The Listener

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A Strategy for Broadcasting by John Maddox

The most serious danger in the dispute about the reorganisation of sound broadcasting is that public attention will be diverted from the more serious difficulties with which the BBC and other broadcasting agencies will have to struggle in the years ahead. The Campaign for Better Broadcasting is only one of the organisations which resist the strategy outlined in 'Broadcasting in the Seventies': by doing so, it is seeking to retain a system more suited to the Twenties than the present. Indeed, from many points of view the most serious defect of the BBC's plan is that it is not radical enough.

The reasons why 'Broadcasting in the Seventies' has evoked the spate of protest of the past few months are not directly connected with the forward plan. To the extent that the BBC has failed to convince its staff of the necessity and good sense of the proposals, there has been a failure of communication and of labour relations. To the extent that the BBC has provoked the public to irritation and frequently ill-directed anger, there has been a failure of public relations. The present troubles will not disappear until decisions have been taken about the structure of broadcasting in the Seventies and Eighties and until the BBC itself has created better machinery for keeping the support both of customers and of workers.

The second need—the domestic need—could be satisfied quite simply. Much of the dispute about the proposals for sound radio would have been avoided if the BBC had been willing to state its case much earlier and in greater detail than it has done so

One of Sheila Bewley's illustrations for the BBC School Radio series on sex education for eight to nine-year-olds: *see page 824*

far. Those who have heard Mr Gerard Mansell will have been impressed with the thoroughness of the market surveys that have been carried out. Indeed, with all the graphs and charts that the market surveys have thrown up, there is a case for asking why the BBC had to wait for the present mild financial crisis before implementing such a sensible reorganisation.

Why, even now, has not the case for reorganisation been fully spelled out? The BBC's argument is that it has been necessary to make sure that the appropriate organisations were fully consulted in advance. Thus, among the customers, the regional broadcasting councils were first asked for their opinions, then the General Advisory Council was told of the proposals, and, weeks later, 'Broadcasting in the Seventies' was published. In retrospect, this procedure might seem to have been deliberately designed to make trouble. For one thing, the worthy committees concerned were not, and could not have been, in a position to make the detailed criticisms of the proposals which the word 'consultation' implies. Instead, it was inevitable that this procedure should have served chiefly to stir familiar anxieties: fear that the regions would suffer, for example, or that the renaming of the four broadcasting channels would threaten the output of drama. In circumstances like these, however, there is no chance that a body like the General Advisory Council can be much different from a rubber stamp, unwilling though it may sometimes be.

The difficulty, of course, is that there is no way in which responsibility for making decisions about long-term strategy can be delegated by the BBC to its advisory bodies. Its independence, which is its strength, requires that it should be free to make decisions like these, and it follows that it must for practical purposes be alone in making them. Advisory bodies can be a useful way of anticipating trouble, but to suppose that consultation with the advisory bodies is some kind of substitute for democracy is unrealistic and unnecessary. In the nature of things, the BBC cannot be run by consumer syndicalism.

With this important gloss on the meaning of consultation, at least as far as the advisory councils are concerned, it is hard to think that anything would have been lost if 'Broadcasting in the Seventies' had been published before the consultations took place. Then, at least, criticism would have been well-informed. But a still better solution would have been to use the occasions for telling the councils what was planned as occasions for publishing the proposals as well. Indeed, this would seem to be the most obvious lasting role of the advisory councils.

What the BBC is most in need of in its relationship with its customers is a sounding-board for communicating with them. Briefly, this means some kind of public access to the proceedings of the advisory councils, most simply by arranging that the proceedings should be reported in the newspapers. Although this issue is now being discussed, there is no sign as yet that the BBC is ready to use these bodies more imaginatively than as a means of telling whether people consider that *Dr Who* has become unsuitable for children.

The inevitable one-sidedness of the process of consultation with the bodies which are supposed to represent the general public seems to have spilled over into the Corporation's dealings with its staff and their unions. Is it possible that here again the procedure was too formalised, with discussions too hastily arranged and too quickly terminated? The difficulty of persuading staff to fit in with the new framework would certainly have been no greater if the people concerned had had access to an accurate published account of what the Corporation had intended. It is true that negotiations from a known position may sometimes entail that this is seen to be modified in the process of making an agreement, but it is a mistake to think that such changes always entail a loss of face.

