

SUMMIT ELSE

Eventually there was a meeting at the House of Commons, in late January 1954, between Ian Jacob and his Chairman Alex Cadogan on one side, and two members of the Government, Home Secretary David Maxwell-Fyfe and leader of the House of Commons (and wartime Postmaster General) Harry Crookshank on the other. Technically three members of the Government were present, because current Postmaster De La Warr served as moderator.

This meeting mostly concentrated on programming, in particular the practicalities of the Competitor's public service aspect and how it may have clashed with that of the BBC. Specifically religious and educational programming, and important news events such as the Coronation. Ian Jacob was very clear on the point that the new Corporation should by no means be allowed to weasel out of their duty to broadcast any of this, although a proposal for them to have their religious programming created by the BBC's Religious Advisory Committee was quite acceptable. Maxwell-Fyfe assured Jacob that anything of major import - addresses from the Queen, Party Political Broadcasts and the likes - would by law appear simultaneously on both services, and that whatever system the Competitor would use for news gathering and broadcasting, it would be impartial and objective.

Sport was another sore point. Ian Jacob showed remarkable foresight on this subject. While acknowledging that competition was unstoppably coming in this sector, he warned that the inevitable result would be to force broadcasting costs up, for everyone involved, with no upper limit and no will to even consider setting one. Worse, the new Corporation was potentially only the tip of the iceberg, as Jacob muttered darkly about the eventual coming of "pay-as-you-watch" television. By this he meant literal coin slots in constant need of topping-up that would be installed on the television sets themselves - as proposed earlier by Lady Rhys Williams as an alternative to commercial television and based on something being trialled in America - rather than the way it actually shook out (major corporations charging multiple astronomical fees over multiple platforms - something only a madman could or would predict in the 1950s). Broadly speaking, however, he was right.

The final subject to be breached was, inevitably, also financial in nature. Crookshank made a rather surprising, and very carefully worded suggestion to Jacob. Reminding the Chairman and Director-General of the Archbishop of Canterbury's idea (once known as Plan II) for the BBC and the Competitor to share both advertising and licence fee revenue, Crookshank then switched it up and, as noncommittally as possible, looked to sound out the BBC's opinions on the converse: a

possible arrangement cutting out the Competitor from the deal altogether - essentially one whereby the BBC would get some extra revenue on top of the licence fee, presumably from some light advertising.

Having rejected the Archbishop's gambit out of hand once already when it was Plan II, Jacob was even faster to dismiss this version. It might have kept the licence fee intact (i.e. unshared), but it still required the BBC to take on some amount of advertising or commercial obligation, and that Jacob was not prepared to accept. Not a single atom of it. He also saw through why Crookshank had brought up the old Plan II - to suggest that the idea of the Competitor sharing licence money wasn't so different to the BBC taking on advertising money.

Jacob argued the comparison was faulty. It was perfectly reasonable, after all, to assume the Competitor might need extra cash from somewhere from time to time, particularly early on when it was still setting up. This was all a journey into the unknown, after all. However, the BBC (as a Corporation) had existed for nearly thirty years. It was a known quantity. More to the point, it had a character of its own, established over those three decades (and change, counting the Company years) which depended, to a large extent, on its status as a non-commercial, publicly funded and public-serving. To take on even the slightest smidgen of revenue from advertising, even indirectly, would change that permanently, and to cause that to happen would be a betrayal of the BBC.

So ended the first and, as it turned out, last summit meeting between Government and Corporation. Less than six weeks later, on the 4th of March 1954, the Television Bill was published, christening the Competitor as the Independent Television Authority. Norman Collins came up with the name, and it immediately irritated the BBC, who objected to the implication that they weren't independent. And that word "authority" seemed a bit strong as well. The sound of grinding teeth around London was only drowned out by an enormous, simultaneous and very deep sigh.