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The B.B.C.

Voice of the Establishment

OF all the voices of the Establishment, the British Broadcasting Corporation is the most powerful. Like other institutions of the Establishment, it has taken a knock or two in recent years. But, inexorably, its spirit will triumph. It has, indeed, already triumphed. When a rival organisation, the Independent Television Authority, was created its members included Sir Kenneth Clark, Lord Layton, Dr. T. J. Honeyman, the Rector of Glasgow University, and Miss M. E. Popham, a former Principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College. Not one among them but, in another year or so, might have been appointed a governor of the B.B.C. itself; not one that did not represent the "British mentality at its best", as Reith had insisted that the B.B.C. should do.

Clifford Allen of Hurtwood once wrote to Reith, saying that he was fascinated by the way in which the B.B.C. was creating its own ritual. He was referring to its public ritual, its tireless and solemn celebration of public occasions. A monarch has a birthday, the national anthem is played before the news; one monarch dies, the loudspeakers go silent; another monarch dies, they relay only solemn music. There are even precedents now for handling a monarch's abdication. A state opening of Parliament or a Boy Scouts' Jamboree: a great body of conventions has been built up at Broadcasting House for presenting either. Occasionally the liturgy is altered, something added to, or subtracted from, the established formu-

lary; but, even so, it is still the same, as if the B.B.C. was itself part of the ceremony: that crozier, really a microphone; the censer boys, attendant producers; and, beneath that rich cope, Richard Dimbleby himself. It is a significant comment on the confused state of British opinion that, in recent years, the B.B.C. has had no more enthusiastic defenders than the Labour Party, although it has done more than any other body to buttress the most conservative institutions in the country, to create and perpetuate reverence for the orders, the privileges and the mysteries of a conservative society.

But the B.B.C. has created its own ritual inside its own organisation, which is just as significant. Part of it is no different from the ritual of any overgrown bureaucracy. As Malcolm Muggeridge has written, the B.B.C. "came to pass silently, invisibly; like a coral reef, cells multiplying until it was a vast structure, a conglomeration of studios, offices, cool passages along which many passed to and fro; a society, with its king, lords and commoners, its laws and dossiers and revenue and easily suppressed insurrection." By the time a new idea has received the benediction of each order of the hierarchy, it has usually ceased to be an idea and become a piece of case-law, binding rather than freeing. It is a wonder, indeed, that in such circumstances the producers at the B.B.C. should ever achieve anything of enterprise or moment, and almost anyone who

has ever had anything to do with the B.B.C. will pay a willing tribute to their devotion to their work; it is only by their persistence that what is heard through the loudspeaker is not always muffled, what is seen on the screen is not always sicklied o'er with the pale cast of second thoughts.

THE ritual is most easily observed at the level of heads of departments and their assistants. Watch one of them greet an eminent person, a bishop or a Cabinet minister or a trade union leader. The eminent person is ushered into what is, perhaps a little ironically, known as the "hospitality" room; the head of department, who has never had his eye off the door, bolts the last corner of his sandwich and advances, hand outstretched, an obsequious smile laid across a face which is sallow from days spent in fruitless committees; he breathes the ritual B.B.C. welcome to eminent persons, "How good of you to come," and, overcome, relapses into a bold offer of a glass of sherry; if this is the kind of programme in which the eminent person is to be questioned by a number of journalists, the next fifteen minutes are spent in introducing him to his inquisitors, with the smiling, ritual reassurance, "I don't think you have anything to fear from Mr. —", nor does he, for Mr. — has already had it pointed out to him that the point of the programme is, not to put the eminent person on the spot, but to "reveal his personality"; after a short run through, the producer is desperate and takes the opportunity, while the head of department is reassuring the eminent person, to urge the inquisitors to be tough with their victim; but the resources of the B.B.C. are not yet exhausted; the chairman of the discussion has been chosen for a good reason; when the programme is actually on the air, at the precise moment when one more supplementary question would pin the eminent person to at least one clear statement of his opinion, the chairman intervenes with the languid observation, "I think we have had enough of that question. May I ask, Sir, if it is true that your hobby is fishing?" The full ritual has once more been played

through without a hitch; the producer retires, despondent, for a drink round the corner; the head of department assures the eminent person that his personality 'came across well'; and the eminent person withdraws, convinced, as so many before have been, that the B.B.C. is a force for good in the land.

