

GLASS HOUSES (III)

They needn't have worried overmuch, however. It had been clear from close to the start that the Pilkington Committee and the Government that had commissioned them were not exactly ideological kinsmen. When it was announced in February 1962 that the Report was delayed for a couple of months, the Government took the opportunity to convene a taskforce, under Rab Butler, to prepare a response in advance, fully aware that they weren't going to agree with most of it.

As a result, the inevitable White Paper came out only a week later, and was already half-finished before the Report dropped. Unsurprisingly it wasn't exactly overflowing with detail, and was described as "interim", an early sketch of the Government's future plans for broadcasting in the light of the recommendations of the Pilkington Commission. Little, if anything, was committed to at this stage; it served mostly to signal the Government's attitude to the Commission and its Report.

The second, more substantial White Paper followed in December. It seemed most excited about the prospect of big-screen outdoor television broadcasting of special events, something the Report had explicitly argued against only to be completely ignored by the Government. By contrast, the plans for local radio were essentially acknowledged as being "very nice and a good idea and all but in all honesty we don't really care" - the last part going unspoken, of course.

The Report's recommendations for ITV - essentially to restructure it from the ground up with the ITA as central power rather than mere regulatory body - were completely dismissed beyond a vague admonishment to the Authority and an advisory note to the effect that they maybe should be a bit more proactive in future. This, of course, came much to the delight of Cadbury, Wiggins and the other defenders of the ITV network and its practices within and without. There were still changes by some ITV companies, stung by the criticism - fewer imports, more effort into the local news and so on - but they were taken by the companies off their own bat rather than being mandated.

Besides, this is a book about the BBC - and given the monumental pat on the head the Report amounted to for the Corporation, they were the ones to benefit most from the White Paper it triggered. As well as a Local Radio service (which the Government promised they'd look into at a later date), they also gained extra broadcasting hours for the television service and an update licence to cover the latest transmission technology - it was now, or would very soon be, possible to broadcast in 625 lines on UHF - and, not long after that, in colour. The standard and system for the latter were still being worked on, and patents were being filed (Baird and his Telechrome having

long since been surpassed), but once that was done and all was agreed upon, it was the BBC who would get first bite of the sweet, sweet fruit that resulted.

Better yet, to tie in with these technological advances, the Report's idea of a third channel was revived. A new station to show off this brave new high-definition, vividly coloured world of broadcasting. And obviously there was no question of it being a commercial channel, not with the thorough scolding the ITA received in the Report - even though the Government didn't agree with it. Only the BBC could be trusted to launch these innovations. It was the National Broadcaster, after all.

So passed the Pilkington Commission, Committee, Enquiry, Report and anything else that could be appended to the name. The BBC had run out convincing, even lopsided victors, despite the enquiry ostensibly not even being a competition (even though it absolutely was). Greene barely even tried to suppress his glee.

"So the Pilkington Enquiry came and went and the BBC emerged from it more successfully than we had imagined in our wildest dreams. I remember receiving an advance copy of the report just before the meeting of the BBC Board of Management on Monday June 25th 1962. I read out the summary of recommendations and everything was there that we had hoped for, or very nearly everything. It was an exciting moment. Perhaps when one looks back one is tempted to think that we did almost too well. But one does not fight a campaign to achieve a partial victory."↔

The only thing Greene wanted and didn't get out of the Pilkington Report and its aftermath was an immediate rise in the licence fee, and even that - like local radio - was vaguely promised for a later date. It seemed to be, in Greene's words, "a gratifying vindication of all that the BBC had been trying to do." But of course, swords have two edges, and in the very same paragraph of his autobiography he also acknowledged the Versailles-like downside of a win so hard and thorough, in a fight that never ended - the fostering of complacency on one side, resentment on the other.

"It made some of us cocky and it hardened the hearts of the BBC's enemies...From that time onwards the knives were out."

Greene and his BBC had reached the point from which there is only one possible direction.