



## BSAC INTERVIEW SERIES

### INTERVIEW WITH GREG DYKE

The BSAC Interview Series continued on Wednesday 1 July, when Greg Dyke, Chairman, BFI was interviewed by Adam Singer, Chairman, BSAC. This report is an abridged version of the discussion.

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Adam Singer introduced Greg Dyke and commented on the commercial and entrepreneurial successes of his career including his work as a journalist, as Chairman of Pearson Television, and as the Director General of the BBC where he oversaw the introduction of Freeview.

**AS: Before we start on film, there is one question I have to ask you Greg. If you met the 30 year old Greg Dyke today and told him 'you are working on Tory Party Policy', what would he have said?**



**GD:** Chairing a committee on policy in the digitally-related creative industries is an interesting opportunity. You can commit politicians in manifestos in a way that you can never commit them again. This government would never have had a Freedom of Information Act if they hadn't put it into the '97 Manifesto. It seems to me it's the most interesting time to work with politicians.

**AS: What does film actually mean to you? Because when you were appointed as Chairman a lot of people saw you as a major television person but were surprised that you had this burning passion about film.**

**GD:** Well I am a television person. That was my background and that's what I like, and I don't think you can separate the two that easily in Britain; they are interrelated. I think the BFI's moment has come. You've spent many, many years building the biggest, and probably the best film library, and the digital world allows you to do something with it. There are all sorts of issues about rights, but that's the really exciting moment that it's no longer about film buffs, it's now about all sorts of people, and we're living in a world I think where the visual medium will dominate education over the next 50 years.

**AS:** When we were talking about this session last week you came up with what I thought was a very Cartesian description of film and the BFI. You said that there were two ways of looking at film; film as culture and film as industry. And you intimated that the BFI was very much more about a repository of film as culture. Would you like to elaborate?

**GD:** Not just a repository but, if you go to the Science Museum, for example, no one doubts the value of the Science Museum and what it does. Now I think film is the same. I think we are now at a time where we should begin to understand and value the collections in the way that we do at the V&A and at the Science Museum etc. The visual medium is no longer the preserve of the specialists and the people in the film and television industry. It's the preserve of everybody. Much of the mythology about our industry has disappeared. In less than 30 years, it's a phenomenal change.

**AS:** One of the questions that arises from that, is what do we actually mean by film? Is the only definition of film, that art form which has had a theatrical release? It strikes me going forward it's almost impossible to define what a film is, and if it's impossible to define, then how does one defend it, protect it, and preserve it?

**GD:** There is a thing called a cinematic film, there is film as an art form, but there is the visual medium that we all use, and they're very different, and they are separate. The use of this visual medium is going to be enormous for education. When I was at the BBC I announced that the BBC Library should be made available to the public, where it's possible with rights. It's very difficult. But the idea that a kid can draw down BBC material and use it in all sorts of educational ways I think is wonderful, and I think the same applies to the BFI, but there's a massive rights problem that needs to be overcome because the amount you can actually use at the moment is quite limited. Coming back to the original question; I don't know what film is. I'm not a film specialist. There is no doubt that there is a thing which is a movie. Is there going to be a totally different thing that is almost like a movie? Yes, probably I think there is.

**AS:** Yes, but if it's only on DVD is it still a movie?

**GD:** Yes. It's just a delivery mechanism. There are people who think if it's not on 35 it's not a film. I don't believe that at all.

**AS:** So if you can't define film then how does something like the UKFC fit into this? You've got the BFI, you've got the UKFC, why doesn't the BFI fold itself into something like the British Library?

**GD:** Well we take the biggest grant of anybody from the UK Film Council. It's not a very satisfactory relationship. I think the UK Film Council feels that and we feel that and sometime over the next few years someone needs to work out what the relationship should be. Do we merge, do we separate? There are a lot of discussions about that.

**AS:** Well just as an aside, just after you got the Chairmanship at the BFI, when Greg was asked why he went for the BFI job rather than other media-related opportunities, Greg simply responded 'It came up, it was interesting, I've always been interested in libraries'.

