

UNDERTAKING SIDES

Gaitskell's broadcast turned out to be the capstone of a rather busy day of highly public anti-war sentiment, centring around a demonstration in the middle of London in which thirty thousand people heard Aneurin Bevan bellowing up a storm against the Prime Minister and his actions. If Gaitskell felt potentially overshadowed he didn't show it that evening. Where Bevan did what he did best - rail against the Conservatives - Gaitskell reached across the aisle, pointing out that millions of Britons disapproved strongly of military action over Suez, even by proxy, and that Eden's purpose was to regain the Canal in defiance of not only world opinion but this vast cohort of his own people (though probably not quite a majority).

Following Eden's example, Gaitskell framed his speech as an address, even an appeal, to the entire nation. In practice, he was clearly addressing rebel Tories who disapproved of Eden, and whose numbers were slowly but steadily increasing to the extent that the Prime Minister's position was starting to come under threat. Some had urged him to press directly for Eden's resignation. Gaitskell chose to keep that card in his deck for the time being, but did make an explicit pledge to "support a new Prime Minister in halting the invasion of Egypt...and complying with the decisions and recommendations of the United Nations." Nigel Nicolson MP, a backbencher who had forsaken Eden for at least as long as his Egypt policy continued, went so far as to say that Gaitskell "had an audience of about 20 million, but his talk was really addressed to thirty people, of whom I was one." 

Nicolson overestimated the ratings somewhat; Eden had had about eighteen million viewers and listeners, divided evenly between television and radio; Gaitskell as Opposition leader had slightly less - although he was helped by the ITV transmission having Armchair Theatre for a lead-in. Certainly it attracted enough eyes and ears to be instantaneously controversial, condemned in some quarters as an active betrayal of British forces in the field, or near the field, or about to be in the field - depending on how the speaker viewed the situation.

One such appalled observer was none other than the BBC's Chairman - and close personal friend of the Prime Minister, of course. Cadogan found Gaitskell's address downright disgraceful, but consoled himself with the notion that the broadcasters, in allowing it, had merely handed him the rope with which to hang himself. On the other hand, Violet Bonham Carter - who, before she was lobbying against ITV, served a term as a BBC Governor, and remained a close friend of Winston Churchill throughout - told Gaitskell that in his broadcast he spoke for England.

Whatever the case, the nation was split almost down the middle - with a slight majority against the Prime Minister. The Manchester Guardian and Daily Mirror condemned "Eden's War", while the Daily Express, in a latterly chilling turn of phrase, supported his desire to "keep Britain Great". The BBC were caught in the middle, wishing desperately they could just ignore it, knowing that it was impossible. They had to report on this increasingly tangled and insane mess without actively enraging either side - which was, of course, all but impossible.

On bonfire night, boots hit the ground as both British and French paratroopers dropped into Port Said. The BBC were prepared for this escalation - or as prepared as they could have been, considering the long, serious conversation on the subject took place, by necessity, not between the Director General and the Chairman but their respective deputies, Sir Phillip Morris and Harman Grisewood - Jacob was still in Australia, Cadogan in Paris on mysterious "Suez business". The policy resulting from this conversation was to stay the course - to change nothing as regards programming, editorial policy or extra-corporate diplomacy. This decision was greeted with surprise both from Parliament - particularly Downing Street and the Foreign Office - and from within Broadcasting House itself.

There was a certain sensibility to it, however. Now there were actual physical troops on the ground, the general opinion shifted once again so that for the first (and as it turned out last) time, there was a small majority in favour of what was euphemistically labelled "Eden's Suez policy", particularly on the Conservatives' side. It was now a case of supporting the troops, a very different matter to supporting the Prime Minister. Even then, however, it was clear this case of affairs would only last as long as the war, or whatever they were calling it, went well for Britain. The BBC retaining absolute neutrality in their basic operations as well as their editorial stance would, if nothing else, protect them from the vacillations of the needle.