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by Eric Gilder; Mervyn Hagger

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Eric Gilder and Mervyn Hagger

"Lucian Blaga" University, Sibiu;
John Lilburne Research Institute (for Constitutional Studies) USA

JOHN REITH AND THE FEUDAL VALUES OF BRITISH BROADCASTING IN A MODERN AGE

Abstract. *The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has self-promoted its reputation as the "standard" by which all other modern broadcasters should be judged. While the international face of the BBC represents the British Foreign Office, its domestic services are supposed to mirror the British way of life. However, this "British-ness" owes its origins to feudal cultural norms once articulated by John Reith who both shaped and directed its broadcasting policy. Reith admired Mussolini and shared Hitler's dislike for modern jazz. He banned Churchill from the BBC airwaves before WWII and he regarded American commercial broadcasting as "`vulgar." It was Churchill who helped to end the BBC monopoly by introducing commercial broadcasting which brought with it a commercial culture that both Reith and Hitler despised. Today, many Britons look back fondly to that quieter, more unified and dignified age of Reith and pose this question:* What price has Britain paid for its broadcasting freedoms?

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"You never know a British institution by examining its law. You have to meet its man" claimed William Hard in 1933 while assessing the British Broadcasting Corporation under the control of John Reith. He added, "Sir John is in practice the effectively absolute autocrat of the whole British air" (340).

Historiography of Reith's Pre-modern Political theology

It was the eve of the 18th Century when John Charles Walsham Reith was born in Scotland on July 20, 1889.[1] Winston Churchill who would become Reith's chief antagonist had been born a decade earlier in 1874, followed by two of Reith's sources of inspiration: Benito Mussolini in 1883, and Adolph Hitler on April 20, 1889. As a British subject young Reith owed his allegiance to the sole corporation around, that is, "The Crown in Right" of the United Kingdom. His father's calling as a minister of religion surely helped Reith to understand the relationship between "The Crown" and its "Subjects," because his father's denomination had been created by dissent emanating from clashing interpretations over church government that pitted egalitarian management by local congregants, against autocratic control by a supreme dynasty.

On April 3, 1971 (long after John Reith had left the British Broadcasting Corporation), Kenneth Allsop of *The Spectator* magazine looked back at his greatest accomplishment and mused in "The Spectator's Notebook" that:

> The BBC broods over our lives like the great cathedrals of the past looked down upon villains. In little more than a generation this consequence of Reith, electricity and crystal sets has become covered with ancient-seeming lichen, so that it looks, and often behaves as if it were immoveable, indestructible and immortal. The BBC is the nearest thing to a national church that we have had since Cranmer. (449)

[1] The Rev. Dr. George Reith, a minister of the Free Church of Scotland that seceded from the Church of Scotland in 1843.

Following in the footsteps of the fractious theological reign of England's Henry VIII, his Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer turned a de facto schism with Rome into the Established Church of England with the help of the Privy Council and its Court of Star Chamber. Cranmer facilitated in ritual that which the king had brought about by fiat.

Originally England's King had the luxury of dispensing orders to his subjects under advice from his Privy Councilors, but British subjects have now morphed into European citizens with egalitarian rights. Meanwhile the Privy Council has gradually lost most, but by no means all, of its ancient and secretive powers as a primary government acting as if it still answers to none but Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.[1] Thus, when Parliament cannot achieve enactment of legislation, the Privy Council has been known to produce a similarly desired result by means of a Royal Order in Council.[2]

Nevertheless, the Privy Council has also been most active in bringing about broadcasting policy changes in the United Kingdom. In 1967, an Order in Council applied the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act to the Isle of Man by overriding the island's ancient legislature to silence "Radio Caroline North."[3] The year before another Order redrew the coastline of England to prosecute the offshore stations "Radio 390," "Radio City" and "Radio Essex" under the Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1949 (cf. Gilder).

Historiography of Crown Copyright Control

After Reith migrated to England, he answered an advertisement seeking a general manager for the British Broadcasting Company, Ltd. In 1922 this enterprise had been forced into existence by the British General Post Office (GPO) in order to create a commercial monopoly. While the GPO was under the control of Parliament, it owed its point of origination to powers delegated to it by the institution responsible for the Royal Mail that had been created under a Royal Prerogative.[4] It is this murky chain of secretive command that is so difficult to simplify, so easy to ignore, yet so necessary to understand when tracing the history of the BBC that Reith came to control.

