

Alasdair Milne condemns the loose thinking of Price Waterhouse's 'hasty and threadbare' report on the BBC

# Travails with my Auntie...

IF IT'S not McKinsey, it's Peat Marwick McLintock and now Price Waterhouse. The BBC over the years has become an open book for City accountancy firms to pronounce on the "value for money" that broadcasters can offer.

These recurring examinations have served to fuel the Government's continuing neurosis about the licence fee as funding for the BBC; in the same breath, talk of arrangements for the franchise deliveries of ITV, and in the same breath again, fears that the desired deregulation of commercial broadcasting might lead to a collapse of standards have led to the establishment of fatuous bodies like the Broadcasting Standards Council.

Nor can we forget inquiries such as the Annan Committee of the mid-seventies, which covered the whole future of broadcasting, or shorter and more precise exercises like the Peacock Committee of the mid-eighties, engendered by the late Prime Minister's open dislike of the BBC and her wish that it should accept some form of advertising. We broadcasters have been much examined.

Annan spent more than two years on his work. Peacock a year. The time offered to the accountants is measured more sparingly. Six months for Peat Marwick McLintock; six weeks for Price Waterhouse.

And what has the BBC got out of this latest investigation? A skimpy piece, recommending, for example, more sponsor-

ship of programmes. "We believe (they say) that sponsorship of programmes could be worth an additional £50 million to the BBC over the remaining period of the charter." What makes them believe that? If the present charter arrangements, which forbid sponsorship, were altered, why should the BBC automatically benefit from great increases in income when there are new and hungry broadcasting forces in the market? This kind of loose thinking is the mark of a hasty, threadbare inquiry. Again, the BBC is urged by Price Waterhouse to maximise its revenue when it takes over the collection of the licence fee in April this year.

The BBC has wanted the Government to agree to it being involved in the collection of the licence fee for years and I am sure better management will produce better results. But the £11.5 million estimated by Price Waterhouse as increased revenue over a five-year period is not a cockshy.

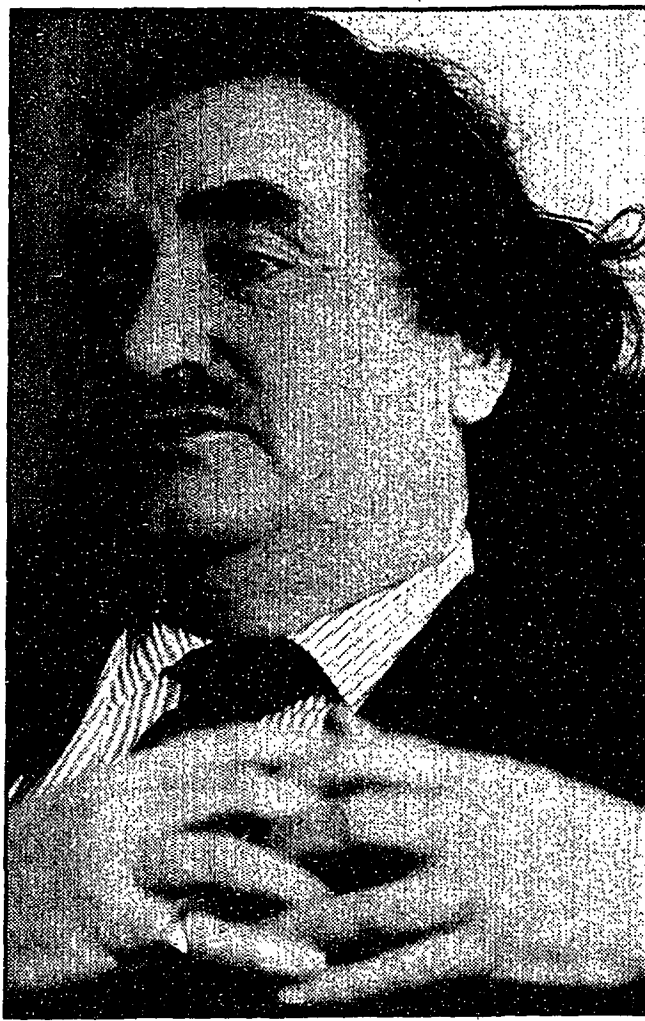
The moment when the report was finally blown apart was when Price Waterhouse recommended that BBC Enterprises (the sales arm of the BBC) should have a greater say in the conception and development of TV and radio programmes to improve the sale of programmes and related products, especially overseas. Salesmen and accountants have never put together a decent programme idea in their lives. Programmes are made by BBC producers for the British people who pay the licence fee;

if they generate revenue and overseas interest, which they have done for many years, so much to the good. But the cart doesn't drive the horse and Price Waterhouse's report should be looked at squintily for that heresy alone.

