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"WORKING THE SYSTEM"

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DUNKLEY: The first official broadcast from a legal, commercial, mainland radio station in Britain was made six months ago by David Jessel when he introduced the London Broadcasting Company's early morning show on the 8th of October, 1973. But before that broadcast could come about a whole host of forces, pressure groups, lobbies and business interests brought influence to bear in one way or another - directly or indirectly - on the Gvernment in the attempt to have some sort of a commercial radio system set up. The phrase "some sort" is important, because the story of the way in which a commercial radio system was achieved in this country isn't by any means the story of a single concerted effort.. and I don't simply mean that there were some groups and organisations opposing the idea - although such groups certainly did exist, and sometimes played a very important role in the proceedings. But even more important is the fact that the various groups in favour differed widely among themselves over the question of just what sort of commercial radio we ought to have. Consequently, when the Government did finally formulate a plan, it was inevitable that a considerable number of the people who had been agitating for it would have to be disappointed by the particular sort of system which was chosen. When I spoke to Christopher Chataway, the minister responsible for carrying the legislation through the last parliament, he was certainly in no doubt about this disappointment.

INSERT 1: Christopher Chataway, MP

I think it really was inevitable because they wanted such a wide variety of different things. Some of them wanted, well, the same sort of freedom in radio as there is for the printed word. They wanted no authority, they wanted anybody to be able to set up a radio station whenever they liked. And one could say, well, it would be likely then that nobody would be able to listen to anything because airwaves would be just completely jumbled. But they wouldn't really take that and they believed that it could be a complete free for all. But on the other hand some wanted one or two national networks, so that it was absolutely impossible, that the White Paper would be a great disappointment to most of them.

DUNKLEY: So the story of the establishment of commercial radio, from the point of view of the various pressure groups involved, is a story of a very qualified sort of success. It's true that between them the lobbyists managed to achieve their aim in principle - they did see a commercial radio scheme set up. But it's difficult now to find anybody who worked in any of the pressure groups who's completely happy with the sort of system that's been established.

The origin of many of these groups can be found in three quite separate events which occurred ten years ago - in 1964. On Good Friday of that year, it was the 27th of March, the motor vessl "Caroline" dropped anchor off the east coast near Frinton, and for the first time the British public began to hear a new sort of radio broadcast. Radio

Caroline was the so-called "pirate stations" - "pirate" - in the eyes of the authorities because they broadcast from beyond territorial waters on wavelengths, which had not been assigned to them under International Convention.

Eight months later, on the 23rd of November, 1964, Sir Ronald Garvey, the Governor of the Isle of Man, formally opened Manx Radio - first legal commercial radio station to broadcast from within the British Isles (though not on the mainland of course). There was no causal connection between these two events; the Isle of Man was constitutionally free to choose its own form of broadcasting - subject to the agreement of various national government bodies - and it was able to introduce commercial radio without waiting for a national plan from Westminster. And in the Isle of Man, the idea had been under discussion long before any of the pirates arrived.

In the General Election of that same year, 1964, the Labour Party was voted into power, and shortly afterwards the Local Radio Association was formed, as an organisation representing the interests of businessmen who had an eye on the possibilities of mainland commercial radio.

These three ventrues - the pirate stations, Manx Radio, and the Local Radio Association - can be seen as separate wedges, each helping to open up the general subject of commercial radio at a different point. Between them they involved all five of the major interest groups which were subsequently going to take a major part in the lobbying which preceded the passage of the Sound Broadcasting Act of 1972 - the Act which made commercial radio possible.

First of the five were those with a business, by which I mean men who were concerned with radio primarily as a money-making concern. Second there were those with show business interests, a fairly subtle distinction perhaps; but these were man who were already impressarios, or who were established in some existing branch of entertainment and were keen to diversify their interests whether these happened to be in television, say, or in the record industry. The third group was made up of certain sections of the public - pop music fans, and a variety of other listeners, as well as a significant number of people who simply believed that radio should be "free" in the way that the press is free: who felt that anybody who wanted to open a radio station should be allowed to do so, just as easily as they might launch a new magazine or a new paper. Fourth were the equipment manufacturers - firms such as Pye who were already involved in Manx Radio, or Marconi who gave help and advice to the Local Radio Association. And finally there were the opponents of commercial radio - mostly people who felt that any such scheme threatened their livlihood - the Musicians' Union, for instance, and a number of local newspaper proprietors who suspected that commercial radio would deprive their publications of advertising income.