Now, the whole point about this behaviour is that it is born, not just of the timidity of a bureaucracy, but of the natural obsequiousness towards authority of any part of the Establishment. "Broadcasting", wrote Reith in his autobiography, "has for long been recognised as an estate of the realm." It is one of the few unchallengeable statements in the book. The B.B.C. can lay claim to the title of the fourth estate with far more justice than can the Press, which anyhow should never have regarded the title as in any way creditable. What matters is not that the B.B.C. by its constitutional position, is liable to have to submit to pressure from the political authority, although its defenders tend to underestimate the frequency with which such pressure has been exerted. As W. J. M. Mackenzie and J. W. Grove, in their textbook, *Central Administration in Britain*, point out:

Since the B.B.C. was set up as a public body in 1927, the government has many times intervened in particular matters of day-to-day administration although it has no formal powers to do so. A case in point was the attempt of the B.B.C. to merge its Western and Midland Regions, a proposal which met with such stiff political opposition inside and outside Parliament that the Corporation was forced to abandon it.

Cases of direct intervention such as this are not, however, as important as the assumption that underlies all the B.B.C.'s attitudes to authority: namely, that it *ought* to be on the side of authority.

This assumption was never more clearly stated than by Reith himself, in a letter to Baldwin at the time of the General Strike. "Assuming," he wrote, "the B.B.C. is for the people and that the Government is for the people, it follows that the B.B.C. must be for the Government in this crisis too."

This remarkable assertion, remarkable in its unconscious self-revelation, deserves to

stand as the classic definition of the Establishment's attitude to those in positions of power. It is precisely this self-deluding assumption that their own views must correspond with the interests of the nation, and the equally strong presumption in favour of the political authority of the day, which are at the root of the Establishment's attitudes. It is not surprising that they should have found their firmest expression in an utterance of the first Director-General of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

THE legend of the B.B.C.'s independence and impartiality has been so sedulously spread that it is necessary to expose it at some length. It is possible to do this by taking the evidence almost entirely from the autobiography of Reith himself. This extraordinary book is almost as terrifying as James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, with which it has a more than coincidental resemblance. Here, for all to see, is a detailed self-description of what happens to a man who can totally persuade himself that all that he does is done in the cause of righteousness.

"I was entirely moral," he writes of himself at the age of fifteen. Ten years later, he sees himself as a man "of principle and character and will." "It was indeed royal to do good and be abused," he comments at another point. This was the man, impelled by ambition, protected by his arrogance, sustained by an almost inexhaustible capacity for self-deception, who decided to use the new instrument of broadcasting in order to impose on the people what he thought would be good for them. As will be seen, he developed, as he proceeded on his chosen path, an authoritarian philosophy, compounded of an obsessive contempt for ordinary people and an unassailable belief in his own rectitude, which has left a lasting influence far beyond the corridors of Broadcasting House.

In his autobiography, Reith makes much of the fact that the B.B.C. was not commandeered by the Government during the General Strike of 1926. (The B.B.C. was not

then a public corporation, but it was about to become one.) In spite of this, at no time during the General Strike did the B.B.C. behave either independently of the Government's wishes or impartially towards the strikers. Soon after the strike began, for example, the Archbishop of Canterbury telephoned to Reith personally, saying:

that a manifesto had been drawn up by the leaders of all the Churches; might he broadcast it? He said that he had already communicated with No. 10 and had been told that the Prime Minister would not prevent its being broadcast, though he would prefer not; he had been told to apply to me. A nice position for me to be in between Premier and Primate; bound mightily to vex one or other. . . .

As might be expected, the Archbishop's statement was an innocuous one, proposing terms under which the strike might be called off and negotiations opened, whereas Baldwin had stated that he would not discuss terms until the strike had been called off. Reith talked next to J. C. C. Davidson, who was then acting as Deputy Chief Civil Commissioner, who told him

categorically that the statement should not be broadcast and that the Prime Minister hoped it would not be. . . . Rightly or wrongly, therefore, I told the Archbishop on the telephone I was sorry the statement could not be broadcast. He said he supposed the Prime Minister had objected. I replied that the responsibility was mine.

Such was how Reith interpreted the independence of the B.B.C.

