

BEING CARLETON (II)

The Government wasn't finished with him yet, however, and sent him in 1950 to Malaya, then in the midst of a troubled and drawn-out transition from empire to independence. As the fifties dawned, the new Federation of protectorates and former colonies were fighting off a communist insurgency, and Greene was drafted in as head of Emergency Information Services to aid in this fight. One of his assistants was Lee Kwan Yew, who went on to become the father of the Republic of Singapore, as well as a lifelong friend to Greene.

Finally returning to the BBC for good in 1952, the obvious place for him was the Overseas Service, first as assistant controller, and then from 1955 outright controller. He wasn't to hold that position for long, however. The following year, Sir Norman Bottomley retired as Head of Administration. This is the same Air Chief Marshal Bottomley who had been Bomber Harris' successor at the RAF, and became one of many military men (the Director-General included) who somehow had found himself at the Corporation in the twilight of his career - being too old for the armed forces but still useful as an all-purpose leader or chairman. The war having created something of a surplus, there were a lot of them about in 1950s Britain, in business in general and at the BBC in particular - because the BBC was at inception a completely new concept; there simply wasn't anyone around with direct experience of broadcasting yet.

By the mid fifties, three decades into the BBC's existence, that was changing. There were people working at the Corporation who'd never worked anywhere else, who'd risen through the ranks and therefore experienced broadcasting from the ground up, unlike the likes of Bottomley, or even Ian Jacob himself, who'd been parachuted straight into positions of authority because of - leaving aside the influence of connections, like Jacob's relationship with Churchill - their generic leadership skills. These skills were usually formidable, but rarely had anything to do with the broadcasting industry specifically.

Greene was at the forefront of this second generation. Like William Haley, he'd come to broadcasting through journalism - but unlike Haley he didn't leap from his newspaper straight to the top of the BBC tree. He'd spent time down in the trenches, creating a radio network out of nothing in a war-devastated landscape of rubble and extremely guilty defeated survivors, practically with his bare hands.

The BBC, and Ian Jacob in particular, recognised this and other achievements, and the conclusion was unavoidable: Greene and his contemporaries would build and shape the broadcasting industry through the next generation, and Greene in particular was going to be in the vanguard. By 1956,

with competition now a thing, it was clear that the BBC's hitherto assumed control of that future was actually far from guaranteed - they'd already been humiliated by ITN. They couldn't afford to let someone like Greene, with his almost unique experience and knowhow, potentially slip through their fingers.

So after just a year as Controller of Overseas Services, Greene was moved up to replace Bottomley as Director of Administration - almost a Prime Ministerial role to the DG's President. It did have one unfortunate side-effect, that of distancing Greene from actual programme-making and placing him among the thicket of bureaucracy. But, of course, he'd need a solid experience of both as Director-General, and that was the message heard loud and clear - with Jacob eyeing retirement at the end of his contract, Greene was being prepared to take over.

Two years later came the ingenious castling move swapping Greene for Tahu Hole, enabling him to repair the BBC's flailing news department in time for Jacob's departure and his assumed accession. It became official in the latter half of 1959, to little if any surprise - there were few other prospective candidates anyway - but much approval and even excitement among the BBC staff. In replacing Hole and reforming the News department he had healed a great, throbbing wound in the Corporation, in a relatively short span of time. The Corporation's newsmen actually felt valued as human beings for the first time they could remember.

Apart from that, Greene was the first Director-General to truly rise through the ranks - Cecil Graves was the only previous in-house promotion, and in truth he had started at roughly Bottomley's level as an administrator and mostly moved sideways for ten years before succeeding Ogilvie. Besides, he only really counted as half a Director-General at most.

So as the sixties dawned, there was genuine anticipation within the corridors of Broadcasting House for their future under the new boss, with his track record of modernisation and solid man management. He started in the job on January 1st, 1960, and one of the first things he did - within his first week - was to buy out Tahu Hole's contract for a large sum of money on the condition that he took early retirement and never came back. He agreed.

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RULE THE WAVES (6.02)