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A phantom medium?

**The SDAP, the Labour Party and the politics of radio
broadcasting in the Netherlands and Great Britain (1920-1940)**

A comparative study

Bas de Jong

Paranimfen

Rik Visschedijk

Janko van de Kempe

Voor Froukje, Else, Filip en Jonna

The author of this dissertation received welcome support to conduct his research in Great Britain in the form of a Marie Curie Fellowship in the European Doctorate Programme 'Building on the Past'. He was also awarded with an E.P. Thompson Memorial Bursary, granted by the Society for the Study of Labour History, which was used for the same purpose.

The picture on the cover of this book was taken on 24 July 1937, on the occasion of the opening of the labour movement's open air theatre at 'De Paasheuvel' in Vierhouten, the Netherlands. The VARA was present at this occasion to broadcast a report of the festivities. The picture comes from the collection of the International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam. Photographer J. Coerdès. The persons on the picture are (from left to right): Meijer de Vries (at the microphone), Gerard Nicolaas and Jan Peters.

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The SDAP, the Labour Party and the politics of radio broadcasting
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A comparative study

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 An empty void

As a former Director of Talks of the BBC Hilda Matheson was well informed about the secrets of broadcasting, but in the mid-1930s she confessed that radio was still something of an enigma to her.¹ Matheson had left the BBC in late 1931, but in the years before she had established her reputation as someone with a keen eye for the innovative potential of broadcasting and a strong belief in its value as a means of education and enlightenment. Her resignation did little to curb her interest for broadcasting, and she continued to write about the subject in the following years for various publications.² Among these was the left-leaning political journal *The Political Quarterly*, which in 1934 had asked her to elaborate on the relationship between politics and broadcasting. In taking up the invitation, Matheson opened her article by reflecting on the medium-specific qualities of radio: ‘of all forms of communication broadcasting is the most elusive’: ‘you cannot see it, nor feel it, nor hear it, except at the fleeting moment of its first projection into the ether’.³ With politics being an equally elusive category, Matheson continued by arguing that the interplay between politics and broadcasting was a highly slippery one. Clearly intrigued by this relationship, Matheson stressed that this was not ‘an exaggerated statement of difficulty’, but that radio had really introduced a whole new spectrum of opportunities, uncertainties and risks to political life. While she had witnessed from nearby how politicians had sought to control the impact of this new medium, she claimed that this was really futile and that it was ‘much like trying to catch the Loch Ness monster with a bent pin’.⁴

To substantiate this claim she also pointed towards the Netherlands, where a recent occasion had shown that the rise of radio had even bestowed silence with a whole new political significance. The occasion Matheson referred to concerned a five-minute’s silence which the socialist broadcasting association VARA (‘Vereeniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs’, Association of Workers Radio Amateurs) had observed on January 10, 1934 in protest against the Nazi regime’s execution of the Dutch communist Marinus van der Lubbe, who had been convicted for setting the *Reichstag* on fire. Although this seemed a suitable response, at the time the VARA’s actions were condemned by the Dutch Radio Council as a provocation and a violation of its rules about the political use of broadcasting. In fact, it decided to punish the VARA by suspending the broadcasting association from the airwaves for a whole Saturday. But while it anticipated that other broadcasting associations would step in, to take over the vacant airtime on this particular Saturday, this did not happen. And so, the unforeseen result of its ban was that the entire Hilversum-station was taken off the air for the larger part of this day. And so, what was first a five-minute’s silence by one broadcasting association, was now repeated and amplified as a whole

- 1 Fred Hunter, ‘Matheson, Hilda (1888-1940)’ in: H.C.G. Matthews and Brian Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (21-6-2018). Also about Matheson see for instance Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting. Volume one 1922-1939. Serving the Nation* (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts 1991) 153.
- 2 For instance Hilda Matheson, *Broadcasting* (London 1933).
- 3 Hilda Matheson, ‘Politics and broadcasting’, *The Political Quarterly* 5 (1934) 179-196.
- 4 Matheson, ‘Politics and broadcasting’, 181.

day's silence by several broadcasting associations. And this, Matheson observed, was a silence 'which was politically more eloquent than words'.⁵

Still, silence comes in many shapes and sizes and its political significance in broadcasting extended beyond its use as a form of protest.⁶ Indeed, those political figures who had already enjoyed the privilege of speaking before a radio microphone, would have experienced a whole different sound of silence. To most of those speakers their first-time experience with broadcasting was a confusing and slightly frightening ordeal, which had much to do with the radical novelty of radio. This, at least, was what Arthur Greenwood, a prominent member of the British Labour Party, confessed in 1935: 'broadcasting to a politician (..) is something which at first is terrifying. Imagine yourself in a studio, all alone, talking to a lifeless microphone, not seeing a soul, unable to weigh the effect of your words on the enormous unseen audience who are "listening-in" by the fireside.'⁷ A similar impression speaks from the words of a Dutch commentator, Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper. Kleerekoper was a prominent member of the SDAP ('Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij'), the Dutch labour party, and he was a beloved radio speaker for the broadcasting association VARA. He too had a vivid recollection of his first appearance before a radio microphone: 'Instead of a platform and a hall filled with people, and the mysterious atmosphere of a public meeting, [the broadcasting studio contained] nothing but a yo-yo [BdJ: the microphone] hanging on a rope from the ceiling which only just reached the top of my head. Beyond that, I was surrounded by an empty void, which absorbed me and obliterated me. I began with a raised heartbeat and a squealing voice.'⁸

The correspondence between these confessions is striking and it shows how broadcasting cloaked a speaker's public in silence. Up until the 1920s, the status of a politician was largely shaped by his ability to speak to people, who were present at the same location – in halls, streets or other venues. But while their presentation and style of speaking were carefully crafted to match these circumstances, the rise of radio came with a different reality. In broadcasting, the noise of the crowd had made way for the silence of a studio and the public, or audience, had now become a scattered collection of individual listeners. And so, a politician who was speaking from the studio was now facing 'a phantom public', to borrow Walter Lippmann's phrase.⁹ Of course, this did not mean that every politician struggled to reach out to this newly emerging public to the same extent, and there are notable examples of political leaders who were less daunted by the quietude and solitude of the broadcasting studio. In Britain, for instance, the Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was widely considered as an outstanding radio speaker, and the same applies to the Anti-Revolutionary Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Hendrik Colijn.¹⁰ Probably the most renowned masters of this medium were Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill and in both cases we can safely claim that their rhetorical skills and mastery of the microphone have helped to shape the course of events throughout the 1930s and the 1940s.¹¹

5 Ibidem, 180. More generally on this occasion Huub Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie. Overheidsbemoeiing met radioprogramma's 1919-1941* (Amsterdam 1988) 171-177.

6 A brief exploration of 'the politics of silence' is offered by Ido de Haan, 'Politiek van de stilte. Aantekeningen voor een ongeschreven boek', *Krisis. Tijdschrift voor actuele filosofie* 2 (2013) 51-52.

7 Arthur Greenwood, "Fireside politics", *Labour* 3 (1935) 86.

8 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Een nieuwe rubriek', *De Radiogids*, 15-7-1933.

9 Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York 1925).

10 Jon Lawrence, *Electing our Masters. The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford 2009) 96-100 and Huub Wijfjes, 'Echt en oprecht. Geluidsversterking, radio en politieke retoriek, 1900-1945', *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 3 (2000) 134-160, there 152-157.

11 More extensive on this Huub Wijfjes, 'Spellbinding and Crooning. Sound Amplification, Radio, and Political Rhetoric in International Comparative Perspective, 1900-1945', *Technology and Culture* 55 (2014) 148-185.

And yet, radio was much more than an occasional tool which those in power could use to address the public about the political issues of the day. Indeed, what should be noted in this respect is that the early 1920s did not only witness the emergence of broadcasting, but that these were the same years that saw the arrival of mass democracy transforming the makeup of the political landscape in countries across Europe.¹² While this raises the question of what the larger significance of radio has been to interwar political culture and, moreover, how its emergence fitted in with this broader shift in democratic politics, somehow it seems that the perception and understanding of radio is still clouded by its status as ‘the most elusive form of communication’. This is also recognized by Eric Hobsbawm, who has noted that ‘it is difficult to recognize the innovations of radio culture, since so much that it pioneered has become part of the furniture of everyday culture’.¹³ Equally important in this respect is the fact that radio has for long been a subject of historiographical silence itself. Writing about ‘decades of critical neglect’, media historian Michele Hilmes observes a strange contrast between radio’s minor place in the writings of history and its centrality as a cultural institution in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴

And so this leads to the main subject of this study. Because if radio’s elusive qualities have helped to obscure its significance to interwar political culture, this study seeks to restore radio to the prominence it once had. It does so by asking how broadcasting was shaped by politics in the 1920s and 1930s, and through this it hopes to find how the radical novelty of radio helped to reshape politics at the same time. It approaches these questions from a comparative perspective as it charts and compares the various sides of the relationship between politics and broadcasting through the perspective of two likeminded political parties – the Dutch SDAP and the British Labour Party. It is anticipated that this comparative approach can help to shed new light on the significance of radio to interwar political culture and, as such, that it may take us a step further as well in recognizing how this ‘phantom medium’ has helped to precipitate certain changes that are commonly ascribed to the younger sister of the broadcasting family, i.e. television.

1.2 Problem: radio, television and political change

If radio has suffered from a lack of interest, this surely does not apply to television. Reflecting on the ‘roots of forgetfulness’, Michele Hilmes has argued that the causes of radio’s neglect are multiple and complex, but that the 1950s rise of television played a key role in this development.¹⁵ More specifically, Hilmes explains that radio’s prominence came to fade when television was embraced as a miracle of post-war modernity, and that it was generally considered as its inferior precursor from the 1960s onwards. This was also reflected in its academic status. While historians and scholars from other disciplines came to develop an interest for television, radio remained a subject of minor significance for some decades. In fact, Hilmes sees this as a sign of the pervasive influence of modernization-theory across the academic field and she argues that television came to serve as a symbol of the drive to progress and democracy, which marked the post-WWII order.

12 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (London etc. 1998) 1-39.

13 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York 1994) 196.

14 Michele Hilmes, ‘Rethinking Radio’ in: Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio eds., *Radio Reader. Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (New York and London 2002) 1-19, there 8.

15 Hilmes, ‘Rethinking Radio’, 2-8.

Since radio was seen to belong to a different era – less modern and less enlightened – its history was easily dismissed as a footnote to later developments.¹⁶

Admittedly, this is only a partial reproduction of a more complex picture, and it is not wholly accurate either, since radio has made a definite comeback in academic circles in the past decade or two. This is also recognized by Hilmes, who has done a great deal herself to save radio from the historical margins, just like many other scholars of media history and media studies. While this has yielded a substantial increase in the number of studies that are dedicated to the history of radio, there is still plenty of work to do to bolster this revival of radio. This challenge is as broad-ranging as it is complicated. It does not merely concern the ‘forgotten’ subject itself, radio, but also the implications of its neglect in the writings of history and adjacent disciplines. For it is one thing to renew or to restore the interest for radio by exploring it in its historical context, but it is another thing to challenge the established views which have been built on its neglect. Picking up on what was noted above, this means that we should shake off the one-sided fixation on television. More particularly, this requires us to question the dominant narrative about the emergence of television in the 1950s and the 1960s as a primary catalyst of political change. Because however important the rise of television has been to political culture, it is most remarkable that radio is almost always ignored in accounts which reflect on its impact and achievements. While this suggests that the historical assumptions of this narrative remain flawed, it also indicates that the television-centric understanding of political change might need to be aligned more closely to the earlier, radio-history of broadcasting.

An illustration of these points can be found in two landmark studies in political communication science. The first of these is Jay Blumler’s and Dennis Kavanagh’s ‘The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features’, which analyses the evolution of political communication in Western democracy throughout the twentieth century.¹⁷ The overall trend which Blumler and Kavanagh observe, is one of increasing complexity and they argue that the media have come to acquire a more diverse and an ever-more powerful role in politics and society. While they concentrate on the last stage, or ‘third age’, of this development, most important here are their comments about the 1950s and the 1960s influence of television on politics. They see the introduction of television as a primary cause of the transition from a first age of political communication to a second age. Among other things, they note that television ‘enlarged the audience for political communication by penetrating a sector of the electorate that was previously more difficult to reach’.¹⁸ Besides that, they point towards the role of television news, which, they claim, transformed ‘the language of politics (through the crafting of soundbites and cultivation of more intimate styles of address), and the personalization of its presentation’.¹⁹ While they ignore the role of radio, a similar image emerges from the second, equally influential study of Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz on the “Mediatization” of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?²⁰ In this article the authors coin the term ‘mediatization’ as an instrument to analyse

16 Ibidem, 4-5.

17 Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh, ‘The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features’, *Political Communication* 16 (1999) 209-230.

18 Blumler and Kavanagh, ‘The Third Age of Political Communication’, 212.

19 Ibidem.

20 Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, “Mediatization” of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?, *Political Communication* 16 (1999) 247-261. This article appeared in the same issue of *Political Communication* as the article of Blumler and Kavanagh and Mazzoleni and Schulz also refer to Blumler and Kavanagh’s periodization to locate their concept of ‘mediatization’ in time.

the processes through which politics has increasingly come to incorporate the forms and logics of the media. Parallel to Blumler and Kavanagh they argue that the process of mediatization ‘dates back at least to the introduction of television’ and they too observe its influence in the changing language of politics, in the increasing centrality of television forms to political communication and in the growing power of media actors in the political field.²¹

Of course, these are but two articles, but numerous other studies might have been quoted – in political history, political communication science, political science, media studies – that say the same in different wordings. But, to stick to these examples, what should be noted is that the advent of television serves in both articles as a demarcation-point between a modern and pre-modern era in political communication. Both articles concentrate primarily on politics in its contemporary form. Although this is legitimate, there are some serious shortcomings in the historical claims which underlie their analysis. There is much to question, for instance, about the linearity of the developments Schulz and Mazzoleni see unfolding in the movement towards a point of ‘mediatized politics’ as ‘politics that has lost its autonomy’.²² This implies that autonomy is something to have or not to have, while it seems more appropriate to understand it as a relative concept and as a site of continuous struggle.²³ A similar point could be made about Blumler and Kavanagh’s three-staged periodization, which is equally predisposed towards politics in its present-day formation. The suggestion which speaks from both articles is that complexity is a feature of the present and that the past is, by nature, a primitive prelude of a more advanced future. This is not the most adequate way to approach history and it might explain their blind spot for radio and the potential significance of the earlier radio-history of broadcasting. Beyond that, it also exposes a critical flaw in their argument. As they stick to the dominant view of television as the medium that changed politics forever, they observe its influence, among other things, in an expanded audience, in the cultivation of political intimacy and in the transformation of political language. Because the curious thing is that radio partly worked along similar lines, and that it can be seen to have had a similar effect on the language, audience and presentation of politics, albeit in the decades before television took over the living room.²⁴

There is another side to these issues. Because if television has helped to obscure the role of radio as a medium of political change, it appears this was somehow connected with the perceived primacy of political parties to interwar politics. More precisely, claims about the political impact of television often go hand-in-hand with assertions of a parallel ‘demise’, ‘decline’ or ‘crisis’ of political parties. Many authors observe a causal relationship between these developments and it features as a central argument, for instance, in the sub-field of political science which concentrates on political parties.²⁵ A key title in this respect is Richard S. Katz’s and Peter Mair’s ‘Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy’.²⁶ This article traces the genealogy of political parties and it sets out a three-staged development through which parties have moved to develop into the latest incarnation of, what they call, the ‘cartel party’. While Katz and Mair

21 Mazzoleni and Schulz, ‘“Mediatization” of Politics’, 249–252.

22 Ibidem, 250.

23 A critical reflection on the notion of autonomy in journalism studies is offered by Michael Schudson, ‘Autonomy from What’ in: Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu eds., *Bourdieu and the journalistic field* (Malden, MA 2005) 214–223.

24 A telling title in this respect is for instance Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public. Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis 2005).

25 Among those are also Mazzoleni and Schulz, and Blumler and Kavanagh in the articles which were mentioned above.

26 Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, ‘Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy. The Emergence of the Cartel Party’, *Party Politics* 1 (1995) 5–28.

promote a model of party change, rather than party decline or crisis, they signal that the rise of television was a crucial factor in the transition from mass-parties to 'catch-all parties'. As the wording (catch-all) suggests, they see television as the medium which allowed and compelled parties 'to make universal appeals directly to voters' and which, as such, helped to push parties in taking on a different shape and function.²⁷

Taking a broader and a longitudinal approach to these issues is political theorist Bernard Manin in *The principles of representative government*.²⁸ Manin's work is more firmly rooted in political history and in political philosophy, yet in explaining the changes in politics in the decades around the 1960s, Manin provides a similar image as the authors above. The shift he observes is a transition from an era of 'party democracy' to an era of 'audience democracy'.²⁹ While he sees mass-parties as the organizing principle of the preceding decades, as the term suggests, he sees this later era as a period which is increasingly dominated by the forms and rules of attention that are dictated by the media. Again, television is assigned with a crucial role in this shift, and Manin argues that it gave the public, or indeed the audience, a new shape and a new weight in political terms. While this suggests that Manin is indebted to the same television-centric understanding of political change as so many other scholars, he does actually mention the role of radio as well – 'through radio and television, candidates can, once again, communicate directly with their constituents without the mediation of a party network'.³⁰ Strangely enough, he locates radio in the post-war era, alongside television, and not in the 1920s and 1930s, so at the heart of his era of 'party democracy'. By arguing for a sense of simultaneity in the impact of radio and television on the transition to an 'audience democracy', Manin does not merely misjudges radio's historical status as a predecessor to television, he also ignores its potential influence on the earlier, interwar 'party democracy'. Perhaps this is only a minor imperfection, but it does expose the ambiguous and indistinct status which radio still has in political science, political history and in related fields of study.

So far, this problem has been discussed in the most general terms, but it is remarkable how pervasive this image is and how deep the gap is between radio as a medium of perceived insignificance and television as a carrier of fundamental change. A particular version of this account features prominently in Daniel Hallin's and Paolo Mancini's seminal study *Comparing Media Systems* when they reflect on the place of television in the transformation of politics and society in the Netherlands.³¹ Their interest for the Netherlands is primarily fuelled by its history of 'pillarization', or segmented pluralism, which divided the country's public life in a number of closely-knit communities with a different confessional and ideological outlook.³² They see the 'particularly interesting Dutch case' as 'perhaps the classic example' of how the larger processes

27 Katz and Mair, 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy', 13.

28 Bernard Manin, *The principles of representative government* (Cambridge 1997).

29 Manin, *The principles of representative government*, 206-235.

30 Ibidem, 220. In a more general sense Manin writes of 'mass media' and 'channels of political communication', and although his reference to radio indicates that it is included in these categories, television is clearly the defining medium of the era of 'audience democracy'.

31 Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge, etc. 2004).

32 It was the work of Arend Lijphart which gave the notion of 'pillarization' its international prominence, notably Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation. Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley 1968). In recent years Dutch historians have critically assessed many assumptions which underlie the concept of 'pillarization', but Hallin and Mancini's use of it shows its continuing influence in international scholarship. See for instance J.C.H. Blom and J. Talsma eds., *De verzuiling voorbij. Godsdienst, stand en natie in de lange negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 2000), Piet de Rooy, 'Zes studies over verzuiling', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 110 (1995) 380-392 and H. te Velde, 'Inleiding. De internationalisering van de nationale geschiedenis en de verzuiling', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 124 (2009) 499-514.

of secularization and modernization came to change the nature and fabric of society.³³ While using its example to reflect on the role of television in the process of ‘depillarization’, among other things they note how this medium served as ‘a common ground’, which helped to bring the various ‘pillars’ together.³⁴ In relation to that, they also point towards processes of political change, notably the ‘decline of political parties’, which were bound up with the changes in the media system. Although Hallin and Mancini’s work is more diverse than can be captured in these few notes, what’s most important here is that it largely reproduces the standard account of television as a medium which rises up from the fog of the past. By now, it needs little explanation that this account is not unproblematic, since it cuts off television’s perceived impact on politics from the earlier, radio-history of broadcasting. But somehow it is also ironic. Because the Dutch case forms a ‘particularly interesting’ example as well, to quote Hallin and Mancini once more, to challenge this conventional wisdom and to re-explore the earlier interplay between party politics and broadcasting from a radio-perspective.

1.3 Purpose: an Anglo-Dutch comparison

Indeed, the reason for this is that the structures of the ‘pillarized’ broadcasting system of the Netherlands date back to the second half of the 1920s, when a variety of newly founded broadcasting associations rushed to claim their share of the airwaves on behalf of their respective communities. Several of these broadcasting associations were closely affiliated with one of the major political parties, which did not only provide those parties with a privileged access to the airwaves, but which also saw those same broadcasting associations develop a distinct political and partisan profile. This was most clearly epitomized by the SDAP’s relationship with the VARA, and the common assumption in the literature about this period is that the actions of this broadcasting association were tightly controlled by the SDAP’s leadership and, moreover, that this broadcasting association was really a mouth-piece to the SDAP in the interwar decades.³⁵ From a historiographical point of view this image is all too crude, but it does illustrate why the SDAP’s partnership with the VARA makes such an interesting case to reconsider the place of radio in interwar political culture and to ask what its role has been as a medium of political change.

To be clear, all this does not suggest that these issues have been overlooked by Dutch historians. Much like what was noted above, the recent decades have seen a steady stream of studies about the early and later history of broadcasting in the Netherlands.³⁶ Indeed, this includes a ‘biography’ of the VARA which was published nearly a decade ago.³⁷ Based on its close

33 Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 263 and 269.

34 Ibidem, 269-271.

35 The term ‘mouth-piece’ comes from Kees Brants and Philip van Praag, and they apply it to denote the overall relationship between media organizations and their respective political parties in the age of ‘pillarization’, see Kees Brants and Philip van Praag, ‘Signs of Media Logic. Half a Century of Political Communication in the Netherlands’, *Javnost – The public* 13 (2006) 25-40, there 28.

36 For instance Peter Bak and Wim Berkelaar, *Verkundiging en verstrooiing: een geschiedenis van de NCRV (1924-2014)* (Amsterdam 2014), or Bert Hogenkamp, Sonja de Leeuw and Huub Wijfjes eds., *Een eeuw van beeld en geluid. Cultuurgeschiedenis van radio en televisie in Nederland* (Hilversum 2012) and earlier Huub Wijfjes ed., *Omroep in Nederland. Vijfenzeventig jaar medium en maatschappij, 1919-1994* (Zwolle 1994)

37 Huub Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep* (Amsterdam 2009). This dissertation is a late product of the research project which led to the publication of this ‘biography’; the same project also saw the publication of a website that was dedicated to the VARA’s history. The author of this dissertation was involved in this project as its archival researcher.

affiliation to the SDAP, the (party) political element features prominently in this work as well, and the same applies to some of the other, earlier studies by the same author, Huub Wijffjes.³⁸ But while these are mainly concerned with the history of broadcasting in its cultural and political context, for some reason historians of Dutch political culture have largely steered around the subject of radio, so including the question of what its arrival meant to the main political parties in the interwar decades. At this point it might not surprise that this stands in marked contrast to the emergence of television in the 1950s and the 1960s, which has attracted far more attention among historians of political culture. The relative indifference to radio is probably best illustrated by Bernard Rulof's study *Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak* ('An army of priests for a holy cause').³⁹ This study explores the SDAP's approach to mass politics and public demonstrations in the interwar decades, and, as we shall see, the VARA played a vital role in these events as well, by broadcasting the main speeches and the proceedings to the audience at home. However, not only does the author fail to acknowledge the contribution of radio, he even states that interwar politicians were not capable yet to enter the living room and sell their message to the audience as they would be in the age of television.⁴⁰ This is surely remarkable (but not exceptional), so in taking up the subject of radio, this study does not only seek to counter this neglect, it hopes to find as well whether there is perhaps a broader significance to it.

In doing so it applies a comparative perspective. For too long, the writing of history has been confined to the writing of history within its national context. Of course, there are exceptions to this claim, but it certainly applies to the study of those phenomena which are somehow related to the 'pillarized' past of the Netherlands. This includes the history of broadcasting which has largely been written in terms of national particularity. Once labelled 'the jewel in the crown of pillarization', many authors have stressed the 'unique' character of the Dutch broadcasting system, among whom Asa Briggs and Peter Burke.⁴¹ This study, however, is less interested in the 'unicity' of this arrangement or of its product, and in looking beyond the national boundaries it aims to develop a broader understanding of radio as a medium of political change instead. As such it also answers the call for more comparative history which has resounded throughout the previous years among historians of various disciplines.⁴² Among these is the political historian Henk te Velde, who has argued that the notion of 'pillarization' has come to stand for a *Sonderweg* in Dutch history, so as a distinct national trajectory along the path to modernity.⁴³ In claiming that it is time to move beyond this idea of national exclusivity, Te Velde also refers to the work of Bernard Manin (that was quoted above), and one of his suggestions is to chart the comparative history of political parties.

38 Notably Wijffjes, *Radio onder restrictie*.

39 Bernard Rulof, *Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak*. SDAP, politieke manifestaties en massapolitiek 1918-1940 (Amsterdam 2007).

40 Rulof, *Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak*, 15 and 17.

41 For instance Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media. From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Oxford 2002) 229, Jo Bardoel, 'Dutch Television. Between Community and Commodity' in: David Ward ed., *Television and Public Policy. Change and Continuity in an Era of Global Liberalization* (New York 2008) 199-222, there 200 and Huub Wijffjes, 'Tussen de "avond van Oud" en de "nacht van Schmelzer". Politiek en radio in de jaren vijftig en zestig' in: *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 3 (Amsterdam 1991) 243-263, aldaar 247. A similar image is used by Piet de Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd. De ongemakkelijke democratie, 1913-1949' in: Remieg Aerts a.o. eds., *Land van kleine gebaren. Een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland 1789-1990* (Nijmegen 1999) 179-262, there 199-200.

42 Te Velde, 'Inleiding. De internationalisering van de nationale geschiedenis en de verzuiling', Bert Hogenkamp, Sonja de Leeuw and Huub Wijffjes, 'Inleiding. Een eeuw van beeld en geluid' in: Idem eds., *Een eeuw van beeld en geluid*, 6-15, there 8-9, and Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, 'Introduction: Comparative European Perspectives on Television History' in: Idem eds., *A European Television History* (Malden 2008) 1-54, there 11.

43 Te Velde, 'Inleiding. De internationalisering van de nationale geschiedschrijving en de verzuiling', 504.

Indeed, it is along this line that this study will proceed as well, more particularly by exploring and comparing the party political dealings with radio. In doing so this study pairs the SDAP with the Labour Party in Great Britain, where the British Broadcasting Corporation was claimed to rule 'the ethereal waves'.⁴⁴ This may seem an odd choice, since both parties faced entirely different circumstances in broadcasting and in politics alike.⁴⁵ In fact, the BBC has long served as a primary counterpoint in the debate about the organization of broadcasting in the Netherlands, and critics of the pluralist arrangement have often hailed it as their lighting example.⁴⁶ Then again, radio was essentially the same medium to both parties, so regardless of the fact whether they were dealing with the partisan VARA (in the SDAP's case) or an independent BBC (in the Labour Party's case). In reflecting on a similar, but much more prominent opposition between two broadcasting systems – i.e., between British and American broadcasting – Michele Hilmes has argued that these 'loudly proclaimed dualisms' often conceal a 'more extensive history of mutual influence, converging practices, and shared cultural values'.⁴⁷ Although the 'dualism' between Dutch and British broadcasting was not entirely mutual, this does not make it a less interesting example to look beyond the surface of both broadcasting systems and to chart the struggles and challenges which the SDAP and the Labour Party each faced in interwar broadcasting.

As such, this comparison aims to contribute to the British understanding of this subject as well. What was true for the Netherlands applies to Britain as well, in the sense that the national perspective has long dominated the writings about its past. This point is forcefully made by Susan Pedersen, who observes that the study of British political history has long been troubled by 'two besetting sins', i.e. the sins of parochialism and, what she calls, 'Panglossianism', or in other words 'of accepting the exceptional and incomparable character of British institutions and of letting our historical subjects' understanding of those institutions substitute for our own'.⁴⁸ Other authors have made similar observations, and it is generally recognized that the idea of British exceptionalism was long tied to an image of Britain as a country of gradualist and evolutionary change. The roots of this view are multiple, but it is broadly understood that it crucially revolved around the relative stability of the British parliamentary system. In light of the political upheavals that troubled so many countries on the European continent throughout modern times, it is not difficult to see why Parliament holds such a central place in accounts which testify (or celebrate) this sense of British particularity.⁴⁹

44 I. Thomas, 'Systems of Broadcasting', *Political Quarterly* 6 (1935) 489-505, there 505.

45 The literature on the comparative method distinguishes between the 'individualizing' approach and the 'universalizing' approach, with the former focussing on the unicity of the cases under consideration, and the latter aiming to identify similarities. Authors have also suggested hybrid forms of comparisons, such as 'encompassing comparisons' and 'variation-finding comparisons'. It is this latter category which this research is most closely related, since it sees both parties' response to the rise of radio as variations of a particular phenomenon. See Stefan Berger, 'Comparative history' in: Idem, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore eds., *Writing History: theory and practice* (London 2003) 161-179, there 161-162. The literature on the comparative method is too vast to quote, but other insightful articles are for instance Deborah Cohen, 'Comparative History: Buyer Beware', *German Historical Institute Bulletin* 29 (2001) 23-33, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, 'Comparative History – a Contested Method', *Historisk Tidsskrift* 127 (2007) 697-716 or Jürgen Kocka, 'Comparison and Beyond', *History and Theory* 42 (2003) 39-44.

46 Among those to note these regular references to the BBC is J. de Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven in Nederland tot 1940* (Leiden 1946).

47 Michele Hilmes, 'British quality, American chaos. Historical dualisms and what they leave out', *Radio Journal. International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 1 (2003) 13-27, there 14-15.

48 Susan Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?' in D. Cannadine ed., *What is history now?* (Basingstoke and New York 2002) 36-56, there 38. Stefan Berger, a foremost comparativist himself, refers to other authors who have stressed the need for comparative history. See Berger, 'Comparative history', 161-162.

49 For instance Bernhard Rieger and Martin Dauntton, 'Introduction' in: Idem and Idem eds., *Meanings of Modernity. Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford and New York 2001) 1-21, there 9-10.

Although Parliament features prominently in this study as well, it is another (not less esteemed) institution that takes centre stage in the chapters that follow, i.e. the BBC. Similar to what was noted about the Dutch case, the history of broadcasting in Britain is well covered, and, as such, the relationship between politics and broadcasting has attracted detailed attention. A notable example in this respect is Asa Briggs' monumental history of the BBC, but other media historians have reflected on this relationship as well, among whom Paddy Scannell or Jean Seaton.⁵⁰ Combined, their work does not only acknowledge the constitutive and regulative role of politics in broadcasting, it also observes the transformative impact of broadcasting on politics. However, more recently radio has emerged as a subject of interest to political historians as well, among whom Jon Lawrence, whose *Electing our Masters* provides a fascinating view of the changes in Britain's electoral culture from the 19th until the early 21st century.⁵¹ Although it does contain valuable insights about the significance of radio to interwar political culture, on the whole Lawrence remains unimpressed with its influence and his analysis leans very much towards the television-centric understanding of political change. Highly relevant in this respect is also Laura Beers' *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party*.⁵² This study investigates the Labour Party's relationship with the media in the interwar decades, and it makes a compelling case about the modernization of the party's media strategies throughout the 1920s and the 1930s. As part of that Beers does reflect on the place of radio in these developments as well, but this clearly is not her study's priority, since she focusses predominantly on the Labour Party's involvement with the (popular) press. And so, altogether, this suggests there is ample reason to take up the subject of radio more rigorously, and to explore its political significance in the British context as well. In fact, most of the studies that are referred to here, reflect on these issues from the national perspective. Although it is too soon to say whether this has somehow helped to obscure the broader significance of radio, bringing the Labour Party and the SDAP together around this subject should certainly offer new insight into the assumptions of national particularity which remain widespread in both cases.

50 Asa Briggs' history of broadcasting in Britain spans five volumes. This study makes extensive use of the first two volumes. Asa Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting. Vol. I. The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (London, New York, Toronto 1961) and Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless. Vol. II. The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (London, New York, Toronto 1965). Also Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, or Jean Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics' in: James Curran and Jean Seaton eds., *Power without Responsibility. The Press and Broadcasting in Britain* 5th ed. (London and New York 1997) 111-127 and Jean Seaton and Ben Pimlott, 'The struggle for "balance": the BBC and the politicians 1926-1945' in: Idem and Idem eds., *The Media in British Politics* (Aldershot, etc. 1987) 133-153.

51 Jon Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*.

52 Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (Cambridge MA 2010). Two unpublished dissertations, which are worth mentioning here as well are Timothy John Hollins, *The presentation of politics: the place of party publicity, broadcasting and film in British politics, 1918-1939* (Unpublished dissertation, University of Leeds 1981) and Trevor Ryan, *Labour and the media in Britain 1929-1939. A study of the attitudes of the labour movement towards the new media, film and radio, and of its attempts to use them for political purposes* (Unpublished dissertation, University of Leeds 1986).

1.4 Comparative framework and research questions

The main purpose of this study is to develop a new understanding about the role of radio as a medium of political change. This is less straightforward than it may seem, since it raises the complicated question of how to define and measure change, and where to look for it. Probably, the most obvious place to look for change in relation to broadcasting is in the realm of programmes and in the various ways in which radio was used by political actors, or political parties. However, there was more to radio than what reached the ears, and although its emergence carried a promise of innovation, the change it actually brought to politics was the combined result of its bare potential and the processes which shaped its place in the public sphere. A similar point is made by Paul Starr, who has argued that ‘communications media have so direct a bearing on the exercise of power that their development is impossible to understand without taking politics fully into account, not simply in the use of the media, but in the making of constitutive choices about them.’⁵³ Equally important in this respect is what the Dutch political historian Ido de Haan has noted about politics ‘as a struggle over substance within a given form, and, at the same time, as a struggle over the form of politics itself.’⁵⁴

So, against this background this study combines an institutional perspective with a cultural perspective, and it charts the relationship between politics and broadcasting not just in the medium-specific context of radio, but also in the broader debates about the place of broadcasting in politics and society. Of course, it focusses more particularly on two political parties, and the central question which guides this effort is how the SDAP and the Labour Party helped to shape the political construction of broadcasting in resp. the Netherlands and Britain, and how, at the same time, both parties were shaped and affected by the rise of radio in the interwar decades. Clearly, this is a rather large question, so it has been subdivided in three separate subjects, which each capture a different side of both parties’ involvement with broadcasting. The first of these concerns the construction of both broadcasting systems, and in charting these processes, this study asks more specifically how the SDAP and the Labour Party perceived and contributed to the institutional organization of broadcasting. The outcome of these developments was completely different, – i.e. a ‘pillarized’, pluralist broadcasting arrangement in the Netherlands and a centralized, public service broadcasting arrangement in Britain – and the second subject explores the SDAP’s and the Labour Party’s role in the interplay between politics and broadcasting in the years afterwards. While these first two subjects largely stay within the institutional realm, the third subject crosses the divide to chart the cultural implications of radio, more particularly by exploring the role of both parties in the evolution of political broadcasting and, moreover, by examining the use of radio for party purposes. It is these three subjects that make up the comparative framework of this research and, as such, these issues will be introduced more extensively in the separate parts of this study.

However, related to this is another, larger question that needs to be addressed here. Because it might be noted that the overarching research-question contains a reciprocal element, in the sense that it both asks about the hold of politics over radio, as well as about the influence of radio on

53 Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media. Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York 2004) 1.

54 Ido de Haan, ‘Stijl, vorm, ontwerp. Nadeel en nut van het stijlbegrip voor de politiek’ in: Henk te Velde and Dick Pels eds., *Politieke stijl. Over presentatie en optreden in de politiek* (Amsterdam 2000) 225–251, there 248.

politics at the same time. This may seem a circular argument, but it really points to the fact that the relationship between politics and broadcasting was intricately and fundamentally intertwined, in the sense that politics and broadcasting were both master and servant of each other, albeit on a different level and in a different way. This is not an ‘exaggerated statement of difficulty’, to quote Hilda Matheson once more, rather it is anticipated that an enhanced understanding of these reciprocal dynamics can help to shed new light on the significance of radio to interwar political culture. While this points to the need to capture and conceptualize these dynamics, it is for this reason that this study has brought together a number of theoretical notions that may serve this purpose. In doing so this study draws on the example of Pierre Rosanvallon’s work, and, more precisely, on his proposals in relation to his approach of a ‘philosophical history of the political’.⁵⁵ The name of this French historian has not been mentioned above, but the following chapter will explain in more detail how his work links up with what this study aims to do, and, moreover, how this has been shaped by the ideas and proposals of a range of other authors as well. As such, it will also introduce the various notions – ‘representation’, ‘integration’, ‘public sphere’, ‘constitutive moment’, ‘time and space’ – that will help to structure this effort.

And yet, at this point all this remains far removed from what the first and foremost task of this study is, that is to compare the SDAP’s and the Labour Party’s involvement with broadcasting in the interwar decades. As such, the first priority of the chapters that follow is to provide an empirical and chronological account of the two separate cases. With these chapters concentrating on each party within their national context, these will in turn form the basis on which the actual comparison can be made. It is these comparative findings that make the ingredients to reflect on the larger questions about the reciprocal nature of the relationship between politics and broadcasting and the significance of radio to interwar political culture. It is the overall conclusion to this study where these questions will be taken up again, as part of the attempt to rethink the role of radio as a medium of political change. And so, this means there is still a long way to go before we reach that point, and, more particularly, that we have to travel back and forth from Britain to the Netherlands for a number of times, before we can actually start putting the various pieces of this puzzle back together.

1.5 Sources and methods

Perhaps needless to say, comparative history is a strenuous and complicated affair. According to Hans-Ulrich Wehler the comparative approach forms the ‘royal road’ to historical knowledge, but many other authors have stressed that this road does not make an easy journey.⁵⁶ Among those is Stefan Berger, who writes in some detail about the ‘problems and pitfalls’ in comparative history, whereas Michael Schudson labels it as ‘cumbersome’ and ‘conceptually bedevilling’.⁵⁷ A similar tone is struck by Deborah Cohen, who notes that ‘comparative history is a tremendously uncertain business’, where ‘many perils await the unsuspecting’.⁵⁸ At the same time these authors are equally convinced of the promise and potential of comparative history, and it is

55 Pierre Rosanvallon, ‘Toward a Philosophical History of the Political’ in: Idem, *Democracy Past and Future: Selected Essays*, Samuel Moyn ed. (New York 2006), 59-76.

56 As quoted in Jürgen Kocka, ‘Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: the Case of the German *Sonderweg*’, *History and Theory* 39 (1999) 40-50, there 40.

57 Stefan Berger, ‘Comparative History’, 166 and Michael Schudson, ‘The News Media as Political Institutions’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (2002) 249-269, there 263.

58 Cohen, ‘Comparative History: Buyer Beware’, 25.

anticipated here that these uncertainties may lead to new and unsuspected insights. Indeed, one of the difficulties of conducting a comparative research concerns the makeup and availability of primary and secondary sources. While this study applies a broad, or multi-level analysis to the relationship between politics and broadcasting, it builds on a broad range of sources to analyse these issues. Although archival irregularities are an inevitable part of a comparative study of this kind, on the whole the material which has been put together for this research is coherent enough to even out the potential imbalance which this might cause.

So for the Dutch part of this comparison the main archival collections are held at three different locations. The first of these is the SDAP-archive, which is kept at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, and which contains invaluable material – correspondence, reports, memoranda and other documents – to study the connection between the SDAP and the VARA.⁵⁹ Its files on the VARA concentrate primarily on the period from 1925 until 1933, but the additional records in the other sections of this archive compensate this gap.⁶⁰ Besides that, the VARA also holds its own archive in Hilversum. Its holdings are more extensive for the post-war period, but it still has ample material from the interwar decades, which, above all, highlights the organizational dimension of broadcasting. Thirdly, the National Archive (NA) in The Hague stores a number of collections, which document the official response to broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the archives of the Radio Council ('Radioraad') and the Radio Broadcasting Control Committee ('Radio Omroep Controle Commissie').⁶¹ As part of that, it also holds a vast collection of texts of radio programmes which were retrieved in the 1930s. This collection of texts offers a unique insight in the content of specific programmes on specific moments and, more generally, of the evolution of the form of radio programmes on the longer term.⁶² Besides that, these different archives in Amsterdam, Hilversum and The Hague contain different minor collections, among which private archives, which offer additional primary sources.

For the British case, the situation is somewhat different. There, the archive of the Labour Party, kept at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC) in Manchester, holds a vast array of documents about the party's history.⁶³ Altogether, this archive holds a smaller amount of material on the Labour Party's interwar dealings with broadcasting as the SDAP-archive. However, combined with the documents which can be found in the Trades Union Congress (TUC) archive at the University of Warwick's Modern Record Centre (MRC), this still yields an adequate amount of data to investigate the subject.⁶⁴ It is the BBC's Written Archives Centre (WAC) in Reading, which holds the most extensive and the most wide-ranging collection of sources to reconstruct the British part of this comparison. Of course, this archive concentrates first and foremost on the BBC's history. As part of that it has also gathered material from the 1920s onwards, which highlights the Corporation's dealings with the political establishment. While the collection of the BBC's Written Archives Centre is both varied and vast, its holdings include material about the production of programmes, correspondence with programme contributors, texts of radio programmes, documents about its organizational structures, correspondence with external parties and policy files on its institutional position.

59 International Institute of Social History (IISH), Archive SDAP. The catalogue for the archival holdings of the IISH can be found online, at www.socialhistory.org/en/archives.

60 IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1956-1972.

61 National Archive (NA), Archive Ministerie van Cultuur, Recreatie en Maatschappelijk Werk (CRM), 2.27.05, Archive Radioraad and archive Radio Omroep Controle Commissie (ROCC).

62 NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 71-86 and inv. nr. 243-354.

63 Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), Archive Labour Party.

