

THE PRIME MINISTER SHOW

“Near-unprecedented” because this was actually the second ever Ministerial Broadcast to appear on television. However it was arguably the first that really mattered. The first, a mere three months earlier, had been something of a proof-of-concept, triggered by the state visit to the UK of the Soviet Premier and his sidekick as part of Krushchev’s post-Stalin relaunch of the USSR. The purpose of Eden’s broadcast on that occasion was merely to demonstrate that television could be used for such broadcasts, and indeed should be prioritised in future.

That future arrived quickly. Nasser’s unexpected, shocking action had enraged the Governments of at least two countries, and a Prime Minister who didn’t react quickly and with every means at his disposal would look like a damp rag on a stick. For Eden to actively make an appearance in person, declaiming straight down the lens into every television-equipped household in the country - and the remainder would at least be able to hear him on the Home Service - would underline the serious credentials of both the event and the Prime Minister himself.

While the first Ministerial Broadcast had gone off reasonably well - Eden in Alexandra Palace reciting a script saying how nice it would be for the East and West to get along with each other for a change - the second was, by all accounts, a miserable experience. This one was filmed at the forbidding, brutalist Lime Grove Studios, in a studio on the fourth floor - necessitating the Prime Minister taking an unrelentingly bleak journey up three flights of concrete steps, lit by naked, unfiltered lightbulbs, before arriving in a tiny room with some grey drapes, a desk and a camera. He did have a bucket of iced champagne laid on, but it probably didn’t do much to puncture the Orwellian atmosphere.

Eden was also forced (by the need to read his script) to wear his spectacles, which he preferred not to do on public duty, because they were a great handicap to his status as the first telegenic Prime Minister. They were thick milk-bottle numbers that transformed him from Douglas Fairbanks into a slightly worried local grocer. Light was constantly shining into the lenses as well, which an increasingly embattled Eden speculatively blamed on communist agitators working at the BBC trying to sabotage him - a notion he probably got from his uncle-in-law.

It was tricky for the Corporation as well, though, now that there were two television broadcasters. There was no particular question of ITN being involved in making the broadcast, but the commercial broadcaster still had to show it - it was only fair. The speech therefore had to be delayed by twenty-four hours in order to ensure its simultaneous transmission on ITV - the first time this had happened - as well as on the Home and General Overseas Service, and all four national radio networks in the United States.

The speech itself was relatively moderate, which was an agreed legal requirement for such broadcasts. The BBC had drawn up the guidelines well in advance - in 1947, in fact - and they stated in no uncertain terms that such broadcasts “should deal with facts, explain legislation approved by parliament, or appeal for public co-operation”. The content had to be acceptable across party lines and be resolutely uncontroversial. Otherwise, the Opposition (now led by Hugh Gaitskell) were permitted to request a broadcast of their own in rebuttal. Eden’s August broadcast fulfilled this admirably: he explained the importance of the Canal, defined Nasser as a dictator and warned against appeasement. All of which reflected the multi-partisan consensus in Parliament and, broadly, around the world. At that time.

By the end of the month, that was no longer true. Both Britain and France had spent August gradually seething toward boiling point, with military confrontation looking more likely by the day. This was much to President Eisenhower's concern. He was trying to get re-elected, and he didn't want to be facing World War Three right at the start of a putative second term, particularly over this Canal bollocks.

There was also a thing called the United Nations now, of which Britain (and France) were a part, and whose mission statement, at least in theory, was to prevent wars happening if at all possible. They, too, frowned upon the notion of military action against Egypt; they made it clear that the Security Council would consider us the aggressors and denounce us as such.

All this became clear to Hugh Gaitskell as August wore on. No less clear to him, and arguably far more immediately important would have been a statement signed by two dozen of his own MPs on the 8th - the day Eden filmed that broadcast - that forcing Nasser to sell the Canal back at gunpoint would be in violation of the UN charter. So from an initially hawkish starting point - he had been the first to compare Nasser with Mussolini - Gaitskell started to tactically step back, essentially advising Eden to leave it, he's not worth it. The Prime Minister's anger, however, did not abate. The consensus was gone. And the BBC took note and tugged at its collar.