
Low Conspiracy? – Government interference in the BBC¹

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Abstract

This article provides a detailed account of a largely neglected episode of Government intervention in BBC editorial policy – over coverage of the H Bomb in 1954/5. In the light of this it then examines two other better known episodes of government intervention in BBC coverage – during the Suez crisis of 1956 and over The War Game. It argues that such episodes of deliberate government intervention tend to have been underplayed by scholars because fears of the accusation of ‘conspiracy theory’. It concludes by suggesting some general features of these interventions and BBC response.

The official view is that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is editorially and managerially completely independent of the British Government. The view contains an obvious element of truth. With the possible exception of the Second World War, public broadcasting in Britain has long displayed a degree of independence from the government of the day which public broadcasting (at least until relatively recently) in many other major Western European countries did not.

Beyond that, however, the claim for the BBC independence from the government becomes contentious. Take, for example, the following version of the claim made in the (in many other respects rather open-minded) 1992 Government consultation document, *The Future of the BBC*. ‘Traditionally, Governments have not intervened in decisions about programmes nor in the day-to-day management of the BBC’ (HMSO 1992, 13).

Most scholars of British media or politics would greet that formulation with derision. After all, seven years beforehand, in 1985 the Home Secretary, Leon Brittan, very publicly ‘intervened in decisions about programmes’ by writing to the Chair of the BBC Governors requesting that they did not transmit a programme on Northern Ireland in the *Real Lives* series – a request with which the Governors promptly complied. And, a decade on, we have had the events surrounding the BBC’s reporting of the Iraq War and the Hutton Inquiry.

More historically minded observers will also be aware that *prima facie* evidence of Government intervention in the editorial affairs of the BBC goes back a long way. They will, to take one example, recall the strong suspicions of the Government interference during the Suez crisis of 1956. But despite the widespread belief that the Government has, at least on occasion, intervened in BBC programming decisions, most academic study of British broadcasting - including the rather rich critical tradition – has shied away from investigating quite how great apart conscious government intervention has played in the editorial life of the BBC.

The main reason for this reluctance to investigate the instances and effects of the government intervention head on is, I believe, a fear of being dismissed as a ‘conspiracy theorist’. The argument for that reluctance was put very elegantly by Richard Hoggart in the forward to one of classic critical books on British broadcasting, the Glasgow University Media Group's original volume of *Bad News*.

Having commended the book's challenge to the myth of television news objectivity and outlined four main filtering processes on news, Hoggart warns that those who want to make such a study have to steer clear of two tempting errors. He labels them ‘low conspiracy theory’ and ‘high conspiracy theory’. ‘High conspiracy theory’ as Hoggart describes it, is the belief that ‘the agenda is very tightly framed, not by direct orders but by a number of more hidden forces’— recruitment, unspoken but firm transmission of how certain questions should be tackled, and so on. ‘High conspiracy theory’ may, Hoggart acknowledges, have some value, ‘but it misses the complexity if you hang on to it too long’. Even worse, according to Hoggart, is ‘low conspiracy theory. In this type of theory ‘it is assumed that orders are given that this shall be shown and that not, that telephone calls from high places decide what stresses there shall be and so on’. Hoggart dismisses such low conspiracy theory in two neat sentences. ‘There are sometimes pressures of this kind: it would be jejune to deny that they exist at all. But they are neither as frequent nor as important as some romantics would like to think’ (Glasgow University Media Group 1976, x-xii).

Most media scholars seem to have heeded Hoggart's warning. There may be occasional phone calls from high places, but it would be romantic indulgence to pay much attention to them. One of the few to have directly confronted Hoggart's

knowing dismissal of ‘conspiracy’ theory head on was the Marxist political scientist, the late Ralph Miliband.

Miliband was concerned to argue the general proposition that most British media institutions ‘are in fact, although no doubt to varying degrees, agencies of conservative indoctrination’. He happily acknowledged that they have some degree of independence and that ‘any degree of independence from the state and government in the case of such institutions is to be prized’. But, he continued, ‘that independence is in practice much less substantial and much more limited than is usually claimed’.

In defending that proposition Miliband quotes favourably and at length Hoggart on filtering in the selection of news. But, Miliband adds, Hoggart's position ‘leave(s) out of account the quite *conscious* pressures which make for conformity’ (Miliband 1982, 79-83, Miliband's emphasis). That brings him into direct confrontation with Hoggart's comments on ‘high’ and ‘low’ conspiracy theories. Miliband's comments on them are instructive. On ‘high’ conspiracy theory, Miliband is happy to acknowledge the qualifications on agenda setting that Hoggart makes, but, he adds ‘they can hardly be said to demolish the case which Professor Hoggart makes, namely that there are powerful and effective pressures towards conformity exercised in the presentation of news and current affairs on television and radio’.

On Hoggart's curt dismissal of ‘low’ conspiracy theory Miliband dryly comments, ‘Professor Hoggart may be right; but one cannot help wondering how he knows with what frequency telephone calls are made, or how important they are. Nor in any case does it take many telephone calls to create a certain atmosphere’ (Ibid).

Miliband's position seems to me fundamentally correct. We know that in other areas of social life conscious political pressure is important. We are happy to acknowledge that at least on occasions such pressures have been applied in British broadcasting. We also have a considerable volume of quite respectable studies questioning the impartiality or objectivity of broadcasting. So why should we be so frightened by the taunt of ‘conspiracy theorist’, that we do not investigate to what degree and in what manner such conscious political pressures towards conformity have operated within the British media? The matter should be a rich quarry for empirical investigation.

Unfortunately – at least so far as the BBC goes – the only general historical survey of the question based on primary research is in a number of ways seriously inadequate. Asa Briggs' *Governing the BBC*, published in 1979 is a study of the role of the Governors of the BBC based on Briggs' considerable access to BBC

archives during his writing of the official history of the Corporation. In a lengthy chapter entitled 'A selection of issues' (Briggs 1979, 187-233), Briggs examined nine case studies, from the earliest days of the BBC to the 1970's in which the BBC found itself under political pressure. While Briggs makes no claim that the nine cases are a fully comprehensive survey, both the selection and the treatment, makes them less than adequate as a representative study.