**GD:** I think the value of collections is enormous, and I think the BFI has got the best film library in the world. The challenge is how do you make it available?

**AS:** **So how do you do that? How do you make the BFI not be just another one of those mausoleums for outdated arts?**

**GD:** Well you couldn't for many years could you? And suddenly the digital world comes and then the opportunity is there. The only trouble is, to digitalise all this stuff is incredibly expensive, but that's what you've got to do. And then you sort out the rights, and then you make it available to whoever wants to use it.

**AS:** **And so which is more important in your view? Building a new £150 million complex or putting all that money into digitization?**

**GD:** Well hopefully you can do both. The point about the new building is to give the film industry a centre. When I was interviewed for the BFI, I said 'Look, if it's the London Film Institute I'm not really interested'. I'm one of these obsessives about the centralisation of our society. We are one of the most centralised nations in the world, if you compare us to the United States, the media, the film industry, it's all in London, and actually the job of the British Film Institute is to make the stuff available on a wider scale. And that's about having relationships with the universities, it's about having relationships with art centres. There's a lot of stuff that you can show, you have got the rights to show, if it's in something called a BFI building. So you can make BFI buildings, pod things, available in libraries and elsewhere, that allows access to this material.

**AS:** **So what's the dream in terms of access to this material five or ten years out?**

**GD:** You've got to have a common system of categorisation to make things easily accessible. I recently went to see the Yorkshire Film Library and they have some wonderful things. I found a wonderful Tory Party training film from 1949 teaching people how to canvass, just magical. How do you make all this stuff available so that people know where to find it? First of all you've got to categorise it, then you've got to digitalise it, to be fair to this government have put up money to start doing that.

**AS:** **One of our members kindly provided me with this question. We have seen the role of the BFI Imax funded from the public purse expand into one which is showing mainstream Hollywood films, it now directly competes with nearby commercial operators, is this an appropriate use of public money?**

**GD:** Well I think the Imax is a mixture, but in truth if you're running a BFI that has had no increase in its grant for six years and you've had to increase your contributions to your pension by a million pounds a year, you've got to look at ways to make it more commercial. I personally don't find that difficult, others do.

**AS:** **It does strike me there is a real issue there, once essentially publicly subsidised bodies start to get into the competition business.**

**GD:** If you take Batman for instance, I mean the Director of Batman asked for it to be shown at the Imax. Let's not kid ourselves, there is going to be no increase in public spending in the next 10 years, if anything it's going to be hacked to pieces, all public sectors bodies like the BFI are going to have to find their way through, and that will mean making more commercial income. It's inevitable.

**Rupert Gavin, CEO, Odeon & UCI Cinemas:** All commercial cinema operators are extremely exercised by the competition. 52 weeks in the year there is a commercial film being show at the Imax. It doesn't seem to be a public service-focussed operation and it doesn't seem consistent with the BFI's remit. Full sympathy for Greg that he needs to have funding for the organisation, there must be a way to have funding and I'm sure we can resolve that, but that argument, if one is after financial support there are lots of ways to do it.

**AS:** **Greg, I'd really like to get into your views on UK film financing and how that's going forward. And how does something that size make a real difference in terms of scale to the industry? How do you see this changing it? What do you see your role is on that?**

**GD:** Well as John Woodward who runs the Film Council would say, the worst thing that happened to the Film Council was the purpose that it was given to 'build a sustainable film industry'. The truth is you can't build a sustainable film industry. I think the Film Council has done pretty well in bringing film and manufacturing into Britain, but I think the idea that, just by pump priming you're going to get a film industry and then it will be self-sustaining, was never real and I don't think anyone believes it now.

**AS:** **And do you see it really having a long term future? I mean don't you think we have too many of these what could be described as 'film quangos'? Isn't this essentially what the Tories would be looking for?**

**GD:** Well I've always thought that politicians in opposition always say they're going to kill quangos and governments always set up more. I think the Film Council has a role and I think the Tories recognise that role.