But, of course, what is at the heart of their hurried work is any government's anxiety about the licence fee. For many years, the BBC was in the unenviable position of being the only body funded by what the Treasury called "a regressive poll tax", even though 80 per cent of people found no difficulty in paying it; now we have another poll tax! People who know nothing about it say the BBC is overstuffed, bloated with bureaucracy, wasting money. But we were derided in the eighties when we said it was the cheapest operation of its size in the world.

In the past few days, Sir John Harvey Jones, that Tamerlane of the commercial world, has voiced his opinion of the BBC: get rid of half the top management, a third of the staff (he was quoted as saying), give up popular entertainment, do the things the BBC does best.

Proper things, well, I have a sneaking regard for his idea of getting rid of a lot of the top management — and some of the governors, too; and I am sure staff reductions will continue, though the BBC will have to struggle to meet the Government's arbitrary prescription that 25 per cent of its programmes should be made by independent producers. The



Harvey Jones: 'Get rid of a third of the staff'

BBC has always depended on a critical mass of talent that cannot so easily be dispersed without potential lasting damage to its programme operations.

On the programme side, though, I can state with authority that Sir John was way wide of the mark. He did a wonderful job as troubleshooter but I have it from a good source that those programmes were the limit of his experience of the BBC.

The BBC is, at its best, a great creative organisation. Of

course, it suffers from bad governors, bad managers, bad accountants and so on. Quote me one organisation that doesn't. What it does have is a track record, matched by nobody in the world, of programme creation at the highest level. And I include in that without qualification or even a nod in the direction of Sir John, achievements in popular comedy and drama going way back beyond the famous successes of BBC television to the golden days of

radio. Competition from the commercial sector has sharpened the BBC's performance over the years; it has shown no signs of submerging it.

So, if the BBC has been judged by most people to have done a decent, and indeed a successful, job over the past 70 years, where do we stand in the argument about the licence fee? We've been through the advertising discussion, though I suspect it may surface again one day. We've had Peacock arguing for subscription to be the future source of funding for the BBC and despatching devices to go with it — which, as far as I can tell, nobody wants for their mainstream television.

This government has made it plain it intends to squeeze the BBC by raising the licence fee at a lower level than the RPI — and Price Waterhouse dutifully recommended that course to Kenneth Baker. The argument will continue inside and outside the BBC: are they doing too much, should they abandon local radio, why did they ever start breakfast television (mea culpa), why don't they give up Radio 1, why don't they do this and that or the other? The answer is this: if you're running a good broadcasting operation with money provided by every member of your audience, you should try to serve the interests and tastes of each of those individuals to the best of your abilities and to their satisfaction.

The author was director general of the BBC between 1982 and 1987

## Research

Peter Fiddick

CHRISTMAS comes but once a year, and when it comes... it lasts a fortnight and everyone celebrates by watching hours of television. According to the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB), we each watched 35 hours 39 minutes in Christmas week. That's nearly five hours a day. So if all you watched was Only Fools and Horses, think how much some couch potato was having to put in to make up the shortfall.

But it's a fair bet that you, or someone near you, devoted some part of Christmas day to watching Only Fools and Horses. The charts below show BARB's Top 30. At first glance, it seems the nation was latched in front of rival soaps EastEnders and Coronation Street. This is true in a sense: BARB's rules allow the lumping together of audiences for the first screening and the weekend repeat. Detailed figures show their best single audiences were The Street's 18.6 million (Friday)

and EastEnders (Thursday), pulling 14.8 million. So the biggest single audience was for Del Boy and chums (17.9 million). It is not this column's role to put a moral gloss on these things. You may interpret the foregoing as demonstrating the enduring attraction of high-quality entertainment or the sagging morale of the nation.