The case which will figure centrally in this article – the H Bomb in 1954/55 – is only referred to in Briggs' study in a single passing, and misleading, allusion (Briggs 1979, 103), despite, as will become apparent, its very clear constitutional importance.²

The H Bomb case is also not referred to at all in the fourth volume of Briggs' history of the BBC, which covers the relevant period. Several major incidents of successful government interference from the pre-war period, which are not referred to either in Briggs' history or in his *Governing the BBC* have since been uncovered by Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff in the first volume of their *A Social History of British Broadcasting* (Scannell and Cardiff 1991).³

In at least some of the cases which Briggs does discuss -for example Suez and *The War Game* (not one of his case studies but discussed in the opening chapter of *Governing the BBC*) – the material selected underestimates the success of political pressure on the BBC.⁴ And, lastly, Briggs' reliance on the BBC, but not the Government sources, may not only lead to a rather partial presentation of the Government pressure on the BBC, but, in at least one case, could lead to the neglect of an incident amply documented in currently public Government sources but apparently unrecorded in BBC archives.⁵

It is way beyond the scope of this paper to present an alternative -and better - general survey of government intervention in BBC programming. What I want to do is more modest. First I will outline in some detail one largely neglected, but very important, case of government intervention in the BBC – over the H Bomb in 1954/55. Then, I want to point to some connections between that case and two other cases which have been discussed (but still not wholly adequately) elsewhere, Suez 1956 and the banning of the *The War Game* in 1965. Finally, I want to draw some tentative conclusions about the place of conscious political intervention in BBC programme policy. Whether those conclusions stand up, will of course be determined by future and much wider research.

The H Bomb

In early June 1954, a producer at BBC radio received a scribbled memo from her boss – 'Will you read and report on this, please'. The producer, Nesta Pain was

something of a specialist in science features. Her boss was radio's Head of Features, Laurence Gilliam, and attached to his memo was a script he had been sent for a proposed symposium on atomic weapons to be broadcast that August on the ninth anniversary of Hiroshima (WAC R19/99 Gilliam, 3/6/54).

A week later Pain gave her verdict – ‘very dull indeed. It must be difficult to make anything but a very stodgy programme out of a collection of people's views, and I don't think it's at all a good way of handling this subject’. But that wasn't the end of the matter. Pain offered to draw up her own plan for a programme on the same theme of the hydrogen and atomic bombs, and a few weeks later she got the formal go-ahead to work up a proposal (WAC R19/99 Pain, 10/6/54 and Gilliam, 19/7/54) .

On August 31 she submitted her draft –‘Programme suggestion: The Hydrogen Bomb: Home Service 60 minutes’. The scope of her proposed programme was ambitious:

1. Los Alamos 1945
2. The decision to use the bomb in war
3. The physics of the atomic and hydrogen bombs
4. Dangers of peacetime explosion of hydrogen bombs
5. Hydrogen bombs in war

And behind it was a clearly stated passion. ‘Like many people’ she concluded, ‘I have simply avoided thinking about these bombs and their implications over the last ten years. Now that I have been obliged to do so, I feel very strongly that in the face of dangers which might conceivably engulf the whole of the human race (even the possibility seems absurdly dramatic) it is the clear duty of all of us to know and appreciate the facts, and so have the chance of doing any small thing we can to prevent such things from happening’ (WAC R19/99).

The tone obviously worried at least one of Nesta Pain's BBC superiors. Nevertheless, on 11 October a decision came. ‘Hydrogen Bomb: Agreed that Mrs Pain shall go ahead with a factual scientific survey concentrating on the effects of the bomb and not its strategic implications’ (WAC R19/99).

There was nothing particularly path-breaking for the BBC in this. The BBC had broadcast programmes about the bomb. As recently as April 1954 a whole edition of *Panorama* had been devoted to it, including contributions from such critics of the nuclear weapons build up as the philosopher Bertrand Russell and the nuclear physicist Professor Joseph Rotblat (WAC T32/266/8).

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In the autumn of 1954 Nesta Pain pursued her project at a leisurely pace. She wrote to a number of eminent nuclear scientists to seek their advice, and, presumably as a result of Nesta Pain's enquiries, in the autumn of 1954 word got to the Government that a programme on the Hydrogen Bomb was in the offing. At that time, the issue was a particularly sensitive one to the Government because they were busy preparing the Defence White Paper for early 1955 which would make public Britain's decision to manufacture the new weapon.

So concerned were the Government that a letter was drafted in Downing Street (Cadogan, 6/1/55) for the Postmaster General, Lord De La Warr, to send to the BBC. On December 18 De La Warr dispatched the letter to the Chair of the BBC Governors, Sir Alexander Cadogan. Cadogan was a former senior civil servant who during the war had been Sir Anthony Eden's permanent under secretary at the Foreign Office. The letter is worth quoting in full:

Dear Cadogan

I understand that the Corporation are proposing to broadcast in the New Year a feature programme on the Hydrogen bomb.

I do not know what the content of this programme is likely to be, and I recognise that there has been a good deal of discussion about the Hydrogen bomb in the Press, both here and in the United States. But the wide dissemination in a broadcast programme of information about thermo-nuclear weapons might well raise important issues of public policy. Indeed this is a subject on which the public interest might in certain circumstances require the issue of guidance or directions to the Corporation in pursuance of section 15(4) of the Corporation's Licence.

I am therefore writing to ask you to let me see in advance the script of any programme, whether for broadcasting or for television, which contains information about atomic or thermo-nuclear weapons, so that the Government may have an opportunity to consider whether it is necessary in the public interest that such guidance or directions should be issued.

(signed) Yours. ..

De La Warr (WAC R34/997)

This was nothing less than a demand by the Government to preview any BBC programmes about nuclear weapons and to use the Government's statutory powers to axe from them anything it chose.

