

THESE ARE THE NEWS

Once Churchill regained office, the Fourteen-Day Rule was practically holy writ. Asked (by future Liberal leader Jo Grimond) if he would reconsider it, instead trusting “the good sense of the BBC to exercise discretion”, he replied unequivocally:

“No, Sir. I will never reconsider it. It would be shocking to have debates in this House forestalled time after time by expressions of opinion by persons who had not the status or responsibility of Members of Parliament ... I am quite sure that the bringing of exciting debates in these vast, new robot organisations of television and BBC broadcasting, to take place before a debate in this House, might have very deleterious effects upon our general interests, and that hon. Members should be considering the interests of the House of Commons, to whom we all owe a lot.”

This was 23rd February 1955, however, just seven weeks (to the day) before he stepped down in favour of Eden. It was also seven months before the launch of ITV, whose news provision was an issue of some concern. Plans were underway for the four companies involved in running the various stations to pool some resources together and form a news company of their own, which was to be known as Independent Television News. The process was completed by May with the appointment of Adrian Crawley, a former Labour (and future Conservative) MP as its first editor.

Before long, their plans for televised news coverage started leaking out - and they scared ten kinds of hell out of Ian Jacob and the BBC. ITN's approach was shaping up to be so fresh, so new and so groundbreaking they had to invent new words. Instead of “newsreaders” they had “newscasters”, who would actually appear onscreen and speak directly to the viewer - and be referred to by name! They wouldn't even have to be journalists - for its very first bulletin, ITN hired the dashing Christopher Chataway, who had no journalistic credentials to speak of, but had just won gold at the Commonwealth Games in the three mile dash, and no less importantly had verdant swept-back hair and a manly chin dimple, making him nice to look at - which was a thing ITN actually wanted the viewers to do, apparently.

The very idea of looking at someone reading the news was terrifyingly alien to the BBC at this point. It's time to introduce one of the more infamous figures in the BBC of the 1950s: Tahu Hole. The unusual name was due to his New Zealand origins - not that he was the slightest bit Maori. The name was also the most colourful thing about him. A large, slow-moving man, he took charge of the BBC's news by default in 1948 when the other members of the editorial board William Haley set up for the purpose dropped out for one reason or another. Since then, he had become one of

the least popular authority figures in the Corporation. Partly this was because of his authoritarian style of running the news department - which was as much from a lack of imagination as active malevolence - and partly this was because he wasn't very good at it.

By 1953 he had overall hands-on command of the production of news bulletins. Since television's post-war comeback, there were two kinds of these: the main news had remained entirely out-of-vision, with an announcer speaking very slowly and carefully over a shot of Big Ben's clock. Supplementing this was the continuing BBC Television Newsreel, still taking the Movietone format of reports of things that had already happened, shot on film. As such, it was incapable of being up-to-the-minute (up-to-the-week was the best it could manage), and inevitably was much more of an entertainment programme.

Hole's brilliant idea to modernise BBC news broadcasting was to merge the two together as the twenty-minute BBC News and Newsreel. Which was more or less what it sounded like: ten minutes of the one format followed by ten minutes of the other. What did change was that in the opening "BBC News" part, instead of a shot of the Great Clock, Hole permitted the use of still images illustrating the stories in question, and even maps and diagrams. Once in a while a human hand would reach in to point at a particular location or data point, which was as much excitement as Hole would allow. The news itself continued to be read by an invisible announcer, to avoid a "cult of personality". The "new" format debuted, to widespread disdain, in July 1954 - just months before the birth of ITN.