STRIKING THE BALANCE (II)

The Company dutifully reported both sides of the debate, without editorial comment and as equally as they possibly could in the delicate circumstances. Which turned out to be “not very much”, considering the imbalance of power between the two sides, TUC and Government. When Reith attempted to arrange a broadcast from the Labour Party - by now Her Majesty’s Official Opposition, and naturally on the side of the strikers - the Government swept in and squashed the very notion. Ramsay MacDonald himself - Labour leader, former Prime Minister and Nick Clegg of the Jazz Age - tried and failed to change Reith’s mind, unaware that it wasn’t his mind that needed changing. When MacDonald was turned down, it led to the very first ever use of a classic phrase that would be repeated countless times down the decades whenever anyone couldn’t get what they wanted out of the national broadcaster: “BBC bias”.

It didn’t help that Reith had worked for the Conservative Party immediately before getting the BBC job and was a personal friend of the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin. Philip Snowden, MacDonald’s former Chancellor of the Exchequer eventually wrote an open letter to the Radio Times complaining about the biased BBC “misleading the public” and “caus[ing] pain and indignation to many listeners”. He ended his letter with the first recorded ideological begrudgement of the licence fee: “Personally, I feel like asking the Postmaster General for my licence fee back.” And thus was history made.

Reith immediately composed a reply for the following week’s issue. In it, he explained that the BBC had lacked what he put as “complete liberty of action”, and that his Company had attempted, and to his mind succeeded, to state the case for the Trade Unions within the limits imposed by the Government. He also made the chilling point that a Government is naturally going to look out for itself, no matter who they are:

"We do not believe that any other Government, even one of which Mr Snowden was a member, would have allowed the broadcasting authority under its control greater freedom than was enjoyed by the BBC during the crisis."

It hadn’t just been Labour who were denied broadcasting space: Reith had even been forced to turn down the Archbishop of Canterbury and his idea for a peace treaty that he and other church leaders had drawn up, which would have ended the strike with no wage cuts and a restoration of Government subsidies to make up for it. Not a result the Government were after. Of course, the with the Church of England being a much more powerful institution at the time than the Labour Party, it would have been politically inexpedient for Baldwin to veto this broadcast altogether as he

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had MacDonald’s. Instead, he demurely told Reith and his Company that he wouldn’t stop the broadcast, but he’d really much prefer it if it didn’t go out - effectively smearing the buck in superglue before passing it to Reith. As he put it: "A nice position for me to be in: between Premier and Primate, bound mightily to vex one or other.".

In the end, the choice was made relatively simple. The Chancellor of the Exchequer - one Winston S. Churchill - had been suspicious of the BBC since day one and was repeatedly lobbying Baldwin to let him take it over and convert it into a full-fledged state broadcaster. If Reith had allowed the Archbishop to broadcast his peace appeal, potentially leading to a humiliating defeat for the Government, it would give Churchill the perfect excuse to effectively send in the tanks and commandeer the BBC. Faced with the dismantling of the Company he had built from scratch with his bare hands (and also some other people), he turned the Archbishop down.

The strike ended after a week and a half when the miners finally ran out of resources and returned to work without a deal, or having really achieved anything. Those who didn’t lose their jobs faced wage cuts and longer hours. Sympathy strikes and mass picketing were swiftly made illegal. Reith was to eventually admit - to his staff, not to the public - a great regret over the lack of Labour and TUC voices making their own case on the airwaves. The BBC had come through its first historical flashpoint changed, but ultimately stronger. Thanks to Reith’s unbending stance, the Company had gained the reputation which would endure into its reincarnation as the Corporation and beyond, for prioritising impartiality above all else.

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