Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique

French Journal of British Studies

XXVI-1 | 2021
The BBC and Public Service Broadcasting in the
Twentieth Century

Surviving the Committee of Enquiry: A Thriving BBC (1922–1995)

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/7171>

DOI: 10.4000/rfcb.7171

ISSN: 2429-4373

Publisher

CRECIB - Centre de recherche et d'études en civilisation britannique

Electronic reference

Daniel Ruff, "Surviving the Committee of Enquiry: A Thriving BBC (1922–1995)", *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online], XXVI-1 | 2021, Online since 05 December 2020, connection on 05 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/7171> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.7171>

This text was automatically generated on 5 January 2022.

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Introduction

- 1 Wireless telephony was seen first, by UK authorities, as a means of communication for the armed forces. The Postmaster-General (PMG, the minister with responsibility for the technology) at the end of the First World War, Albert Illingworth, resisted all requests from amateurs and from the manufacturers of wireless receiving equipment to grant them licences to broadcast, fearing that commercial uses and interests would interfere with what needed to remain a serious and tightly-controlled tool. The Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, which held many of the patents for radio, was particularly insistent in its repeated applications, in the hope that its broadcasts would help sell more receivers. The Imperial Communications Committee—a sub-committee of the Imperial Defence Committee—took hold of the question in April 1922. One of its members had visited the USA and returned with horrifying tales of the near-anarchy which was already overtaking the airwaves there, in a completely unregulated¹ market. This testimony convinced the committee that the British system needed to be regulated: there must be no advertising to finance programmes, and (following pressure from the newspapers) no broadcast news either. Only radio equipment manufacturers should be allowed to broadcast programmes²—of music, education, religion, and entertainment.
- 2 It is well known that the first BBC, the British Broadcasting *Company*, was formed in 1922 to pool the resources of a number of such manufacturers, in a response to the State's early inclinations to contain the development of broadcasting. The General Post Office (GPO) began to sell wireless receiving licences in November 1922, with half the

proceeds destined to finance the new commercial Company's necessarily non-commercial activities. John Reith was appointed to be the BBC's General Manager. His efforts to shape the company, and perhaps even to define the concept of public service broadcasting, have been well documented.³ But if Reith and his colleagues at the BBC thought that victory in this first battle with the British State had won them the war, and that they were now free to develop broadcasting in Britain as they saw fit, they were soon to be disillusioned. The BBC has, throughout its history been regularly submitted to intense public scrutiny and required to justify its governance, its funding model, its editorial choices, sometimes its very existence. This article will study the remits of the various committees of enquiry which were commissioned to report on British Broadcasting and the work of the BBC, in chronological order, from its birth until the 1990s, in order to determine the importance of each one, its role in the Company/Corporation's development, and possible lessons from the process for the future.

Company to Corporation—Sykes and Crawford

- 3 The Company had a shaky start financially. Programmes were subsidised by wireless manufacturers from a levy on equipment sales, and by radio licences, as already mentioned. But many amateur radio enthusiasts built their own equipment from scratch and were able to buy cheaper "experimental" licences which generated less revenue for the BBC. The Company had barely come into existence when on 24 April 1923, Major General Sir Frederick Sykes was asked to enquire into its finances and operations. Reith himself insisted that he should sit on the committee of enquiry to represent the BBC's point of view (the first and last time that such a senior BBC figure should be granted a seat on a broadcasting committee).⁴
- 4 The committee examined the relationship between government and programme content. It was accepted that the Postmaster-General should be able to forbid the broadcast of news which was not in the public interest; but that more general responsibility for content was undesirable, if only to spare the minister's blushes: "*a Minister might well shrink from the prospect of having to defend in Parliament the various items in Government concerts*"⁵—although the BBC's Licence to broadcast stipulated that its programmes must be of a standard to meet "*the reasonable satisfaction of the Postmaster-General*".⁶ The committee recommended that the BBC should not compete with the printed press by broadcasting news bulletins; its monopoly would give it an unfair advantage. Marconi's London station, 2LO, had got into a spat with *The Times* (before the BBC's creation in 1922) by reading extracts from that newspaper aloud in its programmes. The BBC reached an agreement with the press agencies in November 1922 which allowed it to broadcast a news summary provided by them each evening, well after the publication of the evening press, in return for a cut of its licence-fee income.⁷ Curiously, the press did not object to the idea of the BBC broadcasting politicians' speeches live.
- 5 Reith defended vigorously before the committee the position that the BBC should be the nation's only licenced broadcaster. He refused the term "monopoly", however, on the grounds that any wireless manufacturer could join the list of the company's shareholders. But he was already shaping the BBC's future as a public service broadcaster.⁸ The Postmaster-General also agreed on the need to maintain a monopoly,

because of the scarcity of radio spectrum, but also for the simplicity of dealing with a single company rather than a number of competitors. Nevertheless, the report's conclusions refused to rule out the possibility for the government to grant licences to other broadcasters in the future if it was felt appropriate to do so;⁹ and the government continued to allow for this theoretical possibility, even after the creation of the Corporation, and despite much lobbying from Reith to abandon it (although it would be another half-century before the State licenced the first competition to the BBC in radio).