Cadogan was out of the country when the Postmaster General's letter arrived. In his absence a holding letter was rapidly dispatched back to De La Warr saying that Cadogan would 'consider the important questions raised by the PMG's letter' when he returned.

In the meanwhile the BBC letter reassured the Postmaster General, 'one of our producers who is in close touch with the scientific world has been conversing with a number of experts with a view to establishing whether an idea which she had formed had enough in it to justify the putting forward of a proposal for a programme for consideration by the Corporation. From what she has so far learnt, it seems unlikely that this will be so but in any case a programme on such a delicate subject would have to receive most careful consideration before it took shape and arrived in the schedule' (WAC R34/997, 21/12/54).

Inside the BBC that last message was backed up by Corporation's Sound Broadcasting Committee on 4 January 1955:

'Suggestions for programmes on atomic or hydrogen bombs or on atomic energy projects must be referred to Directors at the outset, i.e. before any action was taken involving consultation with people outside the BBC. It was essential that the Director-General and Board should be adequately informed before they were questioned about BBC plans and intentions by anyone outside the Corporation' (WAC R34/997).

Cadogan returned to the country on January 5, and the next day he discussed the Postmaster General's letter with Director General, Sir Ian Jacob, a former career soldier and deputy military secretary to Churchill's war cabinet. And on January 7 the two of them discussed the matter with the Postmaster General in person (WAC R34/997 Board of Management, 10/1/55). The results of these deliberations were threefold.

On January 24 Cadogan sent lengthy formal reply to the Postmaster General. The letter carefully questioned what precisely the Postmaster General wanted. 'It is essential for a proper consideration of the matters raised in your letter that we should be told with as high of definition as possible what the Government has in mind'. Cadogan then warned that Government seemed to desire to exercise a measure of control over the BBC which would be unprecedented in peace-time'. He continued that 'the Corporation cannot agree to accept and follow Government guidance over particular fields of output except where security is concerned. To do so would be to abdicate from responsibilities given to the Governors by the Charter... Precedents of this kind have a way of broadening with the passage of time and if extended at all widely would put the Government in the

position of taking over responsibility for our output'. And on the specific question at issue Cadogan asserted,

'there are few topics in the field of current affairs, science and defence which can be dealt with nowadays without reference to thermo-nuclear development and its results, We should find it very difficult I think to deal with eminent and well-informed contributors who are perfectly free to write and speak elsewhere on any aspect of thermo-nuclear development which is relevant to their work and is not secret, if they found that some limitation is placed upon them at the behest of Government when they came to take part in a programme'. Cadogan concluded that the Postmaster General's letter was 'of grave concern to the Governors' (WAC R34/997).

On the face of it this was a firm defence of the BBC's independence. But interspersed with that formal defence were some very different signals. It was these that were to govern the other two strands of the BBC's response to the Postmaster General's broadside.

Cadogan had begun his letter of the 24th by reassuring the Postmaster General that 'the Corporation never had any plan for mounting a feature on the hydrogen bomb in the New Year as suggested in your letter'. As we know, this was not completely true. Nesta Pain's project was well under way.

Inside the BBC the Board of Management, meeting on the same day as Cadogan sent his letter, noted, 'DG (Director General) said that the Chairman had written to the Postmaster-General asking for more information about the Government's attitude on the points they had raised. *Meanwhile no programmes should be broadcast about atomic weapons*' (my emphasis).

And just to ensure that nothing about nuclear weapons sneaked in under another guise, the minute added, 'D Tel B (Director Television Broadcasting) and DSB (Director Sound Broadcasting) undertook to let DG have a note of proposed programme arrangements in connection with the tenth anniversary of VJ Day' (WAC R34/997 Grisewood, 27/1/55).

So in the short term the Government had got what presumably they were most concerned to *get* when De La Warr's original letter was sent -no BBC programmes on the Hydrogen Bomb before the Defence White Paper was published in February. On February 20 Churchill was to write in a private letter to Jacob 'I am very glad you are standing up against the idea of anticipating the Parliamentary Debate on the H Bomb' (copy in WAC R34/997). But the Government also got something rather longer term. At the end of his January 24th letter Cadogan had

said that the BBC would ‘welcome enlightenment’ on the thinking behind the Postmaster General's letter ‘either through the medium of discussion or in writing’. It had probably already been decided in conjunction with De La Warr that the medium for further enlightenment on nuclear weapons was to be discussion. A meeting on the subject between the Government and the Corporation was fixed for February 15. The BBC was represented by Cadogan and Jacob. The Government delegation was distinctly heavyweight. In addition to De La Warr and his chief civil servant at the Post Office Sir Ben Barnett, the Government team had two other members -the secretary to the Cabinet, Sir Norman Brook, and the Minister of Defence, Harold Macmillan. The meeting was held at the Ministry of Defence and Macmillan appears to have led off for the Government side.

According to Jacob's note of the meeting, Macmillan explained that:

‘The Government had been giving anxious consideration to the extent of the information that should be made public about the hydrogen bomb and its effects, and to the way in which this information should be presented. On the one hand they did not desire to keep the public in entire ignorance; on the other *hand they did not want to stimulate the feeling so easily accepted by the British people because it agreed with their natural laziness in these matters, that because of the terrible nature of the hydrogen bomb there was no need for them to take part in any home defence measures or similar activities*’ (WAC R34/997 Jacob, 16/2/55, my emphasis).

So how did the Government now propose to proceed along the path it had started with the Postmaster General's letter in December? Jacob reported:

‘the Minister of Defence felt that that these two communications should now be put away in the files and that the matter should be handled on a more informal basis. He *assumed that there would be no difficulty in close touch being maintained between the Ministry of Defence or Sir Norman Brook and the Corporation in this matter, and this would enable both parties to exchange information and views without hampering documents*’ (Ibid, my emphasis).

How did the BBC respond to Macmillan? According to Jacob, ‘*The Chairman entirely agreed with the Ministers proposal and confirmed that the Corporation had no desire to embarrass the Government on this very delicate matter*’ (Ibid, my emphasis).

