The BBC 1922-1995

Passages for commentary

John Mullen

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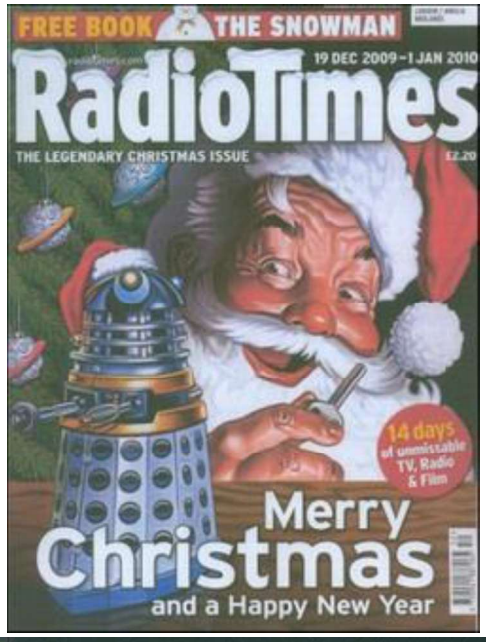


THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

HL Deb 25 July 1951 vol 172 cc1213-96

Extract cc1214-1216

Lord WOOLTON […] It is interesting to note—and I think most creditable—that during the war, with all the stringencies of war, the B.B.C. retained a great deal of its independence. Those members of your Lordships' House who were Ministers at the time will know that we frequently had words on the subject of what we were allowed to do and how much we were allowed to use the broadcasting service. That independence, while it was quite frequently inconvenient, was, I am sure, perfectly right. It is a peculiarly British compromise between logic and practice. Here we have a Government deciding the extent of the licence for broadcasting; we have the Government collecting the revenue; we have the Government appointing the Governors; and, having done all that, we have the Government telling them to be independent. That position cannot be defended on the basis either of reason or of logic. The best parallel is to be found in the entirely illogical composition of your Lordships' House. The answer in both cases, of course, is the quite unassailable one, that it may not be very logical but it seems to work very well.

I have raised this issue because of the obvious danger that lies in the future if we had an unwise Government able to capture the B.B.C. That could be done. It might be done by the use of political patronage, by which the Government would secure the political support of the majority of the Governors; but, more important, and I think infinitely more dangerous, the Government might use their influence through the Chairman of the Governors to secure appointment to key positions on the staff of people who would give a Party slant to the general programmes of the B.B.C. I am glad to see my noble friend the Chairman of the B.B.C. in his place, and I assure him—though I believe it is unnecessary—that in making these remarks on the subject of the Chairman of the B.B.C. I am talking of a hypothetical Chairman, and certainly not casting any reflections on his conduct of his office. The danger is one of degree, and one that varies over a wide area. Nothing more tangible might happen than that a Chairman of deep political conviction might tend to favour those people of like mind, so that the political orthodoxy of the Corporation might take its tone from the Chairman.

There, I believe, is a real danger. The Chairman might, either from an excess of political impartiality, or because of his personal sympathies, allow Communist influence to get a hold in the place. Believe me, once that happened we should have a deliberately destructive force at work, giving a slant to programmes in such a subtle manner that it might be difficult for those in control of the administration of the B.B.C. to be both wise and patently just in dealing with the staff involved. I raise this issue, because I personally am convinced that we are in some danger of hiding our heads in the sand regarding the danger of Communist infiltration into our public and our educational services—and there is no educational service in which it could be so dangerous as that of the Broadcasting Corporation.