But worse was to come. Reith himself suggested to the Prime Minister that he should broadcast to the nation, and Baldwin said that he would like to do so. As if this strange initiative on the part of a supposedly impartial figure were not enough, Reith proceeded to write into Baldwin's manuscript the most famous words which the Prime Minister was to utter during his strike. When Baldwin arrived at Reith's house, he

handed me his manuscript. "Tell me what you think of this," he said. I suggested one alteration with which he agreed. Then he said he thought of ending with something personal. "Yes," I replied, "something about people trusting you. And what about you saying that you're a man of peace; that you're longing and working and praying for peace; but that you won't compromise the dignity of the constitution?" "Excellent," he said, "write it down if you have a legible hand." I did so. . . .

Reith's hand was legible enough; a moment later the skilful words were uttered.

This, however, was not all.

Another embarrassment next day. Ramsay MacDonald telephoned to ask if he might broadcast; he knew I was not entirely a free agent, but might he send along a draft? This he did with a friendly note offering to make alterations. I asked Davidson to show it to the Prime Minister and to say I strongly recommended it should go out. Davidson told me it certainly could not go; it would set Churchill off again.

Thus, as the result of Reith's ready deference to the expressed wishes of the Government, both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Leader of the Opposition were banned from the air. It was not until the strike was over that a member of the Labour Party was at last allowed to broadcast.

At the end of the strike came the most remarkable and most ludicrous episode of all. On the evening of the day on which the strike was called off, Reith himself read a message which the Prime Minister had written, again at Reith's request. "It was," he records in his autobiography, "an appeal to forget what had happened, to look forward, to build the country up again." The sentiment—the "appeal to forget what had happened"—was true to the mystique of the Establishment. Clearly, something out of the ordinary was demanded by the occasion. Reith found it. Baldwin's message was followed immediately by a reading of Blake's *Jerusalem*, which was then repeated by orchestra and choir.

*Bring me my bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear. O clouds unfold:
Bring me my Chariot of fire.*

But what Reith got was a knighthood in New Year's Honours List.

Two other examples may be given of the deference which the B.B.C. under Reith showed to authority.

In 1931, Churchill asked that he should be allowed to broadcast his views on India. Reith suggested that, if this were permitted, someone representative of the Left-wing should be allowed to broadcast as well, and

that these two should be followed by a spokesman of the Round Table point of view. It was a reasonable proposal, but once again the Government intervened, and once again the B.B.C. hastily withdrew:

We went to see the Secretary of State. He was most apprehensive of the effect of such a series of talks at that time; it would do immense harm in India. The Board (of Governors of the B.B.C.) decided to accede to the request so emphatically made by the Minister responsible for dealing with a particularly delicate and critical situation. One does not need to endorse his attitude and apprehensions to understand the Board's decision.

Of course, the point is that almost any Minister, at any moment, can claim that the situation for which he is responsible is "particularly delicate and critical." As every journalist knows, it is the commonest excuse given by a Minister who is trying to prevent either news or comment being published. The only difference is that journalists tend to be more sceptical of the excuse than the B.B.C. proved to be on this occasion.

As is well known, Churchill was kept off the air during the whole of the period of German rearmament before the 1939-45 war. Reith makes no mention of this in his 500 pages of autobiography, although it was a decision which even his successor as Director-General of the B.B.C., W. J. Haley, concedes to have been "not so admirable". Reith may not have been ultimately responsible for the banning of Churchill—it was due partly to an agreement with the major parties, under which political broadcasters were nominated by the party Whips; and partly to the presumption in favour of established authority which has been shown by every Board of Governors of the B.B.C.—but his silence must be taken to mean that throughout the years from 1933 to 1939 he never demurred.

In June, 1932, Reith played a characteristic role in ensuring the maximum publicity for the plans of the Government:

On Monday, June 27, I was informed that the Chancellor, Neville Chamberlain, had decided to convert the £2,000 million War Loan from five to three and a half per cent. The Cabinet were not to hear about it until 9 p.m. on the following Thursday; he wanted the widest and most intelligent publicity; I was asked to suggest the means.

The Prince of Wales was to broadcast from a Canadian dinner at 9.35 that night; it was arranged that at the end of his speech he should say that the Chancellor was just going to make an important announcement in the House of Commons and warn people to listen to their wireless thereafter. The Chancellor's speech would be given to me on Thursday afternoon and it would be broadcast immediately he had spoken in the House. . . . It went off all right.

Such was the part played by Reith in establishing the supposed independence and impartiality of the B.B.C. Like many Scotsmen and most sons of the manse, Reith was always "deeply respectful towards those set in authority over him and expected a corresponding respect from those over whom he was set." It was this attitude of mind which he instilled into the B.B.C. from the moment of its birth, and the B.B.C. is not rid of it yet.