To ram home the message Jacob repeated that the BBC had no immediate plans to mount programmes about the effects of the H Bomb – ‘there did not seem any immediate point in doing so’. Of course the Corporation would have to have programmes ‘expounding and discussing the White Paper on Defence’, but Jacob

added, 'naturally these would be founded on the information contained in the paper' (Ibid).

Cadogan's January 24 letter may have looked like a firm defence of the BBC's independence. The February 15 meeting had been anything but that. Not only had Cadogan and Jacob agreed to the substance of the Government's immediate demands over nuclear weapons coverage, they had also institutionalised the method of informal consultation between the BBC and the Government on programme matters. It was, as we shall see, a precedent of which the Government took careful note.

For the moment the Government seemed well satisfied with the meeting. A draft memo from the De La Warr to Churchill records:

'we went over the whole problem. We finally agreed that the Corporation should keep in close touch with the Ministry of Defence on all matters relating to the presentation of the hydrogen bomb to the public. We all thought that this was a more satisfactory and practical solution than that the Government should try and lay down precise rules in writing. I hope that you will agree that this arrangement should give us the results we want' (PRO DEFE 13/71, my emphasis).

With the publication of the Defence White Paper and the debate on it in the House of Commons at the beginning of March immediate pressure from the Government on the BBC seems to have eased. However, the effects of the pressure already applied were still to work their full course through the Corporation.

Jacob convened a meeting for 4 March of senior BBC executives to discuss a paper he had drafted entitled *Thermo-nuclear Weapons and Broadcasting*. As Jacob's paper makes clear both this meeting and the paper itself were a direct result of the intervention by the Government. Jacob's paper began by outlining the Government's concerns. It continued that the Corporation had to act 'responsibly' and 'in the national interest, though this does not necessarily coincide with the interest of the Government of the day'. To further the national interest on this subject meant expounding the facts given in the Defence White Paper, but it also meant organising discussions about the conclusions to be derived from them, 'for example, should Britain make hydrogen bombs?'

Jacob then came to the crunch:

'The more difficult problem, arises over topics such as the symptoms induced by "fall-out", the degree of radio-activity in the atmosphere which may prove harmful, and so on. In contemplating programmes on such subjects there are two tests to be applied. First, is there a worth-while object to be achieved by the programme, which would outweigh the horrific impact? Secondly, the corporation usually considers that certain subjects of a medical and scientific nature are best dealt with by means other than broadcasting. Do certain aspects of nuclear matters fall into this category?' (WAC R34/997 Jacob, 28/2/55, my emphasis).

The message is inescapable - steer clear of too probing discussions on the effects of the H-Bomb. The traditional BBC method of policing the injunction was put into force. 'It will be advisable for Directors and Controllers to keep a careful watch on what is proposed, and to bring up for central consideration at a very early stage projects that have doubtful features'.

Jacob's paper was to have an effect on at least two proposed programmes in the next few months. Over the Spring and Summer of 1955 Nesta Pain continued her leisurely researches for her radio feature on the H Bomb. At the same time the Panorama team on television had conceived the idea of doing a special edition around the tenth anniversary of Hiroshima in August and of reassembling for it some of the contributors who had appeared on the previous *Panorama* on the H Bomb in April 1954, including Bertrand Russell and Professor Rotblat (WAC T32/1201/1 Barsley, 21/7/55).

Rotblat had also been contacted by Nesta Pain for help on her programme. In late July she received a worried letter from him:

'Dear Mrs Pain, I had just started writing something for your programme on the Hydrogen Bomb when an incident occurred which made me wonder whether I should continue with it. I have been asked by John Furness of Panorama to take part in a programme on the tenth anniversary of the Hiroshima bomb. I thought that on such an anniversary one should give a review of the development of weapons during the last ten years. I left out deliberately all the questionable effects, such as the genetic, and various biological after-effects, and kept only to hard facts. After having prepared the programme...I was told that I had to change it radically so as to avoid talking about fall- out radiation effects altogether. It appears there has been a directive from the DG that the bomb should be played down. Naturally I did not want to be a partner to such a policy which I considered completely hypocritical and consequently I refused to appear on the programme' (WAC R34/997, my emphasis).

Rotblat was, as we have seen, right in believing that such a directive existed. But how had its message filtered down to John Furness on *Panorama*? We cannot be certain. But several suggestive details of the process are contained in the documents that remain from the programme.

The original idea by *Panorama* producer Michael Barsley for a special edition on the tenth anniversary of Hiroshima was altered by his boss, the Head of Talks, Television, Leonard Miall, to a special on VJ Day in which Hiroshima should be one element. 'I am checking up with DSW (Harman Grisewood - the Director of the Spoken Word and Jacob's special assistant) the policy questions on Hiroshima material in connection with the anniversary', wrote Miall in mid July (WAC T32/12O1/1, 14/7/55). A week later Miall wrote to Barsley,

'I am very disturbed to hear that you have already been in touch with Rotblat and that he is coming in for preliminary discussion. I would remind you of the directive from the DG that there must be no negotiations for broadcasts concerning the atomic bomb without a general outline of the programme and speakers being first approved by the DG' (WAC T32/12O1/1, 21/7/55).

Barsley submitted his outline, and the next day Miall relayed to Barsley the modifications the Director General wanted:

'DG repeated the substance of his conversation with Sir Edwin Plowden about professor Rotblat. There is no objection to using Rotblat but:
a) he is regarded as a rather wild man, and
b) he is not as fully conversant with the present atomic energy work as are some others... In dealing with this subject ...we will get the best results from the atomic energy authority if we use as our contact man someone who has their full confidence'(WAC T32/12O1/1, 22/7/55).

At some stage during this process the *Panorama* team got the message. John Furness wrote to Barsley:

'I was summoned to Leonard (Miall)'s office this morning...he reiterated strongly his statement about letting the DG and Grisewood have a script of what you propose to do in the VJ/Atom programme on the tenth, and he also sounded a note of warning of our not being able to use Rotblat's talk without DG blessing. I get the impression that there's an anti-H bomb" pressure at astronomical levels! If my guess is right we may find ourselves embarrassed over our approach to Bertrand Russell' (WAC T32/12O1/1 Furness, n.d.)

