STRATAGEMS OF DEFEAT

The anti-commercial lobbyists, in the Labour Party and elsewhere, took a while to admit defeat in their struggle against advertising, doomed though it was and increasingly obviously so. Eventually Rab Butler told Ian Jacob directly that there was no alternative for funding a second television service except by advertising. Jacob relayed this to the Board of Governors, who tugged at their collars uncomfortably as they surveyed Plans I-IV, asking tentatively if Jacob was sure Plan IV was really out of the question (he was, and even if he hadn't been, Butler was), or even wondering if a possible Plan V could be drawn up.

Ultimately, Board member Lady (Juliet) Rhys-Williams gamely stepped forward, proposing an outlandish scheme whereby the BBC would stop making programmes altogether and instead become a mere holding corporation for two new television companies, both funded by the licence fee supplemented by a minimum of advertising, or else literal coin slots in the back of the televisions (which was being pioneered in America).

It was probably quite telling that Lady Rhys-Williams already had controllers in mind for her two new companies, and even more telling that those controllers were to be fellow anti-competition lobbyists George Barnes and Norman Collins. In the event, the idea was smacked down almost immediately by the other Governors on the grounds that it would basically end the BBC and thus destroy "the strongest weapon for the maintenance of existing standards"[1].

There was even a Plan VI drawn up somewhere, by someone, but all details of that have been lost save that it was intended to combine the best points of all the plans (possibly even including V) in a desperate attempt at finding, or forging, some sort of common ground compromise between the BBC and the Government. Whatever it actually consisted of, the Board of Management turned it down just as flat as the Governors had Rhys-Williams' gambit.

Finally, as 1953 came to a close, Parliamentary debate made it clear that television advertising was unavoidably coming, and that no possible compromise could exist without including it in some way. The Labour Party howled and rended its garments but remained impotent in opposition. On top of that, the BBC were informed in no uncertain terms that the Government intended this to be a true competitor - the Corporation were to play little or no part in it.

Suddenly everything was much more straightforward. All Roman numerals were rendered moot -

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Plan I, the original White Paper, was practically the only option left. The Government had spoken, and as far as they were concerned the establishment of commercial television was the entire point. The final illusion the Governors and other anti-advertising lobbyists had to hold onto was that maybe, just maybe, there'd be an election before any of this could happen, and the Conservatives would lose it.

This was barely a hope at all, and it was shattered into granules by the Director-General himself in his memo on "The Future of Broadcasting", with which he began (on New Year's Day itself) what was sure to be an interesting 1954 the Corporation. In stone-facedly serious tones, Jacob reiterated his fear and loathing of advertising, while simultaneously confirming its inevitability (though not, thankfully, at the BBC itself) and slamming the lid shut on any faint hope otherwise.

"*The establishment of a separate system of television financed entirely, or almost entirely, by advertising revenue creates something that will never be reversed or brought further under control. To bank on this happening after the next general election would be a foolish gamble. Future development is certain to be in the direction of further freedom for commercial television, as the power of the advertisers increases, [and] as the operation rapidly becomes more profitable…"*

Ian Jacob was a military man, and a strategist. Military planning, even in hypothetical scenarios, depends on a clear contact with reality. If wishes were ammunition, Gallipoli might have worked out. Not to mention fresh water, food supplies, enough guns to go around, some modern abseiling equipment and any kind of plan at all, and also some more ammunition. The point is that Jacob wasn't interested in faint, doomed hopes. For example, the faint hope that the new television service wouldn't last - that it would run out of money and die out before the sixties.

"*The available evidence points to there being a great deal of money behind those who will be concerned with commercial television, an amount ample to tide over the initial unprofitable period and even to pay some or all of the cost of converting existing television sets in the hands of the public*."

Ian Jacob was a General on the ground. He had no time for daydreams or possible reprieves. His job was to deal with what was actually happening, and that was a new television service full of adverts with which the BBC would have to compete, every day, for the rest of its existence.

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