THE JACOB PAPERS II

Finally, it fell to Jacob himself to provide his own vision, which he set out as Plan IV. This was the most complicated of all, and if it wasn't the least likely it was only from the strength of the competition. It wasn't entirely dissimilar to Plans II and III, but with the BBC thoroughly in the driving seat.

Under Plan IV, the Competitor would be run by an entirely independent Board of Directors, who would be entirely responsible for its programming, and who could not be touched by the BBC's Governors. However, the Corporation would provide the new service's facilities and equipment. This would be possible because the new service would also be funded, in whole or in part, through the television licence - minus the BBC's hire charge. The "in whole or in part" was doing a certain amount of heavy lifting, but however else the Competitor would get its money under Plan IV, it would absolutely not be from advertising. That to Jacob was the whole point of the exercise. Just to eliminate all ambiguity, he described advertising in his closing arguments as "the maggot which will rot any system that is set up".

Jacob's stance on commercial television could not, therefore, have been clearer without heading full-pelt into the realms of vulgar invective and possibly rude graffiti. It was particularly remarkable because laying out the plans was only half of Jacob's task. Having done so, he now had to weigh them against each other and recommend one out of the four proposals, with cold objectivity, despite being the author of one of them. To his credit, he did so with admirable military discipline.

Unsurprisingly, Plan II - the Archbishop's gambit, wherein the Competitor and the BBC would share both the licence fee and advertising revenue - was rejected almost instantly by Jacob, on the grounds that advertising was bad enough qua idea, but advertising on the BBC was unthinkable and ultimately lethal to the Corporation.

On consideration, Jacob also considered Plan I - the Government's proposal as set out in the White Paper - to be unworkable, and a bad idea besides. A bad idea because the loss of the broadcasting monopoly made "the sensible conduct of educational, political and religious broadcasting very difficult"[1], throwing the lofty principles Reith had hammered into the BBC to the wolves. Unworkable because Jacob had no confidence it could attract the kind of advertising revenue necessary to support a central organisation on the proposed scale of the ITA:

"*If the new corporation exercises any measure of real control...it is doubtful whether the scheme will pay its way. There will not be enough in it for the advertisers."*[1]

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2021

This was a widespread belief about the Government's plan at the time, and history eventually proved it wrong. In 1953, however, it was still irrefutable and counted heavily against Plan I.

That left III and IV and with a heavy heart, Jacob was forced to concede that the Government and commercial interests (not quite a venn-diagram making a circle, but the overlap was large) were dead set on introducing advertising and had sufficient clout to make it inevitable. His beloved Plan IV would have come back from the Government unopened with a "Return to Sender" stamp.

So Jacob ultimately came down in favour of Plan III as the least-worst option, the one most likely to satisfy all parties - the "separate but equal" nature of the second channel hopefully insulating the "real" BBC from the evils of advertising. That Plan III was the least likely of them all was, for the moment, quietly disregarded.

There was one caveat: while recommending Plan III, Jacob did make a point of not ruling out Plan I, the original White Paper - albeit with a backhanded, even vaguely passive-aggressive justification. It was a military strategist's thought process at work. He still didn't like Plan I, but since (to his mind) they'd never get enough advertising revenue, and it was therefore bound to fail, it might have been politically expedient to back it for now, wait for it to inevitably crash and burn, and clean up the rubble afterwards with their own second channel, while suppressing the urge to say "told you so". Jacob didn't go this far in his paper, but he did make a point of underlining what he thought was the high likelihood of Plan I's failure.

One thing, however, was inescapable, for Jacob and the BBC. The monopoly was over. That was, if not the whole point (making money was also a major consideration), then a major motivating factor behind the whole enterprise. The Government wanted another television service run by a different set of minds and points of view. They would have their Competitor. The BBC would no longer be the only game in town. An era was at an end.

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2021