DECONSTRUCTION TIME AGAIN

Post-War Britain started to settle into shape as the Forties finally and wearily came to a long-expected end. Before long the year would end in a one, and that meant charter renewal time. It had more or less rolled over by default in 1941, for obvious reasons, but now the War was over and the world was very different both from the last actual renewal and from the last time it was properly looked at in 1931 - when Reith was still in charge. With that in mind, Attlee's government commissioned yet another committee into broadcasting, headed by William Beveridge (after their first choice, BBC and Ministry of Information veteran Cyril Radcliffe was claimed by the Law Lords), who was a past master at this sort of thing. The previous (and far more famous) Beveridge Commission had led to the creation of the Welfare State, and to Attlee's Government - the implementation of Beveridge's findings having been a key Labour policy at the 1945 election.

This time, Beveridge headed a distinguished and multi-partisan panel largely consisting of broadcasting outsiders like himself (possibly because it was assembled with Radcliffe in mind, before Beveridge was parachuted in). It included Megan Lloyd George, daughter of the legendary Prime Minister; Brigadier Selwyn Lloyd, a young up-and-coming Tory who would eventually become Chancellor of the Exchequer; Joseph Reeves, a Labour MP (for Greenwich) apparently chosen out of a hat; a random trade unionist and some Public School headteachers.

The new committee were tasked in 1949 the straightforward goal "...to consider the constitution, control, finance and other general aspects of the sound and television broadcasting services of the United Kingdom (excluding those aspects of the overseas service for which the BBC are not responsible) and to advise on the conditions under which those services and wire broadcasting should be conducted after 31 December 1951". Basically, to take the pulse of broadcasting at the dawn of the fifties, and plan its future thereafter, as with most such committees.

The main question went unspoken in the official terms of reference, but it was fairly obvious at the time: should the BBC keep their monopoly? Should competition be introduced? And if so, should it be, of all things, commercial? This was the Commission's main concern, and it took them once again to the United States to see if there was anything at all palatable about the commercial model of broadcasting, both in television and radio, that could be applied over here.

The general feeling tended to be that there wasn't. Labour in particular had a natural revulsion for the concept, railing against the idea of something as powerful as broadcasting being given over, even in part, to a company motivated by nothing more than profit. The fear was that the never-

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ending hunger for hard cash would see standards (which didn't sell) go out the window in favour of empty spectacle (which did). This attitude was exemplified by the Labour representative on the Commission, Joseph Reeves MP, who after his trip to America claimed that their programming was "positively ruined by obtrusive and objectionable advertising matter"[1].

Of course, in many cases in America, the broadcasters went further than merely selling spot time for commercial announcements, often selling the entire programmes, and having the sponsors involved in, even controlling the production side of things. All of the Commission members recoiled in horror at this notion, with Mrs Mary Stokes (principle of Westfield College) sternly noting the difference "...between merely selling spot time to advertisers for purely revenue reasons at prices related to the popularity of the programme in which the spot advertisement is inserted, and allowing the sponsors, or rather their agents, to get control of the production side of the business..The first might irritate listeners and should only be contemplated as a revenue - producing expedient...The second is calculated to bedevil the whole system and in my opinion it is doing so in the United States."[1]

The closest thing to a champion that commercial television had on the Committee was Selwyn Lloyd, and even he balked at the uncompromising methods of the United States. He was, however, keen to stress the potential of competition, by its mere existence, to prevent complacency. More importantly, he highlighted and partially formulated the idea of applying the concept to a set of small local stations with the potential "to promote community spirit and local interest and to perform the function of the local newspaper in Britain". In so doing, he anticipated the eventual framework of commercial television when it did unavoidably rear its head in the UK.

The Beveridge Commission worked more quickly and quietly than the previous one from the closing months of the war - and indeed than the previous Beveridge Commission. It gave its findings in 1951 - just in time for the Government that commissioned them to be replaced.

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