FACE THE PUBLIC

If you asked him, Reith would probably have said he didn't care what the public thought of him, just as he didn't care much for honours and titles. It may even have been true in this case, but either way there was little he could do to change the public's perceptions of him. They were largely cemented in 1929 at the election which replaced Baldwin with MacDonald. After a couple of hours of results coverage, Reith got wind of a handful of telephoned complaints that the announcers were somehow showing their bias for one party or another via the tones of their voices. Rather than looking into the matter at all, even just to check that these claims might have had any basis in reality whatsoever, Reith's typically forceful response was to kick all the professional announcers in his employ - who had spent the past several weeks rehearsing for this very night - out of the building and host the remainder of BBC's coverage himself. Within minutes of Reith taking over from the previous announcer, the BBC's phone started ringing even louder, this time with baffled listeners who couldn't understand a word he was saying, asking him to slow his speech down and enunciate, or just do something to make his speech clearer, because this is worse than before.

After a (relative to 1929) inundation of such calls, the really couldn't be ignored any longer and someone would have to step up and actually face the Director General, and tell him he was doing it wrong and could he please slow down. That someone turned out to be the Senior Announcer Eric Dunstan. As a former diplomat, he was a pretty good choice for the job, not that his qualifications ultimately helped. In Dunstan's own words:

"*I did my best politely to inform him of the position, but all he said was: "I will not read any slower; I am going on announcing" and he turned his back on me."*"

An enraged Dunstan immediately stormed straight out of Broadcasting House. By the morning, the BBC had a new Senior Announcer. And Reith had a freshly reinforced public image as a miserable tyrant, which he never managed to shake, all attempts causing it to cling ever tighter to him.
As the thirties wore on and more and more of Europe fell to one dictator or another, Reith found it harder to so much as cough without attracting a comparison to Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, or occasionally Stalin (for variety, although he had much less in common with him than with any of the others). George Lansbury said he would have made an excellent Hitler. Nancy Astor, after meeting his mother, asked him to his face if she was the source of his "Mussolini Traits". Hastings Lees-Smith - the same Labour MP who had advised Whitley of Reith's impending institutionalisation - went even further and called the whole BBC "the nearest thing in this country to Nazi government that can be shown,"** which was surely belabouring the point. Then again, Reith didn't do his own image much good with his occasional statements in praise of the Hitler administration, largely for a

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couple of traits they and Reith had in common: efficiency and a loathing of jazz. (The former turned out to be an illusion - Nazi Germany was a nightmarish bureaucratic conga line of knives in backs, which Reith managed to avoid for the BBC).

Another issue that pursued Reith throughout the thirties was the idea of a Staff Association - a soft trade union - to give “factory floor” employees more say in events and policies which affected them. The idea had first been raised, unsurprisingly, by Ethel Snowden in 1930, in the last months before Whitley took over from Clarendon. Reith, of course, wouldn’t have the idea in the house, but the Governors had at this point little interest in what he thought, and besides, Labour were in Government now - Snowden was now lady resident of 11 Downing Street, and perfectly capable of ringing around the cabinet for some heavyweight endorsements. For example, Permanent Secretary of the MInistry of Labour, Horace Wilson. With his encouragement, Snowden drew up a plan for a Staff Association consisting of five councils, all of whom could bring their grievances directly to the Governors - bypassing management, ie Reith himself, entirely. The very notion naturally enraged the Director-General (given his and Snowden’s relationship, the possibility exists that this was at least partially the desired outcome).

A compromise was reached: they’d look into it - Lord Gainford, as a former Postmaster General and Parliamentary Secretary Treasury, would research how banks and the Post Office ran their respective Staff Associations while Reith - already hyper-sceptical about how the BBC could possibly take a template from the banking sector - turned inward and asked his BBC management whether such a thing was even needed in the first place. In all cases the response was that the staff were very happy in their work, morale was high and everyone appreciated the Corporation’s “personal approach”. Head of Entertainment Roger Eckersley (brother of Peter) wrote back: “It has always been my own policy to beg staff not to bottle up their grievances, but to be open and direct about them, and I always encourage a policy of direct access upwards.”††

This was enough to put the issue to bed, but only for a while. The idea of a staff association would recur throughout the thirties, and Reith’s running of the BBC would be called into question again and again.

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