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# THE PILKINGTON REPORT— ITS EFFECT ON BRITISH TELEVISION

*Broadcasting in Great Britain is in the hands of two organizations—the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Television Authority. The BBC's legal right of existence is embodied in its Charter and the I.T.A.'s in the Television Act of 1954. Both these legal instruments are due to end in 1964, and to study the whole ramifications of broadcasting a committee was set up by the Postmaster-General in 1960, under the chairmanship of Sir Harry Pilkington. This committee was empowered to make recommendations on the future development of broadcasting in Britain, and its report has been published recently.*

*Its main recommendations were:*

1. *A change from the 405 line standard to 625.*
2. *The BBC should be authorized to start a second TV programme as soon as possible.*
3. *A colour TV service on 625.*
4. *Independent TV should be reorganized so that the authority should plan programmes and sell advertising time. Programme companies would produce and sell programmes.*
5. *Independent TV should be reconstituted before being authorized to provide a second programme.*
6. *Sound broadcasting should be the sole responsibility of the BBC.*
7. *Rights and duties of the National Broadcasting Councils of Wales and Scotland should be extended.*
8. *Pay as you view TV proposals turned down.*
9. *Licence fee increased to £6.*
10. *No special educational TV service.*
11. *No advertising magazines.*

*The Government has gone ahead on some of these proposals but has deferred its decision on the reconstitution of Independent TV, the provision of sound broadcasting, pay TV, and the licence fee.*

**F**ORTY YEARS OF BRITISH BROADCASTING HISTORY are punctuated by the names of Government-appointed committees of inquiry. Sykes, Crawford, Ullswater, Beveridge have all left their marks.

They were part of the democratic process of free criticism and free ventilation of public issues; pauses in an orderly development. The Pilkington Committee of eleven members, presided over by Sir Harry Pilkington, the glass manufacturer, was the logical successor to these previous bodies. It was charged with the task of making recommendations on the future of broadcasting in all its aspects, especially television.

In important respects the problems confronting the Pilkington Committee and the circumstances of its appointment made it different from its predecessors. It was the first that included a survey of commercial television within its scope. This, known in the United Kingdom as Independent Television, or ITV, was introduced in 1955. Involving, as it did, a sharp break with the British tradition of public service broadcasting, free from advertising, ITV has been the target of much criticism from political opponents, who have had powerful academic, besides some clerical, backing.

Moreover, the Pilkington team must have been depressingly conscious of the treatment accorded by the Conservative Government of the day to the Beveridge recommendations against commercial TV made ten years before. Strangely, the decision to start ITV in 1955 was based on a one-man minority report, that of Mr Selwyn Lloyd, who later became Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Beveridge majority proposal to continue the BBC television monopoly was, after acrimonious Parliamentary debates, rejected.

This was in marked contrast to the respectful acquiescence of past Governments to the ideas of the previous committees. All of these had upheld the BBC monopoly, its freedom from competition and its position, in the words of the Crawford, 1926, Committee as "a public Corporation acting as a trustee for the national interest".

So, when appointed in 1960, the Pilkington team, with the Beveridge precedent in mind, faced the distasteful possibility that whatever opinion they expressed, the Government might think and act differently. This has, in fact, happened. After two years' laborious examination of the complex subject, during which the committee studied 636 memoranda received from various organizations, the Government has rejected the main recommendation.

This was that the Independent Television Authority, which has overall control of commercial television in this country, should itself plan the programmes and sell the advertising time. At the moment the programme planning and preparation is in the hands of fifteen separate programme companies scattered throughout the country, which also collect the advertising revenue, while the ITA itself owns and operates the transmitting stations.

There was another unusual feature of the Pilkington Committee that deserves mention before plunging into the argument that has followed the issue of its 150,000-word report. Its membership was broadly based to include representatives of as many walks of life as possible. Special knowledge of the subject was by no means the main qualification. Billy Wright, the international footballer, was one member; Joyce Grenfell, the actress, another. There was a strong academic flavouring with Richard Hoggart, Professor of English at Birmingham University, and Professor F. H. Newark, Professor of Jurisprudence at Belfast, besides Dr Elwyn Davies, Secretary of the University of Wales. The only technical authority was Dr R. L. Rose-Smith, formerly Radio Director of the Department of Industrial and Scientific Research.