Better move on swiftly to the New Year week, where a swift glance at the charts shows a decline of box-fixation and a reversal of the major channel's fortunes. Average viewing, per head, in the second week was down to 29 hours 49 minutes. And, whereas the BBC had again pulled off its ritual Christmas demonstration of pulling power — with a 44.7 per cent share of our viewing against ITV's 39.3 per cent — the next week's equivalents were 37.8 per cent against 42.7 per cent.

This gap is wider, in ITV's favour, than that channel was achieving last autumn. But then Mr Greg Dyke, ITV's youngest guru, has proclaimed ITV's new schedule will open a five-point gap against the old enemy. The holiday is over. Stay tuned.

### BBC1 (week ending Dec 30)

| Rank | Programme                        | Time  | Million |
|------|----------------------------------|-------|---------|
| 1    | EastEnders (Thurs/Sun)           | 7.30  | 21.7    |
| 2    | Neighbours (Mon)                 | 7.30  | 18.3    |
| 3    | Only Fools and Horses (Xmas Day) | 7.30  | 17.9    |
| 4    | Neighbours (Fri)                 | 7.30  | 17.5    |
| 5    | ET                               | 7.50  | 17.0    |
| 6    | Neighbours (Thurs)               | 7.40  | 17.0    |
| 7    | EastEnders (Tues/Sat)            | 7.45  | 17.0    |
| 8    | Christmas Generation Game        | 8.00  | 16.7    |
| 9    | Only Fools and Horses (Sun)      | 8.00  | 16.0    |
| 10   | Neighbours (Wed)                 | 8.00  | 15.8    |
| 11   | Question of Sport                | 12.30 | 13.2    |
| 12   | Antiques Roadshow                | 12.30 | 13.2    |
| 13   | Last of the Summer Wine Xmas Spl | 13.04 | 13.0    |
| 14   | Back to The Future               | 12.55 | 12.9    |
| 15   | News (Sun)                       | 12.30 | 12.5    |
| 16   | Russ Abbot Xmas Show             | 12.31 | 12.3    |
| 17   | Birds of a Feather               | 12.18 | 12.1    |
| 18   | Light of the Navigator           | 11.52 | 11.8    |
| 19   | Bergerac Special                 | 11.50 | 11.8    |
| 20   | Telly Addicts                    | 11.32 | 11.2    |
| 21   | Bread                            | 11.17 | 11.1    |
| 22   | Challenge Anneka                 | 10.04 | 10.8    |
| 23   | News/Sport/Weather (Sat 21.45)   | 10.58 | 10.8    |
| 24   | 30 Years of Variety Performances | 10.45 | 10.4    |
| 25   | News/Weather (Sun 21.45)         | 10.34 | 10.4    |
| 26   | Nine O'Clock News (Thurs)        | 10.34 | 10.3    |
| 27   | News/Weather (Wed 18.25)         | 8.13  | 8.1     |
| 28   | Top of the Pops Xmas Party       | 10.11 | 8.0     |
| 29   | One Foot in the Xmas Grave       | 10.01 | 7.9     |
| 30   | World's Strongest Man            | 9.59  | 7.8     |

