

AUGUST 2016

G4S: THE BBC

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**

MOTION:

**“THE TELEVISION
LICENCE FEE
SHOULD BE
ABOLISHED”**

**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

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**DEBATING || BEYOND
MATTERS || BARS**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

A PROJECT BY

Institute of Ideas



Debating Matters Beyond Bars takes our challenging schools debating competition format into HMP Birmingham.

Teams of prisoners will engage each other in debate on a series of contemporary social, political, biomedical and cultural debates, encouraging inmates to think about the world around them, beyond bars.

When Debating Matters was launched in schools in 2003, it was intended as antidote to a belief that young people were unable to argue and discuss some of society's most contentious social and political questions.

Debating Matters Beyond Bars will encourage prisoners to research and argue about the ethical rights and wrongs of the big issues facing society, using reasoned, well evidenced argument which we hope it will be an important addition to Birmingham's educational work.

This project is an exciting opportunity to demonstrate that debate can flourish in unexpected places and that no idea should be beyond critical discussion or contest.

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KEY TERMS

[Public service broadcasting](#)

[Royal Charter & Agreement](#)

INTRODUCTION

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In May 2016, the Royal Charter, which sets the remit and cost of the BBC [Ref: [BBC](#)], was renewed to much fanfare, keeping in place the licence fee, and how the BBC is funded more broadly [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Despite these recent developments, debate surrounding the purpose and necessity of a public service broadcaster in the 21st century still remains. In a changing digital landscape, and amid spending imperatives from government, some question the idea of a mandatory licence fee, and in August 2015 Justice Secretary Michael Gove called for the non-payment of the licence fee to be decriminalised [Ref: [Express](#)], further adding to the pressure on the BBC to justify its current funding arrangements. However, for supporters the BBC represents the best in public service broadcasting, an institution to be proud of, the “envy” of broadcasters around the world [Ref: [Independent](#)], and its current funding method - the annual £145.50 licence fee - should be seen as a form of public good, like “museums, hospitals, arts organisations and universities.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] But Critics point to the fact that the licence fee gives the BBC an unfair advantage over its commercial competitors – with an editorial in The Times bemoaning the fact that: “It competes on blatantly unequal terms with local and online outlets – spending more than £4 billion worth of licence fees with no clear boundaries to its remit” [Ref: [The Times](#)]. The debate polarises opinion, and questions about the nature of public service broadcasting [Ref: [Ofcom](#)], together with issues surrounding a television tax in an age of Netflix, Amazon and other ‘on demand’ providers, mean that the future of the BBC and its place in British society is contested. Is it unfair that the BBC is able to levy its own mandatory tax on all television users? Should it have to compete on the same footing as commercial providers? Or is the licence fee a symbol of a shared, collective public good, distinct from other broadcasters, and independent of government? Should we abolish the television licence fee?

THE TELEVISION LICENCE FEE DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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Inform, educate, or entertain - What are we paying for?

John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, from its inception in 1922 until 1938, felt that public broadcasting had the effect of creating a “culturally unifying ideology” which lifted the nation as a whole [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Implicit to this understanding was that the BBC would serve as a cultural beacon – universal, and accessible to anybody and everybody, from the wealthiest to the poorest. As such, universality is a vital concept for supporters of the licence fee, as Director of Policy at the BBC James Heath argues, “the social and cultural value of the BBC comes from its universal availability, as well as the range and breadth of (its) output.” [Ref: [BBC](#)] He goes on to state that the BBC is unique in its ability to work towards a common good, and claims that, “everyone wins from paying the licence fee because everyone pays it. The licence fee is a form of shared investment, akin to the pooling of health risks for mutual security.” [Ref: [BBC](#)] Furthermore, for some, the most powerful reason why the licence fee is necessary is that: “It ensures that it is the British people who pay for the BBC, and not the government” meaning that BBC retains in a unique position in which it is independent and, crucially, free from political control [Ref: [BBC](#)]. This point of view is challenged by opponents, who cite recent admissions of political bias at the BBC from former high ranking members of staff [Ref: [The Times](#)], as well as suggesting that the BBC no longer knows what or who it is for. The Telegraph, for example, notes that whilst some of the output, such as Radio 4, are truly enriching, “some of the contemporary output fails to be distinctive, and could easily be produced by a commercial organisation without a charge to the viewer”, concluding that: “The BBC needs to go back to the drawing board and think

