

GLASS HOUSES (II)

Their conclusions on radio reflected those on television. Commercial radio had been ostensibly under consideration by the Commission, but given their stance on the populism of ITV - "Those who say they give the public what it wants begin by underestimating public taste, and end by debauching it" - no-one could be surprised when they stated outright that the public absolutely did not want the same thing happening to the radio.

This came as something of a surprise to much of the public. Instead, the Commission recommended a slate of local stations, of course to be run by the BBC and funded by the licence.

"We consider that the BBC can confidently be expected to provide a service of local sound broadcasting. The Corporation's conception of the possibilities of such a service is much further ranging than that of the companies."

The companies referred to there are the dozens of commercial interests who had expressed an interest in starting their own radio stations - or in some cases had actively applied for licence to start one, even though such a thing didn't exist yet. Over a hundred commercial broadcasting companies had registered themselves and either sounded out the possibility or simply assumed the inevitability of commercial radio being launched eventually. Commercial television already existed, after all; it was almost as if the internal combustion engine had predated the cart and horse.

They certainly weren't expecting to be told flat-out that it was never going to happen, because Britain (whether they knew it or not) didn't want it, and that the BBC would instead serenely expand its monopoly. There was an inevitable outcry, but very little that could be done about it. Short of going beyond the law, that is, and that was an option no-one (at that point) truly expected anyone to take, or have any success with if they did. The BBC serenely started planning out this new network of Local Radio stations.

So it could be charitably said that the overall response to the Pilkington Report was mixed, in that the BBC were happy and everyone else wasn't. Basil Nicolls, while having the grace to be embarrassed at what almost amounted to a full-body massage, even praised the Commission for "having the guts to speak out", which in this day and age seems tantamount to deliberately trolling ITV.

The print media, who had no great love for the BBC, were distinctly unimpressed. The Economist went ahead and called it a worst-case scenario come true. The response in The Times (still edited by William Haley) was some kind of masterpiece of one-sided dialectic:

"The Report of the Pilkington Committee, the latest of the decennial inquests on broadcasting, gives three cheers for the BBC and cannot raise even one for commercial television. Since this is at variance with the conferment of popular applause as expressed in the way most people use their switches, it requires some justification. This the committee offers at remorseless length — without doing it very well."

First it questioned the perceived gap between the Commission's findings and the supposed views of "the people". Then it demands to see the Commission's working, which is apparently a burden the Times doesn't need to shoulder for their own assumptions. Then it remembers that the Report is the Commission's working and finally resorts to calling it rubbish.

Meanwhile, in their Sunday sister, Maurice Wiggin simply hurled some downright foaming proto-Thatcherite invective at the whole thing, calling the report "gobbledygook" and accusing the Commission of having "a deep-rooted fear of free enterprise and a completely unrealistic attitude to the simple commercial facts of life...the hopeless last resort of men [sic] who fundamentally fear the operation of a free society". Somewhere, Keith Joseph was probably nodding solemnly along.

The collective making up The Competitor, unsurprisingly, was less impressed with the findings, particularly the parts about how they were terrible and should feel awful and ashamed about what they were doing to the innocent people of Britain. Indignance bordering on rage was expressed throughout the network, occasionally spilling over that border, as with Peter Cadbury, Chairman of Westward and a man known for two attributes - theatricality and almost no fuse on his temper whatsoever. Both attributes were illustrated quite sharply by his response to the Report: burning an oversized effigy of it on a bonfire on the grounds of Westward Television studios. The Commission, and Pilkington himself in particular, probably counted themselves lucky he chose to effigise the paperwork rather than the people.