The Report of the Beveridge Committee brought to light the ill-defined position of the Governors. I understand from their White Paper the Government propose to deal with this matter by Charter. May I therefore make three observations? I have come to the conclusion that it would be better if the Chairman of the B.B.C. were chosen from one of the very large number of men in our national life—men or women; I have no feeling as to their sex—who have achieved distinction on other than political grounds. I think it might be well if, instead of the Chairman's being chosen by the Government—that is to say, by the Prime Minister of the day—he were chosen by a small Committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Archbishop of Canterbury, acting as an impartial chairman. By that means we might at any rate secure that the temptation to make a political nominee would be reduced. […]

Ordeal by Television – Noel Annan writes about broadcasting, politics, and Ulster, and replies to Raymond Williams

When Lord Caradon summed up the BBC Television programme on Northern Ireland in which he took part by saying that 'we might have been dull but I don't think we have been dangerous,' most people agreed. I certainly did. I believe that the BBC were completely right to go on with the programme, but the balance as to whether they should have done this was far more delicate than those people realised who denounced Mr Maudling for attempting to suppress free speech. One of those people, Mr Raymond Williams (*Listener*, 13 January), disclosed that for him representative democracy is a poor thing unless Ministers can be hauled before the television cameras on occasions and in circumstances not of their own choosing, and there be compelled to defend themselves against their critics. Open politics, so he says, is what we need. An MP ought always to speak and vote as if his constituents were watching him. Once he gets into the corridors of Parliament, once he gets onto the corridors of power, he gets corrupted.

Where have you heard those views before? They remind me of the days after the First World War when secret diplomacy was roundly condemned and the new ideal of the League of Nations was 'open covenants openly arrived at'. It was an ideal which failed. Negotiations can't be carried out in public, and anyone who has tried to run any concern once it gets beyond a certain size knows that you can't plan ahead and at the same time reveal all your plans. Nevertheless the press too, by and large, like to see politicians taken to task: they like to see politicians told that the dignity they think they possess is a figment of their imagination. One columnist thought it was time Ministers realised that Parliament's prestige has declined, and Ministers therefore had no right to claim special authority to pronounce upon any situation. The BBC should be free to present what it wants and in the way that it wants.

Now these claims, which one often hears advanced among the intelligentsia, go far beyond what the BBC itself has ever claimed. The BBC has always recognised that it's in a quite different position form newspapers: newspapers are privately owned; newspapers compete against each other. In the days of its monopoly, the BBC held a very special position, and in regard to politics its position hasn't been much changed by the advent of Independent Television and commercial radio. It is a national system, and thus whenever something of national importance happens in politics, such as a financial crisis or an emergency, a serious tension in foreign affairs, still more if it's a crisis which involves the Armed Forces, like Suez – in those circumstances the BBC must try to retain its independence and hence its credibility vis-à-vis the Government. But at the same time it must be responsive to what the Government thinks is important for the nation.

The classic case of this is the General Strike. John Davidson, Baldwin's *éminence grise* who was in charge of Government broadcasting policy at that time, decided with Reith how often news bulletins should be broadcast. They agreed that it was in the best interests of the nation that the BBC should remain independent and should not act as an agent for government propaganda, which was what Winston Churchill wanted. But in fact its independence was pretty restricted. All the news bulletins were vetted by Davidson's staff, as was the daily situation report, and so when Ramsay MacDonald as Leader of the Opposition asked to broadcast to the nation, although Reith was in favour of his broadcasting, Davidson refused to permit it. Then again, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked to broadcast a speech of conciliation. Baldwin thought it unwise, but he might have given in had not, once again, Davidson intervened. Davidson took the line that the Government had determined from the start that the General Strike must be called off as a precondition to many negotiations with the TUC or the miners: any weakening on that constitutional issue would be disastrous for the future. And once again Reith gave in.

Ever since, Reith has been strongly criticised for his subservience, but if he had not been subservient – or, to put it another way, if he'd not admitted the Government's right to have the last word at a time of national crisis – Davidson would have had him out and taken over the BBC, and the BBC would have lost for ever its general independence in ordinary times, and, in times of crisis, its freedom from becoming a propaganda machine.

Now the point Mr Maudling was making about the Northern Ireland television programme is not unlike the point made by Davidson during the General Strike. […]

Noel Annan, 'Personal View'. "Ordeal by Television – Noel Annan writes about broadcasting, politics and Ulster, and replies to Raymond Williams." *The Listener*, vol. 87, no. 2236, 3 Feb. 1972, p. 131-2.