- 6 On the central question of funding, the committee faced many disagreements. Advertising was ruled out, notably due to pressure from the printed press, which again feared competition from radio; but also following negative observations from the USA, where advertising was felt to have an adverse effect on programme quality. The sponsorship of individual programmes or programme segments was not felt to represent a similar danger, and this possibility was retained.¹⁰ The various wireless receiving licence categories were to be merged into a single, ten-shilling licence, with the GPO keeping an initial 25 per cent¹¹ of the price—though this percentage would rise with the number of licences sold. Royalties from the sale of receivers were to be abandoned. Before the end of the Company's existence, sales of licences had risen so fast that the Postmaster-General decided to cap the BBC's income at £500,000 per annum. The GPO retained all licence-fee revenue above this figure.
- 7 The BBC's Licence was extended until 1926. So the dust had barely settled on the Sykes report before the government commissioned the Earl of Crawford in July 1925 to chair a new committee to prepare for the next possible Licence period by reviewing the future of radio once again, "*in the widest possible terms.*"¹²
- 8 The BBC had begun to prepare its case for the renewal of its Licence even before the committee was appointed. Reith had become uneasy with the Company's commercial status, which was often used as an argument against its privileged monopoly and its protected licence-fee income. Despite reservations from some of the Company's directors, who were perhaps naturally more concerned with defending its commercial interests, Reith argued in a written submission to the committee that the "quasi-commercial constitution" of Company should be abandoned in favour of a new constitution as a public service.¹³ The PMG agreed broadly with Reith's view on this point, as did many of the witnesses heard by the committee. Links with wireless manufacturers should be severed, and those with listeners and the nation strengthened. The committee could scarcely fail to agree:

We think a public corporation the most appropriate organisation. Such an authority would enjoy a freedom and flexibility which a Minister of State himself could scarcely exercise in arranging for performers and programmes, and in studying the variable demands of public taste and necessity. [...] Its status and duties should correspond with those of a public service, and its directorate should be appointed with the sole object of promoting the utmost utility and development of the enterprise.¹⁴

- 9 The proposed new status as public corporation¹⁵ would secure the BBC in its monopoly without some of the negative connotations which could be attached to the lack of competition for a commercial company. Reith himself no longer objected to the term, and there was broad political consensus for the idea as the importance of broadcasting in the life of the nation continued to grow. The BBC was to have a new constitution, but ensure continuity in its programmes and for its internal hierarchy and staff. Licence-

fee funding should continue, though how the cap on the BBC's share of this funding should evolve was left vague, and advertising was still excluded. Fears were expressed in some quarters about the shadow which the government and the GPO might continue to cast over a public corporation—and Reith was concerned notably about the power the PMG held over the licence fee.

- 10 The press continued to oppose allowing the BBC to broadcast news in direct competition to newspapers. With respect to 'controversy',¹⁶ the committee believed that *"a moderate amount of controversial material should be broadcast, provided the material is of high quality and distributed with scrupulous fairness."*¹⁷ Quality must be preserved in all programmes; the Reithian idea of giving people what was good for them, rather than what they wanted, was shared by the great and the good sitting on the committee. The suggestion that different broadcast frequencies might be used to provide a choice between different types of programme received a lukewarm reception: *"special wavelengths or alternative services may provide an escape from the programme dilemma, but we trust they will never be used to cater for groups of listeners, however large, who press for trite and commonplace performances."*¹⁸
- 11 The report was published in early 1926, and by the end of the year preparations were in place for the transition from private Company to public Corporation. Reith obtained a slightly better financial deal on the licence fee: there would be no cap on the BBC's income, but its share of revenue would decline as the number of licences sold increased (90 per cent of net revenue after the deduction of GPO collection costs, for the first million licences sold, falling in tranches to only 60 per cent on the fourth and subsequent millions).
- 12 The government did not initially follow Crawford's recommendation that the BBC should be freer to broadcast "controversy"; but the ban was lifted on an experimental basis in March 1928 and was never reinstated. At the same time, the Corporation gradually regained ground confiscated early on by the press, by advancing the time of its evening news broadcasts, and by opening its own newsroom rather than depending on "wire" services. The outbreak of war in 1939 brought all considerations of restricting the BBC's news operations to an end.
- 13 The British Broadcasting Corporation was incorporated by Royal Charter on 1 January 1927 and was granted a new licence to broadcast for ten years. Reith (Now Sir John) became the first Director-General, and a non-executive Chair and Board of Governors were appointed to represent the public and licence-fee payer interest, and to answer for the BBC to government, thus keeping the State at arm's length. The basic principles of the BBC governance and regulation would remain intact for the next eighty years.

