THE VISION THING

So what was to be done? Beveridge himself wasn't fond of the BBC's monopoly, but If commercial television was the only other option he reluctantly stood in its favour. Ideas and proposals abounded during the course of the investigation. Two groups in particular became prominent: one was made up of members of the socialist think-tank the Fabian Society. The other was known as the Liberal Research Group and actually consisted of just three people: Dingle Foot, Aubrey Herbert and Bruce Belfredge, all members of the Liberal Party (Foot joined most of his family in Labour a few years later; none of them are of any relation to Robert Foot, the former Director-General).

The Fabians suggested breaking it up into four separate authorities: one for television, two for radio (national and regional) and one for the World Service. All separate and independent, but under the jurisdiction of the same governing authority along the lines of the Federal Communications Commission in America. The Liberal Research Group argued something similar, but more bullish. They advocated breaking it into three (one for national broadcasting, one for overseas broadcasting and one for television in particular) plus a bunch of local organisations, and setting them all against each other, echoing Selwyn Lloyd's evangelism for the concept of "competition" as the answer to all the BBC's current faults.

The various partition schemes didn't seem to be the answer. When the Committee brought the Fabians' notion of four micro-BBCs under the same board of Governors to William Haley, he expressed grave doubts in its practicality: *"..[T]hey would be rather like a small boy holding a gyroscope spinning it at very full speed."* [1] Beveridge was more interested in the Liberal Group's version, but ultimately rejected the version they'd brought to him, while encouraging them to go away, think about it, and return to the Committee with a new draft. This they failed to do.

They also, inevitably, called on Lord Reith. He was then the Chairman of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation, working to bring some form of broadcasting system to the far reaches of the former Empire, and order to that system. It was a little over a decade since he'd left the Corporation, and a particularly eventful, transformative decade - much to the chagrin of the man himself, who was never over-fond of transformation when he didn't control the process.

As anticipated, he was dead set against competition on principle, seeing the very idea as unavoidably having a negative effect on programme quality - referring to moral qualities more than artistic ones, naturally. The all-important duty of broadcasting to ensure as few people go to hell as

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possible was best served through what Reith called “the brute force of monopoly”. Without competition, ratings were (theoretically) irrelevant. There was no need to chase an audience with nowhere else to go, and therefore no reason to offer them incentives to tune in in the first place.

Apart from that, Reith’s three-page paper advocated more, and indeed almost absolute, power for the Director-General, with both the Governors and Parliament shorn of much of their oversight and influence. Essentially he waved the Whitley Document in the committee’s faces and insisted on its eternal wisdom. The Document - the manifesto he’d drawn up in 1931 with then Chairman J. H. Whitley, which had canonised the BBC’s power structure in the DG’s favour - was still holy writ at the corporation, issued to all new Governors at the start of their term with the requirement that they sign off on it.

But things, despite Reith’s best efforts, were changing, and even the great man himself knew that by 1949, he was fighting a rearguard battle. Even the Document itself was no longer sacred. The version Reith was insisting on was the original, drafted in 1931, and that had been initially dropped during the war, then revived shortly afterwards (at the suggestion of the Ministry of Information rather than from the BBC themselves) in a slightly revised form, with extra text tilting the balance very slightly back in the Governors’ direction.

That was obviously never going to be enough, however - it was the whole principle of the thing that got on the collective wick of the current crop of Governors, and they made that perfectly clear to Beveridge when he came knocking, at every possible opportunity and a few others they created specifically for the purpose. Ultimately, Beveridge’s final report did indeed recommend scrapping the damn thing and rethinking the relationship between DG and board along more balanced lines, as well as increasing the Governors’ salary.

The monopoly was - despite Beveridge’s antipathy toward it - more or less preserved. What did interest him was the idea of regional broadcasting, which was a major part of the Committee’s recommendations. Broadcasting had been inevitably London-centric up to this point, but more-or-less national coverage had been achieved in the twenties and the technology and infrastructure had only improved since then (World War II notwithstanding). It was time to properly serve the provinces, starting with the other home nations. The Committee recommended the formation of National Broadcasting Councils for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the heads of which would also have a seat on the BBC Board of Governors.

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