**AS:** **Why is there this lack of recognition of the importance of the BFI archive do you think? If it was a major repository of books, illuminated manuscripts they'd be safe, but not film.**

**GD:** Well there's still snobbery about it. However the government accepted that the money should be spent, it's just the agony of getting the money out of the Treasury for the archive. The perception of film will change dramatically over the next 20, 30 years. The visual image is everyday life and therefore there will be a generation of politicians coming through who recognise what can be done and how it can be used. But we should understand there's still incredibly conservative elements in our society who somehow think that the way it was done when they were at school is the way it should be done forever.

**AS:** **Now, can I throw this open to questions. I stole one of Phil Clapp's questions earlier. Do you have a follow up, Phil?**

**Phil Clapp, Chief Executive, Cinema Exhibitors Association: You said the purpose of the National Film Centre is to give the film industry a centre. I just wondered if you could expand on how you see that.**

**GD:** Well I mean a cultural centre. I agree about the difference between an industry and a cultural pursuit, and I think they would be better separated personally. I think the film industry and the television industry are of an age that requires proper academic study. In places of higher education, there is an explosion in the study of visual media. But I do think there's a distinction between promoting and helping an industry and the study.

**PC:** And just a follow up question which occurred as you were talking about the tortuous process of getting money out of government. I declare an interest as a former DCMS official. You've clearly, both in your current guise and in previous broadcasting guises dealt with the Culture Department. If you had a blank piece of paper and you were devising to some extent the geography of government would you have a separate Culture Department? Or would you deal with an industry?

**GD:** I've got no problem with the Culture Department. I think the current BBC system of governance is a disaster, and I think we have complicated the process of approval of something to such an extent that it's agonising for the people involved. We have over complicated the process of spending public money instead of just trusting people to get on with it.

**AS:** There are two issues for archive; the hard and fast technology of actually preserving the films and making sure people can access this content which involves making decisions about what should be kept and made available.

**GD:** Preservation must be first. Bob Dylan's first ever appearance on film was in a BBC play and the tape was wiped, as the tape was seen as more valuable than the content at the time.

**Greg Bensberg, Principal Adviser, Broadcasting, Ofcom: The whole issue of archiving, to my mind, is becoming critical, for television as much as for film. How do you preserve all these services? And it seems to me that there's no credible technology which does that any more. Film, despite it's weaknesses, is remarkably resistant, whereas most of the stuff produced nowadays electronically for film and for broadcast is very ephemeral. It's stored electronically and put the switch and it's gone. Do you have a view for the BFI role on that?**

**GD:** Well there's an enormous amount of it, you can't preserve it all now. Who is going to pay for it? Who judges what is worth saving and what is not? Who knew when you didn't preserve Bob Dylan in the play, because nobody had ever heard of Bob Dylan, that it would become so valuable.

**AS:** So how would you describe your vision for the BFI? Have you gone to the BFI because the BFI wanted the skills of your ability to make those arguments, your cogency? Or have you gone to the BFI because you have a real passion for, and a vision, for film?

**GD:** I have a real passion about libraries. I've got a passion about preservation of culture. I was fascinated by the opportunity that the digital world presents to people with visual libraries.

**AS: Do you have a view about the licence fee to be applied to fixed wire networks as outlined in Digital Britain?**

**GD:** The people who are most likely to use the broadband infrastructure are the people who are less likely to have fixed line telephones. Why is my mum, who has got a fixed line telephone, going to be charged more to fund a broadband system that she will never use?

**AS: And didn't you think that trying to attempt to cover such a broad range in Stephen Carter's words 'of both plumbing and poets' is actually too much for one report? I mean how are you going to avoid that in your work for the Conservatives?**

**GD:** I've always believed that it is important to separate yourself from self-interest, the interest for your own company, and listen to other people. I don't think we will be anywhere near as comprehensive as the Digital Britain Report.