Furness was wrong on that last point. *Panorama* on VJ day and Hiroshima went out on August 10 with Russell and with plaudits all round. Jacob's paper on *Thermo-*

Nuclear Weapons and Broadcasting had, remember, permitted discussions on whether Britain should or should not make the H Bomb. What it had found problematic was exactly the talk Rotblat had proposed to make -a sober, but nevertheless chilling account of the dangers of radiation.

We still have a copy of the talk that Rotblat had originally intended to give. After explaining the basic principles of the atomic and the hydrogen bombs, Rotblat described the enormous explosive power of the hydrogen bombs that had already been tested. He then went on:

‘There was, however, much more to this latest bomb than an increase in the area of destruction by blast and heat. A new factor came into play which made the bomb far worse than originally thought, namely the contamination of a huge area with radiation. ...in last year's test explosion in Bikini the fall-out covered an area of 7,000 square miles. If the same conditions prevailed when a hydrogen bomb was exploded over London while a south-west wind was blowing the area of fall-out would reach up to Manchester and Liverpool. The inhabitants within this cigar-shaped area would not receive a lethal dose immediately; they could be saved if evacuated early enough, provided there was place whither to evacuate them. If instead of one, a dozen such bombs were exploded at suitably chosen centres, then almost all of this island could be blanketed in the deadly fall-out...The most frightening aspect of this problem is not what has already been achieved but the rate at which things are developing. During the last 10 years there has been a thousandfold increase in the explosive power of the bomb...You can extrapolate for yourself where this is going to lead during the next few years, and then you will realise why scientists keep warning you that a future war may result in the destruction of all life on earth.’ (WAC T32/1201/1 ‘110 years of Nuclear Weapons’).⁶

That was what Rotblat was planning to say. It was precisely the sort of approach that Harold Macmillan appears to have been so concerned about in his meeting with the BBC on February 15. And as a direct or indirect result of that government intervention Rotblat's proposed talk was *not* included in the *Panorama* of August 10. Instead an astronomer from Greenwich observatory gave the latest news about spaceships and satellites.

The Rotblat *Panorama* incident also seems to have put an end to Nesta Pain's enthusiasm for her H Bomb project. It was finally dropped in the autumn (WAC R19/99 Pain, 21/9/55 and Stewart, 13/10/55).

So, the Government's intervention in December 1954 not only ensured no discussion of the H Bomb by the BBC in the run up to the Defence White Paper -

it also, directly and indirectly, ensured that the BBC downplayed the dangers of the Bomb for the rest of 1955.

Over the H Bomb formal Government threats, followed by less formal but top level discussion, had worked. They had produced significant modifications to programme content in the area where the Government had applied pressure.

Suez

Viewed in the light of this intervention on the H Bomb in 1954/51 the BBC and the Government relations during the Suez crisis of 1956 take on a new interest. Suspicions of successful Government pressure on the BBC during Suez were sufficient for the Corporation some years later to feel that the Pilkington Committee would want to pursue the subject, and the BBC then prepared its own account internally in anticipation of Pilkington's interest. An account of Government pressure on the BBC during Suez crisis is given by Briggs in *Governing the BBC* (Briggs 1979, 209- 217). I do not want for the moment to challenge anything in that account. What I want to do here is focus in rather more detail on the early stages of the crisis. Here Brigg's misses one crucial incident and the extremely interesting Government papers relating to it were of course unavailable to him, while they are available to scholars working now. On 26 July 1956 Egypt's President Gamal Abdul Nasser nationalised the Anglo-French owned Suez Canal. The BBC immediately recognised that the Suez crisis posed delicate problems for the balance of their programming. Was this a party political issue? If the Government wanted to exercise its rights to have a ministerial broadcast on Suez should the Opposition have the right of reply? Should the BBC as a world broadcaster advertise to an often hostile world dissent at home? And then there was the minor local difficulty that the chair of the BBC Board of Governors was also, among other posts, a director of the Suez Canal Company.

During the Suez Crisis the new Prime Minister, Eden proved as ready as his predecessor, Churchill to try to bend the BBC to his will. And on at least two occasions during the first few weeks of the crisis, well before the invasion, Eden succeeded in his efforts. The method he used was the direct but informal chat that, as we have seen, had been institutionalised over nuclear weapons in 1955. Away from the public gaze, the Government was very clear that it was that method, rather than open confrontation, that brought results.

Less than two weeks after the nationalisation, Eden demanded and got a ministerial broadcast to the nation. The Labour Party declined to exercise its right to reply. As Eden broadcast, Commonwealth leaders were assembling in London for a conference which was to turn into a major diplomatic offensive by the former canal owners. One of those leaders was Australian premier, Robert Menzies, a vocal supporter of Eden on the canal issue.

Way before the Suez crisis broke BBC radio had invited Menzies to appear in two current affairs programmes during his visit to London. Menzies had declined the offer. On Wednesday, August 8, in the new political situation, the offer was renewed, this time to be interviewed in the Home Service programme *At Home and Abroad* on August 14 'In view of the forthcoming Conference the Suez Canal issue is a delicate matter', said the new invitation, 'but. ..listeners here would appreciate very much the opportunity to hear an authoritative Australian view on the problem, though naturally we should not expect Mr Menzies to talk about it except in general terms' (WAC R34/1580/1).

