

Kings calling

Raymond Snoddy explains why Kings College has witnessed so many more memorable political fireworks and media dramas than other television gatherings

Cambridge has always had that certain cachet that Edinburgh never quite manages to match. Edinburgh is great for enabling the creatives of the television industry to let off steam, but not so many of the high-ups turn up, except to give the flagship MacTaggart lecture, often at a time when they are looking for a new peak of the broadcasting industry to climb.

Cambridge's biennial schedule also helps to add to the weight of the occasion – giving the tectonic plates of broadcasting enough time to move noticeably to provide another scare about what the future might hold.

Every two years, like clockwork, the end of broadcasting as we know it is confidently predicted by the Cassandras of the industry, aided and abetted by American new-media experts and their entourages of number crunchers.

While the actual changes have been dramatic enough, the death of television as we know it has proved rather exaggerated – at least so far.

But the factor that gives Cambridge its ultimate cutting edge over other talking shops is the well-established tradition that the senior politician in charge of broadcasting – in recent year the secretary of state at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport – will turn up and, often as not, tell the industry what its political future is going to be.

These futures have come and gone with the swings of ideology, fashion and technical innovation.

Douglas Hurd, then Margaret Thatcher's home secretary, announced a mad-cap scheme to requisition some of the BBC's night-time hours for commercial video providers; the scheme came to nothing. Chris Smith, New Labour's first media minister, announced a cautious go-ahead for analogue switch-off, something that, to date, has turned out to be an unexpectedly smooth success.



Then there was Tessa Jowell. She got off to a uncertain start at Cambridge on the day she had been given the task of repatriating British bodies from the Twin Towers attack, if any could be found. Jowell lived down her initial Cambridge performance to go on to become one of the most successful politicians in charge of the broadcasting brief.

This year has all the elements of Cambridge drama at its very best. A new secretary of state in the shape of erstwhile BBC foreign correspondent Ben Bradshaw will be centre

stage after the ministerial revolving door swept Andy Burnham off to Health.

Even better for those in search of verbal fireworks, Bradshaw is a new secretary of state who has already put his foot in it by appearing to pre-judge the tricky licence fee "top-slicing" issue before a "consultation" had barely got under way.

Moreover, Bradshaw then upped the ante by traducing BBC director-general Mark Thompson for daring to want to protect the integrity of the BBC's funding mechanism.

The timing seems just right for an announcement on "top-slicing" – or at the very least, the heaviest of hints that the BBC has lost the battle.

All of which sets things up very nicely for Conservative Culture hopeful Jeremy Hunt to address Cambridge on the issue in two years' time come 2011.

Some favourite personal moments from past Cambridges? The forecasts of doom all seem to merge into one other. But there was the hugely memorable moment when, in an inspired piece of choreography, all five chief executives of Channel 4 – Jeremy Isaacs, Michael Grade, Michael Jackson, Mark Thompson and Andy Duncan – were brought together on a single stage.

They were far too polite to be critical of each other and Jeremy Isaacs refrained from revealing more than a fraction of what he really feels about *Big Brother*. It was a collector's item having them all there together sharing a conversation.

Cambridge is also great for journalists, who have traditionally hob-nobbed with the industry's leaders in the bar of King's College until the early hours. It was there that John Birt's up-coming peerage oozed out at around 1:30am – long before Birt himself knew he was going to get it.

For all its merits Edinburgh is never quite like that. ■