64 University of Warwick Modern Records Centre (MRC), Archive Trades Union Congress (TUC, MSS.292).

The combined amount of archival material on which this study is based, is too diverse to reflect on each and every category of sources here. Instead, it is more helpful to indicate which kind of sources have been used in the reconstruction of the three subjects which make up the comparative framework of this study. The first subject covers the political response to the earliest introduction of radio and it explores the role of the SDAP and the Labour Party in the formation of the resp. Dutch and British broadcasting system in the 1920s. A key role in this process was played by the committees (in Britain the Sykes Committee and the Crawford Committee and in the Netherlands the Posthuma Committee and the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee) which were installed in the mid-1920s to advise their governments about the organizational question of broadcasting. With the SDAP and the Labour Party both participating in these committees, the documents which were related to these bodies (correspondence, memoranda, testimonies and reports) make interesting material to compare both parties' ideas about broadcasting.⁶⁵ These matters were not confined to these committees. In both countries the debate about broadcasting continued in Parliament, and to a lesser extent in the press. And so, the proceedings of parliamentary debates offer an equally significant source to trace the SDAP's and the Labour Party's contribution to these developments.⁶⁶ A later section of this paragraph provides more detail on the titles of newspapers and periodicals which were analysed with the same purpose.

The second subject largely builds on the first – also chronologically. It analyses the unfolding institutional relations between both parties and broadcasting from the latter half of the 1920s until the end of the 1930s. As such, there is considerable overlap between the type of sources which are used for both subjects. Yet, if the former subject focusses on the organization of broadcasting at large, the latter subject explores the interactions which were taking place within and around this context. So, again, the proceedings of parliamentary debates are a useful source to observe the public position of both parties towards broadcasting. Yet, in both cases there was a different, less public circuit of interactions between party politics and broadcasting in the form of numerous meetings, memoranda, letters and private encounters. The series of documents which report of these exchanges can be found in the archives of the SDAP, the Labour Party, the VARA and the BBC. Most of these sources have been studied before and these include minutes from meetings which, at first sight, are not the most exciting finds. Even so, these different sources have never been put together for a comparative research. Combined, this material is vital to understand how the SDAP and the Labour Party were involved in and affected by the further emergence of broadcasting in the 1920s and the 1930s. Although there is less source material available for the closing years of the 1930s, perhaps remarkably this concerns the Dutch and the British part of this comparison. On the whole, it only forms a minor gap, which hardly interferes with the larger findings of this study.

It is the third subject which steers this comparison towards programmes, as the epicentre of broadcasting. More specifically, this subject asks what the form and place of party politics was in the evolution of political broadcasting. As such, it traces the protracted attempts of party political figures to accommodate their presentation and style of speaking to the medium-specific demands of radio. More generally, it asks how the SDAP and the Labour Party perceived radio programmes

65 For the Labour Party the relevant documents are part of the archival holdings of the Labour Party archive at the LHASC and the TUC archive at the MRC. The WAC of the BBC also holds extensive material on these committees. For the SDAP the most relevant sources come from the National Archive and the SDAP archive at the IISH.

66 For both countries the proceedings of parliamentary debates are accessible and fully searchable online. For Great Britain these debates can be found at <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard> and for the Netherlands these are available at <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

as a platform of party political communication and how the leadership of both parties sought to manage the representation of the party element in political programmes. A complicating factor in this, is the elusive nature of the notion of political broadcasting. We are dealing here with two broadcasting organizations – i.e. the VARA and the BBC – which held a competing conception of what politics was and how broadcasting might serve it. Then again, this subject is approached from the SDAP- and the Labour Party-perspective. Not only does this help to narrow down the broad and elusive category of political broadcasting to a comparable sub-section, it also helps to reduce the vast amount of BBC- and VARA-programmes to a manageable proportion.

More precisely, this means that the programme analysis concentrates on those programmes in which the SDAP and the Labour Party were most explicitly involved, either as participants in the talks which preceded these programmes or as contributors to the actual programmes. So, seeing political broadcasting as a product of different stages, this part of the comparison looks at different elements, among which the negotiation- and production-process, the form and content of programmes, the political perception of the broadcasting audience, as well as the rhetoric and forms of address through which party figures spoke to the radio audience. The same applies to a separate category of radio talks – general election talks – which offer the most clear-cut illustration of how radio came to find a new place in political culture. Yet, there is a broader context to these different categories of talks which needs to be taken into account as well. Because in both countries the emergence of broadcasting fuelled a heated and protracted debate about the potential harms or dangers of this medium to democracy. These debates played a crucial part in defining and changing the political boundaries which programmes were expected to observe. While the SDAP and the Labour Party were critically involved in these debates in the parliamentary arena, they were also immediately affected by the outcome in the sphere of programmes. So, charting this interplay should help to understand both parties' position in these matters.

Flexibility is required when exploring these issues. Because on either side of this comparison, the archival material is far from complete. Most striking in this respect is the near total absence of audio recordings, which would allow an acoustic analysis of programmes. Although the British Library does hold some sound recording from 1930s election talks, notably from the general election campaign of 1935, there is no such material for the Dutch case.⁶⁷ Instead, we have to resort to the textual version of these talks, even though these are not complete either. For the British case, some of the election broadcasts were published in the BBC's broadcasting magazine *The Listener*, whereas others can be found in the Written Archive Centre.⁶⁸ In the Dutch case the verbatim accounts of these radio talks were not published, but a number of texts from the 1933 general election campaign can be found in the National Archive.⁶⁹ This is also the location of the vast corpus of radio texts which the Dutch authorities amassed to keep broadcasting in check.⁷⁰ Although this collection does not cover the total output of radio programmes, it does contain numerous texts of VARA-programmes in which the SDAP was crucially involved.

67 The British Library, The British Library Sound Archive.

68 *The Listener* was first published in 1929 as a weekly publication, which contained the texts of radio talks and additional comments and information. The BBC also published the *Radio Times*, which was principally aimed to give the details of the weekly programming schedule of the BBC. Digitized versions of *The Listener* (accessible at www.gale.cengage.co.uk/product-highlights/history/the-listener-historical-archive.aspx) and the *Radio Times* (accessible at www.genome.ch.bbc.co.uk) have come available in the course of the research which was conducted for this study. For this study the original copies were used, which, among other places, can be found at the British Library.

69 NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

70 NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 71-86 and inv. nr. 243-354.

Key finding aids to these poorly searchable files are the programme-overviews of the VARA's weekly programming guide and its annual year-reports.⁷¹ The collection of texts which is held at the BBC's archive is not complete either, but it does include numerous texts of radio talks which held an immediate party political relevance. In some cases, the broadcasting magazine *The Listener* also published the verbatim accounts of radio speeches or talks by party figures, which were part of the regular, or non-election, programme output of the BBC.

This magazine is part of a broader range of periodicals and newspapers which have been explored for supplementary evidence and statements. Among these are, first, the BBC's *Radio Times* and *The Listener* and the VARA's programming guide *De Radiogids*. A whole different perspective is offered by the partisan newspapers *Het Volk* and the *Daily Herald*. These papers have been scanned on selected moments (for instance general elections and key broadcasting debates) as to find how the press reported about the political implications of broadcasting. The same applies to a variety of periodicals, some of which were directly affiliated to the SDAP or the Labour Party, while others were marked by a left-wing orientation. Among these are *De Socialistische Gids* and *De Sociaal-Democraat* for the Dutch case and *The Labour Organiser*, *Labour Magazine* and *The New Statesman* for the British case. Altogether, this has yielded a mixed result, since radio and broadcasting were no major subjects to most publications at the time. Additional material was found through two alternative resources. The first of these was the digitized version of *Het Volk*, of which large parts came available during the course of this research. This offered further opportunities to search this paper for radio related matters on a number of selected moments.⁷² The second was the WAC's collection of press cuttings, which contains a large variety of newspaper clippings from the 1920s, the 1930s and after. Although this collection has its drawbacks, among which its pre-selected nature, it does form an invaluable supply of colourful detail and, as such, a welcome supplement to the main body of sources.

1.6 Outline

The structure of this study is relatively straightforward, as it follows the tripartite structure of the comparative framework. This means that it is composed around three parts, which each contains two chapters, one exploring the Dutch part of the comparison and another exploring the British part. What's more, each of these parts is preceded by a short introduction which explains the main subject of the particular part and which raises a number of sub-questions. In a similar way, the two chapters which make up these parts are followed by a conclusion, which summarizes and compares the main findings of these chapters. Of course, these three different parts each concentrate on different aspects of the larger relationship between politics and broadcasting. And so, these findings need to be put together as well, not only to reflect on their mutual significance, but also draw up an overarching picture of this relationship. The obvious place to do so is the overall conclusion, which completes this study.

71 The VARA year-reports can be found in the VARA archive in Hilversum. The VARA's programming guide *Radio* was first published in 1926 and its title was changed in 1930 to *De Radiogids: officieel orgaan van de Vereeniging van Arbeiders-Radio-Amateurs*. These titles can be found in the VARA archive as well.

72 The digitized versions of *Het Volk* and some of its affiliated labour newspapers can be searched and accessed at <https://www.delpher.nl>. This website offers access to a much larger variety of historical newspapers and periodicals from the Netherlands. Unfortunately, the digital collection of *Het Volk* does not cover the second half of the 1930s.

There are some steps to take before we reach that point. What follows first is chapter two, which offers a broader reflection on the historiographical and theoretical background to this study, and which elaborates more specifically on the notions that were referred to above. After this, chapter three and chapter four – part one of this study – explore the political construction of the British and Dutch broadcasting system in the 1920s. While chapter three focuses on the Labour Party, chapter four concentrates on the SDAP. This is purely informed by chronological considerations, since British authorities responded with a greater urgency to the rise of radio as their counterparts in the Netherlands. As a result, the Labour Party became involved in these developments at an earlier moment than the SDAP. This also explains why the British broadcasting system acquired its ‘definitive’ shape at an earlier point in time than the Dutch broadcasting system. An additional consequence is that chapter three covers a shorter period as chapter four. Whereas the former covers the years from the early 1920s until the end of 1926, the latter runs up until the early months of 1930, when the ‘pillarized’ structures of the Dutch broadcasting system were officially recognized.

For the sake of symmetry, the two consecutive parts of this book follow the same routine, with the first chapter of each part dealing with the Labour Party and the second chapter with the SDAP. And so, chapter five focusses on the Labour Party’s position towards broadcasting in the period from 1927 until 1939. This chapter opens with a paragraph on the BBC’s managerial structures and internal power relations, since this would soon become a hotly debated political issue. Its formal independence made the BBC a more difficult organization to deal with than the Labour Party deemed acceptable. Throughout the 1930s this would cause significant tensions between the Labour Party and the BBC. Chapter six will show that similar tensions arose between the SDAP and the VARA as well, albeit in a whole different setting. Again, this chapter covers a longer period as the preceding chapter on the Labour Party. The main reason for this is the need to trace back the interactions between the SDAP and the VARA to the founding of the VARA in 1925, which had a vital influence on later developments. Although the VARA was anything but independent from the SDAP, their partnership was never contested and remained strenuous during most parts of the 1920s and 1930s. As such, chapter five and chapter six will each illustrate the problematic nature of the process of integration between politics and broadcasting.

The chapters which make up the final part of this study reveal a similar pattern, albeit in the sphere of programmes. There, the leadership of both parties found it equally difficult to adjust to the new reality of broadcasting. Chapter seven first looks at the Labour Party’s efforts to use radio as an instrument of party publicity as part of the general election campaign of 1924. It follows the Labour Party’s dealings with the microphone and with political broadcasting more generally, up until 1939. It might be noted that this chapter covers the same period which both preceding chapters cover together. This is also reflected in the number of pages, which is roughly the same as the number of pages of chapter three and chapter five combined. The same applies to chapter eight, which covers the same time-stretch and which offers an equally elaborate picture of the SDAP’s involvement with programmes in the Netherlands. Still, in exploring these issues, these chapters are not confined to programmes alone. As was explained above, these chapter also explore the SDAP’s and the Labour Party’s place in the debates about the political boundaries of broadcasting. Altogether, these six chapters will show that both parties’ adaptation to broadcasting proceeded along entirely different lines. At the same time, they will also raise unsuspected and striking parallels which shed a whole new light on this process in both cases. In fact, the implications of these findings might well extend beyond these two cases, but this is something which the overall conclusion to this study should decide.

Chapter 2

A new beginning?

Steps towards an integrated approach to media innovation and political change in history

For the past three to four decades the writing of political history has witnessed significant changes. Tracing back the 1970s and the 1980s the roots of this development are multiple, but it is commonly associated with the cultural and linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences, as well as with the emergence of postmodern modes of thought.¹ In a most general sense these developments have spurred political historians to look beyond the closed world of ‘politics’ as they had long studied it and to ask instead how the shape and meaning of ‘the political’ has changed over time.² This was a fundamental shift and it has opened up the field of political history to a whole range of new perspectives, methods and approaches. And although the nature of this shift differed from country to country, with a focus on ‘culture’ as a common denominator it revealed a shared interest in such varying issues as the ritual or symbolic dimension of politics, the role of language and identity, or the changing relationship between politics and the public.³

Indeed, this is also reflected in the writing of political history in Britain and the Netherlands, as the two countries that form the background to this study. In the Dutch case the recent decades have seen a steady stream of publications that take the notion of ‘political culture’ to analyse particular aspects of the country’s political past.⁴ This is not the place to present a full historiographical overview, but among the subjects historians of Dutch political culture have explored are the rhetoric and culture of parliamentary politics or the changing forms and styles of political leadership.⁵ What’s more, these developments have also brought an upsurge in the scholarship on political history in Britain. Although this field remains more strongly divided between opposing schools of thought – i.e. between historians of ‘popular politics’ and historians of ‘high politics’ – the cultural approach to politics has definitely steered the writing of British political history in new directions.⁶ Commonly referred to as the ‘new political history’, its

1 James Epstein, ‘Introduction: New Directions in Political History’, *The Journal of British Studies* 41 (2002) 255–258, there 255, Jon Lawrence, ‘Political history’ in: Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore eds., *Writing History: theory and practice* (London 2003) 183–202, there 192–195.

2 For instance Remieg Aerts, *Het aanzien van de politiek. Geschiedenis van een functionele fictie* (Amsterdam 2009) 108–112 or Henk te Velde, ‘The Opening Up of Political History’ in: Willibald Steinmetz, Ingrid Gilcher-Holthey and Heinz Gerhard Haupt eds., *Writing Political History Today* (Frankfurt and New York 2013) 383–396.

3 Aerts, *Het aanzien van de politiek*, 108–112 or Lawrence, ‘Political history’ 192–193.

4 Important in this respect was the long-running research project ‘De natiestaat. Politiek in Nederland sinds 1815’ (The nation-state. Politics in the Netherlands since 1815), which brought together a significant number of historical researchers around the subject of the nation-state and political culture in history.

5 Henk te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap. Persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl* (Amsterdam 2002), Henk te Velde, *Het theater van de politiek* (Amsterdam 2003), Jouke Turpijn, *Mannen van gezag. De uitvinding van de Tweede Kamer 1848–1888* (Amsterdam 2008) or Erie Tanja, *Goede politiek. De parlementaire cultuur van de Tweede Kamer, 1866–1940* (Amsterdam 2011).

6 Steven Fielding, ‘Review Article. Looking for the “New Political History”’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (2007) 515–524, S. Pedersen, ‘What is Political History Now?’ and Lawrence, ‘Political history’, 193–195.

practitioners have taken a similar interest in, for example, the intricacies of language and identity in the construction of political culture as their Dutch counterparts. In fact, in relation to this historians of political culture (in Britain and the Netherlands alike) have also shown a growing recognition of the centrality of the media to these processes.⁷ While this has yielded a growing number of studies that focus or reflect on the mediation (or ‘mediatization’) of politics in history, it has also left the role of some media – i.e. radio – underexposed.⁸

However, in taking up this subject here, this study looks beyond the cultural approach to politics as well. This is partly informed by the observations of the Dutch political historian Ido de Haan, who, somewhat provocatively, called for ‘a new beginning in political history’ a little more than a decade ago.⁹ In doing so, De Haan did not deny the significance of the cultural turn in political history, but he did note that its emergence has helped to obscure some of the key aspects of the political process, most notably the role of power and elites, the changing shape and function of institutions and the contingent and eventful nature of politics.¹⁰ In advocating an alternative approach, De Haan argued more particularly for the reincorporation of the institutional perspective in the writing of political history. Beyond that he also emphasized that political history should not just describe the changing forms and styles of politics, but that it should also investigate the rationale or logic of change throughout history. Other historians have taken an interest in these matters as well, among whom Jon Lawrence in Britain. His argument was fully attuned to the British historiographical context, but much like De Haan Lawrence noted a growing reluctance among political historians ‘to focus directly on questions of policy formation and the structure of state power’.¹¹ In a similar way, he also observed that the writing of political history had steadily lowered its explanatory ambitions.¹² Although his considerations were more comprehensive than this, it led him to call for the ‘reintegration of political history’ partly along the same lines as De Haan.¹³ While this included the need to transcend the dichotomy between culture and institutions, in a more general way Lawrence argued that political history should adopt a synchronic and a diachronic frame, in the sense of describing the intricacies of politics at a given moment in time, and in the sense of explaining political change through time.¹⁴ In fact, it was these shared concerns which caused Lawrence and De Haan to highlight the significance of those moments when politics was ‘most in flux’, political crises, regime changes or revolutions of a different kind. In drawing attention to these moments (or indeed ‘new beginnings’), both claimed that these were the times that offer a most immediate and most insightful view of the multifarious dynamics in politics as in more settled times.

It is against this background that this study explores the relationship between politics and broadcasting from an institutional and from a cultural perspective. What’s more, the question that guides this effort is how the SDAP and the Labour Party (as the two political parties at the

7 For instance Beers, *Your Britain* and Lawrence, *Electing our Masters* or Remieg Aerts, *De letterheren. Liberale cultuur in de negentiende eeuw: het tijdschrift De Gids* (Amsterdam 1997).

8 A similar point is made by Huub Wijffjes, ‘Introduction: Mediatization of Politics in History’ in: Huub Wijffjes and Gerrit Voerman eds., *Mediatization of Politics in History* (Leuven etc. 2009) ix–xxii.

9 Ido de Haan, *Politieke reconstructie. Een nieuw begin in de politieke geschiedenis* (Utrecht 2004).

10 De Haan, *Politieke reconstructie*, 22–23.

11 Lawrence, ‘Political history’, 194.

12 Ibidem, 194–195.

13 Ibidem, 195.

14 Ibidem.

centre of this study) have been involved in the political construction of broadcasting in the 1920s and the 1930s, and in turn how both parties were shaped and affected by the rise of radio in those same decades. What's more, in comparing these cases this study seeks to develop new insight into the role of radio as a medium of political change, and, as such, to question the television-centric understanding of political change that is so widely accepted among political historians and scholars of political communication science. And so, in proceeding along these lines, the challenge is to conceptualize the dynamics of change between politics and broadcasting from an institutional and a cultural perspective. It is for this reason that this study brings together a number of theoretical notions and concepts that can be used to reflect on both sides of this puzzle. Although the larger part of this study focusses on the empirical reconstruction and comparative analysis of both cases, it is anticipated that these notions and concepts will eventually help to capture the broader significance of its findings.

2.1 Constitutive moment

Of these, the first notion comes from Paul Starr's work *The Creation of the Media*, and it emphasizes that the arrival of radio was very much a 'new beginning' or a 'moment of flux', not just from a media historical point of view, but also from a political perspective. Perhaps to remind, Starr's name was mentioned also in the introductory chapter in relation to his words that 'the communications media have so direct a bearing on the exercise of power that their development is impossible to understand without taking politics fully into account, not simply in the use of the media, but in the making of constitutive choices about them.'¹⁵ In a most general sense Starr's work explores the transformations in media- and communications history from the early 17th until the mid-20th century, and it is aimed, more particularly, at restoring the political element in the writing of this history. As such, it challenges two traditions – in Starr's words 'technology and economics' – which have long analysed developments in these fields, either as the necessary outcome of technological innovation, or as the inevitable triumph of the market.¹⁶ What's more, Starr's work has a comparative element, but not only does it concentrate primarily on the American example, it also endorses the claim to American success – he labels the American media 'as a formidable power' and the country as 'a leader in communications' throughout modern history – which is closely connected with the 'economist' tradition in media- and communications history.¹⁷ This is one of the reasons why his book holds little immediate significance to this comparative effort, but, having said that, this study does take up his notion of a 'constitutive moment', as it offers a fruitful perspective to capture the intricate forces which shaped the emergence of a new media technology at a given moment in time.

So taking a closer look at this notion, in a most general sense Starr describes it as a moment of radical openness in the material or institutional framework of communications, which may have been triggered by political or cultural changes, by economic developments, or by technological innovations.¹⁸ His emphasis lies mainly with the latter cause, but his work reminds

15 Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 1.

16 Ibidem.

17 Ibidem, 2.

18 Ibidem.

that technology does not emerge in a vacuum and that the function of a new medium is crucially shaped and constrained by the conjuncture of forces and ideas at its moment of arrival. What's more, emphasizing the fundamental indeterminacy of a 'constitutive moment', Starr points towards the processes of decision-making which helped to steer and shape the incorporation of a new technology in its cultural and political environment. More particularly, he coins the term 'constitutive choices' as the choices about the institutional framework of communications and information'.¹⁹ These choices fall in different categories and range from questions about the state's involvement in the media system, to questions about the democratic purpose of a new medium, to the practices and conventions in political communications. So stating that 'architectural choices are often politics by other means', Starr's work urges us to trace the political element in the broad chain of events which shaped the institutionalization of a medium.²⁰

Perhaps needless to say, there is a close resemblance between these considerations and the observations above about the moments of openness or uncertainty in the institutional configuration of politics throughout. This is no coincidence, and it emanates from a shared interest of Starr and De Haan (and Lawrence to a lesser degree) in the scholarship on, what is called, historical institutionalism. The literature on this scholarship is too vast to quote here, but what may be noted is the shared affinity between the notion of a 'constitutive moment' and the focus on 'new beginnings' with the concept of a 'critical juncture', which holds a central place in the historical institutionalist scholarship.²¹ This concept has been defined as 'a brief phase of institutional flux' that is preceded and followed by (relatively longer) periods of institutional stability, and it has been applied to a large variety of topics, such as cold-war studies, EU-law and social welfare policies.²² Indeed, De Haan refers to this concept as well, as a 'crossroad' in time, at which historical developments witnessed a moment of unusual openness.²³ What's more, it is not difficult to see how it informed Starr's notion of a 'constitutive moment', and the following pages will offer further insight into how the historical institutionalist perspective has shaped this comparative study.

2.2 Public sphere

Indeed, it has also shaped the interpretation of the second notion, Jürgen Habermas' concept of the 'public sphere'.²⁴ In recent decades much has been written about this concept, and although Habermas' understanding of the rise and fall of the public sphere has faced extensive criticism, this has somehow it seems this has only helped to cement its place as a philosophical and

19 Ibidem, 4.

20 Ibidem, 6.

21 For an insightful exploration of the place of 'critical junctures' in historical institutionalism see Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics* 59 (2007) 341-369. More extensively on historical institutionalism Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen and Frank Longstrech eds., *Structuring politics. Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis* (New York 1992) 1-32, Kathleen Thelen, 'Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999) 369-404 or Kathleen Thelen, 'The Explanatory Power of Historical Institutionalism' in: R. Mayntz ed., *Akteure-Mechanismen-Modelle. Zu Theoriefähigkeit makro-sozialer Analysen* (Frankfurt 2002) 91-107.

22 Capoccia and Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures', 341.

23 De Haan, *Politieke reconstructie*, 24.

24 Habermas, Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge 2008).

scholarly concept.²⁵ The main thrust of Habermas' work is well-known and it charts how 17th and 18th century Europe witnessed the emergence of the public sphere as an autonomous space of public debate and deliberation. As this public sphere became the place where public opinion was formulated, it came to develop into a source of legitimacy and authority, vis-à-vis the power of the state. What's more, Habermas locates the public sphere's golden age somewhere around the middle of the 19th century, and he sees its manifestation in a variety of places (coffeehouses, salons, concert halls, etc.) and fora (literature, newspapers, magazines, etc.). However, its demise was not far away. Because Habermas' work is essentially a *Verfallsgeschichte* and he traces the decline of the public sphere, and its ideal of rational and critical debate, in the proliferation of political forces and market forces, which prioritized private interests over the public interest. Eventually, these forces came to acquire such weight that their combined pressures resulted in the public sphere's 'refeudalization'.

Habermas assigns a minor role in these developments to radio. Similar to what the previous chapter noted about Bernard Manin, he situates radio alongside television, thereby suggesting a sense of simultaneity in their historical impact. It might not surprise that Habermas has little appreciation for how these media have contributed to the public sphere's degeneration. Most notably, Habermas rejects radio and television as instruments of paternalism and public apathy: 'They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under "tutelage", which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and disagree.'²⁶ There is more about radio and television that disturbs him. Because he also dismisses its modes of intimacy and privacy that tend to dominate the forms of address in broadcasting. He sees this in opposition to the higher qualities of rational and critical debate, from which the public voice can emerge as a force which transcends the private concerns and opinions of individuals. What's more, taking this to a different level, Habermas also points to the regulative powers which various states have assumed over broadcasting in the 20th century. Although this was partly aimed to protect radio and television against 'capitalist encroachment', according to Habermas it has made these media susceptible to manipulation by a different form of (state) power.²⁷

Yet, in drawing on the notion of the public sphere, this study associates itself more particularly with a number of authors who have taken Habermas' original account to expand it in new directions. The first of these is the media sociologist Rodney Benson, who seeks to reconcile the concept of the 'public sphere' with insights from institutionalist scholarship. On the whole, Benson rejects the 'quasi-"universal" logic' which haunts the notion of the public sphere.²⁸ Part of this follows from Habermas' neglect of the various benevolent forces (for instance journalistic professionalization or governmental regulations) which, in Benson's view, have helped to mitigate the commercial pressures on the public sphere throughout history. So, rejecting the pessimistic Habermasian gaze, Benson seeks to narrow the gap between the abstract potential of the public sphere-concept and the empirical issues (media organizations, media policies,

25 The scholarly literature on the public sphere is too vast to cite. For an authoritative introduction see Craig Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the public sphere* (Cambridge MA 1992) or more recently chapter two 'The public sphere' in Lasse Thomassen, *Habermas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London 2010). A critical reflection on Habermas' concept of the public sphere is offered by Douglas Kellner, 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention' in: Lewis Edwin Hahn ed., *Perspectives on Habermas* (Chicago 2000) 259-287.

26 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 170-171.

27 Ibidem, 188.

28 Rodney Benson, 'Shaping the Public Sphere: Habermas and Beyond', *The American Sociologist* 40 (2009) 175-197, there 178.

journalistic practices, market structures, etc.) which can be studied from its perspective. One of his suggestions is to infuse Habermas' work with Bourdieu's field theory, but he also looks towards the 'new institutionalist' media scholarship, including Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media*.²⁹ More particularly, Benson argues that the institutional perspective can be helpful to highlight the numerous ways in which the state has helped to shape the form and function of the public sphere. Stating that there is a comparative aspect to this challenge, Benson raises some larger questions which should guide the analysis of actually existing public spheres: 'In short, we need answers to such questions as: What is the empirical structural organization of the public sphere? How do public spheres vary cross-nationally? And what are the complex links between structural characteristics of public spheres and the form and content of mediated discourses?'³⁰ As large as these questions may seem, it is not difficult to see how the subject of study fits in with this purpose.

Then again, Benson's approach to the public sphere is also inspired by an essay of Michael Schudson, in which he argues 'to bring the state back in'.³¹ Benson praises this article as one of Schudson's most important pieces and it does, indeed, contain valuable insights to the purpose of this study as well. On the whole, Schudson challenges the strict dichotomy between civil society and the state on which Habermas' understanding of the public sphere is based. What's more, he explains that, as a result, most authors tend to think in oppositional and antagonistic terms about the role of the state in the public sphere. In contrast, Schudson argues that the state should be understood as a fundamental part of the public sphere, not merely since its various bodies help to constitute and regulate the public sphere, but also since these same bodies are themselves locations of politics and political representation. To support this claim, Schudson points to parliaments, which do not only control the actions of governments, but which also serve as a foremost forum of public opinion themselves.³² He stretches this point by emphasizing that governments too ought to be considered as a part of the public sphere. Arguing, more specifically, that public opinion and public debate cannot spring up from a vacuum – 'the public voice exists only insofar as institutions are available for its self-construction' – Schudson contends that governmental structures play a vital role in shaping, organizing and preserving the public sphere, both in its entirety and in its diversity.³³

But, besides questioning the strict dichotomy between the state and civil society, Schudson also promotes an alternative interpretation of the dichotomy between institutions and culture. More precisely, Schudson mobilizes a conception of institutions as a cultural form to argue that the formative function of institutions extended beyond the processes of policy-making or decision-making. As such, his work offers an interesting illustration of a core claim of historical institutional scholarship, which assigns a mediating and structuring role to institutional configurations, also in a cultural sense.³⁴ By doing so, Schudson draws extensively on the notion of representation, as to elaborate on the suggested link between institutional structures and cultural patterns. So, among other things, he argues that 'the presence of representative governmental institutions engenders public spaces, and the presence of particular forms of representation will give rise to

29 Benson, 'Shaping the Public Sphere', 188.

30 Ibidem, 180.

31 Michael Schudson, 'The "Public Sphere" and its Problems: Bringing the State (back) in', *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* 8 (1994) 529-546.

32 Schudson, 'The "Public Sphere" and its Problems', 535-536.

33 Ibidem, 540.

34 See for instance Thelen, 'The Explanatory Power of Historical Institutionalism', 92.

particular types of public space.³⁵ In a more general sense, this leads him to conceptualize the dynamics of the public sphere (and its patterns of deliberation and participation) in relation to the representative framework of politics in which it was incorporated and from which it derived part of its legitimacy and vitality. Although Schudson does not elaborate explicitly on the significance of the notion of representation to his approach of the public sphere, in taking up this notion as well this study seeks to build on the Schudsonian interpretation of the public sphere.

As such, it also builds on the work of other authors, among whom John Durham Peters, who has claimed that Habermas' conception of the public sphere, and his larger theoretical project, is pervaded by a 'distrust of representation'.³⁶ Peters' argument is wide-ranging and it traces how Habermas' writings are composed around a model of democratic politics which assumes the equal participation of citizens in rational and critical debate. Much has been written about the inherent limitations of this model, for instance its reliance on an all too exclusive notion of citizenship. What Peters argues is that it promotes a narrow conception of politics as an embodied conversation, which depends primarily on speech and which takes place in a bounded setting of co-presence. This normative ideal stood in marked contrast with historical reality. Peters points, for instance, to representational forms of politics, which did not require the active participation of citizens, but which relied instead on their capacity as spectators. He sees this as the source of Habermas' 'distrust of representation'. He observes that this is both manifest in Habermas' rejection of political rhetoric, ceremony and imagery, but also in his hostility towards representative forms of power, which came to undermine, or 'refeudalize', the public sphere.³⁷

2.3 Representation

Someone who has elaborated on these issues from a media theoretical perspective is the cultural theorist Clive Barnett. He has taken the flaws in Habermas' work to 'rethink the geographies of the public sphere' and to re-conceptualize the 'spatiality of communicative power', with a special interest in matters of media, communication and representation.³⁸ Similar to Durham Peters, Barnett notes that Habermas' outlook is marked by the prioritization of dialogue and consensus formation.³⁹ He observes a fundamental conflict between these ideas of politics as rational deliberation and, what he sees as, the mediated nature of modern political life.⁴⁰ Yet, what is most significant here, is the notion of representation which Barnett advocates to reconcile the mediated reality of modern life with the demands of democratic politics.

Central to Barnett's notion of representation is the irreducible essence of representation. Departing from a deconstructivist understanding of representation, Barnett argues that representation should not be seen as the manifestation of a direct link or an immediate connection between the represented and the representative, but, rather, that the process of representation

35 Schudson, 'The "Public Sphere" and its Problems', 533.

36 John Durham Peters, 'Distrust of representation: Habermas on the public sphere', *Media, Culture and Society* 15 (1993) 541-571.

37 Peters, 'Distrust of representation: Habermas on the public sphere', 562-567.

38 Clive Barnett, 'Media, Democracy and Representation: Disembodying the Public' in: Idem and Murray Low eds., *Spaces of Democracy: Geographical Perspectives on Citizenship, Participation and Representation* (London 2004) 185-206. More generally, Clive Barnett, *Culture and Democracy. Media, Space and Representation* (Edinburgh 2003).

39 Barnett, *Culture and Democracy*, 54-80, there 57.

40 Ibidem, 5.

should be understood as an act of supplementation. So rejecting expressive understandings of representation – which conceive representation in terms of restoring to presence already formed identities or interests – Barnett draws attention to the fundamental gap between the represented and the representative.⁴¹ As the act of representation depends on the ability to bridge this gap, Barnett points out that this crucially relies on the availability of a medium of representation. In doing so, he takes a broad view of what a medium is and how media contribute to the dynamics of representative politics. Or, in Barnett's own words, 'understanding media processes requires a decentring of the media, towards a broader analysis of the processes through which social life is mediated', to which he adds that his work is most concerned with 'patterns of mediation, rather than with the media *per se*'.⁴² In fact, stating that 'the sorts of politics that go on within media (...) are shaped by the sorts of politics that go on around the media', Barnett extends his argument by pointing to the significance of issues of media ownership, media regulation and media access.⁴³ Because it is there, in the more conventional realm of politics, where a medium's place and function in the public sphere is first defined. Among those examples which Barnett reflects on, are the media policies of the EU which he uses to elaborate on the relationship between the advent of a European public sphere and forms and patterns of citizenship and democracy.⁴⁴

In taking up the notion of representation it is helpful to look in other directions as well. A most interesting example, in this respect, is the work of the political theorist Michael Saward, who seeks to shake up established ways of thinking about political representation.⁴⁵ More particularly, Saward has developed his notion of the 'representative claim' to move beyond the static and narrowly institutional understandings of political representation which are dominant in political science. According to Saward representation has too long been thought of as the mere product of a single political mechanism – notably elections – or as a stable and transparent relationship between a political agent or organization and its constituency.⁴⁶ This has caused political theorists to meditate endlessly on the different forms and typologies of representation. Yet, Saward argues that this has done little to advance our understanding of the processes which are actually going on in representation. His suggested alternative is to locate a 'claim' to represent at the heart of the process of representation. This helps him to recover the dynamic essence of the relationship between the represented and their representatives. It also allows him to reconstruct representation as a multi-layered and a multidimensional concept. Because a claim is inherently unstable. It revolves, on the one hand, on the efforts of individuals or organizations to be recognized as the voice or advocate of certain identities or interests and, on the other hand, on the willingness of others to accept those actors as representatives, or their representatives. From this perspective, representation can be re-conceptualized as the outcome of a process which involves a greater diversity of actors and which takes place across a broader variety of platforms than standard accounts have long held.

41 This is a key argument in the work of political philosopher Frank Ankersmit as well. See for instance F. Ankersmit, *Macht door representatie. Exploraties III: politieke filosofie* (Kampen 1997) 14-17. Ankersmit sees representation as the constitutive act of democratic politics and he argues that the aesthetic gap between the represented and the representative is crucial in opening up a separate sphere of politics where a politician can act on behalf of the public in a representative capacity. This is a crucial aspect of his aesthetic conception of political representation. See also F.R. Ankersmit, 'Democracy's inner voice. Political style as unintended consequence of political action' in Corner and Pels eds., *Media and the Restyling of Politics*, 19-41.

42 Barnett, *Culture and Democracy*, 3.

43 Ibidem, 4.

44 Ibidem, 142-168.

45 Michael Saward, 'The Representative Claim', *Contemporary Political Theory* 5 (2006) 297-318 and Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford 2010).

46 Saward, 'The Representative Claim', 298.

Although Saward's ideas seem to apply most readily to the conduct of individual political actors, so to those who actually make claims about their representative status, he does reflect on the institutional side of representation as well. Part of his effort to re-conceptualize political representation, focusses on representative institutions. More traditional accounts have long considered these as the stable and given structures of representation, but Saward offers a more dynamic interpretation.⁴⁷ In fact, one part of his study reflects in some detail on the representative functions of political parties.⁴⁸ On the whole, Saward argues that it is necessary to escape the bipolar narrative of the 'rise' and 'decline' of political parties (to which the introduction to this study referred as well). Rather, the challenge which Saward observes, is to analyse the changing forms and dynamics of representation as embodied by political parties throughout history: 'The representative claims historically have taken a variety of forms. (...) How parties attempt to negotiate these forms in different circumstances, how they vary the content and presentation of their representative claims in and across different contexts, help us ultimately to clarify the challenges parties face today and into the future.'⁴⁹

Obviously, this study is primarily concerned with the challenges which the SDAP and the Labour Party faced in the past, when these parties were confronted with the rise of a new medium, radio. If the words above give ample suggestion of the potential value of Saward's ideas to this study, there is more to his work that holds an immediate relevance as well. Pointing to the simultaneous significance of cultural and aesthetic aspects of political representation, Saward states that a representative claim is a product of creativity. This leads him to highlight the construction or the making of representative claims and the ways in claims are presented to and received by an audience.⁵⁰ What's more, it also explains why he grants a central role to spin-doctors, campaign managers, music celebrities and other creative actors in processes of claim-making. At different moments, Saward also refers to media technologies and media outlets as equally important factors in the making and dissemination of the endless stream of representative claims.

This, however, is as far as Saward goes. Of course, as a political theorist it is only reasonable that Saward does not take these ideas a step further. Even so, there are good reason to do so, because his work does not only invite, but really asks for a further exploration of the interplay between politics and the media along the lines of the representative claim. Now, Saward refers to media technologies and media organizations as the neutral resources which are available to political actors or other makers of representative claims to reach to an audience.⁵¹ However, this obscures the interplay of forces in which media organizations have to operate. Indeed, this study holds that media organizations are themselves the products of a process of construction and that they are built and shaped to perform a representative function as well, also in a political sense. In fact, media organizations do not only have a task in representing the (political) world to their audience, they are also part of a representative relationship with their audience. Beyond that, they are also subjected to representative forms of power, which flow from the political realm. All this suggests it might be worth-while to expand Saward's approach to representation by applying it to a media context and, moreover, to use it to elaborate on the different sides of the intricate relationship between party politics and broadcasting in the interwar decades.

47 For instance Saward, *The Representative Claim*, 75-76.

48 Ibidem, 126-137.

49 Ibidem, 127.

50 Saward, 'The Representative Claim', 310-311.

51 For instance Saward, *The Representative Claim*, 76 and 133.

2.4 Integration

At this point it is also helpful to return once more to Jon Lawrence's notes about an 'integrated approach' to political history. Because it was noted above that his suggestions included an appeal to combine a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. This was informed by his conviction that political history should attempt to capture the ideas and assumptions which informed a political culture at a given moment in time, but that it should also seek to explain the logic and dynamics of political change through time. Or, in Lawrence's own words, political history 'must be as concerned with charting and explaining change over time, as with describing the intricacies of politics at any given moment'.⁵² In taking up this suggestion, this study links the notion of representation to the notion of integration. If the former can help to highlight the representative forms and status of politics and broadcasting in time, the latter can help to chart their mutual dynamics through time. What's more, both notions have a double value, in the sense that they can be used to analyse cultural patterns as well as institutional structures. And so, by applying these notions side-by-side, the two emerge as a tandem-concept, meaning that the dynamics of the former should be understood in relation to the workings of the latter.

The notion of integration which this study applies, brings together different strands of literature. Seeing integration in an institutional and in a cultural light, the historical institutionalist work of Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, offers a first lead.⁵³ Starr's book has been referred to in the pages above, most notably in relation to his notion of a 'constitutive moment'. While the introduction of a new media technology can be considered as a constitutive moment, the question which leads from this is what place and function this medium would come to acquire in the broader public sphere. Part of this was resolved by the decisions, or 'constitutive choices', that were made by those involved at different points in time, for example about the organizational form a medium should take. However, there was always a larger context to these choices which served to constrain or steer the incorporation of a new a media technology in a particular direction. While Starr uses the term 'mechanisms of entrenchment' to refer to this process, he traces these mechanisms in the variety of frameworks – organizational, legal, regulatory, technological, etc. – which were already in place and which served to guide the emergence of a new medium.⁵⁴ What's more, Starr emphasizes the embedded nature of historical developments and, as such, he points to the 'strong inertial tendencies' which inhabited these frameworks and which steered new developments to follow their structures and logics, at least up to a certain point.⁵⁵

Indeed, identifying the location of this point is one challenge this study faces. The previous chapter observed that radio might have carried a promise of innovation, but that its actual impact on politics was the combined result of its bare potential and the processes which shaped its place in the public sphere. What should be noted here is that Starr's discussion of the 'mechanisms of entrenchment' draws heavily on the concept of 'path dependency' which has a central place in historical institutionalist literature.⁵⁶ To be clear, 'path dependency' should not be misinterpreted as the determinist logic which holds that the outcome of events is the inevitable result of earlier

52 Lawrence, 'Political history', 196.

53 Starr, *The Creation of the Media*.

54 Ibidem, 4.

55 Ibidem, 5.

56 See for instance Thelen, 'Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics', 384-399.

choices. Rather, it signifies that historical developments unfold in bounded patterns and that the direction of developments during longer phases of relative stability, partly emanates from structures which were laid down earlier, so during shorter periods of relative openness. An obvious example, in this respect, are the present-day structures of the Dutch and the British broadcasting systems, which have clearly changed since the 1920s, but which are still the creatures of decisions which were made a century ago.

However, to speak of one path would ignore that history is really a frenzied intersection of smaller and larger paths, roads and highways. This is one reason why Starr's 'mechanisms of entrenchment' is not adopted here. Another reason is the suggestion of causality which speaks from this term, as its 'mechanistic' formulation leaves little space for the forces of contingency which make history so vulnerable to chance and accident. So, instead, this study adopts the notion of integration as a term which offers a more open-ended perspective on the developments under consideration. Besides that, it also opens up more adequate opportunities to explore these developments as a reciprocal process. Because the incorporation of a new media technology did not only affect the medium itself, but also its environment. Indeed, the question which this study asks, is how the SDAP and the Labour Party were involved in this process, and, at the same time, how these parties were affected by this process. In asking these questions, the notion of integration does not apply to radio alone, but also to its environment and its constituting organizations. In fact, radio should not merely be understood as an object of integration, but also as a mechanism of integration in its own right. It is this latter capacity, which can help to highlight which impact radio has had on its environment and notably on those political parties which form the main subject of this comparison.

