

JOHNNY TODD RISING

Meanwhile, the Pilkington Committee Enquiry continued to loom large throughout Greene's early tenure. Greene found himself "making speeches two or three times every month" in his first two years in charge, every word carefully chosen as part of his strategy of approaching it as a problem in psychological warfare - "define one's objectives, rally one's friends, rattle one's enemies, state one's case with the utmost conviction, persuasiveness and clarity".

Certainly Greene didn't lack confidence, or indeed chutzpah in looking back. In a collection of essays and speeches published at the end of his tenure he opined that ITV

"...made the usual mistake of thinking that they were fighting the same war over again and were bound to win."

Although he also added a stern warning for his successors: "The BBC must remember that next time."

Early on, the Committee drew up a list of specific things on which they wished to ruminate: the Charter and licence fee were a given, but beyond that they were looking to the future. There was more than enough room, both in terms of hours and in bandwidth, to expand both sound and vision broadcasting. In specific, the Committee were pondering extended radio hours and, most interestingly of all, a potential third television channel, a mere five years after the inauguration of the second. This, of course, came with the sub-question of whether it should be another commercial broadcaster or a second BBC channel. There were continuing advances in technology to consider as well - 625 line transmission was already a thing in many places, and colour was around the corner - for which this new channel could potentially serve as a notional petri dish. Assuming they agreed it was a good idea in the first place, and depending on who they thought should run it.

Sir Harry Pilkington's aim was to have this all sorted out by the end of 1961, leaving plenty of time for the Government - now led by Harold Macmillan - to pass any necessary legislation before the expected 1963 general election. In the event, it took a bit longer than that, and the final report was issued in June 1962 - which turned out to still leave plenty of time, as 1963 would prove to be quite a hectic year for the Conservative Government, what with various ins and outs, and the election would wait until 1964.

1962 was, therefore, a big year for the BBC, as are most years ending with a two. Pilkington was just the brightest-flashing belisha beacon. As the baby-boom generation matured, and the war receded into the distance, society gradually relaxed. Great notional collective buttocks gradually unclenched. Greene saw it happening, and could have chosen to fight it. Many did, including a certain Shropshire schoolteacher soon to become important in the narrative.

Greene, however, did not. In fact, he swam with the tide, commissioning new programming that more closely reflected reality as it actually was, rather than as the Establishment desperately wanted it to be. That was practically the mission statement of one of the 1962 debutants, the defiantly northern and unglamorous Z-Cars - intended as an antidote to Dixon of Dock Green (admittedly also on the BBC) which even then was seen as basically an anthology of Enid Blyton fairy tales in comparison with reality.

Z-Cars debuted in January and raised a bit of ire among working policemen (particularly the Chief Constable of Lancashire, who'd initially welcomed the Liverpool-in-all-but-name-set programme as a break from constantly hearing about That London). Shedding the cherubic image of Dixon was good, but the alternative - policemen as ordinary working blokes with flaws and occasional bad language (by the standards of the time) - turned out to sting a bit. Such depictions were radical for the time, though - articles were written marvelling at the mere fact that the police were being scrutinised at all.

Most importantly, however, it caught on with the public. It ran for a remarkable six series and 182 episodes across four years before the main cast moved into what became an increasingly bewildering web of spin-offs (multiple iterations of Softly, Softly and solo vehicles for Stratford Johns, and even some history documentaries). Meanwhile the original was almost immediately revived as a soap-opera and continued for well over a decade - by which time the same was being said of Z-Cars as had been said of the almost-adventures of Constable Dixon. But that's progress for you.