POINT/COUNTERPOINT

A fortnight after the formation of Bonham Carter’s lobbying group - the National Television Council - Mr. Attlee, now Leader of the Opposition, drew his own line in the sand. At a miner’s rally he declared that “It looks at present as though the Government will hand over television to private enterprise”, and that, this being the case, Labour would “have to alter it when we get back to power".

If Attlee’s intention really was to stand against commercial television, and there’s no reason to think it wasn’t, this was a grave error on a number of levels. First and most simply, he had forgotten that the first person to take sides on any issue ultimately takes sides for the opposition as well, if only by default. Attlee had instantly made commercial television a party political issue - and, to make matters worse, he had placed himself (as it turned out) in the unpopular camp.

A Gallup poll held around the same time suggested greater resistance among the Conservative Party than Labour, to the surprise of some. But that was before Attlee made his speech, explicitly taking sides on the matter, and in so doing almost immediately backfiring fairly impressively. The main effect of Attlee declaring the Labour party’s stance on commercial television - which was, incidentally, barely even acknowledged by the commercial television lobby itself - was to consolidate the previously wavering Conservatives on the other side, if only on general principles. Attlee had even given the Government a valid reason to activate the whips on the issue and make it official.

His final mistake was to promise something that in all likelihood couldn’t be delivered. This was pointed out by the distinguished journalist William Clark - like Attlee, an opponent of commercial television - in an article in Twentieth Century magazine a month after the speech. Clark disdained Attlee’s conviction that a theoretical Labour Government could just put the genie back in the bottle after a preceding Conservative administration had released it.

His reasoning was simple: once onscreen and broadcasting, commercial television was bound to be popular. That was its whole reason for existence. It would have to be unusually, catastrophically inept not to be - to the point of self-sabotage. Under the reasonable assumption that this doesn’t prove to be the case, a Labour - or any other - Government coming along and abolishing it after the fact would be painting themselves as killjoys at best and destructive tyrants at worst. Either way they’d be lucky to get elected ever again. If commercial television was to be stopped, it would have to be now, from the start.

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Meanwhile Ian Jacob and the BBC looked on. Were they about to be privatised? It seemed unlikely. No-one really wanted to mess around with the existing Corporation, if only because they weren't sure how or if this commercial thing would work - for all they knew it might explode and take the entire BBC with it, leaving Britain with nothing. It was an unacceptable and unnecessary risk, and this basic position was confirmed in a speech in Parliament on July 2nd, 1953, by the Postmaster General, Lord De La Warr.

The ostensible point of the speech was to announce that a White Paper would be prepared for the autumn to explicitly lay out the terms under which, as De La Warr put it, "competitive television might be permitted to operate"[1]. This White Paper, and the inevitable debate in the House, would "enable the House and the country to exercise a proper judgment in this essential matter before a final judgment is taken"[1]. But before he even got around to that, De La Warr made it clear that the BBC would be left "intact" and indeed extended - the Corporation, he urged, should "move forward at once with certain projects"[1] - including the further expansion of television and research into VHF broadcasting.

De La Warr kept any details about the form commercial television would take calculatedly vague - not that he had much choice, given that no-one really knew anything solid about it yet. The important part, especially for Ian Jacob and the BBC, was that now they knew where they stood. They weren't being touched directly - they could carry on with what they were doing - but things were still fundamentally changing. Competition was coming. And not in the way they'd been trying to engineer it, with a second channel of their own. Real, external, money-driven competition.

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