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BROADCASTING: THE ANNAN REPORT

Three years ago, after persistent pressure from many quarters through the sixties and early seventies, the Government finally accepted the need to review the prevailing situation in broadcasting. They commissioned Lord Annan and a fifteen-member committee 'to consider the future of broadcasting services in the United Kingdom...and to propose what constitutional, organisational and financial arrangements and what conditions should apply to conduct...these services'. In March of this year the Annan Committee presented their research and recommendations to Parliament in a five-hundred page report which cost £315,000 to prepare. Legislation is currently under consideration based on its findings.

Any attempt to make a thorough and meaningful analysis of the entire contents and implications of the Report would be a gargantuan task and impossible within the confines of this column. But there are a few observations worth noting which have some relevance here.

First, I would agree with the view that in the main 'the case for among other things two new broadcasting authorities, one to take responsibility for local radio, cable TV etc, and another for a fourth TV channel are, with reservations, well argued whether one agrees with the proposals or not. However the Report claims that by setting up these new authorities, the duopoly of the BBC and the IBA in broadcasting

will no longer exist. But providing alternatives is not always a means to changing a system if that system is so entrenched. In any event it seems the BBC and IBA will remain the most powerful communicators in the land, for economic reasons if none other' ¹. In general, Annan appears to accept without question that vast fixed investments are inevitable when discussing the Big Two, yet invariably retreats behind the Economy Scapegoat when considering alternatives. More specifically, the Report strongly recommends that the proposed fourth channel 'should not be allowed to develop into another competitive channel'. Hence there is a clear contradiction here with the suggestion that the existing powers of the duopoly would cease to exist. Rather, it appears, the Committee have compromised their brief by conceding to advice received according to the order of hierarchical pressures. Uppermost have been those who have the loudest voices; the most 'experience'; and the most at stake. Not, it seems, external and objective opinions, but those of representatives of the BBC and IBA themselves, intent on maintaining their status quo.

Throughout the Report 'Annan appears to reinforce the belief that the BBC and IBA are the professionals and that therefore their procedures, though not infallible, are difficult to question' ¹. For instance, in its endless debate on programmes, it is only ever the content which is discussed, never the traditionally accepted form and structure - a totally synthetic set of devices assumed to be the most appealing in audience seduction - which have been evolved by broadcasters. Yet 'it does criticise broadcasters for their belief in a divine understanding of the needs of the public. This is underlined by the lack of interest in analytical

audience research, either carried out by independent bodies or even their own researchers. Their continued dependence on ratings alone seems to be a slim and singularly unintelligent way of assessing anything, other than that X number of TV sets are switched to a particular channel at any one time. Annan gives some space to 'minority' views, but the general impression is that it accepts that 'broadcasting' implies conveying information to as wide an audience as possible, and that in some magical way the mass of that audience governs its acceptability (despite their call for more research). Broadcasters should not simply be conveyors of information, but should promote and educate, stretching the capacity of an audience rather than offering it soft options. If broadcasting is about communication, then more should be made of it as a means for communicating new ideas'¹.

Annan concedes to this rarely, and then with conservative caution. It makes specific recommendation only in the context of the proposed fourth channel (and there the programme suggestions come uncomfortably close to the existing output). They state the channel 'should encourage productions which say something new in new ways: it should include...programmes from a variety of independent producers'. Independent producers meaning, one suspects, companies outside the industry but intent on perpetuating its aims. However, even supposing it ~~will~~^{would} be theoretically possible to view the occasional new, even radical gem, the prohibitive conditions Annan has set on its formation, including the prenatal kiss-of-death statement that 'the fourth channel should not be allocated until the nation's economy permits', will most likely restrict it forever to the pages of the Report.

The only alternative is to legislate for change within the existing organisations. Any substantial recommendation or even significant hint of this is hard to find.

A prime failing of the Report ~~is~~, among others, ^{is} its acceptance that whilst television uses pictures, the success of communication is essentially dependent upon the spoken word. This is undoubtedly based on the obvious precedent of radio, and perhaps also in the belief that 'truth' is ultimately conveyed through linguistic means. This is exemplified throughout the hierarchies of broadcast authorities in that producers are invariably literary men from Oxbridge, with little visual sensibility. To 'say something new in a new way' demands the prime recognition that television is pictures as well as sounds. And that those pictures have a profound effect on the perception of 'truth'.

