HALEY'S CHOICE

At the start of the year, veteran Times editor William Frances Casey retired after spending nearly forty years with the newspaper, starting as a sub-editor shortly before the First World War and rising to the top job shortly after the Second. Britain's main paper of record was therefore in the job market, and one name stood out to the headhunters in positively macrocephalic fashion.

The feet of William Haley- Sir William since 1946 - had begun to itch as the fifties dawned. He was the first Director-General to have a truly significant tenure since Reith. At the start of 1952, while Parliament was finally finishing its deliberations on the already barely-relevant Beveridge recommendations, he was starting to come up to his decade in charge - starting from his appointment in 1943 as Editor-in-Chief, a defacto co-Director Generalship which was soon combined with the real job (and has been ever since).

The milestone held no interest to Haley - indeed, Reith remains the only man to stay as much as a full decade - and, although not unhappy at the Corporation, was starting to consider moving on to new challenges if the opportunity came up. As Haley ticked into his fifties, he was approaching the point where if he didn't make a move he was in danger of spending the rest of his career at the BBC. He had no particular interest in this potential fate, particularly since he still thought of himself as a journalist, not an administrator - which is the only role the BBC had for him at this point.

When Casey announced his retirement, the timing was so on point that it almost seemed like divine intervention. Haley was a newspaperman by instinct and always had been, even at the BBC. His true loyalties were most obviously demonstrated immediately after the War, when he deliberately took steps to reign the BBC's news department back in, restoring the primacy of print media as the public's information brokers. Whenever he left the Corporation, it would inevitably have been to go back to Fleet Street, and so it proved.
The Times made their job offer with time to spare: shortly before the White Paper was even published, in fact. As he watched it struggling its way through Parliament, forced by his job description to accompany it all the way, one imagines the decision made itself. It's hard to picture a more stark illustration of the difference between a bureaucratic, administrative future at the BBC and a creative, journalistic one back in Fleet Street. Nor a better-timed one.

On the 6th of June, 1952, the announcement was made public: the new editor of the Times was to be Sir William Haley, and as a result he was leaving the post of Director-General of the BBC, effective from the 30th September, although in practice he had been granted a leave of absence

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from the first of August. He was given a series of glowing valedictions: the Board of Governors, praised his role in the "furtherance of moral and cultural values" in both the Corporation and Britain in general.

More notably still, the BBC's internal magazine Ariel published a message from John Reith himself congratulating Haley on the Times editorship ("the most splendid of offices") and thanking him for holding "the second most responsible office in the country with dignity, devotion and distinction; to the general acclaim". No-one wanted to ask him if the office of Prime Minister came first or third.

Haley made an effort to bow out as gracefully as possible, personally bidding farewell to as many of his colleagues as he could, and delivering what amounted to a farewell speech at the General Liason Meeting - a sort of AGM of the BBC's senior staff, only less formal and not annual - on July 1st. Here he spoke of a "new era" to go with the new charter, with other staff changes going on beneath him, with new heads of Television Drama, Spoken Word and Technical Services, among others, due to come in at the same time as the new Director-General - and all on top of the reorganisation caused by the birth of the National Committees. He closed with a warning against the encroachment of sponsorship and commercialisation, and a stirring speech calling for the protection of the Corporation's integrity:

"*Fight against too many hours. Fight against lowering of standards. Fight for all necessary outside cooperation and resources. Television must not become a film industry. Television must remain civilised and adult…"*[1]

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