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"WORKING THE SYSTEM"

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DUNKLEY

In the first of these programmes I looked at the three converging areas of activity which, in their different ways, were contributing to the growing pressure for a commercial radio system in this country during the early sixties. They were the opening of the pirate radio stations; the opening of the legal commercial radio station in the Isle of Man; and the formation of the Local Radio Association. Though none of these three was a particularly powerful force considered on its own, when seen in combination they did seem to represent a definite pattern of straws in the wind.

However, since October 1964 there had been a Labour Government in power, and it was known that Labour politicians - who had opposed the introduction of commercial television a decade earlier - were not enthusiastic about the idea of commercial radio, either. Nevertheless, Mr. Wilson was then governing with a majority of only three, and there was always the hope of a general election. So during 1965 and early 1966, the pressure groups held their fire and presented a low profile, hoping for the election of a Conservative government more sympathetic to their views.

But when Mr. Wilson did go to the country in March 1966, he was returned with a substantially increased majority, and the champions of commercial radio realised that if they went on waiting for a Conservative administration, they might have to wait a very long time indeed. So although their hopes of success were pretty low, they began putting pressure on the Labour government.

First in the field was the Local Radio Association which represented men who hoped one day to get licenses to run stations of their own. Three months after the election, early in June 1966, they sent copies of their plan to every backbench MP, explaining their belief that Britain could support as many as 276 local commercial stations. At the same time they complained that Anthony Wedgwood Benn, then the Postmaster General, had refused to see their delegation although (they said) he had met other interested groups including newspaper owners.

Since many newspapers were firmly opposed to commercial radio, considering it inimical to their own interests, Mr. Wedgwood Benn's actions were taken as a fairly obvious confirmation of the Labour Government's sympathies. With the thought that they might still have to sit out another entire Labour Administration before seeing their plans bear fruit, the commercial radio enthusiasts concentrated their efforts

on the long-term planning of the Conservative Party. Their first apparent success was at the Conservative Party's annual conference at Blackpool in 1966 - when a resolution was passed committing the party to the idea of commercial radio and including it as one of the planks in their party platform. This motion was proposed by Eldon Griffiths, and seconded by John Gorst - the secretary of the Local Radio Association and at that time a Conservative candidate. It was hardly an earth-shattering event, but it was significant in that commercial radio had, for the first time, been adopted as a formal commitment by one of the major political parties.

The importance of that commitment became very clear in December 1966 when the Labour Government, after many delays, finally published its White Paper on Broadcasting and thereby destroyed any residual hopes that the commercial radio enthusiasts might still have had of seeing their plans fulfilled under a Labour Government. The White Paper acknowledged that there was an audience for what it called "continuous music as popular entertainment" ...in other words the service that the pirates had been providing. But instead of recommending that a similar service should be offered by legal land-based commercial stations, the Labour Government said that it had decided that the BBC should take on the job, and should convert the Light Programme (as it was then called) into a more or less continuous pop channel.

Then, in a paragraph which was to cause endless controversy, the White Paper went on to say that "No general service of local sound broadcasting which would be available during the hours of darkness as well as in daylight can be provided only on medium wavelengths allotted to the U.K. The only possibility for such a service lies in VHF. In practical terms" - it said - "some 150 towns and cities could be served. Of the proposals put to the Government for the provision of a service, some advocate that it should be provided by commercial companies, others that it should be provided by the BBC."

Then the authors of the Labour White Paper quoted a Conservative White Paper published four years earlier which said that "The justification for local sound broadcasting would be in the provision of a service genuinely 'local' in character." The Labour document declared that their own government shared this view - and then came the crunch: "The Government consider that this objective would prove incompatible with the commercial objectives of companies engaging in local sound broadcasting."

To make sure that there were no mistakes about their views, the authors of the White Paper added, "While the Government do not in principle rule out advertising as a means of financing broadcasting stations in public ownership, it is in their view of first importance to maintain public service principles in the further development of the broadcasting services. Accordingly they reject the view that a service of local sound radio should be provided by commercial companies."

The White Paper went on to outline an experiment which it said the BBC should carry out, setting up nine stations broadcasting on VHF, offering a full-scale "local service" and organised in cooperation with local interests.