Consolidation and Vision—Ullswater and Selsdon

- 14 Towards the end of the first Charter period, the government returned to what was becoming the well-established habit of commissioning a committee of enquiry to make recommendations for the future. In 1935, the Ullswater committee was appointed to:
consider the constitution, control, and finance of the broadcasting service in this country and advise generally on the conditions under which the service, including broadcasting to the Empire, television broadcasting, and the system of wireless exchanges, should be conducted after 31 December 1936.¹⁹

- 15 Reith had already begun lobbying the government and Post Office officials in 1933 before the committee was appointed, in the hope of a) increasing the BBC's income from the licence fee; b) otherwise preserving the status quo; and c) avoiding the appointment of a committee of enquiry at all. He was really only successful in the first of these: the report recommended that the BBC should receive no less than 75 per cent of licence-fee income, and that further funds should be allocated to it for the development of television.
- 16 Ullswater was the first committee to hear evidence from a group hitherto notably absent from debates about what the BBC should be or do: its listeners. The Corporation had barely, and somewhat reluctantly, started to consult listeners to sound out their opinions on programmes. Reith remained hostile to such consultations, convinced as he was that public opinion could only have a detrimental effect on programmes and programme makers. Polling started with specifically targeted groups: teachers were consulted about educational programming, for example. But the BBC was well into its teens before its general listenership was allowed to express an opinion on programmes.
- ²⁰ One of the criticisms from listeners taken up in the report's conclusions may be summarised in the more recent neologism that the BBC and its programmes were too "London-centric". This criticism has plagued the BBC throughout its history, and is still heard today, despite recent efforts (not for the first time) to move various operations and staff out of London and into the nations and regions.
- 17 Ullswater furthermore recommended that the Empire Service (the forerunner of today's World Service) should be expanded, notably through more broadcasts in local languages; that the Board of Governors should see its membership enlarged (from five to seven seats); and that limits on news reporting should be further relaxed. In short, there were few voices raised against the essence of what the BBC had become, and it was considered that it deserved to see its Royal Charter renewed for another ten years. The government broadly accepted the committee's recommendations, and the new Charter was approved in the House of Commons in December 1936 without even the need for a division. One suggestion from the report which the Postmaster-General blocked, unsurprisingly, was the idea that broadcasting was becoming such a major responsibility that it should be removed from the Post Office and entrusted to a minister and a department with more clout (for example, His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Home Department). The PMG also removed the possibility (which had never been taken up) for the BBC to broadcast programmes or features sponsored by a commercial interest.
- 18 The mid-1930s were rather exceptional for the BBC in that it was under the scrutiny of not one but two committees of enquiry. Appointed shortly before the Ullswater committee, and running for a while in parallel to it, the Selsdon committee was asked to study the more technical question of television broadcast standards. It was asked to choose between two rival technologies, developed by John Logie Baird and the EMI company respectively; though it was also asked to advise on the future development and funding of a television service. In keeping with the general confidence enjoyed by the BBC at the time, Selsdon did not question that a future television service should be entrusted to the BBC, and that the Corporation should retain its monopoly in all British broadcasting.²¹
- 19 Funding was indeed a challenge: increasing the cost of the radio licence would be unfair to the vast majority of the BBC's audience, who would not have access to television for

another two decades; and sales of a separate television licence would not generate enough revenue to develop the technology and a viable programme service in the first instance. Advertising was again ruled out, though the door to sponsored programmes on television was left ajar (at the very moment it was, as has been seen, being closed for wireless—or “sound” as the BBC increasingly called it at this period, at least internally). The BBC itself was reluctant to divert its existing revenue from sound to vision. Selsdon somewhat optimistically suggested that another source of public funding should be identified. Ullswater’s mediation in the BBC’s conflict with the PMG over the share of the licence fee deducted by the GPO represented a convenient solution here.

- 20 On the technical question, Selsdon was unable to decide. The Baird system was entirely British, which gave it an economic and industrial advantage in the committee’s eyes; whereas the EMI system was technically superior (allowing pictures of 405 “lines”—compared with Baird’s 240-line system). As a result, the BBC was required to pursue the development of both systems in parallel over a five-year test period, and the members of the committee designated themselves to continue to observe and arbitrate during this time. Test broadcasts did not begin immediately; the BBC needed to identify new premises for the tests, and build and equip studios. Alexandra Palace in central north London was chosen and became the home of BBC Television (along with Lime Grove from the 1950s) until the construction of Television Centre at White City in 1960. The parallel broadcasts (alternating the rival systems each week) proved counterproductive, since potential viewers were reluctant to invest £30 to £40 (approximately one-third of the price of a small motor car) in a piece of equipment which could rapidly become a white elephant, if the other technology were to win.²² They were abandoned within months, with EMI being declared the winner in February 1937.²³

Surviving Competition—Beveridge and Pilkington

- 21 By the end of the war, the BBC’s popularity was immense. It had preserved morale on the “home front” and kept families in touch through the Forces’ Programme. It had abandoned the Reithian practice²⁴ of broadcasting programmes at different times each day in order to “surprise” people into listening to something improving, in favour of regular slots which allowed people to “listen in” to their favourite programmes daily or weekly as more stable and thus reassuring fixtures. Even past conflicts with Churchill were apparently forgotten. A new Royal Charter was granted almost as a matter of course and without the need for a full committee of enquiry. A committee of ministers from the National government, chaired by Lord Woolton, nevertheless produced some recommendations: that the BBC should be essentially preserved without advertising; that the radio licence fee should be increased to 20 shillings per annum; and that overseas services developed during the war should be maintained and extended, but placed under closer government control than domestic programmes. Arguments were becoming more audible for authorising commercial competition for the BBC—Australia and Canada were quoted as possible models—but neither of the main party leaders accepted these. Churchill’s Conservatives were out of power before Woolton could produce a formal report, but Attlee’s incoming Labour government agreed that the BBC’s Charter should be renewed for another five years, whilst a more formal committee of enquiry could consider the longer-term future.

- 22 In 1949, Attlee asked William Beveridge—better known for his 1942 blueprint for the Welfare State, and now Liberal peer Lord Beveridge—to chair a new committee of enquiry. His report was only published in January 1951, and was to be the most detailed examination of British broadcasting so far, running to two volumes and almost 900 pages, in keeping with the vast remit he had received: “*To consider the constitution, control, finance and other general aspects of the sound and television broadcasting services of the United Kingdom.*”²⁵
- 23 There were concerns within the BBC that Beveridge’s Liberalism might make him less disposed than previous committee chairs had been to continue to endorse the monopoly. The question was indeed studied in more detail than hitherto, but the answer given was in favour of the monopoly.²⁶ Although some committee members expressed different views, it was felt by the majority that advertising would bring down programme standards, whether on the BBC or on competing channels. If competition there must be, then it should come from one or more new public corporations competing on equal terms with the BBC. But even this form of competition was ultimately felt to be unnecessary, and liable to complicate the job of regulation: “*Enforcement of the necessary conditions of impartiality, fair treatment of minorities, regard to national interest and regard to outside opinion, is likely to prove easier with one Corporation than with three or four Corporations.*”²⁷ The conception of broadcasting as a public service was not questioned; what was necessary was to ensure sufficient “*safeguards against the misuse of broadcasting power.*”²⁸
- 24 In return for keeping its monopoly, the BBC must be more accountable to its Board of Governors on a day-to-day basis. The Chair should work more closely with the D-G and attend management meetings. The BBC should also consult its viewers and listeners—and above all start actually to take account of their views, notably in catering to minority needs and tastes. There were further calls for the BBC to serve the nations and regions better, and to experiment with technological innovations, notably to allow the creation of local radio stations. It should also be allowed greater scope to innovate in making political programmes,²⁹ and to transmit party political broadcasts during election campaigns.
- 25 Attlee’s government, accepting the principal conclusions of the Beveridge committee, was decided to grant the BBC a new Charter for 15 years; but Labour’s poor results in the 1950 election and its eventual fall from power in 1951 left it neither the strength nor the time to follow this intention through. The incoming Conservative PMG, Earl De La Warr, extended the BBC’s Charter for just six months, so that yet another (ministerial) committee of enquiry could be formed to look at the whole question over again. It concluded in a White Paper published in May 1952 that television should be opened up to competition as soon as economically viable.³⁰ The competition would be commercial, the BBC retaining its monopoly over licence-fee income. Its Charter was renewed for another ten years.
- 26 There was much opposition to the idea of commercial broadcasting. The BBC lobbied the government strenuously in private, and a number of Conservative peers in the Lords resisted the government’s proposals. Never one to cower behind understatement, Lord Reith himself placed the introduction of commercial broadcasting into the UK on a par with that of “*smallpox, bubonic plague and the Black Death.*”³¹ The *Television Act 1954* was nevertheless on the statute books within two years, and the first networks under

the responsibility of the new Independent Television Authority (ITA) on the air within little more than three.

- 27 At the turn of the decade, as the end of the BBC's latest Charter period approached, and an assessment of the first years of commercial television became possible, the Conservative government asked the Pilkington committee to study the future of broadcasting in the UK, the possibility of creating a third television channel, and the industry's financial arrangements. The BBC was worried; ITV dominated the television audience ratings charts (albeit on the back of "give-aways"—game shows with extravagant prizes for answering questions which were much criticised in the quality press and by both sides in Parliament as idiotic), and the Corporation's audience share had been known to fall to barely one-quarter (i.e. three viewers in four were watching "the other side").
- 28 The Pilkington report focused on programme quality; it refused to define what "good broadcasting" was, but expected both the BBC and ITA to recognise it when they saw it.
³² BBC programmes were criticised when they attempted to ape ITV's style in direct competition; the rest of the time, they were mostly hitting that indefinable mark: "*The BBC know good broadcasting; by and large, they are providing it.*"³³ ITV, on the other hand, was falling "*well short of what a good public service of broadcasting should be.*"³⁴ The ITA should play a much more active role in regulating the companies, and even in deciding what programmes they should make and when they should be scheduled. The BBC should continue as it had been doing, so that competition would play out for quality rather than ratings.³⁵ When a third television channel became possible, it should of course be entrusted to the BBC. This would allow it to diversify its programmes and better serve minority groups in a way which ITV, subject as it was to commercial pressures, would be unable to do.³⁶ In radio, the monopoly should be preserved, and local radio pursued, thanks notably to new VHF frequencies.
- 29 The government's response came in the form of two successive White Papers. It did not seek significantly to reform the ITA and ITV;³⁷ nor did it pursue Pilkington's suggestions that subscription TV might be worth considering, or allow the BBC to develop local radio.³⁸ It did, of course, entrust the third channel to the BBC, to be broadcast on 625 lines and in colour when possible. Both BBC and ITV were required to increase their educational output. Labour suggested that the future BBC2 should be entirely devoted to education. Carleton Greene preferred a second mainstream channel, but one with more cultural and experimental content than the existing channel (now to become BBC1). The two channels would seek to be complementary to one another (and by the same occasion, it was hoped, be less concerned with competing with ITV).

Towards a Multi-Channel Future—Annan

- 30 Towards the end of the 1960s, the Labour government was planning to appoint a new committee of enquiry into the future of broadcasting—and had already identified Lord Annan as its chair. When Heath's Conservatives won the election of 1970, the plan was put on hold. The Tory minister for Posts and Telecommunications³⁹ decided without the need for a committee of enquiry that radio could be opened up to competition as television had been, so that the ITA became the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and was allowed to grant Independent Local Radio (ILR) licences. Another

Crawford committee (chaired this time by one Sir Stewart Crawford—apparently no relation to Lord Crawford of the 1926 report) met briefly in 1974 to examine broadcasting in the national regions. It recommended that both the BBC and IBA devote more resources to the nations, notably for broadcasting in the Welsh language.

- 31 When Labour won back power in 1974, it abolished the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, and entrusted responsibility for broadcasting to the Home Secretary. In April, Roy Jenkins reinstated the Annan committee and asked it to look into the future of broadcasting in the light of the technological and social changes which had taken place since Pilkington. It took several years to report; in the meantime, the government extended the BBC's Charter and ITV's franchises until 1976, then again until 1979 (the report was published in 1977), and finally, since a general election was imminent, again until 1981.
- 32 Annan studied various technological innovations and made certain predictions: the advent of the domestic video recorder; the possibilities offered by cable as a means of broadcast delivery; and an increasing number of TV channels—though he did not imagine direct broadcasting by satellite as a possibility, and believed that a finite pool of talent for television would limit the multiplication of channels available. Cable television should not supply its own new, commercial channels, but rather deliver those of existing public service broadcasters, and perhaps allow community television at a very local level. The committee did not expect any future channels to deviate from public service broadcasting principles, and was determined to *“preserve British broadcasting as a public service accountable to the public through Parliament. This tradition has long been accepted by the nation and our recommendations are designed to strengthen it.”*⁴⁰ The USA was again quoted as a counter-example, where deregulation and commercial competition had reduced choice and driven down standards.
- 33 Within the framework of public service broadcasting, a new flexibility was needed. The BBC should keep two television and four national radio channels, but should abandon local radio. Regional television should be the preserve of a re-cast IBA, with another authority created for local broadcasting. Yet another authority could run the future fourth television channel, with commercial funding but a different remit to avoid direct competition with ITV. The Open University, the Arts Council, the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry should all be allowed to make programmes for broadcast on the fourth channel if they were prepared to pay for them.⁴¹
- 34 The committee heard much evidence to the effect that neither broadcaster was moving sufficiently with the times, that both ITV and—perhaps even more so—the BBC were too paternalistic, too conservative or elitist in their artistic choices, too male, too white. Annan agreed: *“Our society's culture is now multi-racial and pluralist: that is to say, people adhere to different views of the nature and purpose of life and expect their own view to be expressed in some form or other.”*⁴² He suggested that, to the BBC's traditional vocation, *“to inform, to educate, to entertain”* should be added a fourth mission: *“enrichment—to enlarge people's interests, to convey to them new choices and possibilities in life.”*⁴³
- 35 The Labour government accepted many of Annan's ideas and recommendations. It began to make plans for a fourth TV channel to be placed under the responsibility of an Open Broadcasting Authority. Although Harold Wilson had left frontline politics a year before Annan reported, his legendary dislike and mistrust of the BBC was still felt in the Labour White Paper which followed. There was a strong suggestion that the

Corporation was not sufficiently neutral politically, and even the veiled threat to create a new layer of management just below the Board of Governors, some of whose members would be appointed directly by the Home Secretary.⁴⁴

The Assault of the Market - Peacock

- 36 Many of the plans (and threats) in the White Paper were never carried out. The Labour government which thought the BBC too pro-Tory was replaced with a Conservative one which was even more convinced that the Corporation was staffed entirely by pinkos.⁴⁵ After the launch of Channel 4—with surprisingly few tweaks to Labour’s plans—in 1982, and her second election victory in 1983, it was widely believed and expected that Margaret Thatcher would be looking to pick a fight with the BBC, and that the creation of the Peacock committee to look into the Corporation’s future funding was to be the centrepiece battle of the war.
- 37 By the 1980s, colour television was clearly the norm and the number of colour licences was stabilising. The BBC could no longer count on significant numbers of households switching from the cheaper black-and-white licence to the pricier colour one to guarantee a continuously rising income. The cost of the licence fee itself—set by the government—became the key factor in the BBC’s finances. Thatcher’s first Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, was comparatively compliant, and accepted the regular increases the BBC requested. His successor, Leon Brittan, was less receptive when the BBC asked in 1984 for an increase from £46 to £65. Brittan awarded the BBC £58 after six months of reflection, and at the same time announced the appointment of the Peacock committee to study the very future of the television licence. Thatcher herself was known to be favourable to advertising as a replacement for the licence fee, and probably to the complete privatisation of broadcasting (her government was busy privatising many other public services at the time). But there was resistance from within her ranks, and from the civil service: the same Willie Whitelaw threatened to resign if Thatcher imposed advertising on the BBC;⁴⁶ and Home Office officials intervened in the appointments to the Peacock committee to ensure that it was more politically balanced (to the extent that a *Sunday Times* editorial later called the committee “*obstinately open-minded.*”)⁴⁷
- 38 Peacock’s was the first committee to be tasked with studying *only* the funding of broadcasting, without regard for the nature or quality of programmes, or the notion of public service; and to reason in terms of “consumers” rather than viewers or citizens.⁴⁸ The committee ignored these implied restrictions on its remit and functioned rather as its predecessors had done. The overwhelming majority of its witnesses were unfavourable to changing the BBC’s status or imposing advertising. Whatever the implicit pressure from Downing Street or the neoliberal convictions of some of its members wishing it to conclude otherwise, the committee could not but report that:
- the introduction of advertising into the BBC, even in a gradual phased way, is likely to depress the growth of ITV revenues compared with what they would otherwise be [...]; so long as spectrum scarcity prevails, and there is no direct means of consumer payment for programmes, rivalry between two systems even partly dependent on advertising is likely to intensify the “ratings war” and so reduce the effective range of choice open to viewers and listeners.⁴⁹
- 39 Peacock’s conclusions were not a resounding endorsement of the first 65 years of the BBC for all that. Public service broadcasting saw its role, in the report’s vision of the

industry, confined to completing at the margins what the commercial sector was unable—or found it uneconomic—to provide. The market satisfies the consumer; the public service plugs the gaps for the citizen. According to this logic, the industry as a whole was ripe for deregulation, to increase competition and thus choice, to allow for the creation of new cable and satellite channels and new economic models based on subscription or pay-per-view. The BBC's role was thus expected to diminish over time, until the universal licence fee could be replaced by voluntary subscription for those citizens who still craved a PSB fix. In the meantime, Peacock recommended that parts of the BBC could be privatised immediately: popular music channels Radios 1 and 2 were not, the committee felt, providing a public service which justified licence-fee funding.

- 40 As a liberal with a lower-case “l”, Peacock also suggested that broadcasting be deregulated in terms of its content:

The end of all censorship arrangements would be a sign that broadcasting had come of age, like publishing three centuries ago. Prepublication censorship, whether of printed material, plays, films, broadcasting or other creative activities or expressions of opinion, has no place in a free society and we would want to advise Government and Parliament to embark forthwith on a phased programme for ending it.⁵⁰

- 41 This was the sort of recommendation Thatcher could never be expected to follow. Indeed, in 1988 she created the Broadcasting Standards Council to work alongside the existing Broadcasting Complaints Commission, as a new watchdog to safeguard “taste and decency”—and reinforced rules further in this area in the *Broadcasting Act 1990*.

Conclusion

- 42 Peacock was the last committee of enquiry into broadcasting of our period. As has been seen, its conception of public service broadcasting and its expectations for the future evolution of the sector were hardly causes for optimism for the BBC, even if its licence-fee funding model was secure for the time being. Since then, the sector, and the market, have evolved well beyond what most of our committee members could have imagined; the number of channels and the technical means of delivering them have grown exponentially (irrespective of whether or not one is tempted to agree with Annan's assessment of the “finite talent pool” for programmes which he believed would eventually bring such expansion to a halt).
- 43 Peacock's questions have not gone away. Major's government asked them again in the 1990s (and answered them much as Peacock had done),⁵¹ and Blair's government tasked another committee with examining them again (albeit with the expectation that the licence fee would survive for the duration of the then current Charter period but perhaps not beyond).⁵² When seen in the longer perspective of the many committees which have been more or less critical of the BBC down the decades, however, and just as importantly, in the perspective of the BBC's ability to weather out the various political storms which have buffeted it over the same period, it is perhaps less surprising that nearly 35 years after Peacock, the BBC is still with us. As Dominic Cummings wheedles Boris Johnson on to another bout of sabre-rattling outside Broadcasting House, they would perhaps both do well to remember, even beyond the

obvious importance that voters attach to their BBC, that no serious public scrutiny of the Corporation so far has concluded for anything other than the need to preserve it.

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NOTES

1. Unregulated until the creation of the Federal Radio Commission in March 1927.
2. *The Daily Mail* had been lobbying for a licence also; such an example of what would later be called cross-media ownership was explicitly ruled out.
3. Rather less well documented is the way Reith seemed tempted to re-write the history of his already undeniably central role, in order to make it even more impressive. He claimed in 1960: “I literally didn’t know what broadcasting was. The advertisement was attractive; I thought it was the sort of thing I wanted, and I applied.” Though he went on to specify that he felt qualified “to manage almost anything.” Lord Reith speaking with John Freeman in *Face to Face* (London, BBC TV, 9 October 1960). See also Andrew Boyle, *Only the Wind will Listen* (London, Hutchinson, 1972) on Reith’s claims with respect to ‘public service broadcasting’.
4. The more technical remit of the Selsdon committee did allow senior BBC engineers to be appointed to its membership.
5. *Broadcasting Committee Report*, Cd. 1951 (London, HMSO, 1923) (*Sykes Report*), paragraph 25.
6. *Wireless Broadcasting Licence*, Cd. 1822 (London, HMSO, 1923), paragraph 5.
7. The news summary was provided by Reuters, the Press Association, Exchange Telegraph, and Central News. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume I: The Birth of Broadcasting* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 132.
8. Reith identified monopoly as one of the four characteristics defining public service broadcasting; the others were that its operations should be motivated by the notion of service rather than profit, that it should seek to serve all citizens equally throughout the UK, and that it should strive for the highest standards possible in programme making. John Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1924), pp. 57 ff.
9. *Sykes Report*, op. cit., paragraph 76.
10. “We consider however, that there would be no objection to the operating concern being allowed to accept the gift of a concert and to broadcast a preliminary announcement giving the name of the donor; and also to broadcast the name of the publisher and the price of a song which is about to be broadcast.” *Ibid.*, paragraph 41.
11. Previously, GPO administration costs had been levied at 50 per cent.

12. Postmaster-General Sir William Mitchell-Thomson speaking in the House of Commons of the creation of the Crawford committee: *Hansard*, vol. 186, col. 1872, 20 July 1925.
13. Reith's *Memorandum of Information* to the Crawford committee, p. 9, quoted in Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 335.
14. *Report of the Broadcasting Committee*, Cd. 2599 (London, HMSO, 1925) (*Crawford Report*), paragraphs 3–4.
15. The committee in the end preferred the name *British Broadcasting Commission*—a suggestion overruled by the PMG.
16. The term was commonly used at the time for any type of news, including the broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings, whose coverage might expose the BBC to criticism for a perceived lack of neutrality—although the word could also have a broader scope, beyond current events, for example to matters of taste and decency.
17. *Ibid.*, paragraph 12.
18. *Ibid.*, paragraph 14.
19. *Report of the Broadcasting Committee*, Cd. 5091 (London, HMSO, 1936) (*Ullswater Report*), paragraph 1.
20. And the opinions were indeed unwelcome: if the first listening figures, established for the year 1937, showed properly enough that the King's Christmas broadcast was the most popular programme of the year, consultations also showed that as many as 80 per cent of listeners regularly switched the BBC off on Sundays in favour of Radio Normandie or Radio Luxembourg's English-language stations, because of the former's policy of broadcasting no entertainment at all and favouring religious programmes on that day of the week. The BBC's programming policy remained unchanged. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume II: The Golden Age of Wireless* (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 271.
21. *Report of the Television Committee*, Cd. 4793 (London, HMSO, 1935) (*Selsdon Report*), paragraph 39.
22. Some 20,000 sets were sold before television broadcasts were interrupted on 1 September 1939 to focus resources on radio, for which more than 9 million households held licences at the outbreak of the war. George V's coronation procession was seen by around 50,000 viewers in May 1937.
23. Another rather technical committee of enquiry, chaired by Lord Hankey, decided in the final months of the war that the 405-line system should be kept when programmes were able to re-start after the war, because this would allow the service to resume in less than a year, whereas if the suggested "high-definition" alternative of 600-plus lines were to be developed, programmes might be delayed by another five years. BBC Television restarted in 1946 on VHF frequencies and 405 lines; BBC2 began to broadcast in 625 lines on UHF in 1964, and in colour from 1967. From 1969, the transmissions of the then three television networks moved to UHF and colour—though legacy simultaneous re-broadcasts in 405 lines lasted locally into the 1980s for viewers with older sets.
24. Reith himself had left the BBC in 1938. It has been suggested—for example, by his successor Greg Dyke in *Greg Dyke on Lord Reith* (London, BBC Four, 23 May 2007)—that PM Neville Chamberlain, who offered him the chair of Imperial Airways, left him little choice in the matter, and that Reith was thus forced out of the BBC, perhaps at the request of its Governors, because he was becoming something of a liability due to his overbearing management style.
25. *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1949*, Cmd. 8116 (Volume I) and *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1949: Memoranda Submitted to the Committee*, Cmd. 8117 (Volume II) (London, HMSO, 1951) (*Beveridge Report*).
26. *Ibid.*, Volume I, paragraph 187.
27. *Ibid.*, paragraph 171.
28. *Ibid.*, paragraph 180.