Beginning in 1869, Parliament began to reach back in time to build upon a convoluted series of existing laws that gave the General Post Office authority over the sending and receiving of written and printed correspondence.[5] In that year GPO authority was extended to wired communication by telegraph and in 1904, it was further extended by an Act of Parliament to incorporate wireless telegraphy. The essence of that law is that no person shall establish a wireless telegraph station;[6] build a wireless telegraph station, install equipment at a wireless telegraph station or use equipment at a wireless telegraph station for the purpose of sending or receiving a signal for wireless telegraphy, without first obtaining a license from the Postmaster General.

The feudal historical theory behind these Acts is that the method of transmittal of information is not at issue; the transmission of information by any means is, being the domain of the Post Office and ultimately the Crown. At one time, this included the licensing of the printers and publishers of books and newspapers.[7] That monopoly originally enforced

[1] Privy Council is the institution; Privy Councellors (with English spelling) is the function of its membership that gives advice to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

[2] See the court case of Chagos Archipelago inhabitants being barred from returning to their homeland leased by Privy Council action to the US as a strategic military base (currently under appeal as of this writing). See "Court Victory for Chagos Families," 11 May, 2006. (Accessed 23 March, 2007). http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4760879.stm.

[3] This Act became law after midnight on August 14, 1967 in order to silence so-called "pirate radio stations" broadcasting offshore in international waters from ships and marine structures.

[4] Executive powers vested by the Crown in the monarchy exercised with advice and consent of the Privy Council, which today usually means Members of Parliament.

[5] The 1869 Telegraph Act was based upon earlier railway legislation (See Briggs 10).

[6] A "station" is, simultaneously, a "location."

[7] Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, founded 1403; received a Royal Charter in 1557.

copyright control with the right to copy being subject to licensing and owed its origin to the Catholic Church Index of prohibitive works. Copyright licensing in England was originally intended to serve as an arm of Crown censorship enforcement but this authority was eventually transferred to the authors of the works to be copied.[1]

When microphones were added to telegraph wires to create the telephone, the exchanges were interpreted as being "electronic Post Offices" and therefore within the domain of the GPO. When "modern" wireless telephony became possible this same pre-modern logic was applied, although it was later questioned because telegraphs and telephones served individuals while wireless telegraphy and telephony had a broadcast effect.[2] Administration of these electronic means of communication also came under the jurisdiction of the Committee of Imperial Defence, which had been created by Prime Minister Arthur Balfour in 1904 at the time of the Wireless Telegraphy Act. This Committee was formed by representatives from the Admiralty, War Office, Air Ministry, Treasury, India Office, Foreign Office, Colonial Office, Board of Trade and the General Post Office.

American Resistance to British Wireless

A pioneer in wireless technology, Italian Guglielmo Marconi established a factory at Chelmsford in the southern county of Essex in England so to further his experiments. The Crown encouraged this work as a means of electronically linking the vast British Empire to London, but stock scandals involving government ministers wrecked this scheme. Many publications available in the UK assisted amateur operators of wireless senders and receivers to keep pace with broadcasting developments. These "hams" were also capable of receiving many of the sending stations located in the United States, some of which were engaging in wireless telephony. Although the Crown also wished to curtail foreign influence over the minds of its subjects, neither the ionosphere, neither ground waves nor overseas transmitting stations were under any form of natural, legal or moral obligation to cooperate.

Before the advent of The Great War (WWI), the American Marconi subsidiary company had established ship-to-shore wireless stations. In 1914, Britain entered the War and forbade further use of amateur wireless equipment. When America joined the fray several years later, it also forbade the use of wireless equipment by private citizens. Furthermore, the US Navy came to regard Marconi's American subsidiary as a threat to US national security because it placed US naval communications under partial foreign control. Therefore, the US Government forced the buy-out of British-owned American Marconi by the all-American General Electric Company. For its part, GE formed a subsidiary, Radio Corporation of America (RCA), with the US Navy represented on its board of directors. In 1919, the new RCA absorbed the assets of the old American Marconi. After the War, the US Navy attempted to retain control of all American wireless operations but, the US Congress relinquished this technology to private interests once again (Briggs 17-18).[3]

British Resistance to "American Vulgarity"

With the cessation of hostilities, The Crown's agencies were unsure of how to proceed with the management of wireless broadcasting in the UK, and British government representatives

[1] History of Copyright Law: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_copyright_law (Accessed April 2, 2007).

[2] When the GPO used this same theory of nexus to force the creation of the British Broadcasting Company, Ltd. as a monopoly, Captain William Wedgwood Benn, MP challenged the powers of the Postmaster-General under the Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1904 and stated that they were being improperly interpreted and that he would attempt to deprive him of these powers altogether (see Briggs 33). It should be noted that this Scottish Liberal Party MP (later switching to the Labour Party), was followed into Parliament by his son Anthony Wedgwood Benn who became Postmaster-General in the 1960s and led the charge to silence the offshore commercial radio stations in order to preserve the BBC monopoly.