The report burst like a bomb in the Press, and the magnitude of the fall-out seems surprising when it is considered that five out of eight main recommendations have already been accepted by the Government and are largely non-controversial. But the technical recommendation that TV line definition should be raised from 405 to 625 lines conforms to the decision of the expert Television Advisory Committee made some years ago. It would not have been referred to Pilkington but for some surviving differences of opinion in the industry. This, and another overdue

development, namely the start of a colour service, have been accepted. So also has the proposal to start a second BBC television service. Concessions to Scotland and Wales to improve reception and increase their say in TV programme matters have been made as a matter of course.

What triggered off the big explosion was the suggestion that the Independent Television Authority should be converted into something that looked, on paper, like a second monolithic BBC—and a BBC with a monopoly of TV advertising. Cynics have pointed out that much of the indignation was generated by papers that have big holdings in Independent TV companies, but others that have no vested interest in ITV, such as the *Daily Telegraph*, were also highly critical.

The salient fact is that until the Pilkington report came out massive evidence suggested that ITV in the United Kingdom had been a highly popular success, besides a big profit-maker for the lucky pioneer investors. Thirteen companies are already operating and there are two more preparing to start. Last year their combined profits before tax totalled nearly £30 million, and the gross revenue was nearly £100 million, or, roughly, three times as much as the BBC receives in licence fees.

Audience research has persistently shown that viewers prefer the commercial offerings in the ratio of 6 to 4 and sometimes it has approached a 7 to 3 figure. The top of the Top Ten shows on the Independent network are watched by 7 million homes and recently the 12-millionth TV-radio licence was taken out, easily maintaining Britain's position as the most television conscious country in Europe with the greatest number of sets in relation to population.

The Pilkingtonians were utterly unimpressed by this success story, and, indeed, seemed shocked by the excessive profits. They said that there was much "disquiet and dissatisfaction" with television. These two words crop up repeatedly in the report. "Disquiet" said the report was due to the conviction that the capacity of television to influence people was often misused. Many of the best potentialities of television were not being realized; too often it portrayed a world in which the moral values normally accepted in society were either flouted or ignored. It showed excessive violence and failed to realize the possibilities for presenting worth-while material; in short, it was plagued with triviality.

So far this was generalization, but then the committee, which reported unanimously, came down heavily on the side of the BBC, whose service, it said,

was a successful realization of the Charter, though competition had sometimes led it to depart from its own ideal of public service. In contrast, declared the committee, the service of Independent Television did not successfully fulfil the purpose of broadcasting as defined in the Television Act of 1954. (I should explain that the imminent expiry of the BBC's Royal Charter and of the Television Act which created ITV caused the appointment of the committee.)

The strongly avowed preference for the BBC against ITV has been the storm centre of the controversy in Press and Parliament that has followed. In brief, Pilkington thought the BBC wonderful and ITV, chiefly because of the profit motive and the hunt for big audiences, odoriferous.

The committee further made scathing criticisms of the Independent Authority and its alleged lack of control over the programme companies. Though the report is fairly tactful about American influence it is implicit that the members did not think it was for the good. The report comments, for instance, that between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. the BBC devoted, in a typical week, less than one hour to Westerns and rather less than one hour and a half to crime programmes. ITV, on the other hand, devoted two hours to Westerns and three to crime.

But this suggestion that there is an impassable chasm between the two programmes is not borne out by facts. Each network broadcasts about the same amount of foreign material, mostly American, namely between seven and eight hours a week out of a total of fifty or sixty. When the Western *Wagon Train* was dropped by the ITV it rolled on in the BBC channels. At the moment of writing it goes out on Sunday nights at the same time as the rival ITV network is putting out the American crime series *77 Sunset Strip*.