carefully about what it is for.” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] Furthermore, the recent furore regarding whether the BBC should keep its Good Food website, was indicative to some of the lack of clarity about what it is there for - with Journalist Christina Patterson noting that: “It isn’t there to publish recipes you can find in other places. It isn’t there to produce ‘lifestyle content’, you can find in newspapers or magazines. And it certainly isn’t there to crush commercial rivals with public cash.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]

An unfair advantage?

Critics of the licence fee assert that mandatory funding means the BBC has the ability to unfairly dominate all forms of media. Nigel Dodds, deputy leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland, argues that as a result, “the BBC is simply too powerful. Well over half the UK population consumes its news primarily from the BBC”, and warns that: “This is a dangerous concentration of influence” [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Others suggest that the fact that the BBC doesn’t need to generate profit in the way that commercial organisations do has a negative effect on free speech, and the plurality of the media, because: “Having an overwhelmingly dominant state funded news organisation, is inimical to the genuine and robust diversity of views on which a true democracy depends.” [Ref: [The Times](#)] Responding to these claims, those in favour of the licence fee make the point that having a public broadcaster which doesn’t have to worry about profit and has a steady revenue stream means that: “The BBC has the space to be distinctive” and produce challenging and ground breaking content, which actually results in a more diverse media landscape [Ref: [BBC](#)]. Moreover: “Thanks to the licence fee, (the BBC) produces content of a quality and breadth

THE TELEVISION LICENCE FEE DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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that the commercial sector could never hope to match” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)], and at 40p per household per day we receive 8 network television channels, 10 radio channels as well as online access, which supporters claim is unrivalled value for money [Ref: [BBC](#)]. Opponents though retort that if the BBC was really that confident with its content, it would compete for audiences like other broadcasters, noting that: “The trouble is that nothing is a bargain when you have no choice but to buy it.” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]

What next? The BBC and the digital revolution

Aside from considerations of content and purpose, there are also arguments regarding the practicalities of a licence fee in the digital age. “Now (that) television is no longer our central cultural stage”, argues author Edward Lucas, and new and innovative broadcasting mediums are available - such as original online content via Netflix or Amazon, as well as catch up television (for which you do not need a television licence) - there is no good reason for the licence fee [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Others focus on the cost of the fee, describing it as, “regressive and archaic” [Ref: [The Times](#)] because it is a heavy burden on lower income families, due to the fact that, “it is a flat rate charge” which “takes no account of people’s income or wealth” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Alternative suggestions to fund the BBC have been mooted, such as a flat rate tax on all households whether they use a television or not, as happens in Germany, or a more radical subscription service in which viewers would only pay for the content which they want [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Journalist Allister Heath favours a subscription model in which users would have access to television and online content, and argues that abolishing the licence fee is positive because it would allow the BBC to compete

internationally, eventually seeing it, “reinvent content for the digital age and conquering the world.” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] However, some commentators are critical of these arguments, and claim that whilst it does need modernising, the licence fee ensures that the BBC stays true to its public broadcasting remit, rather than chasing commercial revenue [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. And despite the fact that: “Choice busts out of every new provider – Amazon, Netflix, and many more to come – the BBC at £12 a month dominates the British airwaves” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], an indication of the enduring quality the licence fee provides. So where does the balance lie - is the licence fee the guarantor of independent, quality broadcasting for all? Or is it an unfair, archaic tax, out of step with the new media landscape?