It may be objected that Reith left the B.B.C. as long ago as 1938, and that the evidence of more than twenty years ago is no longer necessarily relevant today. There is some slight truth in this. Haley, the only other remarkable Director-General whom the B.B.C. has known, made many changes, and he certainly freed the B.B.C. from many of its formal entanglements with the major parties. The Whips no longer have a stranglehold on political broadcasting, although their influence is still formidable enough. But there is no evidence that Haley in any way changed the B.B.C.'s fundamental attitude to those in authority. No full or relevant memoirs of the period following Reith have yet been published, and this makes it difficult to offer documented examples of the B.B.C.'s behaviour, without falling back on unsupported, or unpublishable, verbal evidence or on the necessarily suspect accounts of those who have quarrelled with the Corporation.

But, in fact, the conduct of the B.B.C. at critical or awkward moments speaks for itself. When, it is pertinent to ask, has a strike leader been offered facilities by the B.B.C. similar to those which were given to Eden during the national railway strike of 1955? Why ban the second of two scheduled interviews merely because in the first Siobhan

McKenna made a few spritely observations about the Northern Ireland Government? The examples could be multiplied. The B.B.C. remains today as deferential to those in authority and as predisposed in their favour as ever Reith could have wished that it be. It allows fair play only when the two front benches are agreed about a policy, and then only to the front-bench point of view. This belief in bi-partisanship, as will be shown, has its source in instincts far more complicated than the simple desire to play safe.

Few activities of the B.B.C. encourage this attitude to authority more subtly and more persistently than its news broadcasts. These are, it is claimed, impartial, accurate and trustworthy. They are, in fact, nothing of the sort. A pointed description of a B.B.C. news bulletin may be found in a letter which Jennie Flexner wrote to Tom Jones in 1938. Writing from New York, she said:

It has been interesting to hear what the B.B.C. sends us: great detail about the English weather; quite full information about the U.S.A. culled from our commentators; and then a little carefully arranged news about Europe in general. So the *New Statesman* is very welcome and we thank you very much.

She was describing an overseas news bulletin in 1938; a home news bulletin twenty years later is little different. A journalist, listening to such a bulletin, is impelled to ask himself whether it bears any relation to the search for news on which he has been engaged during the day, whether for *The Times* or the *Daily Mirror*. The answer can only be that it does not. A B.B.C. news bulletin may sometimes give facts; it only rarely gives news; and it scarcely ever gives the truth of an event or a situation.

This is partly due to its own peculiar conception of what constitutes news. One may take a typical example. A Minister, as is often the case, introduces a Bill which has been forced on him by party or public pressure, but every political correspondent knows, because he has been informed, that the Government's legislative programme is to be so arranged that it will never reach the statute book, and this fact is reported in most newspapers. What does the B.B.C. do?

It reports the fact that the Bill is to be introduced; it does not, however, report the equally significant fact, which necessarily alters the first, that the Bill will be strangled and that its introduction has merely been a familiar and time-honoured political manœuvre. Examples such as this occur almost every day. By divorcing a happening from its origins and its circumstances, the B.B.C. in its news bulletins is as guilty of a gross distortion of fact and truth as any politically biased newspaper, and almost certainly more consistently so.

BUT the manner in which the B.B.C. presents the news holds more serious dangers than that. In its selection of news, in its careful phrase and in its unspeakable diction, it fosters the illusion that in every public issue there is a body of ascertainable fact, on which a rational man may found a rational opinion. This is a perilous delusion, especially if people come to believe that the ascertainable fact is unfailingly communicated to them by one body, the B.B.C. It is far preferable that public issues should be presented as they are in the Press, as collisions of great interests, prejudices and appetites; and if these sometimes appear unattractive, it is right that they should do so, for unattractive they frequently are. It is far preferable that the fears and appetites of trade unionists or stockbrokers should be plainly represented and plainly recognisable in the *Daily Herald* or the *Daily Telegraph* than that they should be given respectability and innocence by a B.B.C. news editor and a B.B.C. announcer.