[3] See also http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/R/htmlR/radiocorpora/radiocorpora.htm (Accessed April 2, 2007).

sailed for the USA to investigate the American system first-hand. The GPO became acutely aware that broadcasting stations in America were being funded by private companies, and some of them were selling airtime for advertising messages that the United States government was neither directing nor censoring. Marconi Publicity Manager Arthur Burrows thus feared that the UK airwaves might become "filled with audible advertisements . . . on behalf of somebody's soap or tomato ketchup" (Briggs 13). British officials viewed the American system as vulgar, not just because it was commercial, but mainly for being secular. (Its authority flowed upwards from citizens speaking through a Constitution, instead of from a king speaking on behalf a Crown through his government, down the subjects of the Realm. To Britons, it was a world turned upside down.)

Because British hams were demanding opportunities to restart wireless activities, the GPO began issuing new licenses with call letters to receiving stations. In 1920, a GPO license was also issued to station MZX at the Marconi factory using a ten-watt transmitter to broadcast for no more than thirty minutes per day. When its license was later withdrawn, howls of protest were heard from British amateur radio societies. In 1922, the GPO issued another license to station 2MT at the Marconi factory research facility in the nearby village of Writtle. By this time, however, developments in the United States were again reaching the ears of British listeners at their own receiving stations.

Because the US airwaves were at that time unregulated, broadcast reception was marred by interference due to chaotic schedules from competing transmissions over limited bandwidth. British authorities noted American complaints about chaos in reception and sponsored advertising messages, and their views were repeated by British newspaper proprietors (who did not want to open the door to electronic advertising, because they feared that their advertising revenue would be diverted to commercial radio stations).[1]

A Very "Modern" Forced Marriage

In the 1920s, many big electrical manufacturers in the United Kingdom were subsidiary operations of American companies, and they were also clamoring for British transmission licenses. While Marconi had expanded into America, Westinghouse, Western Electric and General Electric had expanded into Britain. In their homeland, these companies were engaging in commercial broadcasting, which is what their subsidiaries now wanted to do in the UK. (The historical relationship between the British General Electric Company and the American General Electric Company is complicated due to constantly moving proxy shareholdings often facilitated by the International General Electric Company or IGEC. It was a wholly owned subsidiary of General Electric in the USA that held financial interests in British companies. In 1933, GE created consumer electronic and recording giant, EMI. [Electric and Musical Industries]).

By June 24, 1920, the London Marconi station 2LO was broadcasting live music during the evening hours and other stations, some owned by American subsidiary companies, were also coming on the air. In order to both regain and then retain control of the British airwaves, the GPO ordered all individual electrical entities having an interest in British broadcasting to get together to form one broadcasting company during the summer months of 1922.[2]

By absorbing the transmission facilities of its member companies, this ad hoc consortium continued operations even though the British Broadcasting Company did not hold

[1] See *New York Times* 10 March, 1924: Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover (who held US Government responsibility for US radio broadcasting) took the opposite view and denounced the attempt by AT&T to create a commercial monopoly in broadcasting. Hoover specifically made the point that a broadcasting monopoly would be similar to a press monopoly and it made no difference how that monopoly was achieved and that it made no difference whether or not the broadcasting was for-profit.

[2] The British Broadcasting Company was formed by combined interests of Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company; British Thomson Houston Company; General Electric Company; Western Electric Company; Burndept Ltd. (representing the interests of 28 smaller companies.)

its first Board Meeting until December 21, 1922, and it did not receive its first broadcasting license from Postmaster-General Neville Chamberlain until January 18, 1923. Meanwhile the young company advertised several job opportunities in the press. John Reith applied for the post of General Manager on October 13, 1922. He was eventually hired on December 14, and began his first day at work on December 30. On November 14, 1923 he was promoted to Managing Director (Briggs 44).

Autocrat of the Whole British Air"

John Reith became Sir John in 1927 and Lord Reith in 1940 and ten years after that in 1950; Charles A. Siepmann looked back at his broadcasting career:

> ". . . it is the personality of one man that accounts for broadcasting in Britain as it is today. Sir John Reith was so certain he was right that no research seemed necessary. Regardless of its actual effects for him his policy stood self-justified. Secure in his personal conviction of what was right and wrong, he imposed upon a nation the imprint of his personality." (129-30)

That same year, the Beveridge Report quoted Reith: ". . . it was the brute force of monopoly that enabled the BBC to become what it did; and to do what it did; that made it possible for a policy of moral responsibility to be followed (364). Reith had never tried to obscure his intentions at the BBC. In 1924, just two years after the BBC had been formed, Reith wrote Broadcast over Britain and made it clear that the BBC had no intention of providing what the public wanted; it would only provide them with what he believed they should have according to Reith's own formula.