Using the already existing vast resources (rather than to opt out with tentative new proposals), it would create no great financial crisis if the present authorities were to each set up an experimental unit. 'The prime purpose of this unit would be to research television as a visual medium - as a means of conveying information visually. The unit would consist of practising artists, covering all the visual arts - especially video, film and photography; designers; aestheticians; art historians and others. It would also have the means to programme production. If broadcasting is not to become another degraded victim of civilization it must be prepared to be self-critical, not just in relation to content, but more important still, in its traditional concepts of form'¹.

The Report never discusses broadcasting as a potential artform in its own right, except in one instance where it tangentially refers to Lord Clark's remark 'that television could never become a medium which would transmit the greatest art because such art rested upon the existence of an elite to absorb and direct talent'. This concept is grossly outmoded and thus

itself elitist (in the derogatory sense). However, Annan takes great delight in its find, and with a confused and equally anachronistic view continue 'We ourselves agree that it is in its (broadcastings) nature to communicate personalities more successfully than ideas, emotional reflexes better than intellectual analysis, specific detail better than universal principles, simplicity better than complexity, change, movement and disorder better than permanence, tranquillity and order, consequences better than causes'. That this is a blinkered and reactionary declaration by the supposed arbiters of 'taste', misguidedly ignoring acknowledged shifts of emphasis in the context of recent art, is unseeing enough, but that they should follow with a statement which clearly identifies a position incompatible with the current socio/political climate in general, is nothing but irresponsible: 'The audience does not need education or even literacy to understand and enjoy programmes; and for good or evil, this is potentially one of broadcasting's greatest assets'. The insidious inference here surely being that 'for good or evil' it is one of the broadcasters' greatest assets? However, in the very next paragraph (which deals with the influence of programmes), Annan proceeds to conveniently contradict itself, in its typically constant attempt to ^{seemingly} satisfy all opinions, with the hope that each will pick out only what he wants to hear - rather like interpretation of the Scriptures. At the end it states (and there is little need for further comment) 'we judge the programmes in the light of attitudes and beliefs which have been formed by our family, friends and education. The greater our knowledge and the deeper our convictions, the less likely ~~t~~ television is to change our attitudes' (my italics).

In the chapter 'The Arts in Broadcasting' the Report supports the belief voiced by Lord Redcliffe-Maude that 'Broadcasting can claim to have done more for the artist in Britain than any other agency during the last half-century'. Whilst this may be true of essentially traditional playwrights, choreographers and composers, plus the ^{occasional} ~~old~~ old master and a few modern sentimentalists who 'touch the heart, stir the emotions or create for those who see and hear them a vision of order prevailing over the muddle of life...', it rarely acts as an 'agency' to give any true insight into the mainstream of progressive endeavour. That art can be provocative, contravening expectations, even implicitly political, is a view they have not seen, or more probably care to ignore. The 'visual arts', identified as 'photography, painting and sculpture', certainly have had by far the least coverage by the broadcast institutions in keeping with their comparative lack of attention elsewhere in Britain, and Annan makes no attempt to recognise this. Rather, it stresses what a wonderful job is being done for the (traditional) performing arts. No mention whatsoever is made about alternative media now being used by artists such as video or film which could so readily be appropriated to television. Here would be an opportunity for broadcasting to become a source of information rather than merely a means of conveying it. Yet by implication it would threaten the broadcasters' control of form and structure as well as content, which both they and it seems Annan could never accept.

Finally, in discussing the uses of independent video **equipment**, the Report admits that 'Those who buy or rent video recording systems will be able to free themselves from the tyranny of the broadcasters' schedules' and, they should have added, their concepts of 'good' programmes. Later they continue: 'But as far

as we can judge today, we doubt whether video recording will diminish the demand for off-air television services more than the availability of gramophone records or cassettes has diminished the demand for music on sound broadcasting'. This point is certainly open to contention. I would submit that whilst the demand may still be there for music in broadcasting, the effect of personal choice has substantially influenced the actual **nature** of the output on radio as much as the reverse. When, as indeed it is bound to do, the market expands for video equipment (bringing prices down), people will realise that the choice of material as well viewing time is ~~limited~~ ^{totally unrestricted}. And for Annan to suggest that 'The broadcasters may slightly alter their programmes, but video recording will not change the programmes fundamentally' is about as perceptive a prediction as might come from an ostrich with its head buried in the sand.

1. Tamara Krikorian, extracts from an unpublished paper on the Annan Report.