In brief, the BBC would probably have had an easier passage for the new pattern of sound broadcasting if it had paid less attention to the mechanism for formal consultation and more to the need to convey an accurate account of its intentions to consumers and to staff, and if it had more vigorously acknowledged that the introduction of a new strategy, even in a small part of broadcasting, requires that the innovators should publicly and passionately demonstrate that their intentions are good.

Can it be right to foist on the public a pattern of broadcasting in which the old Reithian principle of diversity within each channel is replaced by the kind of homogeneity that allows a single-minded listener to stay tuned to the same wavelength for days on end? This is the most substantial point in the manifesto which the Campaign for Better Broadcasting has published. No doubt the consequent criticisms of the BBC would have been effective in the old days, when sound broadcasting was the only kind of broadcasting and when the BBC made its splendid reputation by devising balanced programmes, each put together with the flair of a good newspaper or magazine.

Unfortunately, the old formulae are quite inapplicable now that the intrinsic difficulties of broadcasting, in television as well as sound, go well beyond those of distributing the signals. In such circumstances, the customers can reasonably expect much more diversity than at present, in Britain, is provided. In television, for example, it will not be possible for long to provide only three parallel channels. In sound broadcasting, although most people can now look forward to three or four national programmes and the output of a local station as well, there are still obvious opportunities for broadcasters to seize. Where are the continuous news broadcasts with which some American cities are provided? Is there not a case for continuous classical music on some wavelength or another?

The technical developments of the last few years have created a great many dazzling prospects. Now that it is possible successfully and comparatively cheaply to transmit television signals from one place to another half the world away, it is possible to think of broadcasting systems that allow a person in London to receive not merely the output of BBC or ITV but also, at will, the television networks of France or America. To make this diversity of choice possible, coaxial cables would have to be used instead of broadcast signals for carrying television programmes to individual receivers, and there are other good technical reasons why cable television is certain to become popular. The movement in this direction is already well under way in the United States. Thus a strategy for the Seventies should include at least some realistic appraisal of how British consumers can share in the benefits which technology promises to make possible.

Money is another problem skated over by most of the discussions of the past few months. To be sure, there will eventually be a higher licence fee, perhaps some help with the cost of educational broadcasting, some local subventions for local radio, and, possibly, a better return from the Post Office's task of collecting licence fees. Nothing in what is now planned for the future of the BBC's finances suggests, however, that the Corporation will be able to keep up with the steadily increasing complexity of television production and with the legitimate public interest in diversity.

This is why the time seems more than ripe for the serious consideration of alternative methods of financing. To assume that this is merely another way of asking that the BBC should sell advertising time is quite mistaken. Indeed, it is hard to think that the resources of British advertisers could keep pace with the growth of the output of broadcasting which would take place in the Seventies and the Eighties if all respectable opportunities were seized. But might not broadcasting be financed more or less on a pay-as-you-go principle, with modest (or even non-existent) charges for rudimentary services and a time charge for more sophisticated services, of much the same kind as telephone charges? Certainly such a basis for financing would create a natural balance between public interest in broadcasting services and the money available for them. Inevitably, there would be a tendency for individual broadcasting stations to return to Reithian diversity. Broadcasting authorities like the BBC would be less racked by

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Next week

'Eden, Suez and the BBC': by F. R. MacKenzie. Christopher Serpell: 'Four Views of Suez' Third Programme Quarterly Plan.