**AS: And how are you going to deal with the problems of presenting a report like this, it's hard to put some of the major issues in such a way that one's political masters wish to hear. If you're not radical enough then you're not going to make any change. On the other hand you can be too radical to be heard, which is essentially what happened to David Elstein's report, which I thought was excellent.**

**GD:** I think you've got to look at things that are sellable and doable. Piracy is a massive issue. We'll be looking at that. If we stick high speed broadband into every home without sorting out piracy our industry is just dead and buried, so piracy has got to be settled.

**AS: To deal with the piracy issue means a certain set of compromises; it means dealing with things like the fair use issue. Digital Britain didn't really address the rights issues, meaning that a lot of the stuff they're talking about in terms of going forward on the poet side is built on sand because they haven't done the hard work on rights, which takes longer than a year. You're talking about 100 years of institution.**

**Patrick Barwise: In principle, Digital Britain reflects the Industry Department which represents infrastructure, and the Culture Department which represents UK content, in practice, in my opinion it is completely alienated. Would it be fair to say that the scale and lobbying power of the telecoms companies, the technology companies and the Industry Department has meant that the priorities have been skewed towards infrastructure and against UK content?**

**GD:** We have certainly separated them in our discussions and it seems to be particularly in television there is going to be a real problem about funding content, and we have to find other ways of funding it. One of the problems that came about with Freeview was that everybody went back to advertiser-funded revenues, which was fine until you got the current train crash, which is where you saw structural change coming that way and hitting an advertising recession. It is sad that there was a massive new source of income through pay television and it went into sport, and that's not a criticism of Sky, they have a very effective business model, but we didn't get an HBO or a Showtime, spending significant sums on new drama in particular.

**AS:** We have this continual obsession with preservation and turning the whole of British broadcasting into some form of glorified National Trust that you always keep that going, and you don't allow any of these new things to come forward. Are you going to fall into that trap? Or are you going to say these things should die, and new things should flourish?

**GD:** I've always had a different view. One of the things we did in this society is put a vast amount of money into a television system as opposed to a film system. A television system which by and large reflected our society and culture, and I think that's to enormous advantage, and I wouldn't like to see that thrown away without understanding what it meant. And therefore I personally think it's worth keeping some of this stuff going, even if you have to subsidise it for a period of time to understand what the new world is bringing us.

**Greg Bensberg:** Just picking up Greg on what you said about HBO and why we haven't got one in the UK, is that in part due to Public Service Broadcasting? America hasn't got anywhere near the strength and depth we have and is that basically a market replacement for that or is there a genuine difference between the two markets?

**GD:** No, Sky captured the pay market and spent an awful lot of money on football and found a business model that worked. It's not an open pay market in this country in the way it is in the States. When HBO recognised that in a non-advertiser funded market if you could get everybody to talk about HBO, even if they didn't watch it, they'd pay for it, and that's what's happened. A vast amount of money is now being spent on certain drama projects in America that are not advertiser funded for the cable channels. We haven't got that, and I don't think it's because the BBC does it or ITV does it. I think it's because we actually have a different model of pay television.

**Rupert Gavin:** In the current plurality of media options do you believe plurality in public service is now either essential or even affordable?

**GD:** I think it would be a mistake if the BBC was the only public service broadcaster, but I also think it would be a mistake to take chunks of money off the BBC to allow others to do it.

**AS:** Do you see YouTube as a public service broadcaster?

**GD:** Yes but the sort of public service I'm interested in offers more than that. I think the decline of regional news on television, radio and newspapers is bad for democracy. All politicians promise devolution in opposition and they don't do it when they're in power. I think competition policy is stuck 30 years ago, it's got to be changed, but whether anyone can do it quickly enough to stop the decline I have no idea.

**Simon Milner, Director for Media & Convergence, BT:** I remember when we were at the BBC together you used to say that one of the problems with the BBC was it was too obsessed by Westminster and Westminster politics. I now feel that this whole industry and music, publishing and local newspapers are all obsessed by Westminster because that's where they think the solution comes, and to some extent your role on this group is fermenting that. Don't you think there's a general problem that everybody thinks the government is going to sort out their industrial problems?

