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COMMENT

A canny investment

THE fourth Ashes Test opened to capacity crowds and brilliant sunshine at Chester-le-Street yesterday.

More than 17,000 fans packed into the Durham Emirates International Cricket Ground, on the Riverside, to watch as England struggled to 239-9 against the Australians. Millions more watched the match on television.

Earlier this year, there were raised eyebrows when Durham Cricket Club asked for £6m in public funding to help secure its future.

The club received loans from Durham County Council and the North-East Local Enterprise Partnership shortly before its biggest ever event.

Councillors faced criticism for agreeing to a £2.8m loan even as they put the finishing touches to swingeing public service cutbacks elsewhere.

Without wishing to belittle the impact of council cuts, yesterday's Test proved, once more, that nothing lifts a region's spirits more effectively than top class sport.

The benefits to County Durham provided by an influx of visitors and international television coverage far outweigh the difficult decision to help the club out.

Top class cricket at the Riverside is already worth £20m a year to the regional economy. Anything that helps make international cricket a permanent fixture is a wise investment.

As for the Test, England fans should take heart from past history. Chester-le-Street has hosted four Tests since 2003 – and all of them have resulted in convincing England victories.

Whatdoyouthink?

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After a torrid year of scandals for the BBC, its critics have called for changes to the way it is funded. Journalist and Teesside University lecturer **Neil Macfarlane** asks if it's time to scrap the licence fee

Is BBC worth it?



TRIUMPHS AND TRIBULATIONS: Successes such as the Olympic coverage and Doctor Who have been tempered by scandals such as the shocking revelations about Jimmy Savile and the subsequent costly inquiries

IF subscription to the BBC became optional, would you pay it? Could you live without the Six O'Clock News, Match of the Day or EastEnders? So engrained in the national character is the corporation that it has earned the nickname Aunty.

But there are those who no longer see it as a friendly favourite relative – but rather a wasteful gravy train with huge financial advantage over its rivals because of a law which decrees that every household in the country must give it £145.50 a year.

There have been great successes for the Beeb recently, with the coverage of last year's Olympics, for example, winning near-universal acclaim. But there has been no shortage of turmoil. The awful revelations of sexual abuse to emerge after Jimmy Savile's death led to further disgrace with the resignation of director general George Entwistle, and a series of subsequent journalistic howlers by its flagship news programme Newsnight, which claimed the jobs of editor Peter Rippon and head of news Helen Boaden. The latter two were shuffled into new posts at the top of the BBC soon after.

Three internal inquiries into the Savile case have cost £5m. Entwistle, who admitted he wasn't up to the job and quit after only three weeks, was awarded a £450,000 pay-off. And he wasn't the only one to leave with a hefty pay packet – another 149 executives won golden goodbyes worth more than £25m in total over the past three years. Lord Patten, the chairman of the BBC Trust, said the scale of the payments was a matter of "shock and dismay" for him.

He is not alone. In this age of austerity, in which funding for everything from bin collections to social workers and soldiers is being slashed relentlessly, many are beginning to question if it is right that Great Britain plc con-

tinues to pick up the tab for a media conglomerate. Among them is Culture Secretary Maria Miller, who warned the BBC: "Every publicly-funded organisation must be able to justify every penny of taxpayers' money they spend, and even more so in these tough economic times."

Meanwhile, the BBC recently abandoned plans for a new digital production system earlier this year – after spending £100m. There were apologies, but is that enough?

THERE is evidence that the BBC's state-backing gives it an unfair advantage over its competitors.

Last year, Britain's oldest children's comic The Dandy disappeared from our news stands after sales took a dive in a market now dominated by the likes of In The Night Garden and Cbeebies Weekly – both printed by the BBC.

These magazines are effectively promoted to the target audience every night on television and always have the backing of cash from the licence fee pot. Desperate Dan and chums weren't so lucky, and you can now find them online only.

Travel guide publisher Lonely Planet, another print institution, made huge cuts last month after its new owner took charge and decided that the costs met by the previous owner were unsustainable – that previous owner being the BBC. You could hear the sighs of relief from rival travel publishers such as Rough Guide when that deal went through.

On a local scale, rows between papers and their nearest BBC branch are common. One broke out on Twitter recently after a Kentish Gazette reporter noticed his exclusive story from that morning's paper playing out on the teatime news without so much as a mention of the source.

Hardly fair, especially in a climate where papers are struggling with falling circulation and

a drop in advertising revenue – two factors the BBC need never worry about. Tim Luckhurst, Professor of Journalism at the University of Kent, waded in, tweeting: "Would it hurt the BBC to credit every newspaper from which they borrow a good story? Not remotely. Would it promote good journalism? Yes."

THE BBC funding model seems safe for the time-being, but the corporation's guardians should be wary.

While the Coalition Government led by David Cameron is determined to slash public spending in virtually every area, it hasn't been as tough on the BBC as many within the Conservative party – such as former Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt – would have liked.

But given the public's lack of enthusiasm for any of the three main parties, there is a not too far-fetched scenario that might result in game-changing policies in the future.

One person who may end up having a key role had this to say in a column in the Daily Telegraph last year: "The BBC is unlike any other media organisation in the free world, in that it levies billions from British households whether they want to watch it or not."

"The Beeb continues to destroy the business case of its private sector rivals with taxpayer-funded websites and electronic media of all kinds. None of this might matter, if we were not going through a crucial and difficult economic period."

These are the words of Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London. He is tipped by many to lead his party one day. With a couple of election missteps here and there by Cameron, Miliband and Clegg, it is not entirely improbable that Boris might one day find his way to 10 Downing Street.

Might the BBC find itself in for a less comfortable ride under a future Prime Minister Johnson?