ONLY VOICES OUT OF THE AIR

It reached its peak in 1934 when Labour MP (and future Prime Minister) Clement Attlee casually suggested that, in the absence of a staff association, Reith ruled “a little by fear”. Reith immediately hit back:
“*Unless the awareness and respect which a subordinate should feel of and for his chief is to be called fear – the fear a man should have of not doing as well as he might; of letting himself down; of letting his chief down.”*

This may not have done a lot to change Attlee’s mind. By 1934, with the newspapers taking every possible opportunity to nibble at his flesh like pirahnas, Reith was summoned in front of the 1922 Committee, the semi-legendary organisation of Conservative backbench MPs. Expecting a confrontation over his record on staff relations, he pre-empted them with a letter signed by 800 staff members reading:

“*The undersigned members of the staff of the BBC, thoroughly disgusted with the false and malignant statements about the director-general being published in certain newspapers, wish to record their detestation of the newspapers concerned, and to reaffirm their loyalty and gratitude to the director-general.”*
Game, set and match to Reith. At least for now.

Reith’s last great action at the BBC was the creation of the Empire Service. Having brought the new broadcast media to Britain itself, it was obviously time by 1932 to move forwards and look toward bringing the BBC to the greater Britain that was the Empire. As had become usual, Reith’s idea had some trouble getting off the ground, and also as usual that trouble was largely bureaucratic and centred around the Government. Not that anyone in Parliament had any great objections to the idea, on either side of the chamber (by now Ramsay MacDonald was token Labour Prime Minister in a Tory-dominated Coalition, thereby achieving the impressive feat of detonating his own legacy before it had even been written). Quite the contrary; everyone in the Government thought it was a splendid idea. They just weren’t entirely certain of how it was going to be funded. None of the Departments of His Majesty’s Government particularly felt like footing the bill, and they kicked the can around themselves for so long that Reith finally lost patience and launched the damn thing himself as a full subsidiary of the BBC, funded by the licence fee.

The Empire Service broadcast on shortwave where the rest of the BBC was on long, and at the start was explicitly aimed at the likes of Australia, Canada and New Zealand - all of whom had the Union Jack in their flag at the time, but were also newly autonomous or semi-autonomous and

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therefore in need of reminding of their place in the Empire, why Britain was so great, and why they should be grateful.

It was launched on the 19th of December, 1932, just days before King George V delivered the very first Christmas address. In it, in words written for him by Rudyard Kipling, the monarch discussed the marvels of this new technology that could send his voice across the world, to all four corners of his Empire:

"*I speak now...to men and women so cut off by the snows, the desert or the sea, that only voices out of the air can reach them..*"

In this way, he acknowledged the BBC and in particular its new Empire Service. Australia and company were cut off by the sea, but now, thanks to this marvellous new technology and the people running it, were no longer as distant as they were. Thanks to radio broadcasting, they were more British than ever - the ability to call themselves British of course being the greatest of the many gifts the Empire had provided them, if only in the Empire's head.

The first voice heard on the Service naturally belonged to Reith, who gave an opening address five times over the course of fifteen and a half hours so it could go out live at the same hour around the world. Here, Reith's businesslike mind reach some kind of apotheosis, as he used the historic first regular international BBC broadcast to actively warn the audience that this new service wasn't actually going to be worth listening to, at least not yet:

"Don't expect too much in the early days; for some time we shall transmit comparatively simple programmes, to give the best chance of intelligible reception and provide evidence as to the type of material most suitable for the service in each zone. The programmes will neither be very interesting nor very good."

In other words, the whole thing was still in its proof-of-concept phase. Perhaps partly because of Parliament's reticence on funding the damn thing - and the concomitant lack of both funds and confidence - the Empire Service would remain an experiment until the BBC could ascertain that it actually worked at all. Of course, history tells us that it did, and within a decade was broadcasting all around Europe in every major European language, necessitating a name change to the Overseas Service. It was, of course, also coming in very handy at that point for propaganda purposes, with most of the world by now on fire one way or another. But by then, it wasn't Sir John Reith's problem anymore.

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