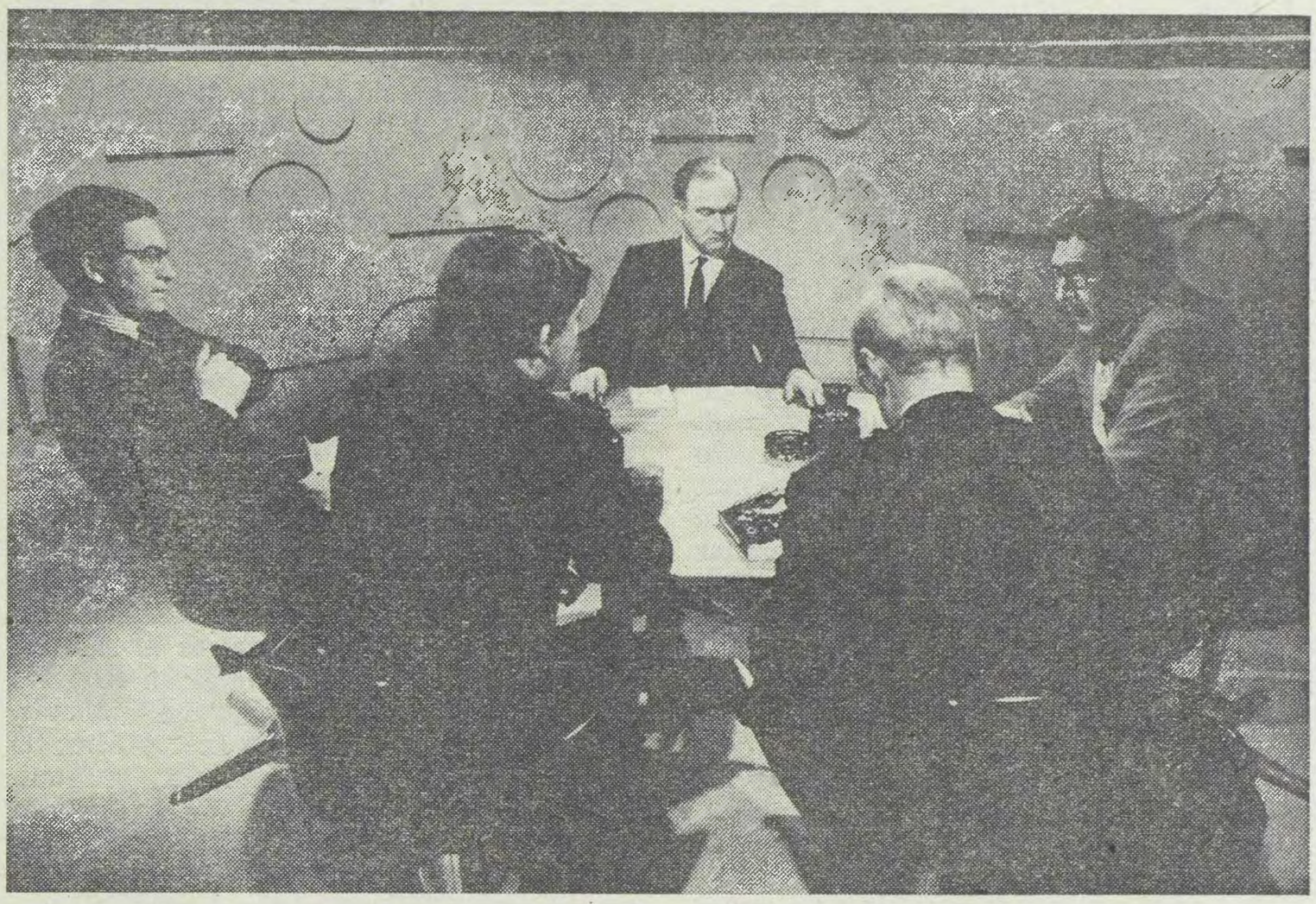
the fear that each step to provide a better service would entail another visit to Downing Street, begging bowl in hand.

But who is to provide the diversity of services which are possible in the decades ahead? One of the structural problems within the BBC, uncovered in the past few months, is that of the relationship between the creative people on the studio floor and the higher management to which they are responsible. Popularly, this is the issue of producer power. To what extent must and can the inclinations of an individual producer be subordinated to the needs of the network for which he works and to the requirements of public responsibility? The problem is a little like that of the writers who work as specialists for newspapers and who may frequently find themselves at odds with editorial policy. In the long run, in newspapers, the remedy is to find another job. In the BBC, probably the best and for some the only employer, movement is more difficult. This sense of frustration has no doubt been partly responsible for opinions such as that of the BBC producer R. D. Smith, who believes: 'The situation at the BBC has been deteriorating for a good number of years. Politics, finances, the growth of commercial television, the teenage explosion into big-spending, the decline of old cultural patterns, the beginning of new habits in entertainment—all these phenomena have forced changes on an organisation rooted morally, intellectually and structurally in a society that has had its day.' In the long run, there will have to be a diversity of employers in broadcasting, which probably implies not merely the form but also the reality of autonomy for broadcasting stations.