To clarify this point, we should turn to some studies which reflect on processes of integration from this latter perspective. A most telling title from the Netherlands is, for example, Knippenberg and De Pater's *De eenwording van Nederland: schaalvergroting en integratie sinds 1800* ('The unification of the Netherlands: scale expansion and integration since 1800').⁵⁷ Equally informative is Auke van der Woud's *Een nieuwe wereld* ('A new world'), which explores 'the birth of modern Holland'.⁵⁸ In looking at processes of national integration, both studies highlight the advance of modern infrastructures – railways, postal systems, waterways, telephone networks, electricity networks etc. – as a key factor in the cultivation of a shared sense of belonging to the outside world. While these studies situate these developments in a national context, these infrastructures were crucially tied up with those of neighbouring countries. And so, one could also investigate similar processes of integration from a global or a European perspective. An example of this latter approach is offered by a more recent title, *Materializing Europe. Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe*.⁵⁹ In the introduction to this volume the editors claim that 'in many ways, technological infrastructures are indeed the essence of European integration'.⁶⁰ In taking up this perspective, they also argue that many studies mention the integrative dynamics of

57 Hans Knippenberg and Ben de Pater, *De eenwording van Nederland: schaalvergroting en integratie sinds 1800* (Nijmegen 1988).

58 Auke van der Woud, *Een nieuwe wereld. Het ontstaan van het moderne Nederland* (Amsterdam 2006). See also G. Verbong and E. van der Vleuten, 'Under Construction: Material Integration of the Netherlands 1800-2000', *History and Technology: An International Journal* 20 (2004) 205-226.

59 Alexander Badenoch and Andreas Fickers eds., *Materializing Europe. Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe* (London 2010). This publication is part of the more extensive research project 'The transnational Infrastructures and the Rise of Contemporary Europe'.

60 Alexander Badenoch and Andreas Fickers, 'Introduction. Europe Materializing? Toward a Transnational History of European Infrastructures' in Idem and Idem eds., *Materializing Europe*, 1-23, there 2.

infrastructures, but that very few ‘offer a detailed analysis of the complex and contested processes by which such structures came about’.⁶¹ This is part of the reason why they promote a broader notion of integration which acknowledges the constructed nature of (national and transnational) infrastructures as well as the complex links with the dynamics of integration which flowed from these. With these observations we are not as far removed from broadcasting as it might seem, since both authors share an interest in the history of television and radio, and this volume includes a chapter on broadcasting (‘and the mediated performances of Europe’) as well.⁶²

So in following these suggestions, this study leaves the material and technological side of broadcasting for what it is, as it focuses primarily on its institutional and cultural dimension. A key part of this concerns the dynamics of integration which flowed from radio as a medium. While Badenoch and Fickers stress the significance of infrastructures as ‘mediating interfaces’, there are various other studies which offer additional insights in how these processes might be understood.⁶³ Among those is, for instance, David Holmes’ *Communication Theory. Media, Technology and Society*.⁶⁴ This book builds on the works of a broad range of media- and communication scholars and it argues for a renewed understanding of the historical continuities in the technological transition to the digital media landscape of today. In doing so, Holmes juxtaposes the notion of ‘integration’ to the notion of ‘interaction’ and he observes that the latter has for too long been prioritized over the former as the hallmark of a preferred model of communication. He traces this, for instance, in ideas about media technological change in history as a movement of democratic progress and in the perception of new media as the means to democratic debate and enlightenment. Seeking to balance these ‘interactionists’ theories of media and communication, Holmes calls for a reappraisal of the myriad ways in which new and older media technologies have tied societies and cultures together. As part of this, Holmes also refers to James W. Carey’s distinction between ‘ritual’ and ‘transmission’ (or ‘transport’) views of communication.⁶⁵ Of these, the latter links up closely to the comments about infrastructures (waterways, railways, etc.) and integration. But Holmes stresses that the former (‘ritual’ view) offers an interesting corrective to those accounts which see communication primarily in terms of information and interaction. In a more general way, this leads him to theorize on questions of ‘community’ in media and communication studies, thereby drawing on the observations of the widest range of authors (Durkheim, McLuhan, Meyrowitz, Baudelaire, etc.).⁶⁶

A key title, in this respect, is Benedict Anderson’s landmark study *Imagined Communities*, which analyses the cultural construction of nations and nationalism in the 19th century. In doing so, he assigns critical importance to communication processes and the ways in which media – newspapers and the novel in particular – helped to cultivate and foster a shared sense of belonging to the

61 Badenoch and Fickers, ‘Introduction. Europe Materializing?’, 4.

62 A. Fickers and S.B. Lommers, ‘Eventing Europe: broadcasting and the mediated performances of Europe’ in: Badenoch and Fickers eds., *Materializing Europe*, 225-251. Other examples are Bignell and Fickers eds., *A European Television History* and A.W. Badenoch, *Voices in ruins: West German radio across the 1945 divide* (Basingstoke 2008).

63 Badenoch and Fickers, ‘Introduction. Europe Materializing?’, 12.

64 David Holmes, *Communication Theory. Media, Technology and Society* (London 2005).

65 Holmes, *Communication Theory. Media, Technology and Society*, 122-135. Also James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (rev. ed. New York and London 2008). Carey conceptualizes a ‘transmission’ or ‘transport’ view of communication as the extension of messages in space and the exchange of information between a transmitting agent and a receiving agent. The ‘ritual’ view of communication highlights the shared experience of the portrayals of the world, which are evoked by forms of communication. Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 11-28.

66 Holmes, *Communication Theory*, 167-222.

nation.⁶⁷ On the whole, his work offers a fascinating illustration of how the ‘ritual’ dimension of communication can be traced in history as a force of change. Highly illuminating, for instance, are his observations of the collective reading of the morning papers as a mass ceremony, which brings thousands or even millions of readers together at a same point in time.⁶⁸ Although the large majority of the readers of a newspaper would never meet in real life, by ‘attending’ this ceremony and by consuming the same images of ‘nation’ and ‘nationhood’ they did temporarily share a similar outlook on the horizons of the larger whole, and their place in it. These observations might well be applied to other media, and among those to take up Anderson’s perspective is also the media historian Michele Hilmes. She argues that the concept of an ‘imagined community’ found its perfect instrument in radio, which ‘more than any other agency’ was capable of evoking and imposing a unifying experience of nationhood.⁶⁹ What she noted also is that Anderson holds no exclusive claim over these issues and that other authors have reflected on similar questions before him. Among these are, for instance, Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, who have explored the BBC’s role as a purveyor of a sense of ‘communal identity’ and ‘national unity’ throughout history.⁷⁰

In fact, two studies which were referred to in the introduction – Laura Beers’ *Your Britain* and Huub Wijfjes’ *Radio onder restrictie* – reveal a similar interest in the role which media have in processes of integration.⁷¹ It is a central claim of Beers’ work that the Labour Party came to recognize the press, broadcasting and other media throughout the interwar decades as the pieces of the puzzle of national approval. As such, it learned the lessons of the press campaigns, which in earlier years had portrayed the Labour Party as a threat to the British nation. In a different way, Wijfjes has argued that broadcasting played a key role in reconciling the tensions in the 1930s between the SDAP’s internationalist stance and its national aspirations. Yet, in taking up these perspectives, it appears that both authors have mainly looked towards the literature on party history and labour movement history. There, the term ‘integration’ is often used to denote the advance of labour parties and labour organizations in a national context⁷² Among the subjects which have been explored from this perspective is the expanding presence of labour parties in national parliaments and the mutual impact which these processes have had on parties and parliaments. But the pages above indicate there are numerous other ways to elaborate on these issues. It is along these lines that this study pursues the observations of both authors in new directions, also by weighing these on a comparative scale.

67 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd rev. ed., London and New York 1991).

68 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35.

69 Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices. American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis and London 1997). For a Dutch collection of essays on media and the construction of communities see Marcel Broersma and Joop W. Koopmans eds., *Identiteitspolitiek. Media en de constructie van gemeenschapsgevoel* (Hilversum 2010). On radio, see Bas de Jong, ‘Grensoverschrijdend en gelijktijdig. Radio en de arbeidersbeweging in het interbellum’ in Broersma and Koopmans eds., *Identiteitspolitiek*, 31-43.

70 David Cardiff and Paddy Scannell, ‘Broadcasting and national unity’ in: James Curran, Anthony Smith and Pauline Wingate eds., *Impacts & Influences. Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century* (London 1987) 157-173.

71 Beers, *Your Britain* and Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*.

72 One example is Stefan Berger’s comparative study of the German SPD and the British Labour Party of which the second chapter is titled ‘Integration of the British and the German Labour Movements into their Respective Societies’. Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900-1931* (Oxford 1994) 18-60.

2.5 Time and space

There is a last subject which needs to be addressed here. Because most of the authors which are referred to above, reflect in some way or another on the subject of ‘modernity’ or on the derived implications of ‘the modern’. These, obviously, are towering subjects, which cannot be dealt with adequately in the short space of this concluding paragraph. However, there is a common thread running through the work of these authors, in the sense that most of these relate the looming question of modernity to a more specific interest in the reconfiguration of time and space, as two categories which offer particular insight in the dynamics which shaped the face of modernity. So, Clive Barnett, for example, uses the notion of space to elaborate on the changing patterns of communication and democracy, whereas Fickers and Badenoch point to the transformation of a shared European space, as facilitated by the construction of different infrastructures. In turn, Benedict Anderson refers to Walter Benjamin’s reflections on time and his idea of a ‘homogeneous, empty time’ as a fundamental feature of modernity.⁷³ In relation to that, Anderson also points to the significance of the clock, the calendar and, indeed, the newspaper as instruments of temporal structuration. Another example is Paddy Scannell’s *Radio, Television and Modern Life*, which elaborates on similar issues from a broadcasting perspective.⁷⁴ He takes the notion of time to think through the meaning of ‘dailiness’, and he values broadcasting as a ‘daily service, that fills each day, that runs right through the day, that appears as a continuous, uninterrupted, never-ending flow’.⁷⁵ Scannell’s larger claim is that radio and television have helped to remedy the fragmentation of social life, as caused by the same forces of modernity which fuelled the permanent restructuring of space and time.

These are just some examples, but they do illustrate how the categories of space and time make an interesting perspective to explore the dynamics which, it would appear, permeated the subject of this study as well. One title which is most relevant for this purpose is John B. Thompson’s *The Media and Modernity*.⁷⁶ Thompson’s work explores how the temporal and spatial conditions of communications were transformed throughout history by the emergence of new media technologies. One of the terms which Thompson coins, is ‘space-time distanciation’ to denote how media innovations – the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television etc. – have helped to liberate processes of communication from the need of co-presence in a face-to-face setting. Another term from his work is ‘despatialized simultaneity’, which echoes Benedict Anderson’s and James Carey’s interest in the ceremonial and ritual aspects of communication. Thompson sees this as the simultaneous experience of events by people who did not share the same locale, but who were partaking in the event in its mediated capacity.⁷⁷ A major strand in Thompson’s work focusses on the implications for the exercise of political power, and he locates these, among other things, in the ‘transformation of visibility’ and in the changing forms and demands of ‘political publicness’.⁷⁸

There is more to Thompson’s work than this and his explorations offer further insight in the reconfiguration of time and space in relation to the changing shape of politics throughout history. Still, Thompson charts these shifts with the sweeping gaze of a sociologist. Although

73 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24–25.

74 Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life. A Phenomenological Approach* (Oxford and Cambridge MA 1996).

75 Ibidem, 144–178, there 149.

76 John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge 1995).

77 Ibidem, 32–33.

78 Ibidem, 119–148.

there is a historical dimension to his work, his approach to these matters is hardly confined by the boundaries of time and space in which the subject of his study was embedded. If this allows him to leap through time to highlight those moments and developments which are most important to his argument, surely this is different from the historian's approach, which, by nature, should be more sensitive to how a subject is located in time and in space. Indeed, this is one reason why this study looks towards the work of the French political historian Pierre Rosanvallon. Perhaps to remind, his name was mentioned also in the introduction in relation his proposals about a 'philosophical history of the political', and although it is impossible to do justice here to his illuminating and profound reflections on the writing of political history, among the issues Rosanvallon highlights is the significance of the time-factor in politics. More particularly, Rosanvallon observes that time has long been seen as a 'basically neutral element' in political history, and he argues that it should be understood instead as 'an active and constructive dimension' of politics in history.⁷⁹ So, among other things this leads him to draw a distinction between time as a resource and time as a constraint of political action in history, and beyond that he also reflects on the tensions of temporality that are inherent to the democratic regime, in the sense that the political urgencies of the moment often clash or conflict with the political concerns for the longer term. Although there is much more to say on this subject (and Rosanvallon does so accordingly), on the whole it shows there are good reason to follow this line and to chart the reconfiguration of time and space in politics as a result of the emergence of radio from the early 1920s onwards.

2.6 The enigma of the political

And yet, to focus merely on Rosanvallon's comments about the meaning of time in political history, would ignore the broader significance of his work to this comparative effort. In fact, as a distant inspiration to this study, Rosanvallon's work explores various themes that are pursued here as well. Among these is the focus on questions about the changing role and meaning of representation in modern political history, and his work offers a highly insightful view of the tensions, contradictions, uncertainties and blind spots that are the result of, what he sees as, 'the heart of the problem of modern representation: the quandary of the representability of democracy.'⁸⁰ However, equally interesting are his reflections on questions about change and stability in political history. While his call for a 'total political history' (i.e. the need 'to make sense of the political in all its complexity') sounds remarkably similar to Lawrence's appeal for the 'reintegration of political history', so does his appeal to analyse 'the way the institutions and the events of a political culture combine to establish more or less stable political forms'.⁸¹ Then again, instead of elaborating on the various issues in Rosanvallon's work that resonate somehow with the larger purpose of this study, it seems more helpful at this point to make a few, final comments on the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' that lies at the centre of his ideas about the 'philosophical history of the political'.

79 Pierre Rosanvallon, 'Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France' in: Idem, *Democracy Past and Future: Selected Essays*, Samuel Moyn ed. (New York 2006) 31-58, there 47. Another interesting exploration of the significance time in politics is Kari Palonen, 'Four Times of Politics: Policy, Polity, Politicking, and Politicization', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 28 (2003) 171-186.

80 Rosanvallon, 'Inaugural Lecture', 42.

81 Rosanvallon, 'Toward a Philosophical History of the Political', 65.

The same distinction was used in the opening paragraph of this chapter, and while the former term conceives ‘politics’ as a fixed category with a stable essence, the latter term sees ‘the political’ as a fluid category with an indeterminate essence.⁸² Against this background it is not difficult to see why political historians have increasingly embraced the latter as it allows for a broader analysis of the changing meaning and forms of politics (or the political) throughout history. In Rosanvallon’s case, the use of this distinction is notably inspired by the French political philosopher Claude Lefort, who, probably, is best known for his concept of power as an empty place.⁸³ In its most concise form this means that power belongs to no-one and that its fundamental indeterminacy is really the founding principle of democratic politics. What’s more, it is a particular argument of Lefort that power does not reside in society, but that its exercise requires the institution of a political stage, on the basis of which society can understand and govern itself as a political entity.⁸⁴ As elusive as this may sound, what may be noted here is that it draws on a notion of politics as theatre which occupies such a central place in the writings of political philosophy and political history.⁸⁵ It also figures in Rosanvallon’s work, for instance when he notes that ‘the majestic theatre of the general will is also the permanent stage for scenes borrowed from the more dailies comedies of power’.⁸⁶ But at the same time Rosanvallon insists on the need to always look beyond the events and figures on the political stage, and he emphasizes forcefully that this is the only way to reach, what he calls, ‘the enigma of the political’.⁸⁷ In taking up this challenge this study explores the long-neglected significance of radio, indeed a medium that was quite unlike the medium of theatre. To do so, it is necessary to come down from these abstract heights and engage with this subject in its everyday appearance in the past, for, as Rosanvallon puts it, ‘it is at a “bastard” level that one must always come to the political, in the tangle of practices and representations’.⁸⁸

82 Rosanvallon offers a more extensive elaboration of this distinction in his ‘Inaugural Lecture’.

83 A collection of Lefort’s most important texts on politics was recently translated and published in the Netherlands, Claude Lefort, *Wat is politiek?* eds. Pol van de Wiel and Bart Verheijen (Amsterdam 2016). There are various English-language publications of Lefort’s work as well, among which Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge 1986) or Claude Lefort, *Writing: The Political Test*, ed. David Ames Curtis (Durham and London 2000).

84 For example Claude Lefort, ‘Het vraagstuk van de democratie’ in: Idem, *Wat is politiek?*, 81-100, there 95 and 97 or Claude Lefort, ‘Democratie & vertegenwoordiging’ in: Idem, *Ibidem*, 101-118, there 103.

85 The literature on this subject is too vast to cite, but among the historians to use this notion are also Jon Lawrence and Henk te Velde, and this study will reflect in more detail on this subject, and both authors treatment of it, in a later section. See for example Te Velde, *Het theater van de politiek* and Lawrence, *Electing our masters*. Also on the significance of this notion to the writing of political history Ido de Haan, ‘Stijl, vorm, ontwerp’, 245-248.

86 Rosanvallon, ‘Inaugural Lecture’, 40.

87 *Ibidem*.

88 *Ibidem*, 46.

A phantom medium?

Part I

Red blueprints for broadcasting

Part I

Red blueprints for broadcasting

Introduction

In November 1926 the Conservative Postmaster General William Mitchell-Thomson informed the House of Commons about the forthcoming reorganization of the British Broadcasting Company, or the BBC. The BBC had been founded only four years earlier, in November 1922, by a variety of larger and smaller radio manufacturing companies.¹ However, its founding was instigated by the British Post Office, which was also responsible for granting the BBC its first broadcasting licence. As a product of a public-private partnership, the BBC had managed to introduce the wonder of broadcasting in the following years to an ever-increasing part of the British public. In doing so, it had also acquired a solid reputation for providing programmes of a high cultural standard. Nonetheless, its future remained uncertain, since it was generally agreed that the public purpose of broadcasting was incompatible with the BBC's status as a private company. It was this conviction which caused the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin to re-establish the BBC in January 1927 as a public corporation. In the young history of British broadcasting this was a landmark decision, which was warmly welcomed across the political spectrum. In fact, when the Conservative Postmaster General announced the news, it was greeted with cheerful comments from the Opposition benches. Labour Party MP William Graham labelled the Postmaster General's speech as one of a 'most democratic and businesslike Socialist character'.² The substance of his words was echoed in the claims of a fellow Labour MP, Charles Ammon, who welcomed the BBC's new status as a victory for socialism. He stated that the Labour Party hoped the Postmaster General's 'education as a Socialist would proceed more rapidly than hitherto'.³

When compared with the history of broadcasting in the Netherlands, the significance of this moment is matched only by what has come to be known as 'het zendtijdenbesluit' ('the broadcasting time decree') of May 1930.⁴ This decree was announced by the catholic Minister of Infrastructure, Paul Reymer, who ordered that the near-total amount of broadcasting time was to be allocated, in equal parts, among the four major broadcasting associations, i.e. the KRO, the NCRV, the AVRO and the VARA.⁵ It was this decision that sealed the pluralist, or 'pillarized' nature of the Dutch broadcasting system. It settled the long-running debate about whether the Netherlands was best served with a single, national broadcasting service or with a variety of private broadcasting

1 Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* (London and New York 2002, sec. ed.) 18.

2 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 15-11-1926, 1591, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

3 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 15-11-1926, 1603, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

4 For example Hans van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd. De strijd om het Nederlandse omroepbestel in de periode 1923-1947* (Baarn 1976) 33.

5 KRO stands for 'Katholieke Radio Omroep', Catholic Radio Broadcaster; NCRV stands for 'Nederlandsche Christelijke Radio Vereniging', Dutch Christian Radio Association and AVRO stands for 'Algemeene Vereniging Radio Omroep', Public Radio Broadcasting Association.

associations. Although equality was the basis of the broadcasting system which was endorsed by Reymer's decision, not everybody was equally pleased with this outcome. Anger ran high in AVRO-circles. In the previous years this broadcasting association had presented itself as the rightful heir to the throne of national broadcasting. As a result of Reymer's decree it was now reduced to a smaller version of its former self, not only in terms of broadcasting time, but also with regards to its national aspirations. Triumph, on the other hand, was proclaimed by the VARA, the socialist broadcasting association which was closely affiliated to the SDAP. It was this broadcasting association which gained most from Reymer's intervention, since it saw its presence in the airwaves jump from a mere eight hours per week to a total of fifty hours.⁶ This seemed good news for the SDAP as well, but the party leadership did not respond with unanimous excitement. When Reymer's decree was first discussed in Parliament, senior party leader Willem Vliegen claimed he could think of an arrangement for broadcasting which was 'better than the arrangement which is laid down by the Minister's decision'.⁷ What's more, he also stated that the SDAP had really wanted a different broadcasting system. Then again, he rushed to admit as well that the promotion of the VARA formed a fair deal and that his party was glad to accept this outcome.

Of course, these examples offer only a first glimpse of the SDAP's and the Labour Party's position in the debate about the Dutch and the British broadcasting system. Even so, these examples reveal a remarkable contrast in how both parties welcomed these defining moments in national broadcasting history. It would appear that the SDAP had better reasons to claim a victory in broadcasting than the Labour Party. After all, Reymer's decision to grant the VARA an equal position to the other broadcasting associations, did not only form a major boost to the VARA and the wider labour movement, it also promised the SDAP unprecedented opportunities to use radio for party purposes. The same did not apply to the Labour Party. At the time, it was only months ago that the BBC and the Labour Party had clashed during the general strike of May 1926, an episode which will be covered in more detail in chapter three. Their conflict revolved around the BBC's refusal to allow Labour leaders to address the country through radio and it showed that the BBC was well prepared to ignore the labour movement's interests or the Labour Party's demand for access.⁸ This was a pattern which would recur in the following years. And yet, it was the Labour Party and not the SDAP which seemed most delighted with these turn of events. This is certainly intriguing, and it suggests that both parties' approach to broadcasting was only remotely informed by their own partisan interests in broadcasting. What's more, it raises the question how both parties perceived the institutional organization of broadcasting and more specifically what their ideas were about the shape and structure of a national broadcasting system.

To be clear, the existing literature offers some first clues to these questions. Jean Seaton and Ben Pimlott have noted, for instance, that the BBC's status as a public corporation was warmly supported in Labour circles, regardless of the BBC's efforts to antagonize the Labour Party on a regular basis.⁹ On the Dutch side it has been observed that the SDAP was initially in favour of setting up a single, national broadcasting organization, so in spite of its close connection with

6 Huub Wijffjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep* (Amsterdam 2009) 64.

7 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 28-5-1930, 2244, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

8 Michael Tracey, 'The BBC and the General Strike: May 1926' in: Edward Buscombe ed., *British television: a reader* (Oxford 2000) 27-44.

9 Jean Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics' in: James Curran and Idem eds., *Power without Responsibility. The Press and Broadcasting in Britain* 5th ed. (London and New York 1997) 111-127, there 117-123 and Seaton and Pimlott, 'The struggle for "balance"', there 140 and 150-151.

the VARA.¹⁰ But, although important, the scope of these observations remains limited, since the observers are primarily interested in the history of broadcasting in its cultural and political context, and only to a lesser degree in the history of the party political involvement with broadcasting. As such, they offer no more than a partial picture of the evolution of both parties' approach to broadcasting, which, moreover, cannot explain the background and wider implications of these inconsistencies. And so, what is needed is a structural analysis which concentrates on the ideas and actions of both parties and which traces their evolution from the earliest emergence of broadcasting to the moments when both broadcasting systems acquired their more permanent shape.

For this purpose the following chapters go back to the immediate years after World War I, as the years that witnessed the birth of broadcasting as we know it. At that point in time, the technology of radio – or 'wireless telegraphy' and 'wireless telephony' as it was then called – had been available for years already, and it was widely used as a means of point-to-point communication, notably for naval, military and commercial purposes.¹¹ Although a series of one-off experiments had demonstrated the cultural potential of radio in the years before, among which a 1910 transmission of the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana* from the New York Metropolitan Opera House, it was only after World War I that radio's potential for broadcasting was put to practice on a wider scale, also in the Netherlands and in Great Britain.¹² These activities were still very rudimentary, but it did present Dutch wireless 'amateurs' with regular transmissions of speech and music from November 1919 onwards.¹³ Their British counterparts had to wait a few more months, until January 15 1920, before they could tune in to the first ever British broadcast.¹⁴ In both countries the authorities had sanctioned these initiatives on a temporary basis. But the emergence of broadcasting was irreversible and it soon raised the basic, but complicated question of 'what next?' And so, it was these developments that marked the 'constitutive moment' of broadcasting, as the moment that urged the authorities to formulate an idea about the future of broadcasting in politics, culture and society, and, moreover, to lay down an institutional framework to facilitate its further development. This book is primarily interested in the response to broadcasting by the Labour Party and the SDAP, and it would take a few more years before these parties were invited to discuss the 'constitutive choices' about broadcasting. But in exploring their involvement in this process, it is equally important to consider the broader context of these moments and to ask how both parties' approach to these matters was shaped by or tied up with the larger political issues of the time.

Two developments seem particularly important in this respect. The first of these concerned the shifting relationship between state and society. This was a long-term process which traced back well into the 19th century, when the state was increasingly recognized as a means to regulate or remedy the shortcomings in society that were caused by the march of time. Dutch historian Jan Romein has labelled this process as the 'mutual permeation of state and society' and his words remind that this was not a top-down, unilinear development, but that society did come to change

10 Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 46–47. See also Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 26.

11 For instance Jane Chapman, *Comparative Media History. An introduction: 1789 to the present* (Malden and Cambridge 2005) 118–123 and Lyn Gorman and David McLean, *Media and Society into the 21st Century. A Historical Introduction* (Malden and Oxford 2009) 50–51.

12 Huub Wijffes and Bert Hogenkamp, 'De dageraad van de eeuw van beeld en geluid' in: Idem, Sonja de Leeuw and Idem eds., *Een eeuw van beeld en geluid. Cultuurgeschiedenis van radio en televisie in Nederland* (Hilversum 2012) 18–53, there 36–37.

13 Wijffes and Hogenkamp, 'De dageraad van de eeuw van beeld en geluid', 36 and De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 14–15.

14 Seán Street, *A Concise History of British Radio, 1922–2002* (Devon 2005) 17.

the face and nature of the state as well.¹⁵ Various historians have noted that these developments gained a particular momentum in the years around World War I. This was notably so in Great Britain, where the war triggered an unprecedented push in state interventionism as to mobilize all available resources.¹⁶ Although the Netherlands remained neutral during this conflict, these years did see a notable increase in the role of the Dutch state as well.¹⁷ In the following years most of these arrangements were cut back, but the lessons were not lost and a question which came to divide Dutch and British politics in the decades afterwards was to which extent society needed to be controlled and to which degree the state could offer the required antidote. As such, it also resonated in the debate about the future of broadcasting, which was both a product of the state's regulatory powers over the airwaves and the manifestation of society's search for information and entertainment. So in answering the question of 'what next', those involved would have to decide whether broadcasting belonged to society, to the state or somewhere in between. In fact, the following chapters will show that the SDAP and the Labour Party could each draw on a distinct range of ideas about this subject and that the opposition between state and society formed a cornerstone of the socialist doctrines which inspired both parties' actions. And so, the question here is how these ideas informed their understanding of the institutional organization of broadcasting.

But, in relation to this, we should also explore the significance of the second, larger development which coincided with the emergence of broadcasting in the early 1920s. Because the events of World War I did not only alter the relationship between state and society, it also opened the doors of democracy to millions of new voters. This was symbolized most clearly by the introduction of mass suffrage in Britain and the Netherlands in the years around 1918, which produced a threefold increase in the size of the Dutch and the British electorate.¹⁸ This was a democratic triumph, but also an experiment with no return. For both countries it remained to be seen how the political system would cope with this influx of new voters and the shifts in the balance of power which it might produce.¹⁹ At the time, there were widespread concerns that the newly enfranchised masses were easily manipulated and that they lacked the moral and intellectual capacities to participate in the democratic process in a meaningful way. This also explains why the rise of radio carried an enormous promise. Because the emergence of broadcasting did not only offer the means to inform a million wide audience about the political issues of the day, it also provided politicians and parties with new opportunities to promote their views or ideology, the SDAP and the Labour Party included. This raises the question to which degree both parties' understanding of broadcasting was geared towards its democratic function and, more specifically, to which extent their ideas about a national broadcasting system were based on a conception of radio as an instrument of democratic debate and information.

15 J. Romein, *Op het breukvlak van twee eeuwen. De westerse wereld rond 1900* (Amsterdam 1967).

16 For instance Par Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State* 2n ed. (London and New York 1996) 119-210 or Philip Harling, *The Modern British State. A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge 2001) 112-153.

17 Piet de Rooy, *Republiek van rivaliteiten. Nederland sinds 1813* (Amsterdam 2005) 157-160 and de Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 187-191.

18 D.J. Elzinga and G. Voerman, *Om de stembus. Verkiezingsaffiches 1918-1998* (Den Haag 1992) 9 and Matthew Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate. A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars* (London and New York 2005) 17-18. The extension of the franchise followed a male lead in both countries, and women had to wait a number of years before they would receive equal voting rights. This happened in 1919 in the Netherlands and in 1928 in Great Britain.

19 For instance De Rooy, *Een zoekende tijd*, 183-187 and 191-196 and David Marquand, *Britain since 1918. The Strange Career of British Democracy* (London 2008) 41-42

For this purpose it is also necessary to look beyond the communicative dimension of democracy and to consider its upturns in the institutional sphere. Because there was more to the expansion of democracy than the increase of the electoral input. The decades around 1918 witnessed a larger debate as well about the value and limitations of parliamentary democracy as the most advanced form of government.²⁰ The terms of this debate differed from country to country, and so did its outcomes. While some political movements came to reject democracy altogether, with due consequences, others used their energy to promote a reorganization of the structures of democratic governance. It was this latter approach which dominated the debate about democracy in Great Britain and the Netherlands. In the former country these developments were reflected, for instance, in the deliberations of what David Marquand has called ‘democratic collectivist’ commentators and ‘democratic republican’ observers.²¹ Among those issues which were discussed in the course of this debate was the democratization of industry and the economy.²² Similar subjects were discussed in the Netherlands as well. In 1918 the country did not only see the introduction of mass suffrage, it also saw the introduction of a system of proportional representation, which was both a culmination and a new impulse to the public reflection on the meaning of democracy.²³ What’s more, the influence of these developments has also been observed in the emergence of, what has been called, a ‘second circuit of democracy’, which consisted of a variety of extra-parliamentary bodies that were incorporated in the broader democratic process.²⁴ All this did not pass unnoticed in Labour Party- and SDAP circles, which suggests there are good reason to trace how both parties understood the democratic organization of broadcasting and to ask how they perceived the place of broadcasting in relation to Parliament, government and the wider framework of democratic governance. Of course, there is a party political element to this as well, since the SDAP and the Labour Party were part of this same political environment. And so, the question is also how the SDAP and the Labour Party perceived their own position in broadcasting and of political parties more generally.

And yet, the following chapters can only go so far in answering these questions. At this point, it might be useful to remind that this book consists of three parts. Although each of these parts focuses on a different subject, there is a considerable degree of overlap and continuity between these parts, in time as well as in the events which are covered. This means that the answers to these questions should really be seen as a product of the combined insights of the separate parts. Indeed, the same applies to this book’s larger aim to chart the dynamics of media and political change along the lines which were laid down in the previous chapter. It may be noted that the pages above refer to only one of the notions – ‘constitutive moment’ – that were introduced in that chapter. This, however, is largely in keeping with what the introduction explained about this book’s overall structure, which combines an empirical focus in the separate chapters with a theoretical perspective in the comparative conclusions. But it is the overall conclusion to this book where the pieces will be put together with the aim of finding a new perspective on the significance of radio to interwar political culture. At this point this remains a long-term objective, even though the following chapter should provide the first ingredients for its realization.

20 Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 1-39.

21 Marquand, *Britain since 1918*, 60-75.

22 Rodney Barker, *Political Ideas in Modern Britain. In and After the 20th Century* (2nd ed., London and New York 1997) 135-178. Also Mark Stears, *Progressives, pluralists and the Problems of the State. Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909-1926* (Oxford and New York 2006).

23 Jasper Loots, *Voor het volk, van het volk. Van districtenstelsel naar evenredige vertegenwoordiging* (Amsterdam 2004).

24 Ido de Haan, ‘Verplaatste democratie? Politieke representatie in functionele organen’ in: Remieg Aerts and Peter de Goede eds., *Omstreden democratie. Over de problemen van een succesverhaal* (Amsterdam 2014) 89-309, there 92.

Chapter 3

A socialist victory?

The Labour Party and the birth of the British Broadcasting Corporation

3.1 The Liberal shadow (1918-1922)

The general election of December 1918 was a pivotal moment in the history of British politics. World War I had come to an end only weeks ago, on November 11, and Britain had emerged from the war as a different country.¹ Among other things, this was reflected in the introduction of mass suffrage by the Lloyd George coalition, which extended the vote to all adult men above the age of twenty-one and most women over the age of thirty.² To the Labour Party this was a long-awaited moment. The new electorate was largely dominated by working-class voters, which the Labour Party considered as the natural allies of its cause.³ It was anticipated that the influx of these new voters would increase the party's share at the polls and that it would push the party's presence in the House of Commons beyond the 42 seats it had won in 1910, the last general election before the outbreak of the war.⁴

In 1918 the Labour Party was still a relative newcomer in British politics. The roots of the party traced back to the founding of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in 1900.⁵ Founded as a parliamentary pressure group with a limited organizational basis, the LRC brought together a variety of socialist groups and trade unions, notably the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Fabian Society and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). Each of these organizations held a different view of the higher purpose of labour politics.⁶ The ILP's ethical socialism was rooted, for instance, in 19th-century social-religious reformism and it placed much emphasis on notions such as 'solidarity', 'communal spirit', 'justice' and 'equality'.⁷ Its idealist and elevated conception of social progress was contrasted by the more narrow economist approach of the TUC's trade unionism, which was largely aimed at promoting the interests of its membership. This, in turn, stood out against the intellectual and positivist approach of politics by the Fabian Society, which advocated a firm belief in constitutional action, piecemeal progress and the benign powers of

- 1 For example Richard Overby, *The Morbid Age. Britain Between the Wars* (London 2009).
- 2 Kevin Jefferys, *Politics and the People. A History of British Democracy since 1918* (London 2007) 12 and Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 17-18.
- 3 Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain. A New History of the Labour Party* (London 2011) 118.
- 4 'Appendix I. Labour and the electorate 1900-1997' in: Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tsiratsoo eds., *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge 2000) 393.
- 5 Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (Oxford 1974), vxii-xviii.
- 6 José Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought' in: Tanner, Thane and Tsiratsoo eds., *Labour's First Century*, 8-45.
- 7 R. Leach, *Political Ideology in Britain* (Basingstoke and New York 2002) 81 and Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 14.

an extended state.⁸ Although the influence of these different perspectives on the Labour Party's outlook was hardly clear-cut, taken together, these different groups tied the party to a moderate, reformist and gradualist approach to socialism.

Until 1918, Labour's electoral advance had largely matched its gradualist ethos. In the decades before its parliamentary size had hardly been substantial enough to upset the leadership of the Liberals and the Conservatives, as the two parties which had controlled British politics for so long.⁹ However, World War I did not only see the introduction of mass suffrage, quite crucially it also gave the Labour Party its first experience in office. Initially, the outbreak of the war had evoked strong tensions in Labour circles, due to the party's formal pacifist stance. Among those to oppose the British entry into the war was James Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour Party leader who had a history in the Independent Labour Party and who had been elected to the chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1911. Three years later, MacDonald was forced to resign from his position as party leader when the vote of a party majority decided that Labour's place was not on the side-lines, but that it ought to support the British war effort.¹⁰ This was a dramatic moment, but MacDonald's role in Labour politics was far from finished. For the time, his position as party leader was taken over by Arthur Henderson, who did not have MacDonald's charisma and commanding presence, but who did have significant experience in the leadership of the Labour Party as well.¹¹ In 1915, it was Arthur Henderson who received the invitation from the Liberal leader Herbert Asquith to join a wartime coalition with the Liberals and the Conservatives. Henderson accepted the offer on behalf of the Labour Party. When Asquith's cabinet ran ashore, he stayed on in government under a new Liberal Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, whose rivalry with Asquith would divide the Liberals in the following years. Although Henderson resigned from his post in 1917, after a conflict with the cabinet over an international socialist meeting in Stockholm, his time in office was highly significant as it showed the Labour Party was capable and ready to carry government responsibility when this was needed.¹²

Henderson's resignation allowed him to devote his energy to other urgent matters. Because the pending introduction of mass suffrage and the looming troubles in the Liberal camp caused the Labour Party to reconsider its political strategies for the near future.¹³ So far, the party remained a loose coalition of socialists, trade unionists and radical liberals and it was generally understood that it needed a broader organizational and a clear-cut ideological profile if it wanted to capitalize on these developments in the near future. And so, in 1917, Henderson was asked to work out the schemes for a new party structure.¹⁴ His design saw the establishment of Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs), which were aimed to improve Labour's organizational presence throughout the country and, moreover, to open up the party to individual members who were not affiliated to the trade union movement. Beyond that, the party also drew up a new party constitution and a new policy statement, *Labour and the New Social Order*. This latter document was largely drafted

8 Leach, *Political Ideology in Britain*, 81-83 and G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: a History* (London etc. 1985) 24-32.

9 Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke and New York 2008) 34-35.

10 David Marquand, 'MacDonald, (James) Ramsay (1866-1937)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (24-4-2015).

11 Chris Wrigley, 'Henderson, Arthur (1863-1935)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (24-4-2015).

12 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 39.

13 Pugh, *Speak for Britain*, 119-122.

14 McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, 91-106, there 93.

by Sidney Webb, frontman of the Fabian Society, and it promoted an agenda of social reforms, full employment and public ownership.¹⁵ This latter cause was also encapsulated by Clause IV of the new party constitution.¹⁶ Over time, this clause would become a defining symbol for Labour's socialism, but in 1918 it passed almost unnoticed as one element of the larger effort to reposition the Labour Party against the Conservatives and, notably, the Liberals.¹⁷

The question was whether all this was enough to yield the Labour Party the breakthrough it was hoping for. In December 1918 Britain returned to the polls to seal the end of World War I with the election of new, post-war government. In previous elections the Labour Party had fielded no more than 78 candidates, in all 650 constituencies; by putting forward no less than 388 candidates the Labour Party sent a clear signal to the country that it was ready to challenge the Liberals as the main rival for the progressive vote.¹⁸ And yet, when the dust had settled it turned out that this election came too soon for the Labour Party. Although disappointing, this could not have come as a great surprise, since Lloyd George and the Conservatives were fighting this contest as the victorious war-coalition. This was reflected in the impressive parliamentary majority (of 473 seats) it was awarded by the British public. The Labour Party, on the other hand, was presented with less impressive figures, as it won the modest number of 57 seats in the House of Commons, a net gain of 15 seats compared to the general election of 1910.¹⁹ And so, the introduction of mass suffrage had failed to deliver the Labour Party the victory it had hoped for. What added to the disappointment was that the list of Labour candidates who were elected to Parliament did not include any prominent figures, for instance Arthur Henderson, Ramsay MacDonald or Philip Snowden. Their presence would have lifted Labour's morale in the House of Commons. They could now focus on other urgent matters outside the parliamentary arena.

Still, there was a promising side to these results as well. Because the political fate of the Labour Party was not only shaped by its own achievements, but also by the fortunes of its opponents. As the 1918 election reduced the Asquithian Liberals to a mere 36 seats in the House of Commons, in the years afterwards the dispute between Asquith and Lloyd George would continue to haunt and weaken the Liberal cause. Against this background the Parliamentary Labour Party emerged, slowly but steadily, as a genuine force of opposition against the Lloyd George government. It would take until the general election of November 1922 before the Labour Party was really rewarded for its efforts of the past years. Although the Conservative Party won a solid majority again, this was the first election in which the Labour Party won more seats (142) than the Asquithian (62) and Lloyd Georgian (53) Liberals combined.²⁰ This meant the party had now emerged as the second party in British politics, and, as such, as the main opposition to the Conservative government. What made this all the more encouraging, was that the list of those Labour MPs also included leading figures like Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden. This gave the parliamentary party a sense of direction and leadership which would only reinforce its prospects for the following years.²¹

15 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 48-49.

16 McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, 96-97.

17 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 48.

18 Pugh, *Speak for Britain*, 122.

19 'Appendix I. Labour and the electorate 1900-1997' in: Tanner, Thane and Tsiratsos ed., *Labour's First Century*, 393.

20 Thorpe, *A History of the Labour Party*, 56-58.

21 Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, 25.

3.2 From 'wireless telegraphy' to the British Broadcasting Company (1918-1922)

The general election of November 1922 formed a memorable departure in British history for a different reason as well. One day before the election the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) had launched its programming service. This allowed the BBC to announce the election results through radio for the first time in history.²² These reports would not have reached a mass audience yet, since the ownership of radio-sets remained limited to a minority of 'wireless amateurs'. Even so, various newspapers noted the next day that these broadcasts had been flawless and that the results had even been received by listeners in Paris and in Copenhagen.²³

The BBC had been established only weeks earlier, on October 18, 1922. Its founding was a late result of the Lloyd George coalition and it was the Liberal Postmaster General, Frederick Kellaway, who was responsible for steering this process.²⁴ In the years before, the Post Office had presided over this developing field on the basis of the Telegraphy Act of 1869 and the Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1904. These acts gave the Postmaster General the exclusive right of control over all telegraphy- and telephony services, both in its wired and in its wireless forms.²⁵ For some time, this had worked adequately, but things began to change around the years of the first World War. Until then, 'wireless telegraphy' had largely been understood as a means for 'point-to-point'-communication, so as a means to send a message to one designated receiver. However, it was increasingly recognized that radio really allowed an endless range of unknown receivers to tune into these messages, which was illustrated by the mounting numbers of 'wireless amateurs' who were seeking to do so.²⁶ This had long been considered as an unfortunate side-effect and it required a creative mind to reverse the perspective and to recognize that this side-effect really opened a whole spectrum of new opportunities, for example for the transmission of music, news and other forms of information. It was this shift that would pave the way for the birth of broadcasting. These developments were put on a temporary hold during World War I, but in due time it would urge the Post Office to reconsider its hold over the airwaves.