The Pilkington proposal to take away from the programme companies their present responsibilities for programmes and the collection of advertising revenue was hailed by the programme companies and a section of the Press as a bid to nationalize ITV. Had it been any other issue the newspapers might have been expected to divide into their natural groupings, the Labour-Socialist papers being for this measure of additional public control, the Conservative papers against.

But maybe because the chief left-leaning newspapers of the *Daily Mirror* group have big ITV holdings, it did not happen that way. The anguished cry was raised "They want to take *Coronation Street* away from you."\* This particular programme, which

persistently holds its place at the top of the Top Ten highest rated programmes, is a kind of back-street north country situation serial, packed with serio-comic characterization and it goes on for ever.

Leading the opposition to Pilkington, the *Daily Telegraph*, which is independent of all groups, sharply condemned the arrogance which saturated the report and the haughty conviction that what is popular must be bad. The scheme, it said, envisaged two ambling Alps, the BBC and a new ITV, locked in a contest as unreal as the phoney type of all-in wrestling.

Alone among the popular national newspapers, Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* which has always harped on the grotesque profits of the ITV companies and campaigned remorselessly against them, thought that Pilkington had a good idea.

The most bruising onslaught, perhaps, was that in the literary high-brow weekly *The Spectator* in which Henry Fairlie wrote, "It is the ideas of Mr Richard Hoggart (never very clear at the best of times) transmuted by people unused to dealing in ideas." The committee relied for evidence, he says, on bodies that had peculiar and sometimes direct personal interests in the subject.

The Independent Television Authority itself issued figures to establish that out of the 117 hours of programmes produced by all the Independent companies, about 71 hours consist of informative programmes of all types, including talks, discussions, documentaries, news, serious question and answer programmes, besides religious and schools programmes. It repudiated the attitude toward television ascribed to it by the committee. In a typical week, it was claimed, the ITV transmitted 21 hours of "serious" programmes compared with 23½ hours broadcast by the BBC.

Pursuing the policy of allowing the fullest free discussion possible, the Government has sat on the fence when confronted with the controversial recommendations. Though the Government has approved a second BBC television programme it does not say how it will be financed, and it has become clear that neither the Government nor leading members of the Labour Opposition relish the idea of raising the BBC licence fee from the present £3 a year (£4 with tax) to £6. On the other hand, the BBC has made it abundantly plain that it does not relish the idea of receiving the money from any other source. Any grant-in-aid, especially if the money came by a round-about route from the excess profits of ITV would, it considers, undermine its independence.

In one respect the committee has been snubbed by Mr Bevins, the Postmaster-General, the man who

\* See *Sound and Vision*, Vol. 2, No. 2.

appointed it. He said "sorrowfully" in a Commons debate that the unqualified praise for the BBC and condemnation for the ITV were unbalanced.

Though the Government has rejected the Pilkington proposal to make the Independent Authority wholly responsible for programmes, it is fairly evident that it intends to give the Authority more power to control networking. Closer supervision of advertising is also likely, though the British system of spot advertising and no sponsorship will be continued. Advertising magazines which have savoured of sponsorship are to be dropped.

It is highly probable that eventually the ITA, when reformed, will also have a second network, making a total of four, and an ultimate six over the air are envisaged. Contrary to the committee's advice, it is also likely that the Government will authorize an experi-

ment with Pay TV. More use of TV for education and an extension of radio hours have already been agreed.

Parliament, Press, Government and public have all taken in their stride a by-product of the report that will present big problems to the BBC and ITA when planning their second networks. New transmitters, on 625 lines, must all work on Ultra High Frequency. It is also important that the BBC and ITA stations should be co-sited, if only in the interests of rural amenity and the preservation of beauty spots. Otherwise the country will bristle with transmitting aerials like a green pin-cushion.

At least Pilkington has achieved one thing. It has cleared the way on a number of issues for big forward moves. My confident guess is that *Coronation Street* and the programme companies, with clipped profits, will be saved for the next decade.