So, all of these groups and organisations were becoming identifiable in 1964 - and there's no doubt in my mind, that the most important catalyst was pirate radio. The Caroline ship hadn't been in the North Sea for long before she was joined by the motor vessel "Mi Amigo" which put out Radio Atlantis.* And then a whole horde of

* RADIO ATLANTA SURELY !

different people began to climb on the bandwagon: the pop singer Lord Sutch opened a station operating from a Second World War fort; Radio London came on the air; and Radio City. But the originator of the whole thing, without any question, was Radio Caroline. One of the station's executives was Terry Bate, a man who is now, like many of the pirate personnel - involved in mainland commercial radio. I asked Terry Bate why the station was started in the first place.

INSERT 2: Terry Bate

I think two things. If we can sort of go back to Britain in the mid-sixties, it was a particular time when certainly musical tastes were changing, there was an explosion of talent that was having an extremely hard time in finding an outlet for exposure. The only two outlets were of course the BBC and Radio Luxembourg. It was extremely difficult for a budding singer or artist of any kind to get exposure other than through the established channels of the established record companies. It was extremely difficult if not impossible to start a new record label, to get distribution for the record, to get exposure for the record. That's.. I think is one item. And the second I think is really the fact that there was a programming gap that existed. Now, we know that in.. I think it was 1962, the Pilkington report had stated categorically that there was no requirement for a music service. Now the fact of the matter was, there was a great requirement for a music service. In commercial broadcasting terms one could sense a programming gap, a gap in fact you could drive a truck trhough. And that in essence was the start of the pirates. There was no great trick about what they did. There was a public need expressed and no-one was filling it and its very difficult to remember that. Going back to those days, there was not a BBC Radio 1. There was the Light Programme and the Home Programme and the Third - and if you're a Beatle, where do you go amongst those particular services? Again, Radio Caroline, after something like eight weeks on the air was claiming 5½ million listeners in this country, and I believe that that was so.

DUNKLEY: Whatever the exact figure, the pirates were clearly getting a very sizeable audience - yet the stations were considered by the British Government to be illegal. I asked Terry Bate whether there was a feeling among those who worked on the pirate stations that eventually they'd become legitimate and accepted by the Government.

INSERT 3: Terry Bate

BATE: There was always that kind of a feeling among some of the people involved. My own personal feeling was that..

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no, it wouldn't happen. I think that the best one could say is that at some point in the future legal, commercial broadcasting would come to the United Kingdom, and when that time came the experience gained by the people involved in pirate radio would be useful as indeed has proven the case.

DUNKLEY: You've said that that the Government would eventually accept the pirates as legal - but that you didn't think so. Do you think that their operation was in itself a form of pressure, pushing towards the introduction of legal, commercial radio in Britain?

BATE: I don't think there's any question that without the existence of the pirates, not because of anything the pirates did off the air, but merely the fact that they existed and they broadcast and they attracted huge audiences, firstly changed the course of the BBC programming in terms of Radios 1,2,3 and 4, but certainly there is no question in my mind that the local commercial stations currently coming on air throughout the could not have existed had the pirate stations not existed. All they did was open up a whole area of broadcasting that had not been covered previously. And that's I think subsequently how the issue of commercial radio became a minor plank in the Tory Party platform in 1970.

DUNKLEY: So although the pirates apparently had a lot to do with introducing people to the idea of a new kind of radio, they never seem to have stood much chance of becoming legal entities themselves. But apart from simply symbolising a possible alternative, did they take part themselves in any active lobbying to bring about a commercial radio system? Terry Bate:

INSERT 4: Terry Bate

BATE: We had a great number of meetings at the House of Commons and and various other places. Not with a view to legalising commercial radio, not with a view to selling the Government of the day on bringing Caroline or any other radio operator on shore, but really with a view to explaining to them that there were other forms of radio than currently existed in the United Kingdom. We would talk about radio and make presentations on radio. We wouldn't mention Caroline. We would talk about commercials and we would talk about the service that one could offer on a local level, and we would talk about the many, many other kinds of radio that were available and that could have been available here had the legislation existed.

DUNKLEY: Tell me two things - who was we, and who at that time were you talking to?

BATE:
'We' would would,and I include certain other elements of of other radio stations - Philip Birch, for example, of Radio London, I know had a great number of meetings with politicians of various parties. One of my colleagues in the Caroline operation, Ronan O'Rahilly,

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certainly was active on that kind of a level. We talked with members of all political parties. We were invited to dinners at the House of Commons, we threw dinners at the House of Commons ourselves.

