

FIXING A HOLE

The unlamented Fourteen-Day Rule was a relic of a different society, one where the mass-media was young and still less powerful than Governments. The events in Suez, in Hungary and at home had called that into question. The Golden Boy Prime Minister had effectively been brought down after a mere two years, all watched avidly, daily and with an unprecedented level of detail by the entire nation. While it was more or less entirely his own fault, the scrutiny the whole process came under was both new and unwelcome. Scapegoating the media as the real culprits hadn't worked. News was a powerful force now, and with ITN now providing competition - and extremely stiff competition at that, with innovations coming thick and fast - it was the petri dish for modern broadcasting.

So it's a shame BBC News still had Tahu Hole in charge. In 1956 he received a CBE for his service, even though no-one else in his actual industry had anything good to say about him. The few small innovations visible in the Corporation's news coverage at that point (such as visible newsreaders) were occasioned by ITN doing them first, and therefore existed in spite of Hole rather than because of him.

His policy remained as it had always been: the exercise of extreme, almost pathological caution. And as time went by it fit worse and worse with the reality of then-modern newsgathering. The old two sources rule persisted - whereby no story could be broadcast without at least two verified sources, and probably a note from the Queen and the Apostle Paul to boot - even though it actively prevented the news from going out. At the start of Hole's tenure it was merely aggravating and self-defeating. Now they had competition, which quite pointedly did not follow any such arbitrary rules - which now amounted to a licence for ITN to scoop the BBC time and again. The ultimate scoop came in July 1957, when Nasser agreed to an interview on British television, no-one was surprised when Robin Day and ITN got the job. The BBC, with its newsreel and continued lack of visible reporters, was barely even considered.

Not that Hole minded. Scoops, by definition, suggested a lack of due diligence. The suffocatingly dry tone of the BBC News and Newsreel, where staying informed about current events was for the viewer an experience comparable to eating an entire bath towel, was exactly what he wanted to achieve. He didn't care that the poor quality of the service was an increasingly worried running joke in the rest of the Corporation, or that the news department under him was a miserable, grinding workhouse, where any potential for joy was crushed in a dead bureaucratic fist, or that he'd effectively alienated half the Corporation and, as the few fellow old heads who shared his philosophy gradually retired, was gradually alienating the rest as well.

One man in particular, Hugh Carleton Greene, looked on increasingly appalled at the wasteland that was Hole's BBC news. Greene was a former war reporter who had distinguished himself on the German-language service both during the war (taking part in a mission against Nazi radio jamming over the skies of occupied Norway) and after it, when (having temporarily left the BBC) he rebuilt Germany's broadcasting infrastructure. We already met him at the time of the Berlin Airlift, when he saw which way the Cold War was going and created the East Zone Programme in anticipation of the division of Germany.

He returned to the BBC in 1952 and quickly rose to replace Norman Bottomley as Head of Administration - widely seen as the preparatory role for the Director-Generalship. This was in 1956, just in time to watch as ITN almost immediately blew BBC News out of the water. He was later to describe Hole's News department as "the Kremlin of the BBC".

Eventually Ian Jacob perceived a looming point of no return. Either the News department was reformed, possibly from the ground up, or any credibility in television news was effectively lost to the Corporation for at least a generation. Tahu Hole still had one or two friends in the organisation even in 1958, however, and more than that he had a fearsome aura that seemed to protect him from outright sacking. So instead, Jacob staged a minor reshuffle which saw Hole and Green swap jobs; Hole moving into Administration, a role several removes from any influence on actual programming, and Greene taking the all-new role of Director of News and Current Affairs - the two departments coming under the same umbrella for the first time (Current Affairs being the new name for what had previously been Talks).

Greene set about modernising the news output, centring it back around journalism rather than demagoguery, treating the viewer as a willing audience rather than a captive mass and, by and large, doing all the things that ITN were already doing that was making people watch it instead.