussey, who had been newly appointed as the BBC Chairman, wrote a letter refusing to be intimidated by the Government and stood up for the corporation. This may not be surprising, however, as the powers of patronage that the government holds over the BBC are limited. The only people who can be appointed must meet certain criteria.

Between them, Trust members need to be able to reflect the interests of a wide range of different UK communities...and they need to have a range of expertise in: broadcasting and media industries; the financial, legal and corporate aspects of overseeing a large and complex business that spends significant sums of public money; organising public opinion research and consultation; civil society. (BBC Green Paper 2005)

Since all of these criteria must be met, the government cannot simply appoint someone because the Prime Minister likes him/her or the new appointee will be amenable to the Government's stance on issues, rather than maintaining an independent mindset. Government cannot simply stack the BBC Board of Governors in its favor. However, the powers of patronage do still raise questions on just how independent the BBC actually is, especially during the premiership of the Government that is responsible for appointing new members. It is not certain that a new appointee will choose to side with the corporation and not the hand that fed him; it is reliant entirely on the individual. This is what made Trethowan's and Hussey's stances so remarkable; they stood up to the government that gave them their jobs to maintain the liberties of the BBC.

In addition to the powers of patronage, the government was also able, until very recently, to set the level of the licensing fee. Now, however, it is set to be adjusted by inflation, though the government must still approve its budget for any additional funding that it requests. The government also has veto powers over programs and often finds itself drawn into debates over decency and matters of public taste. The BBC governors do have the ability to tell the government quietly that should it veto a program; Westminster could find itself in a larger controversy than it may wish if the matter becomes public. Thus, this power is very informal and again depends greatly on the individuals in power in the corporation. Though it appears not to be on the surface, in reality the BBC is a highly regulated service behind the scenes.

This creates a problem with the quality of BBC programming, as the programs it puts out are held to a higher standard by British citizens. Ofcom, the independent regulator and authority for UK communications industries, outlines six individual characteristics that programs by the BBC must have. They must be of high quality, original, innovative, challenging, engaging, and widely understandable to British citizens. The BBC is also supposed to facilitate conversation

and knowledge around the nation in each region. "...[T]here is a strong association between the BBC and the functioning of democracy in the UK public for reliable, accurate and trustworthy than say the same about ITV, Channel 4 or Five" (BBC Green Paper 2005). Clearly this creates a problem, for while the BBC is far from a puppet or loudspeaker of the government, there is the potential for back-room manipulation which would leave citizens ignorant of the machinations that influence the programs that in turn shape the citizens' understanding of the world around them.

For the most part, it is each individual Government's dedication to the precedents set in 1923 with the Sykes Committee about the independence and responsibility of the BBC that is the corporation's greatest protection. No Government wants the reputation that Blair has earned for New Labour of being a Government of spin, leaks, and underhanded information. Even Mr. Blair, in the 2005 Green Paper, acknowledged the importance of an enlightened BBC. "The BBC has a particular responsibility to help people understand Parliament and the UK political system, including the devolved administrations, so that they can be informed, media literate participants in our democratic system." With the power of New Labour potentially nearing its nadir, Blair is more committed than ever to the importance of coverage of Parliament and keeping the governing bodies transparent and accountable to citizens, especially those of the UK, but also to the population of the rest of the world who use the BBC for news and information about the world. The reputation of the BBC has improved in the past few years. According to Newsknife, a website that ranks the quality of the world's top news websites, the BBC's world edition ranked number two in 2002. The next year, the organization's website ranked number one as a source for world news in 2003 (Outing).

Clearly, however, the current prime minister was not always so committed to keeping the BBC free and its coverage clean and honest. He and Mr. Campbell used the media, including the BBC, to get New Labour's message across, even if this required twisted truths or outright lies. The profiles the prime minister kept on individual journalists and their power and political leanings, and the leaks and the small exclusives he offered as rewards for good behavior, all show a skilful and efficient manipulation of the press. Only once did New Labour demand that the BBC apologize for something, during the case of the WMD and the Hutton Report. Mr. Blair has operated on a system that requires far more slight of hand, and thus is perhaps all the more treacherous. Mrs. Thatcher was in an all out war with the media and the BBC; everyone knew where they stood with her and she left no doubts trailing in her wake. She was never afraid of a battle. Mr. Blair prefers to use stealth and rewards, which when discovered cause more of a furor and disintegration of the public's faith in politicians and the media. Since the citizens thought they were being treated fairly, they felt all the more betrayed when they found out about Mr. Blair and Mr. Campbell's manipulations and machinations to put themselves and the rest of the party consistently in the best light possible. Thus, they centralized the press office and the communications office far more than ever before and paid attention to the men and women reporting on politics and the actions of politicians.