A further danger is that, by its selection of news, the B.B.C. gives the impression that political decisions are taken by a few great and remote men for reasons which are never, can never and should never be explained. Khrushchev makes a speech, Adenauer forces a *démarche*, de Gaulle sends a protest: all of them come as mysteriously from the blue and end as mysteriously in the blue as any titbit of information which filtered out of the chancelleries of Metternich's Europe. Politics, according to the B.B.C. news bulletins, is a matter for those

set in authority, and the doings of those set in authority are reported without partiality or favour: without partiality or favour, that is, except to those set in authority. The attitudes of the dissident or the nonconformist, even the common-sense evaluations of ordinary people, find no place in a B.B.C. news broadcast; or, if they do find a place, it is as a peremptory postscript to the elaborate, and even affectionate, accounts of the to-ings and fro-ings of the lords of the universe.

Now, it is not claimed that these dangers are due entirely to any deliberate policy of the B.B.C. In the first place, a B.B.C. news bulletin is limited, at the most, to fifteen minutes, which represents less than two columns of *The Times*. This makes it unavoidable that much will be omitted for which a newspaper can find room, especially since the B.B.C., observing its own order of priorities, considers it necessary to repeat at length almost every official pronouncement or *communiqué* and to record in detail the otiose routine of even semi-attached royalty. But even more important is the fact that the B.B.C., in constructing its news bulletins, is guided by no sense of news values. It is not sufficiently appreciated that one of the casual protections which a free press gives to its public is simply the news sense of its editors, news editors and night news editors. Precisely because they are, first and last, interested in what will interest their readers, they from time to time give prominence to news and views which the B.B.C. would either ignore or bury in the middle of its bulletins. This news sense is not infallible; it is often distorted; the trivial is frequently elevated, the significant sometimes overlooked. But, by and large, the press is far more likely than the B.B.C. to stumble on the significant, especially the significant which is uncomfortable to authority, and present it in such a way that it cannot be ignored: to stumble on it, if one likes, primarily out of an instinct for sensation.

But the criticism of the B.B.C.'s attitude to news which embraces all the others is that it does not attempt to discover the truth. It merely records public events and public

statements. Not for it to investigate on its own account the accusations against the Thurso police and decide that they deserve to be ventilated; it must wait until officialdom has admitted that they are a public issue. Not for it to make its own inquiry into the massacre at Hola Camp and present its own findings; it is satisfied with repeating official pronouncements. Not for it to unearth some public scandal, such as the Electrical Trades Union's disposal of its funds; it will ignore the subject until authority has given its official licence to publish. Thus, even in its news bulletins, in that part of its activities which is most commonly and widely praised, the B.B.C. is dependent on authority. It is to authority that it looks for guidance in its selection of news, instead of to a fallible but free news sense; and it is from authority that it takes the tone which informs all its news bulletins. Fed by authority, it is to authority that it gives homage.

BUT the attitude of the B.B.C. towards those in power is not the most interesting of its characteristics and certainly not the most relevant in a discussion of the Establishment. The Establishment is a difficult and, if misunderstood, dangerous conception. It is a pity, one sometimes feels, that it was ever popularised and there is much to be said for the view that it should have been left to ferment in the more obscure vats of A. J. P. Taylor's writings.

Intended to assist inquiry and thought, this virtuous, almost demure, phrase has been debauched by the whole tribe of professional publicists and vulgarisers who today imagine that a little ill-will entitles them to comment on public affairs. Corrupted by them, the Establishment is now a harlot of a phrase. It is used indiscriminately by dons, novelists, playwrights, poets, composers, artists, actors, dramatic critics, literary critics, script-writers, even band leaders and antique dealers, merely to denote those in positions of power whom they happen to dislike most. If this is all that the Establishment means, the phrase is unnecessary and a fraud. It is necessary and valu-

able only if it helps to describe something specific about the manner in which power in England is exercised, something that has been previously overlooked or insufficiently examined. In this limited object, the conception of the Establishment can be of some assistance. But although it may be possible to rescue the idea of the Establishment from prostitution, there is no promise that a respectable woman can be made of the Establishment itself. Even General Booth had to admit that there were tasks beyond his powers.

