

COME DANCING

Anger often cools after a good night's sleep on it. It didn't seem to work that way for Eden, but as the summer of 1956 dragged on, the initial general consensus in favour of punching Nasser hard about the face and neck continued to dissipate. Gaitskell's Labour had already softened, now the people around Eden were starting to pull back as well - largely because it had become clear the general public were less than enthusiastic. It was only slightly more than a decade after World War II left most of the planet in ruins, and those ruins were still being rebuilt. In the cold light of day, the idea of starting a new war began to seem rather unattractive.

Eden, of course, thought this was what the BBC was for, or should have been, at least in that moment. His uncle-in-law Churchill had repeatedly contemplated seizing it and placing it entirely under Government auspices as a state, rather than national broadcaster, all the way back to the days of the Company when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. There's no evidence of Eden considering anything similar aloud, but it must have occurred to him, particularly when on the eve of the big Conference the Light Programme broadcast a talk from Salah Salem, known as the Dancing Major, and one of Nasser's most prominent cabinet members.

As one might imagine, Eden was enraged even further. The Egyptian perspective, as far as he was concerned, should never have been broadcast to the British people. He openly questioned whether the BBC were "enemies, or just socialists", accused the Corporation of putting forward "a deplorably misleading picture of British opinion as uncertain and hesitant" and demanded to know if anyone in the Government had been consulted or even informed about Salem's broadcast. He certainly hadn't, and Selwyn Lloyd at the Foreign Office similarly claimed ignorance. The BBC eventually sent out a curt statement: "The Foreign Office were informed that Major Salem was to broadcast. We are not obliged to seek permission." Shades there, again, of Ian Jacob's instinctive disrespect, bordering on contempt, for politicians.

Once again, Eden turned to Cadogan as a sounding-board for his fury, this time in a letter in which he edged towards threatening the Corporation itself. In this time of "grave crisis...for this country and the whole future of the Western World", he warned darkly, the Governors of which Cadogan was the chairman should be especially aware of "the very heavy responsibility which rests on the BBC." That responsibility being the image of Britain both around the world and to its own people. But, he was careful to add, "of course the Government had no intention of interfering with the freedom of the BBC to try and reflect, as well as educate, public information in this country."

The "of course" is doing a lot of work in that sentence, and while it undoubtedly stands out more in retrospect 65 years later, Cadogan will surely have noticed it at the time, and in all likelihood so will Ian Jacob when the message was passed on to him by way of summoning him (from a holiday in Suffolk) to a face-to-face meeting with the Prime Minister. How that went is largely unrecorded but Eden apparently came away satisfied that Jacob now understood better the Government's position and the importance of asking permission, whether technically obliged to do so or not.

Perhaps surprisingly, Cadogan in his reply to the Prime Minister actually stood up to him - possibly he had heard about Grisewood's fears for the BBC's constitution. Rather than solemnly reinforcing Eden's position, the Chairman defended the broadcast, claiming that Salem had had a script, that that script had inevitably been vetted as a matter of course, and that having listened to it himself he

could vouch that it was mild and carefully unprovocative in both text and delivery - contrary to what Eden had heard from "all your friends who have criticised it to you".

This reasonable disagreement did little to improve relations between the BBC and the Government. While some Cabinet members made attempts at diplomacy, such as the Chief Whip (one Edward Heath) who drew up a list of Conservative MPs who could make ministerial broadcasts in future times of turbulence. Above him, however, the Government started to make ominous enquiries about a permanent studio in 10 Downing Street, or seemingly innocent questions to Ian Jacob on "general broadcasting policy". Jacob's reply showed he hadn't softened on politicians, nor if they kept bothering him was he likely to:

"I am not sure what is intended by the words 'general broadcasting policy'. There has never been any guidance in the past, nor do I believe that we require any."