Lord Hailsham, House of Lords debate on the Pilkington Report, 18th July 1962, 2.55 p.m. (Hansard, vol 242, cols. 605-611)

My Lords, the shrill cries of almost hysterical lamentation and rage which arose on the lips, not always entirely disinterested, of certain newspapers and certain magnates on the publication of the Pilkington Report were surely both undignified and out of place. […] The fact that the Report is so controversial is a fact which I welcome, since it provokes interest, but it has the disadvantage of meaning that we cannot implement it all without further discussion. Moreover, it is fair to say that even since the publication of the Report events like the television exchange through Telstar and other developments in the international and technical field constantly remind us that the subject is simply not one that will ever stand still at all at this stage of its development.

But the fact is that seven years ago we took an important departure of policy in establishing a second channel of television broadcasting financed by advertising […] I think people should not underestimate the popularity of the commercial programmes, as at times I was tempted to think that the Committee had done. But I beg my friends also not to ignore on the other side or to dismiss as contemptible or ridiculous the genuinely popular basis of the serious moral unease reflected on almost every page of the Report.[…]

On sound and on its one television channel the British Broadcasting Corporation has survived in competition with the commercial broadcasts, and I am glad to think that it has received such a good report from the Committee, although, I am not sure I am one of those who would go the whole way with them in seeming to exonerate the B.B.C. from all criticism. The B.B.C. is a national institution of which we are all, I hope, justly proud. The I.T.A. and the programme companies got a basting 609from the Committee which they may or may not have deserved. But here again I would venture to think that there is no practical politician who believes that they can now be destroyed, or that we can now afford to disclaim revenue from advertisements as the main source of revenue

from some of our T.V. channel broadcasts, at least until there are more than four channels altogether.

This is the thesis of the White Paper which after discussion I ask your Lordships to approve. Some decisions are urgent and cannot be delayed, even though they necessarily involve, as they do, controversial corollaries, like that to allot forthwith a second television channel to the British Broadcasting Corporation while not immediately allotting one to the Independent Television Authority. Other decisions will be better delayed for an airing in the light of public opinion as it develops and further consideration of possible alternatives. If I begin with one or two theoretical considerations, I hope that I may be acquitted of being dogmatic in the sense which I have deprecated. It seems to me that both extreme theoretical cases have been in danger of overstatement. If therefore I re-state my own position in relatively moderate terms I hope that I may be forgiven.

Despite a belief in freedom, which I suppose every Member of this House will share, I also think that no responsible Government can wholly wash its hands of anything touching our standards of taste and behaviour. The Puritans may have been wrong, or perhaps they were right, to forbid bear-baiting for the sake of the baiters rather than the bear, but it is not mere puritanism to assert that the state of public morals and the standards of taste in public entertainment can never be a matter of indifference to patriotic men and women and are not necessarily adequately catered for by purely commercial considerations. […]

But surely we must also be on our guard against the opposite danger of paternalism. Prohibition and censorship can be, as we have often discovered in the Christian centuries, as demoralising as surfeit. And if commercial considerations are admittedly inadequate as a criterion of public interests, those who seek to equate the pursuit of profit with the worship of evil are often better friends to the Devil than the pornographer or pimp. If we cannot pass by undismayed by the spectacle of violence, vulgarity and triviality in art, there is also, surely, great unwisdom in trying to shackle human nature to an unnatural asceticism. The truth, my Lords, is surely that in matters of this kind there is somewhere a balance to be struck.

Meeting popular demand

Robin Scott
Controller, Radio 1 and 2

Radio 1 on 247. . . . Radio 2 on 1500 and VHF. Anyone who switched on two radio sets separately tuned to the Light Programmes' medium and long (or VHF) wavelengths at 7 am on Saturday, 30 September 1967 witnessed the strident birth-pangs of a much-heralded and rather bouncy new radio network – or, rather, the emergence of two new programmes, one resembling in many respects the old 'Light' (but with a number of new features), the other brand new in style (but sharing some of the most popular features of the other).