The idea of the Establishment is concerned less with the actual exercise of power than with the established bodies of prevailing opinion which powerfully, and not always openly, influence its exercise. The Establishment is not a power *élite*. If its members have any connexions with power blocs in society, it is not these connexions which give them their particular influence. If in their other activities they represent actual interests, it is not their representation of these interests which makes them members of the Establishment. Indeed, the one significant fact about the Establishment is that it represents nothing in the national life. It has its roots in no class and no interest; it responds to no deep-seated national instinct. It is this rootlessness which is seen by its defenders as its main virtue, and by its opponents as its most depressing fault. Its defenders have, of course, found a euphemism for this rootlessness: they call it disinterestedness. It must be disinterested, they argue, precisely because it represents nothing. What, after all, has the Warden of All Souls to gain? He is retained by no industry. He receives little or no emolument for his untolled services. No higher academic honour can fall to a man who must already be surprised at the full recognition of his talents. Where find a more disinterested or impartial person? Where, indeed, unless in the twilit figure of a still surviving Liberal or a retired Civil servant or a pale headmaster. All of these, it need scarcely be pointed out, are usually to be found in any Board of Governors of the B.B.C., which, however composed, may confidently be

taken as a microcosm of the Establishment of the day. They move in a world which is utterly separated from reality, governed only by its own mystique. Deprived of real experience, impelled by no real interest, avoiding any real conflict, it is to this, the exalted representation of nothing that they would like to reduce the social and political life of Britain.

Nothing, of course, could be more seductive. The representation of nothing can only be replaced by the representation of something: by the representation of specific interests, which may mean conflicting interests, or of real ideas, which may mean conflicting ideas. How much more simple, how much more civilised, to avoid painful decisions, to represent nothing, to be nothing. The Left-wing critics of the Establishment have altogether missed this vital point. If the Establishment represented established interests, it might, from their point of view, still be deserving of criticism. But why create a new term to describe power blocs which are already familiar? The whole point about the Establishment is that it represents no interests; and its claim to disinterestedness may, in this sense, be readily accepted.

One clear, and relevant, example of this may be given. In the long discussion which preceded the introduction of commercial television, the Establishment came as near as it has ever done to organising a campaign against the Government of the day, a Conservative Government. The earnest periods of Vice-Chancellors writing to *The Times*; the grim tenacity of Lady Violet Bonham Carter; the lengthy judgment of a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, Lord Radcliffe, who actually wrote a letter to *The Times* which occupied one whole column; the soft, enfolding platitudes of the Archbishop of Canterbury; the persistent lobbying of W. J. Haley: not a step was omitted. The debate on commercial television remains one of the clearest examples of the Establishment in action in defence of one of its dearest illusions, namely, that it knows best what is good for other people. But the significant fact to observe is that the Establish-

ment was at this point opposed to a Conservative Government and to the numerous business interests which advocated the introduction of commercial television. Why should the Establishment regard the defence of the B.B.C.'s monopoly as so essential to its own preservation?

WHAT makes the influence of the B.B.C. on the life and mind of the nation so baleful is the wash of "gentle persuasion", as Muggeridge described it twenty years ago, "patiently wearing away angular opinions; like waves on a beach, ebbing and flowing, transforming rocks and stones into smooth round pebbles, all alike. . . ." This is its true mission. It fears, and when it does not fear it despises, non-conformity; and, if non-conformity must be allowed its say, it will gently rob it of all anger and all laughter, of all passion and all heartache, until it lacks both pith and point. Aneurin Bevan, in *In Place of Fear*, describes how a new member of the House of Commons, imagining that he has thrown a brick at the members opposite, finds to his bewilderment that it has turned into a sponge in mid-air. Much the same alchemy is practised by the B.B.C.

It is most evident in discussions. The point of these discussions, as anyone who has listened to them knows but those who have taken part in them know even better, is not to find and explore the point of difference, but to find and scrupulously to map the common area of agreement. In these discussions, the chairmen are all-important, and one sometimes wonders if the B.B.C. does not breed them especially for the purpose in a B.B.C. Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, for it is difficult to believe that they were born of viviparous parents.

"Well, well, well," says one, when two members of his team have for once been aroused, "they did get excited about that, didn't they?" The audience laughs and is soothed.

"I am afraid," says another, "that the team cannot agree about that. Let's hurry on to the next question." His pain and surprise at such a default are barely concealed.

More commonly, however, even when a discussion has just concluded between three or four people of immovably opposed points of view, the chairman will sum up with bland indifference to what has been said in the preceding half-hour, rescuing from a wide area of conflict some small patch of common agreement which he can offer to the listeners as their reward for hearing him out.