From 1918 onwards, it was notably the Marconi Company that pushed the emergence of broadcasting in Britain. Its founder, Guglielmo Marconi, had left Bologna in 1896, after which he had made Britain his main operating base.²⁷ In the following decades Marconi had managed to build his company into an international enterprise.²⁸ However, its activities were bound by national regulations. An unpleasant reminder of this came at the end of 1920, after the Marconi Company had successfully performed a series of experimental broadcasts from its Writtle-station near Chelmsford.²⁹ This included the famous transmission of the concert by the soprano Dame Nellie Melba, which was sponsored by the *Daily Mail* and which was received in large parts of Europe and even in North America.³⁰ The British Post Office had granted permission for these

22 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 88 and 140.

23 Ibidem, 88.

24 Ibidem, 94.

25 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 16.

26 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 36-41.

27 Street, *A Concise History of British Radio*, 14.

28 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 32.

29 Ibidem, 50.

30 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 14.

transmissions, but its officials became increasingly alarmed about the risks of signal interference with other, established forms of wireless communication, for example between aircrafts and airfields. In November 1920 the Postmaster General informed the House of Commons that all experimental broadcasts would be terminated henceforth. This was a futile effort, which illustrated that he had yet to reconcile the dilemmas that were raised by the new frontier in the airwaves.³¹

Because wireless signals were not bound to the reach of authority of the Postmaster General. And so, alternative broadcasts soon came available from outside Britain. An interesting example, in this respect, were the transmissions from The Hague, the Netherlands, where the Dutch radio-pioneer Hans Schotanus à Steringa Idzerda was broadcasting his Sunday-afternoon Concerts. His broadcasts were initially aimed at a Dutch audience, but in a short space of time these concerts became so popular in Britain that the *Daily Mail* was happy to sponsor these from 1922 onwards.³² This could hardly satisfy the demand for more programmes among the fledgling broadcasting audience, and the radio manufacturing industry was eager to meet this demand, as it hoped to expand the market for its products. Their combined pressures caused the Postmaster General to reopen the airwaves in 1922 to domestic broadcasts.³³ When this happened, the Marconi Company lost the privileged position it had earlier held, since two other major manufacturers (Western Electric and Metropolitan-Vickers) were now granted with an experimental broadcasting license as well.³⁴ But if the Postmaster General had hoped this would bring some calm to this field, he was surely mistaken. In 1922 alone, nearly a hundred other radio manufacturers came knocking on the Post Office's doors to apply for a license of this kind as well.³⁵ And so, this convinced the Post Office it needed to draw up more comprehensive provisional structures as to cope with the new phenomenon.

In doing so, it hoped to learn a lesson from what had happened in the United States, where the liberal policies of the authorities had helped to boost a rapid surge in the number of radio stations.³⁶ For this purpose the British Post Office had sent its assistant secretary, F.J. Brown, overseas to observe these developments from nearby. His visit to America would leave a lasting impact on the history of broadcasting in Britain. What Brown saw and heard did not please him. He returned to Britain, in March 1922, with a bleak report. Summed up by the term 'American chaos', Brown denounced the disarray of stations and the lack of coordination from the authorities, which caused all sorts of problems to arise, notably frequency-interference.³⁷ Asa Briggs labels Brown as the Post Office's 'leading spokesman' in broadcasting matters, which was illustrated by the fact that his lessons clearly resonated in the wordings his political superior, the Postmaster General Frederick Kellaway, used to inform the House of Commons about the

31 Street, *A Concise History of British Radio*, 19.

32 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 15. Asa Briggs refers to these concerts from The Hague shortly in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 53. See also Wijffes, 'Het radiotijdperk, 1919-1960' in Huub Wijffes and Eric Smulders eds., *Omroep in Nederland: vijftienzeventig jaar medium en maatschappij, 1919-1994* (Zwolle 1994) 41-75, there 43-44.

33 Street, *A Concise History of British Radio*, 19.

34 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 17-18.

35 Jean Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics' in: James Curran and Jean Seaton eds., *Power without Responsibility. The Press and Broadcasting in Britain* 5th ed. (London and New York 1997) 111-127, there 112.

36 See for instance Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics. Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920-1940* (Baltimore and London 2000) 9-11.

37 Hilmes, 'British Quality, American Chaos', 15-17, Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics', 113 and Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 96-97.

subsequent steps in broadcasting.³⁸ Among other things, Kellaway stated 'it would be impossible to have a large number of firms broadcasting' in Britain, since this 'would only result in a sort of chaos'. To which he added that it was necessary 'to lay down very drastic regulations indeed for the control of wireless broadcasting'.³⁹ This was in April 1922. A month later Kellaway announced the Post Office would invite all radio manufacturers to 'come together (...) and co-operate' in the best interests of British broadcasting.⁴⁰

This amounted to nearly four-hundred firms. It would have been quite impossible to discuss the founding of a national broadcasting service with the representatives of all those manufacturers.⁴¹ Although these companies shared a common objective, expanding the market for radio-sets, they were also competing for the same ground. Most of these companies were small businesses, operating on a local level. Only a handful – 'the big six' – were active on a national and international level. These larger companies (among which the Marconi Company, Western Electric and Metropolitan Vickers) would take the lead in the forthcoming talks as they would invest most resources and expertise. What was most easily settled was the name of this broadcasting service, i.e. the British Broadcasting Company. It took more time to discuss the details about organization, finances and administration, also since the Post Office remained critically involved in the whole process. Among other things, it was agreed that the broadcasting activities were to be financed by the shareholders of this body, by a percentage of the royalties of sold radio-sets and by the revenues of a license-fee, which listeners would have to pay to the Post Office.⁴² It was unsure whether this would provide the Broadcasting Company with sufficient income, but it did convince the various participants to put their faith in this project. And so, after months of negotiations the British Broadcasting Company was formally established on October 18, 1922, when the radio manufacturing industry came together for that specific purpose.⁴³

3.3 Broadcasting in a divided nation

So, on its founding, the BBC was basically a compromise between the need for state regulations and a demand for market expansion. The question which now surfaced was what its purpose should be in terms of programmes and how its broadcasting activities might serve the audience, rather than the Post Office or its shareholders. This was a most fundamental question, which went to the heart of building a new broadcasting service from the ground up. This task was placed in the hands of John Reith, a young and ambitious Scotsman. In the years before, Reith had worked at an engineering firm in Glasgow, so he had no experience with broadcasting when he applied for the position of general manager at this new undertaking. However, he did have strong convictions about what Britain needed and how broadcasting might serve this purpose. This helped him throughout the following fifteen years to develop the concept of public service broadcasting and, moreover, to build the BBC into a national institution of international prestige.⁴⁴

38 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 93.

39 As quoted in Ibidem, 68.

40 As quoted in Ibidem, 100.

41 Ibidem, 125.

42 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 18.

43 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 123.

44 Ian McIntyre, 'Reith, John Charles Walsham, first Baron Reith (1889-1971)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (30-4-2015).

In doing so, Reith established a firm reputation of his own as well. Although he yielded great respect and admiration for guiding the BBC to prominence, his position was never undisputed. His authoritative manners and uncompromising demeanour made him a controversial figure, not only with his staff, but also across the political spectrum.⁴⁵

Even so, his style of leadership did help Reith to mould the BBC to match his ideal. Central to his conception of broadcasting was the conviction that it should be developed into a force of education and improvement and that it should bring listeners together in an enlightened sense of national unity.⁴⁶ In 1924 he explained his ambitions for broadcasting as a ‘responsibility (..) to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every human department of knowledge, endeavour and achievements, and to avoid the things which are, or may be, ful.’⁴⁷ This may sound most sympathetic, but it was also paternalistic and elitist. In deciding about what was ‘best’ Reith subscribed to a set of cultural values which corresponded with the outlook of the higher strata of society.⁴⁸ This was not unproblematic, since the broadcasting audience was largely representative of the other strata of society; it raised a continuous tension between the popular demands of the audience and the more highbrow supply of the BBC. Reith was fully aware of this gap as well, but it only strengthened his resolve to ‘improve’ the tastes of the BBC’s audience. This is also recognized by Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, who portray Reith as a late heir to the 19th-century cultural critic Matthew Arnold. More specifically, they point to Arnold’s 1869 essay *Culture and Anarchy*, in which he warns for the looming threat of ‘anarchy’ and ‘division’ in British society and in which argues that the cultural education of the masses could help to remedy the antagonisms in a divided nation.⁴⁹ Apparently, some fifty years later this threat had not passed, as it urged Reith to take up Arnold’s mission by developing broadcasting into a force of ‘unity’ and ‘enlightenment’.

And yet, Reith’s diagnosis of what Britain needed was also shaped by the developments of the present. All over Europe the interwar decades were experienced as a period of crisis and there was a widespread concern about the disruptive impact of modernity on the fabric of public life.⁵⁰ It is generally understood that the sense of crisis was not as profound in Britain as elsewhere, but this did not prevent British observers from worrying about ‘disorder’ and ‘decline’ on a domestic front.⁵¹ There is no need to draw up a catalogue of these concerns here, but among the subjects which stirred the public nerves was the rise of mass politics and the introduction of universal suffrage in 1918. Jon Lawrence has noted that the early 1920s witnessed significant fears about the ‘brutalization’ of British politics and the spread of political violence by the millions of soldiers and ex-servicemen, who had grown so accustomed to violence when fighting the war abroad.⁵² Of course, Britain was no Russia, but Lawrence argues as well that these developments left a mark

45 Seaton, ‘Reith and the denial of politics’, 112.

46 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 7-11. Also Cardiff and Scannell, ‘Broadcasting and national unity’, 158-159.

47 These words come from Reith’s 1924 manifesto on broadcasting *Broadcast over Britain*. As quoted in Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, ‘Serving the nation: public service broadcasting before the war’ in: Bernard Wailes, Tony Bennett and Graham Martin eds., *Popular Culture: Past and Present* (London and New York 1982) 161-188, there 163.

48 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 33-35.

49 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 9-10.

50 Martin Daunt and Bernhard Rieger, ‘Introduction’ in: Idem and Idem eds., *Meanings of Modernity. Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford and New York 2001) 1-21, there 9-12.

51 Overy, *The Morbid Age*.

52 Jon Lawrence, ‘Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003) 557-589.

on British political culture, in the sense that it caused the suppression of the rowdy, boisterous and sometimes disorderly nature of public politics and a parallel shift towards a more passive and quiet form of politics.⁵³ In 1918, these same millions were granted the vote on their return from the front, which gave these developments a greater urgency. Decades earlier Walter Bagehot had warned that this formed the sort of bold move that might cause ‘*vox populi*’ to become ‘*vox diaboli*’.⁵⁴ At the time, there were many who feared for the impact on the British political system, among whom Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald. He claimed that the extension of the vote was ‘like a flood of waters for which no preparation had been made’.⁵⁵ A year later he wrote that ‘at this moment we know the mass at its worst...[its] mind in times like this is still the elemental mind of primitive man’.⁵⁶

This is only a partial picture, but what should be noted is that Reith was prone to perceive these developments in similar terms. In facing this reality Reith was convinced that broadcasting should become an ‘integrator of democracy’, as he would call it.⁵⁷ His efforts to do so form a major theme in the subsequent parts of this book, notably the third part. Although his conception of politics was marked by elitist overtones as well, Reith held a firm belief in broadcasting as a means to promote ‘a more intelligent and enlightened electorate’.⁵⁸ What’s more, he thought there was an urgent need for this, since he observed that the problem of an uninformed electorate was developing into ‘a serious menace to the country’.⁵⁹ His analysis was only partly based on the influx of new voters in 1918. It was also informed by the perceived ‘crisis’ in the British press. It was not long ago that the British press was hailed as a watchdog and a platform of public debate, but in recent decades much had changed, and according to many commentators not for the better.⁶⁰ To a large degree this followed from the rise of popular newspapers – chief amongst these the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* – which had conquered a highly dominant position in the British newspaper market. The content of these papers reflected the commercial motives of their owners, the so-called ‘press-barons’.⁶¹ Their sensational and populist style helped to sell these papers to a mass readership, but it did little to uphold the democratic values newspapers had earlier subscribed to. It seemed a bitter irony that these papers did not only neglect their public duty in this age of mass democracy, but that large parts of their readership was formed by the newly enfranchised voters, which had most to gain the most from reading a more informed newspaper, or at least so it was thought.⁶² What added to these concerns were the political antics of their owners. In controlling large parts of the British press, the press-barons held considerable power over public opinion, which they readily used to sway the political debate or to stir up

53 Jon Lawrence, ‘The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War’, *Past and Present* 190 (2006) 185–216.

54 As quoted in Marquand, *Britain since 1918. The Strange Career of British Democracy*, 32–33.

55 As quoted in Clare Griffiths, ‘Dubious Democrats: Party Politics and the Mass Electorate in Twentieth-century Britain’ in: Moore and Van Nierop eds., *Twentieth-Century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands*, 30–44, there 33.

56 As quoted in Lawrence, ‘Forging a Peaceable Kingdom’, 564.

57 As quoted in Cardiff and Scannell, ‘Broadcasting and national unity’, 159.

58 As quoted in Michael Bailey, ‘Rethinking Public Service Broadcasting: The Historical Limits to Publicness’ in: Richard Butsch ed., *Media and public spheres* (Basingstoke and New York 2007) 96–108, there 103.

59 As quoted in Bailey, ‘Rethinking Public Service Broadcasting’, 103.

60 Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Urbana and Chicago 2004) 39–43.

61 James Curran, ‘The era of the press barons’ in: J. Curran and J. Seaton ed., *Power without responsibility. The press, broadcasting and new media in Britain* 6th ed. (London and New York 2003) 38–54.

62 Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain*, 146–164.

public sentiment.⁶³ Subsequent parts of this book will show that the Labour Party formed a permanent target of their campaigns and, moreover, that this helped to shape its hopes and ideas about broadcasting as well. It would not take long before the Labour Party was invited to express these ideas, as part of a broader inquest into the future of the new-born BBC.

3.4 The Sykes Committee and the Labour Party (1923)

This invitation was the result of a conflict which had emerged between the BBC and the Post Office only months after the broadcasting company had first entered the airwaves. This conflict revolved around the role of the Post Office in the collection of license-fees and its influence on the royalties on radio-sets.⁶⁴ More particularly, the BBC blamed the Post Office for failing to collect the full amount of license-fees and for being all too generous in issuing cheaper, experimental licenses, which caused the BBC to lose out on its expected income. However, the Post Office was, at first, reluctant to alter its policies.⁶⁵ It needed the attention of the press to change its mind. On the whole, newspapers were wary about the influence broadcasting might have on their sales. What's more, many newspapers saw the BBC as an unhealthy alliance between a government agency and private enterprise and it used this conflict to heat up their campaign against this new undertaking.⁶⁶ And so, in facing these pressures, the Postmaster General yielded and he decided in April 1923 that it was best to delegate this matter to 'the strongest Committee I can get in order to consider the whole question of broadcasting'.⁶⁷ With this announcement broadcasting had moved from the interior of the Post Office to the centre of political debate.

The committee which was put together for this purpose, consisted of ten members, who came from different corners of state and society. The chairmanship of this body was handed to Sir Frederick Sykes, a Conservative MP with a background in military aviation. F.J. Brown, whose American journey had inspired the Post Office's desire for unified control, was also invited to the committee, together with one other Post Office official. The BBC was represented by its general manager, John Reith. Among the other members were a representative of the press and a representative of the Radio Society of Great Britain, the organizational home of wireless enthusiasts. The committee was completed by three Members of Parliament. Besides the Conservative J.J. Astor (who had just recently purchased *The Times* to rescue it from 'press baron' Lord Rothermere), these were the Liberal Henry Norman (who was also an esteemed journalist) and Charles Trevelyan for the Labour Party.⁶⁸ Trevelyan was hardly the average Labour MP. Coming from a renowned Whig family, he had switched allegiance from the Liberals to the Labour Party only five years earlier, in 1918, after which he quickly emerged as a radically spirited socialist.⁶⁹ Before exploring how Trevelyan and other Labour figures contributed to the Sykes Committee, we should first consider the main recommendations of this committee.

63 Curran, 'The era of the press barons'.

64 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 6.

65 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 145-147 and Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics', 110.

66 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 162.

67 Ibidem, 160-164.

68 Ibidem, 164. Derek Wilson, 'Astor, John Jacob, first Baron Astor of Hever (1886-1971)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (30-4-2015).

69 A.J.A. Morris, 'Trevelyan, Sir Charles Philips, third baronet (1870-1958)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (30-4-2015).

All in all, the Sykes Committee needed thirty-four meetings and interviewed thirty-two witnesses before it was ready to present its conclusions to the Postmaster General in August 1923.⁷⁰ Its main recommendation was that the BBC should be enabled to continue its activities in broadcasting. It was generally agreed that the BBC had done a good job, despite its financial restrictions. More specifically, they recommended the reorganization of the license-fee system (so that the BBC would receive a greater share of the revenues from the Post Office), and the tightening of restrictions on the import of foreign radio-sets. More generally, the Sykes Committee advised that the broadcasting license of the BBC should be extended with two more years, after which a new committee would have to reconsider its position in broadcasting and its relationship to the Post Office and the manufacturing industry.⁷¹ But, however important these issues were, the more interesting aspect of the Sykes report was how it presented a first conception of broadcasting as a public service.⁷² A key element in this was the notion that broadcasting was essentially a 'public utility' and therefore required some form of regulation by the authorities: 'The wavebands available in any country must be regarded as a valuable form of public property; and the right to use them for all should be given after full and careful consideration.'⁷³ This, of course, was largely in line with the policies the Post Office had so far applied in broadcasting, but, quite crucially, the initial negative rationale (to prevent 'chaos') was now incorporated in a more positive formulation. The Sykes report gave a further underpinning of this shift by stating that 'the control of such a potential power over public opinion and the life of the nation ought to remain with the State, and that the operation of so important a national service ought not to become an unrestricted commercial monopoly.'⁷⁴

But if broadcasting was recognized as a 'public utility', then the question was to which extent and in what form the authorities were responsible for this service, notably since its operation was commissioned to a private company, i.e. the BBC. Until then the Postmaster General had been responsible for overseeing the administrative, financial and technical side of radio matters on behalf of the Post Office. The Sykes Committee saw no need to change this, as it deemed it of vital importance that 'the ultimate control of broadcasting' would 'rest with a Minister responsible to Parliament'. Still, it was recognized as well that the nature of the Postmaster General's office was too restricted to deal effectively with complicated questions which might emerge over other matters in broadcasting. And so, the members of the Sykes Committee suggested setting up an advisory body, a 'Broadcasting Board', which would assist the Postmaster General in his oversight of this new domain. Loosely composed around a variety of interests – wireless societies, Trade Union Congress, the Post Office, radio manufacturers, the entertainment industry, etc. – this body should 'become the authority to whom complaints and suggestions of all kinds concerning broadcasting would be sent'. The Sykes Committee hoped that this would 'inspire confidence in the public mind' about broadcasting.⁷⁵

The most slippery issue concerned the main product of broadcasting, programmes. Because if the Postmaster General was ultimately responsible for the conduct of this 'public utility', then he needed to have a certain extent of control over the programming output of the BBC as well. Yet, this was a highly delicate matter, which raised all sorts of difficult questions about the degree

70 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 184.

71 Ibidem, 187-188.

72 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 6.

73 As quoted in Ibidem.

74 *The broadcasting committee report 1923* (HMSO, London 1923) 6.

75 Ibidem, 13.

of independence in broadcasting, the larger democratic purpose of broadcasting and the BBC's overall relationship to the bodies of power. These questions will be explored in more detail in part three of this study, but the members of the Sykes Committee formulated a first advice on these matters as well. They argued the Postmaster General ought to practice restraint in exercising his powers, mainly since a government would be 'constantly open to suspicion that it was using its unique opportunities (BdJ – in broadcasting) to advance the interests of the political party in power', but also since it was highly undesirable that a government would become responsible for 'the entertainment side' of broadcasting.⁷⁶ However, the Sykes Committee did state that the broadcasting service had to meet the 'reasonable satisfaction of the Postmaster General', who should remain 'the final arbiter' of 'what kind of matter may or may not be broadcast'.⁷⁷ It saw this as a safeguard, or as an instrument of last resort: if the BBC would ignore and continue to ignore the Postmaster General's orders, it was then up to him to intervene and to consider whether the BBC's misconduct was serious enough to withdraw its broadcasting license altogether.

'A partially controlled but otherwise irresponsible private monopoly'

In the hearings of the Sykes Committee the representative of the Labour Party, Charles Trevelyan, showed a most pressing concern for these matters. Until April 1923 the Labour Party had hardly shown an interest in broadcasting or in the BBC, but in its neglect it was no different from the other parties.⁷⁸ Therefore, the invitation to the Sykes Committee marked the moment when parties first became involved in discussing the present state and future of British broadcasting. By a minor coincidence, the Labour Party had been alerted to the significance of broadcasting one week earlier. Because on April 12, the BBC had hosted a talk on a London building dispute, which had provoked an angry response from a number of Labour sympathizers among the audience. Among those to take offence was also Charles Ammon, the Labour Party's whip in the House of Commons, and he turned to the Postmaster General to ask whether he was prepared to 'secure that any broadcasted political or industrial news will be stated in an unbiased manner'.⁷⁹ In response the Postmaster General had stated that it was 'undesirable that the broadcasting service should be used for the dissemination of speeches on controversial matters' and that he had informed the BBC of this as well.

This was a minor incident only, and in the following years and decades the BBC would be accused of bias on many occasions. Even so, its particular timing gave this incident a greater weight, at least potentially. With the future of the BBC being decided upon in the following months, Reith realized he had to treat the deciding powers, including those on the Opposition benches, with circumspection. And so, his diary entry of May 31 reveals how he sought to soothe the irritation in Labour circles: 'The Labour party are showing considerable hostility to us so I had a talk with Ammon in the House of Commons for an hour and did very useful work.'⁸⁰ Apparently, this did not resolve the matter, because three weeks later, Reith met Ammon again at the House of Commons. This time Ammon was accompanied by Herbert Morrison, who was

76 Ibidem, 14.

77 Ibidem, 31-32 and 36.

78 Hollins, *The Presentation of Politics*, 288.

79 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 24-4-1923, 300-301, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>. On Ammon, Alan Clinton, 'Ammon, Charles George, Baron Ammon (1873-1960)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (30-4-2015).

80 C. Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries* (London 1975) 89.

a Labour MP for Hackney South and the upcoming leader of the London Labour Party. In this latter capacity, he was also represented on the London County Council, where he would have met Ammon on a regular basis as well.⁸¹ Morrison was also one of the first Labour leaders to develop an active interest in broadcasting. The BBC's handling of the London building dispute helped to shape his ideas about the institutional organization of broadcasting. Just days before, he had submitted these (in the form of a memorandum) to the Sykes Committee on behalf of the London Labour Party. And yet this did not cause him to bear a grudge against Reith, since Reith was again rather satisfied with the outcome of this meeting; afterwards he noted in his diary that he 'made them very friendly'.⁸²

In the months before Reith, as a member of the Sykes Committee, had witnessed from nearby how the main parties thought about broadcasting. As such he must have noted that Charles Trevelyan, as Labour's representative on this body, seemed primarily concerned about the use and abuse of broadcasting for political purposes. Asa Briggs labels Trevelyan 'the most vigorous questioner' on 'censorship', who 'throughout the whole committee's hearings (...) asked difficult and searching questions'.⁸³ In doing so, Trevelyan explored the margins of the relative independence of the BBC, as shaped by its relationship to the Post Office and its shareholders. Although the Post Office had no direct command over the BBC, as the department overseeing the operation of broadcasting, the Post Office was in a position to put pressure on the BBC. But, at the same time, the BBC was also a vehicle of the private interests of its shareholders and these did not, at all times, run parallel with the interests of the Post Office. More specifically, Trevelyan was both interested in the extent to which Post Office officials could intervene in BBC-programmes, as well as in the extent to which the BBC could ignore its demands. So when questioning Post Office official R.W. Woods, Trevelyan asked if 'for public reasons' the government of the day could prevent something from being broadcast by the BBC for being 'undesirable'.⁸⁴ Woods answered that he did not think the government could intervene to prevent speeches, concerts, lectures or other programmes, but he did think it 'could intervene to prevent news, because it would have to be approved by the Postmaster General'.⁸⁵ When he discussed this point with BBC-directors, Trevelyan found that the Post Office's ambiguity caused the BBC to adopt a cautious stance: 'we do not wish to have the Broadcasting Stations used for propaganda which will excite one section of the population and be very distasteful to another' and 'we think, therefore, that it is better for the Broadcasting Company to keep away from controversial matter. Political matter is very controversial'.⁸⁶ Trevelyan doubted whether 'absolutely excluding controversial questions' was the right approach, if only since 'you are going to make yourselves very dull'.⁸⁷ He asked those same directors whether they could 'not conceive a situation in which the public would rather like, not to have partial propaganda, but to have statements from both

81 David Howell, 'Morrison, Herbert Stanley, Baron Morrison of Lambert (1888-1965)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (30-4-2015) and Bernard Donoughue and G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison. Portrait of a Politician* (London 1973).

82 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 90-91.

83 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 167 and more generally 167-171. Also Hollins, *The Presentation of Politics*, 261-269. The debate about censorship, controversy and broadcasting will be investigated more extensively in the chapter on political broadcasting in the third part of this study.

84 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 167.

85 Ibidem, 167.

86 As quoted in Hollins, *The Presentation of Politics*, 263 and 264.

87 Ibidem, 265.

sides on great public questions; but would not feel safe if taking those statements if issued from a Company and not from some sort of body which represented the public'.⁸⁸

This question was in effect a veiled confession. Although the Sykes Committee went some way in formulating a view of broadcasting as a 'public utility', Trevelyan did not think it went far enough. His questions about censorship suggested he was mainly worried about the Post Office's hold over broadcasting. When the Sykes Report was published it turned out he was most concerned about the presence of the radio manufacturing industry in broadcasting. In a two-paged reservation, annexed to the Sykes report, Trevelyan explained that he saw the industry's involvement as a distortion of the public function of broadcasting.⁸⁹ He stressed it was unacceptable that the machinery of the state was used for the benefit of those private companies, notably by collecting the listeners' license-fees. And so Trevelyan argued that the operation of broadcasting should be transferred to the state altogether. One way of doing this was to 'buy out and take over the eight stations of the British Broadcasting Company and operate them itself', but Trevelyan claimed the Post Office might also use 'a different waveband', by establishing 'an extra large station or stations of its own'.⁹⁰ He claimed there was 'no reason why the Government should not in the public interest at once start transmitting meteorological reports, police intelligence, business announcements and other service'. Although admitting that the BBC had been quite successful so far, Trevelyan was convinced that a state agency was capable of delivering the same or even better results. For one thing, since the Post Office could 'employ the best technical managers and scientific advisers', but also since it was 'more sensitive' to the needs and demands of the public than a private company: 'A public authority which failed to satisfy the listeners-in would be subjected to such a constant bombardment of public criticism that it would have to improve its methods.'⁹¹

With his defence of state ownership, Trevelyan promoted a position which had also been advocated in one of the written evidences to the Sykes Committee.⁹² As was noted above Herbert Morrison had submitted a proposal on behalf of the London Labour Party, which he claimed 'does not appear to have had appreciable public attention so far'.⁹³ Morrison himself was a great advocate of public ownership; in recent years he had made it one of his major themes to extend municipal enterprise. His biographers note that his main objective as leader of the London Labour Party was to 'substitute municipal for private provision' and that the essence of his socialism was the 'provision of services and goods to the public by public authorities and not by private enterprise'.⁹⁴ This led him to argue for municipal enterprise in the broadest range of services, among which the distribution of water and electricity, the provision of public transport and the building of houses. Beyond these conventional services, Morrison also promoted municipal ownership of restaurants, laundries, theatres, dances, banks, farms and kitchens.⁹⁵ Apparently, from here it was a small step to claim that broadcasting should be publicly owned as well.

88 As quoted in Beers, *Your Britain*, 80.

89 'Reservation by Mr. Charles Trevelyan', *The broadcasting committee report 1923* (HMSO, London 1923) 39-41.

90 'Reservation by Mr. Charles Trevelyan', 40.

91 *Ibidem*, 40.

92 'Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, inv. nr. R4/65/1.

93 'Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, Sykes Committee Papers, inv. nr. R4/65/1, f. 3-4.

94 Donoughue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 55.

95 *Ibidem*, 569.

Although Morrison's proposal failed to have an impact on the Sykes Committee's deliberations, it does offer a helpful insight in the perception of broadcasting in Labour circles.

Summed up in twenty-two points, this memorandum suggested that 'broadcasting, instead of being in the hands of a partially controlled but otherwise irresponsible private monopoly, should be publicly owned and controlled'.⁹⁶ It argued that broadcasting should be transferred to a government department, preferably the Post Office. Similar to Trevelyan's reservation, Morrison's memorandum claimed that this would inevitably make broadcasting more responsive to public criticism, than if it would continue in its present, privately owned form. In relation to that it was also suggested to set up a 'Broadcasting Advisory Committee', as a representative body (representing the broadcasting audience, the 'amusement-industry', the press and the broadcasting staff) which should see to it that broadcasting was operated in the public interest. Although this body should be vested 'with some real measure of control', it should also be 'responsible to the Minister, who in turn would be responsible to Parliament'; because 'the last word must obviously rest with Parliament as representative of the general body of citizens'.⁹⁷ Yet, the memorandum gave no further details about the nature of the Advisory Committee's control over broadcasting and neither did it reflect on the exact powers of Parliament and government over this Committee, or over the operation of broadcasting more generally.

This points to another issue. Because the argument for state ownership in broadcasting was mainly informed by moral and economic considerations, and much less, or so it seems, by an interest in broadcasting itself. This was reflected, for example, by the strong emphasis which was placed on questions about cost and efficiency, trade and enterprise or by its concern for the implications of broadcasting for the various professional interests, among which those of the 'amusement-industry'. Perhaps, this was illustrated most clearly by a comment about the nature of the BBC's organization. The memorandum claimed that the BBC was merely 'a financial organization employing technical experts, staff, musicians, artists and workpeople' and there was 'no more difficulty in the Government employing such persons than there is in the case of the Company's Board of Director's'. It continued by arguing that 'the various "Uncles" could tell children's stories (...) just as ably and cheerfully for the community as they can on behalf of (...) the British Broadcasting Company, Ltd.'⁹⁸ Although this was not entirely inaccurate, the innocence of this example helps to conceal – whether deliberate or not – a more complex reality, which, moreover, was fraught with political conflict as well. Because broadcasting was more than a matter of employment. It was also, and much more importantly, a matter of deciding who should tell which stories, at which occasion, in which form, for which parts of the audience and with which purpose. If children's stories make a category of programmes which is least likely to raise controversy, the same does not apply to programmes about, for example, politics. This was one reason why the Sykes Committee rejected the idea of state ownership of broadcasting, since it anticipated that this would provoke continuous complaints about the abuse of government power in broadcasting. Although this risk seemed very real, Herbert Morrison and Charles Trevelyan largely ignored it in their statements, probably, since it did not weigh up to what they thought represented the far greater risk, a privately-owned monopoly in broadcasting.

96 'Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, inv. nr. R4/65/1, f. 4.

97 Ibidem, f. 6.

98 Ibidem, f. 5.

Apparently, Labour's own experience with the BBC helped to shape this judgement. The incident about the London building dispute had only happened a few weeks earlier, and the London Labour Party's memorandum referred to this occasion by stating that the 'private broadcasting company involves political dangers. Already accusations have been made that announcements and subjects of a party political or anti-Labour character have been radiated'; it added to this (somewhat sinister) that 'it is obvious that in view of the subtle and obscure character of modern commercial publicity the extension of that psychological treatment of political and industrial questions in connection with broadcasting involves great dangers to democracy'.⁹⁹ It also claimed that this was not an isolated incident, but that it was symptomatic of a general lack of trust in the BBC. Among other things it argued that 'neither the public as a whole, nor even the trade and professional interests can have confidence in a new undertaking possessing the enormous possibilities of wireless when (it) is in the hands of a private monopoly'.¹⁰⁰ A few pages later it made a similar point, which more or less summed up the London Labour Party's position: 'Without hesitation our submission is that such a monopoly (...) should be in public hands and that there should be public accountability either for inefficiency or for political or class misuse of the great publicity powers of modern wireless.'¹⁰¹

What's more, these last words did not only sum up the London Labour Party's position, it also highlights the ambiguity at the heart of its conception of broadcasting. Although Morrison did praise the 'great publicity powers' of broadcasting, he showed no appreciation for its positive value to democracy, for example as a platform of public opinion or as means of political education, and neither did Trevelyan. In fact, in the ten pages which comprise both statements the term 'democracy' was used only once to denote broadcasting as a threat – 'involves great dangers to democracy'. And so, neither Morrison, nor Trevelyan made any suggestions about the role of broadcasting in election campaigns or about its value for government officials, party leaders or other political figures to inform the audience about the political issues of the day. This is remarkable, also since Morrison's and Trevelyan's defence of public ownership was deeply democratic, albeit in the sense that it relied on a view of democracy as a form of government. Their main concern was the democratic nature of the institutional organization of broadcasting and its relation to the wider framework of democratic government, notably Parliament. This might also explain their relative neglect of programmes, since it seems that their ideas about broadcasting were mainly inspired by a notion of the public as an abstract source of democratic legitimacy, and much less by its capacity as an audience, or as a body of politically informed citizens. Of course, one cannot deny that this latter capacity held a more prominent function in broadcasting than Trevelyan and Morrison seemed to acknowledge. Even so, these are only the first formulations of a Labour Party view of broadcasting, so it remains to be seen how distinct these ambiguities were to Labour's wider understanding of broadcasting and whether these would somehow reverberate in the party's dealings with the BBC in the following years. And yet, to answer these question we should first take a closer look at the party political roots of these ideas. This will show that these ambiguities were really part of a more fundamental indeterminacy in the Labour Party's outlook in the 1920s.

99 Ibidem, f. 1-2. These observations of the pervasive nature of publicity and communication typically reveal Morrison's hand as his grasp of the public relations side of politics made him a central figure in Labour Party's publicity campaigns throughout the 1920s, 1930s and subsequent decades. See Dominic Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Basingstoke and New York 2005) 30-32.

100 'Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, inv. nr. R4/65/1, f. 2.

101 Ibidem, f. 7.

3.5 Politics of ownership

Based on the above, it seems safe to say that the BBC would not have survived its first year if the Labour Party had won a parliamentary majority in the last general election. Both Trevelyan and Morrison argued the British public was best served when the BBC was dissolved and when broadcasting was transferred to the Post Office altogether. By doing so, they promoted a view which was largely consistent with the position which the Labour Party had adopted some years earlier.

This was most clearly epitomized by clause IV of its 1918 party constitution, which, among other things, claimed the ‘common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange’ and the ‘best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.’¹⁰² In the same year, the party had also presented its new party programme (*Labour and the New Social Order*) which offered further insight in the objectives behind this formula. Largely written by Fabian frontman Sidney Webb, this programme committed the Labour Party to a variety of purposes, among which full employment, a national minimum wage and a mixture of social reforms in education, housing and health.¹⁰³ While these measures would comprise ‘the four pillars of the house of tomorrow’, one of those pillars was ‘the democratic control of industry’. More specifically, *Labour and the New Social Order* advocated a programme of ‘immediate nationalisation’, which would include the ‘National Ownership and Administration of the Railways and Canals (..), Harbours and Roads, and the Posts and Telegraphs (..) in a united national service of Communication and Transport’.¹⁰⁴ Although the ‘house of tomorrow’ would never be completed, the shape of its separate parts would inform the Labour Party’s approach to specific subjects in the following decades. As such, this last resolution would also underpin Morrison’s and Trevelyan’s argument for public ownership in broadcasting some years later.

Nonetheless, their proposals were not a mere product of these 1918 party statements, since the cause of public ownership traced back to earlier decades. Indeed, José Harris has noted that the opposition between public and private property formed a fundamental element of the debates which shaped the Labour Party’s outlook from the 19th century onwards. Among other things, this caused Labour theorists to assess the notions of ‘rent’ and ‘interest’ and to reject their place in the accumulation of wealth, or private property, at the expense of the community.¹⁰⁵ In a more general way, it also fuelled Labour’s hostility towards the market and capitalism, which were widely considered as the twin evils of modern society. Among those to reject capitalism was Labour leader Philip Snowden, and he dismissed it in terms which resonate the fears for the ‘brutalization’ of the masses as were discussed above; according to Snowden capitalism brought out the ‘animal instincts’ in men and it made them ‘hard, cruel, selfish, acquisitive economic machines’; he also claimed market competition was ‘largely responsible for insanity, suicide, and

102 The full wordings of clause IV stated that Labour aimed ‘to secure for the workers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible on the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.’ As quoted in Jim Tomlinson, ‘Labour and the economy’ in: Tanner, Thane and Tsiratsoo eds., *Labour’s First Century*, 46-79, there 51.

103 Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 65-66 and Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 49-50.

104 Labour Party, *Labour and the New Social Order* (London 1918) 17.

105 Harris, ‘Labour’s political and social thought’, 18-21.

drinking'.¹⁰⁶ There was no standard account of what the precise ills of capitalism were. While Snowden's words carried the overtones of ethical socialism, which condemned the competitive nature of the market for its disruptive influence on the spirit of fellowship or communal life, Fabian observers deployed a more rationalist and systematic argument. They rejected the uncoordinated nature of capitalism and the inefficient workings of the market.¹⁰⁷ Although the boundaries between these groups were fluid (and so were the personal convictions of most party leaders), it was the Fabian perspective which came to dominate the Labour Party's stance towards these matters in the following decades.¹⁰⁸

Some of this was also reflected in Trevelyan's and Morrison's proposals for broadcasting and tracing this connection can help to understand the ambiguities in their understanding of broadcasting which were noted above. Two elements stand out in this respect. The first of these is Morrison's and Trevelyan's emphasis on the Post Office as the state department which, they claimed, was best capable of operating an efficient broadcasting service in the public interest. This was largely consistent with Labour's post-war embrace of the state, but it also revealed a more specific, Fabian-minded, belief in the capacities of the state as the ultimate instrument through which the failings of the market could be corrected.¹⁰⁹ This points to the second element, because the Fabian faith in state collectivism was accompanied by a firm belief in the centrality of Parliament in the workings of the British political system. Underpinning this belief, was the notion of 'parliamentary sovereignty', which implied that all parts of the political system were accountable to Parliament, as the country's ultimate representative body.¹¹⁰ Different historians have noted that Labour's esteem for Parliament was part of a more general regard for the constitutional structures of British democracy.¹¹¹ If this wedded the Labour Party to a parliamentary approach to socialism, it also shaped its early ideas about the institutional organization of broadcasting. This was most clearly exemplified by Herbert Morrison's memorandum, which did not only state that broadcasting should be 'responsible to the Minister, who in turn would be responsible to Parliament', but also that 'the last word must obviously rest with Parliament as representative of the general body of citizens.'¹¹²

However, it has been noted as well that the Labour Party's understanding of nationalisation and public ownership was caught up in ambiguities during the larger part of the 1920s. It seems that this has also affected Morrison's and Trevelyan's ideas about public ownership in broadcasting. Among those to highlight these ambiguities is Jim Tomlinson and he argues, more specifically, that the 'enormous ambition' of nationalisation was 'not matched by any clear notion of the institutional forms this could involve.'¹¹³ Although *Labour and the New Social Order* presented a long list of

106 As quoted in Mark Bevir, 'Socialism, Civil Society and the State in Modern Britain', *Socialist History* 20 (2001) 1-24, there 13 and as quoted in Richard Toye, *The Labour Party and the Planned Economy, 1931-1951* (London 2003) 17. On Philip Snowden see also Duncan Tanner, 'Snowden, Philip, Viscount Snowden (1864-1937)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (21-5-2015).

107 See for instance Bevir, 'Socialism, Civil Society and the State in Modern Britain', 10-11 and Mark Bevir, 'Socialism and Democracy: New Labour and the Constitution', *Observatoire de la Société Britannique* 3 (2007) 21-45.

108 Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton 2011) 308-309 and Bevir, 'Socialism, Civil Society and the State in Modern Britain', 14.

109 Barker, *Political Ideas in Modern Britain*, 34-52.

110 Peter Dorey, *The Labour Party and constitutional reform: a history of constitutional conservatism* (Basingstoke and New York 2008) 350-351.

111 More extensive on this Richard Toye, "'Perfectly Parliamentary'? The Labour Party and the House of Commons in the Inter-War Years', *Twentieth Century British History* 25 (2014) 1-29.

112 Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, inv. nr. R4/65/1, f. 6.

113 Tomlinson, 'Labour and the economy', 51-52 and more extensive Jim Tomlinson, *The Unequal Struggle? British Socialism and the Capitalist Enterprise* (London and New York 1982) 63-79.

industries and services that were targeted for state ownership, it failed to specify how these industries and services were to be organized and governed once this would actually happen. Mark Bevir makes a similar point when he explains that the Fabians were the main providers of ideas about state collectivist arrangements, but that their analysis of the institutional implications of public ownership largely stopped short at the established structures of the state's bureaucracy.¹¹⁴ In relation to this, Tomlinson and Bevir also observe that Labour's early 1920s conception of public ownership took no account of the ideas about workers' control, which were discussed in Labour circles in the years around World War I.¹¹⁵ This neglect is important, since it exposes Labour's inability or reluctance to look beyond Parliament to bolster its claims about the democratic nature of public ownership. Although this would be solved in due time (as will be shown in a subsequent chapter), at this point it helps to understand some of the flaws in these early statements about broadcasting.¹¹⁶

Among other things, this concerns the lack of clarity about the institutional implications a publicly owned broadcasting service would have. The term 'corporation' did not figure in Morrison's memorandum and neither did he or Trevelyan reflect on questions about the organizational form or management of this service. Although it was suggested to set up a 'Broadcasting Advisory Committee', it was not specified what 'real measure of control' this body should have or what its relation would be to the (unspecified) powers of the Post Office, the Postmaster General and Parliament in broadcasting. On paper, this might seem a lesser detail, but it would certainly raise confusion or controversy when these suggestions were adopted as the pillars of a state controlled, publicly owned broadcasting service. Perhaps, this is illustrated most clearly by the relative neglect of programmes, as the main product of broadcasting. Although Morrison and Trevelyan claimed with great confidence that their suggested form of public ownership would enhance the overall quality of broadcasting, they failed to acknowledge that it might also become an impediment to this. Because by ignoring the programming side of broadcasting, they turned a blind eye to the fact that a government, the Post Office, parties in Parliament or the members of an advisory committee were not only the controllers of broadcasting, but also its interested parties. This implied that the public interest in broadcasting might well fall prey to the sectional and conflictive demands of those same controllers.