No immediate reply was received directly from Menzies, but on 10 August William Clark, Eden's press adviser, phoned the Controller of Talks for BBC radio, John Green, to say that Eden wanted Menzies to appear on television on August 13 or 14. By this time an extra complication had arisen for BBC radio. It seemed likely that the Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd would be making a ministerial broadcast on radio about Suez at almost exactly the same time on August 14 as Menzies had originally been invited for. If the Foreign Secretary did not broadcast, Green told Clark, then the Menzies invitation would stand. Early in the afternoon of the same day, as it became clearer that the Foreign Secretary would broadcast on radio on August 14, Green formally withdrew the request to Menzies. There followed a further telephone call, this time from Menzies' secretary asking how Menzies might request a television appearance on August 13. 'I said that a Commonwealth Premier could not ask us to break programmes for a quasi-ministerial broadcast as could a member of our own Cabinet', noted Green, 'and suggested that the broadcast of the Foreign Secretary had now affected the whole situation. I suggested that we should probably wish to give that priority and advised him to consult William Clark at the Prime Minister's office'.

Later on in the afternoon Green joined his boss, the Director of Sound Broadcasting and Norman Bottomley, the Director of Administration - who served as acting director general when Jacob was away - to discuss what to do about the problem. They seemed resolved that Foreign Secretary's radio broadcast should cancel Menzies' radio slot, but rather less certain what to do about the television request. At ten o'clock that evening William Clark telephoned Green at home to warn him that Eden himself would make a personal request for Menzies to appear. Clark passed the message on to Bottomley, who in turn said he would tell Jacob (WAC R34/1580/1 Green, 13/8/55).

By the time these warnings were being passed on Eden had made his move. He had phoned his old right hand man at the foreign office, now the BBC chairman, Cadogan. Cadogan's diary for August 10 records: 'After dinner, an excited

Anthony on the telephone, saying that Menzies wanted to broadcast on Suez on Monday, but had been refused by Norman Bottomley (except on conditions)'. Cadogan's response was immediate: 'This really nonsense, so I rang up Ian (Jacob) in Suffolk and said we really must comply with M(enzie)s's request at this time, no matter what our traditions and inhibitions might be. He rang me later to say that all was arranged' (Cadogan, 11/8/56). The Prime Minister had succeeded in getting his ally on television, by a phone call to the chairman. Less than a week later, Eden was to phone Cadogan again.

In the three weeks following the nationalisation of the canal BBC radio had mounted a number of current affairs programmes with a variety of speakers discussing various aspects of the crisis. On 27 July Sir Thomas Rapp had appeared on *At Home and Abroad* to give an immediate response. Over the next two weeks *At Home and Abroad* returned to the subject several times and on August 9 there was a special programme, *The Significance of Suez* described in a BBC internal memorandum as a 'discussion to demonstrate in practical rather than political terms the importance of the Suez Canal to this country and Western Europe. Neither pro-Government nor anti-Government point of view' (WAC R34/1580/1 'Suez Crisis: Talks Output', 13/8/56).

Continuing this approach, but perhaps conscious of the need to air a wider spectrum of views, on August 15 the Light Programme replaced *Dancing by the Sea* with a *Special Survey on the Suez Canal Crisis*. Speakers included a Labour and a Tory MP, an expert on international law and the diplomatic correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*. Also included was a pre-recorded contribution from Major Salah Salem, editor of a pro-Nasser Egyptian newspaper and Nasser's observer in London for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference. Salem had already achieved a certain notoriety in the British media as 'the dancing major' (WAC R34/1580/1 JFK, 15/8/56).

Reaction to the broadcast in the Government circles was sharp. The morning after the broadcast Eden asked Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd to investigate the programme. He reported back later in the day. 'The BBC told the Chief Whip (Edward Heath) that they put on the broadcast as a matter of policy because they felt that up to now only the Government point of view had been put across', Lennox-Boyd reported. He went on to comment, 'whatever the merits of this argument it seems to me inexcusable that it should be put across in a way which virtually monopolised what they claimed to be a balanced survey'.

What particularly incensed Lennox-Boyd was the inclusion of Salah Salem. 'As to Major Salem's recording, I think it an outrage that a body widely believed to be in part at least associated with the British Government should broadcast at such a moment a speech by a notorious enemy' (PRO PREM 11/1089A).

On the Prime Ministers instructions Lennox-Boyd's memo was sent to the Postmaster General, then in Wales, in order for him to comment, particularly on whether the BBC were behaving in accord with the Charter. The Postmaster General, now Charles Hill, replied on August 20. He crisply outlined the legal powers the Government had in the BBC's Licence to instruct the Corporation what to broadcast or to prevent it broadcasting something. But, Hill continued:

‘While the powers of formal intervention remain so limited, it is only by informal contact and discussion that programme content can be influenced. On two major occasions, informal consultation has had some success. In 1951 the BBC ... agreed to consultation on the problems of home emergencies. In 1955 the then Minister of Defence met the Chairman of Governors and Director General on the subject of thermo-nuclear weapons’.

The BBC, Hill observed was generally reluctant to consult the Government in advance. But, ‘when it does so consult, the outcome is generally satisfactory’. The course Hill urged on the Prime Minister was therefore, ‘to use the Suez programme as a peg on which to hang, in discussion with the BBC the general question of informal and prior consultation between Government and the Corporation’(PRO PREM 11/1089A).

By the time Hill dispatched this memo some powerful informal representations had already been made. On the night of the August 15 broadcast Eden once again phoned Cadogan to protest. The next day he followed this up with a letter delivered by dispatch rider to Cadogan's home.

‘The programme’, Eden wrote, ‘gave a deplorably misleading picture of British opinion as uncertain and hesitant. Of course the Government have no intention of interfering with the freedom of the BBC... But I hope that the Governors will bear in mind the heavy responsibility which rests on the BBC at this crucial time when an international conference is meeting in London. Many people will judge the strength and determination of Britain by what they hear on the BBC’. On the advice of one of his civil servants Eden's letter was made ‘personal’ so that, as the adviser put it ‘Sir A Cadogan can pass the effect of it on without disclosing your words’ (PRO PREM 11/1089A).

This time Cadogan seems to have been less sympathetic to Eden's intervention. He records in his diary for August 17 ‘... at lunch a motor cycle messenger arrived with a letter from Anthony, written more in sorrow than in anger, about the Salah Salem broadcast. How he can find the time to worry about such trivialities I can't imagine. It is a few people around him who always stir him up about the BBC’ (Cadogan, 17/8/56).