So far as the Labour Government was concerned the die - or at any rate the experimental die - was cast. But the commercial lobbyists didn't give up hope, and they didn't give up their campaigns either. They simply brought even more pressure to bear on their friends in the Conservative party. The shadow minister with responsibility for broadcasting at that time was Paul Bryan - nowadays Sir Paul Bryan - and once Labour's plans for BBC local radio had been announced, he became the focus for many of the commercial radio enthusiasts.

His activities in this area had started earlier in the year when he had helped to get the Conservative conference at Blackpool to vote for commercial radio. He told me what happened after that:

INSERT 1 Sir Paul Bryan

Bryan: The next thing was to get down to the practical details and I remember straight after that conference I went across to the Isle of Man to look at the only station, the only commercial station that existed in the British Isles. Now that is a very small station; but there was a character there, Dick Mayer, who seemed to me to know more about commercial radio than anybody else in England. This wasn't very difficult because, of course, there were very few people who knew anything about commercial radio, but he really was a great expert and I would say he had more influence on me and my thinking than anybody else. He had a very broad knowledge, not only of programmes, but of the technical side as well. So if you ask me who is the greatest influence, I would say it was Dick Mayer.

Dunkley: Apart from him, did you know Harry McGee of Pye who was also involved?

Bryan: Very well. Yes, he... I took advice from him more on the technical side of it. Dick Mayer had the general knowledge of the programme side as well.

Dunkley: Who were the other groups and people you were seeing at that time?

Bryan: We saw something of the Local Radio Association. They had in fact got out some practical plans of their own, using advice from consultants and so on, so they were useful, but as time went on, really the most active people I think were the newspapers people. The Newspaper Society which represents all the local papers. Those were the ones most interested. And I think where they were effective is this. You see - people talk about pressure groups. They're never half as effective in Parliament in my view as outsiders think, but newspapers are the one that are. Because every member of parliament has his own local newspaper, which matters a lot to him because that's the way he talks to his constituents, through the local newspaper. So if your own local newspaper says to you, 'Please put pressure on your party to make sure we have our share of this', you've got a highly effective pressure taking place. And I think that is what took place. And in fact, as I say, they have quite a big slice of local radio now.

DUNKLEY Richard Mayer, the man who Sir Paul Bryan remembers as having the most important influence on his thinking, is dead now; but Harry McGee, the former Pye executive who helped to set up Manx Radio with Mayer remembers being in frequent contact with the shadow minister.

INSERT 2 Harry McGee

McGee: We talked with many people, with MPs, with Ministers, with Shadow Ministers. I grew quite close to Paul Bryan in these conversations.

Dunkley: When you say you grew quite close to Paul Bryan, do you remember how often you met him?

McGee: Oh, I wouldn't like to put numbers on it, but we met regularly, and he would often ring up and say what do you think about this or what do you think about that.

Dunkley: Were you in effect teaching things to Paul Bryan that he didn't know?

McGee: Oh I'm sure we were. After all Paul Bryan is a politician. I and my colleagues are radio specialists. He would ask for various points in our proposals to be explained, explained in detail, so that he in turn could argue in a coherent way with the people that he in turn had to convince.

DUNKLEY I asked John Gorst - now a Conservative MP, but then the secretary of the Local Radio Association - whether the Conservative undertaking on commercial radio, made at Blackpool, was important to his organisation:

INSERT 3 John Gorst

Gorst: Yes, because it took us this much further. Instead of our having to worry about whether the argument for local radio was accepted, it was now a question of when would the action be taken and obviously it would be taken if and when a Conservative Government was returned. Of course in 1966 with a new mandate this might be four or five years off. We realised that.

Dunkley: That being so, what did you do? As an organisation?

Gorst: Well, events overtook us because what we had to do was to argue with the Labour Government's plans which was to hold these experimental trials using the BBC, and we argued that they weren't in any way appropriate. We even in fact saw Edward Short, who was then Postmaster General, and said that we would be prepared to run one of the experiments ourselves if he would let us. He listened to John Whitney, John Bolting and myself, but that's I think all he was prepared to do.

Dunkley: Did you at that stage or immediately after October '66 begin to lobby or have any association with the Opposition Shadow Minister?

Gorst: Yes, I went along on one or two occasions to the Conservative Backbenchers Broadcasting Committee and explained our proposals to them. But by this time of course they were beginning to make their own inquiries with the help of some market research which they'd commissioned, and so they were listening to a number of submissions. I did have the opportunity

throughout this period of time as far as I remember to talk to both Ian Gilmour, who was at that time his number 2 and played Devil's Advocate with some of the ideas they were contemplating.