Using completely different methods and eliciting completely different responses from the media, both Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Blair have without a doubt done what they can to censor the BBC. What Mrs. Thatcher did was far more like conventional censorship, as she tried to flat out tell public broadcasters what they could not say and force them to tell the story according to her desires. However, Mr. Blair is just as guilty. During his time at 10 Downing Street, he has never told the BBC that it could not publish something or that they must use one phrase over another,

but the very way in which his Government has presented information to the press constitutes censorship. A prime example was Jo Moore's memo on 11 September, when she said that it was a good day in which to bury unfavorable news. It is not so much what the Government says to the media and the BBC, but how and when they say it. Every press release and piece of information New Labour gives to the media has been engineered and crafted so that it makes the most of every opportunity and makes the Prime Minister and his party look their best.

Obviously, this is nothing new to politicians anywhere, but the current Government does it with such a high degree of skill that it is unprecedented in British history. The new standard of censorship also makes it difficult for reporters to do their job and to keep their footing. As an anonymous journalist explained, "We are working in the context of a more powerful state, one that is brusque, authoritarian and contemptuous of alternative ideas" (qtd. in Franklin 28). Journalists who have been in the business for a long time recognize that things are changing quickly. The state is becoming more centralized and powerful, with the office of the prime minister as the rallying point. That rallying point then shifts and turns into the mouthpiece of the prime minister—the press secretary, who devotes the time to the media that the prime minister cannot. As the office of the prime minister becomes more powerful, with more and more of the party platform coming from the party leader and many bills being written and debated at his urging, so too does the press secretary gain power as the prime minister's premier spokesperson. Bernard Ingham under Mrs. Thatcher started the trend and Alastair Campbell continued it, even going further to centralize it and keep his position a powerful one. Obviously more time and energy is being spent crafting the face of the party to present it to the media, but this is not a recent trend.

Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Blair are only the latest links in the chain of government censorship, both of the BBC and of all of Great Britain. Politicians in democracies come into conflict with the media almost constantly, and more often than not politicians act on those conflicts to try to expend some power in influence. Mrs. Thatcher used force; Mr. Blair chose to coerce the media with promises of presents and threats of punishment. They used these tactics in addition to those that were already in their hands to begin with; the powers of patronage, hints regarding funding or charter renewal, and nudges towards expected or desired angles of stories. Prime ministers in the past three decades have been far more willing to get their hands dirty and manipulate the press and the BBC in ways previously uncommon but not unheard of. This has also created conflict in how BBC reporters do their jobs: "For the BBC, the need to retain the good favor of all Tory and Labour governments...[has] in the view of many had a negative impact on journalistic output in the late 1990s" (McNair 103). Now, rather than telling the story as they and their editors feel is right, writers have to concern themselves with what the government will say and do, or threaten to do. Not that the government has more power than before, but it is more willing to use the power it does have and to use it in different ways. This is shown in the acts of Parliament passed by Mrs. Thatcher and the spin and bureaucracy of Mr. Blair. Both prime ministers were willing to break with past conventions of non-interference to further their parties and their policies.

Even though the British government seems to have entered into a trend where manipulation and censorship of the BBC is on the rise, it has not reached critical levels by any means. The UK is still towards the top of the list for freedom of the press, and it certainly has not slipped as much as the United States has in recent years. The BBC remains one of the most respected news corporations in the world, and as of right now, this is not greatly threatened by

the increasingly interested role of the government. Now that the current government has experienced firsthand what the repercussions of too much intervention in the media can be, it will be more cautious and future governments will learn from its mistakes, as it did from the mistakes of the Conservative governments before it. Though its integrity has been diminished and remains threatened by the government, the bureaucracy within the BBC, in the form of the Board of Governors and the other various monitoring bodies, will keep it independent.

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