Against a background of political and commercial squabbling, confused thinking and often ill-informed controversy, the White Paper of December 1966 paved the way for a Bill to outlaw the activities of 'pirate' broadcasters and called on the BBC to provide a continuous service of popular music from 5.30 am to 7.30 pm and 10 pm to 2 am. This service was to be carried on the Light Programme medium-wave of 247 metres.

The exact nature of this service and its scope were not – nor could be – exactly defined at the time. The 'popular music' label was applied – or misapplied – to a wide variety of types of music.

It was argued, in many ways with justification, that the Light Programme (apart from news and weather summaries) contained less than two and a half hours of 'speech' programmes in the fourteen hours from 5.30 am to 7.30 pm. It was noted that in spite of 'pirate' competition the Monday to Friday average audience during the breakfast period from 7 am to 9 am had increased by over one million since 1964; that if some inroads had been made into the audiences particularly at weekends these were considerably smaller than the exaggerated claims made by the 'pirate' broadcasters – and this in spite of the fact that the unrestricted (and illegal) use of gramophone records made their programme-building tasks comparatively easy.

Even so, there was clear evidence of a demand for a new-style radio programme and the opportunity to provide this was eagerly seized.

It was immediately evident that a new service could not be valid if it was merely to offer a popular music alternative to the speech programmes on the existing Light Programme whilst otherwise relaying the normal pattern of programmes. Nor could it just be an extension of the 'pop' and popular music output of the Light. This had gradually expanded over the years, acquiring at various times of the day something approaching the format of North American radio with

programme 'segments' or 'strips' of two or three hours' length. But much of this output – particularly the mid-morning period – still retained the fragmented planning pattern of former years.

The new network had to be more than an occasional alternative to the 'Light'. As far as was possible with the resources available, particularly in terms of 'needle time' (the permitted hours of broadcasting of commercial records) Radio 1 had to be designed as a programme with an individual style of presentation. Presentation in its widest sense – to borrow a commercial analogy – embraces everything from the promotion to the packaging of the product. To a radio station delivering a constant stream of popular music in one form or another the manner of delivery is all-important. This must be both professional and personal.

There were, understandably, hundreds of candidates for the important jobs of presenting the peak programmes on Radio 1. From all the 'known quantities' and from auditions about forty names emerged. On about twenty of these rested the main responsibility for launching Radio 1 and sustaining Radio 2. Some of those selected had learnt their professions with 'pirate' radios or with commercial radio stations in the Commonwealth, others had acquired their skills with the BBC Light Programme. Most are young broadcasters – but it was quite evident that a few of the 'older hands' commanded a very wide following and had a special appeal to the 9 am to 5 pm audience which mainly consists of housewives.

And what of the 'product' itself – the musical content? The 'pirates' with few exceptions copied North American formats based on permutations of the Top 20, 30 or 40 best-selling records interlarded with the occasional novelty or hit from yesteryear. On to the basic 'pop' format were grafted station identifications of various kinds, jingles and commercials, with the disc jockey carrying the whole format forward at a pretty frenetic pace. A far cry from the days of Christopher Stone!

None of these stations was concerned with covering the whole spectrum of popular music, for this is not considered commercially viable. But the Light Programme continued to have surprising success with its attempts to please everybody all the time. 'Breakfast Special' was – and is – also a 'format' with only about 30 per cent needle-time providing a fairly fast moving pattern of contrasted types of music and interpretations – from brass bands to 'pop'. Its audience has consistently increased, with a peak audience of 5½ to 6 million at 8 am and a considerably higher total 'patronage'.

