IT’S ONLY WORDS

1951 and 1952 was to be an eventful period for both the BBC and Britain in General - perhaps the most eventful since the war. First, in January 1951, there was a resounding thud as the Beveridge Report finally arrived, in self-consciously substantial form. Despite the inquiry only taking two years - admittedly half as long again as the Hankey Committee had - the report ran through two breezeblock-sized tomes and a total of 910 pages. Hankey's report, by contrast, had been a single slim volume. Indeed, Beveridge was keen to impress upon the reader the sheer quantity of, well, *everything* in his report.

“The number of words written to us or spoken to us in evidence,” the report bragged a few paragraphs in, “amounts to nearly 640,000 from the BBC and associated bodies and about 1,000,000 from outside sources.” To say nothing of a further 500,000 words consisting of “thoughts prepared by the Chairman ... and running with the evidence”. This turned out to be the substance of the 327-page first volume, with the second consisting of 523 pages disseminating the evidence itself, or the “most interesting parts” of it at least. Most commentators noted that most, if not all, of the actual points of interest appeared in the latter. And on top of that, Selwyn Lloyd, having disagreed with almost everyone else on the subject of commercial television, had taken it upon himself to prepare a minority report setting out the case for competition.

For all its verbosity, the Beveridge Report’s main conclusions were fairly simple, although the sheer density of the text made it a little hard to tell without extensive digging. Essentially: no, we don’t much want commercial television. (Except Selwyn.) No, we definitely don’t want full-blown sponsorship, on television or on radio. (Not even Selwyn.) There should be more local and regional output; not just “for”, but “by”. Same for broadcasting of minority interest - maybe even religious programming that acknowledged people who weren’t Christian. As for the BBC Charter, nothing about it needed changing except that the Chairman of the BBC deserved a pay rise.

Which isn’t to say the BBC was given a complete pass. Its status as a public service broadcaster - and indeed the nature as such of British broadcasting as a whole - was considered a fait accompli from the start, never in doubt or under threat. The final details, however, were up for grabs. Beveridge set out a pair of “fundamental questions” that formed the basis of his inquiry. The circuitous nature of which provides some idea of what the report was like to read (not to mention why it ran near a thousand pages).

The first was “Is the BBC today so near human possibilities of perfection that all we have to do is to

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recommend renewal of the present Charter and Licence for another ten, fifteen or fifty years, with a few amendments of detail and a few suggestions for consideration by the Governors and the Director -General?" and the second `Should all broadcasting ... including the Overseas Services and Television, continue as the monopoly of a single Corporation?" More succinctly put, is the BBC perfect or are there aspects that need improving, and should it keep its monopoly either way?

The second question was ultimately answered by the committee in the affirmative (although not unanimously, of course, but that was Selwyn Lloyd's problem). The first was trickier. Of course, put by Beveridge it was basically rhetorical - of course there were things that needed improving, and the purpose of the inquiry was to identify which and how. While its monopoly was ultimately untouched, the committee did warn that BBC may have been in danger of becoming an "uncontrolled bureaucracy".

It was largely an unfounded concern - the main justification being that it wasn't subject to full parliamentary control in the way official Government Departments were. This anxiety wasn't limited to the BBC; the Attlee Government's nationalisation programme created dozens of new public corporations running the country's freshly nationalised industries (the National Coal Board, for instance), and Parliament worried constantly about their lack of direct control over any of them, despite being owned by the Government. The BBC was in many ways the prototype for this system (the report admitted as much), in spite of having been created by a One Nation Tory in John Reith, and made a decent focus for various frustrations from all sides.

It was disingenuous, however. The BBC may have been (and remains) technically independent of the legislators, but they were and are still subject to plenty of Governmental oversight, from the appointment of Governors, to the Treasury keeping a constant, hawk-like eye on their income, to the charter giving Parliament ultimate existential control of the pursestrings. But Beveridge was not reassured: the BBC was simply too big.

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