Now, all this is not just an accident, nor does it spring just from a desire to play safe, discreditable enough though this motive would be in itself. It has its origin in the attitude which those in possession and in power try sedulously to foster among those who do not possess and do not have power, the attitude which is common to the B.B.C. and to the Establishment. It is difficult, in these days, to persuade a majority of people to accept ideas merely because they are advanced by authority or prescribed by custom. It is far easier and more effective to persuade them that there really is no difference between apparently opposing points of view, that there really is no conflict either of ideas or interests with which they need bother their heads, that there really is nothing worth getting excited about. Here is the real danger of the B.B.C. It does not preach; it does not even try to persuade; it brainwashes, and it brainwashes with such skill that no one notices. This is its value to the Establishment. It would turn up its nose at subliminal advertising. But it is guilty, day in and day out, of subliminal advocacy, slipping in, through the apparently innocuous words of the chairman, a whole attitude to life and thought.

No attitudes exist in isolation, and it is important to the Establishment that it should encourage acceptance of prevailing opinion in all fields of thought and art. To this task, the B.B.C. brings conviction as well as other qualities. It is in its nature that it should find thinkers or artists acceptable to it only when they have become generally accepted. It hunts names, experts and accepted authorities. Its guide to the world of thought, letters and the arts is *Who's Who*; its list of Reith lecturers might

have been culled from *Who Was Who*. Where the boundaries of accepted thought are being crossed, there you will not find the B.B.C.; where there is dissidence or protest, there you will not find the B.B.C.; where there is irreverence or resistance to cant, there you will not find the B.B.C. For a body such as the Royal Academy, there is point in its conservatism; its task is to inform and discipline every new development with tradition. But for the B.B.C.'s attitude there can be no defence. It is not even conservative; it is certainly not the repository of a traditional discipline. It moves sluggishly with all that is worst in British life, all that finds prevailing opinion safe and comforting.

THE relevance of this to the Establishment has already been hinted. Protest never comes from one quarter alone. The effective protest may well lie in some activity which seems far removed from public affairs. It is therefore essential to it that it should ensure, as far as possible, that in every field of ideas only those which are acceptable to it are given prominence.

It does not require a conservative institution, because conservatism is a positive attitude and might at times be indefensible; certainly it might well entangle it in a position from which it would find it hard to extricate itself, and the precondition of the Establishment's survival is that it should be able easily to shift its ground with prevailing opinion and so control it. Nor does it want an institution which is so progressive that it entertains protest; that would be to destroy itself. It wants what the B.B.C. provides: an institution which represents all in the life of the nation to which mediocrity has paid the tribute of success and acceptance. Success and conformity: these are the twins which the Establishment and the B.B.C. labour to uphold.

It may be asked whether a medium of mass communication can be anything but a mirror of prevailing opinion. The answer is that it can, but only on one condition: that one trusts the people to find their way,

at will and by their own taste, to attitudes which truly reflect their own yearnings and those of society in which they live. This the Establishment, but in particular the B.B.C., will never allow them to do. It has already been observed that one of the most patient illusions of the Establishment is its belief that it knows best what is good for other people, and the B.B.C. holds the same belief as a legacy from Reith.

"In earliest years," he wrote in his autobiography, "accused of setting out to give the public not what it wanted but what the B.B.C. thought it should have, the answer was that few knew what they wanted, fewer what they needed." The result of this attitude was a policy which has been succinctly described by Haley in the Lewis Fry Memorial Lecture which he gave in Bristol University eleven years ago, while he was still Director-General of the B.B.C.:

The listener was deliberately plunged from one extreme to the other. The devotees of Irving Berlin were suddenly confronted with Bach. Many listeners were won for higher things in this way, but many were irretrievably lost. For the weakness of the process was that so many intolerances were set up.

Haley went on to describe the policy which he substituted for Reith's:

Since the war we have been feeling our way along a more indirect approach. It rests on the conception of the community as a broadly based cultural pyramid slowly aspiring upwards. This pyramid is served by three main Programmes, differentiated but broadly overlapping in levels and interests, each programme leading on to the other, the listener being induced through the years increasingly to discriminate in favour of the things that are more worthwhile.... As the standards of the education and culture of the community rise so should the programme pyramid also.

The reverse, of course, has happened. The Third Programme has a much smaller audience than it had at its inception; the Home Service has lowered its standards; and the Light Programme has become unvaryingly banal. The B.B.C.'s television service falls somewhere between the Home Service and the Light Programme.