### ITV (week ending Dec 30)

| Rank | Programme                   | Time  | Million |
|------|-----------------------------|-------|---------|
| 1    | Coronation Street (Fri/Sun) | 20.16 | 20.16   |
| 2    | Coronation Street (Tue/Sat) | 17.85 | 17.85   |
| 3    | Coronation Street (Mon/Sat) | 17.34 | 17.34   |
| 4    | Coronation Street (Wed/Sun) | 16.83 | 16.83   |
| 5    | Home and Away (Fri)         | 15.11 | 15.11   |
| 6    | Home and Away (Thurs)       | 13.25 | 13.25   |
| 7    | Best of Blind Date          | 13.06 | 13.06   |
| 8    | Beverly Hills Cop II        | 12.85 | 12.85   |
| 9    | Top of the Pops Xmas Party  | 12.68 | 12.68   |
| 10   | Dirty Dancing               | 12.20 | 12.20   |
| 11   | Home and Away (Mon)         | 11.68 | 11.68   |
| 12   | Home and Away (Wed)         | 11.45 | 11.45   |
| 13   | Fate Confession             | 11.05 | 11.05   |
| 14   | The Spill (Thurs)           | 10.37 | 10.37   |
| 15   | Wish You Were Here          | 10.77 | 10.77   |
| 16   | Emmerdale                   | 10.40 | 10.40   |
| 17   | This Year's Life            | 10.37 | 10.37   |
| 18   | News (Sat, 21.01)           | 10.36 | 10.36   |
| 19   | My Left Foot                | 9.67  | 9.67    |
| 20   | Russell's Mysteries         | 9.67  | 9.67    |
| 21   | Police Academy 2            | 9.36  | 9.36    |
| 22   | Des O'Connor Tonight        | 9.30  | 9.30    |
| 23   | Upper Hand Xmas Special     | 9.13  | 9.13    |
| 24   | Widowmaker                  | 8.59  | 8.59    |
| 25   | Return of the Jedi          | 8.58  | 8.58    |
| 26   | Emmerdale (Tues)            | 8.55  | 8.55    |
| 27   | The Match                   | 7.90  | 7.90    |
| 28   | Wheel of Fortune Special    | 7.86  | 7.86    |
| 29   | Krypton Factor              | 7.50  | 7.50    |

### BBC1 (week ending Jan 6)

| Rank | Programme                      | Time  | Million |
|------|--------------------------------|-------|---------|
| 1    | EastEnders (Thurs/Sun)         | 19.31 | 19.31   |
| 2    | Neighbours (Thurs)             | 18.30 | 18.30   |
| 3    | EastEnders (Tues/Sun)          | 18.27 | 18.27   |
| 4    | Neighbours (Fri)               | 18.16 | 18.16   |
| 5    | Neighbours (Mon)               | 18.24 | 18.24   |
| 6    | Neighbours (Wed)               | 18.14 | 18.14   |
| 7    | Only Fools and Horses          | 18.30 | 18.30   |
| 8    | Antiques Roadshow              | 12.30 | 12.30   |
| 9    | Allo Allo                      | 12.29 | 12.29   |
| 10   | Lovell                         | 11.44 | 11.44   |
| 11   | News/Sport/Weather (Sat 21.03) | 11.22 | 11.22   |
| 12   | Paul Daniels Magic Show        | 10.31 | 10.31   |
| 13   | Bergerac                       | 10.77 | 10.77   |
| 14   | Question of Sport              | 10.74 | 10.74   |
| 15   | Spaceman                       | 9.84  | 9.84    |
| 16   | To the Manor Born              | 9.78  | 9.78    |
| 17   | Six O'Clock News (Wed)         | 9.33  | 9.33    |
| 18   | Clubs Show                     | 8.64  | 8.64    |
| 19   | Challenge Anneka               | 8.96  | 8.96    |
| 20   | Over My Dead Body              | 8.70  | 8.70    |
| 21   | Midnight Caller                | 8.64  | 8.64    |
| 22   | Six O'Clock News (Thurs)       | 8.54  | 8.54    |
| 23   | Neighbours (Tues)              | 8.49  | 8.49    |
| 24   | News/Weather (Tues 22.05)      | 8.28  | 8.28    |
| 25   | Top of the Pops                | 8.13  | 8.13    |
| 26   | Moving Finger                  | 8.22  | 8.22    |
| 27   | Six O'Clock News (Fri)         | 8.22  | 8.22    |
| 28   | News/Weather (Sun 18.25)       | 8.13  | 8.13    |
| 29   | Nine O'Clock News (Wed)        | 7.91  | 7.91    |
| 30   | Match of the Day Live          | 7.28  | 7.28    |