DUNKLEY: How were you received at these dinners, meetings, and so on?

BATE: Well, you know, there's the two sides of the House. There's the left and the right. And the left side of the House, when we said the word 'commercial' they all shuddered, but I don't think that's a particularly socialist reaction, I think it was a British reaction. Then when we explained to them that we were really talking not about a Caroline or a BBC, but really, a local radio station and that potentially there was an extra channel of communication open to their community, and suddenly there was a whole different change of emphasis. On the right hand side of the House, by and large, I suppose the free enterprise party, the Tories were far more disposed to thinking in terms of commercial radio. I wouldn't like to think that what we were doing was really a pressure group or a lobby of any kind. It was really an attempt to tell some influential people about another way of doing something. That was really it.

DUNKLEY: To what extent did the people who were running the pirate stations encourage the formation and the activities of public pressure groups - things like the Free Radio Association, Campaign for Independent Broadcasting and so on. Did you have any connection with them at all?

BATE: Directly, no. We didn't start them. We were approached by fairly intelligent fans of the station who theoretically knew exactly what this kind of radio could do and and why it should be brought in their terms on land. Certainly, we had dialogue with them, we talked with them. We tended not to get publicly too involved. They had rallies, and some member of the station would go and talk at the rally and so on. But I would not say that we were strongly identified with them one way or another. We were actually very busy in running a professional radio broadcasting company. That was what we were trying to do, demonstrating, I think, by that kind of professional operation that there was more in it than just having a giggle with a boat and a transmitter, which is what it was not, ultimately.

DUNKLEY: Did Caroline actually ever put out any publicity messages for any of the organisations?

BATE: Oh yes. We ran announcements publicising the fact that there would be a rally in Trafalgar Square or whatever. We did not actively, although the temptation was great sometimes, campaign on air for, you know, mass descents on Downing Street etc etc. We tended not to editorialise anyway. We were not that kind of a radio station. But we did on the odd occasion urge certain listeners in certain areas to write to their MP and perhaps, you know, not say that that pirate radio was a good thing, but perhaps on another matter that they should write to their MP etc.

DUNKLEY: At this time, as the pirate stations were building up their audiences, and watching their fan clubs grow in size and in potential political significance - and while the executives were beginning to make contact with various people inside the Palace of Westminster - Manx Radio, the legal station on the Isle of Man was also feeling its way into the new realm of commercial radio. It was operated by the Isle of Man Broadcasting Company, a firm which was formed jointly by Richard Mayar Associates and Pye - the electronics company. At the time, in 1964, one of Pye's tope executives was Harry McGee. He's since left the firm, but I asked him when the Pye Company first started to think about the possibility of local commercial radio stations in Britain.

INSERT 5: Harry McGee

Well, we started almost in the wake of getting commercial television going, bringing in the the necessary multi-channel television sets to enable people to have the choice between BBC and ITA. But in all parts of the United Kingdom, this required a Thirteen Channel tuner. And as soon as sets with a Thirteen Channel tuner had been launched, which was in the late fifties, we began to think that there ought to be a competative service in radio, particularly radio serving the local needs of a small community.

DUNKLEY: And what did you do about it?

McGEE: Well, we thought of course on the technical side mainly in the initial stages. And the crux of the matter is that the BBC were using all the available wave lengths allocated to the United Kingdom by the Copenhagen Broadcasting Convention. And of course, this was quite right, because there's no point in wave lengths lying fallow. And if wave lengths are lying unused, there's a great temptation for other countries to start using them. So we looked at the problem and we of course looked at the States, looked at what was happening there. The Stanley family at that time were the leaders of the Pye Company. Mr Stanley was Chairman and Managing Director. Mr John Stanley was Deputy Managing Director. And I that time I worked with Mr John Stanley very closely. And C.O.Stanley you'll remember was one of the leading lights in the setting up of Independent Television. And he became involved with ATV. And in ATV, on of his associates was a man called Richard Mayer. Richard Mayer of course had been the man who had set up Radio Normandy before the war, and had a great deal of experience in setting up and the running of Independent commercial radio stations. So when the Manx Government decided in the early sixties that they wanted to have their own radio station, they went to the British Post Office and didn't get too far. The Post Office said there weren't any frequencies available, and so on and so on. The John Stanley and I met representatives of the Manx Government and were appointed technical consultants to the Manx Government, and our responsibility was investigate how the Manx Government could have an independent commercial radio station. and we were empowered to negotiate with the British Post Office on the Manx Government's behalf. And in that agreement, we had the right to form half of any subsequent radio station.

