MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!

The bell had been rung, and there was no unringing it. For all that the BBC held out a minute hope that the Government might somehow change its mind between July and September, it was always a forlorn one. This was illustrated quite potently during the original announcement of the White Paper in the Commons (delivered by the Lord Privy Seal Harry Crookshank concurrently with Lord De La Warr in the upper house), when the pro-commercial members of the Conservative backbench - which was most of them - audibly jeered at every rear-covering use of the word “might” made by Crookshanks. Truth Magazine reported that they “[had] seldom seen Tory back-benchers so openly angry with their own Government...They muttered and wriggled in rage and yelled "might" with furious emphasis.”[1]. There was a very real chance that, had they failed to deliver some form of commercial broadcasting at this point, the Government could have had a full-scale rebellion on their hands. Churchill was unlikely to risk something like that for the sake of television.

The real questions, once those speeches had been made, were about the BBC’s role. No-one was advocating for its total privatisation, if only because it was far from certain that commercial television would work at all, and there was still a more than reasonable chance of the whole notion being so mismanaged and misconceived as to go both up and down in flames at the same time. Besides, it was extremely popular, particularly after the Coronation - so much so that a local branch of the Conservative Party (in Twickenham) proposed a motion that the Government should just forget about commercial television altogether, solely on the basis of how good the Corporation;’s coverage had been. In creating commercial television, all involved had to tread carefully, and try their best to keep the beloved institution and/or insurance policy they already had as intact as possible.

But how intact would that actually be, in practice? They were losing their monopoly - that was unavoidably inevitable at this point - but would they also have to have lines and frequency ripped from them to make room for the new operators? And what of the Ten Year Plan, which had of course been announced just weeks before the Postmaster-General effectively confirmed commercial television?

The timing made the Plan an item of negotiation in itself, and Ian Jacob made it clear from the outset he was not prepared to compromise on either it or the BBC’s integrity in general. David Gammans discovered this when he - unofficially, of course - broached the idea of co-operation (such as the buying-in of programming) between the Corporation and ABDC - the company of

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Norman Collins. A few years earlier he had been BBC Director of Programmes (and creator of Dick Barton, Special Agent) before leaving the Corporation in protest at the role being split between television and radio. Now, as promised, he had returned to haunt them as one of the prime movers behind the push for commercial television, forming the Associated Broadcasting Development Company for the exact purpose of getting in on the ground floor. ABDC were expected to form a large part of any such service (which it did, in a way, as the primordial soup from which ATV emerged).

Jacob turned any notion of co-operation down flat, and even flatter the idea of the ultimate compromise: the BBC itself either selling advertising space or putting on sponsored programming, saving everyone else the trouble of creating a new network. In fact, there was no appetite for such an arrangement at all on any side. In September, both Collins himself and his partners in ABDC, Sir Robert Renwick (of Pye Electronics) and Lord Duncannon, advised the BBC Governors (who were still mulling things over) in no uncertain terms - over dinner, because this is Britain - not to accept the incursion of sponsorship, nor to sell time to anyone. The Governors concurred, and shortly afterwards issued a statement officially ruling such a travesty out. Of course, the ABDC people had their own potential profits in mind, rather than the integrity of the BBC - if the Governors had gone the other way there may never have been an Independent Television Authority for them to apply to for a broadcasting licence.

Not that there was ever any danger of the Governors deciding anything else. Ian Jacob had made it clear in a memo in February - long before the Coronation - that such a violation of the BBC’s principle was absolutely unthinkable. To sell itself or its programming to outside interests would be to “abdicate its trusteeship for public service broadcasting”. But Collins and his company won’t have read that, and couldn’t have been a hundred percent certain of anything from the outside - which kept alive the principle of “better safe than sorry” and ensured the two parties’ goals continued to run parallel rather than clashing.

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