THE LAST WORD

Introducing commercials was only part of it, of course. While the BBC were ruminating on their next step, Postmaster General De La Warr let Ian Jacob know that “the Government was very anxious to avoid the possibility of a monopoly in the form of a single programme company”[1]. Technically this was in response to the Corporation kicking around the notion of the ITA as production company for The Competitor, with the responsibilities of the smaller broadcasting companies being limited to simply transmitting the shows the ITA made for them.

De La Warr’s response spoke to the Conservative Government’s desire not to replace one monopoly with two competing ones, but also more fundamentally to their distrust of monopolies in general. The modern-day religion of the free market and its invisible hand was still being formulated. Milton Friedman was in the process of laying out the fundamental basis of the sort of laissez-faire neoliberalism which would, 25 years later, be considered God. Competition, under this philosophy, was the engine that made the world run, and it was the whole point of the developing Television Bill. A competitor for the BBC, yes, but also within the new service itself. The idea was for commercial television itself to develop into a river “from many little rivulets and streams”[1] as it would be put in the Sunday Times in 1961, some six years after the fact.

The goal now was to ensure the continuing operation of the BBC as it always had done, with the licence fee and the public remit and everything, with as little change as possible, in the face of an alternative for the viewing public. The Governors wrote one last letter - described as an aide-memoire - to the Government in which they set out their grievances one last time for the record - specifically that the very concept of public service broadcasting was potentially imperilled by the introduction of advertising.

“*Advertising and the need to make money bring into the conduct of broadcasting a new motive which will inevitably become primary...The Programme Companies are there to make a profit by satisfying the advertiser, that is to say, by conveying his message to the largest possible audience. The idea of giving a service to the public may still be there, but it can only be a secondary motive.”*

They added a pointed comment that they understood and even heartily agreed with the need for a second channel, but would have been perfectly happy to supply it themselves. This wasn’t just passive-aggression; the Governors argued that the introduction of competition, especially commercial competition, reduce the viewing public to a mere “market”, and has a detrimental effect on quality:

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"*When the competition is between commercially conducted services and public services, it cannot be valuable in terms of broadcasting, as it chiefly involves competition for the largest audience."*

An argument which also reduces the public to a mere market, and the lowest common denominator to boot, but if they even noticed the contradiction there's a good chance they'd rationalise it away with the claim that at least the BBC had earned it.

Finally and inevitably they brought up the financial impact of the Government's plan. Those resources - personnel, real estate and equipment -were still finite, and more to the point unchanging, even though demand for them was about to double. Given this, the Governors argued that if advertising was being introduced to save licence money, it would only do so in the short term. In the long and even medium terms, the introduction of advertising-sponsored competition would drive up costs, stretch the licence fee thin, and threaten public service broadcasting as a result.

The Government were actually willing to talk over this particular issue, although as it turned out this only amounted to a series of enquiries as to how much the BBC would be willing to help out the Competitor by sharing equipment and such. The Corporation indicated that they would be happy to oblige, all other things being equal.

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