DUNKLEY: Having obtained that agreement Pye called in the firm of Janski and Bailey, American radio engineering experts, and, with their help, after several days and nights spent on the Isle of Man monitoring all the existing radio signals, they identified a number of gaps in the frequency spectrum where a new Manx Radio could be slotted in. They reckoned that they'd be able to use the space they'd found without offending against the international agreement on radio broadcasting laid down at Copenhagen in 1948 - and they were also sure that they could broadcast on VHF for 24 hours day, as well as on medium wave in the daytime, without interfering with other broadcasts. When they put this plan to the British Post Office, it was received without any entusiasm at all - but they persevered, and eventually were granted the license. Harry Mc Gee explained what happened next.

INSERT 6: Harry McGee

McGEE: At that time, we were asked by the Manx Government how the station was going to be set up, going into the details of equity and so on. And we remembered our old friend Richard Mayer and we contacted him - he was in South Africa at the time. He flew over. We introduced him to the Manx Government. It was all agreed and we set up the Isle of Man Broadcasting Company Limited. Having got the agreement of the British Post Office to do this, we built a radio station very quickly. I remember it was in a very large caravan. And we had this taken to the Isle of Man in time for the TT races of 1964. That would be June, 1964. And the station was formally opened the following November.

DUNKLEY: It was about the same time, as far as I know, the same year, '64, that Pye's plan for a hundred commercial radio stations in Britain on the mainland was published. How long had you been thinking about that plan?

McGEE: Oh we'd been thinking about it for several years. And the thing emerged backed up by the facts and figures that we were producing in setting up Manx Radio. Bear in mind that John Stanley was thinking about it, I was thinking about it. We had Richard Mayer with us at that time working on Manx Radio. We had the benefits of the work that Janski and Bailey were doing on our behalf. The whole thing was coming together. And so we put that on paper. I think we called it Local Broadcasting in Britain. And we had in that the Pye plan which was the crux of the matter again was daylight broadcasting on medium wave and VHF, and VHF going right through the night, never being switched off.

DUNKLEY: What did you do with that plan. Having published it, who did you show it to?

McGEE: Well, of course, we sent it to every MP and to quite a few members of the House of Lords. The BBC of course had some, and people in the Post Office, Newspapers - all the communication media. And at that time of couse the advertising industry began to take an interest in the

possibilites of commercial radio. And the thing was discussed and it did was it was supposed to do - it was a catalyst.

DUNKLEY: There must have been some feeling at the time, not simply of philathropy or altruism - Pye after all are a business company. What did Pye see as being the benefit to them of the possibility of this set up?

McGEE: You may think this is a strange one but Pye never saw the opportunity to make a great deal of money out of commercial radio. Obviously they and other people in the broadcasting equipment field would make some money out of setting up a hundred radio stations, because there'd be a hundred studios, a hundred transmitters, a hundred directional antennas and so on. But we always stressed in the Pye plan how comparatively economical it was in terms of money at that time, to set up a radio station. I remember we talked about 25-50,000 pounds as being necessary to set up a radio station. To put the thing in todays perspective, one colour television camera costs as much as almost a radio station.

DUNKLEY: There was also presumably the question of either.. well more radio sets, different radio sets?

McGEE: Oh that's the other side of it. You've said something very important there - different radio sets. Again, looking back, VHF was very much in its early days. And people were not encouraged to buy VHF sets. And the reason that they were not encouraged to buy is that the BBC duplicated on VHF what was available on medium wave. And so since people tended to keep radio sets many many years, there was no need for them to rush out and buy a VHF set when the old set, that they had was tried and tested and an old family friend, got all the programmes that they would get on VHF. Our argument was that you would never get people on to VHF unless you offered them something different.

DUNKLEY: Pye, then, was interested in a commercial radio system, both for the sake of the alternative it would offer the public and, naturally, for the business it could bring them. However cheaply the individual stations might be set up, there was the prospect of a 100 of them, costing up to £50,000 each - and when you add that up it means five million pounds worth of business for somebody. In addition there was the possibility of at least as much turnover again in new radio sets, if VHF broadcasting was introduced.

Of course, Pye weren't the only equipment manufacturers who were interested. Marconi, too, became involved at quite an early stage when they gave advice to the Local Radio Association. The formation of the LRA was the last of those three events which made 1964 such an important date in the campaign for commercial radio. The secretary of the Association at that time, though he is now no longer involved in it, was John Gorst - who had originally worked for the Pye organisation and had been involved in their radio activities, and who later became a Conservative MP. I asked why the organisation was originally set up.

