THE JACOB PAPERS

This became several more in short order when the franchised nature of the Competitor was codified in the initial White Paper stage of the Television Bill. The new service was to consist of several geographically-arranged stations across the nation run by distinct and independent “operating services” - separate, parallel-running companies who between them would shoulder all the responsibility for the actual programming, while the actual ITA would be there to keep them all in line as an independent regulatory body.

This served two purposes: it prevented the replacement of the monopoly with a straight duopoly - in fact something even worse, a pair of monopolies). The confederated structure was also an effective alternative to the sort of “sponsored programming” seen (with great disdain) in America. By dividing the Competitor into smaller, more manageable chunks - and keeping the ITA as a state-supported oversight board - it made it more likely that such smaller companies could survive on inter-programming advertising alone. It was originally the idea of the advertisers themselves, or some of them at least - the ones who didn’t fancy the intrusion of sponsored programming, and the changes it would force upon their way of working, any more than anyone else.

This structure, once decided upon, changed the landscape - the ITA was no longer the Competitor. Instead it was the oversight to several Competitors in different parts of the country, making things more complicated for the BBC.

While the Television Bill was making its way though parliament, the Corporation was assured, repeatedly, at length and by several individuals from the Postmaster-General on down, that nothing would change for them and they would carry on exactly as before. But one suspects that everyone involved knew at the time that this was an easier promise to make than to keep.

The BBC certainly did. There was only a finite amount of resources out there for making television. Not just technology and equipment, but real estate and personnel as well. While the creation of a new outlet should - with any luck - eventually lead to those resources increasing as the expanding market caught up with itself, the Corporation and the Competitor, or Competitors, were inevitably going to have to do some sharing at first. The BBC had to decide how much they were prepared to do, while the ITA decided how much they expected from them, and see how close the two figures were.

Ian Jacob saw the writing on the wall, or at least admitted it was there, before the Governors did.

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As late as November 1953, they couldn't bring themselves to go any further than acknowledging that the status quo was unlikely to remain in place. Which by then had been obvious for some time. The important thing was that the Bill was still at the White Paper stage, and therefore malleable, at least for now. Jacob was therefore charged with formulating possible directions to try and steer it in.

After consultation with an increasingly depressed Board of Management, Jacob was able to draw up a paper of his own detailing four potential ways forward. Plan I was just the Government's White Paper, with no changes at all. Plan II had been suggested by the Archbishop of Canterbury in an article in The Economist, and involved the ITA as a public corporation, modelled closely after the BBC, with both of them sharing the licence fee and making up the difference with advertising.

This was, of course, vanishingly unlikely (to be fair, the Archbishop had first proposed it before the White Paper was revealed), but seemed positively likely next to Plan III. This revived the "second BBC channel" plan, and involved the Corporation running both services in a "separate but equal" arrangement, with the second channel to consist entirely of bought-in programming - either imported or from independent producers - supported by advertising as well as the licence fee. Unsurprisingly this was the idea of the BBC Board of Governors themselves, so Jacob dutifully included it in his paper as Plan III even though it had as much chance of actually happening as immediate universal nuclear disarmament, and both he and they knew it.

Finally, it fell to Jacob himself to provide his own vision, which he set out as Plan IV.

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