THE EXPANSIONISTS (II)

They started by listing what they'd already achieved in the 20 months since war broke out: forty-eight new premises built or bought, mostly in London, and the Overseas Service staff increased by a genuinely impressive 560%. Next, they acknowledged the problems while simultaneously shifting the blame:

"The whole initiative and pressure in the matter of the provision of new stations and transmitters before and since the war has been taken by the BBC, and they have been met month after month with delays and adjournments - some, no doubt, inevitable, but not attributable in any shape or form to the BBC."

Finally, the Chairman made a point of rallying around his director-general, warning Noel-Baker against "say[ing] that Ogilvie is unfit for his job," warning that any explicit attack on him would be "strongly resented by the Governors".

For his part, Duff Cooper, in his own Parliamentary response, attempted to grant the BBC something close to complete plenary absolution of all sin, citing a lack of accomodation in Central London that managed to be simultaneously suitable and available to the Overseas Service, and pointing out that the BBC, unlike the people he was addressing, had to pay for itself. "They are doing their best, and the difficulties are very great."

Parliament were ultimately less than convinced. On 17th July 1941, Duff Cooper sadly told the Governors that he had failed to make the case for broadcasting to the people "in high quarters" and that maybe those on the board with friends in such places should consider making the most of such connections? He was speaking like a man on borrowed time, and indeed just three days later he was put out of his misery at the Ministry of Information and moved to the Duchy of Lancaster.

His successor was Professor Yaffle template and close Churchill ally (and indeed, sidekick and disciple) Brendan Bracken, who would remain as Minister for the duration of the War in Europe. He immediately staged a massive clearout of the staff he'd inherited and turned his attention to the ongoing row over the Overseas Service and Triple Expansion. The BBC's hackles warily raised. Bracken was famous even then, not only as a Churchill loyalist (almost to the point of osmosis) but as a slippery political grifter who couldn't be trusted to call twelve pence a shilling. Irish at a time when that was politically inexpedient,

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2018

he invented an entire backstory for himself involving an Australian upbringing (he lived in Victoria for five years), a bushfire, and a never-clarified connection with the headmaster of Winchester College. Between that and his closeness with Churchill - the man who'd tried to seize the BBC back when it was still a company and he the Home Secretary, and still wasn't over-fond of it as Prime Minister - the Corporation was not expecting the extension of a warm hand of friendship.

But as it turned out, Bracken was actually sympathetic to the BBC as an institution, probably more than Churchill was banking on and certainly more than the Corporation expected. He did have severe problems, however, with the way it was being run. With the war costing more and more every second, the Government's resentment grew over the BBC's spending of what was, after all, still public money. As Bracken saw it, the heart of the problem was the Corporation's administrative structure, still largely the same framework erected by Reith, but rendered dysfunctional by the ravages of time, by piecemeal renovations and revisions that amounted to the business admin equivalent of haphazardly hammering a new gearbox into an old car, and ultimately by the lack of its architect and guiding hand, John Reith - or at the very least, someone of similarly forceful personality.

Triple Expansion was finally killed off in September 1941, when a leaked memo made two things apparent: first, that money had become so tight that the Government was all but commanding an increasingly panicked BBC to close down anything and everything that they and/or the nation could safely do without. Second, that the BBC's initial estimate of the potential cost of Triple Expansion - £2.3 million, around £115 million in today's money - were apparently so arbitrary they might as well have been pulled out of their collective backsides. And the estimate had only got bigger since - more than doubled, in fact, up to a full £5 million, £168 million or so in modern coinage. As the Corporation ran around desperately trying to come up with an equation or logarithm that made this acceptable, it became painfully obvious that the old systems of management and organisation, dating back to the Reith years, was no longer adequate. They were creaking fit to crack from what expansion had already been achieved. A new approach was needed, a new system - and ultimately a new Director-General.

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2018