INSERT 7: John Gorst, MP

GORST: The purpose of Local Radio Association was first and foremost to campaign for local commercial broadcasting. There was in existence an organisation which was really the sort of residue of the popular television association. It had some funds left over I believe. But they were dedicated to campaigning for the choice and competition in television and radio. At that time there was far too much interest in who was going to get the second television service, and this is what their main activity was about. And so we felt there was a need for another organisation which would concentrate on local broadcasting.

DUNKLEY: Now, why was the LRA formed at that particular time. I mean what were the events which combined to bring this about?

GORST: We'd had a White Paper in 1962 from the Conservative Government which had said that there was no evidence of a demand for local radio and that therefore they proposed to do nothing about it. At the same time, Manx Radio had come on the scene, I think a few months before we started. So had the first of the pirate ships, and they were in fact rapidly proving extremely popular in their different ways. But we wanted to make sure that if there was any commercial radio, it would be local, not either regional or national in the first instance, because this we felt was the really big gap in our broadcasting spectrum.

DUNKLEY: And who was "we" exactly?

GORST: The first initiative for the formation of the Local Radio Association came from a couple of chaps called John Whitney and Philip Waddylove, who were directors of an aspiring company called Radio Yorkshire, and they came to me because I was a public relations consultant and said what can you do to put us on the map? And I said to them that I thought the best way to to about it was to form an association in which they would play a leading part, but as part of a much bigger whole. And then at the end of the day, if the campaign succeeded they would obviously have put themselves into a good position to be considered for franchises. And so, for a period of I think two or three months, they commissioned me to set up the Local Radio Association, which I did. I recruited some friends of mine, like the Bolting brothers and others who formed and ad hoc committee which was later regularised, and became the council of the LRA.

DUNKLEY: You really invented the LRA in fact?

GORST: I invented it as an answere to a public relations problem, I suppose. The circumstances which I've described clearly dictated that something like this was going to happen anyhow.

DUNKLEY: How did it grow? I mean, you've mentioned Mr Whitney and Waddylove. How fast did you gather members?

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GORST: Very slowly indeed. I think basically the people who joined were those who had shown an interest, like, say, George McWatters in Bristol - his company had put forward evidence to the Pilkington Committee. And there were others of similar nature. But I think that what could so easily be forgotten at this distance in time is there was no enthusiasm, even amongst the people who supported it. Throughout 1965 and '66, maybe even later than that, the only initiative really came from me because I set up policy committees to consider all the various aspects of radio. Anyone could have come along to them, but in fact, it usually turned out that it was only John Whitney and myself. And being by that time, retained and paid by the Local Radio Association as a professional it was clear that nobody else really had the time or the belief that we were going to get anything because of course we had a Labour Government who were dead opposed to commercial radio.

DUNKLEY: What do you think the Association achieved in its early years, say between the years of '64 and '66?

GORST: What I think was achieved was an answer to the commonly held belief and I think this certainly went through the Post Office, the Labour Government, and I think the BBC subscribed to this view, that there just weren't the frequencies available on which this could be done. And what we did was to commission Marconi - I say commission - perhaps i ought to say request Marconi because we had this help from them entirely voluntarily. We did a feasibility study to show that over 200 stations could be fitted into the country on medium wave. And indeed we show in that report that it would be possible to have a certain amount of competition between stations as well.

DUNKLEY: So by early 1965, the pirate stations were operating at full blast, suggesting that a commercial radio service was a feasable proposition, and showing with their audience figures that there was definitely a public for this new sort of radio. In the Isle of Man, Pye and Richard Mayar Associates were demonstrating that contrary to earlier beliefs VHF broadcasting could be carried on 24 hours round the clock.

Pye had published its plan for a hundred stations; and the Local Radio Association, with the support of Marconi, had published a different plan allowing for 276 stations. And although the Labour Government was still turning its face firmly away from the whole idea of commercial radio, there were good reasons for believing that the Conservative opposition was beginning to view the idea with a good deal more sympathy.

In the next programme in theis series, in two week's time, I'll be looking at the events which took place in the period 1966-1968, from an official adoption of a commercial radio plan as part of the Conservative Party programme in 1966, through the passing of the Marine Offences Act by the Labour Government in 1967, and on to 1968, when all the hopes of the commercial radio pressure groups rested on the election of a new Conservative Government.