ESSENTIAL READING

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FOR

[I've never had a TV and I'm not missing anything](#)

Edward Lucas *The Times* 18 August 2015

[Ditch the licence fee, and let the BBC compete for its audience](#)

Allister Heath *Telegraph* 15 August 2015

[The BBC should be rescued from itself](#)

Telegraph 17 July 2015

[Tame the gorilla](#)

The Times 26 February 2015

AGAINST

[The BBC is under threat because it challenges market ideology](#)

Polly Toynbee *Guardian* 30 June 2015

[The licence fee remains the best way to fund the BBC](#)

Ben Bradshaw *New Statesman* 4 March 2015

[Why the licence fee is the best way to fund the BBC](#)

James Heath *BBC* 14 July 2014

[The BBC informs, educates and entertains, but in what order?](#)

Charlotte Higgins *Guardian* 1 July 2014

IN DEPTH

[Tomorrow's BBC](#)

Rona Fairhead *Independent* 17 August 2015

[What can the history of the BBC tell us about its future?](#)

Charlotte Higgins *Guardian* 15 April 2014

BACKGROUNDERS

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[Is it really the BBC'S role to publish free recipes for harissa spiced lamb?](#)

Christina Patterson *Guardian* 19 May 2016

[Opportunity knocked](#)

The Times 13 May 2016

[The Guardian view on charter renewal](#)

Guardian 12 May 2016

[Undermining the BBC makes us look like idiots](#)

Clare Foges *The Times* 9 May 2016

[Sure, fund the BBC by subscription \(if you want it to be like Sky that is\)](#)

Neil Midgley *Forbes* 24 July 2015

[The BBC is in need of reform not evisceration](#)

Financial Times 16 July 2015

[BBC: I'm proud of having a broadcaster that's the envy of the world](#)

Chris Bryant *Independent* 16 July 2015

[The battle is beginning over reform of the BBC](#)

Evening Standard 14 July 2015

[The battle for the BBC](#)

Charlotte Higgins *Guardian* 14 July 2015

[Blind faith in the BBC](#)

New Statesman 9 July 2015

[Imperial overreach](#)

The Times 7 July 2015

[Time to rally around the BBC](#)

Guardian 1 July 2015

[Think smart and the BBC can be the new Netflix](#)

Ed Williams *The Times* 17 May 2015

[Never mind bias – the BBC could be obsolete within a generation](#)

Jeremy Warner *Telegraph* 12 May 2015

[The BBC's views and structure are outdated](#)

Telegraph 12 May 2015

[A new Government needs to cut the BBC down to size](#)

Nigel Dodds *The Times* 24 April 2015

[Could the BBC survive without the licence fee?](#)

David Epstein *Telegraph* 2 March 2015

[Why the BBC licence fee should be scrapped](#)

Christina Odone *Telegraph* 26 February 2015

[Why subscription isn't the best way to fund the BBC](#)

James Heath *BBC* 15 July 2014

IN THE NEWS

[BBC charter renewal at a glance](#)

BBC News 12 May 2016

[End of the licence fee in sight as BBC told to branch out](#)

The Times 12 May 2016

[I'm tempted to end BBC says minister](#)

The Times 5 May 2016

[Gove: decriminalise TV licence fee](#)

Express 16 August 2015

[Newspapers 'pay the price for BBC public funding'](#)

The Times 17 July 2015

[BBC to take on cost of £750 million cost of subsidy in over 75's deal](#)

Guardian 6 July 2015

[BBC dogged by liberal bias, former Chief says](#)

The Times 22 June 2015

[John Whittingdale interview: 'I am not going to war with the BBC'](#)

Telegraph 19 June 2015

[Jonathan Dimbleby warns of "Powerful vested interests" attacking BBC licence fee](#)

Guardian 15 June 2015

[Alan Yentob defends the licence fee after Culture Secretary calls it regressive](#)

Guardian 5 June 2015

[No long term future in the licence fee says Committee](#)

BBC News 26 February 2015

[BBC licence fee alternative should be paid by everyone – even if you don't watch TV](#)

Independent 26 February 2015

[Public want licence fee scrapped](#)

Telegraph 4 July 2014

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AUDIO/VISUAL

[MORAL MAZE: The BBC](#)

BBC Radio 4 15 July 2015

[MORAL MAZE: The morality of public service broadcasting](#)

BBC Radio 4 13 October 2012

ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



FOR DEBATERS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether debaters have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far debaters have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent they have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.

**“WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**

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