

SELLING NASSER

It's worth mentioning at this point that Anthony Eden was, unbeknownst to most of the country at the time, chemically addicted to amphetamines. Specifically benzedrine, which he took (on doctor's advice) due to chronic gastric issues - mostly stomach ulcers - exacerbated by several major surgeries, many of them botched. Benzedrine, considered a harmless stimulant, was a fashionable wonder drug at the time. These days of course we know it causes mood swings, insomnia and chemical dependence, none of which are ideal traits in a Prime Minister, particularly with an international crisis like Suez on his plate. Eden, while eventually coping to his addiction, constantly denied that it had any affect on his judgement during Suez, but if that is the case then it does seem like an enormous coincidence.

What was not gone was the Fourteen Day Rule and similar restrictions on political reporting, despite the immediacy of Suez throwing their pointlessness and unworkability into sharp relief. On the 16th of August, a conference was held in London, thrown jointly by the United States, Britain and France - essentially an attempt for Eisenhower to say "please don't do this" in person to his increasingly enraged and war-happy NATO partners.

Obviously there was no question of broadcasting it live, but there was a discussion programme afterwards on BBC Television. Roundtable talks were a staple of sound broadcasting, of course, but this was one of the first of its kind in the visual medium, and so no-one was quite certain how it worked, in a legal sense. Since there was no way the news itself was going to hang around waiting for the BBC to figure out how to report on it, the discussion went ahead and everyone had to try and figure it out afterwards. At least it was August and Parliament was in recess, making the Fourteen Day Rule temporarily irrelevant.

With the opposition starting to cool on the prospect of all-out warfare, despite his own rage not abating in the least, Eden wanted to get as much of the actual British public onside as possible, and, after all, what else was a national broadcaster for?

During the conference, Australia's Prime Minister Robert Menzies turned out to play a key role. Already an elder statesman (halfway through an 18-year run as PM which only ended voluntarily when he finally retired at 71 in 1966), he'd proved a cool head and an eloquent speaker, and had already been chosen to present an outright disingenuous settlement to Nasser (involving the Canal coming under International control) that everyone already knew he'd never accept in a million years. The perfect salesman, thought Eden, for Nasser's destruction. So he petitioned the BBC to arrange another broadcast, to be delivered by Menzies, in sound on on the Home Service at the very least.

Much to Eden's incandescent fury, the Corporation's Controller of Talks (Sound), John Green, declined to offer Menzies a slot on the grounds that it would be politically imbalanced and break the all-important impartiality rules to broadcast so many speeches in favour of the Prime Minister's position (Foreign Secretary Selywn Lloyd was already due to give yet another), without any sign of an argument in the other direction. In a rage, Eden called Cadogan on their special private line. The Chairman immediately agreed that this was absurd and a nonsense, and was on the line to Ian Jacob as soon as the Prime Minister hung up, ordering him in no uncertain terms to allow Menzies to speak "no matter what our traditions and inhibitions might be" - and on television as well as radio, to boot.

Ultimately, however, Menzies would not get his broadcast; Ian Jacob - who as a military man was neither impressed nor intimidated by politicians - stuck to his guns, encouraged by his assistant, BBC veteran Harman Grisewood. Not only would Menzies' speech, uncontested, be in breach of the all-important Rules of Impartiality, it would also have to be treated as a Ministerial Broadcast all the same as Eden and Lloyd's, even though Menzies wasn't a minister in the British Government. Rule one of those was that they had to be resolutely uncontroversial, and this obviously wouldn't qualify in the least.

Worse than that, the BBC lifer Grisewood was keenly aware of how the Corporation was supposed to operate. It had (and has) a constitution, and nowhere did it say that the Chairman wielded absolute executive power the way Cadogan was attempting, with the Prime Minister's encouragement. Suez was already starting to split the nation; now it was damaging the structure of the national broadcaster.