That afternoon Cadogan sent Eden a hand written reply. Cadogan was sorry that Eden had been bothered by the broadcast, but he did not agree with Eden's friends who had been critical of it. Cadogan concluded, 'I spoke yesterday to Norman Bottomley, who is in charge until Ian Jacob returns. He has warned all his people to be specially careful while the conference is sitting, and, apart from straight news, they will not stage any programmes of this sort' (PRO REM 11/1089A). Cadogan may have thought that Eden was fussing over trivia, but in practical terms he gave Eden precisely what he had asked for – no more 'Salems' during the conference.

The phone call and letter to Cadogan was not the only avenue of informal pressure on the BBC that Eden pursued. At the same time that the Chairman of the BBC was penning his reply to Eden, the Director General of the BBC was meeting face to face with the Prime Minister. Jacob had been summoned from holiday in Suffolk. We have been unable to locate any direct record of what passed between Eden and Jacob on the afternoon of August 17. What we do know is how Eden was briefed by his civil servants to approach the meeting. Jacob, the brief explained would no doubt argue that the BBC had a duty to be impartial and to balance out the views of Eden, Menzies and the Foreign Secretary which it had already broadcast, 'by an expression of views, quite commonly held in the country, opposed to Government policy over Suez'. The brief continued, 'I suggest in reply you should stress the fact that this is life or death for Britain, and that a nation cannot regard life and death as of equal value' (PRO PREM 11/1089A).

On August 21 a letter went from Downing Street to the Postmaster General thanking him for his memo on influencing the BBC. It concluded:

'As you know the Prime Minister saw Sir Ian Jacob on October (sic -in fact August) 17 and had a long talk with him about the Suez canal question. The Prime Minister feels that Sir Ian Jacob now more fully understands the strength of the Government's feeling that the BBC should take account of the national interest, but he agrees that this would be further helped by the development of informal and prior consultation on the lines you suggest.'(PRO PREM 11/1089A).

In the end the BBC came through the Suez crisis with its reputation for independence from the Government if anything enhanced. After initial unanimity in Parliament against Nasser, Suez rapidly became a party political question as the Labour Party leadership swung to oppose military intervention. In the months that followed the nationalisation of the canal and through the military intervention later in the year, the BBC was scrupulous in giving the Opposition equal time to the Government to air their views. And despite considerable government pressure, both political and financial, the BBC appears to have stuck to its belief that dissent should also be aired on the External Services.

But there had, as we have seen, been a significant blot on that record, or to be more precise two blots. In the early stages of the crisis, when party political lines had seemed less clear cut, the Corporation had on two occasions bent before the Government intervention. Just as over the issue of the H-Bomb in the year before, when maintaining political independence would have meant something different from being neutral between the front benches of the Government and Opposition, the BBC had been altogether more compliant. So long as the Government interference was along the lines of informal approaches and demands for more informal consultation the BBC's top brass were willing to indulge them. It was precisely that method of approach which had been institutionalised the year before over the H Bomb.

The War Game

The second case which takes on new significance, in the light of the 1954/55 H bomb intervention, is the BBC's decision in 1965 not to show Peter Watkins's graphic portrayal of Britain after a nuclear holocaust, *The War Game*. Watkins was viewed at the time as a brilliant young producer, whose success with *Culloden* encouraged the BBC to offer him virtually carte blanche to pursue his desire to make a drama- documentary on life after a nuclear exchange. Hue Weldon gave the go ahead to Watkins' proposal for *The War Game* in late 1964. Watkins was engaged in extensive preparatory work for it from January 1965 with shooting in April. In late November, after considerable delay, the BBC finally announced that it had decided not to show *The War Game*.

The story behind that decision has been told in *Governing the BBC* (Briggs 1979, 121:3) and in far greater detail, and with a rather more critical emphasis, by Michael Tracey (in Aubrey 1982, 38-55). One of the curiosities of research in this field is that both Briggs and Tracey had exclusive access to the BBC files on the subject -Briggs as official historian of the BBC, while Tracey as sympathetic biographer of Hugh Greene was rather unorthodoxly supplied them by this most unorthodox of the BBC Director Generals. The files are now, happily fully open. They essentially confirm Tracey's account, with a few rather important additions. From the start Weldon recognised that the *War Game* was a political hot potato, and interest in it rapidly went to the top - to the BBC's then Director General, Hugh Greene and its then Chairman, Lord Normanbrook. Normanbrook, it should be noted, has already appeared in our story. Prior to his peerage, he was Sir Norman Brook, Cabinet Secretary and participant from the Government side in the Feb 15 1955 meeting with the BBC over the H Bomb.

It is with Normanbrook that discussion on *The War Game* goes out of the BBC and, via 'informal consultation', to Government (or rather to the Government's

most senior civil servants). On September 7 1965 Normanbrook wrote to the then Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Burke Trend saying ‘showing of the film on television might well have a significant effect on public attitudes towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent. In these circumstances *I doubt whether the BBC ought alone to take the responsibility of deciding whether this film should be shown on television...It seems to me that the Government should have an opportunity of expressing a view about this*’ (WAC T16/679/1 Normanbrook, 27/9/65, my emphasis).

A special showing of *The War Game* was therefore arranged on September 24 for Trend, Sir Charles Cunningham (Permanent Under Sec Home Office), Air Chief Marshal, Sir Alfred Earle (Vice Chief of Defence Staff), G Leith (MoD) and A Wolstencroft (Post Office) together with Normanbrook, Oliver Whitley (Assistant to DG) and John Arkell (Director of Administration) from the BBC (WAC T16/679/1). The files contain minutes of their preliminary discussion after seeing the film, including the note that they all thought it would increase support for CND. They went away to think about it and consult their ministers (Ibid).