THE element which is common to both Reith's and Haley's attitude is their belief that culture is something which can be transmitted to the mass of a population by a curriculum of humane studies. Their motives were almost certainly different. Reith, a Calvinist to the core, wished to punish people. He wished to give people six of the best every day, and a round dozen on the Sabbath. Haley, a largely self-educated man and in this an almost nineteenth-century figure, believed that people would be enticed, as he was by Benn's Popular Library and Everyman's Library, into voluntarily taking a sort of adult education course through the B.B.C. But, whatever their motives, their fallacy is the same. The mass of a people must find its culture, if it is to be real to them at all, by following their own tastes and their own pleasures.

This is what the B.B.C. have always sought to deny them, and what the Establishment sought to deny them by resisting the introduction of commercial television. One can scarcely blame it. Its one hope of maintaining its position is to devitalise the people, to insinuate its own standards of success and mediocrity, to impose its own culture and with it its own attitudes, until they think and feel with it. The Establishment knows that a population with independent tastes, even if its tastes are only Tommy Steele and Terry Dene, is a population which is capable of feeling, thinking, and therefore perhaps even acting, independently of it. A population which can erect its own idols, even if they are only the idols of Wembley, is a population which will not be pre-disposed to idolise those whom the Establishment would wish it to. It is far safer to brainwash the mass of the population in a middling, middlebrow, middle-class culture; this the Establishment entrusts to the B.B.C. It can entrust it in the full confidence that the B.B.C. will, of its own nature, perform the task to the best of its ability.

Chinese Journey

It was a documentary about the Far East, and the commentary gave the number of "little communists" who would be born while the film was running. Apparently, a Chinese is born every second (every two seconds, an Indian). During the evening we almost felt them making their way, and at the end of the performance they were asking us for our seats. Is Asia equally concerned? No longer threatened by a Western invasion, is it disturbed by its own invasion of itself, by these millions who arrive each year to claim their share and their place? Have births — which were once family events which the State did not even register — become a great collective event, burdening the Eastern spirit? Since 1953 (the year of the first Chinese census) there are 600 million (and more) and for the first time everybody knew it. Has this changed things? I left Paris with such questions in mind.

Westerners once loved Peking not only for its beauty but also for the astonishing advantages they enjoyed there. In one quarter of the city they were rulers, and they used the nearby temples for weekends; at their feet they saw a nation of traders and artisans, and on their whims depended the coolies' hope of life. (If they all took a rickshaw, the runner would die within a year from heart trouble; if they all went on foot he would die within a week of hunger.) I travelled in China thirty years ago, when it was in a state of anarchy, and I had this lordly status. I now told myself: "This time I'll be cut down to my right size." Not at all. The privileges accorded the tourist have, if anything, increased.

At railway stations I automatically began to make my way to the platform by following other travellers. But the interpreter directed me towards a luxuriously furnished waiting-room decorated with flowering plants, and I might have been Edward VII arriving in 1910 at the

Gare du Bois de Boulogne. If I moved to pick up my suitcase, it was withdrawn from my grasp, indignantly, as though I were about to lose face. In the sleeping-car compartment, designed for four persons, two berths were reserved for me, and in the restaurant car an entire table, from which Chinese were strictly turned away. I would have liked to ask them to sit down, but was not sure whether I had the right to evade these favours. (In addition, I suppose, they were quarantine measures.)

In every city where I stayed I was given a royal suite on the top floor of a skyscraper palace. The entrance to my rooms in Shanghai was a large door lacquered in red and black which opened on to red columns, brightly-coloured chests, mahogany furniture and shelving, porcelain and jade knick-knacks, carved wooden friezes, coloured glass lamps, urns, nests of tables . . . I never had time to finish the inventory. (And I have forgotten to add the enormous circular mirrors which gave to this pseudo-palace the final touch of *mauvais lieu*). In the panoramic restaurant I was given a place raised slightly above the tables occupied by crowds of Soviet tourists. The only automobile in the city (or almost the only one) waited for me outside the theatre in which I had been given, free of charge, the best seat.

I was not, as elsewhere in the Far East, a target for touts and beggars; one didn't have to burrow every moment in wallet or pocket, nor keep an anxious eye on luggage. Everything fell into place around me as though by a miracle. I ended up by almost forgetting that I had paid (before leaving Paris) for everything in advance. Only once did I have to change money (and that was to buy a sandalwood fan whose lingering scent was to keep alive for me, in Europe, memories of China). I had been told that I would not need to go to the bank, and it was in fact the bank