Dunkley: This is Paul Bryan's number 2?

Gorst: Yes.

Dunkley: Did you feel at that time that you were in any sense in competition in this lobbying process?

Gorst: Yes. Very much so. We were in competition, of course, with the BBC. We were also, of course, in competition with the Musician's Union, who were completely opposed to this. We were in competition with the Labour Government. We were in competition with the Post Office, who didn't approve of the frequency questions that we were raising. Of course newspapers were more inclined to wish local broadcasting on to the BBC who wouldn't be in competition for their revenue. So one way and another, I think we were really in competition with everyone.

Dunkley: That being so, did you feel any optimism about... I mean you make it sound as though the scene at that time was absolutely appalling. Was it?

Gorst: No, because I thought that there was an inevitability about this. We'd seen commercial television. That had in fact breached the principle. And it was now really only a matter of time before the arguments which we knew were sound in principle and workable in practice from our study of the frequency situation. It only required the will to do something about it.

DUNKLEY The next major event contributing to the "will to do something about it", and eventually get legal commercial radio on the air, was - paradoxically at first glance perhaps - the passing of the Marine Offences Act by the Labour Government in August 1967. This was the Act designed to drive the pirate radio stations off the air, and although it took a little time for that to happen, in the end it worked. The result was to infuriate thousands of young pop fans, who had come to rely on the pirates for their new sort of entertainment - and there were plenty of older people who felt the same way. The interesting thing about many of the teenage fans was that by the time of the next election in 1970, with the voting age lowered to 18, they would be eligible to vote, and there are people who suggest that their votes may well have had an effect in some of the marginal constituencies.

Whether that's so or not the Marine Offences Act certainly had the effect of encouraging thousands of listeners, mostly young but some older, to join the new Listeners' Associations, which were getting under way to fight for the sort of radio the pirates had stood for. One of these organisations was the Free Radio Association and I asked Geoffrey Pearl, the Chairman, why the Association was formed early in 1967?

INSERT 4 Geoffrey Pearl

Pearl: My original purpose in forming the Association was to sow the seeds of free enterprise radio at a time when the soil was fertile. This was a long-term purpose. Once the association was formed, we found ourselves with the short-term purpose of dealing with the Marine Offences Act, of proposed legislation, and doing what we could to prevent it, and, subsequently, after the 1970 General election, lobbying the new Conservative Government, to persuade them to bring in a system of free radio, rather than authority controlled commercial radio.

Dunkley: How do you define free in those terms?

Pearl: Our definition of free radio is free enterprise radio; that is radio which is not owned or controlled by the Government or by an authority appointed by the Government.

Dunkley: Now you said that the soil was fertile at that time. In what sense was this so?

Pearl: By 1967, there were 10 or 11 off-shore radio stations, providing a very popular form of radio; something in the regions of 45% of the population were listening to the off-shore radio stations, according to a national opinion poll. The stations were doing no harm. The listeners were enjoying them. The axe was about to fall, and there were a large number of people who wanted to do something to safeguard the stations. But I think more significantly than that even, people were experiencing a new form of radio, a new form of free enterprise, and, speaking personally here, I knew, I had no doubt, that it was going to come to an end. I knew that there was nothing that we could do to prevent it, when there was a Government in power which was ideologically opposed to the very principle of free enterprise. So while it was there and while people were experiencing it and knew about it, I wanted to provide the opportunity for them to band together in association so that the idea of Free Radio would be able to continue, and the seeds that were sown at

that time eventually come into fruition maybe many years hence.

Dunkley: How did you start off? How did you start building the organisation in the first place? How did you get members?

Pearl: Our first job was to gain the confidence of the off-shore radio stations. A meeting was called of all the different stations. It was quite a job bringing them all together, but when we did so I outlined the plans of the association, which were basically that we would support the off-shore stations in what they stood for and help them in any way we could but that they would not finance us. This was in February 1967, and although they would not finance us, they would play their part in the campaign by broadcasting the announcements of the association over the air. That was agreed and within weeks we were in business in a big way.

Dunkley: How did your role seem to define itself, or how did you define that role at the beginning? I mean, did you see yourselves as a political organisation or specifically as a pressure group or as a publicity organisation or what?