On November 5 Normanbrook saw Trend (together with Cunningham and Wolstencroft) again. According to Normanbrook they said they did not want to intervene and would leave the decision up to the BBC, but a) they made detailed suggestions as to how the programme should be altered if it were to be shown, and b) Normanbrook noted, ‘it is also clear that *Whitehall will be relieved if the BBC decides not to show it*’ (WAC T16/679/1 Normanbrook, 5/11/65, my emphasis).

The 'decision by the BBC' to ban *The War Game* then follows. Who precisely made that decision, when and why is, as Tracey discusses at length, impossible to be definitive about (Aubrey 1982, 52-54). But it is difficult to escape the fact that this was at the very least influenced by what Trend has made clear was ‘Whitehall's view’. It should also be apparent that what was at stake in the decision not to show *The War Game* was the influence that wide dissemination of concrete facts about the effects of nuclear war was expected (in my view correctly) to have on increasing support for unilateralism. It was precisely this concern which had been voiced on February 15 1955 by the Government team of which Normanbrook was then a member. The BBC had then agreed on prior consultation. So what more natural that, with a different -BBC- hat on, Normanbrook should take the initiative in consulting the Government ten years later.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from the 1954/55 H Bomb case and the extra information given here about the Government intervention and BBC response over Suez and *The War Game*?

First and most obvious, there was, during this period at least, a bit more 'low conspiracy' about than the standard works on the BBC document. Or, too put it in less loaded terms, a bit more successful conscious intervention by the Government. That in itself gives some support to Miliband's well directed jibe about how does Professor Hoggart know just how many telephone calls there are. It should be a spur to further digging.

Second, the cases we have discussed point to the crucial role of the Chair of the BBC Governors as a key conduit between the Government and the Corporation. They also point to the importance of the background of the Chairman prior to appointment. That also should be a spur to further investigation.

Third, these cases point to the need to distinguish between form and content, in BBC response to the Government pressure. An apparently vigorous general defence of independence -as Cadogan exhibited in writing over the H Bomb -can go hand in hand with concession over substance -as Cadogan did in the same case.

Fourth, the BBC may display a scrupulous even-handedness in dealing with issues on which the Government and Official Opposition are divided (as they were during the bulk of the Suez crisis), but it is altogether more susceptible to the government pressure where the two front benches are united even if there is significant dissent elsewhere. Nuclear weapons both in 1954/5 and in 1965 fall into this latter category, so does the first few weeks after the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, and so too, in a later period, did Northern Ireland.

Fifthly, the Government pressure worked alongside other factors which made the BBC conformist, reinforcing them. So, in our account of the BBC and the H Bomb 1954/55 it was not that the case of Nesta Pain got a completely free run to make an emotional expose of the effects of the H Bomb. There were internal forces in the BBC which, quite independent of the Government pressure, modified her proposals. But the Government pressure played a significant part in reinforcing them and in defining limits of acceptable practice. Similarly there were many other pressures on the BBC over *The War Game* other than the Whitehall view -much of the press, Mary Whitehouse, the Conservative Opposition, and some internal BBC 'professionalism'. But the Whitehall view was significant. I would argue that a convincing case exists at least over nuclear weapons and Northern Ireland that conscious government intervention has been significant in setting the BBC's agenda. It is well worth investigating whether a similar case could be made in other and more recent areas.

Sixthly, even in the three cases we have discussed here it must be apparent that conscious political intervention can take a number of forms -the official letter with

the threat of statutory sanctions (De La Warr 1954), the top level meeting where informal consultation is agreed on (Macmillan 1955), the late night phone call (Eden 1956) and the 'sensible' consultation with senior civil servants (Trend 1965). There are no doubt others. What they have in common is precisely that conscious intervention by the core of the state in the day-to-day affairs of the BBC, which is denied by official myth.

Those are six good historical reasons why, especially after the fall-out from the BBC's reporting of the Iraq war, scholars should turn their attention back to the question of conscious Government intervention in affairs of the BBC. And why, to reformulate the question in the terms that have unfortunately become standard, the very lowest of conspiracy theory should be put firmly back on the agenda of media studies.

Notes

¹ This is slightly amended version of an unpublished paper written in 1994. To the best of my knowledge the only published account of the events of 1954 and 1955 concerning the government, the BBC and the H Bomb, which this paper describes in detail, is contained in David Miller's *Don't Mention the War* (Miller 1994, 17-21).

² Briggs' total reference to the H Bomb issue is as follows 'Cadogan personally refused at a later date to submit scripts for a projected television programme on nuclear warfare to the Government on the grounds that it would be both impossible and undesirable. ...Intimate though he was with Ministers, he refused to compromise the BBC's "independence"' (Briggs 1979, 103) I leave it to readers of the rest of this article to judge whether this is a balanced summary of what went on.

³ For example the drawing of the BBC into a Government Committee on Emergencies in 1934 (Scannell and Cardiff 199, 47).

⁴ See my accounts later in this article. On Suez, for example, Briggs does not mention the Salah Salem incident. On *The War Game* he does not mention the steer given by Trend to the BBC as to Whitehall's view.

⁵ In early 1951 there was a meeting between the then Director General of the BBC, Sir William Haley and Sir Frank Newsam head of the Government' Home Emergencies Committee to discuss a paper from Newsam on 'broadcasting in a civil emergency'. This meeting was cited by the Postmaster General in 1956 as a precedent for the efficacy of informal Government representations to the BBC. Full minutes of it can be found in the Public Record Office (PRO CAB 137/77 Gedling, 7/2/51) but I have been unable to locate any reference to it in the BBC's archives.

⁶ There is an extra and intriguing dimension to the fact that Rotblat appeared on the 1954 *Panorama* programme, but was eventually effectively prevented from appearing on the 1955 one. His views on the dangers of thermo-nuclear weapons had changed radically in the interval. In early 1954 Rotblat shared the then

common opinion that the H-Bomb was a 'clean' bomb: by 1955 he had concluded it was in fact a very 'dirty' bomb and that the public must be warned about this danger (Rotblat, conversation with the author 1994).

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- WAC BBC Written Archives Centre.
PRO Public Record Office.
Cadogan Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan (in Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge).