COMPETITION TIME

The pledge in the Ten Year Plan to introduce a second channel was, in part, an attempt to head off a growing movement for the introduction of commercial television. In renewing their charter for that ten years, the Government made a solid but carefully vague commitment to “competitive television”. Jacob and the BBC were hoping, rather desperately, that limited, internal competition, in the form of a second BBC television station, would be enough. If they genuinely believed that, they were kidding themselves.

Selwyn Lloyd (who was a junior minister by now) might have been outvoted on the subject of commercial television on the Beveridge Committee, but that didn’t end anything. As television grew in Britain, it did the same in America - the home and the model of commercial broadcasting, at least in the English language. Money was being made over there. Lots of it. All without an equivalent of the BBC to exert control over broadcasting on the whole - to set and enforce quality, and more importantly, moral standards.

The question was one of control. Commercial television, especially as deployed in the US, gave control over to a largely abstract concept - that of what sold the most cigarettes or dish detergent - which, it was argued, had a negative effect on quality control. To say nothing of the moral aspect, which for many was the most important and the most vexed. Commercial interests in the US had already led to their television containing ”'two to four hours of visual education in violence and crime” simply because that got ratings. Could we possibly expose the wide-eyed little children of Mother Britain to something so awful?

Sides started to be taken when it was revealed that various companies had applied to the Government for potential commercial broadcasting licences, even though no-one had really decided what that meant yet. The newspaper industry largely came out against commercial television, on the grounds that the BBC were bad enough - competing with them had done their industry quite enough damage as it was, and they had some form of oversight, which advocates for commercial broadcasting couldn’t guarantee for their pet project.

The sole exception (if you didn’t count Punch, then edited by Malcolm Muggeridge) was the Daily Mirror, who accused their rivals of hedging their bets, having (they claimed) applied for commercial licences themselves on the quiet, while loudly decrying the notion in their headlines. One of the biggest rivals, the Daily Sketch, responded by doubling down spectacularly:

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"*We, like the Daily Mirror, know that there will be big profits for station holders. If we are granted a licence we will apply ourselves to the running of a station with all the enthusiasm we can muster; but we are still entitled to our opinion that commercial television is not in the national interest."* ⤵

Even within the Mirror itself, there were dissenting voices - notably William Connor, better known pseudonymously as the pungent opinion columnist Cassandra. He was popular enough (there was a non-zero number of people who bought the Mirror specifically for him) that he could pose a question in the Mirror that probably made his editor decidedly uncomfortable:

"*If you once let the soap -sellers get a grip of this fantastically powerful medium of propaganda, how are you going to keep the politicians out?"* ⤵

Thus the issue of control reared its head again. It had been a sticking point as far back as the Beveridge Report, which concluded that the BBC's monopoly was the best option going forward simply because they couldn't think of a way to make commercial television work. That didn't mean people stopped thinking about it. Particularly in Parliament, where the battle lines were drawn pretty much straight down the middle of the House.

Labour were dead set against commercial television, to an almost swivel-eyed extent - although they kept their cool in public at first. Unfortunately for them, their transformative era of power had lasted a mere six years and was now long over. With the Conservatives back in power - and there to remain until the mid-sixties - the prospects for commercial television were much brighter.

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