

BUILDING A BETTER ITV

The Television Bill that was to create this new Authority took shape in the first quarter of 1954, carefully proceeding through the issues and material in the manner of a stressed middle-ager pressured into navigating a fairground buzz wire game - with the Bill itself as the wire loop he was carefully guiding through the predetermined route, taking extreme care not to accidentally touch the edges and spark further criticism and indignation from the BBC.

This was harder than it sounded, with the BBC having problems with the phrase “due impartiality” (they, the Corporation were committed to “complete impartiality” - was the ITA being given an easier ride by this wording?); the length of the ITA’s initial contract (for ten years until 1964, supposedly contradicting an informal agreement that it would be looked back into at the same time as the BBC’s next Charter review in 1962); and the fact that the ITA’s licence didn’t contain anything similar to the bit in the BBC’s one ensuring that “the constancy and purity of the waves emitted shall be maintained at as high a standard as may be reasonably practicable”. Further to that issue, who was going to be in charge of the ITA? The Postmaster General? Was that going to work without extending the powers of that office? Could high-quality engineering practices be guaranteed with a profit margin and the interests of advertisers as part of the equation? Foremost in the minds of the Corporation’s representatives: how difficult is the BBC’s life going to be once the ITA and its new channel is set up?

Finally, the Bill reached a form with which everyone was happy, or at least content. In short order it became an Act and achieved Royal Assent to become the law of the land on 30th July 1954. Days later, the question of who was going to be in charge of the ITA was answered, to the surprise of many, with the words “Sir Kenneth Clark”.

Even then Clark was a looming archetype of the British intellectual. An art historian, museum creator and general professional cleverer-than-you person of such stature he’d been knighted at 35, he was the perfect appointment to offset the perceived vulgarity of commercial television. With this man at the helm, the venture couldn’t fail to be classier than Julius Caesar reciting Shakespeare’s sonnets while being painted by Raphael, advertising or no advertising.

This was a more formidable opponent than Jacob and Cadogan at the BBC were expecting. It was probably something of a relief when Clark, upon taking the job, immediately initiated diplomatic talks aimed at forging a peace of some kind between the BBC and the ITA. “There is much on which we can co-operate, and in which the ITA will be the learners,”¹ he told Jacob in an initial

exchange of letters. Later he met personally with Cadogan to assure him that any special powers granted to the ITA by the Television Act were strictly for emergencies only.

This was a useful reassurance for the BBC. because they were already seeing the effect of the end of their monopoly on their supposed regulators the Post Office. Now the BBC weren't the only game in town, there was less motivation on their part to give them stuff they wanted, like a second television channel. The Postmaster-General wasn't just going to be a rubber-stamp operator anymore, inasmuch as he ever was. Now he had other options. Well, one other option. Now the BBC had to play nicer than ever. At least in theory.

The first solid contracts were finally sent out, awarded and signed throughout 1954, while the two services, Corporation and Authority, warily sounded each other out on the practicalities of transmission. Specifically the ITA wanted to share a mast or two, while the BBC bristled at helping them out in any way, particularly given how their presence had slowed progress on a potential second BBC television channel. They couldn't, however, prevent a mass exodus of engineering talent to either the ITA themselves or one of the companies operating regional franchises. Competition had definitely arrived, and the BBC needed to learn how to fight.