

EVEN PARANOIDS HAVE ENEMIES

Harold Wilson was a famously paranoid man, seeing conspiracies and plots against him everywhere. This was partly mitigated, at least in hindsight, by the fact that, as it turned out, there genuinely were people out to get him, mostly at MI5. There were even plans for a potential military coup in case he got too lefty. But he didn't *know* all this at the time. Golda Meir pointed out that even paranoids have enemies, and Wilson demonstrated the same principle in reverse: even people with enemies can be paranoid.

All of which is to say that Wilson's relationship with the BBC was adversarial from day zero. The dispute over Robert McKenzie and his desk was merely the opening shot. The first major confrontation came on election day 1964 itself, and it came (of all things) over *Steptoe and Son*. An episode (a repeat) was scheduled to go out at 8pm, two hours before polls closed. This to Wilson was unacceptable.

This had nothing to do with the content, or the personalities involved. True, Harry H. Corbett was a committed and outspoken socialist, and that might have been dicey during the Purdah period - ITV had been forced to drop *The Avengers* for the duration after Honor Blackman appeared in a Liberal Party Election Broadcast. But though Corbett's political loyalties were well known, he hadn't actually campaigned with Labour. Besides, Wilson would hardly complain about that.

The issue was the programme itself. *Steptoe and Son* was one of, if not the most popular programmes on television, even in repeats - perhaps especially in repeats, since it was the only way to see the same show twice in those days. At prime-time on polling day, this had enormous potential for keeping people at home rather than exercising their democratic rights. This represented - especially to Wilson - a grave danger to the electoral process itself, and more importantly to the Labour party's chances of winning, particularly with this election the tightest in fourteen years. This last factor burned particularly bright and hot in Wilson's mind. A little demon on his shoulder whispered that the BBC were plotting to keep him out of 10 Downing Street using insidious, underhand methods.

Wilson was immediately on the phone to Harman Grisewood - once Ian Jacob's faithful deputy, now Greene's - citing a gentleman's agreement between the broadcasters and the parties that, in effect, they wouldn't show anything on polling day that anyone would particularly want to watch, or would care about missing. Grisewood claimed not to have heard of any such thing and tried to palm Wilson off with politely deferential platitudes. Wilson was having none of it and almost

immediately turned up at headquarters for an almost impromptu summit meeting with Greene, where the two men faced each other down, and not for the last time.

Greene's first priority was getting Wilson to calm down about the idea of a BBC plot. There was no such thing, he insisted,, and if it would help to prove it he was happy to invite Douglas Home and Liberal leader Jo Grimond, or representatives thereof, to join in with this conversation.

Unsurprisingly Wilson was less than enthusiastic about this idea, which amounted to handing a shiny box of ammunition to both his rivals. But the issue remained: Steptoe and Son was on at 8pm on election day, and that was unacceptable.

Neither man was prepared to leave the room unsatisfied. Fortunately there was one other person in the room, flanking Greene - the charismatic Welshman Donald Baverstock. He was there in his capacity as station controller, and it was he who came up with an almost insultingly simple solution: move Steptoe forward an hour to 9 o'clock. An hour before polls closed, Baverstock reasoned that anyone who hadn't already voted, or at least left for the polling station, by then wasn't going to do so at all. It was better for the BBC, too, because now one of the highest-rated programmes of its day would act as the lead-in to the results programme, providing a massive ratings boost against ITV's equivalent.

Greene loved it, and once it was relayed to Wilson, so did he. "This might be worth a dozen or so seats to me," he said as he and the DG shook hands. That might seem a fanciful statement, but come election night, Labour triumphed and Wilson became Prime Minister by a just-about-workable majority of four seats. By moving Steptoe and Son an hour back, Donald Baverstock might possibly have changed history.