COMMENT ON THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENT
Commons Sitting – Prime Minister. *Hansard* House of Commons Debate. "Engagements" 11 May 1982 vol 23 cc596-602

Mr Marlow. With regard to the Falkland Islands, unlike the Commonwealth and the United States, our Community partners, despite their public utterances, seem to have been flapping around like decapitated chickens. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, unless we have their robust, continuing and wholehearted support, it will go ill with the Community within this country and we might be forced to move against the Community, which neither she nor I would wish to do?

The Prime Minister. I must point out to my hon. Friend that the European Community has given us staunch support right from the beginning of the Falklands campaign. It gave us staunch support by imposing an import ban. It extended it. There are no military exports from the European Community to the Argentine. There are no new export credits, and at present an import ban is in force. The Community will make a decision by the end of this week on whether it should extend that import ban and I hope and believe that it will.

Mr. J. Enoch Powell. While the Prime Minister is considering these matters and the exercise of a prerogative that lies in the hands of a Government, will she bear in mind that at no time has this House been informed, or been invited to accept, that there should be any other sequel to the repossession of the Falkland Islands than the immediate and unconditional restoration of sole British administration?

The Prime Minister. I am fully aware of the point that the right hon. Gentleman has made. Sovereignty cannot be changed by invasion. I am very much aware that the rights of the Falkland Islanders were to be governed through the means of a legislative and executive council, and that is what democracy is all about.

Mrs Sally Oppenheim. If my right hon. Friend has time today, will she watch a recording of last night's "Panorama" programme? Is she aware that for the most part, but not all, it was an odious, subversive, travesty in which Michael Cockerell and other BBC reporters dishonoured the right to freedom of speech in this country? Is it not time that such people accepted the fact that if they have these rights, they also have responsibilities?

The Prime Minister. I share the deep concern that has been expressed on many sides, particularly about the content of yesterday evening's "Panorama" programme. I know how strongly many people feel that the case for our country is not being put with sufficient vigour on certain—I do not say all—BBC programmes. The chairman of the BBC has assured us, and has said in vigorous terms, that the BBC is not neutral on this point, and I hope that his words will be heeded by the many who have responsibilities for standing up for our task force, our boys, our people and the cause of democracy.

Mr Winnick. Does not the Prime Minister agree that one of the virtues of a political democracy is that radio and television should be independent from constant 599 Government control and interference? Would it not

be useful if some of her right hon. and hon. Friends stopped their constant intimidation of the BBC? Perhaps the Prime Minister would take that hint as well.

The Prime Minister. It is our great pride that the British media are free. We ask them, when the lives of some of our people may be at stake through information or through discussions that can be of use to the enemy—[Interruption.]—to take that into account in their programmes. It is our pride that we have no censorship. That is the essence of a free country. But we expect the case for freedom to be put by those who are responsible for doing so.

From BBC Yearbook 1993

Chairman's Foreword

The modern BBC is the inheritor of a great tradition of quality, artistic talent, honest accurate reporting and above all independence. We must maintain and enhance this tradition while fitting the BBC for the fast-changing and competitive world into which we have been thrust.

For time does not stand still. The old, talented but rather leisurely BBC simply does not fit into the multi-national competitive business of today. But the ideals and quality which fashioned that BBC are more relevant than ever. They stood like beacons in the old broadcasting world. They will shine as brightly in the new.

The Governors have never doubted that for the BBC to survive in anything like its present form, changes would need to be far-reaching and to affect every area. And they would have to be effected fast. The timetable was set by the rapid pace of change elsewhere in broadcasting and accelerated by the need to replace our Charter, which expires in 1996. As I write, the Government will shortly publish a White Paper outlining the future of the BBC for the next decade.

We have had to demonstrate that our performance justifies a universal service paid for by the licence fee. Our objective has been to create the best-managed corporation in the public sector without sacrificing the historic values of our output. Three recent productions, *Middlemarch*, the bi-media coverage of the Prague Festival, and the events of D-Day, demonstrate that the BBC's flair, skill and inspiration flourish undimmed.