First of all, Reith believed that the BBC should inform the electorate and, second, it should halt the secularizing of Sundays which should be reserved for the official religion of the country as seen through the "ecumenical" lens of the Church of England"(cf. Harline).[1] This automatically denied access to BBC airwaves by "rationalists," Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, Mormons, Jews or the "gospel religion." Third, on Reith's list was his intention to treat broadcasting as a servant of culture interpreted by his fourth point to mean that there would be no concessions to the "vulgar Americanization" of the British airwaves. Reith's fifth premise revealed a conflict. While admitting that the BBC was a company with shareholders, he also posited that making money should not be the object of broadcasting, because he viewed broadcasting as a public service. His sixth point was an edict: he demanded blind loyalty by employees whose character had to be beyond reproach (Briggs 54-56).

Plugging Reith: NOT!

When Reith made it clear that he was slamming the door to any form of light entertainment on the first day of the broadcasting week, he had also made it clear that this was to be accompanied by his disdain for jazz music which would be banned on the remaining six days of the week. (It was a musical disdain that he shared with Adolph Hitler who he admired for demonstrating leadership in cultural matters [cf. Home])

However, British "listeners-in" were not only able to hear the BBC, but they could also hear transmissions originating from within America's borders and those emanating from transmitters located in various countries around Europe. [2] Noting how the GPO had created a broadcasting monopoly that was far from egalitarian in reach, Leonard Frank Plugge decided to provide a "vulgar" alternative for British listeners (Time 26 June, 1939). Born two months after Reith on September 21, 1889, Plugge began building his own International Broadcasting Company by leasing time on foreign transmitters aimed at the British Isles. (Plugge

[1] The Establishment of the Church of England gave Reith cause to note that England was officially in name and in law a Christian country which during the first half of the 20th Century maintained legal restrictions on non-religious Sunday activities.

[2] Review of shortwave relays of NBC and CBS broadcasts from the US that could be heard in the UK on the 49-meters waveband (*Radio Pictorial*).

pronounced his Scandinavian family name “Plooje”, but in 1935 when he stood for election as a Member of Parliament, his Conservative Party supporters persuaded him to use the English pronunciation. This suited their slogan of “Plugge in for Chatham”, and their constant “plugging” won Plugge a Parliamentary seat that he held until 1945.)

Plugge’s IBC English-language commercial broadcasts began in a modest way with a fashion talk sponsored by a London department store established by an American citizen, coming from Radio Paris transmitting from a station located on the Eiffel Tower. This experiment quickly mushroomed throughout the 1920s and 1930s from sporadic talks on only one transmitter, to a full schedule using many transmitters and almost a full-time broadcasting operation via Radio Normandy on the coastline of France (Leonard 3-7). To add insult to injury, the IBC leased space for its offices and production studios across the street from the BBC’s Broadcasting House.

The “New” Royal BBC

Because the monopoly enjoyed by the British Broadcasting Company was raising questions about freedom of trade and freedom of expression, the Privy Council arranged for the original company to go out of business at the end of 1926, and for a Royal Charter to be issued to a new British Broadcasting Corporation that same year (Briggs 89-90). The activities and assets of the old BBC were then absorbed by the new BBC, which commenced broadcasting in 1927. This had little impact upon Reith’s style of management because he was still in charge. He merely left his post as Managing Director of the company to become Director General of the corporation. His religious ideology, admiration of Mussolini and Hitler, fanaticism for Sunday observance and antagonism towards jazz music were all still in place.

When Reith fell out with Winston Churchill and banned him from the BBC airwaves, Churchill turned to the short-wave transmitters of CBS in the US and to the standard broadcast transmitters of IBC in Europe. On October 1, 1937, Churchill delivered a talk called “The Peace of Europe” over IBC’s sponsored time on Radio Toulouse (“Best of British”). (Reith’s ban turned Churchill into the enemy of BBC monopoly, which in the 1950s resulted in Churchill helping to end the BBC sole control of television broadcasting.)

Meanwhile, Reith’s policy on Sunday broadcasting and Plugge’s success at the IBC had inspired other investors to construct a powerful commercial radio station in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg with antennas specifically aimed at the British Isles. Although the GPO forbade landline links from London to the transmitters mainly located in France and Luxembourg, Captain Plugge solved that problem by recording soap operas and other shows on the audio sound tracks of movie reels. Luxembourg used such transcription methods and began featuring recorded music that was banned on the BBC. By 1938, most of these commercial radio broadcasts to British listeners were having their greatest impact on “boring” Sundays, and as result, Reith lost a significant slice of his audience to both the IBC and Luxembourg commercial broadcasts (Leonard 6).