Pearl: We always saw ourselves as a political organisation but never as a party political organisation. As an association we are always careful not to identify ourselves with any of the parties even though at times this was very difficult when one party refused to know us and another party opened its arms to us and said, well, talk to us. It's very difficult to remain aside from party politics but this was our intention all the time.

Dunkley: What did you start to do in the early months of the organisation?

Pearl: We were making contact with the political parties, and we held a rally in Trafalgar Square, and we issued a great deal of literature. We did as much as we could to publicise the existence of the stations, and to discuss the forthcoming legislation in our literature - so there was an educational role. We were to a large degree educating people. We had a slogan which was "Fight for Free Radio", and we did our utmost to see that this slogan appeared as far and as widely as possible. Car stickers were seen in abundance. Posters were displayed and at the height of the campaign it was really quite impossible to go far without seeing this particular slogan. So the fact that there was a campaign

was certainly brought to the public's attention.

DUNKLEY — Another of the listener organisations formed at about this time was the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting which, like the Free Radio Association is still in existence. I asked Martin Rosen how the campaign was started.

INSERT 5 Martin Rosen

Rosen: Well, we were formed in 1967 after the Government had passed the Marine Offences Act which outlawed all the off-shore radio stations. We were originally formed as an organisation called National Commercial Radio Movement, and our prime aim was to promote the introduction of independent radio in its widest possible forms. We were a listeners' group but we drew into our organisation people from all fields of life, from all political parties, but the basic thing was we were all listeners and had no vested interests in commercial radio.

Dunkley: How did you see your role - as political lobbyists or as publicists or what?

Rosen: A bit of both I think. We did quite a lot of political lobbying. We also distributed leaflets to the public just presenting them the facts. I feel that perhaps our brief was that the public wanted commercial radio but they didn't know exactly what form of commercial radio was possible and we took it upon ourselves to make a study of this and then present this study to politicians, to people within the broadcasting industry and to the public, explaining exactly what our views were and why we wanted them.

Dunkley: How much contact did you have with the Conservative people in opposition?

Rosen: We met Paul Bryan several times while he was their Shadow spokesman for Post and Telecommunications and we met one or two other Conservative MPs. At that time, we didn't bother at all with the Labour Party, not because we were politically biased, but because they had come out in complete opposition to commercial radio and we felt we would be wasting our time talking to them.

DUNKLEY — During the last months of 1967 and the first

half of 1968 the pirate stations were gradually disappearing from the air and the experimental BBC stations, suggested in the Labour Government's White Paper, were opening, one after the other. On the 8th November 1967 Radio Leicester made its first broadcast. A week later Radio Sheffield went on the air. Radio Merseyside opened a week after that, and then between January and July 1968 stations started operating in Nottingham, Brighton, Stoke-on-Trent, Leeds and Durham. The BBC's Local Radio Development Manager Hugh Pearce explained in a BBC booklet that "It was decided it would be wrong for the BBC to pay for the whole cost of the experiment from its general license revenue and financial contributions were to be sought from local authorities and other local sources." Today the BBC has twenty local radio stations but that first bunch of eight went into operation just at the time when the Conservative Opposition, and particularly Paul Bryan, were building up their interest in local commercial stations. It was at this time too, the winter of '67 and the spring of '68, that a new voice began to be heard more and more often among those of the commercial radio campaigners - the voice of Hughie Green; television quiz-master, talent spotter and intriguingly a pilot of many years experience. Mr. Green formed a company called Commercial Broadcasting Consultants and tried - initially anyway - using an altogether new method of bringing commercial radio to Britain. He approached the idea not through central government but through the local authorities. I asked Hughie Green how he first became interested in local radio.

INSERT 6 Hughie Green

Green: Well, I had a friend of mine who came round here one night and said 'Why don't we have commercial radio' and I said 'Well, why waste time? They'll never allow it in Britain.' And then a friend of mine who is a very fine engineer, radio engineer, by the name of Faraday, he said to me 'Well of course, we couldn't have any more commercial radio. We couldn't have any more radio in this country', and I said 'Why not?' So he said 'Well, the White Paper,' he said 'of 1966 clearly states when it talks about local sound radio that no general service of local sound broadcasting would be available during hours of darkness as well as in daylight. Can be provided only on medium waves allotted to the United Kingdom. The only possible way to do it, it says, is on VHF.' Well, having been a pilot for the past thirty years and still holding all of my licenses, one has to deal with

radio the whole time. And I was intrigued when he produced that piece of evidence, which we at Commercial Broadcasting Consultants within a year drove a cart and horse through because it simply was a long way from the truth.