At this stage, all that can be certain is that a sensible adaptation of the broadcasting system to these independent and powerful pressures will require a radical recasting of present arrangements. There is a case for thinking that the time has come to separate the broadcasting of electromagnetic signals from the devising of the programme which they carry. Indeed, it may be time to ask that anybody with an idea of what might be transmitted by radio or by television should be given an opportunity to devise a programme and to negotiate with some central agency in much the way in which people wishing to make telephone calls can expect the Post Office to transmit what they have to say. If some means could be devised of relating broadcasting revenue to the demand for particular services, it would be much easier than at present to imagine how several independent channels might coexist within the framework of what is now the BBC. If there could be established a flourishing international trade in broadcast programmes, the BBC as a whole might expect that its high qualities would earn a handsome revenue from abroad. With luck, both customers and staff would benefit from such a radical recasting of the present pattern of broadcasting. By comparison, what is now planned for sound radio is almost an irrelevance.

John Maddox is the Editor of 'Nature' and a member of the BBC's General Advisory Council.

Charles Curran, Director-General of the BBC, answers questions on the BBC's plans



Charles Curran (centre) was questioned on 30 November by (left to right) Michael Finley of the 'Kent Messenger' group of newspapers, Nigel Lawson, Editor of the 'Spectator', and Marius Goring, who is associated with the Campaign for Better Broadcasting. Robin Day took the chair

ROBIN DAY: Is it not a fact, Mr Curran, that despite the increased combined licence fee, which is due to come in 1971, BBC local radio plans will put it heavily in debt—I think the figure is £7½ million by 1974—and that, in the meantime, its established national and regional services are going to suffer in quality and scope.

CHARLES CURRAN: You put two questions to me there and I don't believe that they're connected questions. May I take the local radio point first. You said that we'll be £7 million in debt in 1974. I think what I've said is that we shall be £7 million in debt by 1971. Now that will happen because we shall get no extra money until 1971, and we shall be building up local radio, and we shall also be keeping all our orchestras which we had hoped to be saving—that is, if we can reach satisfactory agreements with the Musicians Union. Now what happens after 1971 is affected, first of all, by the extra money which we shall get from the new licence arrangements, and secondly by the fact that local radio will be growing. I can't tell what the position will be in 1974. It's not impossible that we shall be £7 million in debt. A great deal depends on colour licences and the revenue we get from that. Our plans for national services were drawn up well before the financing of local broadcasting became an issue. We had a study group at work on this no less than 18 months before 'Broadcasting in the Seventies' was published, and they came to very much the solutions we now put forward for national radio. There's a phrase which has been used again in the press, I see, this morning: 'dismantling the regional radio'. Now this simply isn't true. What we are doing is discontinuing regional opt-out programmes: programmes which are done from the English centres of Bristol, Birmingham and Manchester, purely for their own regions.

DAY: The regional men would say that this was the very heart and core of their capacity to initiate independently.

CURRAN: They might well do so, but in fact two-thirds of the output of Birmingham and Manchester is at present for the networks, and that will continue.

DAY: If you had not taken on this huge local radio project—£5 million or so a year—would you not be able to afford to maintain the quality and standard of the Third Programme as it is and the independent output of the English regions as they now are?

CURRAN: There is no question but that the quality and standard of the material which is now in the Third will be there in Radios 3 and 4 in the future. Therefore, it's not really a question of money. The question of maintaining regional output was already discussed before we knew that we were going to get money for local broadcasting. We put this question clearly in 'Broadcasting in the Seventies' as a separate financial issue.

DAY: How do you justify the segregation of the four radio programmes into four separate compartments corresponding to four different classes of alleged audience