Vulgarity Is Dead, Long Live Vulgarity?

On June 30, 1938, Reith was pushed out of the BBC, but it ironically took the European ravages of Hitler to rescue the BBC audience from the clutches of American-influenced vulgarity. By 1939, the former British Postmaster-General Neville Chamberlain had become Prime Minister, and he failed miserably at that job as well when he discovered that Hitler was not true to his word. In the wake of the failed British and German peace accord at Munich, Nazi troops stormed across Europe closing down both the IBC and Luxembourg commercial stations.

When Churchill took over from Chamberlain, Reith was assigned the job of Minister of Information in the wartime government. When America was dragged into World War II by Japan, the USA dispatched both her GI’s and means of entertaining them to the British Isles. With the sounds of yet more vulgarity emanating from the American Forces Network, the BBC sans Reith partially capitulated by launching their own national network equivalent called the “Forces Programme.”

Many additional chapters about the history of broadcasting in Britain have been added since WWII. While Captain Plugge's IBC never returned to the air, "Radio Luxembourg" did manage to limp back during the evening hours and during the 1950s the door to commercial television was kicked open. In the 1960s, an offshore fleet of commercial radio stations eventually ringed the British coastline in imitation of Captain Plugge's pre-WWII operations from the European continent. These ship and WWII-era maritime stations were mainly financed by Texas entrepreneurs and California religion. By the early 1970s, the BBC lost its sound monopoly when commercial radio stations were licensed on the mainland of Great Britain (cf. Gilder).[1]

Some decades later upon entering office, Prime Minister Blair began extolling "Cool Britannia" (echoing the culturally heady Wilson years) until the net effect of its consequences began to become apparent to all: the British subject of old had morphed into European citizens who did not behave in the ways of yore. World trade had changed the face of the British High Street, and as well as the sights and sounds that were to be seen and heard over the British airwaves. Today, the "British-ness" of old has disappeared. Another kind of culture has taken root in Britain that often dismays Prime Minister Blair. (Indeed, in many ways Tony Blair sounds as if he is lamenting the passing of a British Society that John Reith was not only trying to preserve, but to foster.)[2]

Gone are the patient people who waited in queues. Gone are the "Bobbies" on bicycles riding without guns. Gone are the uniform rosy-red cheeks of British boys and the Snow-White British girls, because gone is that Society that looked and acted as if national and world management was all a part of a "White Man's Burden." Gone is the society where everyone looked alike, heard the same songs, the same talks and the same jokes, and reacted accordingly. Gone are quiet Sundays where "nothing happened." Gone is the Empire that morphed into a Commonwealth where diversity existed outside of British shores, because any diversity within its coastline was supposed to remain unobserved. Today, citizens from all over the world have made London their home.

Prime Minister Tony Blair continues to look wistfully backwards to the England that was while continuing to project England into the future as a devolved unit of the United Kingdom within a United Europe. Blair laments the lack of civility and the fissures that have rent the fabric of British Society. He has suggested edicts that might force compliance with the "British-ness" once championed by Reith. While the airwaves of London now reflect some diversity of culture and language, much of it seems to be in imitation of those "vulgar" American radio formats, but with different accents. Even the British station logos hark back to the days when American radio once held out a beckoning hand to a dream that seemed to be unobtainable to British eyes and ears. Yes, the BBC still exists, but it is now like a flower whose pod has exploded with seedlings all across the dial.

The fight against vulgarity began with radio, but now radio as it was known is dying as a medium. Rapid technological innovations are dividing the once unified mass audience of Reith's era into even more diffuse units. Self-indulgent, "post-modern" listeners are constantly reinventing themselves in their own individualistic ways to the point where it is now very difficult to define what the term "British-ness" could possibly mean.

As we survey the wreckage of Reith's ideology that was eventually destroyed by the vulgarity that he opposed, we ponder the question of whether the introduction of modern commercial broadcasting was but a symbolic apple that feudal Britannia lusted after? If Reith was correct, then what does the future hold for Britain now its inhabitants have left the "British-ness" of his broadcasting Eden behind?

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[1] A low-power commercial station was licensed by the GPO to the Isle of Man in May, 1964.

[2] See "Crackdown on Yob Culture – Blair" BBC News (UK Politics), 28 November, 2000. Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1045754.stm (Accessed 06 April, 2007).

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