Dunkley: Let me stop you there and ask what was Commercial Broadcasting Consultants? When did you set it up and why did you do so?

Green: Well we set it up when we read what was in the White Paper. Based on the fact that I was aware that in the United States there were many medium frequencies which were duplicated. In other words there would be a station in New York and 132 miles away in Philadelphia on the same frequency because they were using a technique of directional ariels which had never been used in this country, they were using frequencies over and over again. So once we saw that we said 'My Gosh, this is terrific. This can really work in this country.' And we formed Commercial Broadcasting Consultants because we thought that we would be able to sell this to the councils, which at that time, the BBC were trying to sell their VHF local stations to. And that was why Commercial Broadcasting Consultants was formed.

So what happened was as follows. We went to the GLC. We said 'Would you be satisfied if we can provide you with a legal and technically perfect medium frequency station?' and they said yes, if you can do that, we will go ahead and we will buy it and we will see if we can put it through council and indeed apply to the Government for the rights to do it. Which of course is now history. They did that, and we managed to do that by virtue of our own technical work under Mr. Faraday and also by going to Brown Bevery, which, of course, is one of the largest companies in the world for arielisation, and we completely proved that this could be done. And indeed they applied for a license.

Dunkley: Having found that the thing was feasible, what did you then do?

Green: We knew from the very first moment we started into it that it was feasible, because it was impossible to believe that it was feasible in America and Canada and yet not feasible here. So simultaneously as we did that, we also went into all the rest of the thing that was impertant in this country, because realising we were going to do it in this country, unlike some of the other people who went ahead and went into this business and said ridiculous things like 'Let's scrap the Copyright Act' and 'Let's get rid of the phonographic protection' we realised that

we were going to have to live with what the country had at this particular time. So we made representation to the Phongraphic Protection Limited and to the Copyright Society. So whilst we were doing our technical work we were also doing our practical union work as well.

DUNKLEY: Had you had any meetings, had CBC or yourself had any meetings with Paul Bryan who was the shadow spokesman while Labour were in power?

GREEN: Yes, we had, because both the Manchester Corporation and the GLC naturally put us in touch with the Conservative Central Office, and we not only had chats with Paul Bryan, but we also had long talks with Peter Walker, because, of course, Peter Walker was in charge at that time of local Government. And one of the things that we emphasised to Peter Walker was that for financial viability we wanted to see the thing go trough local government so that local government could be the administrators of the law that would have been written in Westminster. In other words, local government couldn't change the law, but they would be the administrators of the law.

DUNKLEY: Did CBC consciously feed the press with information to keep this whole business of commercial radio on the boil?

GREEN: We tried always to tell the press the truth, as far as we knew the truth to be. We told the press that it was essential to know about this thing technically as well as finacially, because we did not want to see it for the sake of the Conservative Party, and particularly for our own sakes, become bust. Whenever we saw people going off on tangents, like Mr Gorst, of having 300 stations, we would call up various friends in the press and say, well, ask him how he's going to pay for his stations. And whenever people said, oh well, it can't be heard on medium frequency, we would then call up somebody on the press and say, alright chaps, let's have a little bit of a get together and all come round and listen to it.

DUNKLEY: Hughie Green's hopes of setting up stations with the help of local councils failed, however, because, no matter how enthusiastic they were, the councils themselves had to seek permission from central government to operate a radio service, and that permission was never forthcoming. Nevertheless, Mr Green and his company played a major part in publicising the broad idea of commercial radio, and by continually supplying the press with information they kept the topic alive in the minds of the public as well as politicians.

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It was in 1969 that the subject reached a critical pitch of discussion. That was the year when Paul Bryan outlined a detailed plan for a 100 stations - the first time that a major party had come out with a specific plan.

In the third and final programme next week, I shall be following the events from the announcement of that plan, through the election of 1970, to the passing of the Sound Broadcasting Act in 1972; and I'll be looking at the lobbies which opposed the scheme during those years as well as those in favour.