FATHER'S SHOUT

Over the course of a year and a half, the Hankey Committee met a total of thirty times to hear evidence from various companies related, or who would have liked to have been related, in some way to the broadcasting industry. There were old hands who had helped to set up the original Company, such as Marconi-EMI and General Electric. There were Dragons' Den-style pitches from new innovators like Scophony, who were developing a motorised system of mirrors mounted on rotating drums as an alternative to the cathode ray tube. There were Government representatives from the Ministry of Education and the Board of Trade. There was the BBC themselves, of course, And there was also one private citizen, by special invitation personally signed by Hankey: John Logie Baird.

Despite having been left behind by the industry itself, Baird never stopped working in his lab at Crescent Road, London, feverishly hammering away at television innovations decades ahead of anything anyone else was even considering at that time - such as high definition, colour and even 3D ("stereoscopic relief"), all of which he thought not only possible but, given a bit more research, practical and even ultimately inevitable. His recommendations to the committee, unsurprisingly, tended to involve the nation adopting his latest technological advances as soon as possible.

The big project at Crescent Road when Hankey came knocking in 1944 was Telechrome, which involved an indeterminate number of electron guns (up to three) pointed at some translucent multicoloured polymers to provide a fairly high-def (600 lines) and brightly coloured picture. Baird gave the Committee a demonstration of this and other things he was working on, and a 2000 word memo detailing his recommendations, as television's father, for its future. Alongside Telechrome, which he was sure he could make practical as a national standard before long, these recommendations included a ludicrously over-confident call for the industry to aim for a screen resolution of 1000 lines. This was another thing he reckoned he had already achieved in his laboratory and, like Telechrome, was one Eureka away from making viable in practice. For reference, the standard was still 405 lines, via the system patented by Marconi back in the mid-thirties which had put Baird out of the running in the first place.

Baird's main recommendation outside of the technology itself was to end the BBC's monopoly. His longest-term vision was of a global international television service, but even he acknowledged that "considerable time must elapse" before that could even go on the agenda. Television had yet to spread outside of London before the War called its temporary halt. Spreading the medium to "the provinces" (ie everywhere else) was the first priority of all. But then that didn't necessarily have to involve the BBC.

A new independent television service to breaking the Corporation's monopoly was not only

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2020

something Baird considered crucial, he was keen to be a part of such a service. He had already formed a new company, John Logie Baird Ltd, for that exact purpose (the original Baird company having long since slipped from his control, even before it disintegrated completely shortly before the War broke out), with help from his good friend, acclaimed actor, and fellow son of Helsenburgh, Jack Buchanan. This new company would, in Baird's best-case scenario, broadcast to the nation in colour (via the Telechrome system) under similar auspices to the BBC. The extent to which Baird was motivated by residual bitterness at the BBC for the end of their relationship, which precipitated the end of the original Baird company, is obviously impossible to measure.

Either way the Hankey Committee agreed with the principle, and were highly impressed with Telechrome, although Baird's plan for 1000-line two-colour national broadcasting would have required then-unthinkably vast tracts of bandwidth, not to mention the complete overhaul and replacement of every single piece of the extant television broadcasting apparatus in the entire country. A tall order at any time, but right after a devastating global conflict Baird might as well have been asking for multicoloured oxygen. The Committee's interest, and that of the television industry (and its aspirants) continued for a while; Hankey and company encouraged Baird to keep searching for some kind of practical compromise, and he was in talks with Cable and Wireless to open a colour studio in 1944.

These ultimately came to nothing, however. There were legal reasons (there was an irritating competition-law loophole that prevented the opening of such a studio for several years) but probably the more pressing cause was that Baird suffered from a combination of hypothyroidism and an almost pathological need to continue working, even through cripplingly high fevers. By 1945 he was rarely visiting his lab any more, largely because he couldn't climb more than two stairs in a row without collapsing in exhaustion. In the winter of 1946 he had a decent-sized stroke which left him theoretically bedridden, to the extent that his wife and doctors could keep him there, until his death in June. Telechrome effectively died with him, and when colour television did arrive it was via a very different process: a simpler, cheaper one that was largely compatible with extant technology, but the picture wasn't quite as bright, and it didn't even come close to 1000 lines.

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2020