

"I am Thankful for the B.B.C."

by Bertrand Russell

Ronald Clark, in his Life of Bertrand Russell, discusses how with trepidation the British Broadcasting Corporation tentatively engaged Russell in 1944 to appear on a few programmes. At first, in fact, the proposal that he be engaged was turned down. This was in March 1944, when it was known that Russell would soon be returning to Britain from the United States. Clark remarks: "... not until five months later, after Russell had settled into Trinity, was the prospect of using him again taken up" (p. 495). His first appearance was not until the autumn.

Clark does not mention it, but it is just possible that a popular article by Russell at a crucial moment may have swung the B.B.C. in his favour. The article compared the B.B.C. to American radio, and was published in Reynolds News, London, on September 24, 1945, under the headline "I am Thankful for the B.B.C." Although the article was occasioned by an earlier one on behalf of commercial radio by Howard Thomas, Russell soon had additional reason to be thankful for the B.B.C.

- K.B.

Howard Thomas, in last Sunday's issue of *Reynolds News*, presents a strong and well-reasoned case for the view that the B.B.C. should be exposed to the competition of commercial radio.

Neither the British nor the American system seems to him perfect, and he argues that the best results of both are to be obtained by combining them. The B.B.C., he thinks, should have the sort of place in radio that *The Times* has in the newspaper world, but it should be equally exposed to the competition of less dignified organs.

I cannot speak on this subject as a radio expert. Apart from occasional broadcasting, my only title to an opinion is a long experience of American radio. I lived in the United States from September, 1938, to May of the present year; the final stages of Munich, the outbreak of war, the fall of France, Hitler's invasion of Russia, Pearl Harbour, Stalingrad, El Alamein, all came to me first by way of American commercial broadcasting. Sometimes, though rarely, I was able to get the B.B.C., and whenever I could I heaved a sigh of relief.

It was intolerable to have news of the bombing of Rotterdam or the German occupation of Paris interrupted at the most crucial point by the announcement that So-and-so's pills would cure worry, and I was maddened by the sham excitement of announcers dealing with events too stupendous to need any artificial dressing up.

But Mr. Thomas may retort that, under his system, the B.B.C. will still be there for those who prefer it. We must therefore go somewhat more deeply into the questions at issue.

The arguments in relation to radio are, in my opinion, exactly the same as the arguments in any other aspect of the controversy between Socialism and capitalism. It must be conceded that each system has advantages which the other lacks, and disadvantages from which the other is free. It is only by striking a balance that we can come to a reasonable conclusion.

It is said that the B.B.C. is less entertaining than commercial radio, just as (we are given to understand) *The Times* is less entertaining than the *Daily Mail*. I will not pursue the analogy, which might be invidious towards one or other. But when, in America, you are entertained by the radio, your amusement or delight is only a means to an end: the end is to sell you products or opinions which will further enrich men who are already richer than anyone ought to be.

True, there are left-wing stations; I have broadcast from them myself. But they have less money than the others, their programmes are not printed in ordinary newspapers, and only those who are already passionately devoted to left-wing propaganda know what they have to offer. Nor can they afford the fees that are demanded by the broadcasters whom the great public wants to hear. In effect, therefore, in spite of legal freedom, American radio is a powerful force in support of the plutocracy.

The same thing would be true of commercial radio in England, even if the B.B.C. continued to exist for the benefit of a handful of high-brows. Clearly men who want you to buy their soap will pay artists higher fees than the State can offer; if it attempted to compete, friends of the soap-makers in Parliament would protest about the waste of public money. Commercial radio, therefore, if allowed to exist, will be sure to be more entertaining to the general public than the B.B.C. can hope to be when it has commercial competition to face.

Mr. Thomas himself speaks of the advantage possessed by commercial radio in "The unlimited money available to be spent on programmes"; but, to my mind, this argument works against him.

Mr. Thomas considers radio primarily as a means of entertainment.

This, however, is not its most important function. Its most important function is to create opinion, and, when it is commercial, to sell goods. Most broadcasting stations run by private interests in a capitalist community exist primarily to cause listeners to hold opinions, not because they are true, but because they are convenient to the rich, and to buy products not because they are good, but because their producers can afford to spend large sums in *saying* that they are good. What is done in the way of entertaining the public is done as a means to these ends.

But, it may be said, broadcasting by the State is no more impartial than broadcasting by private interests. No doubt this is true in a totalitarian State, but it is not true with us. Any political opinion which is held by a substantial proportion of the population gets its innings, and if the B.B.C. were to attempt to refuse it a hearing, there would be a protest which would certainly be successful.

There is a vast difference between democratic and totalitarian Socialism; under the latter, all organs of publicity are controlled by the party in power, while under the former, every party is allowed a share proportional to its numbers. It is only under democratic Socialism that an institution such as the B.B.C. can perform the functions that we expect of it.

It must be admitted that, at a time of crisis such as the general strike in 1926, the B.B.C. loses its impartiality and becomes politically an organ of the powers that be. But no system could prevent an evil of this sort at such a time.

If there had been private broadcasting systems in 1926, they would have been disciplined - willingly in the great majority of cases, and forcibly in the small minority. In a serious struggle for power, the safeguards of liberty that are possible in quiet times are inevitably suspended, provided the struggle for power is not conducted by constitutional methods. Democracy is a device by which such struggles can be conducted without war or a war mentality.

For my part, I favour the continuation of the B.B.C. monopoly, first as a Socialist, and, second, as one who has suffered under commercial radio in America. I do not believe that the benefits which the nation derives from the B.B.C. could survive if it were subject to commercial competition. I believe, on the contrary, that the result would be a general lowering of the political intelligence of the nation, which would be unfortunate at any time, but at the present time utterly disastrous.