29. The so-called “fourteen-day rule” according to which the BBC must not cover in its programmes any topic which was due to be debated in Parliament within the next fortnight, was already less strictly adhered to. The rule dated from censorship during the war, but was in reality not formally stated in any official text and depended on voluntary observance. The PMG, Dr Charles Hill, did attempt to impose it by ministerial order in July 1955, but withdrew it the following year following widespread criticism in the press.

30. *Broadcasting: Memorandum on the Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1949*, Cmd. 8550 (London, HMSO, 1952), paragraph 7.

31. *Hansard*, vol. 176, col. 1297, 22 May 1952.

32. *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting, 1960*, Cmnd. 1753 (London, HMSO, 1962) (*Pilkington Report*), paragraph 34.

33. *Ibid.*, paragraph 149.

34. *Ibid.*, paragraph 207.

35. It should be noted that the BBC had a new D-G from 1960: Hugh Carleton Greene had immediately instructed BBC television to improve its audience share without sacrificing standards; and by the time the Pilkington report was published, it was well on the way to scraping back half of viewers. See Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, *The Third Floor Front: A View of Broadcasting in the Sixties* (London, Bodley Head, 1969), pp.131 ff.

36. This logic is interesting to bear in mind when considering the launch of Channel 4 in 1982, and the remit it was given.

37. Though the ITA's powers were increased in 1963 and again in 1964 to allow it to curb some of the excesses deplored by Pilkington.

38. Labour allowed local radio from 1966, with the first stations being collaborations between local authorities and the BBC. BBC Radio Leicester was the first to start broadcasting in November 1967. The network grew faster in the early 1970s with a revaluation of the television licence fee, and the growth in income from the more expensive colour licence, and this despite the fact that the radio licence was abandoned in 1971.

39. Christopher Chataway—the second minister to hold the title; Labour had abandoned the term Postmaster-General in 1969.

40. *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting*, Cmnd. 6753 (London, HMSO, 1977) (*Annan Report*), paragraph 30.1.

41. Some of the future identity of Channel 4 is clearly discernible here, even if its final remit and regulatory arrangements were rather different.

42. *Ibid.*, paragraph 4.5.

43. *Ibid.*, paragraph 3.22.

44. *Broadcasting*, Cmnd. 7294 (London, HMSO, 1978).

45. Thatcherite loyalist Norman Tebbit wrote in his autobiography of his perception of BBC staff at Television Centre on the evening of the 1983 election victory: “*The atmosphere in the studio was terrible—almost everyone on the staff seemed to be in mourning with no attempt to conceal their regret that their side had lost.*” Norman Tebbit, *Upwardly Mobile* (London, Futura, 1989), p. 261.

46. See Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 634–6.

47. “Swearing in the jury”, *The Sunday Times*, 26 May 1985. It is worth remembering that Rupert Murdoch’s News International, owner of *The Sunday Times*, started bidding for the UK’s first Direct Broadcasting by Satellite (DBS) franchise in 1986, and was thus becoming a competitor in addition to already being a critic of the BBC.

48. *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, Cmnd. 9824 (London, HMSO, 1986) (*Peacock Report*), p. 1.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

51. In the Green Paper *The Future of the BBC: A Consultation Document*, Cm. 2098 (London, HMSO, 1992), and the White Paper *The Future of the BBC: Serving the Nation, Competing Worldwide*, Cm. 2621 (London, HMSO, 1994).

52. Gavyn Davies, *The Future Funding of the BBC: Report of the Independent Review Panel* (London, DCMS, 1999).

ABSTRACTS

The BBC has been subjected to legitimate public scrutiny throughout its history. Governments have regularly commissioned committees of enquiry to study its role, its values, its programmes, its funding, its future. Far from destabilising the Corporation, these enquiries have tended—sometimes against expectations—to confirm the importance of the BBC in the life of the nation. Although programmes and technologies have evolved beyond recognition since his time, Reith's founding principles of public service broadcasting have been endorsed time and again. The BBC and its funding model are never completely out of the woods; but a longer view of the constant cycle of public enquiries shows that it is in every sense hard to beat.

La BBC, depuis ses débuts, fait l'objet d'un examen minutieux et légitime. Au fil des décennies, les pouvoirs publics ont multiplié les commissions d'enquête chargées de se pencher sur son rôle, ses valeurs, ses émissions, son financement, son avenir. Loin de déstabiliser la Corporation, ces enquêtes ont plutôt tendance – parfois contre toute attente – à confirmer l'importance de la BBC dans la vie de la nation. Même si les émissions et les technologies ont profondément évolué depuis l'époque de Reith, les valeurs fondatrices de service public voulues par celui-ci ont été réaffirmées à maintes reprises. La BBC et son modèle de financement continuent régulièrement de susciter doutes et interrogations ; mais un regard diachronique sur le cycle incessant de commissions d'enquête montre qu'ils tiennent encore et toujours la route.

INDEX

Mots-clés: BBC, commissions d'enquête, service public audiovisuel, radio, télévision, régulation

Keywords: BBC, committees of enquiry, public service broadcasting, radio, television, regulation

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