Of course, these were still the introductory years of broadcasting, so the following chapters will have to show whether these inconsistencies were a result of the novelty of broadcasting, or whether these were somehow intrinsic to Labour's perception of these matters. To understand why broadcasting was so readily targeted as an object of public ownership we should also look beyond the basics of Labour's blueprint for the 'house of tomorrow'. In previous years the Labour Party had met fierce hostility from the popular press, which had come to portray the party's advance in British politics as a crisis of potentially catastrophic proportions. In doing so, it made ample use of the imagery which was offered by the political turmoil across Europe and it blamed the Labour Party for bringing 'extremism', 'militancy' and 'internationalism' to the British shores.¹¹⁷ The *Daily Mail* was among those newspapers which fuelled the anti-Labour mood; on the day of the 1922 municipal

114 Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 309. See also Dorey, *The Labour Party and Constitutional Reform*, 350-351 and Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought', 15.

115 Tomlinson, 'Labour and the economy', 52 and Bevir, 'Socialism, Civil Society and the State in Modern Britain', 14-16. More extensive on this Stears, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State* (Oxford and New York 2006).

116 The following chapter will show that this process was crucially steered by Hebert Morrison and his 'discovery' of the public corporation-model towards the end of the 1920s. See also Tomlinson, *The Unequal Struggle?*, 78.

117 Laura Beers, 'Education or Manipulation. Labour, Democracy, and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009) 129-152, there 141.

elections it warned its readers that '[Labour] threatens every man's house and furniture, and every woman's clothes and jewellery, as was done in Russia....If the Labour Bolsheviks once get control we shall all be irrevocably dragged along the Russian Road to Ruin.'¹¹⁸ A year later it denounced the Labour Party as a 'wing of the German Bolshevik Sozialistische Arbeiter Internationale', which, once in power, would torment Britain with 'the sweated wage, the massacres, the machine guns, the fearful famines and the pestilences' of Soviet socialism.¹¹⁹

In Labour circles it was generally thought that this 'red scare' campaign was a symptom of the commercial rationale which drove the British newspaper industry. It was noted above that a large share of the British press was owned and controlled by the so-called press barons.¹²⁰ The *Daily Mail*, for instance, was owned by Lord Northcliffe, who also owned the *Daily Mirror*, which were the two largest popular dailies in early 1920s Britain. Both the *Mirror* and the *Mail* stood at the forefront of the campaign against the Labour Party and this did not change when both papers were taken over in 1922 by Lord Northcliffe's brother, Lord Rothermere, after the former's death. But the looming threat of 'bolshevism' was not just a brotherly obsession. Labour faced frantic hostility from newspapers of other proprietors as well, among which the *Daily Express*, which was owned by the Canadian press baron Lord Beaverbrook.¹²¹ All this yielded ample evidence for Labour figures to observe a close connection between the structures of ownership and the anti-Labour bias of the British press.¹²² Beyond that, it was also felt that the popular press was part of a 'capitalist plot', which was aimed at misleading the minds of the masses and to prevent the readership of these papers from understanding that their 'true' interests lay with the Labour Party, and not with those parties and politicians who sought to capitalize on the fears for Labour.¹²³

In facing this enemy front, the Labour Party did not have the resources which were needed to counter the 'poison gas of the capitalist press'.¹²⁴ Although it had recently, in 1922, acquired the *Daily Herald* with the TUC, this was a rather desperate attempt to save this title from collapsing since it was the only paper with a pro-labour outlook which survived in the newspaper market. There was much doubt and mistrust in Labour circles about this purchase, since the labour movement had lost a lot of money to its former paper, the *Daily Citizen*, which had collapsed in 1915.¹²⁵ Wary to repeat these mistakes, many thought it was impossible to print a party paper in which the reading public was genuinely interested and which would not become a bottomless pit of movement finances. Yet, the machinations of a few Labour figures, notably George Lansbury and to a lesser degree Arthur Henderson, drove the *Daily Herald* in the hands of the labour movement.¹²⁶ Its reluctant ownership presented the Labour leadership with the most urgent question of how the continuing decline of the *Daily Herald* could be turned around. One advisor argued that the paper should, above all, avoid a party political profile: 'the appeal should not be to "Labour", "Socialism" and "Anti-Capitalism"

118 As quoted in Beers, *Your Britain*, 50-67, there 52.

119 As quoted in James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics* (London and New York, 2005) 8.

120 Curran, 'The era of the press barons', 38-54.

121 Beers, *Your Britain*, 20-22 and Thomas, *Popular Newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics* 8-11.

122 Beers, *Your Britain*, 68-77.

123 Stuart MacIntyre, 'British Labour, Marxism, and Working Class Apathy in the Nineteen Twenties', *The Historical Journal* 20 (1977) 479-496, there 481-482.

124 As quoted in MacIntyre, 'British Labour, Marxism, and Working Class Apathy in the Nineteen Twenties', 482.

125 McKibbin, *The evolution of the Labour Party*, 222.

126 Ibidem, 221-235.

but the merits of the paper as a paper... Even the political features should be presented to the readers on their non-political side.¹²⁷ Although this advice was welcomed, it was also counterintuitive to the broader understanding of the purpose of the press in Labour circles, which is why the *Daily Herald's* difficulties persisted in the years after 1922.¹²⁸ As these developments coincided with the emergence of broadcasting, this helps to explain why Trevelyan and Morrison argued for its transfer to the Post Office, so in addition to Labour's more general advocacy for public ownership. Not only would this prevent broadcasting from developing into a force of similar hostility as the popular press, it would also allow the Labour Party to invest its funds and energy in the recovery of its recent acquisition, the *Daily Herald*.

3.6 Labour's first government (1924)

When the report of the Sykes Committee was published, in October 1923, it received a relatively quiet reception. On its presentation the Postmaster General announced that he would accept its main recommendations and that the BBC would be enabled to continue its activities in broadcasting. Among other things this implied a reshuffle of the license-fee system, a two year extension of the BBC's broadcasting license, a broadening of the membership of the BBC (enabling smaller firms to join the company as well) and the establishment of an Advisory Board to assist the Postmaster General in broadcasting matters.¹²⁹ These matters held a crucial significance for the future of British broadcasting, but at the time the Sykes Committee's recommendations were not considered important enough to be a subject of political debate in the months afterwards. In fact, Parliament was not sitting when the Postmaster General announced his support for the Sykes Committee's recommendations, which meant that its report passed unnoticed through the House of Commons.¹³⁰

The press was more outspoken in its reception of the Sykes Report. Reactions varied, but overall the tone was relatively mild. Some newspapers praised the past achievements of the BBC and welcomed the Sykes Report as a step forward. Others criticized the excessive hold of the Post Office over broadcasting and its harmful partnership with the radio manufacturing industry. The Sykes Report was also reviewed in some Labour publications. The *Daily Herald*, for instance, gave a brief, factual overview of its most important recommendations.¹³¹ More interesting was a review by Labour MP George Middleton in the *Labour Magazine*.¹³² Middleton had a background in the Union of Post Office Workers and he saw the recommendations of the Sykes Committee as 'another victory for the profit-making interests' and the 'big wirepulling concerns'.¹³³ What's more, he deemed it 'nothing short of a disaster that the State should practically have parted with all control of broadcasting'. All in all, he did not present any new ideas about the institutional organization of broadcasting, since he largely echoed the views which Trevelyan and Morrison had promoted before him. Even so, he did state what the Labour Party's strategy should be for the

127 As quoted in *ibidem*, 226.

128 Thomas, *Popular Newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics*, 12.

129 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 186-189.

130 *Ibidem*, 189.

131 *Daily Herald*, 24-8-1923.

132 G. Middleton, 'The Report of the broadcasting committee', *The Labour Magazine* 2 (1923) 304 and 305.

133 Middleton, 'The Report of the broadcasting committee', 305.

following years: 'The object of Labour in the House should be not to allow the BBC to continue its hold on the Government, and to secure the cancellation of the contract at the earliest possible moment. (...) The agreement will expire at the end of 1924, and it will then be open to the Post Office to take over all broadcasting. From the point of view of the public, it is of the utmost importance that this monopoly should pass to the State when the contract terminates.'¹³⁴

Ramsay MacDonald's minority government

At the time of writing, Middleton could not have foreseen that the Labour Party would all too soon be in a position to change the government's policies towards the BBC. This was the outcome of the political turmoil which swayed the country after the Conservative Prime Minister Andrew Bonar Law was forced to resign from his position, due to severe illness. His government still had four-and-a-half years to go, but Bonar Law's successor, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer Stanley Baldwin, quickly ran into trouble. Facing mounting unemployment figures, Baldwin sought to impose protectionist policies, but by doing so he would break one of the election promises which Bonar Law had made in the build-up to the general election of 1922, so less than a year ago. Baldwin decided it was up to the electorate to support or dismiss his plans, which meant that Britain would have to return to the polls at a much earlier date.¹³⁵

The Labour Party seized this opportunity with both hands. As a traditional champion of free trade, the Labour Party was able to fight a solid campaign against the Conservatives' protectionist policies. Still, in opposing the Conservatives it met serious competition from the Liberals, which held a longer record in promoting the cause of free trade. More importantly, the Liberals had also settled a truce quite recently, which had reunited the Asquithian and Lloyd Georgian camps under one banner. As such, the Labour Party found itself campaigning with and against the Liberals in a shared opposition against Stanley Baldwin's Conservative Party, who, in turn, was keen to see which of the two parties, the Liberals or Labour, would claim the larger share of the votes between them.¹³⁶ First, however, Baldwin had to cope with a loss of (nearly) one-hundred seats, which his protectionist plans had cost his party at the polls. Some of these lost votes were picked up by the Liberals, which emerged from the election with 159 seats in Parliament. This could not prevent that it was again beaten by the Labour Party. Winning a total of 191 seats, the Labour Party managed to exceed its best result ever.¹³⁷ This, however, was not the reason why this election stands out as a key moment in the modern history of British politics. Because after losing so much support Baldwin decided to resign as Prime Minister, even though his party was still the largest party in Parliament. The result of this was that for the first time in history the Labour Party was asked to form a government.

This truly was a ground-breaking moment. In a relatively short period of time, the Labour Party had managed to break the longstanding hegemony of the Conservatives and the Liberals. This caused obvious excitement in Labour circles. Still, reservations were also raised. If Labour accepted the offer, it would only have a limited mandate as a minority government and it would therefore not be able to pursue the program of radical reform it had long talked of. It could easily seem as if it was merely 'minding the shop', until the Conservatives had settled their affairs and were ready again to assume control of the country. Then again, party leader Ramsay MacDonald saw it as a perfect

134 Ibidem.

135 Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 28-29.

136 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 60-61.

137 Ibidem and 'Appendix I. Labour and the electorate 1900-1997' in: Tanner, Thane and Tsiratsoo ed., *Labour's First Century*, 393.

opportunity to prove that the Labour was not a band of bolshevists, but rather a responsible and reliable party which was ready to carry the weight of government. MacDonald anticipated that if Labour refused the offer, it would be haunted for avoiding its responsibilities in the following years. He was supported in this by the party's National Executive Committee (NEC), the parliamentary party and the general council of the TUC. Urged by the conviction that 'moderation & honesty were our safety', MacDonald composed a cabinet around a core of experienced Labour leaders and dedicated trade unionists.¹³⁸ Among those figures who were appointed in this cabinet were Arthur Henderson (Home Secretary), Philip Snowden (Chancellor of the Exchequer), James Thomas (Secretary of State for the Colonies) and J.R. Clynes (Lord Privy Seal).¹³⁹ MacDonald himself would proudly lead this cabinet as Labour's first Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary.

MacDonald's cabinet stayed in office for no more than ten months.¹⁴⁰ In that short period of time Labour's minority government did not build an impressive record of achievement. It only claimed some modest successes, notably in housing and to a lesser extent in healthcare and education. What's more, it failed to draw up more far-reaching plans on contentious issues such as unemployment or nationalisation, much to the frustration of some sections of the labour movement.¹⁴¹ The ILP, for instance, criticized the government for failing to introduce 'real' socialist measures and in trade unions circles it was felt that MacDonald was insensitive to the unions' interest, even though these were the primary sponsor of the party.¹⁴² Against this background the first Labour government seemed no resounding success. However, when measured by the objectives of MacDonald and his fellow party leaders, the Labour Party did achieve its main objective, namely to demonstrate that Labour was capable of governing the country. They hoped this would be enough to relegate the Liberals to the side-lines of Westminster politics for good, and to establish itself as the only alternative to the Conservative Party.

A Labour Postmaster General

Labour's moderate approach in government was also reflected in its dealings with broadcasting. Ramsay MacDonald himself did not show any particular interest in the BBC. To John Reith he confessed for instance that 'so far as I am personally concerned I am absolutely indifferent to all this talk, whether it is done by hostile or friendly people. I rather be left alone.'¹⁴³ This might explain why the Labour leader forgot to appoint a Labour member to the Broadcasting Board, the advisory body which was set up after the Sykes Committee had recommended to do so. Although MacDonald had received a request to name a Labour candidate in November 1923, it took the Labour Party almost a year to respond. When it did, it appointed Marion Phillips, the party's chief women's officer, only to find then that the Broadcasting Board had ceased to meet already and that it had turned into a dormant body.¹⁴⁴ Labour's neglect was surely remarkable, not only since Herbert Morrison and Charles Trevelyan had both argued for the establishment of an advisory body along such lines, but also since it was a Labour Postmaster General, Vernon Hartshorn, who was partly responsible for the swift demise of this Board.

138 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 77-78.

139 Ibidem, 62.

140 Ibidem, 61 and 64.

141 Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 78-79.

142 Ibidem, 78 and 80.

143 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 271.

144 Hollins, *The Presentation of Politics*, 290 and Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 247-248.

Although John Reith thought he had been ‘quite successful’ in establishing friendly relations with the new Labour Postmaster General, he did not think Vernon Hartson was particularly interested in broadcasting.¹⁴⁵ On the whole, Hartshorn’s time at the Post Office had little impact on the BBC or on broadcasting in general. With the recommendations of the Sykes Report just recently accepted there were no issues which required Hartshorn’s urgent attention. Occasionally he was presented with questions in Parliament about BBC related matters, but these were mainly about the minor details of its operation. There was one issue, however, on which Hartshorn’s influence did leave a mark. As was noted earlier, Reith was anxious to develop broadcasting as a platform of information and debate about the political issues of the day, a subject which we will look at in more detail in chapter seven.¹⁴⁶ So far, the BBC had not succeeded in pursuing this ambition, which was mainly due to the restrictive hold of the Post Office over, what was called, ‘controversial broadcasting’. However, the Sykes Committee had discussed these matters as well and although its report stated that the Postmaster General should remain ‘the final arbiter (..) as to what kind of matter may and what may not be broadcast’, it also encouraged the extension of the BBC’s activities in this direction.¹⁴⁷

In turn, this spurred Reith to approach the Postmaster General on a regular bases with requests for permission to organize debates or programmes about those issues which were considered ‘controversial’. Such was for instance the case in August 1924, when Reith suggested to stage a broadcasting debate between the three party leaders, which would be chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons. Vernon Harthorn was not prepared to depart from the line which was laid down by his predecessors and he dismissed this and most other requests with a simple ‘no’, since it would open a door which, he thought, should better stay closed. Although there was no straight connection between Morrison’s, Trevelyan’s and MacDonald’s relative ‘indifference’ to programmes, Hartshorn’s rejection certainly placed him in good company. However, he did make one vital concession to the BBC in October 1924, when he authorized Reith to organize the first ever British election broadcasts by the three party leaders.¹⁴⁸ The result of this was that the end of Labour’s first term in government was marked by a historical departure of a rather different nature.

Out of office

After ten months in office the Labour government had come to an early end in October 1924. Although MacDonald and his fellow Ministers had shown that a Labour government would not bankrupt Britain, this was not enough to dispel the hostile mood which the party had encountered in recent years. In fact, allegations of ‘bolshevism’ and communist sympathies did not only play an important role in the events which would lead to the cabinet’s downfall, they also set the tone for the bitter election campaign which followed. What sparked these events was a statement by an editor of the communist *Workers Weekly*, who had incited British soldiers not to shoot at fellow workers. Seeking to demonstrate its commitment to peace and order, the government initially ordered the prosecution of this editor, yet it withdrew its decision after further consultations.¹⁴⁹ The Liberals and Conservatives responded with outrage and as they

145 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 90 and Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 95.

146 Hollins, *The Presentation of Politics*, 273.

147 *The broadcasting committee report 1923* (HMSO, London 1923).

148 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 268, Hollins, *The Presentation of Politics*, 279 and Beers, *Your Britain*, 81.

149 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 64 and Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 81.

voted to set up an official inquiry to investigate this matter, this urged MacDonald to hand his cabinet's resignation.¹⁵⁰ And so, Britain returned to the polls yet again, for the third time in less than two years.

The subsequent election campaign was fought in a tensed and overexcited atmosphere. This was most clearly epitomized by the *Daily Mail*'s publication of the 'Zinoviev letter', a document in which British communists were incited by the Communist International to prepare for the coming revolution. This was a forgery, but its effects were very real, since it helped to stir up the fears for socialist radicalism and extremism which had troubled the public mind for some years. In these hostile circumstances the Labour Party failed to capitalize on its efforts of the past months to prove it was not the herald of disorder or chaos. On the whole, Labour lost 40 seats and it came out of the 1924 election with 151 seats in Parliament. Even so, its loss was relative, since the overall support for the party did increase from 30,7 to 33,3 percent, compared to the election of 1923. Yet, these percentages could not conceal the absolute triumph of the Conservative Party, which won an impressive majority of 412 seats. As the Liberals were reduced to a mere 40 seats, this allowed Stanley Baldwin to return to the post of Prime Minister a year after his resignation.¹⁵¹ His Conservative government would stay in power until 1929.

3.7 The Crawford Committee (1925-1926)

If the Labour government had managed to prolong its time in office it might have been able to steer the BBC in a new direction. The BBC's broadcasting license would expire at the end of 1926 and in early 1925 it remained uncertain whether the Baldwin government would renew its license on the same basis or whether it would seek to adjust the present arrangements. Of those involved John Reith was least assured the government would act in the best interest of broadcasting if he would sit by and await its verdict patiently. What's more, in his dealings with the Postmaster General, the Post Office and the BBC's Board of Directors Reith had come to understand that it was necessary for the BBC to secure a greater degree of autonomy.¹⁵² Among other things, this was informed by the struggles which Reith had fought in the past years with the Post Office over the revenues of the license-fee. But Reith also felt that the Postmaster General's hold over broadcasting – as the 'final arbiter' – was an impediment to the BBC's development as a force of democratic education and enlightenment. A concern of a whole different nature was the BBC's relationship with the radio manufacturing industry. Because despite its non-commercial character, the Broadcasting Company was still labelled by its critics as a vehicle of business interests. Although many people had come to appreciate the BBC and the programmes which it provided, Reith anticipated that this connection with the private sector might well discredit his long term ambitions in developing broadcasting as a public service to the nation.¹⁵³

These were some of the reasons why Reith came to conclude that the BBC should be released from its present owners and, in addition, that it should be re-established as an independent, public body. However, the present owners were also his superiors, so he was not entirely free in

150 Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 81.

151 Ibidem.

152 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of Broadcasting*, 31.

153 Ibidem and Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 332.

promoting this case. It did not stop him from discussing his ideas with a number of figures who would play a role in the process, once the Postmaster General would decide to reconsider the BBC's status and broadcasting license. In doing so Reith also approached Labour Party figures who had shown an interest in broadcasting in the years before. Among those was for instance Labour leader J.R. Clynes, who was contacted by the BBC's publicity officer to inform him about the BBC's purpose: 'we interpret our functions as essentially a public trust, and if there is to be any change in our constitution at the end of the present License, we feel that it should be in the direction of strengthening public control.'¹⁵⁴ Of course, the Labour Party could only agree with these words. In seeking support in Labour circles the BBC also approached Thomas Johnston, who had voiced his concerns in Parliament about the Postmaster General's hold over broadcasting. Based on that, he had argued the BBC really ought to become a public institution under public control. Reith held a similar opinion. After meeting Johnston personally he noted in his diary that he 'was glad to meet him. A rough sort of fellow but straightforward. Anyhow he will be friendly to the BBC.'¹⁵⁵

It was notably Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald in whom Reith found a sympathetic ally, despite MacDonald's initial scepticism about broadcasting. Then again, Reith himself was highly sceptical about the Labour Party as well; he once noted 'It is pathetic how apprehensive Labour leaders are of their followers and how little control they seem to have over them.'¹⁵⁶ But there were other qualities which allowed Reith and MacDonald to build a friendly relationship over the years. One of these was their shared roots in the north-east of Scotland. Besides that they also shared a faith in the elevating purpose of broadcasting and some years earlier MacDonald had urged Reith to 'keep up the standard of your service. Do not play down. Remember that the great mass of our people really want good things.'¹⁵⁷ They continued their talks over a number of meetings in 1925. Reith's diary reveals how he first met MacDonald 'in his room at the House' [BdJ: of Commons] and that he 'liked him and found him interesting.' Some months later they met again: 'had much talk with him. He was very affable.' Apparently, their acquaintance was so enjoyable that Reith decided to introduce a relative to the former Prime Minister: 'Took mother to meet Ramsay MacDonald who gave her tea in his room at the House.'¹⁵⁸

A public corporation

So Reith had lobbied quite extensively when, in July 1925, the Conservative Postmaster General Mitchell-Thomson announced that he would ask a new broadcasting committee to investigate if and how the licence of the BBC should be extended. This committee was placed under the chairmanship of the Conservative Earl of Crawford. The Labour Party was represented by William Graham, a Member of Parliament and former financial secretary to the Treasury in the Labour government of 1924.

Reith himself was not a member of the Crawford Committee, as he had been of the Sykes Committee. Even so, he did find firm support for his cause with the Post Office, which proved

154 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 332.

155 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 91.

156 As quoted in Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics', 114.

157 D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy. Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988), p. 150. See also Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture. A Study in British socialism and the arts, 1884-1918* (Cambridge etc. 1982) 257-259 and in MacIntyre, 'British Labour, Marxism, and Working Class Apathy in the Nineteen Twenties', 483-485.

158 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 91.

to be enormously important for the outcome of these deliberations. Among those to share his concerns was the Assistant Postmaster General, Lord Wolmer, who had privately assured Reith he 'was anxious to be helpful'.¹⁵⁹ Even more significant was the contribution of the Post Office's secretary Evelyn Murray. It was his opinion that the BBC ought to be re-established as an independent public body, preferably a public corporation. He explained his views in the Post Office's memorandum to the Crawford Committee. Among other things, it stated that 'the Corporation should enjoy a large measure of independence and should not be subject either in its general policy or its choice of programmes to the detailed control and supervision of the Postmaster General, from which would follow the corollary that the Postmaster General would not be expected to accept responsibility or to defend the proceedings of the Corporation in Parliament.'¹⁶⁰

Apparently, Murray's suggestions were largely consistent with the views of the members of the Crawford Committee; Asa Briggs notes that his statement would form the basis on which the Committee came to draw up its recommendations about the future of the BBC and British broadcasting more generally.¹⁶¹ What's more, this overall consensus was one of the reasons why the proceedings of the Crawford Committee were, on the whole, less interesting than those of its predecessor, the Sykes Committee.¹⁶² The same applies to the Labour contribution to this committee. Two years earlier Charles Trevelyan and Herbert Morrison had voiced an opinion which was radically different from the majority opinion, but now the Labour Party had ample reason to be confident or even optimistic about the forthcoming developments in broadcasting. Probably, this helps to explain why William Graham did not play a distinctive role in the deliberations of the Crawford Committee, so other than Charles Trevelyan had done before him in the proceedings of the Sykes Committee. In fact, neither did the Labour Party nor any other labour organisation submit a statement or memorandum to this second broadcasting committee as to express its views about the institutional organization of broadcasting.¹⁶³ It also suggests that Reith's efforts towards the Labour Party had been effective enough to rally the party behind his case and to discourage party figures from advocating a separate, and alternative model for broadcasting.

Eventually the Crawford Committee presented its final report in March 1926. It stated that much had changed in broadcasting since the Sykes Committee's inquiry. When this first committee was established broadcasting was 'still embryonic – regarded by many as a toy, as a fantasy, even as a joke'. Since then it had 'become so widespread, concerns so many people, and is fraught with such far-reaching possibilities, that the organisation laid down for the British Broadcasting Company no longer corresponds to national requirements or responsibility.'¹⁶⁴ Its main recommendation was therefore that broadcasting should be discharged from its ties to the radio manufacturing industry and that it should be publicly owned and publicly controlled instead; or in the words of the Crawford Report 'that the broadcasting service should be conducted by a public corporation acting as Trustee for the national interest, and that its status

159 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 330.

160 As quoted in Ibidem, 328.

161 Ibidem, 330.

162 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 31.

163 Only Hamilton Fyfe of the labour newspaper *The Daily Herald* appeared on February 3, 1926 before the committee as a witness. In his witness to the committee Fyfe was primarily asked to state his views on broadcasting from a press perspective. *Report of the broadcasting committee, 1925* (HMSO London 1926) 17.

164 *Report of the broadcasting committee, 1925* (HMSO London 1926) 4.

and duties should correspond with those of a public service'.¹⁶⁵ As such it dismissed a full transfer of broadcasting to the state and its operation by a government department, which was what the Labour Party had advocated some years earlier. One reason for this was that a Minister would never have the 'freedom and flexibility' which was required to control the programming output and to keep it in line with the 'variable demands of public taste and necessity'.¹⁶⁶ Instead the Crawford Report recommended the establishment of a commission as the governing body of this new undertaking. Based on that the Crawford Committee also suggested to rename the BBC into the British Broadcasting Commission, which, it stated, would be 'a suitable title for the new authority'.¹⁶⁷

Altogether, the Crawford Report gave a concise statement about how it saw the future of British broadcasting. In doing so it largely endorsed the ambitions which John Reith had laid down in the years before. Among other things this was reflected in recommendation no.14 – 'High Standards Required' –, which stressed that 'every effort must be made to raise the standard of style and performance'. As part of that it also noted that the 'gradual infusion of improved standards or improved standards will be welcomed by listeners – unconsciously at first, but with growing appreciation amongst those who will instinctively learn to desire better performances'.¹⁶⁸ The most contentious issue in this respect was the BBC's dealings with the broadcasting of 'controversial matter'. This was recognized by the Crawford Committee as well, which advised the Postmaster General to allow the BBC a greater latitude on this point. More particularly, it stated that listeners would appreciate 'a moderate amount of controversy', but only 'if the material be of high quality, not too lengthy or insistent, and distributed with scrupulous fairness'.¹⁶⁹ Yet, this was a daunting task, which would undoubtedly raise controversy itself. This was one reason why the Crawford Report emphasized that the broadcasting commission ought to be 'strong and impartial' and that the BBC's commissioners should act from the outset with 'firm and consistent circumspection'.¹⁷⁰

There were other reasons as well why the Crawford Committee argued that the outlined broadcasting commission should be granted with a sufficient degree of independence, since this was vital to its anticipated status as a 'Trustee for the national interest'. In making this case the Crawford Committee also considered the composition of a new governing board for the BBC, which was to succeed the BBC's present Board of Directors. More specifically, the Crawford Committee argued against a governing board which was organized along representative lines (for instance by including representatives from the press, or the music- or entertainment-industry) and it warned that 'compromise and even conflict might ensue owing to division of allegiance' if a representative board was set up. Instead, it stressed the responsibility of the governing body to act on behalf of the public interest as a whole, which required that the board members 'should be persons of judgment and independence, free of commitments' so that 'they will inspire confidence by having no other interests to promote than those of the public service'.¹⁷¹ Besides that, the Crawford Report stated that these 'commissioners' should be expected to devote much

165 Ibidem, 14. See also Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 333-338.

166 *Report of the broadcasting committee, 1925*, 5.

167 Ibidem, 5.

168 Ibidem, 12.

169 Ibidem, 13.

170 Ibidem.

171 *Report of the broadcasting committee, 1925*, 6-7.

‘time, energy and enthusiasm’ to their duties, since ‘broad and far-reaching issues underlie the whole problem’ of broadcasting.¹⁷² These different comments highlight that the governing board would hold a vital place in the constitutional structures of British broadcasting, as it would both embody and preserve the BBC’s public status.

Looming over all this was the larger question about the BBC’s relationship to the government and Parliament. Although the Crawford Committee was very clear in its recommendations to transfer the responsibilities for broadcasting to an independent public corporation, it was much less clear about the nature and the degree of the responsibilities which the government and Parliament would have over broadcasting. To be sure, the Crawford Report did make various, rather specific recommendations about the Postmaster General’s role in infrastructural matters or financial concerns. But beyond that it resorted to general statements to emphasize that the BBC’s independence required the government and Parliament to keep their distance from the daily operation of broadcasting. So among other things it stated that the BBC ‘should enjoy the fullest liberty, wide enough to mark the serious duties laid upon it and elastic enough to permit variation according to (...) changes in public taste’.¹⁷³ It also argued that the BBC should not be subject to constant pressure or direction from the government, since ‘too rigid rules and too constant a supervision by the State’ would only ‘discourage enterprise and initiative’. Then again, it also stressed that the ‘the Postmaster General would be the Parliamentary spokesman on broad questions of policy’ and that ‘the State, through Parliament, must retain the right of ultimate control’ over broadcasting.¹⁷⁴ And so, this illustrates that the suggested independence of the BBC was not unconditional and that it was crucially tied to the will of Parliament. Or, as the Crawford Committee stated: the BBC ‘should be invested with the maximum of freedom which Parliament is prepared to concede’.¹⁷⁵ As reasonable as this may sound, the following chapters will show that the interests of Parliament and broadcasting would often clash, and that the freedom of broadcasting would suffer accordingly.

3.8 The BBC and the General Strike

As the second party in Parliament, the Labour Party would be involved in many of these conflicts. Such was also the case two months after the publication of the Crawford Report, when the BBC suddenly found itself at the centre of a national crisis. The general strike of May 1926 would last over a week and it threatened to bring the country to a near standstill. At that moment, the BBC was uncertain about its future, since it was still awaiting the Postmaster General’s official response to the Crawford Committee’s recommendations. It would take another two months, until July 1926, before the Postmaster General would announce that Stanley Baldwin’s Conservative government accepted the Crawford Committee’s advice.¹⁷⁶ As the Crawford Report was drafted in a sphere of relative consensus, months later the public mood about the BBC had changed dramatically, notably in labour circles. This had everything to do with the BBC’s role in the general strike of May 1926, which did not only cause much indignation in the labour

172 Ibidem, 7-8.

173 Ibidem.

174 Ibidem, 13.

175 Ibidem, 13.

176 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 348.

movement, but which also exposed the piercing dilemma's which came with a single, national broadcasting service.

The general strike is a well-covered subject in British historiography and its significance has been studied from various perspectives, also from a broadcasting perspective.¹⁷⁷ While this exempts us from charting this episode in too much detail, as a defining moment in the history of British broadcasting it did crucially alert the Labour Party leadership to the potential implications of broadcasting. By taking a broad view of this conflict, it is this last aspect which is most relevant here. All in all, the general strike of May 1926 was the culmination of a long-running dispute between miners and mine-owners over the intended wage-cuts which the latter sought to impose on the former.¹⁷⁸ In the build-up to this conflict the government had become involved as well, since it aimed to prevent the confrontation the TUC was threatening with, if its demands were ignored. However, its nine-month compensation to the miners' wages only offered a temporary delay and it failed to solve the deadlock. When this nine-month period came to an end, the opposition between the miners and the mine-owners had only deepened and, more importantly, the government had now come to endorse the mine-owners' position as well. In facing these combined pressures, the TUC dramatically decided to use its ultimate instrument, a general strike, to fight the wage-cuts. The strike began on May 4 and would last nine days. At the height of the strike two-and-a-half to three million workers were involved. While this caused a significant disruption of public life, the government was well prepared and it managed to keep the country running notwithstanding.¹⁷⁹ Eventually, the whole affair ended in an inglorious defeat for the trade unions, when, on May 12, the TUC surrendered unconditionally to the government.

The general strike was more than an industrial confrontation. It was also a conflict over political strategies. The TUC's use of 'direct action' defied the constitutional order and the rule of democratic politics since it had failed to provide an adequate solution to the miners' case. This was one reason why the Labour Party leadership was deeply disturbed about these unfolding events.¹⁸⁰ It was noted above that the Labour Party had done much in previous years to counter the popular imagery of 'bolshevism' and 'extremism'. Although it had made important strides in promoting a picture of a moderate and responsible party, many in the party leadership feared that this act of trade union defiance would inflict severe damage to this cause. But, what's more, the general strike was also a struggle for public opinion.¹⁸¹ This was exemplified by the TUC's to call out the printers on strike as well. The aim of this was to prevent newspapers from being published and it was expected that a temporary hold on anti-Labour publicity would help to sway public opinion to the trade union side. Yet, the effect was counterproductive. Not only since a number of pro-government publications continued to appear throughout the strike, but also since the trade unions failed to communicate their own message to the public effectively.¹⁸² What's more, it also made the BBC the main channel through which the British public was kept

177 For instance Michael Tracey, 'The BBC and the General Strike: May 1926', 27-44, Beers, *Your Britain*, 99-119 and Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 360-384.

178 J. Butt, 'General Strike' in: J. Cannon ed., *Oxford Companion to British History* (Oxford 2012), published at <http://www.oxfordreference.com>.

179 Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, 76.

180 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 66 and Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 75-76.

181 Extensive on this chapter six Beers, *Your Britain*, 99-115.

182 Ibidem, 99-100.

informed about the strike.¹⁸³ Although the TUC imposed a boycott on broadcasting as well, this was rather futile, since John Reith decided that the BBC's rightful position in the conflict was on the side of the government.

For the BBC the strike formed a crucial test-case, as it could now prove that it was truly worthy of becoming 'a public corporation acting as Trustee for the national interest', as the Crawford Committee had recommended a few months earlier. When later recalling those turbulent days in May 1926, Reith revealed that he did not 'welcome crises', but that he did 'welcome the opportunities which they bring'.¹⁸⁴ Still, the BBC found itself in a complicated position. On the one hand it sought to defend its status of an impartial provider of news and information, which required it to uphold its relative independence from the government. But, on the other hand, it had very little space for manoeuvring, because if the government would have wanted it could have legally ordered the BBC to broadcast what it asked for and it could have even taken over full control of the service.¹⁸⁵ To Reith's relief this did not happen. Even so, behind the scenes Reith worked closely together with the government, so the BBC's independence was really rather cosmetic. Reith later defended this position by stating that 'the BBC was a national institution, and since the Government in this crisis were acting for the people...The BBC was for the Government in this crisis too'.¹⁸⁶

At the time, this narrow understanding of what the national interest was and who 'the people' were, evoked much anger in the labour movement. In a letter to the programming guide of the BBC, the *Radio Times*, Ellen Wilkinson, MP for the Labour Party, painted a picture of widespread indignation she met while touring the country: 'I travelled by car over two thousand miles during the strike and addressed very many meetings. Everywhere the complaints were bitter that a national service subscribed to by every class should have given only one side of the dispute. Personally I feel like asking the Postmaster General for my licence fee back'.¹⁸⁷ Similar complaints were heard in the leadership of the Labour Party. During the strike the Labour Party approached Reith a number of times. On May 5, for instance, Reith was paid a visit by Charles Trevelyan and William Graham, who urged him to allow a Labour speaker to broadcast a statement about the strike. Their request was turned down. Four days later Reith was phoned by Ramsay MacDonald ('he was very anxious to give a talk') with the same question.¹⁸⁸ Again, Reith had to reject it. While he tried to explain to MacDonald what he had told Graham and Trevelyan as well, that the BBC found itself in an impossible position, he did not inform them that this refusal was not his own decision, but that he was instructed to do so by the government. As such, he would have to endure the Labour Party's resentment instead. This was a price he was willing to pay to keep up the appearance of independence.

It was notably in the first weeks after the strike that Reith faced an angry Labour Party. On May 18 he noted in his diary: 'Correspondence with Ramsay MacDonald and William Graham. We are properly in bad with the Labour Party. I suppose they are utterly humiliated and their

183 Tracey, 'The BBC and the General Strike', 30. Also Seaton and Pimlott, 'The struggle for "balance"', 134 and Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of Broadcasting*, 32-35.

184 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 92.

185 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 361.

186 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 33.

187 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 377. Strikers called the BBC the British Falsehood Company and the resentment about the role of the BBC in the strike resonated in much trade union rhetoric against the BBC in later times. Seaton and Pimlott, 'The struggle for "balance"', 134.

188 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 96.

judgment and outlook warped.’¹⁸⁹ Some days later the names of these men resurfaced: ‘I am still in fatuous correspondence with Ramsay MacDonald and Graham, though the former is much less unreasonable than the latter.’¹⁹⁰ Even so, their resentment would fade in months’ time, as Reith’s diary shows that he and MacDonald would meet each other again in an informal setting in October 1926: ‘In the afternoon (..) to Upper Frognal Lodge [BdJ: Ramsay MacDonald’s residence] where I found Ramsay MacDonald tying up rambler roses. Went for an hour’s walk on the Heath with him. (..) We had much talk about the BBC.’¹⁹¹ A month later William Graham also showed more consideration for the BBC’s role during the strike. In a letter to Reith, dated November 11, he explained: ‘You will readily understand how acutely many of us felt the events of the general strike, and the manner in which, as we thought, it was aggravated by the use of the broadcasting system and other devices. I had a talk with Trevelyan; so far as I am concerned, not one trace of feeling remains; and I certainly appreciate the great difficulty in which you must have been placed’.¹⁹²

3.9 The British Broadcasting Corporation

Graham’s letter to Reith came at an interesting moment. One day later the Post Office would publish the new charter of the BBC, which laid down its status and rights as a public corporation. As a member of the Crawford Committee William Graham had helped to advise this change in status and the substance of the charter would endorse the overall tenor of the Crawford Committee’s recommendations. This did not come as a surprise, since the Postmaster General had announced the government’s support for the Crawford Report some months earlier, on July 14, 1926. At that occasion, Mitchell-Thomson had stated that the British Broadcasting Company would be resolved on December 31st and that its activities would be taken over by the British Broadcasting Corporation. He had also explained why the government chose to set up the BBC by royal charter, and not, as the Crawford Committee had suggested, by an Act of Parliament. By doing so, it sought to grant the BBC the status and dignity which would match the weight of its public task. It was anticipated that this would save the BBC from being seen as a ‘creature of Parliament’ which was ‘connected with political activity.’¹⁹³ Of course, this decision was thoroughly political in itself and so was the whole process which gave the BBC its institutional form. In fact, the following chapters will show that the BBC would continue to be intricately connected to political activity in the subsequent years as well.

In July 1926, William Graham was among those MPs who expressed their consent about Mitchell-Thomson’s statement. Yet, in doing so he also raised some tentative comments about the Postmaster General’s reading of the Crawford Report, which was not entirely consistent with the Committee’s recommendations. Among other things, this concerned the use of a royal charter as the constitutional basis for the BBC, which he thought would disallow Parliament adequate opportunities for discussing the BBC’s record. Yet, he also stressed that the BBC should receive ‘very wide powers’ and Graham urged the Postmaster General to allow the BBC sufficient

189 Ibidem. 97.

190 Ibidem.

191 Ibidem. 98.

192 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 378.

193 As quoted in Ibidem, 353.

latitude to deal with controversial issues in its programmes, as well as the financial scope to develop a high-quality programming service. He concluded with an optimistic note by stating that ‘if we pass from the present position of broadcasting to the new public corporation, or to the efficient form of public ownership and control, which is suggested, there is a great future for this service in British political, social, and economic progress.’¹⁹⁴

In welcoming the anticipated reorganization of the BBC, Graham mainly spoke in his capacity as a former member of the Crawford Committee. However, William Graham was first and foremost a Labour Party MP. He did not refer to his Labour background, but the substance of his concluding words suggest his appreciation for these changes was also informed by his partisan background. And yet, these developments illustrate as well that the Labour Party was not a sole believer in the benefits of public ownership in 1920s Britain. It was explained in the introduction to this chapter that the years of the First World War had seen a notable increase in the role of the British state as to guide the country through this ordeal. If these experiments had convinced the Labour Party to embrace public ownership as an official party cause, it had also formed an invaluable lesson to Liberals and Conservatives alike that the state, or its affiliated bodies, offered an adequate instrument to regulate those areas of public life which were too important to leave to the dynamics of the market.¹⁹⁵ As Jean Seaton explains, these areas included forestry, water and electricity, which were organized and managed as a public utility far before it was decided to reorganize the BBC into a public corporation.¹⁹⁶

The question here is how the Labour Party responded to these changes in the BBC’s constitutional structures. Of course, part of the answer is known already, since the introduction to this chapter also referred to the triumphant words which Labour MP’s used to celebrate this occasion. However, claiming a victory is not the same as winning a cause. It might be noted that the Crawford Committee’s recommendations differed substantially from what Morrison and Trevelyan had advocated some years earlier. The key difference was that they had argued for the immediate incorporation of broadcasting into the structures of the state, whereas the Crawford Committee decided that broadcasting should be organized at a due distance from the state as to shield its activities from the volatile demands of its political controllers. What’s more, the pages above have illustrated that the Labour Party’s thinking about public ownership remained flawed by ambiguities throughout the larger part of the 1920s. Most notably, this concerned a lack of clarity about the institutional implications and the democratic consequences. This was also reflected in Labour’s response to these changes. The following pages will show that its claim to triumph was shrouded in a fog of questions and uncertainties about the broader implications of this shift, not just for the BBC but also for those inhabiting the political environment in which it was embedded.

‘Along the lines of socialism’

It would take until November 1926 before the BBC’s charter was published. When this happened, it was received with some indignation, since it was presented as an agreed document, which meant that Parliament would not be able to amend its substance.¹⁹⁷ Among other things the

194 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 14-7-1926, 482-483, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

195 Bevir, ‘Socialism, Civil Society and the State in Modern Britain’, 17.

196 Seaton, ‘Reith and the denial of politics’, 111-113.

197 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 357.

charter gave the BBC, in its reincarnation as a public corporation, a ten year broadcasting license. The formal powers of the BBC were to be vested in a new controlling body, a five-men Board of Governors which was to be appointed by the government.¹⁹⁸ John Reith was awarded with the new title of Director General and in this capacity he would be accountable to the BBC's Board of Governors. Although this new arrangement would grant the BBC a fair degree of autonomy, it also reinforced the Postmaster General's responsibilities over broadcasting. Most obviously, this concerned the infrastructural dimension of broadcasting, since the Postmaster General would continue to preside over matters like wavelengths or the location of broadcasting stations. A more delicate issue was the extent of the Postmaster General's authority in the sphere of programmes. Among other things, the BBC's new broadcasting license stated that the Postmaster General could 'require the Corporation to refrain from sending any broadcast matter (either particular or general)'.¹⁹⁹ Defying the Crawford Committee's recommendations on this point, Mitchell-Thomson used this clause to re-install the ban on 'controversial broadcasting'. He later explained the government thought it better not 'to start introducing political controversy into this new service without very careful consideration and the fullest discussion in the House and in public'.²⁰⁰

The Postmaster General made this statement in the context of a House of Commons Supply Committee, which dealt with the Post Office estimates for the next year. This was also the occasion which MPs used to express their opinion about the BBC's new charter and license. Although Asa Briggs labels this debate as 'perfunctory and unilluminating', it was not without significance for the purpose of this book.²⁰¹ Among the MPs who used this opportunity were William Graham and Charles Ammon. While both figure (more and less prominently) in the pages above as well, two other Labour MPs, Harry Day and Walter Baker, used this occasion as well to reflect on the implications of the BBC's new charter and license.²⁰² On the whole, they welcomed this new arrangement with approval, arguing that it proved the Labour Party had been right in the past years to claim public ownership and public control in broadcasting. Charles Ammon stated that he and his fellow MPs had 'listened with a good deal of gratified amusement to the discussion (...) today'.²⁰³ Even so, each of these Labour MPs raised a number of questions about the forthcoming reorganization, and the thrust of these questions suggest that Labour's support for the corporation-model was less unequivocal than they seemed to realize.

The first to answer Mitchell-Thomson's statement was William Graham, whose comments partly echoed the Crawford Committee's recommendations, which he had helped to draft. He noted, for instance, there was some doubt in Parliament whether the BBC would be granted with the 'freedom and elasticity' which the Crawford Committee had in mind, to which he added that 'the real difficulty which confronts many critics outside and inside this House is whether (...) we are putting the Corporation under too complete a form of control, and whether in point of fact it will be a mere creature of the Postmaster General'.²⁰⁴ This was also why he expressed his concern about Mitchell-Thomson's decision to ban 'controversy' from broadcasting, which he feared would lead

198 In a subsequent chapter we shall look at the developing relationship between this Board of Governors and John Reith as one of the elements which constituted this new regime of public control in broadcasting.

199 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 358.

200 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 15-11-1926, 1582-1583, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

201 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of Broadcasting*, 37 and Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 350 and 360.

202 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 15-11-1926, 1563-1650, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

203 Ibidem, 1604.

204 Ibidem, 1584-1585.

to 'an inanity or rule of platitude' and that it would prevent the BBC from discharging its duty towards the public. These comments suggest Graham thought the BBC required a greater degree of independence than the Postmaster General considered necessary. However, quite crucially, he also emphasized that the 'exact powers of the Corporation' were defined through its connection to Parliament: 'We take the view, of course, that there must be some relationship to the State. After all, the license really originates with the masses of the British people; they are giving it to this new body, and they must have a representative spokesman in the House of Commons. That representative and spokesman, quite clearly, must be the Postmaster General of the day.'²⁰⁵

In a nutshell, these comments highlight the tensions between the search for independence and the need for control which underlay the debate about the public organization of broadcasting. As a member of the Crawford Committee, William Graham seemed more aware of the complicated relationship between these oppositional functions as his fellow Labour MPs who contributed to this debate. On the whole, those other Labour MPs showed little appreciation for the BBC's status as a public corporation and, more specifically, for the relative autonomy which the BBC would enjoy on the basis of this status. They were primarily concerned about the mechanisms of control which would tie the BBC to the political system and, more particularly, about the opportunities which Parliament would have to express its opinion about broadcasting. It was Charles Ammon who was most outspoken about these issues. While praising the government for its courage to bring the BBC under public ownership, he claimed it was a missed opportunity to organize the BBC as a public corporation, stating that 'it would have been much better if they had gone the whole road and handed the administration over entirely to the Post Office as a national concern.'²⁰⁶ He pointed to the Forestry Commission ('which seems to go on as they like spending public money and Parliament having no voice or control in regard to it') to express his concerns about an unruly and irresponsible broadcasting service. He asked Mitchell-Thomson to 'make quite clear exactly what his position is going to be in relation to this House. Will he be in the position to answer questions concerning the Corporation and broadcasting? Will there be an opportunity in this House for criticism?'²⁰⁷

These were legitimate concerns and they offer another indication of the primacy of Parliament to Labour's understanding of the institutional organization of broadcasting. With the BBC being organized as a public corporation, Labour would now have to put its trust in the BBC's Board of Governors, as the body which would guard over the public interest in broadcasting. However, those same Labour MPs raised a number of questions about the Board's composition, responsibilities and representative status, which intimated they were hardly convinced about its capacities to do so. These issues will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, but, at the time, the Postmaster General's answer would have offered little relief to Labour's concerns. On the whole, Mitchell-Thomson explained there would be some opportunities to raise questions about broadcasting in Parliament, most notably the yearly debate about the Post Office estimates. But he also stated he aimed to 'give the Corporation as free a hand as possible, and to leave as much as possible to the decision and authority of the Governors of the Corporation', which ruled out 'any increased control on the part of the House of Commons by means of questions.'²⁰⁸

205 Ibidem, 1587.

206 Ibidem, 1604. Ammon's faith in the Post Office was shaped by more than party doctrine, since he had worked for the Post Office until 1916, for nearly thirty years. Clinton, 'Ammon, Charles George, Baron Ammon (1873-1960)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (30-4-2015).

207 Ibidem, 1607.

208 Ibidem, 1643.

Still, all this could not spoil the cheerful mood among the Labour MPs about the higher significance of the forthcoming changes in broadcasting. William Graham stated he was 'delighted' to see a 'Postmaster General, an individualist and an anti-Socialist, and member of a Government which professes such a faith, coming with what I call definitely and clearly the Socialism of public corporation'. While praising Mitchell-Thomson for making a speech 'of the most democratic and businesslike Socialist character', he challenged the government to extend public ownership to other industries and services which were also 'ripe for the same kind of treatment'.²⁰⁹ In a similar manner, Ammon expressed his pleasure in witnessing a Conservative government going 'along the line of Socialism when dealing with a new and vital service', even though he really thought it should have taken this one final step further. But, perhaps, this was something for the future. Adding some sympathetic words, he informed his audience that the Labour Party 'shall join most heartily in helping the Postmaster General on with the good work, and we hope that his education as a Socialist will proceed more rapidly than hitherto'.²¹⁰

'One of the great fairy creations of the ages'

Obviously, there was a good deal of party political mockery to these words and it seems likely that this was partly incited by the recollections of the general strike. Even so, the events of May 1926 played no prominent role in this debate – Charles Ammon merely referred to it as a period in which broadcasting was 'abused' for sending 'false information' – which suggests the Labour Party was glad to leave the episode behind.²¹¹ What's more, Labour's commitment to public ownership gave it ample reason to hail the end of the British Broadcasting Company and to cheer its re-establishment as the British Broadcasting Corporation. Even so, its delight about this new beginning in broadcasting was also wilfully short-sighted, since there were many uncertainties which accompanied this shift. It remained to be seen which implications this reorganization would have for the longer term and, as part of that, whether the Labour Party would continue to see this as a victory for socialism, once the new structures were firmly in place.

And so, for now, optimism was the dominant chord. This was poignantly illustrated by a letter which Ramsay MacDonald wrote to John Reith in December 1926, on the eve of the BBC's new life as a public corporation. MacDonald was among those figures who the BBC had invited to attend a dinner party to celebrate the BBC's new future and past achievements.²¹² The Labour leader failed to attend this party, but he did send a kind message to Reith and the other BBC-representatives which was read out at the occasion: 'Those of you who are sitting round these tables tonight will always have the great satisfaction and pleasure of being able to say that you were in at the beginning, and that your services enabled one of the great fairy creations of the ages – the British Broadcasting Company – to come into being, to develop and to charm and enlighten the public.'²¹³ Of course, these words were written to suit the occasion, and this occasion did not ask for a critical assessment of the BBC's record of the past years. Even so, it seems unlikely that MacDonald would have struck an equally complimentary tone some months earlier, regardless of the occasion. And so, perhaps the most recent developments in broadcasting had helped to boost MacDonald's judgment of the BBC, even retro-actively. But his message

209 Ibidem, 1590-1591.

210 Ibidem, 1604.

211 Ibidem, 1606.

212 Invitation to J.R. MacDonald, National Archives, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1436/978-80.

213 Letter J.R. MacDonald to J.C.W. Reith 16-12-1926, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1436/978-80.

revealed a positive expectation about the coming era in broadcasting as well and by hinting at a long and bright future for the BBC MacDonald was more right than he might have realized himself.

Chapter 4

'Avoiding fragmentation'

The SDAP between public and private broadcasting

4.1 The SDAP in the early 1920s (1918-1922)

With the general election of July 1918 the Netherlands entered the age of mass democracy. One year earlier the liberal Prime Minister P.W.A. Cort van der Linden had convinced a parliamentary majority to support his proposals for the extension of the franchise, which would grant the vote to all adult men above the age of twenty-five.¹ This was part of a more elaborate political deal, which also included the equal funding for public and private (i.e. denominational) schools and the introduction of a system of proportional representation. Commonly known as 'the Pacification', this deal represented a landmark occasion in the political history of the Netherlands, not only since it settled two major issues – the 'school struggle' and the suffrage question – which had divided Dutch politics for decades, but also since it proved to have a fundamental impact on the dynamics and make-up of the Dutch parliamentary system in the decades to come.²

The SDAP welcomed the introduction of mass suffrage with high expectations. Founded in 1894, the SDAP had put much energy in campaigning for the extension of the vote in the past decade and it was firmly convinced that it would boost the party's electoral advance in the following years. Even so, the party's commitment to democracy remained ambiguous. Originally a Marxist party, the SDAP had shaken off most of its radicalism in the years before. Its first entry in the parliamentary arena, in 1897, had marked the beginning of a process through which the party's representatives had slowly, but steadily adapted to the rules and conventions of the democratic environment in which they were operating.³ But this process was not easily reconciled with the SDAP's continuing commitment to Marxist theory and, as part of that, the lasting influence of the notions of the 'class struggle' and the 'proletarian revolution' on the party's understanding of progress. For the time being, the SDAP failed to resolve these issues. At regular intervals this caused considerable confusion about what the limits were to the party's democratic embrace and whether it should aim to realize its objectives within the democratic order or whether it should treat democracy as a temporary inconvenience on the path to the classless society.⁴

1 In 1917 women only received passive voting rights. It took until 1922 before women actually received the same voting rights as men. Piet de Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd. De ongemakkelijke democratie, 1913-1949' in: *Land van kleine gebaren. Een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland 1770-1990* (Nijmegen 1990) 176-262, there 185-186.

2 Friso Wielinga, *A History of the Netherlands. From the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* (London and New York 2015) 195-197.

3 Piet de Rooy, *Ons stipje op de waereldkaart. De politieke cultuur van modern Nederland* (Amsterdam 2014) 170.

4 Piet de Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen. Een eeuw sociaal-democratie in Nederland' in: *De Rode Droom: een eeuw sociaal-democratie in Nederland* (Nijmegen 1995) 9-77, there 28. See also Peter Jan Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie. De SDAP tussen klasse en natie, 1929-1939* (Amsterdam 1989).

Yet, it was the pragmatic acceptance of the democratic order which steered the SDAP's actions throughout these years. As such it entered the general election of 1918 with optimism. Compared to the last election of June 1913, the size of the electorate had increased with fifty percent and since many of these new voters had a working-class background, the SDAP expected to improve on the 18 seats of the 100 in Parliament which it had won five years earlier.⁵ At the time, this had been the party's best electoral result and it had yielded the SDAP an invitation to join a coalition government with the liberals. This was a proud moment, but the party conference had rejected the offer (with a very narrow margin), since it feared that the practice of coalition politics – with its need for compromise and consensus – would discredit the party's agenda of radical reform.⁶ However, five years later this risk seemed less daunting. Fuelled by the expected electoral gains, the SDAP's leadership had decided before the election that the party would not turn down another offer, if it was invited to join a coalition government again.⁷

This proved to be a false hope. Even though the SDAP managed to increase its parliamentary presence to 22 of the 100 seats in Parliament, winning 4 seats compared to the election of 1913, there was little reason for excitement. This increase was mainly the result of the newly introduced system of proportional representation and much less of the influx of new voters. The overall support for the party had grown with less than 4 percent. Still, the real loss was suffered by the variety of liberal parties, which saw their numbers plunge from 40 to 15 seats.⁸ Although the SDAP emerged from this election as the second party in Parliament, it was outsized, by far, by the Catholic RKSP ('Roomsche-Katholieke Staatspartij', Roman Catholic State Party) which won a total of 30 seats.⁹ The RKSP turned to the two smaller Protestant parties instead, the CHU ('Christelijk-Historische Unie', Christian-Historical Union) and the ARP ('Anti-Revolutionaire Partij', Anti-Revolutionary Party) to form a coalition government, which was led by the Catholic Prime Minister Ch.J.M. Ruijs de Beerenbrouck. This confessional partnership was far from harmonious, but between them these three parties agreed the country would be worse off under a coalition which would include the SDAP. Their triumvirate proved strong enough to dominate the Netherlands for the larger part of the interwar decades.

In 1918, this remained food for fortune-tellers. Even so, the result of the general election did learn the SDAP some important lessons. Among other things, it taught the party leadership that it needed tact and patience if it hoped to challenge the RKSP's status as the largest party in parliament. However, the idea of a short-cut to power remained attractive to numerous party members and to some party leaders as well. This was dramatically illustrated by events in November 1918, when long-standing party leader Pieter Jelle Troelstra proclaimed that the socialist revolution had reached the Netherlands. Alarmed by the unfolding revolution in neighbouring Germany, Troelstra perceived the spreading of social unrest in the Netherlands as his signal to act. In a lengthy speech to Parliament on November 12th he kindly requested the government to hand over power to the SDAP, so that his party could lead the revolution in the Netherlands in a calm and orderly fashion.¹⁰ The government was surprised, but not impressed by

5 De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 32. These 18 seats would drop to 15 seats in the following year, due to a number of by-elections which the SDAP failed to win.

6 Ibidem, 28 and Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 16.

7 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 16.

8 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 192.

9 This was the name of the alliance under which a number of Catholic electoral association participated in the national election, but it would take until 1926 before it officially adopted this name.

10 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 12 and De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 32.

this most unusual request. It anticipated that the disturbances throughout the country were not severe enough to upset the political hierarchy. Perhaps surprisingly, this view was also shared by most of Troelstra's fellow party leaders. Because Troelstra had acted without prior consultations with his parliamentary party or the party's executive committee. As such, he was fiercely criticized by his party fellows for having gambled with the SDAP's past achievements.¹¹ Among those was SDAP-chairman Willem Vliegen, who declared: 'I have not fought 25 years for mass suffrage to have it abolished only a few months after its introduction'.¹²

Troelstra's 'mistake', as this episode is commonly referred to, did not have the far-reaching consequences which he himself had in mind. Troelstra soon admitted he had crossed the line and that he had misread the unfolding events. Yet, his action did have long-lasting effects, not only for his own position, but also for the SDAP. In a general way the incident helped to reinforce the hostility which the SDAP and other labour organizations had for long been subject to. Most notably, this was reflected by the 1921 order of the Catholic episcopate, which banned any form of political cooperation with the SDAP. Some years later the RKSP would reformulate this command into its doctrine of 'last resort', which meant that it would only consider a coalition with the SDAP if all other options were ruled out.¹³ Troelstra himself suffered a similar fate, albeit within the confines of the party hierarchy. Although he remained immensely popular with the party's rank and file, after November 1918 Troelstra lost most of his authority in the party's executive committee. What's more, these developments helped to cement the shift of power which had been going for some years already towards the party leadership's reformist and moderate section, of whom party chairman Willem Vliegen and party seniors Jan Oudegeest and Johan Schaper were some of the more prominent faces.¹⁴

With these men holding key positions in the party hierarchy, the SDAP set out to undo some of the damage in the following years, notably by adding new substance to its democratic profile. The overall mood in the party remained optimistic. It was generally thought that society would increasingly suffer from the ills of capitalism. It was anticipated as well that the SDAP's electoral fortunes would mirror this development and that the party would eventually prevail at the polls. This was certainly reassuring, but it gave no answer to what the SDAP might do to shorten the time between now and then and how society might be reorganized along socialist lines in the meantime.¹⁵ In searching for a new perspective, the SDAP's leadership set up a number of study-committees to investigate these matters more thoroughly. The first of these was the 1919 'socialisation-committee', which was followed in 1920 by a committee which studied the 'political system of social-democracy' and lastly in 1923 by a committee for 'corporate organization and public participation/corporate democracy?'.¹⁶ The work of these committees will be explored in more detail in a subsequent part of this chapter, but the party leadership was convinced it would help the SDAP to broaden its electoral support. By making 'socialisation' a central subject of its

11 H.F. Cohen, 'Pieter Troelstra (1860-1930)' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, <https://resources.huuygens.knaw.nl/bwn> (3-4-2012).

12 As quoted in De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 195.

13 Ibidem, 205-207 and Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 17-20.

14 De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 33.

15 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 145-146.

16 Peter Jan Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946' in: Maarten Brinkman, Madelon de Keizer and Maarten van Rossem eds., *Honderd jaar sociaal-democratie in Nederland 1894-1994* (Amsterdam 1994) 63-117, there 69-73 and Piet de Rooy, 'De sociaal-democratische passie voor politiek' in: J. de Beus, J. van Doorn and idem ed., *De ideologische drieboek. Nederlandse politiek in historisch perspectief* (Amsterdam 1996) 136-178, there 149-151.

early 1920 propaganda-campaigns, it sought to promote the SDAP as a modern party which had a clear view of how society might be purged from the ills of capitalism.¹⁷

This was one reason why the SDAP welcomed the general election of 1922 with confidence. When this election was announced, party chairman Vliegen declared 'there was no reason to be concerned. Our party is healthy and spirited and our opponents have caught a mood of desperation'.¹⁸ However, there was little despair among the SDAP's opponents when the votes were counted. Between them, the confessional coalition of the RKSP, CHU and ARP managed to win 9 seats, which amounted to a solid parliamentary majority of 59 seats. To make things worse, these gains partly came at the expense of the SDAP. Not only did it lose 2 seats compared to the election of 1918, dropping from 22 to 20 seats in Parliament, more importantly this was the first time in the party's history that it failed to expand or consolidate its electoral support.¹⁹ As such, it sent a strong message to the SDAP that its optimism about its anticipated growth-rate was less realistic as it had anticipated, and, moreover, that it might have to revise the underlying logic which fuelled this optimism. However, it would take more time (and subsequent election results) before the SDAP was ready to pick up this signal. For now, the loss was explained by the Catholic machinations and, notably, the episcopal command which had urged Catholic voters to stay away from the SDAP. Troelstra claimed this intervention had 'corrupted' the election. His bitterness helped to conceal there were other, more uneasy, factors involved as well, among which his own 'mistake' of 1918, but also the apparent setback in the SDAP's appeal to the wider public.²⁰

4.2 An 'oasis of tranquillity'. From wireless telegraphy to broadcasting

The election of July 1922 witnessed the return of Ruijs de Beerenbrouck as Prime Minister, heading the confessional coalition of the RKSP, ARP and CHU. Ruijs de Beerenbrouck's second cabinet largely resembled the team he had led in the past four years. One newcomer was Gerardus van Swaaij (RKSP), a professor in electrical engineering, who was appointed to the post of Minister of Infrastructure. In this capacity Van Swaaij would oversee the state's activities in the sphere of transport and infrastructure. As such, he was also responsible for the developments in a whole different field, wireless telegraphy. Van Swaaij was generally considered as one of the weaker members of this cabinet.²¹ This was also reflected in his approach to wireless telegraphy. His time in office spanned from September 1922 until August 1925. The previous chapter showed that these were vital years for the institutionalization of broadcasting in Britain, but in the Netherlands Van Swaaij largely stood by without taking any decisive steps. His name plays a marginal role only in the historiography of Dutch broadcasting. Ironically, he is best remembered for his decision not to decide himself in radio matters, but to invite a broad variety of figures to discuss the organized future of broadcasting.

17 De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 38-39 and Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 71.

18 Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 25.

19 'Bijlage 2: Fracties en zetelaantal in de tweede kamer sinds 1917', *Land van kleine gebaren*, 378.

20 Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 29.

21 For biographical details about GJ van Swaaij, see http://www.parlement.com/id/vg09ll9u03gh/g_j_van_swaaij (26-6-2015).

In the decades before wireless telegraphy had slowly developed into a field of interest of various parties. Although the Marconi Company had attempted to gain a foothold in the Netherlands, its 1898 offer to build a transmitting station (in return for the exclusive rights of exploitation) had been rejected by the then government.²² One result of this was that the growth of wireless activities was not pressed by large corporate interests, but mainly by a range of smaller players, among which shipping companies, the navy as well as wireless amateurs. It was this latter group which exposed the shortcomings of the legal framework which guided these developments. Based on article 3 of the Telegraphy- and Telephony-Act of 1904 wireless amateurs were banned from owning the machinery to tune in to wireless communications between other parties.²³ This, however, did not stop a growing number of wireless amateurs to build their own apparatuses, since the secrecy only added to the fascination for this 'wonder' of technology. It took until July 1914 before the political authorities acknowledged that the technological possibilities had outgrown the legal framework and that wireless amateurs should no longer be banned from the airwaves. Although the outbreak of World War I caused Dutch authorities to re-install the ban on amateur activities, this was a temporary measure and this ban was withdrawn again in September 1917, which indicated that wireless amateurs had now acquired a permanent place in this developing field.

Yet, it was the discovery of their collective capacity as an audience which would open the door to a new phase in the history of broadcasting. The credits for this go to the Dutch engineer and businessman Hans Schotanus à Steringa Idzerda. His name was also mentioned in the previous chapter, as the organizer of the Sunday-afternoon Concerts which were sponsored by the British newspaper the *Daily Mail*.²⁴ His achievements did not stop there, because Idzerda was also an inventor and the owner of a radio-manufacturing company. Seeking to expand the market for his products, he had started his broadcasting activities on November 6th 1919 from his experimental studio in The Hague, where he invited a range of singers and ensembles to appear before the radio microphone. Idzerda was the first to offer a regular and pre-announced program to the public, not only nationally but also internationally.²⁵ This made him a global pioneer of broadcasting as it would take until August 1920 before a radio station in Pittsburgh, KDKA, would launch a similar, regular broadcasting service.²⁶ But while this would trigger a rapid surge of interest for broadcasting in America, the Netherlands remained an 'oasis of tranquillity', as one author has labelled it.²⁷ As Idzerda struggled to find the resources to finance his activities, he was glad to accept the *Daily Mail*'s sponsorship in 1922. Other radio manufacturers soon followed his example. Of these it was the NSF ('Nederlandsche Seintoestellen Fabriek', Dutch Transmitter Factory) which was most successful. After receiving its broadcasting license in 1923, the company's programming committee HDO ('Hilversumsche Draadloze Omroep', Hilversum Wireless Broadcasting) managed to attract a growing audience with a mixed (but basic) program

22 N.Tj. Swierstra, *Geboorte en opkomst van de V.A.R.A.* (Unpublished, 1980) 16.

23 Wijfes and Hogenkamp, 'De dageraad van de eeuw van beeld en geluid', 18-53.

24 Chapter three, page 57.

25 Among those who refer to Idzerda's activities as a broadcasting pioneer are Peter Burke and Asa Briggs. See Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media. From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Oxford 2002) 162. For a short biography of Idzerda see A.L. van Schelven, 'Idzerda, Hans Henricus Schotanus Steringa (1885-1944)' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, <https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn/26-6-2015>.

26 Briggs and Burke, *A Social History of the Media*, 161.

27 Wijfes, 'Het radiotijdperk', 43.

of popular and classical music, comedy and children entertainment.²⁸ Still, the NSF's station remained unused during large parts of the week, which is why the company decided to rent out its facilities to other organizations. It would not take long before a range of new players found their way to Hilversum, as they were all eager to use this new instrument to spread their message through the airwaves.²⁹

These developments urged the Dutch authorities to reconsider their stance towards this field. So far, the early activities in broadcasting were regulated by the Dutch Post Office, PTT ('Staatsbedrijf der Posterijen, Telegrafie en Telefonie', State Company of Post, Telegraphy and Telephony) on a provisional basis with temporary and experimental licenses. The emerging interest for broadcasting signalled that a more permanent arrangement was needed and, moreover, that it was time to lay down a framework which could facilitate the further development of broadcasting. This was a fundamental challenge, and it required those involved to form an idea about the place which broadcasting should have in culture and society. The previous chapter has shown that the British authorities did not wait for this process to materialize, but that the Post Office had pushed the founding of the British Broadcasting Company in a relatively early stage. The Dutch authorities were less anxious to deal with this developments and their approach did not show a similar urgency. Between 1922 and 1924 the government consulted a number of departmental committees.³⁰ However, these committees were poorly facilitated to formulate an adequate advice about broadcasting, since their expertise focussed mainly on the legal, infrastructural and technological aspects of these developments. And so, in turn, these committees decided to consult the various groups which had been involved with radio in the past years, or which were interested in developing broadcasting in the near future. These included a variety of radio manufacturers, the organized body of wireless amateurs and a number of individuals who were excited about the cultural possibilities of broadcasting. However, this failed to produce a coherent answer or strategy, since the interests and ideas of these different groups varied too greatly. And yet, despite the 'apparent chaos', as one authors labels the situation, it was generally agreed that broadcasting should be left to a single, private broadcasting organization and that the state should only have a limited role in this field.³¹ And so, in June 1924 it was the third committee which advised Minister Van Swaaij to bring together the different groups and to initiate the founding of National Broadcasting Company along these lines.

Van Swaaij decided accordingly and, apparently, he hoped to resolve this matter quickly. He offered a leading role to figures who had been lobbying for these plans in the previous years. So he asked G.W.J. Bruins to take the chair of this committee. Bruins was a Professor of Economy, who hoped to make broadcasting an educational instrument. Among the other figures who were invited was a representative of the association of wireless amateurs and the managing director of the NSF, the leading radio manufacturer and owner of the radio station in Hilversum. However, the start of their talks, and the founding of the anticipated broadcasting company, was soon

28 Wijffes and Hogenkamp, 'De dageraad van de eeuw van beeld en geluid', 45.

29 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 16-17.

30 These were first the 'Commissie tot wijziging van de Telegraaf- en Telefoonwet' (Committee to amend the Telegraphy- and Telephony-Act), which was followed by the 'Permanente Commissie voor de Radio Telegrafie' (Permanent Committee for Radio Telegraphy), and lastly the 'Commissie tot onderzoek van de organisatie van de technische dienst van de PTT (Committee to investigate the organization of the technical department of the PTT). Peter de Goede, *Omroepbeleid met en tegen de tijd: interacties en instituties in het Nederlandse omroepbestel* (Amsterdam 1999) 51-52 and De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 29-33.

31 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 33.

delayed by Professor Bruins' resignation, due to his departure to Germany. Minister Van Swaaij now offered the chairmanship to a former Minister of Agriculture, Trade and Industry, the liberal F.E. Posthuma. But before the Posthuma Committee could resume its task, the chairman received a last request from Minister van Swaaij. This happened in April 1925, when Posthuma was asked by the Minister to invite a number of additional members on his committee, as to broaden its representative status. Again, this caused a further delay, but Posthuma was well prepared to do so, not knowing that it would open the door to two figures whose sole intention was to sabotage his committee's deliberations.

4.3 Between unity and division in the Dutch 1920s

At that point six years had passed since Idzerda had first began his regular broadcasting service from The Hague. This might seem a short span of time, but much had happened in broadcasting in the intervening years, with radio developing from a logistic novelty and an object of fascination of individuals into a means of entertainment and information for the (ever-increasing) millions. In 1925 this development was still in its infancy. Still, it had already seen the frantic 'radio boom' in the United States producing the vast array of smaller and larger commercial radio stations, but also the birth of the British Broadcasting Company. Of course, these developments had not passed unnoticed in the Netherlands. It has been noted that the centralized model of the BBC formed a primary reference point of the earliest plans to set up a National Broadcasting Company for the Netherlands.³² In fact, the previous chapter showed that the BBC was founded on the rejection of American 'chaos'. Although the Netherlands was a most orderly and well-organized country, there were various commentators who thought it was troubled by a kind of 'chaos' as well, albeit of a different, home-grown nature. This explains why some of those hoped that radio might bridge the divisions which were running through the country and, more particularly, why the BBC was seen as an example which was worthy of copying to the Dutch broadcasting context.

It was notably in liberal circles where it was felt that the Netherlands was falling apart. This had much to do with the achievements of 19th century liberalism which had changed the country's social, cultural, political and economic makeup for good.³³ But if the previous century had witnessed the unification of the Netherlands on a liberal footing, this had also opened the door to the adversaries of the liberal state.³⁴ It was notably in the closing decades of the century that those adversaries launched their struggle for a different social and political order. The first push came from Protestant circles, where Abraham Kuyper and his allies began to rally support for the equal funding of public and private schools.³⁵ However, education was but one part of Kuyper's quest against modern society. What he aimed for was a maximum degree of Protestant autonomy (or 'soevereiniteit in eigen kring', i.e. 'sphere sovereignty'). It was this quest which saw the founding of the ARP (or Anti-Revolutionary Party) as the first modern political party of the Netherlands and the emergence of a wider network of Protestant organizations,

32 Ibidem, 28-29.

33 Wielenga, *A History of the Netherlands*, 145-197 and Henk te Velde, 'Van grondwet tot grondwet. Oefenen met parlement, partij en schaalvergroting 1848-1917' in: *Land van kleine gebaren*, 99-175.

34 Piet de Rooy, *Republiek van rivaliteiten. Nederlands sinds 1813* (Amsterdam 2005, 2nd rev. edition) 75-76 and Te Velde, 'Van grondwet tot grondwet', 174-175.

35 Ibidem, 86-92 and Ibidem, 119-127.

including the 'Vrije Universiteit' (Free University) and the daily newspaper *De Standaard*.³⁶ In the following decades these organizations would serve as the strongholds of a denominational counter-culture. What's more, in its struggle for confessional self-determination the ARP struck a lasting partnership with Catholic circles, where a similar need was felt to organize all aspects of life on an independent, Catholic basis.³⁷ It was their shared antagonism to modern liberal society that came to define the political debate into the opening decades of the 20th century. However, these were also the decades in which the achievements of liberal society, notably the primacy of the free market and its capitalist logic, faced a mounting scrutiny by the rise of socialism. In its efforts to build a new society the labour movement emerged as a parallel network of affiliated organizations which covered all aspects of socialist life. Similar to the Protestant and Catholic examples these included, among other things, educational organizations, recreational bodies and a wide variety of periodicals and newspapers.

Of course, this phenomenon is better known as 'pillarization' and it is broadly understood that the growth of these segmented communities, or 'pillars', helped to cement the place of the main political parties at the heart of Dutch politics and society in the 20th century. What played a role in this as well was the 1917 'pacification', which sealed the introduction of universal suffrage and the equal funding of public and private schools. But, what's more, it also gave the country a new electoral system which was based on the principle of proportional representation.³⁸ Although smaller parties and independent political figures continued to find their way to Parliament throughout the 1920s and 1930s, on the whole the workings of this system helped to consolidate the position of the larger parties.³⁹ At the time, there were many who perceived this hegemony of the major political parties with concern. While some rejected it as a symptom of the lack of unity which troubled Dutch political culture, others saw it as an element of a more widespread 'crisis of democracy'.⁴⁰ Among those was the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who claimed that the Netherlands faced 'the heavy burden of an obsolete party system that has fossilized as a result of the calamitous introduction of proportional representation. This system has stopped functioning for a long time already'.⁴¹ But similar concerns resonated more widely, also in socialist circles where Pieter Jelle Troelstra rejected the 'separatist fanaticism' of the Catholic and Protestant parties.⁴² This was part of a more elaborate critique which condemned the rise of confessional parties as an obstacle to the all-defining struggle between capital and labour. While Huizinga thought the British political system offered a far better alternative for this plague of partisanship, Troelstra, on the other hand, argued for a radical overhaul of the parliamentary system and a transfer of political powers to newly designed democratic bodies.⁴³

36 Wielenga, *A History of the Netherlands*, 171-175 and De Rooy, *Republiek van rivaliteiten*, 86-92.

37 Te Velde, 'Van grondwet tot grondwet', 123-127.

38 J.C.H. Blom, 'The Netherlands since 1830' in: Idem and E. Lamberts eds., translated by James C. Kennedy, *History of the Low Countries* (New York and Oxford 1999) 387-460, there 421-422. Wielenga, *A History of the Netherlands*, 195-197. More specifically about the introduction of the system of proportional representation, see Loots, *Voor het volk, van het volk*.

39 Loots, *Voor het volk, van het volk*, 124-126 and 145-146. A study about the smaller political parties in Dutch interwar politics is Koen Vossen, *Vrij vissen in het Vondelpark. Kleine politieke partijen in Nederland 1918-1940* (Amsterdam 2003).

40 See for instance A.A. de Jonge, *Crisis en critiek der democratie. Anti-democratische stromingen en de daarin levende denkbeelden over de staat in Nederland tussen de wereldoorlogen* (Assen 1968).

41 As quoted in De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 227.

42 As quoted in Frank van Vree, *De Nederlandse Pers en Duitsland, 1930-1939. Een studie over de vorming van de publieke opinie* (Groningen 1989) 17.

43 De Rooy, 'De sociaal-democratische passie voor politiek', 151.

Troelstra's own actions suggest that those same political parties played an important part in guiding the country in its transition to a new, mass democratic order without major disruptions. Although the 'masses' were feared and loathed in the Netherlands as elsewhere, it has been noted that Dutch politics in the age of mass democracy formed a rather quiet and subdued state of affairs.⁴⁴ In fact, observations of contemporaries and historians offer little proof that the Dutch 'masses' really existed, at least in its 'vulgar', 'rowdy' and 'violent' form. The dominant image, instead, is of a people which was divided in separate, rather introverted sub-communities which were organized along Catholic, Protestant or socialist lines. Although there were large parts of public life which lay beyond the scope of the 'pillarized' networks, on the whole these parts of society showed a similar degree of order and stability. This did not mean that the Netherlands was unaffected by the rise of mass society and the social, cultural and economic problems which are commonly associated with this process.⁴⁵ In the early 1920s there were significant concerns, for instance, about the degenerative effects of modern society on the behaviour and moral standards of young people.⁴⁶ But although these concerns were genuine, they were also relatively innocent. It shows that the country was spared by the major disruptions which other, surrounding countries had to cope with.

An illustration of these patterns can be found in the makeup of the Dutch press. It was explained in the previous chapter that the British newspaper market had witnessed the rise of the popular press and that this resulted, among other things, in the oligarchy of the 'press barons' and the spread of commercialism and sensationalism in the style of reporting.⁴⁷ A similar development did not occur in the Dutch newspaper-market, which was tied up to an oligarchy of a whole different kind. More than half of the total number of daily newspapers was somehow linked to the confessional and ideological networks which stratified Dutch public life.⁴⁸ These included titles such as the Protestant newspaper *De Standaard*, the socialist daily *Het Volk* and the Catholic newspaper *De Tijd*. The reach of these papers was not absolute, and there was a significant readership as well for independent, non-partisan newspapers. These varied from highbrow liberal organs to popular 'neutral' dailies. Of this latter category, it was *De Telegraaf* which came closest to resembling British popular dailies, not only in its sensational tone and its non-conformist character, but also in the commercial motives and striking personality of its owner H.M.C. (Hak) Holdert.⁴⁹ Together with its ancillary titles it catered to a substantial share of the Dutch newspaper-readership. As such, it held a prominent place in the formation of Dutch interwar public opinion as well, even though its loud voice was often ignored or lost in the dissonance which was produced by the segmented variety of non-'neutral' newspapers.

44 Henk te Velde, 'Perceptions of the Masses in Dutch Politics' in: B. Moore and H. van Nierop eds., *Twentieth-Century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands* (Oxford and New York 2006) 17-29.

45 See also Ido de Haan, 'Between Stupidity and Creativity. Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century' in: B. Moore and H. van Nierop eds., *Twentieth-Century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands* (Oxford and New York 2006) 1-14.

46 See De Rooy, *Republiek van rivaliteiten*, 172-174 or De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 196-198.

47 Chapter three, page 60.

48 Detailed numbers in Van Vree, *De Nederlandse Pers en Duitsland*, 358-361. Also Huub Wijfjes, *Journalistiek in Nederland, 1850-2000. Beroep, Cultuur en Organisatie* (Amsterdam 2004) 146-151.

49 More extensively on the history of this newspaper Mariëtte Wolf, *Het geheim van de Telegraaf. Geschiedenis van een krant* (Amsterdam 2009).

4.4 The SDAP and the Posthuma Committee (1925)

Against this background it seems only fitting that the Posthuma Committee brought together a similar variety of interests. It was noted above that the Committee had initially consisted of a select group of men, who, between them, represented the radio manufacturing industry, educational interests and wireless amateurs. While each of these groups had their reasons for seeking to push the development of broadcasting to a next stage, the pages above have also illustrated that the Netherlands harboured various other groups which, in turn, had their own ideas about how society should be organized. It was in one of those groups where the alarm-bells went off when, in early 1925, Minister Van Swaaij asked Bruins, and later Posthuma to coordinate the founding of a National Broadcasting Company.⁵⁰

In the years before the birth of broadcasting had attracted a growing interest in Protestant circles as well. This had resulted, towards the end of 1924, in the founding of the NCRV, the 'Nederlandsche Christelijke Radio Vereeniging' (Dutch Christian Radio Association).⁵¹ As a most modern means of communication, the appreciation for radio in these circles was ambivalent, since it was both seen as a force of evil, but also as a promise of a higher good.⁵² The founders of the NCRV – among whom Pieter Domisse and Abraham van der Deure – were convinced of its value and they hoped to find a regular place in the airwaves. Their broadcasting association was the first to respond to the opening of the NSF's facilities by renting a weekly timeslot on its Hilversum station from Christmas 1924 onwards.⁵³ In the meantime, various Catholic radio pioneers had begun to explore the possibilities for a Catholic broadcasting organization as well. The turn of events in The Hague (where Posthuma was about to begin his talks about a National Broadcasting Company) gave this plan a further impetus.⁵⁴ Because Posthuma's activities were watched in Protestant and Catholic circles as a possible threat to the confessional aspirations in broadcasting. It urged the NCRV's chairman Van der Deure to approach Minister Van Swaaij and to ask him to open this committee to the Protestant and Catholic interests in broadcasting, as well as to those of other groups in society which might want to join these developments, including the labour movement.⁵⁵

In recent years the labour movement had witnessed a similar surge in wireless enthusiasm amongst its rank and file.⁵⁶ Among other things, this was illustrated by the weekly section on radio matters, '*Ons radiohoekje*' ('Our radiocorner'), which was published by the labour newspaper *Het Volk* since December 1923. But the focus of its articles lay with tubes and valves, so with the technology of radio and in early 1925 the organizational pursuit of a labour broadcasting association was yet to materialize. And so, the Posthuma Committee turned to the SDAP instead to ask whether the labour movement was interested in joining its deliberations. This happened on April 1st 1925, when Antoine Dubois (the managing director of the NSF and

50 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 34.

51 Peter Bak and Wim Berkelaar, *Verkondiging en verstrooiing. Een geschiedenis van de NCRV (1924-2014)* (Amsterdam 2014) 25.

52 Bak and Berkelaar, *Verkondiging en verstrooiing*, 26-27. Also Wijfes and Bert Hogenkamp, 'De dageraad van de eeuw van beeld en geluid', 48-49.

53 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 17.

54 A.F. Manning, *Zestig jaar KRO. Uit de geschiedenis van een omroep* (Baarn 1995) 23-39.

55 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 34 and Hans van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuild. De strijd om het Nederlandse omroepbestel in de periode 1923-1947* (Baarn 1976) 17.

56 Wijfes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 30-32.

one of the original members of the Posthuma Committee) explained the committee's purpose to Cornelis Werkhoven, the SDAP's party secretary. This was not their first talk, since the SDAP had approached the NSF some months earlier, as it hoped to broadcast the opening speeches from its February party conference. On that occasion the NSF had refused to lend its facilities to the SDAP, since it saw its request as a form of one-sided party propaganda.⁵⁷ Months later, the situation had changed and when Werkhoven was asked by Dubois whether his party was prepared to participate in the founding of a 'neutral' broadcasting service, it responded with immediate interest.⁵⁸ Werkhoven informed Posthuma that his party was most happy to join the initiative. What's more, he hoped the matter could be resolved with some urgency, so that the SDAP could use the facilities of the anticipated broadcasting company for the campaign of the forthcoming general election, which was set for two-and-a-half months later, July 1st 1925.⁵⁹

A National Broadcasting Company?

If Werkhoven had managed to attend the first meeting of the Posthuma Committee, in May 1925, he might have realized that these expectations were somewhat optimistic, not only since this was a short period of time to reach an agreement among a diversely composed committee, but also since some of the other members were hardly convinced that the Netherlands really needed a National Broadcasting Company. Most notably, these were the NCRV's chairman Abraham van der Deure and Willem van Koeverden, the Catholic member of this committee. Apparently, this had not been realized by the chairman Posthuma either. In his opening talk he spoke of the great 'cultural potential' of broadcasting as the main reason why he had decided to lend his support to this initiative. He then asked those present whether they agreed about the need for a single broadcasting service. Among those to answer him was the NSF's director Dubois, who stressed the urgent need of a single organization by warning for the risks of 'fragmentation', which could only cause 'a hopeless disorder of a technological and financial nature'.⁶⁰ Other shared this opinion, among whom Posthuma himself, who claimed to be speaking on behalf of the Minister of Infrastructure as well. According to Posthuma, Minsiter Van Swaaij expected that the founding of a 'monopolistic broadcasting organization' would come with certain difficulties, but that he also thought these difficulties would be 'much more serious' when those involved were granted 'too much freedom'. This was why Van Swaaij was said to prefer a unified broadcasting model over an alternative arrangement and why he spurred the members of the committee to reach an agreement which would facilitate this purpose.

This, however, failed to change the mind Van Koeverden and Van der Deure, who held rather different ideas about this question. Throughout this meeting they sent a clear message that they were primarily concerned about the interests of their own denomination. Among other things, Van der Deure insisted that a neutral broadcasting service would be unacceptable to the Protestant and Catholic parts of the broadcasting audience. In relation to that he explained that his people would wish to use the broadcasting facilities every Sunday of the week. The question was whether this was possible within the organizational framework which Posthuma and his allies

57 Ibidem, 32-33.

58 A. Dubois to F.E. Posthuma 1-4-1925, National Archive (NA), Archive F.E. Posthuma (Posthuma), 2.21.026.27, inv. nr. 329.

59 C. Werkhoven to F.E. Posthuma 21-4-1925, NA, Posthuma, 2.21.026.27, inv. nr. 329.

60 Minutes meeting Committee Posthuma 8-5-1925, NA, Archive Staatsbedrijf der PTT: Hoofdbestuur, Radio-omroep Radiodistributie (PTT RODI), 1919-1940, 2.16.25, inv. nr. 7.

had in mind. Van Koeverden and Van der Deure raised some different ideas instead. While the former asked whether it was possible to establish a federative broadcasting union (which would comprise Protestant, Catholic and liberal-Protestant groups in society), the latter claimed the solution was a single broadcasting organization which would use three different wavelengths.⁶¹ The other members of the committee responded with little appreciation to these suggestions. To them, these issues were secondary matters which would have to be resolved in a later stage. What was most important now, they argued, was to reach an agreement about the general status of this broadcasting company first. After that, there were ample opportunities left to discuss the details of its operation or to talk about the demands and wishes of the company's constituent parts.

This, of course, was a serious misjudgement of the fundamental opposition which was emerging in broadcasting and it ignored that it partly ran along the same lines which had come to divide Dutch politics and society in the decades before. So what Posthuma and Dubois rejected as 'fragmentation' and 'disorder', was defended by Van der Deure and Van Koeverden as confessional autonomy, or in the case of the former 'sphere sovereignty'. As such, it was hardly surprising that the same opposition re-emerged in the second meeting of the Posthuma Committee. This time, the party secretary of the SDAP, Cornelis Werkhoven, was present as well. He witnessed how Van der Deure increased the pressure on the other members of the committee by insisting on three demands which had to be granted to keep him from ending these talks. These demands included the free disposal of a fixed evening per week for the NCRV and the airing of a church-service each Sunday.⁶² Werkhoven was the first to respond. He asked Van der Deure to adopt a more patient stance and he explained that the SDAP 'had also considered it useful for propaganda purposes to participate in the founding of a broadcasting organization'; he added to this that the SDAP 'thought that fragmentation in broadcasting should be avoided'.⁶³ He concluded by urging Van der Deure to be more cooperative and to invest in the mutual trust which was needed for such a joint effort, instead of claiming particular rights which may well prove impossible to grant in the near future. But while this showed that Werkhoven and the SDAP were firmly on the side of those who thought in terms of a single broadcasting organization, it also highlighted Van der Deure's and Van Koeverden's unyielding stance. And so, the stalemate was complete, and the remainder of this meeting was spent on questions about the organizational makeup of the anticipated Broadcasting Company.

The third and final meeting of the Posthuma Committee was set for two months later. The aim of this concluding session was to discuss the final details about the statutory basis of the broadcasting organization, after which the Minister would be informed of the results. With no major disagreements arising a conclusion was reached without much trouble. What was proposed was the founding of the Dutch Radio Broadcasting Company ('Nederlandsche Radio-Omroep Maatschappij') by the groups which were represented on the Posthuma Committee. This Broadcasting Company would receive its license from the PTT, the Dutch Post Office and its revenues would come from the broadcasting audience, since every owner of a radio set would be charged to pay a listeners-fee. It was suggested to hand the daily management of this Company to one or more Directors, who, in turn, would be accountable to a Board of Governors. The members of this Board were to be appointed by the shareholders, i.e. the constituent groups

61 Minutes meeting Committee Posthuma 8-5-1925, NA, PTT RODI, 2.16.25, inv. nr. 7.

62 Ibidem.

63 Ibidem.

which had formed the Posthuma Committee. As such, this Board would broadly represent the different segments of society. But the appointment of the Board's chairman was left to the Minister of Infrastructure. His influence was also felt in the sphere of programmes, since the Company's output was to be subjected to the approval of a broadcasting committee, which had to be established for this purpose in consultation with the Minister.⁶⁴ And so, to sum up, these proposals would provide the Netherlands with a privately owned, publicly funded and state licensed Broadcasting Company. Although much remained undecided (most notably with regards to the Company's programming activities and the proportional rights of the constituent parties to use its facilities) this was largely in agreement with the order of priorities which most members of the Committee had in mind.

What was most significant about this third and final meeting was not the substance of these proposals, but the absence of two members who had spoken out most strongly in the Committee's first two meetings. In those meetings Van der Deure and Van Koeverden had signalled they shared a different order of priorities and that they required firm guarantees first, before they would consider joining in the initiative. By staying away from the last meeting, both men sent out another signal that they did not expect that a National Broadcasting Company would serve their interests in broadcasting. Although inconvenient, the other members of the Committee seemed hardly concerned by the non-attendance of Van der Deure and Van Koeverden. Apparently, they figured there was still a substantial majority which was willing to participate in this new body and that it was up to the Minister to decide whether or not he would give the Dutch Radio Broadcasting Company the green light. However, they did not know that Van der Deure and Van Koeverden had secretly, and quite effectively, lobbied in the highest circles of government to win support for their own, alternative plans. With the backing of Catholic Prime Minister Ruijs de Beerenbrouck and Protestant Minister of Finance Hendrik Colijn, both men were confident that a National Broadcasting Company was further away than their fellow members of the Posthuma Committee realized.⁶⁵

A total neglect

But for now these developments were overshadowed by the general election of July 1925. It was noted above that this election was one of the reasons why the SDAP had decided to accept Posthuma's invitation, since it hoped to use radio for the campaign of this election. Chapter eight will show that this was, indeed, the first election in the history of the Netherlands in which broadcasting was used. Although the SDAP's introduction to broadcasting was far from fortunate, this caused little damage. In fact, the 1925 election brought the SDAP back to its triumphant height (of twenty-four seats) of 1918. But with the Catholic RKSP emerging as the largest party in Parliament, this election also saw the return of the confessional coalition between the RKSP, ARP and CHU, albeit in a new composition. Because in the past years ARP Minister of Finance Hendrik Colijn had surfaced as the strong figure of the coalition.⁶⁶ And so, after the election it was Colijn who replaced Ruijs de Beerenbrouck as the country's new Prime Minister. What's more, his appointment would seal the fate of the Posthuma Committee's proposals.

⁶⁴ Draft statute and subsidy scheme National Broadcasting Company, NA, PTT RODI, 2.16.25, inv. nr. 7.

⁶⁵ Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 19.

⁶⁶ Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 34.

It was the new Minister of Infrastructure, the Catholic M.C.E. Bongaerts, who would pass this verdict. With hindsight it seems only natural that a Catholic Minister in a confessional government refused to lend his support to the proposals of a Committee, which were rejected by the two main confessional members of that same Committee. But somehow Cornelis Werkhoven had failed to recognize this turn of events. When he learned of this development, towards the end of September 1925, he was highly displeased, even though he was invited to participate in a new committee which would re-discuss the whole matter. In a last attempt to salvage the Posthuma Committee's work Werkhoven approached the chairman himself. His letter to Posthuma shows he had not quite come to terms with the new reality in broadcasting: 'if my judgment is correct this means a total neglect of the work which the last committee has done under your excellent guidance'.⁶⁷ This was serious enough, but what was all the more worrying to Werkhoven was the makeup of the new broadcasting committee which saw a 'most shocking' shift in favour of the Catholic and Protestant interests in broadcasting.⁶⁸

4.5 'Vereeniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs'

In another corner of the labour movement these developments were observed with more approval. It was noted above that the labour daily *Het Volk* had been running a weekly section on radio matters since December 1923. So far, this section had largely served its readers with information and advice, not only about the technological side of radio but also about new radio stations or interesting programmes. But, in April 1925, one of these readers came up with a new idea, which would offer a radical departure in the labour movement's dealings with broadcasting. Referring to developments in Germany, where socialists had recently established the 'Arbeiter-Radio-Klub Deutschlands' (Workers Radio Club Germany), this anonymous reader suggested setting up a similar organization in the Netherlands.⁶⁹ Closer to home, the NCRV's example learned this was not a bad idea at all.

Still, it would take a few more months before further action was taken. In September 1925 *Het Volk* asked its readers to support the intended foundation of the 'Vereeniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs' (VARA, Association of Workers Radio Amateurs). The two men behind the initiative were Levinus van Looi and Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, two relatively minor figures in the labour movement's hierarchy. The first was the editor of *Het Volk*'s weekly radio section, while the latter was responsible for the newspaper's department of publicity and subscriptions.⁷⁰ They shared a conviction that the labour movement should not miss out on broadcasting, since it offered valuable opportunities to 'spread our message, our music, our songs, our speakers and our artists'.⁷¹ They found support for this cause among a number of higher placed figures who were prepared to be part of the VARA's 'recommendation committee'. These included Roel Stenhuis, the chairman of the trade union federation NVV who also held the chairmanship of the Institute for Workers Education ('Instituut voor Arbeidersontwikkeling', IvaO) and Willem Drop, the

67 Letter C. Werkhoven to F.E. Posthuma 29-9-1925, NA, Posthuma, 2.21.026.27, inv. nr. 329.

68 Ibidem.

69 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 36.

70 J. van der Merwe, 'Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (22-8-2012).

71 As quoted in Wijfjes, *Biografie van een omroep*, 36.

treasurer of the SDAP.⁷² Among those was also Cornelis Werkhoven, the SDAP's secretary, who had served as the party's spokesman on broadcasting in recent months. But neither of these men were present at the VARA's inaugural meeting on November 1st in Amsterdam. With ca. one hundred people attending, the founding of the VARA formed a low-key event. At this occasion, Levinus van Looi was chosen as the VARA's first chairman, whereas Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek was appointed to the position of VARA secretary.

In the literature about the history of the labour movement the founding of the VARA is commonly portrayed as a bold, but logical new step in the labour movement's evolution.⁷³ It was explained already that the labour movement had emerged in previous decades as an ensemble of various larger and smaller organizations. Most prominently, these included the SDAP and the trade union NVV, which both stood at the top of the movement's organizational hierarchy. However, the ideology of socialism extended beyond the political and economic realm and recent decades had also witnessed the proliferation of a large number of educational and recreational organizations, among which musical societies, drama clubs and youth organizations.⁷⁴ While this network of affiliated organizations mirrored the structures which were being drawn up in other, confessional parts of society, it also paralleled the inclusive makeup of labour movements in other countries. In fact, it was no coincidence that the founding of the VARA was inspired by the example of the 'Arbeiter-Radio-Klub Deutschlands', since the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) and the German labour movement were widely admired among Dutch socialists.⁷⁵ Against this background it seems most obvious that the Dutch labour movement turned to broadcasting as well and that it embraced the VARA as its instrument to explore the airwaves in the struggle for socialism. Still, this is not the whole story yet, and it fails to take account of the alternative ideas about broadcasting in other sections of the labour movement. What's more, to capture this broader picture the following pages will also show that it is necessary to look beyond the German connection and, more particularly, to recognize the link which tied the SDAP to the British Labour Party.

4.6 Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee (1925-1926)

Much of this revolved around the figure of Cornelis Werkhoven as the party's spokesman in broadcasting matters. Werkhoven was unpleasantly surprised by the rejection of the Posthuma Committee's proposals by Bongaerts, the new Minister of Infrastructure. After sharing his concerns with his former chairman Posthuma, Werkhoven also decided to inform the SDAP's executive committee about the recent developments in broadcasting. So far, his fellow executives had given him all the space he needed to negotiate in the SDAP's interest. He now gave them a 'detailed exposé' about what had happened in the Posthuma Committee and that he had been to join a new committee. Among other things, he explained that 'he had taken a position of

72 Ibidem, 38-39.

73 See for instance José van Dijk, *Het socialisme spant zijn gouden net over de wereld. Het kunst- en cultuurbeleid van de SDAP* (Amsterdam 1990) 103-105.

74 Van Dijk, *Het socialisme spant zijn gouden net*, 43-83.

75 This is also recognized by Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 37-38. See also chapter one 'Prolog. Die SPD als Vorbild? Deutsche und niederländische Sozialdemokraten seit 1894' in Marc Drögemöller, *Zwei Schwestern in Europa. Deutsche und niederländische Sozialdemokratie 1945-1990* (Berlin 2008).

absolute neutrality' in the former body and that he hoped to do so again in the new committee.⁷⁶ He continued by expressing his concerns about the makeup of the new committee, which showed a clear bias in favour of the confessional point of view. Since he feared that the position of 'neutrality' would not be accepted by the committee, his suggestion was to ask the Minister to appoint a second socialist member on this body. For Werkhoven these were pressing issues, but the other party executives did not seem to share his concerns. Neither were they prepared to elaborate on the possible implications for the party's long-term position in broadcasting. Among those to answer Werkhoven were party seniors Vliegen and Schaper. They thought the case was 'very simple' and they advised Werkhoven to accept the invitation to this committee, and 'if he failed to agree with its report, he could refuse to sign it, or issue a minority report instead.'⁷⁷ Besides that, it was decided that the party's parliamentary leader, Johan Willem Albarda, would approach Minister Bongaerts with a request to appoint a second socialist member on this committee.

National Wireless Broadcasting

This offered little relief, since Bongaerts simply refused to add another member to this body on the SDAP's behalf. On the whole, the committee which was put together to discuss the institutional organization of broadcasting in the Netherlands consisted of ten members. The background of the various members suggest that Werkhoven was right to worry about a lack of balance. Because four of these were thought to represent the cause of a centralized broadcasting organization, in whatever form. Apart from Werkhoven these were the chairman of the HDO (the programming committee of the NSF), the chairman of the amateur society NVVR and a representative of liberal Protestant circles.⁷⁸ Representing a diversity of interests between them already, it is difficult to see how these members could counter the contrasting views of the other six members of the committee, who all came from confessional circles. Among those were the usual suspects Van der Deure and Van Koeverden, as well as a former Minister of War, J.J.C. van Dijk of the ARP. Quite crucially, it also included the chairman of the committee, a position which was offered to a figure of the highest political standing, the former Catholic Prime Minister Ruijs de Beerenbrouck. It was noted above that Ruijs de Beerenbrouck had expressed his sympathies for Van Koeverden's views on broadcasting some months earlier, so his chairmanship of this new committee offered a minor boost to Van Koeverden and his allies in their quest against a single broadcasting organization.

However, what was even more important was the fact that Bongaerts, the new Minister of Infrastructure, seemed equally willing to support Van Koeverden and Van der Deure in their quest for confessional autonomy in broadcasting. This was no coincidence, since Bongaerts, too, had been approached by Van der Deure in an earlier stage with a detailed plan about a National Broadcasting Company which would grant significant autonomy to the confessional interests in broadcasting.⁷⁹ Bongaerts did not adopt this plan, but his inaugural speech to the 'Government-Committee for National Wireless Broadcasting' ('Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationale Draadlozen Omroep'), as this body was formally called, offered some clear indications that

76 Minutes Party Executive Committee 3-10-1925, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 50.

77 Ibidem.

78 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 62.

79 Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuild*, 20-21 and Bak and Berkelaar, *Verkundiging en verstrooiing*, 33.

he was receptive to its line of thought. The formal assignment of this Committee was threefold: to consider the role of the state in broadcasting, to advise the government about a permanent arrangement for broadcasting and to come up with temporary measures to facilitate the operation of broadcasting in expectation of a definitive arrangement.⁸⁰ This was a rather broad assignment, but Bongaerts explained the members of the Committee that broadcasting should, preferably, find a middle-road between state-interventionism and private enterprise. What he meant was that the state should have some interference with radio – for legal reasons, for infrastructural reasons, etc. – but that the overall responsibility for broadcasting should be left to private parties. Although he hoped that this committee would agree on some form of cooperation, he realized that its diverging beliefs and interests might lead to a divided outcome. Quite significantly, he stated that when this might happen, he would then allow a second radio station to be built as to facilitate the various groups in their demand for airtime.⁸¹ And so, before this body had even begun its talks, Bongaerts had seriously weakened the case of those members who still hoped to establish a single broadcasting organization.

Still, this was precisely what the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee came to recommend. After seven meetings the final report of the Committee was presented in July 1926. This report was built around three main recommendations. The first of these was that a private broadcasting company – or ‘Nationale Draadloze Omroep’ (National Wireless Broadcasting) – would be established by the groups which were represented on the Ruijs Committee. Secondly, that this broadcasting company would be financed by a license-fee which the government would impose on all owners of radio-sets. And thirdly, that the facilities of this broadcasting company would be available to private broadcasting associations for a maximum of one night per week.⁸² While the former two recommendations largely resembled what the Posthuma Committee had agreed, the third signalled that the balance in this debate had shifted towards the interests of private broadcasting associations. While the details of the Committee’s report show a similar picture, more importantly they also highlight that this shift worked in favour of the Protestant and Catholic claims. Such was for instance the case with regards to the dispute which had emerged in the Posthuma Committee about the confessional right to broadcast a church-service each Sunday. The Posthuma Committee had rejected this claim as premature, but the Ruijs Committee did not object to it and it even agreed that the larger part of the Sunday-program (from 8am to 12am and from 4pm to 8pm) would consist of church-broadcasts.⁸³

However significant, the report of the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee did not represent a total victory for the confessional side of the body. Among other things, this was reflected in the fact that this broadcasting organization would not merely be a facilitating instrument to private broadcasting associations, but that it would also broadcast a variety of programmes of its own. These programmes were seen as complementary to the overall output of the various broadcasting associations, which is why they would have to be of a ‘general’ and ‘neutral’ nature.⁸⁴ Equally important in this respect was the suggestion to appoint one single Director (‘a high-minded and independent figure’), who would be responsible for the daily management of the organization.

80 *Rapport van de Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep* (’s Gravenhage 1926) 5.

81 *Rapport van de Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, 10. See also De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 63.

82 *Rapport van de Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, 13-14.

83 *Ibidem*, 53.

84 *Ibidem*, 15.

As part of that he would also oversee the organization's broadcasting activities, which is why some members strongly preferred to set up a joint management of three Directors who would represent the Catholic, Protestant and liberal Protestant segments of society.⁸⁵ This was rejected, but the fact that the suggestion was included in the main part of the report indicates that it was considered as a perfectly reasonable option.⁸⁶ The members who had argued for this construction had to rely instead on the controlling powers of the six-men Board of Governors, which would be appointed by the shareholders of the company. Beyond that, it was agreed that a 'Permanent Government Council for Radio Communications' should be set up. This council would serve as the Minister's advisory body in broadcasting affairs, but it would also monitor the content of programmes to make sure that broadcasting associations would respect the law and that they would not broadcast anything that might 'offend the beliefs of other parts of the audience'.⁸⁷ And so, the Committee's first and most urgent advice to Minister Bongaerts was to initiate the founding of this Council, so that it could provide him, in turn, with further advice about what the next steps should be to realize these recommendations.⁸⁸

Werkhoven's minority report

When judging this report the Minister would have to take into account that this Committee had again failed to reach a unanimous conclusion. Because two members of the Committee had issued a minority report to express their dissatisfaction about certain parts of the agreement. The first of these was the least interesting. Written by Anton Veder, the chairman of the amateur society NVVR, this statement raised the marginal position which the NVVR would have within the suggested broadcasting company; it argued that this was a denial of the vital role which his organization had played in the developments of the recent past. He was probably right about this last point, but he failed to acknowledge that the future of broadcasting was shaped by the radio audience and not by radio amateurs. More interesting, therefore, was the second minority report, not only since it offered a radical alternative to the arrangement which was suggested by the Ruijs report, but also since it contained innovative ideas about the place of the audience in the makeup of these structures.

The author of this second statement was the SDAP's party secretary Cornelis Werkhoven. During the meetings of the Ruijs Committee Werkhoven had tried to leave his mark on the deliberations of this body, but, just like he expected, this had not yielded the result which he had hoped for. By drawing up a minority report, Werkhoven followed the advice which his party fellows Vliegen and Schaper had offered him almost a year ago. His ten-paged statement consisted of two parts. In the first part Werkhoven summed up his objections against the recommendations of the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee and in the second (more interesting) part he laid down the broad outlines of a broadcasting system which he and his party would prefer to set up. He opened the first section by explaining his overall problem with the suggested broadcasting company, which was the disproportional degree of control which the confessional interests would have over the organization. As a result, Werkhoven argued, this national broadcasting company would never truly be a national undertaking, but mainly a creature of confessional demands. To

85 Ibidem, 20.

86 Ibidem, 21.

87 Ibidem, 54.

88 Ibidem, 37.

substantiate these claims he referred to the Sunday-arrangement, which ignored, for instance, that the labour movement often held important meetings or demonstrations on Sundays as well and that it was equally important to allow the audience to tune in to the speeches at these occasions.⁸⁹ What troubled him also was the narrow-minded and parochial spirit which spoke from the report's provision that broadcasting associations were not allowed to broadcast anything that might 'offend' other parts of the audience.⁹⁰ Again, he saw this as a sign of the Catholic and Protestant hold over the Ruijs Committee and he warned that it would lead to a rule of intolerance and, moreover, that it would subordinate the freedom of speech in broadcasting to the 'personal views of temporary office-holders'.⁹¹

But there was a different side to these comments as well. Because Werkhoven's minority report did not merely reject the confessional conduct in the Ruijs Committee, it also offered a fundamental critique of a system in which the public interest was sacrificed to the pursuit of private interests. While Werkhoven dismissed its harmful effect on the talks of the Ruijs Committee, more importantly, he argued that it would make the future of broadcasting a chaotic affair if its recommendations were adopted. This was not a new concern and we know that Werkhoven had earlier voiced his party's desire to counter the forces of 'fragmentation' in broadcasting. So far, this had been a single phrase, but Werkhoven's minority report offers a more elaborate view of the centrality of this concern to his understanding of broadcasting. Because most of his objections traced back to a dichotomy between 'order' and 'disorder' which underlay his analysis. Among other things this was reflected in the various terms he used – 'sectarianism', 'conflict', 'competition', 'schism', 'discord', 'division', 'fragmentation', etc. – to warn for the implications of the Committee's recommendations.⁹² These words were mainly aimed at the unfolding situation in broadcasting, but there was a broader relevance to Werkhoven's perception of 'chaos', in the sense that it formed a remote variation on the socialist rejection of the 'uncoordinated' and 'anarchic' nature of capitalist (or pre-socialist) societies. Although the term 'socialism' was used only once throughout these ten pages, the outline of his alternative broadcasting system offered clear evidence of the political sympathies of its designer.

Werkhoven's alternative arrangement was based on the basic, but radical conclusion that broadcasting should not be privately owned and controlled, but that it should instead be publicly owned, and organized in the form of a 'State Broadcasting Company'. More specifically, Werkhoven referred to the example of the PTT, the Dutch Post Office, to argue that state ownership in broadcasting was a perfect alternative to private enterprise. Although he admitted that the PTT's services were not always flawless or entirely satisfactory, according to Werkhoven the overall standard of its service matched up perfectly to private companies of a similar size.⁹³ While those private companies were often haunted by stories of corruption or illegitimate affairs, this would surely not happen with an organization which was owned and controlled by the state. In addition, Werkhoven also argued that a 'State Broadcasting Company' would not be troubled by the endless range conflicts and disputes, which would haunt a private broadcasting company

89 Memorandum of Cornelis Werkhoven, *Rapport van den Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, Bijlage IV, 62-71, there 63.

90 *Rapport van den Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, 54.

91 Memorandum of Cornelis Werkhoven, *Rapport van den Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, Bijlage IV, 64.

92 Ibidem, 66-67.

93 Ibidem, 68.

that was founded by a haphazard collection of internally divided groups, as was suggested by the report of the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee.

Although his idea of a 'State Broadcasting Company' formed a radical departure from what the Ruijs Committee and the Posthuma Committee had discussed so far, this was not the most interesting part of Werkhoven's minority report. Rather, what gave his proposal its innovative edge was the conception of democracy which informed his ideas and, in addition, the way in which this enabled Werkhoven to incorporate the interests of private broadcasting associations in his larger scheme. Because Werkhoven did not intend to bar broadcasting associations from broadcasting altogether, on the contrary. Similar to what was suggested by the Ruijs report, his 'State Broadcasting Company' would operate two radio stations and the facilities of the second station would be hired out to all those groups or individuals (including broadcasting associations and, indeed, political parties) who hoped to reach out to the broadcasting audience for whatever purpose, and with whatever message.⁹⁴ In relation to that, Werkhoven took a firm stance against 'censorship' in broadcasting. He argued more particularly that the state should not impose any restrictions (aside from the existing legal provisions) on the content of programmes and that broadcasters should enjoy the same liberty as people who turned to the press, meetings, telephony, telegraphy or the post instead. Against this background Werkhoven perceived this 'State Broadcasting Company' as a most liberal institution – or in his words an 'intermediary' –, which should allow 'the public mind to express itself freely and indiscriminately' and which should offer ample space to 'the people to voice its opinions, its ideas and ideals, and even its idiocies'.⁹⁵

This credo did not merely apply to the output of the second radio station. In fact, the first radio station held a much more prominent place in Werkhoven's plans, as it formed the main basis of the independent programming activities by the 'State Broadcasting Company'. Moreover, it would also form the democratic centre of the organization, since Werkhoven suggested to hand the responsibilities for these programming activities to a six-men 'broadcasting committee'. Most significantly, he argued that this committee should be organized as a representative body, in the sense that its members would be elected every four years by the broadcasting audience (or, at least, by those members of the audience, who had paid their license-fee). He anticipated that the changing makeup of this body would, in turn, lead to changes in the nature of the overall output of the Broadcasting Company's programmes. As part of that he also looked to the broadcasting associations as the organizations which would play a key role in the electoral process – so somehow similar to political parties in parliamentary elections – among other things by nominating candidates, by mobilizing support among the broadcasting audience and by formulating demands for future programmes. Werkhoven expected that it would help to create a lively and democratic culture of broadcasting: 'If we agree that parliamentary elections help to educate the public in a political sense, we may also assume that the electoral contest for the broadcasting committee shall help to educate an ever-expanding number of listeners (..) not just politically, but also culturally and artistically'.⁹⁶

This, surely, was an interesting prospect, but it did conceal a number of blind spots which Werkhoven failed to address. One of these was his overly optimistic appraisal of the democratic

94 Ibidem, 70.

95 Ibidem, 68.

96 Ibidem, 70.

workings of this system. While his alternative arrangement was aimed to escape the suffocating hold of private broadcasting associations, it did, in a different way, also rely on the intermediate function of those same broadcasting associations. Although Werkhoven claimed that the elected nature of the 'broadcasting committee' would stimulate a spirit of 'cooperation and deliberation', he failed to acknowledge that it might also open the door to the same conflicts and differences of opinion which had troubled broadcasting so far.⁹⁷ As such, this would not solve the problems which Werkhoven perceived, but it would merely relocate these to the heart of his alternative broadcasting system. Another difficulty concerned the role of the government and Parliament in relation to the suggested 'State Broadcasting Company'. Werkhoven's overall stance was that the Broadcasting Company should be independent, and therefore free from political interference. Yet, this largely ignored that broadcasting would become an integral part of the state's machinery, if these recommendations were adopted, and that this would assign the government and Parliament with a crucial tasks of overseeing its operation and of holding it to account. As such, it would also be susceptible to the myriad political pressures which flowed in and around these bodies.

Perhaps, Werkhoven was aware of these flaws as well, because he did admit that he had ignored 'various interesting questions of detail'.⁹⁸ He also noted that his main aim in writing this report was to promote a viable alternative to what seemed an inevitable outcome. Although he recognized that his ideas would probably not find sufficient support, this did not prevent him from concluding this statement with a dramatic, final appeal: 'It is up to His Excellency in the first place, to Parliament in the second place and to public opinion in the last place to judge whether the Netherlands is best served with a solution of the radio-question which follows the fatal direction that is recommended by the Ruijs Committee: with the restrictions of the freedom of speech, with the danger of clerical domination, with the subsidy troubles which is inherent to it, or the direction of the independent State Company, with its safeguards for freedom and justice, with the democratic influence of its interested parties and with a favourable financial basis (...)'.⁹⁹ He added to this, that he hoped, but did not expect that this last direction would be chosen.

4.7 Between public and private interests

In the literature about the history of broadcasting in the Netherlands, Cornelis Werkhoven only takes a marginal place. This may not surprise, since Werkhoven failed to leave his mark on the outcome of these developments. Among the authors who mention his name are Jacoba de Boer and Hans van den Heuvel. Both refer to him as a figure with reasonable objections against the Ruijs report, whose alternative suggestions for a 'State Broadcasting Company' were far removed from the developments on the ground.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, they also raise a similar point about his relationship with the VARA. While De Boer makes a casual remark about Werkhoven's failure to discuss these matters with the broadcasting association, Van den Heuvel asks to which degree his 'strong views' represented the VARA's ideas about the future organization of broadcasting.¹⁰¹ The

97 Ibidem, 69.

98 Ibidem, 71.

99 Ibidem, 71.

100 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 67-68 and Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 26-27.

101 Ibidem, 68 and Ibidem, 24.

effect of these words is the same, in the sense that it questions Werkhoven's failure or inability to coordinate his actions with his fellow socialists. Other historians have painted a similar image, most notably the author of the VARA's recent 'biography', who portrays Werkhoven as an obstructionist whose ideal of a 'State Broadcasting Company' blinded him to the pluralist turn in broadcasting and, more importantly, to the great potential of the VARA as a labour broadcasting association.¹⁰² Undoubtedly, least sympathetic is a short biographical article on Werkhoven, which depicts him as a party apparatchik, who was appreciated for his work ethic, but whose 'rigid and suspicious' character made him one of the more unpopular figures in the party's organizational hierarchy.¹⁰³

This is not a happy picture, and it certainly corresponds to some of the observations above. However, it might be asked whether these personal traits have not helped to obscure the significance of Werkhoven's contribution to this debate. Because it is certainly true that Werkhoven's actions were not, first and foremost, guided by the interests of the VARA and, moreover, that he did not represent the broadcasting association's views on the wider organization of broadcasting. However, the question is whether this should be held against him, since Werkhoven was essentially the SDAP's spokesman on broadcasting matters. What's more, he did grant a central role to the VARA and the other broadcasting associations in his alternative broadcasting system, albeit a different role than these broadcasting associations would acquire in the pluralist arrangement which emerged throughout the years. However, it seems wrong to blame him for neglecting the VARA's interests, as it anticipates too strongly on the 'pillarized' outcome of these developments. More importantly, the authors who do so fail to acknowledge the link between Werkhoven's proposals and the political outlook of the SDAP in the 1920s. Because although he held an isolated position in the Ruijs Committee, Werkhoven was no Don Quixote who was fighting windmills. When we shift our perspective from the context of broadcasting to the party political realm, it turns out that his overall stance was more coherent with the SDAP's ideas, ambitions and limitations than has been recognized so far. By doing so, we will also find there was a British connection to his ideas of a 'State Broadcasting Company', which has not been observed before and which offers an interesting counterweight to the German link in the founding of the VARA.

For this purpose it is necessary to return to the early 1920s and to pick up on what the opening pages of this chapter noted about the SDAP's efforts to formulate a new socialist agenda. It was explained already that these efforts largely revolved around the work of three study-committees, of which the first, the socialisation-committee, was the most important. This committee was set up in 1919 and its creation was an immediate response to Troelstra's 'mistake' of November 1918.¹⁰⁴ Because it caused the party leadership to explore the possibilities for socialist reforms from within the existing political order. A starting point for this was found in Clause 10 of the 1912 party programme; it stated that a new system of production would emerge from capitalist developments and that this system would not be based 'on the exploitation of one class by another, but on public ownership and public control of the means of production, and its purpose is not to make profit for some, but provisions for the needs of all.'¹⁰⁵ Eventually, the report of this committee was presented in 1920 and it promoted a picture of a 'socialized' economic order

102 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 47-49.

103 Lex Heerma van Voss, 'Werkhoven, Cornelis' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (1-10-2015).

104 De Rooy, 'De sociaal-democratische passie voor politiek', 148-149.

105 Ibidem, 149.

in which the most vital sectors and services of the economy (trade, industry, infrastructure, agriculture, etc.) were publicly owned and controlled by representative boards. It emphasized that this was not socialism yet (ideas about a sudden transition from capitalism to socialism were rejected as ‘phantasies’), but a step forward in a piecemeal process of socialist transformation.¹⁰⁶ In the following years the two subsequent committees (the committee for a ‘political system of social-democracy’ and the committee for ‘corporate organization and public participation’) would add further substance to this line of thought, also by taking it into new directions.

This was precisely what Werkhoven did some years later, when he drew up his design of a publicly owned broadcasting system. To be clear, Werkhoven did not refer to these party statements explicitly and he did not use the same terminology either. This, however, could not conceal the immediate connection between his proposals and the broader set of idea which these committees had laid down in the years before. Some of this was reflected in the details of his report, for instance in his praise of the state’s hold over the Post Office, or PTT, and his subsequent claim that broadcasting should be organized accordingly. This was fully consistent with the (equally positive) comments about the Post Office of the socialisation-report.¹⁰⁷ While the socialisation-report had argued for an increased role of the state over the wider transport-sector, quite interestingly, it did so by voicing the hopeful message that ‘the decentralized chaos of capitalism shall be followed by the centralized order of socialisation’.¹⁰⁸ At this point it needs no explanation that Werkhoven’s rejection of the forces of ‘fragmentation’ was pervaded by a similar desire.

And yet, to grasp the continuity between Werkhoven’s approach to broadcasting and the SDAP’s outlook of the 1920s, it is also helpful to consider the larger parallels that connect his minority report to the endeavours of these committees. Two elements stand out in this respect. The first of these was Werkhoven’s prioritization of the public interest in broadcasting and his refusal to place the interests of the VARA, or the labour movement more generally, at the forefront of his design. This did not make him many friends, not among VARA-sympathizers and neither among later historians. However, one look at the historical literature about the SDAP shows that it was largely compatible with the findings of the socialisation-committee, which urged the SDAP to move beyond its narrow working-class focus and to develop a more inclusive perspective which was aimed at society at large. But equally important is the second element, the democratic nature of Werkhoven’s alternative broadcasting system. Historians have largely ignored this, even though it did form an original and crucial part of his proposals. As such they have also failed to observe the direct link between his idea of an elected ‘broadcasting committee’, which was composed by representatives of the various broadcasting associations, and the participatory ideals which informed the SDAP’s image of a fair and equal social and economic order.

There was a broader context to this as well. Because the recollection of Troelstra’s ‘mistake’ had all but faded in the mid-1920s, and the SDAP had hardly convinced its political opponents of its democratic credentials. Although it had established itself as a coalition partner on a municipal level – from 1912 onwards the SDAP had joined other parties in city councils in Amsterdam,

106 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 26-29 and De Rooy, ‘De sociaal-democratische passie voor politiek’, 149-151. The term ‘phantasies’ comes from *Het Socialisatievraagstuk. Rapport uitgebracht door de Commissie aangewezen uit de S.D.A.P.* 3rd ed. (Amsterdam and Rotterdam 1920) 9.

107 *Het Socialisatievraagstuk*, 103 and Memorandum of Cornelis Werkhoven, *Rapport van den Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, 62.

108 *Het Socialisatievraagstuk*, 104.

Rotterdam and The Hague – on a national level it was still waiting for a new offer to join a coalition government.¹⁰⁹ While the SDAP used the lessons of these committees to promote itself as a modern and democratic party which was ready to work with its opponents in the public interest, it was this message which was conveyed by Werkhoven's minority report as well. The irony is that he failed to communicate this message adequately and that his pursuit of unity placed him on the side-lines of this debate, as well as on the margins of broadcasting history. This might also explain why the British connection to Werkhoven's report remains unobserved. Again, this connection traced back to the socialisation-committee, or, more specifically, to the chairman of this committee, Florentinus Wibaut. Because Wibaut was not only a senior figure in the party and a much respected alderman for the SDAP in Amsterdam; he was also an early convert to the Fabian Society's pragmatic and evolutionary understanding of socialism.¹¹⁰ This played a prominent role throughout his long political life (which spanned from the 1890s into the mid-1930s) and it also left its mark on the conception of socialism which was promoted by the socialisation-report.¹¹¹ As such, it also reverberated in Werkhoven's proposals.

But to understand the SDAP's response to the rise of radio, it is also useful to take note of the party's more immediate concerns in the field of culture and communication. In doing so, we may first point to the party's daily newspaper *Het Volk*. Founded in 1900, *Het Volk* was owned and controlled by the SDAP, together with the trade union federation NVV, and in 1925 it gave the party access to nearly forty-five thousand households.¹¹² Although the mid-1920s witnessed growing concerns about its uninspiring style, *Het Volk* remained a formidable political instrument and the arrival of radio did little to challenge the party's reliance on the press as its main channel of communication.¹¹³ But equally important was a development of a different nature; the founding of the Institute for Workers Education in November 1924. This body was a product of the shared ambition of the SDAP and the NVV to enhance their educational and cultural activities.¹¹⁴ The idea for this organization traced back to the years around World War I, but it was only in 1923 that the SDAP and the NVV agreed to take further action. Quite significantly, the committee which discussed the organizational basis and overall purpose of the Institute included the name of Cornelis Werkhoven, who served as its secretary and who had an important role in drafting its report, which was ready in March 1924. While this shows the relative simultaneity between these developments, more specifically it highlights that the birth of the VARA, in November 1925, was closely preceded by the founding of the Institute for Workers Education, or IvAO. It was this latter organization which was aimed to serve as an umbrella of the various other labour organizations. As part of that it was also intended to have a coordinating function in the series of cultural educational activities which were organized by these organizations.¹¹⁵ This helps to explain why Werkhoven did not back the VARA's cause more fully and why he thought the country and the labour movement were best served with a 'State Broadcasting Company'. Not only would this help to curb the claim to autonomy of other private

109 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 75-76.

110 Herman de Liagre Böhl, *Wibaut de Machtige. Een biografie* (Amsterdam 2013) 90-99.

111 De Liagre Böhl, *Wibaut de Machtige*, 307.

112 A.C.J. de Vrankrijker, *Het wervende woord. Geschiedenis der socialistische week- en dagbladpers in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1950) 249.

113 Van Vree, *De Nederlandse pers en Duitsland*, 80-81.

114 Van Dijk, *Het socialisme spant zijn gouden net*, 101-103.

115 H.C.M. Michielse, *Socialistische vorming. Het Instituut voor Arbeidersontwikkeling (1924-1940) en het vormings- en scholingswerk van de nederlandse sociaal-demokratie sinds 1900* (Nijmegen 1980) 194-196.

broadcasting associations, it would also prevent the fledgling VARA from developing similar aspirations and, moreover, from pursuing a position in the labour movement which was not in line with the larger plans of the IvAO or the SDAP.

4.8 'In expectation of a definitive arrangement' (1926-1928)

When the report of the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee was completed, in July 1926, it was presented to a new Minister of Infrastructure, Hendrik van der Vegte of the ARP. Van der Vegte had been appointed to this position only months ago, as part of a larger reshuffle of the confessional coalition of the ARP, RKSP and CHU. This was the outcome of the so-called 'Vatican-crisis', a dispute about the elimination of the Dutch embassy at the Vatican, which had caused the RKSP to withdraw its support for the fledgling government of Prime Minister Colijn. Having served only three months in office, Colijn was preceded by D.J. de Geer of the CHU, as the leader of a new cabinet around the same political parties. But while Colijn would return to lead the country in strong fashion in the following decade, the fall of his first cabinet did mark the premature end of the Ministerial career of Bongaerts, the Minister of Infrastructure who had established the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee. What's more, this also meant that his successor, Van der Vegte, would have to decide about the Ruijs Committee's recommendations on the organizational future of broadcasting. This was hardly beneficial for the continuity of the decision-making process, but it did reveal an emerging pattern. The same had happened with the recommendations of the Posthuma Committee, which had been set up by Minister Van Swaaij of the RKSP, but which had been rejected by his successor, Bongaerts. While this had helped to strengthen the cause of the confessional interests in broadcasting, Van der Vegte's appointment turned out to have a similar effect, as he saw no need to intervene more forcefully and to steer these developments in a different direction.

A first sign of this was offered by Van der Vegte's response to a request he received in May 1926 from a four-man delegation, which included Van der Deure and Van Koeverden as the spokesmen of the NCRV and the (recently re-baptized) KRO ('Katholieke Radio Omroep', Catholic Radio Broadcasting).¹¹⁶ Instead of deciding upon this request himself, he chose to transfer it to the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee, which was still sitting at the time. Whether Van der Vegte was aware of it or not, this was a decision with far-reaching consequences. Because what this delegation had asked for was a license to build a second radio station, which would allow the NCRV and the KRO a larger share of broadcasting time. What's more, it was argued that their use of this station was only a temporary affair and that their license would expire as soon as the National Broadcasting Company (as recommended by the Ruijs Committee) would be established. And so, after the Ruijs Committee had sanctioned their request (with one negative vote and Werkhoven absent), this was also taken up in the subsequent Ministerial order, which stated that this license was granted 'in expectation of a definitive arrangement'.¹¹⁷ However, the weak spot to this provision was that it gave the NCRV and the KRO the relative autonomy which their representatives had pursued throughout the previous years. From the NCRV's and KRO's perspective, this temporary position seemed far better than what the Ruijs report or any other

116 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 72-73.

117 As quoted in *Ibidem*.

‘definitive’ arrangement had to offer. And so, this concession did not only undermine the Ruijs Committee’s recommendations, it also encouraged the NCRV and the KRO to persevere with their obstructionist strategies in the following years.

Then again, the power to end this provisional situation rested with the Minister and it was he who had to decide about a more permanent arrangement for broadcasting, whether or not on the lines which were suggested by the Ruijs report. However, Van der Vegte was hardly inclined to do so and it took him almost a year to present a bill to Parliament which disclosed his ideas about these matters. When he did, in June 1927, it was welcomed with limited approval, since his bill was little more than an empty shell. On the whole, Van der Vegte took no account of the recommendations of the Ruijs report and he only intended to make some legal provisions for broadcasting to the Telegraph and Telephone Act of 1904.¹¹⁸ As such, this would merely result in the formalization of the present situation in broadcasting. Although it did make some minor comments about the need for control over the content of programmes or the introduction of a license-fee system, it made no suggestions either about the larger political implications of these issues. This was surely remarkable, but Van der Vegte justified his approach by pointing at the ongoing developments in broadcasting; he claimed the field was still too much ‘in flux’ to introduce more permanent measures.¹¹⁹ He failed to note that it would only become more difficult to make these changes in a later stage and that the beneficiaries of his non-interventionism were the broadcasting associations which were best served by the present state of affairs.

