

The new arrangements for radio broadcasting are coming into force this month, despite all the opposition that has declared itself over the past few months, mainly in the correspondence columns of *The Times*. This controversy has been fascinating both in itself and as a parable.

The first interest of the often vehement and quite needlessly emotive exchange of letters has been to demonstrate once again the great difficulty that even highly intelligent men have in making the issues between them clear and so really coming to grips in true dialogue. For even an attentive re-reading of this correspondence leaves one with the impression that there has been a great deal of tilting at windmills. The apparent issue has been the 'demise of the Third Programme'. It is against such a demise that not merely such distinguished rival groups of mandarins as the High Table of King's College, Cambridge, Dame Peggy Aschcroft and other celebrated artists, the Campaign for Better Broadcasting and some Masters of the Oxford Colleges, but so many of the staff bodies and programme-makers within the BBC itself have uttered their opposition. And what they have objected to is an attack on 'the quality of listening' and the disregard of the BBC tradition and duty as a privileged monopoly to maintain 'cultural leadership' ready to draw upon and satisfy only minorities in the hope of slowly stimulating larger numbers. Yet the Director-General, backed by his predecessor and the Board of Governors, has at least twice stated quite explicitly that the BBC does *not* intend to abandon its 'traditional role as sponsors and protectors of quality broadcasting' (letters of 27th January and 23rd February).

It is true that the apparent massiveness and force of continued expressed opposition to the BBC's plans within the BBC itself detracts from the credibility of such declarations. There would seem to have been a failure to explain, let alone to convince, those most directly concerned with the production of the programmes involved. It is, however, difficult for an outsider to say whether this expressed opposition represents once again merely a vocal opposition minority going counter to another 'silent majority'. Let us, then, prescind from the question of the reality and success of interior consultation and give the management the benefit of the doubt about the sincerity of their intentions.

So, the true issue does not seem to lie here. Where, then, does it lie? Now there is one phrase in the Director-General's letter which would in fact seem to be as critical as it is mild and apparently colourless: 'Mr Goring asks for the retention of the title "The Third" as a pledge of sincerity of intentions on our part. I respect his motives, but our suspicion is that a title which, in its origin, was a declaration of

intentions, has become a symbol of exclusiveness. To that extent it represents a discouragement of listening. In seeking not to discourage potential listeners we are not abandoning our aspirations about the kind of programmes which the Third has broadcast' (23rd February). And when we refer back to Mr Goring's 'perceptive, if vehement', letter, we find this most revealing comment: 'the abolition made sense in 1969 when the BBC was encouraged to "escape from the elitism of the Third Programme" by the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications.' Do we not come here to the kernel of the debate? If it is now agreed in principle by both management and its critics that the BBC must retain its cultural leadership in the arts and sciences (*v.* particularly the letters of Mr Curran, 27th January and 23rd February—and of Mr Marius Goring, 16th February, and of Mr Peter Laslett and others, 4th March), so that the BBC must continue to exercise a minority leadership, then the only question is whether such an acknowledged minority leadership can be reconciled in theory and in fact with a would-be egalitarian and more fraternal society. Or, put in another, paradoxical way, the question is whether an élite is necessarily élitist. It is surely because the reality of inequalities of character, intelligence and culture, and therefore of minority leaderships, has in yet another crucial instance caught up with the proclamations of *fraternité* that there is considerable uncertainty on either side: where, for instance, the Oxford Masters talk with the groping instinct for the true issues of 'a transformation in the philosophy and attitudes of the Corporation', the Director-General's utterances have all the characteristic fuzziness of compromise and transition.

And this is where the whole controversy reveals its character as a parable of the Church. The Church, heavens knows—too many even recent cases show this—is in no position to crow about its implementation of St Gregory the Great's ancient ideal: 'That man is rightly accounted a hypocrite who diverts the ministry of government to purposes of domination' (*Regula Pastoralis*, Part II, Ch. 6). What remains interesting, however, is how the Church and the 'world'—as represented here by the paradigm institution of the BBC—seem to be approaching a similar problem as it were from different ends. Whereas the Church is committed to a hierarchy and yet at present is striving to re-realize its nature as a brotherhood, such a typical institution as the BBC has been drawn into the attempt to further a fraternal, more egalitarian, society and yet finds itself willy-nilly in a position of eminence.

It is at the very least an intriguing question whether it is easier and better for an acknowledged hierarchy to make itself accountable to a fraternity than for a fraternity to come to terms with a hidden hierarchy. The management of power cannot fail to be absorbing.

P.L.