

FACING OPPOSITION

By September, everyone in British politics and most people in broadcasting were angry and unhappy for one reason or another related to Suez. Opposition to outright military action - certainly without UN approval, which was far from being forthcoming - had grown until it was closer to a consensus than Eden's position - in Parliament at least. For his part, the Prime Minister was more committed than ever to doing *something*, probably involving the armed forces. Hugh Gaitskell sensed an opportunity and started actively needling Eden on the subject, actively describing his continual rhetoric as "provocative" and ultimately starting a vote to censure the Government - which, with the help of the Liberals, ultimately passed.

With his position publicly validated in Parliament, and now at the most visible he'd been since succeeding Atlee, Gaitskell contacted the BBC about potentially delivering a ministerial statement of his own. This was particularly important because, while politicians and commentators were leaning towards a pacifist stance, the majority of the Great British Public, jingoistic and partial as ever, were with Eden.

Gaitskell had been given a chance to make such a broadcast back in August as a reply to Eden's, or to Selwyn Lloyd's a week later, and politely declined, waiting for the winds to start blowing in his direction before sticking his neck out. Now they were, but convincing the BBC to agree to let him speak was going to be a lot trickier if the speech was to come entirely off his own bat, as it were, rather than as a point-counterpoint response to an earlier one by the Government.

Not just for Gaitskell, either; the BBC were equally aware of where they stood with the Prime Minister. Blithely agreeing to something like this would be like poking a lion in the eye, having already spent several hours kicking sand in its face. Eden made it perfectly clear that he believed the BBC was supposed to support the British Government and its policies, particularly in times of national emergency like this.

By sheer coincidence - or at least there's no compelling reason to believe it wasn't - early September 1956 also saw the Public Accounts Committee publish one of its periodic reports. This one just happened to claim that the BBC had and were making far too much money for their "immediate needs", especially since there was ITV now to take some of the pressure off. With 12.5% of the total income from the licence fee already going straight to the Treasury, the PAC made the argument that the money the Corporation made was effectively an annual grant from Parliament, and from there advocated even closer and tighter Government control over the pursestrings.

Ian Jacob, as one might expect, was not impressed. What the PAC were suggesting was similar to Churchill's old ambition from the days of the Company and the General Strike, to have the Government absorb the BBC altogether and turn it into a straightforward state broadcaster - only by stealth, with built-in plausible deniability. The Corporation would still look independent, but in practice it would be beholden to the Treasury and, therefore, the Government. It would be a Government department in all but name. Not for the first or the last time, the BBC's independence was under threat from a hostile Government.

So they had that hanging over their heads at the next meeting of the Board of Governors. Gaitskell's proposed broadcast came up, naturally, and they made sure to tread very carefully around it. It was initially referred to as an attempt by Gaitskell to take up the BBC's original, now month-old offer of a response to Eden and/or Lloyd, rather than a new request off his own bat. Ian Jacob then immediately shot that notion down; the international situation had changed multiple times in the intervening month, with all the summits and Parliament being recalled. So Gaitskell's broadcast couldn't be considered a response; it had to be independent. However, if they did allow him a platform of his own, it would rather irritate the Prime Minister - whom they'd already driven into a rage, and who now had the Public Accounts Committee's recommendations as a pretext to quietly destroy their independence.