**Armando Iannucci**

“We are all in this together!” That, according to Armando Iannucci, was the theme of his MacTaggart lecture. It was his rallying cry to a hall packed with TV executives, directors, commissioning editors, producers and - yes - politicians. It was a speech aimed at unifying the UK TV industry behind a single goal: to save the BBC from the politicians. “We have changed international viewing for the better.” said Iannucci, “but sometimes our political partners forget this”.

When Zai Bennett, director of Sky Atlantic, introduced Armando Iannucci he said that the MacTaggart lecture “sets the tone for the TV festival”. In truth the tone had been set long before that moment. The Secretary of State for Culture and Media, John Whittingdale, had done a question and answer question earlier in the afternoon. In almost every other debate on the day, the future of the BBC was an issue bubbling just under the surface. So when audience members asked about the power of Netflix or Amazon, for example, the other unasked question “could their model of subscription work for the BBC?” was always left hanging. In fact the theme of the “BBC under siege” was set even before the TV festival began. Even the the Edinburgh Book festival had become a platform for the spat between Nick Robinson and Alex Salmond over the independence of the BBC during the independence referendum. In fact the power and scope of the BBC has been a central theme to the MacTaggart lecture over the past 30 years: from Janet Street Porter to Rupert Murdoch, from James Murdoch to Mark Thompson. What makes this year different and crucial, is that Britain now has a Conservative majority government (for the first time in 18 years) at the same time as the country is going through the BBC Charter review.

“We do, do we not, feel under attack” Iannucci said. So how did he plan his counter-attack? By satire of course. The man who created *I’m Alan Partridge*, *The Thick of it* and *Veep* is well known for turning his barbed satirical eye on politicians and the media alike. He’s also famous for creating phrases like Malcolm Tucker’s “Omnishambles” which have now entered the political lexicon.

True to form he invented a few more in this MacTaggart speech. So Nigel Farage’s resignation and rapid reinstatement after the election, according to Iannucci, was “bungee politics” and George Osborne was called the “Prime Minister Regent”.

Osborne launched the Government’s first salvo in the recent budget when it required the BBC to fund free TV licences for the over 75s. The BBC says this effectively takes 20% out of it’s operating budget. Earlier in the day Secretary of State John Whittingdale described this as the BBC “being asked to make a contribution” to £12 billion of welfare savings. This happened before the government had embarked on its consultation into the future of the BBC. Armando Iannucci described this as “shutting the stable door after the horse has been bolt-gunned”.

In his session John Whittingdale also raised the issue of the BBC entertainment show *The Voice* which he said had been “contested between the BBC and ITV”. He questioned if the BBC should get into a “bidding war” with another brand and “whether that’s a good use of license fee money”. But ten minutes later, a lone voice from the audience who worked for Wall to Wall (the producer of *The Voice*) put him straight: the BBC didn’t offer more money than ITV for the programme. Wall to Wall chose the BBC “on the grounds of creativity, not price”. That got a round of applause from the audience.

Just before MacTaggart speech, John Whittingdale was outside posing for photographs with members of his new TV advisory panel. This is the group of people the government has appointed to help guide the consultation process over BBC charter renewal. However, the make up of the panel has been criticised for apparently lacking pro-BBC voices. Lord Patten, the former Chairman of the BBC Trust, has called them a “team of assistant grave diggers”. Armando Iannucci turned his ire on them for a different reason. In the government’s panel of experts there was “not a single person who has made an enduring TV show” he said. Instead they were “just people of the executive branch of television”. “Why do politicians not talk to us creatives?” he asked, “is it because we won’t wear a tie?” According to Iannucci, “Politicians have got TV wrong because they peer at it through their prejudices”.

So he’s good at satirical criticisms but does Armando Iannucci actually have any *solutions* for charter renewal and the future of the BBC? He has just spent the last two years making *Veep* for HBO in Baltimore. As he said during his Thursday morning session, one episode of Veep costs the same as a whole series of *The Thick of it*. Iannucci has cracked the US market and is one of British TV’s most successful exports. His solution is to give the BBC the commercial clout outside the UK so it can make money from its content. He, obviously, puts it much more succinctly: “Let’s monetise the Bejesus, Mary and Joseph out of our programmes abroad” he says.

Remember his mantra “We’re all in this together!” Well, Armando Iannucci wants to include politicians in this movement too. John Whittingdale was in the audience when he said that (although the satirical speaker didn’t know it at the time). Iannucci wants politicians to be “partners” and “supporters” of the TV industry; just not “masters”. “If the BBC was a weapons system” he said, “half the cabinet would be on a plane to Saudi Arabia talking them how brilliant it was… British TV needs its champion supporters”.

Armando Iannucci got a rousing standing ovation for his speech. The delegates here seemed to revel in it. But what did John Whittingdale think? The Secretary of State was asked this question later and, apparently, simply replied: “it was funny”.

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