

The BBC: a three letter initialization that will undoubtedly start a debate on the doorstep, around the dinner table or down the pub, but one that is not necessarily drawn along party political lines.

Whether the BBC has a future is a recurring theme but one that as we hurtle towards the renewal of its Royal Charter, seems more real than it was 10 years ago. But why? Trust in the BBC has taken a dip following a few high profile scandals but that is not the main reason why this Charter Renewal is perhaps more interesting than before. The real debate surrounds the changing environment that we as consumers view television with many people caught up in their busy work and family lifestyles, rarely watching scheduled programmes live but on catch-up. Also, the younger generation in particular use smart-mobile technology to watch television so what, therefore, is the purpose and value of the BBC licence fee?

This is the theme of the primary inquiry of the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which I am a member and this week we have travelled to Holland, Germany and Denmark to look at the funding and governance of their public service broadcasters. One interesting message came across loud and clear in Holland - think very carefully before scrapping the licence fee. The Dutch did and put income tax up to fund the broadcasters. Subsequent wider economic problems have meant, and despite government assurances, the broadcast budgets have been dramatically slashed leading to allegations of political interference.

One other message we got is that the BBC is a phenomenal force within a global and highly competitive industry. They set the benchmark for good quality programming and anyone who spends time abroad will appreciate the gap in what the UK broadcasts to foreign providers.

The future of the BBC is a complex issue and our inquiry is set to run for a few months yet before a report is sent to Ministers. Whether you love it or loathe it, you'd probably miss it, especially if you've seen the alternative, and the political influence and control that may bring.