### ITV (week ending Jan 6)

| Rank | Programme                   | Time  | Million |
|------|-----------------------------|-------|---------|
| 1    | Coronation Street (Wed/Sat) | 19.52 | 19.52   |
| 2    | Coronation Street (Fri/Sat) | 17.44 | 17.44   |
| 3    | Coronation Street (Mon/Wed) | 16.22 | 16.22   |
| 4    | You've Been Framed          | 15.22 | 15.22   |
| 5    | Home and Away (Fri)         | 14.66 | 14.66   |
| 6    | Home and Away (Thurs)       | 14.56 | 14.56   |
| 7    | Curse of Mr Bean            | 13.81 | 13.81   |
| 8    | Home and Away (Wed)         | 13.80 | 13.80   |
| 9    | Blind Date                  | 13.78 | 13.78   |
| 10   | Watching                    | 13.49 | 13.49   |
| 11   | Police                      | 13.32 | 13.32   |
| 12   | This Is Your Life           | 13.10 | 13.10   |
| 13   | Des O'Connor Tonight        | 12.34 | 12.34   |
| 14   | The Bill (Thurs)            | 12.10 | 12.10   |
| 15   | Home and Away (Mon)         | 12.07 | 12.07   |
| 16   | News (Sat 10.48)            | 11.58 | 11.58   |
| 17   | P D James Desires           | 11.46 | 11.46   |
| 18   | Surgical Spirit             | 11.26 | 11.26   |
| 19   | Widowmaker                  | 11.05 | 11.05   |
| 20   | Ghostbusters                | 10.85 | 10.85   |
| 21   | The Bill (Tues)             | 10.89 | 10.89   |
| 22   | 250,000 Question            | 10.54 | 10.54   |
| 23   | Emmerdale (Thurs)           | 10.49 | 10.49   |
| 24   | Wish You Were Here          | 10.47 | 10.47   |
| 25   | News (Wed 22.00)            | 10.34 | 10.34   |
| 26   | Six O'Clock News (Fri)      | 10.05 | 10.05   |
| 27   | News/Weather (Tues)         | 9.91  | 9.91    |
| 28   | The Match                   | 9.77  | 9.77    |
| 29   | Wheel of Fortune            | 9.51  | 9.51    |
| 30   | Taggart                     | 9.68  | 9.68    |

## Right of reply

The Guardian deals fairly with readers, says ombudsman Professor Hugh Stephenson

WHEN national newspapers agreed at the end of 1989 to establish a system of readers' representatives, or ombudsmen, no one could hazard a guess as to the number of complaints about the paper's conduct that might come from Guardian readers. In 11 months I received 60 letters. The majority of complaints fell into two categories: failing

to publish a letter from a reader, often characterised as a refusal to grant a "right of reply". The concept of a right of reply applies only to the person or institution criticised by the paper and not to anyone who expresses a contrary opinion. In these cases it is an editorial decision whether or not to open or prolong a particular debate. The other category ques-

tioned taste and style: whether the paper should have used a photograph of Brigitte Nielsen topless on a beach to illustrate an article on implant surgery, or whether using a four-letter word was justified by context. These questions are essentially subjective and the "right" answers will differ over time and between publications. The codes of practice to which the Guardian subscribes are concerned with objective standards of conduct by the paper and its journalists toward its readers and the public in matters such as invasion of privacy, obtaining information by subterfuge and intrusion into grief. It was never envisaged that it should be part of the role of the

readers' representative to "second guess" the judgment of the editor and his colleagues in matters of taste and style and this group of complaints should go to them directly. Only one complaint was, to an extent, upheld by me during the year. It concerned an article by an outside contributor based on a personal case history. Although the name was changed, the details were so explicit the person would have been recognisable to her Guardian-reader friends. I found this to be an unintended but potentially damaging intrusion without permission into that person's life. My conclusion after a year is that the Guardian seeks to deal fairly with readers and the public. No institution is above criticism and, without wishing to foster complacency, if all newspapers observed the practices of the Guardian, the events that led to the Calcutt Committee — the introduction of readers' representatives, the killing of the old Press Council and the establishment of the new Press Complaints Commission — would not have occurred. If you believe something has gone awry in the paper, three courses of action are open to you: on alleged errors of fact or in asking for a right of reply to direct criticism, make your point to the editor by letter or fax marked "reader's complaint". If it is not so marked, it

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