

LAND OF EDEN

Broadcasting was fully integrated into the political sphere by now. Before the launch of the Competitor - to be known in general as ITV - there was a General Election. Television played a small (one paragraph) part in both the major parties' manifestos - and in particular the introduction of commercial broadcasting. The incumbent Conservatives bragged about how they'd brought choice into the industry and detonated the monopoly:

"The new medium of television, which is becoming ever more important in our lives, must not be under monopoly control. Conservatives have ensured that alternative and competing television programmes will soon be available."

All Labour, still under a weary Clement Attlee, could do in response was to essay some mealy-mouthed equivocation and a vague promise to somehow introduce another alternative service, presumably to rival the BBC, which seemed ill-thought out and quite possibly was made on the sole basis that they knew they wouldn't have to follow through.

"Television is a growing influence for good or ill. Labour will establish an alternative public television service, free from advertising."

Sure enough, the Conservatives won with an increased majority and a new Prime Minister. The election had been called upon the retirement of Winston Churchill and his replacement with his nephew-in-law, Anthony Eden, as a way of legitimising Eden's position - he could now say he was elected as opposed to simply inheriting. The election had been televised, but with little enthusiasm or impact - partly because it was a dull campaign with a largely pre-ordained result, and partly because the majority politicians still didn't trust this new medium, with its vulgarly wide reach and distancing nature that made it much harder to play to the crowd. A new generation was on the rise, however, one more used to broadcasting, and at its forefront was the new Prime Minister.

With his waxed moustache, brylcreemed hairline and dashing chiselled features, Eden was the first telegenic Prime Minister, an upper-class, paternal Douglas Fairbanks. He also had relative celebrity status, and not just (or even primarily) from his marriage. He had served with distinction in the First World War from the age of 19, even surviving part of the Battle of the Somme. He then served even more publicly in World War II in and around the War Cabinet, mostly in the Foreign Office. Where he split from his uncle - apart from being svelte and handsome - was in his

enthusiasm for the new media. Eden was the first PM to actually like television, enjoy appearing on it and be aware of its potential as a political tool - or weapon.

There were certain dated attitudes to be overcome in the television industry itself, of course. Another part of the reason the 1955 election made very little impact is that news broadcasting in general at this point in time was quite dull and non-committal. There were multiple reasons for this. One, quite a large one, was the distinctly unhelpful “fourteen-day rule”.

The “rule “ was actually more of an informal understanding between the BBC and Parliament. It had originated in 1944, after the successful invasion of France, when the war looked to be winding up. Essentially it precluded any discussion of any issues whatsoever that were currently being discussed in Parliament, or were scheduled to be within a fortnight or less. It was actually originally the BBC’s idea, and in 1944 and 45 it was more of a nuisance for the politicians - the wartime Coalition Government was clearly on borrowed time, and plans were being made for the necessary rebuilding and relaunching of Britain into a new era of peace - including the first General Election in a decade. The Fourteen-Day Rule, in this context, prevented undue pressure being put on the BBC by politicians with their own agendas, thereby ensuring a smoother transition and preserving the BBC’s all-important impartiality.

However, the Rule had now outlived the war by a decade, and with it any context under which it could make any practical sense. Any practical sense to the BBC, that is; it still survived because now, in peacetime, it benefitted the politicians instead. Particularly those like Winston Churchill, Prime Minister for the past four years and long-standing sceptic (at best, outright enemy at worst) of the BBC, all the way back to its Company days. His belief that a national broadcaster should either be a tool of the Government or not exist at all had never waned, and although the time was long past that he could reshape it along those lines (if such a time existed it was during the General Strike in 1923), the Fourteen-Day Rule was a decent compromise, asserting the predominance of Parliament while keeping the Corporation from having any possible influence or impact on it, or indeed from doing anything except report on things Parliament had said a fortnight earlier. And we all know what a week is in politics.