**GD:** Yes I do. In the first MacTaggart Lecture I gave, I said the more we want out of government the more our independence in a democratic society is undermined. And everybody now wants something out of government. Actually I look back and the BBC was less obsessed than most. ITV spent a decade trying to get regulatory relief. There is a problem with an obsession about getting something from government. Google didn't do that.

**AS:** **And what would you do if you had ITV?**

**GD:** Well if one day you wake up on a fairly fixed cost business and you've lost 15% - 20% of your revenue, you are in deep problems. It depends what you think happens in the recession. How quickly will advertising revenue recover? Will it recover? But ITV still spends twice as much as any other commercial channel in Europe on original production and it can't afford it, the world has changed.

**AS:** **What do you think of the BBC Trust?**

**GD:** For years, governance of the BBC has dominated debate within the organisation. I came increasingly to the belief that you needed an outside regulator, which was completely against the views of the BBC Board of Governors when I was there. The ideal balance would be a Board that fights for the BBC and a regulator that does the opposite. Well the report last time suggested OfBBC which I thought was quite a good idea. This system won't survive. I suspect you will end up with a system whereby the regulation will be done by Ofcom, but who knows?

We have over-regulated the BBC. The great thing about the BBC over decades is it's ability to do good things, big things, new things. You couldn't do Freeview today at the BBC in the timescale it was done in. I think the BBC website is one of the few European sites in the top 20 European sites. All the rest are American. Now, do we really think that someone from the commercial sector would have done that? ITV could have done that. Channel Four could have done that. But none of them did.

**AS:** **Isn't part of the issue for your report about 'Creative Britain'? Most of the major needle-moving acts that are part of the web have all come from the States. Hardly a single major needle-moving act has come out of the UK, and it looks as if we are doomed merely to provide the coal for the engines of others.**

**GD:** That's not only a British phenomenon, that's a world-wide phenomenon. We are still players in the creative industry, in the production industry. When you go and talk to the HBO guys, who did the HBO guys think they were imitating? The BBC. Who is their closest relationship with? The BBC.

**Michael Comish, CEO, Blinkbox:** **We actually have some industry leading companies on the internet; they happen to be gambling companies, like Betfair and Party Gaming. The BBC is a top 20 site but they've also spent probably 50 to 100 times more than anyone else could afford. When I was running Channel Four New Media the BBC had 20 times our budget so there was a capital issue involved as well. I think as we stray into new media it gets quite complex.**

**GD:** It's an interesting question. Do you think the BBC shouldn't have done that?

**MC:** I think they should have, I just think they could have done it with a lot less money.

**GD:** Looking back, when we created Freeview, we should have made a pay slot available in every box. However, we didn't want people to go to pay television because it was in the interests of the BBC that they didn't. That's where some sort of regulation would have been useful, because although it was best for the BBC, I'm not sure it was best for British society. Instead, we left the pay market completely in the hands of Sky, which I don't think is good for the production industry in the long term.

**Simon Albury, Chief Executive, Royal Television Society: I was there for your first speech as Director General of the BBC, it was a fantastic passionate speech on diversity. I wondered how you'd rate your achievements on diversity and whether you've thrown in the towel on diversity as many organisations have.**

**GD:** No, it's not time to give up. I was heavily criticised when I said I thought the BBC was hideously white. I was glad I said it, because it made us take it very seriously. We introduced all sorts of strict tests. We just about hit the targets we set, but it was agony to get there. I don't want this to be about quotas, but if the BBC doesn't understand what's happening in this society we're going to be in real trouble. I still think this is a terribly white industry, and it's ridiculous given the nature of who we're trying to sell to, the nature of who we're making programmes for. I do feel a bit depressed by it. Have I given up? No, but the world out there is changing much faster than the media industries understand.

Fiona Clarke-Hackston, Director of BSAC concluded the evening by thanking Greg for his frank and open remarks and Adam Singer for conducting the interview.

The next BSAC Interview will be held on Wednesday 30 September when Lee Bartlett, MD Global Content, ITV will be interviewed.