THE BBC AND THE BBC

1926 wasn’t done with the BBC yet, however, nor indeed its stone-faced giant of a figurehead. The licence was still due to expire with the year, and it was in the gift of the Government whether or not it got renewed. Reith’s friendship with Baldwin and (albeit grudging) actions during the General Strike had done nothing to harm the Company’s chances. However, the run-in with Churchill had worried him a little. His beloved extension-of-himself Company turned out to have enemies. He considered the Chancellor’s plan and 'My conclusion was that it would have been better for me, worse for the BBC and for the country.'** Not one to place himself before a society he increasingly saw it as his job to protect, Reith looked to the end of the BBC’s licence and considered.

There was no denying that the BBC, and Reith as managing director in particular, was a roaring success. Radio equipment was selling like water in the desert, the affiliated wireless companies were making money hand over fist, and the Company was well on its way to carving out its own immutable place in the centre of British existence. And John Reith was a huge part of that success. Even so, as 1926 crept toward its end, Reith worried about an uncertain future. Churchill’s plan to annex the Company and turn it into a state propaganda network - effectively nationalising it through martial law - may have failed, largely because it was considered a good idea by no-one except the wilderness-headed Churchill himself. But that wasn’t to say that no-one agreed with his basic premise that the Company couldn’t necessarily be trusted to act in the Government’s best interests at all times. Sure, they behaved themselves during the General Strike, but they could feel them - and Reith in particular - snatching at the bridle for their precious impartiality.

Having taken the job of BBC Managing Director as just another opportunity, knowing nothing about broadcasting, Reith had, to his mind at least, essentially invented the whole concept from scratch. In fact, what he’d created was public service broadcasting, and as its father he was fiercely protective of it. It was unthinkable that the BBC, or at least the infrastructure of British Broadcasting that had ossified around it, would survive after 1926 in some form. But the end of the licence, and with it the period in which anyone was contractually obligated to behave in a certain way, provided an opportunity for that infrastructure to be reformed, streamlined, expanded - almost anything.

The BBC itself was successful and popular enough to probably be more or less safe - although that was still far from a given - but there was more than enough space among the country’s airwaves for a rival service. To Reith, this was the most terrifying prospect imaginable, because his Platonic ideal of public service broadcasting required the BBC to have a monopoly. Competition meant compromise, and under Reith’s philosophy, such a thing was unthinkable if broadcasting was to have a shred of integrity whatsoever. Whether or not it had ever been anyone’s intention, the BBC,

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and therefore John Reith, were now the watchmen at society's vanguard, and to Reith society and God were inseparable. Among the many duties he had taken on for himself, as leader of this new front in British culture, was to maintain the nation's spiritual health. With the new medium of broadcasting, he could ensure Britain's faith in God (specifically the Presbyterian God) not only never wavered but even grew stronger. For Reith as a Presbyterian, this largely revolved around the Sabbath and keeping it holy. This became his greatest fear surrounding the possible introduction of competition. He knew perfectly well from long days cowering before his father's pulpit that the worship of God is no fun at all, and therefore given the the choice of something, anything, else to do at the same time, God would almost always lose. But he also knew - his father had made it clear often enough - that it was of vital importance to the material health of the nation and its people that they follow the word of God in all things. Almost by accident, it had become his duty to ensure that very thing. Provision was one thing, and the BBC were doing that alright. Protection was another, and the existence of a broadcasting monopoly was vital. Without it, Reith later mused in his memoirs:

"*The Christian religion and the Sabbath might not have had the place and protection they had; the place and protection which it was right to give them…. One day in the week clear of jazz and variety and such like…Almost everything might have been different. The BBC might have had to play for safety; prosecute the obviously popular lines; count its clients; study and meet their reactions; curry favour; subordinate itself to the vote."***

So to Reith's mind, the BBC needed to be strong, immutable and free of the spectre of competition, lest Britain tumble towards a new Gomorrah. It was the very first argument to centre around what we now call "dumbing down", albeit on an entirely theoretical basis. Reith had to figure out a way that such a fate be avoided, even as the BBC's contract ran down.

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