BBC Board of Governors

Standing left to right:
Sir David Scholey CBE
Lord Nicholas Gordon Lennox KCMG KCVO
Sir Kenneth Bloomfield KCB
Bill Jordan CBE
Dr Jane Glover
Dr Gwyn Jones
Janet Cohen

Seated left to right:
Shahwar Sadeque
Lord Cocks Vice-Chairman
Marmaduke Hussey Chairman
Margaret Spurr
Sir Graham Hills

This last year has seen the implementation of a series of vital and far-reaching policy initiatives. The application has been uncomfortable, but the benefits for the viewer and listener will be increasingly obvious.

A radical examination of our overheads, financial systems and resource base, conducted during the past year, will throw up very substantial annual savings in excess of £100 million. An unsustainable overdraft has already been dramatically reduced. Over the years ahead there will be significant investment in more and better programmes.

There has already been increased investment in our news and current affairs. Over the last two years we have employed 290 more journalists, whereas elsewhere in the media their numbers have been reduced. These substantial improvements flow directly from the programme of reforms. No one has suggested how else they could have been achieved.

The whole media industry is in a period of great change. The ITV companies, following the application of the 1990 Act, are subject to take-over bids. Sky Television, with the cable industry in its wake, bounds forward, competing for audiences and advertising revenue with ITV, Channel 4 and the national newspapers. Major public companies are now fighting to hold or increase their share of a declining market.

As the ITC have already pointed out, quality may suffer.

In an intensely competitive scene, the BBC stands out as the only stable element with clear objectives: independence, quality and value for money. We can therefore approach the Charter negotiations with some confidence. It is a more heartening prospect for the Corporation, both in the United Kingdom and across the world, than appeared likely in the 1980s.

The hard work and difficulties of the last few years now present the BBC with a glittering opportunity to consolidate its role as an international broadcaster.

We have the archives, the brand name and a wealth of talent, and we are already a net exporter. Our name stands high, especially in Europe. When I was in Prague last year, the Chamber of Deputies halted an important debate to pay tribute to the organisation that has "kept alive the flame of truth in the last 50 dark years".

No one disputes that the collapse of the communist empire was fuelled by access to western television and radio, particularly the World Service. Mr Rupert Murdoch was right to say that "advances in television technology have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere. They cannot escape the eagle eye of BBC, ITV, CNN and Sky". It was therefore disappointing when he chose to remove

BBC television news from China and replace it, not with Sky News, but American films.

The world opportunity remains. The appetite for accurate news and quality television and radio is growing fast; we will supply it. We have reorganised the BBC to meet the international challenge. World Service Television will shortly match in coverage and quality the service provided over the years by World Service radio.

In the seven years I have been with the BBC we have often wondered what were our most dangerous threats. There are said to be three.

First, the political. I have never believed in that. Governments of whatever hue will require a publicly-funded BBC to be efficient - of course. Some politicians will always try to influence the BBC editorially - of course. I don't blame them for trying. I only blame ourselves if we give way, and I do not think most people in political life expect us to. Fundamentally they respect the independence of the BBC and wish to retain it.

Second, there is the competitive threat. That is more dangerous. We now have many more competitors. But they are constrained by the need to sell their products, create profitable businesses and pay dividends.

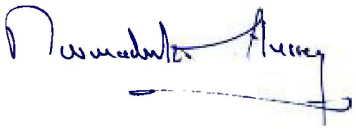
The licence-fee frees us from these constraints and imposes on us the obligation to provide an alternative service to commercial broadcasting - a service of quality and diversity, with challenging programmes in peak periods. It is an obligation I believe we can meet.

Finally, there is the threat that the BBC will not itself have the determination and strength to face the future - self-inflicted wounds are always the most dangerous.

An historic institution must never let outdated ways and customs clog its joints, lest they become arthritic. If it does not keep in step with the changing world, it inevitably becomes antiquated and of no contemporary relevance.

We have moved fast and we have made some mistakes. It won't be easy, but overall we have created a marvellous opportunity for the BBC both at home and abroad.

I am confident we have the courage and will to seize it.



Marmaduke Hussey Chairman