

PARTLY ELECTION BROADCASTING

Political satire had come to mass media just in time for British politics to become part of the great 1960s social transformation. The post-war, traditional-values, patriarchal Tory government came apart in 1963 with the Profumo affair that ultimately saw off the walrus-moustached, pipe-smoking, kindly-faced national dad Harold Macmillan. The obvious choice of replacement was Rab Butler, one of the leading faces of 1950s and early 60s Conservatism, and considered very much the next in line. Unfortunately for him, despite being Home Secretary for his entire tenure, Macmillan never liked him, leaving the imminent election to be fought by skeletal, headmasterly Alec Douglas-Home instead.

This election was of particular interest to the broadcasting industry. Coverage had evolved from Lord Reith incomprehensibly machine-gunning results into the wireless. Television's influence had gradually grown, from the 1945 Attlee victory being the first to be broadcast live, to the medium increasing in power and influence along with a more media-savvy political set - demonstrated by Tony Benn practically inventing political advertising with his masterminding of the *Britain Belongs to You* campaign of Party Political Broadcasts.

It wasn't enough to prevent a landslide victory for the Conservatives, however, with Macmillan and his Government at the height of their popularity. But he was gone now; the Profumo affair had severely damaged their image, and landed them behind an ultimately unknowable toff - an actual aristocrat, just when people were getting ready to consign such people to the status of anachronism - who wasn't particularly enthusiastic about the job of Prime Minister, but now had to convince the country to let him keep it. The next election, frankly, was anybody's. The slightest thing could swing it in either direction. Which is where television came in.

Between the 1959 and 1964 elections, the general public's exposure to national politics had increased exponentially. It was not just that the coverage was more extensive and in greater depth - from the innovations of ITN to the dawn of political satire with TW3 - although that was true. Just on the BBC, Panorama was already something of an institution, having run for over a decade, and from 1957 it was joined by the less stone-faced Tonight in the all-new early evening slot. Current Affairs was becoming more than just an insider's term for a kind of news: a mainstream genre of programming in its own right.

But even setting the content aside, political exposure had grown in the most practical terms conceivable: simply through the spread of television. Almost everyone had one by 1964, where in 1959 the total was still the wrong side of three-quarters of the population. They were also a lot

younger; the original wave of baby boomers - the first television generation - voted for the first time here.

Four years earlier in America a presidential election had potentially been swung by a television broadcast (it was close enough for the idea not to be completely ridiculous). The party leaders and their entourages will have been taking notes. As far as party leaders were concerned, Labour had the advantage. Douglas-Home, while a skilled media operator (keeping a nonchalantly hostile Robin Day at bay on his first interview as Prime Minister) was far from telegenic or charismatic, on top of being off-puttingly upper-class.

Labour leader Harold Wilson, however, was enthusiastic about television and its power. He had been cultivating an image for himself since before taking the helm of the party - a "Man of the People" underlined in red: Gannex raincoat, a nearly ever-present pipe (replacing his actually preferred but far less working-class cigars), and trace amounts of the Huddersfield accent he had been taught to suppress with nasal received pronunciation.

The stage was therefore set for the first modern election, with the two leaders (the Liberals were around as well, but they might as well not have been, winning only six seats and less than 10% of the vote in 1959) providing the perfect symbolism - Douglas-Home practically a walking homage to the Tory past, Wilson looking like, if not the future (although at 48 he was young for a prospective Prime Minister) then at least the present. The broadcasters' job, of course, was to make sure people came to that conclusion - or even a different one - by themselves.