

PERSPECTIVES

Meanwhile, while the West was arguing over that canal in Egypt, the East was having its own face-off in Hungary. Over the autumn of 1956, while many Western eyes were on the Middle East, the Iron Curtain communist regime in Budapest was first toppled by a popular uprising, then brutally reinstated by columns of Soviet tanks, with the West unable to do anything about it without potentially triggering World War III.

Naturally this was a major challenge for the World Service. The transmissions of the besieged Magyar Rádió were fed into the related department at Bush House, where the Hungarian department of the Overseas Service forensically analysed every detail, from precise tones of voice to unusually long pauses between items, in real-time. Meanwhile in Budapest the Hungarians themselves were glued to the Overseas Service. With Magyar Rádió under siege and in danger of changing hands and sides all the time, and Radio Free Europe even then known to deal in over-optimism in hopes of its becoming self-fulfilling prophecy, the BBC was their best hope of objective coverage of the turmoil outside their own houses. Bush House was soon full of messages from Budapest in praise of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

They were more popular in Hungary than at home, in fact. A mere four days after the last broadcast on Free Hungarian Radio - "HELP HELP HELP" - was November 14th, the date of the adjournment debate on BBC bias instigated by the Government. Or more accurately by some particularly fuming Conservative MPs on the Government's behalf. Having forced the debate to take place, the main instigators Sir Peter Rawlinson and Captain Ian Orr-Ewing soon discovered they didn't really have the backing of their own party, who in general would rather put the whole business behind them and didn't believe they really had a case against the BBC (as expected, despite the supposed subject being British media in general, ITV and ITN were never brought up at all).

There was relatively little appetite for the debate from any quarter. The Times that morning explicitly warned them, in an editorial headed "Keep Off" to tread carefully and not create any potential dangerous precedents involving Government intervention in broadcasting - "Whatever is right or wrong with the BBC programmes is a matter for the Governors...appointed precisely for this purpose." This didn't go unnoticed by Rawlinson at the debate itself, nor the identity of the Times' editor (and probable author of the warning), Sir William Haley.

Ultimately only twenty MPs showed up, ten on either side. Despite the low attendance, however, it was surprisingly lively, with its instigators Rawlinson and Orr-Ewing inevitably doing most of the talking. The latter demanded an internal BBC inquiry into all these complaints about bias that he'd

been hearing about (and making). Rawlinson's concern was largely with the Overseas service. Both men brought specific charges, some of which went all the way down to subtle inflections in reporters' voices when discussing particular events or names.

The debate was more or less killed, however, by the Labour MP George Wigg, later to be infamous as one of Harold Wilson's most shadowy henchmen (and the man who first brought the Profumo Affair into Parliament). He gave a buttock-punishingly long speech arguing the exact opposite as Rawlinson, that the BBC was in fact biased in favour of the Government, and had been throughout the Crisis. He even named names: Ian Jacob was a Tory stooge, Cadogan a Foreign Office deadbeat.

However, in Wigg's opinion the problem wasn't the BBC itself, or at least not inherent to it; the problem was the Tories then in charge of it, men who believed that "power should be where power seems to be" who were keeping the BBC from its true mission to "turn this nation into a vast discussion group, probing, inquiring and examining"↑↑.

Sparsely attended it might have been, but the Corporation could still hardly ignore the debate altogether, and duly convened an internal inquiry as Orr-Ewing had demanded. The Board of Governors diligently examined every one of the charges brought up by Rawlinson and Orr-Ewing. A week later their findings were made public: all allegations of bias were groundless, and the BBC's reporting and conduct during the Suez Crisis "fulfilled the BBC's obligations for impartiality, objectivity and telling the truth."

It may not have been a terribly surprising conclusion, considering the internal nature of the inquiry, but it was supported by most outside commentators as well, including most sectors of the Press. The main result of the whole mess was the final scrapping - technically "indefinite suspension" - of the Fourteen-Day Rule, which Suez - being a fast-moving, constantly changing and highly nuanced situation - had finally and unequivocally revealed to be irrational, inexplicable and a complete waste of time.