

In a world of lies, we need the BBC more than ever. This week could be our last chance to save it

Polly Toynbee Fri 6 Mar 2026 THE GUARDIAN

The BBC may have more than one and a half years before its charter expires in December 2027, but the public consultation on its renewal closes next week. All those who care about the BBC's future should hurry and send in their response before 10 March. Despite strong public support for the national broadcaster, you can bet battalions of enemies driven by the right will be out in force to undermine it.

The timing turns out to be accidentally apt. As chaos is unleashed across the Middle East, the BBC and its array of experienced correspondents has never been more visibly needed. Nightly reports from Jeremy Bowen, Sarah Smith, Lyse Doucet, Orla Guerin, Clive Myrie and all the rest give the country – and the world – trusted updates, as few others can do. The secretary of state for culture, media and sport, Lisa Nandy, a strong defender of the BBC, called its World Service “the light on the hill” in a world of flexible fictitious facts.

Truth is not the first casualty of the US and Israel's war on Iran, since there was none to start with. The contradictory reasons for Washington launching attacks against Iran mid-negotiation were never honest. The digital infrastructure where so many now access their information is owned and controlled by the world's six richest men, barons gathering clicks not truth. The BBC, however, is where people can turn in the global information war waged by authoritarian states against open democracies.

Mercifully, charter renewal comes at a rare time of Labour in office. The BBC should be able to escape a radical dismantling or even the abolition that the Tories, Reform and the media that backs them push for. The right's peculiar patriotism seeks to demolish British achievements the country is most proud of: our public broadcasting and our NHS. But in lobbying attack after attack for any relatively minor error in its considerable output, it terrorises the BBC, crowing at the resignation of its director general, Tim Davie, over an editing blunder in a Panorama segment that made little difference to the perception of the intent of a Donald Trump speech. That edition of Panorama was never shown in the US – but rightists, planted on the BBC board by the Tory government, stirred up faux indignation, prompting Trump to sue the BBC for \$5bn (£3.7bn).

As part of the charter consultation, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has put out a lengthy and often confusing questionnaire for the public to respond to. Although not intentionally malevolent, it feels as if it has been put together and thoroughly mangled through many a departmental committee, its authors looking fearfully over their shoulders at the BBC's Daily Mail, Murdoch and Telegraph foes. It has produced some contorted questions that are very difficult for pro-BBC supporters to know how to answer. Here are some tricky ones.

“How, if at all, does the amount those working for the BBC are paid impact your view of the BBC?” That reflects repeated attacks on BBC top salaries, when pay is low compared with the industry standard and exceptionally low and insecure in junior ranks; but this question encourages people to suggest pay should be cut.

“Would you be willing to pay for a BBC top-up subscription service focused on premium and entertainment content?” This is a difficult one. Some of us would be willing to volunteer more than the current £3.36 a week for the wealth of BBC programmes on offer, its archive and iPlayer. But topping up voluntarily or raising the licence fee is not what this suggests. This two-tier plan would be a wrecker, breaking the great universal contract that every licence payer gets everything. (...)

The DCMS consultation will be used to help decide the BBC's future. (...) Encouragingly, Nandy's introduction to the consultation is a powerful encomium for the BBC: “Our vision is for a BBC that is trusted, loved and belongs to us all, providing those shared spaces and places that have become so rare and so precious in recent decades.”

The problem is, as ever, the money. The BBC lost 30% of its funding in the Tory years and urgently needs more to keep up, let alone to add good new services and fulfil its potential, as suggested in this paper, by fostering growth within the creative industries. Stirring resentment against the licence fee with crocodile tears for the poor has been the right's best weapon, but the BBC's funding system remains better than anything else anyone has come up with. Shouldn't this be the last time we are pulled into this debate? Let this be the last charter renewal: why dig it up every 10 years?