The senior scribes of Remain are unhappy with the BBC’s coverage of Brexit. The corporation stands accused, variously, of too little curiosity about the smelly financial underpinnings of the Leave campaign, of ignoring Russian interference, of lazy interviews with the leaders of Tribe Brexit, of insularity (who cares what the bloody foreigners think?) and of too little interest in hard facts (see Alan Rusbridger’s column in these pages last week).

The BBC should be flattered. The Brexit stakes are getting higher and the shouting is getting louder. As politics and journalism become more rancid, the BBC matters more. We own it and we expect its coverage at the very least to provide the running water of the debate, leaving the politicians and the editorials and op-eds in the partisan press to throw in the high-grade stuff – “treachery”, “enemies of the people”, “betrayal” and such like.

The tone and tenor of the recent Remain fusillade against the BBC is characterised by an anxious sorrow – “it’s a great institution gone wrong” – rather than the more abrasive heckling of traditional BBC bashers, who see it as an establishment toady or, alternatively, as a bunch of metropolitan pinkos shorn of patriotism and lacking any empathy with “ordinary Britons”.

Some of the Remain pain dates back to the lead-up to the referendum. The BBC is thought by a great many, not least some around Messrs Cameron and Osborne, to have lost its nerve when faced with the running water of the debate, leaving the politicians and the editorials and op-eds in the partisan press to throw in the high-grade stuff – “treachery”, “enemies of the people”, “betrayal” and such like.

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The answer, even before the rebate of around £80m a week is taken into account, is less than 2 per cent of public expenditure around £80m a week is taken into account, when the question is: how much money? The BBC has people who are trying to get access to fizz-loving Britons). Some of the vox pop journalism is, even by the low standards of this sort of stuff, cringe-making. Going to Mansfield or Ongar to pick up Brexiteer voter rage in five-second chunks is hopeless. A (doubtless metropolitan) BBC reporter throws these together and you end up with unchallenged banality along the lines of “It’s simple” or “What’s the bloody problem?”. It would be impolite or elitist for the reporter to interject. The BBC should go to Mansfield, but it should speak to people for longer, and broadcast proper journalism even in news bulletins where compression is vital.

As for the stats, the problem was not that the £350m nonsense went unchallenged but that there was, and is, almost no attempt to compare the sum with public spending as a whole or even GDP. So politicians parrot that we are “taking back control of our money” as part of the elevator pitch for Brexit, when the question is: how much money? The answer, even before the rebate of around £80m a week is taken into account, is less than 2 per cent of public expenditure and much less than 1 per cent of GDP.

The BBC has people who are trying to get this stuff right, but there is work to be done. Over to the director general. Mark Damazer is master of St Peter’s College, Oxford and a former controller of BBC Radio 4.

Going to Ongar to pick up five-second chunks of voter rage is hopeless.

Mark Damazer Off the Air

Brexit is not the same as climate change deniers, so the BBC cannot shut out their voices.

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