This was a conclusion which the SDAP would soon draw as well. So far, the party had relied on Cornelis Werkhoven to formulate its position towards broadcasting. On the whole, this had been an unfortunate affair, among other things since Werkhoven had failed to strike a partnership which could counter the confessional machinations in broadcasting. Also important was the fact that his suggestions were simply too far removed from the situation on the ground to have a real influence on how this debate was unfolding. This was an inconvenient truth, but it did not prevent the SDAP to draw attention to these ideas once again as part of a first, procedural response to Van der Vegte’s bill by various parliamentary parties. Among other things, the SDAP urged Van der Vegte to take his responsibilities and to save broadcasting from the ‘appalling disorder’ which an ‘ever increasing number of broadcasting associations’ would cause. What’s more, it claimed that broadcasting in the Netherlands was already marked by a ‘state of fragmentation which was not found in any other country.’¹²⁰ For this reason it asked the government to reconsider its position and to explore the possibilities of ‘a centralized state broadcasting company’. It suggested that this company could well operate two radio stations, the first of which would be governed by a public programming board and the second of which would be available to the various broadcasting associations. This was precisely what Werkhoven had promoted in his minority report. While his ideas had been rejected by the other members of the Ruijs Committee, one year later his party fellows found no support either with the government and other parties in Parliament. It was this feeble effort that caused the SDAP to accept that the pluralist arrangement for broadcasting was quickly becoming an inevitable reality. When Van der Vegte’s bill was discussed in Parliament, in February 1928, attentive observers might have noticed that the SDAP’s position had changed and that it was now ready to endorse what it had earlier opposed.

118 Ibidem, 80-81.

119 Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 29-30.

120 ‘Voorloopig verslag. 77.1. Aanvulling en wijziging van de ‘Telegraaf- en Telefoonwet van 1904’, 22-9-1927, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

'I agree with these'

On the whole, parties in Parliament were not impressed by Van der Vegte's bill and the Minister was criticized by various speakers for his uninspired approach of this matter. Nonetheless, most parties agreed that it was undesirable to pursue the founding of a national broadcasting company as a single undivided organization and that the public was well served with the broadcasting associations which had emerged throughout the years. But while Van der Vegte hoped to continue his policy of limited interference, a parliamentary majority urged him to adopt a more directive approach. Most important, in this respect, was the contribution of J.J.C. van Dijk of the ARP (and also a former member of the Ruijs Committee), who successfully introduced two amendments to Van der Vegte's bill. Both amendments would have a long-lasting influence on broadcasting in the Netherlands. The first amendment concerned the establishment of a Radio Council, which would assist the Minister as an independent advisory body in broadcasting affairs. The idea for this body had been discussed at different moments throughout the previous years. The record of the successive Ministers, Van der Vegte included, had clearly illustrated the need for a body of this type. What's more, the following chapters will show that this Radio Council would come to play a crucial role in broadcasting in the subsequent years. As such, it would also have an important say in the implementation of Van Dijk's second amendment, which asked for an equal allocation of broadcasting time among the various broadcasting associations. More particularly, Van Dijk argued that the allocation of broadcasting was a public concern and a matter of distributive justice which should not be left to the arbitrary rule of the owners of broadcasting facilities. He summoned Van der Vegte to intervene and to allocate the available time 'in fairness' ('naar billijkheid') among the different broadcasting associations.¹²¹

In the short history of broadcasting in the Netherlands, the passing of this amendment marked a pivotal point. It introduced the legal underpinning of the pluralist broadcasting arrangement which would be drawn up in due time. As such, it also held far-reaching implications for the VARA. At the time, the VARA was still a marginal organization which held less than ten hours per week to spread the word of socialism through the airwaves. Although it was engaged in a bitter struggle to expand its ethereal presence, so far this had not produced the result it was looking for. While this amendment promised the labour broadcasting association a 'fair' share of broadcasting time, quite remarkably the SDAP's spokesman in this debate, George van den Bergh, welcomed it with a most lukewarm response. With all of the SDAP's MPs voting in favour of the amendment, Van den Bergh had remarkably little to say about their reasons for doing so or about the amendment's significance to the VARA and the SDAP: 'I can be brief with regards to the amendments of Mr. Van Dijk, I don't want to cause any unnecessary delay, I agree with these.'¹²² The briefness of this comment is interesting, not so much for what it says, but mainly for what it does not say. Among other things, it suggests that the SDAP remained reluctant to lend its support to the construction of a pluralist broadcasting system. Besides that, it also suggests that the party had yet to accept the VARA's cause as its own cause and that it was hardly prepared to cheer the labour broadcasting association in public.

This was also reflected in Van den Bergh's overall contribution to this debate. Although he did speak out more plainly about the future of broadcasting, Van den Bergh mentioned the VARA

121 Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 31 and De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 87.

122 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 24-2-1928, 1470, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

only once, as part of some lesser comments about broadcasting to the Dutch East Indies.¹²³ Two subjects were most important to him and his comments about these subjects indicate that he considered these as the last remains of the arrangement for broadcasting which his party had argued for. The first of these had formed a point of particular interest of Werkhoven as well, and it concerned the looming consensus about the need for a form of control over the content of programmes. This was epitomized by a provision in Van der Vegte's bill, which stipulated that broadcasting should not be used to violate the 'safety of the state, public order or public morality'.¹²⁴ Van den Bergh did not refer to this provision explicitly, but he did praise the spirit of liberty which spoke from Van der Vegte's bill as it granted a plurality of voices access to the airwaves. What's more, he called upon the Minister and his fellow MPs to respect the freedom of speech in broadcasting in the near future and to make sure that the airwaves would remain accessible to political or religious statements and persuasions of whatever nature.¹²⁵ However, the positive tone of his appeal could not conceal there was a genuine reason for the SDAP and the wider labour movement to be concerned about the opposite, since its adversaries perceived its ideas and principles as a fundamental threat to the order they sought to uphold.

Then again, it was the second subject which Van den Bergh discussed that caused the most immediate setback for the SDAP. This subject concerned the financial basis of the anticipated broadcasting arrangement. It was explained above that the Ruijs Committee had argued for the introduction of a license-fee system which would compensate the state's infrastructural dealings with broadcasting and which would also serve as a form of public funding for the broadcasting associations' activities. This was one of the recommendations which Van der Vegte's bill did adopt and this was warmly welcomed by Van den Bergh. Although the SDAP's plan for a state owned broadcasting company had been rejected, Van den Bergh labelled this license-fee system, or 'retribution', as an acceptable and most basic alternative since it guaranteed a minimum involvement of the state in broadcasting. Among other things, he argued that it formed the basis of 'a close partnership between the broadcasting associations on the one hand and the state on the other hand, which would both be responsible for the joint operation of broadcasting'.¹²⁶ Somewhat later, he claimed that this partnership would lead to the creation of a 'truly national broadcasting service'.¹²⁷ He also stated that the 'retribution' would allow the broadcasting associations to work together and to coordinate their activities in harmony, and that it would prevent them from competing for the sympathy and financial support of the broadcasting audience. However, the other parties in Parliament held a rather different idea about the need and significance of the suggested license-fee system. In fact, the SDAP was highly displeased when a parliamentary majority turned out to support an amendment of the Liberal Member of Parliament Droogleevers Fortuyn which sought to cancel the 'retribution' altogether. Van den Bergh observed this turn of events with dismay, and he stated that broadcasting would remain the 'shambles' it was without the 'retribution'.¹²⁸ This was precisely what happened and it formed another, unpleasant reminder to the SDAP that its state-centred approach to broadcasting was a lost cause.

123 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 23-2-1928, 1442, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

124 'Memorie van antwoord. 77.2. Aanvulling en wijziging van de Telegraaf- en Telefoonwet van 1904', and 'Gewijzigd ontwerp van wet. 77.5. Aanvulling en wijziging van de Telegraaf- en Telefoonwet van 1904', 17/25-1-1928, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

125 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 23-2-1928, 1442, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

126 Ibidem.

127 Ibidem.

128 Ibidem, debate 24-2-1928, 1469.

4.9 The 'radio struggle' continues (1928-1930)

And yet, the SDAP's leadership had come to realize this already in an earlier stage. In the previous year the party's executive committee had opened talks with the VARA to discuss their mutual relationship. So far, this had been a strenuous process since it required the party executives to abandon the approach to broadcasting as had been formulated by Cornelis Werkhoven in the years before. What's more, Cornelis Werkhoven was crucially involved in this process as well, since he still held a key position in the party's organizational structures. In fact, Werkhoven had also accepted the post of party treasurer, making him the SDAP's secretary-treasurer and the following chapter will show, in more detail, that this caused a series of incidents and conflicts which would cast a long shadow over the SDAP's relationship to the VARA. The rejection of the license-fee system, or 'retribution', did not make this process much easier, as it denied the VARA a source of financial support which it needed so dearly. Ever since its founding the broadcasting association had faced a permanent financial crisis, and it had only managed to survive with help from the SDAP and the trade union federation NVV. However, the patience and funding of the SDAP were running out and while the 'retribution' should have provided the VARA with a guaranteed and stable income, for now it remained dependent on the reluctant support from the SDAP.

The outcome of the debate of February 1928 did promise the VARA a 'fair' share of broadcasting time as well, and this formed a significant boost to its efforts to expand its position in the airwaves. As part of this campaign the VARA had won a 'minor' victory in the previous year, when it had managed to secure some of the broadcasting hours (on Sunday mornings) which came available after the NCRV and the KRO had moved their activities from the first radio station in Hilversum to the second, newly built station in Huizen.¹²⁹ This was hardly enough, but in its search for more airtime the VARA faced a fierce competitor in the AVRO, ('Algemeene Vereeniging Radio Omroep', Public Association of Radio Broadcasting).¹³⁰ This broadcasting association was a recent reincarnation of the HDO and it presented itself as the national broadcasting organization. By doing so it aimed to fill the gap which the failure of the Ruijs Committee and, earlier, the Posthuma Committee had left. What's more, the AVRO claimed that its 'national' status gave it a natural right to use the Hilversum station on an exclusive basis, which meant that the other broadcasting associations – the VARA and the liberal Protestant VPRO – would have to find their place elsewhere, i.e. on the Huizen station. It was readily assisted in these efforts by the popular daily *De Telegraaf*, with which it shared some questionable commercial interests, as its owner Hak Holdert had his eyes set on the lucrative market of radio programming guides.¹³¹ Their machinations were followed with concern in VARA-circles, but it also caused distress among the executives of the KRO and the NCRV, who were hardly inclined to share their newfound facilities with the VARA, or other newcomers. They concluded that their own interests were best served by supporting the interests of the VARA, which laid the basis for the so-called 'radio coalition' as the unlikely alliance between the KRO, the NCRV and the VARA.¹³² There was much that separated these broadcasting associations, but it was their shared opposition against the AVRO's national aspirations that proved strong enough to enter the next phase of the fight for pluralist 'fairness' together.

129 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 49.

130 Ibidem, 52-53. More extensively on this affair Huub Wijfjes, 'De ballade van de bolhoed. Willem Vogt en het debacle van de nationale omroep (1923-1930)' in: *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 1 ('s Gravenhage 1989) 114-136.

131 Wijfjes, 'De ballade van de bolhoed', 120-128.

132 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 53 and De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 78 and 91.

The struggle which followed concentrated on the two broadcasting associations which had most to gain and most to lose, i.e. the VARA and the AVRO. Throughout the years these broadcasting associations became engaged in a bitter dispute, with each side assaulting the opposite side with inflated claims and crude accusations. So the VARA framed its rivalry with the AVRO as a struggle against the forces of capitalism and it portrayed the AVRO's campaign for national recognition as a 'liberal-capitalist conspiracy'. The AVRO, on the other hand, dismissed the VARA as a 'sectarian' organization, which 'poisoned' the airwaves with its subversive and radical ideas. While claiming to represent the 'public interest' in broadcasting instead, the AVRO urged the Minister to intervene and to ban the VARA from using radio as an instrument of propaganda. However, preaching a different message, this was precisely what the AVRO was doing as well. While its request was rejected by the Minister, the unfolding 'radio struggle' between the AVRO and the VARA did learn an invaluable lesson about the mobilizing potential of radio and the increasing popularity of broadcasting among the public. Among other things this was reflected in the growing membership of all broadcasting associations throughout 1928 and 1929.¹³³ The VARA, for instance, saw its membership rise in 1928 from ca. four-thousand to twenty-seven-thousand, and it continued to rise in the following year to reach ca. sixty-seven-thousand at the end 1929.¹³⁴

Within the SDAP these developments were followed with wonder and concern. Although the party leadership had come to accept the cause of the VARA as the cause of the labour movement, it still struggled to grasp the significance of broadcasting. In fact, various party leaders remained convinced that private broadcasting associations (the VARA included) should only have a secondary role in broadcasting and that the country was best served with a single, public broadcasting organization. Werkhoven's unexpected death in December 1928 seriously weakened this side.¹³⁵ However, the ambivalent mood about broadcasting was also fuelled by the 'radio struggle' between the VARA and the AVRO, which generated a significant stream of negative publicity. It was explained already that the SDAP had worked hard in previous years to cast off the popular imagery of a radical party with a revolutionary purpose. It has been argued that this was also reflected in Werkhoven's design of an alternative broadcasting system. His plans had failed to receive a sympathetic response from other parties and, to make things worse, the SDAP now had to stand by and watch how the VARA, as an affiliated organization, was accused of all those things the party hoped to escape so dearly. Nonetheless, it was recognized as well that this was no reason to leave the VARA out in the cold. Among those who came to defend the VARA in the party's executive committee was Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper, a Member of Parliament for the SDAP and a popular journalist for *Het Volk*. Kleerekoper had warned his fellow executives in June 1927 (so, at a relatively early stage) that the party's strategy in broadcasting was not without risks. Referring to the strong position of the KRO and the NCRV, he stressed that the labour movement should not miss out on these developments and that it was the SDAP's responsibility to support the VARA more fully.¹³⁶ The following chapter will show that Kleerekoper repeated this message on a number of occasions throughout the following years. From this perspective, it seems only fitting that Kleerekoper was also the first MP of the SDAP

133 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 95.

134 Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 56.

135 Heerma van Voss, 'Werkhoven, Cornelis'.

136 Minutes Party Executive Committee 11-6-1927, IISH, SPAP, inv.nr. 56 and Minutes combined meeting SDAP and NVV 18-6-1927, IISH, SDAP, inv.nr. 57.

who stood up for the VARA in Parliament and who demanded that the socialist broadcasting association was awarded with a similar share of the airwaves as its confessional counterparts.

This happened during a debate about the budget of the PTT in March 1929, so roughly a year after a parliamentary majority had voted in favour of Van Dijk's appeal for 'fairness' in broadcasting. This had been a clear signal to the Minister, but a year later Van der Vegte had still to make up his mind about how he would implement this 'fairness'-amendment. Yet, he was in no hurry, since he had delegated this thorny question to the recently established Radio Council. It was this advisory body which would have to come up with a formula to appease the competing claims of the various broadcasting associations. This did not prevent Kleerekoper from sharing his views on the Radio Council's puzzle, which, he claimed, was among the most delicate tasks an advisory body had ever faced. These words were not free from exaggeration, but it helped Kleerekoper to argue that the most simple and straightforward part of this task concerned the marginal and neglected position of the VARA. At the time, the VARA was still operating on less than ten hours per week, and Kleerekoper explained his audience that this was clearly at odds with the representative size of the labour movement, but also with the SDAP's status as the second party in Parliament, representing a quarter part of the entire electorate.¹³⁷ And so, he kindly requested the Minister to correct this anomaly and to grant the VARA its rightful share of broadcasting time.

4.10 A victorious defeat

From a party perspective, Kleerekoper's appeal to Parliament marked a clear break with the SDAP's earlier stance in broadcasting. Even so, the significance of this moment was mainly symbolic, and it did little to change the dynamics of the Radio Council's deliberations which were going on behind the scenes. In fact, in March 1929 it would take another year before the Radio Council had drawn up its final advice about the makeup of the Dutch broadcasting system. This, however, was largely in keeping with the lack of urgency which had shaped this process so far; the pages above offer ample evidence that delay and indecisiveness were crucial factors in the institutionalization of broadcasting in the Netherlands. Against this background it was hardly surprising that the Radio Council's long-anticipated advice did not end up with Van der Vegte himself, who did not return to the cabinet after a general election of July 1929. This election did see the return of the confessional coalition which had governed the country since 1918 and Van der Vegte was succeeded by the catholic Paul Reymer. And so, after years of talk and dispute it was now up to Reymer, as the new Minister of Infrastructure, to cut this knot of 'fairness' and to seal the fate of the various broadcasting associations.

For the SDAP, the election of 1929 formed a sobering ordeal. It was four years ago since the SDAP had won its highest election result of 24 seats, which had cemented its place as the second party in Parliament behind the RKSP. This did not reward the SDAP with a renewed invitation to join a coalition government, but it did boost the party's confidence that it would become an inevitable factor in national politics in due time. In the following years the SDAP was guided by the senior authority of Oudegeest, Vliegen and Albarda and the second half of the 1920s formed a relatively calm period in the party's history. These years did see brief upsurges of internal

137 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 6-3-1929, 1610, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

criticism as well and it was feared by some that this mood of optimism was deceptive and that it was smothering the party's radical spirit.¹³⁸ Even so, it was generally expected that the election of 1929 would prove the opposite. Although it was not expected that the SDAP would outsize the RKSP, it did aim to lure catholic workers away from voting for this party. In this way, it hoped to alter the electoral balance between both parties and to put further pressure on the confessional coalition.¹³⁹ However, the outcome of the election showed a different picture. Because the vote for the SDAP only increased with one percent, which was not even enough to grant the party an extra seat in Parliament. Although it did equal the result of the 1925 election, this was hardly the step forward which was needed as it cast serious doubt on the narrative of inevitable progress which had informed the party's claims about the future. It caused one party critic, Piet Schmidt, to note that the SDAP had gained a total of two seats in ten years' time and that it would take the party another four or five generations to win a parliamentary majority, at least if it managed to sustain its present growth-rate.¹⁴⁰

Cutting the knot of 'fairness'

This was a daunting prospect and it emphasized, once again, that the fate of the SDAP was tied to the fortunes of its catholic counterpart, the RKSP. As the largest party in Parliament it was this latter party which held the keys to the SDAP's political future. However, its doctrine of 'last resort' urged the RKSP to consider all other options first, before it would even contemplate joining hands with the agents of socialism. While this barred the doors of government for the SDAP, apparently this doctrine did not apply to broadcasting. It was mentioned above that the VARA did manage to form a coalition with its confessional counterparts, the KRO and the NCRV. Of course, the stakes were different in broadcasting, since the VARA and the confessional broadcasting associations shared an immediate interest in forming a united front against the national claims of the AVRO. What's more, if the practice of coalition politics revolved around the challenge to govern the country together, the shared purpose of the partners in this 'radio coalition' was to lead alone and to acquire the exclusive right over a separate stretch of the airwaves.¹⁴¹

So far, the advocates of this cause had found a willing ear among the members of consecutive governments and this was no different with the government which took office in August 1929. This government was headed by the catholic Prime Minister Ruijs de Beerenbrouck who was well-informed about these matters, since he had chaired the 1925-1926 committee on broadcasting. This did not apply to his party fellow, Paul Reymer, the new Minister of Infrastructure. In the years before Reymer had been Mayor of Hilversum, and in this capacity he had seen this small provincial town transform into the capital of broadcasting in the Netherlands.¹⁴² But he now faced the much more delicate task of making the most fundamental decision about the nature and future of the Dutch broadcasting system up to that point. He was assisted in this by the Radio Council, which had been chewing on this question for some time already.

138 Kneegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 78-81.

139 H. F. Cohen, *Om de vernieuwing van het socialisme. De politieke oriëntatie van de Nederlandse sociaal-democratie 1919-1930* (Leiden 1974) 70-75 and Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 42 and 46.

140 Cohen, *Om de vernieuwing van het socialisme*, 74.

141 Among those to use the term 'radio coalition' are De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 91 and De Goede, *Omroepbeleid met en tegen de tijd*, 57.

142 Arno Weltens a.o., *Kathedralen en luchtkastelen van de omroep in Hilversum* (Zwolle 2002).

Two months after taking office this body presented Reymer with a tentative advice about the 'fair' allocation of broadcasting time. It would give Reymer a first taste of what was to come in broadcasting. Because when the broadcasting associations were informed, confidentially, about the substance of this advice, it caused a minor shockwave, notably in AVRO-circles. The reason for this was the Radio Council's suggestion that it would reject the AVRO's claims of being the national broadcasting association and that it would treat it, instead, as an equal partner to the other broadcasting associations. For the AVRO this was a worst-case scenario. In response it turned to the microphone to whip up the public mood against the impending 'injustice'. This, however, was against the rules of the government, which was highly concerned about the mounting agitation in broadcasting since it feared for its disruptive impact on society. Accordingly, this urged PTT-officials to intervene by breaking off the AVRO's radio protest.¹⁴³ Of course, this only stirred up more trouble and in the following months the temperature kept rising. To Reymer this formed a further signal that it was high time to end the lasting uncertainty in broadcasting before the dish was too hot to serve.¹⁴⁴

Still, it would take until March 1930 before the Minister was presented with the concluding advice by the Radio Council. If he had hoped that this would provide a ready-made solution, he was mistaken. Because the Radio Council had failed to reach a unanimous decision, and it sent the Minister three different proposals, one majority-advice and two alternative schedules. This was symptomatic for the lack of consensus which reigned this field. Still, the make-up of the majority-advice showed even better that the radio question was becoming ever-more difficult to solve. It proposed to grant the AVRO 26 percent of the available broadcasting time, whereas the KRO, NCRV and VARA would receive 18 percent and the VPRO 5 percent; the remaining 15 percent would be used for a 'national programme' which would be hosted in turn by the KRO, NCRV, VARA and AVRO.¹⁴⁵ This last element was thought of as a concession to the advocates of a national broadcasting organization, but it was really an uneasy reminder of their defeat in this struggle. Even so, Reymer rejected the Radio-Council's majority-advice for a different reason. He thought the suggested formula was inadequate, since it still granted the AVRO a privileged position over the other broadcasting associations. Instead, Reymer chose to wield his sword more resolutely by cutting up the airwaves in equal parts and by granting each of the four, major broadcasting associations 20 percent of the available broadcasting time.

This sounds very reasonable, but it was also a most controversial decision. It implied that the national aspirations of the AVRO were dismissed and that this broadcasting association was cut down to the same size as the other major broadcasting associations. Moreover, it also formed a triumphant reward for the VARA, which found itself on the receiving end of Reymer's verdict. The VARA saw its share of broadcasting time rise from a mere eight to an ample fifty hours per week; after years of scarcity and uncertainty, the socialist broadcasting association could now look ahead towards a brighter future. There was a broader significance to this moment as well, since it also implied that the labour movement was recognized as an inherent part of Dutch society and, moreover, that the voices who continued to dismiss labour as a threat to national life were outweighed by those who were willing to grant it an equal place in the public realm.

143 Wijffes, 'De ballade van de bolhoed', 127.

144 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 35-36.

145 Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 35-36 and De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 102-103.

Principles and pragmatics

Reymer's verdict was a last step in a process which had been a long time in the making. It concluded the emergence of a pluralist broadcasting system which has been labelled the 'jewel in the crown [of] pillarization'.¹⁴⁶ Although the labour movement was endowed with a prominent place in this kingdom of the four 'pillars', as its sovereign the SDAP showed little desire to wear this 'crown' with pride. At this point, this should not come as a surprise, since the SDAP had voiced its objections against the private and pluralist organization of broadcasting on a number of occasions throughout the years before. In fact, in May 1930 it was only months ago that the party's chairman, Jan Oudegeest, had pressed the VARA to open talks with its arch-rival the AVRO. He hoped that this would end the hostilities between the two organizations and, moreover, that it would pave the way for their future collaboration. This was a futile effort, since the antagonism between the VARA and the AVRO was so profound that it prevented any form of constructive consultation.¹⁴⁷ However, it also shows that it was equally difficult for some party leaders to accept that broadcasting was moving in a different direction than the SDAP had originally argued for. Some of this was reflected as well in the statements which were made by SDAP spokesmen when the consequences of Reymer's verdict were first discussed in Parliament, on the 28th and the 29th of May 1930.

Indeed, it was at this occasion that Willem Vliegen opened his speech to Parliament with the confession which was quoted in the introduction to these first two chapters. He began by explaining his audience that 'it is certainly possible, also for me, to think of an arrangement for broadcasting which is better than the arrangement which is laid down by the Minister's decision'. In similar wordings he argued it was possible to claim 'it could have been much better' and that the present outcome fell short of being the 'ideal arrangement which could be conceived in the abstract, irrespective of the circumstances on the ground'.¹⁴⁸ While speaking in general terms, these confessions were clearly reminiscent of the SDAP's efforts of the past years. Later on in his speech Vliegen reminded his audience that 'what the SDAP had wanted, had been formulated in a report by our party fellow Werkhoven', which stated 'that there should be one public broadcasting organization, owned by the state and controlled by the PTT or a separate board, and that from time to time private organizations should be allowed to broadcast their views'.¹⁴⁹

There is no doubt that the SDAP still preferred to set up the sort of broadcasting organization which Werkhoven had propagated. However, this prospect was never realistic, not in 1926, when Werkhoven had first drafted his plan, and even less so now, in May 1930. But as a known pragmatist Vliegen had no intentions to reopen this debate and it seems that he made these comments to highlight the SDAP's reasonable face. By picturing the present outcome as a compromise to his party's original position, Vliegen indicated that the SDAP was well prepared to reconcile its principles to a changing context and, moreover, that it was well capable to play along in the game of coalition politics. This was also illustrated by the reasons he gave why the SDAP welcomed Reymer's verdict: 'We need to compare the new arrangement (...) with what we had; that's the basis to judge whether the Minister's order is right or not, or at least whether it moves in the right

¹⁴⁶ Wijffes, "Tussen de "avond van Oud" en de "nacht van Schmelzer", 247.

¹⁴⁷ Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 63.

¹⁴⁸ Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 28-5-1930, 2244, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem, 2245-2246.

direction.¹⁵⁰ In Vliegen's eyes this was clearly the case, since the new arrangement relieved the VARA of the marginal position it had – 'unfairly' – held in broadcasting throughout the past years. A similar conclusion was drawn by the SDAP's second spokesman in this debate, the more radically spirited J.W. Duys. He lashed out more particularly against the national claims and fraudulent practices of the AVRO. But, in addition, he also proclaimed his lasting support for a 'truly public and neutral broadcasting organization'.¹⁵¹ For the time being he welcomed the new arrangement, just like Vliegen, as a step in the right direction and as a victory for justice.

But however important these observations are for the subject of this chapter, at the time the significance of these statements was overshadowed by a new subject which quickly came to dominate the debate about broadcasting in the following years. It was mentioned earlier that the confessional pursuit of autonomy in broadcasting was crucially inspired by the Protestant concept of 'sphere sovereignty'. Although Reymer's verdict went some way to establish these separate 'spheres' in broadcasting, there was a critical shortcoming to this pursuit, since it conflicted directly with the capacity of radio to cross boundaries, including the boundaries of closed communities. A year earlier this had caused Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper to praise radio as 'a little devil' which allowed people to listen to a wider variety of opinions and beliefs than they would normally be exposed to.¹⁵² Speaking out in support of the VARA, Kleerekoper had also warned that radio would help the audience to find its way to his party. It remained to be seen whether this would truly happen, but the VARA's 1930 promotion did spark a heated debate about the role of radio as a medium of propaganda and controversy. It was notably the liberal Member of Parliament G.A. Boon who raised these concerns and who condemned the VARA for spreading 'the poison of politics' through radio.¹⁵³ It marked the beginning of his crusade against the VARA and the politicization of the airwaves, which will be covered in more detail in the following chapters. However, the VARA's new-found status did not only provoke hostilities outside the labour movement. Because the broadcasting association was now a much more prominent voice within the labour movement than the SDAP had long anticipated. The following chapter will show that its expansion caused severe and enduring tensions with the SDAP as well.

150 Ibidem, 2244.

151 Ibidem, 2248.

152 Ibidem, debate 6-3-1929, 1610-1611.

153 Ibidem, debate 28-5-1930, 2230.

Red blueprints for broadcasting

Comparison and conclusion

The previous chapters have explored the institutionalization of broadcasting in Britain and the Netherlands. Ending in December 1926 and in May 1930 these chapters covered the larger part of the 1920s and stopped short at the moments when both broadcasting systems acquired their distinctive shape and structures. For the British case this was the moment when the British Broadcasting Company was replaced by the British Broadcasting Corporation; for the Dutch case this was the moment when the airwaves were sliced up and allocated to the four major broadcasting associations. This book is mainly interested in the Labour Party and the SDAP, as two political parties which did not only contribute to these developments, but which were also affected by the rise of radio. By charting the construction of both broadcasting systems through the perspective of these parties, the previous chapters have yielded ample ingredients to reflect on their comparative understanding of broadcasting. Even so, we should not let this opportunity pass to make some general observations about the processes which the previous chapter explored as this can help to put the emergence of the Dutch and the British broadcasting systems into perspective.

What is most striking in this respect was the sense of urgency which fuelled the British response to the early rise of broadcasting and which seemed largely absent in the Netherlands. In meeting the ‘invention’ of broadcasting in the early 1920s, officials of the British Post Office were quick to urge the radio manufacturing industry to come together and to establish the British Broadcasting Company as a publicly licensed, privately owned and publicly-privately funded broadcasting organization. Chapter three showed that this was crucially inspired by the observations of F.J. Brown, the Post Office’s secretary, who had travelled across the Atlantic to learn from the American approach to broadcasting. On his return to Britain Brown was anxious to avoid that British broadcasting would fall prey to the ‘chaos’ he had observed in America. Brown’s lessons caused the Postmaster General to conclude, in April 1922, that it was necessary ‘to lay down very drastic regulations (..) for the control of wireless broadcasting’.¹ Of course, there was a broader, domestic context to these concerns as well, and chapter three illustrated that the Post Office’s case for unified control was tied up to more widespread concerns about the ills of modern society that were seen to haunt British cultural and political life in the early 1920s. However, broadcasting was not only an object of concern, it was also an instrument of improvement. This, at least, was the firm conviction of the BBC’s newly appointed general manager, John Reith. Chapter three showed that his efforts in developing broadcasting as a public

1 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 68.

service were endorsed by two official committees, the Sykes Committee of 1923 and the Crawford Committee of 1925-1926. It was this last committee's advice that convinced the Postmaster General to re-establish the BBC as a public corporation. This decision was taken towards the end of 1926, roughly four years after the BBC was set up. It shows that the construction of the British broadcasting system formed a relatively straightforward three-step process.

In contrast, it took three years more, until May 1930, before the Dutch broadcasting system found its recognized form. Chapter four has shown that it was not so much the number of years that came to shape the pluralist broadcasting system of the Netherlands, but rather the indecisiveness of the Dutch authorities. The Netherlands had witnessed an early start to the first experiments with broadcasting in the shape of Idzerda's 1919 transmissions of speech and music. But it was only in 1925 that the Minister of Infrastructure asked the Posthuma Committee to investigate the founding of a National Broadcasting Company. This initiative was partly inspired by the example of the British Broadcasting Company, but it could not count on a similar, overwhelming interest from Dutch radio manufacturing companies, most of which were struggling (and failed) to keep their heads above the water.² If this helps to understand why the Dutch authorities were less anxious to lay down a provisional framework for broadcasting, it also explains why a range of other non-commercial parties managed to steer these developments in a different direction. In the absence of long-term policy-making, it was the pursuit of confessional autonomy by the Protestant NCRV and the Catholic KRO that formed the decisive factor in the materialization of the Dutch broadcasting system. Also important in this respect was the limited Ministerial continuity throughout the second half of the 1920s and the willingness of subsequent (confessional) Ministers to comply with the requests from these confessional broadcasting associations. The formula that captured this situation most adequately was coined by one of those Ministers, the anti-revolutionary Van der Vegte; who claimed in June 1927 that the field was still too much 'in flux' to intervene more decisively.³ Obviously, chapter four has also noted that these developments were largely in keeping with the segmentation of Dutch public life, which traced back to the 19th century and which had seen the formation of a number of closely-knit communities. It was against this background that these private broadcasting associations could lay such a strong claim on a separate part of the airwaves on behalf of their communities. Even so, there was nothing inevitable in the emergence of this pluralist broadcasting system, and it would take until 1928 before the provisional situation around the various broadcasting associations was recognized as a model in itself. But even then, it would take two more years before Reymer – as the fifth (!) Minister responsible for broadcasting – would step in by granting each of the four major broadcasting associations an equal share of the airwaves.

This is only a brief summary of what the previous chapters explored in more detail, but it shows that the institutionalization of broadcasting in Britain and the Netherlands unfolded along different paths and with a completely different outcome. Nonetheless, the previous chapters indicated as well that both broadcasting systems were linked by two larger parallels. The first of these concerns their non-commercial nature. Although commercial parties played an important part in the earliest development of broadcasting, at different points in time the Dutch and the British authorities decided to block the further advance of commercial interests in broadcasting. In drawing up an alternative arrangement, it was recognized in both countries as well that

2 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 16.

3 See chapter four, page 114.

broadcasting should be organized on an independent basis, at a relative distance from the state. Although the chosen organizational forms of both broadcasting systems differed significantly – i.e. a single public corporation and a plurality of private broadcasting associations –, both systems were based on a non-statist conception of broadcasting, which is the second parallel between both broadcasting systems. At this point, these observations remain rather general, but the following chapters will explore their subsequent significance in relation to the SDAP's and the Labour Party's position in broadcasting. What's more, these parallels did have a more specific relevance to the previous chapters as well, in the sense that they formed a shared background against which both parties formulated their ideas about the institutional organization of broadcasting. As such, these chapters have shown that both parties' understanding of broadcasting was more similar than might have been expected beforehand.

What was fundamental to their approach to broadcasting was a shared belief in the benevolent powers of the state and a subsequent persuasion that the state should have a distinct responsibility in broadcasting. The first to formulate this view on behalf of the Labour Party were Charles Trevelyan and Herbert Morrison, in 1923, as part of the deliberations of the Sykes Committee. It was noted in chapter three that this committee went some way to define broadcasting as a public service. However, according to Trevelyan and Morrison the committee's recommendations did not go far enough, as it failed to draw the 'inevitable' conclusion that the privately owned British Broadcasting Company should be dissolved and, moreover, that the ownership and operation of broadcasting should be transferred to the Post Office altogether. This was a drastic suggestion, but it was less radical as it may seem since the Post Office was already endowed with a regulatory function over broadcasting on the basis of the Telegraphy Act of 1869 and the Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1904. Such was also the case in the Netherlands, where the legal basis for the emergence of broadcasting was formed by the Telegraph and Telephone Act of 1904. Although Werkhoven had initially supported the founding of a private broadcasting company (which was based on the example of the British Broadcasting Company), the failure of this initiative caused him to alter his position and to promote a similar solution as Trevelyan and Morrison had earlier done in Britain. In propagating state ownership, Werkhoven referred to the example of the Dutch Post Office (or PTT) to claim that the state offered the better alternative to the 'chaos' and 'fragmentation' of a privately owned and operated broadcasting system.

But if this shows that both parties' approach to broadcasting was based on the same, basic premise, the previous chapters also exposed a range of fundamental differences between their more specific ideas about the organization of broadcasting. What's more, it appears that these differences were partly connected to the contrasting conceptions of public ownership which both parties developed throughout these same years. It was explained that both the Labour Party and the SDAP used the late 1910s and early 1920s to revise and reformulate their ideas about the foundations of a socialist future. As part of this process both parties came to embrace a different model of public ownership as well. For the Labour Party this was encapsulated by Clause IV of its 1918 party constitution, whereas the SDAP based this effort on Clause 10 of its 1912 party programme. Chapter three showed that Labour's concept of 'nationalisation' was coloured by Fabianist overtones, most notably a strong reliance on a centralized state. Although traces of Fabian thinking were observed in SDAP-circles as well, on the whole this was far less important than the party's Marxist orientation, which had shaped its ideological outlook in a more profound way. Indeed, this helps to explain why the concept of 'socialisation' which laid at the heart of the SDAP's campaign for public ownership, differed significantly from Labour's concept of 'nationalisation'. This was also reflected in the alternative blueprints for

broadcasting, which were promoted by the SDAP and the Labour Party. There is no need to re-examine these blueprints in detail, but the previous chapters have clearly shown that the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting was more state-centred, whereas the SDAP's proposals relied more heavily on the self-organizing capacity and active involvement of society in the larger organization of broadcasting.

This raises another issue. Because the introduction to these chapters observed that the 'constitutive moment' of broadcasting coincided with the expansion of democracy in Britain as well as in the Netherlands, and it asked to which extent both parties' approach to broadcasting was shaped by these developments. In doing so, it drew a distinction between the democratic function of broadcasting and the democratic nature of its organizational structures. This latter instance held a more immediate significance to the previous chapters, but these chapters do offer some first insights in both parties' ideas about the former function of broadcasting as well. Most interesting, in this respect, were the suggestions of Cornelis Werkhoven. His design of an alternative broadcasting system centred on a democratically elected 'broadcasting committee', which would be responsible for the daily management and programming output of the 'State Broadcasting Company'. What's more, this committee would be composed by representatives of the various broadcasting associations. By giving the broadcasting audience a say over its makeup, Werkhoven claimed this would bolster the democratic spirit of broadcasting. This was not all. Chapter four explained as well that Werkhoven's argument extended beyond the democratic organization of broadcasting and, more particularly, that he also thought the facilities for broadcasting should be available to each and every-one who hoped to reach out to the broadcasting audience. In his own words, the 'State Broadcasting Company' should allow 'the public mind to express itself freely and indiscriminately' and it should offer ample space to 'the people to voice its opinions, its ideas and ideals, and even its idiocies'.⁴ To be clear, this did not mean that Werkhoven or any of his fellow party leaders showed an active interest in the cultural potential of broadcasting and throughout these early years they seemed hardly concerned either about the use of radio as a means of party political communication. Nonetheless, in light of what was noted above it does appear there was an intimate connection between the party's initial ideas about the democratic organization of broadcasting and the use of radio as a medium of public deliberation.

Perhaps remarkably, this connection was much less distinct or clear-cut in the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting. On the whole, chapter three learned that the Labour Party's demand for public ownership was pervaded by a similar democratic rationale as the SDAP's. However, chapter three showed as well that Labour's underlying conception of democracy was quite different than the SDAP's. If Werkhoven's proposals can be seen to promote an ideal of democratic participation, altogether the Labour Party's proposals seemed inspired by the pursuit of democratic control. This was most clearly encapsulated by the centrality of Parliament to the Labour Party's outlook on broadcasting. At different points in time Labour figures claimed that Parliament should retain a final say over broadcasting. Among those was William Graham, Labour's member of the Crawford Committee, who welcomed the BBC's new status as a public corporation by stating that 'the license really originates with the masses of the British people; they are giving it to this new body, and they must have a representative spokesman in the House of Commons. That representative and spokesman, quite clearly, must be the Postmaster General

4 Memorandum of Cornelis Werkhoven, *Rapport van den Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, Bijlage IV, 68.

of the day.⁵ Also interesting, in this respect, were Herbert Morrison's (earlier) comments about a 'Broadcasting Advisory Committee', which should be vested 'with some real measure of control'; what's more, it should also be 'responsible to the Minister, who in turn would be responsible to Parliament'; because 'the last word must obviously rest with Parliament as representative of the general body of citizens.'⁶

As reasonable as this sounds, what should be noted here is that Labour's emphasis on Parliament was not matched by an interest in broadcasting itself or by a recognition of its democratic purpose. In fact, it seems that Labour's demand for control was partly fuelled by its concerns about the perceived threats of broadcasting. So referring to a 1923 disputed BBC broadcast, Morrison warned, for instance, that broadcasting raised 'great dangers to democracy'.⁷ This did not mean that the Labour Party was entirely blind to the democratic potential of broadcasting. After all, it was a Labour Postmaster General, Vernon Hartshorn, who first allowed the BBC to organize a series of election broadcasts for the general election of 1924. What's more, chapter three showed as well that various Labour figures, among whom Charles Trevelyan, claimed to recognize the need for 'controversial broadcasting'. Even so, at this stage they were not prepared to give the BBC a free hand in developing programmes that would bolster British democracy. But, perhaps, this should not surprise, because chapter three offered ample evidence of the fierce opposition the labour movement was meeting from the popular press throughout these years. If this explains why the Labour Party's main objective was to prevent broadcasting from developing into a similar hostile force, the events of the general strike of May 1926 did much to exacerbate these concerns. Against this background the Labour Party had every reason to be pleased towards the end of that year, when it was formally decided to re-establish the BBC as a public corporation.

At this point, we know that this moment was welcomed in Labour circles as a victory for socialism and that various Labour figures mocked the Conservative Postmaster General for his apparent faith in socialist doctrine. But it was noted as well that this rhetoric of triumph was both short-sighted and ill-informed. One reason for this was that these commentators failed to acknowledge that the BBC's new status was granted by a Royal Charter, in order to grant it with a degree of autonomy and prestige to bolster its public task and to prevent that it would be seen as a mere 'creature of Parliament'. While this was clearly at odds with the assumption of control which was fundamental to Labour's understanding of broadcasting, what was equally problematic was that the Labour Party had hardly begun to grasp the broader implications of the public corporation-model. There was an obvious affinity between this model and the agenda of public ownership which the Labour Party had long pursued. However, at this point in time Labour's thinking about public ownership remained flawed and ambiguous, also with regards to the position and powers of Parliament in relation to publicly owned industries and services. It was only in the early to mid-1930s that Labour would enter a debate about the benefits and limitations of the public corporation-model. These developments will be explored in the following part of this book, which will show that the Labour Party still had a long way to go before it would understand and accept the implications of the BBC's status as a public corporation.

In the Netherlands the outcome for the SDAP was completely different, but the party had every reason to be pleased with Reymer's 'broadcasting time decree' of May 1930. Of all the

5 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate, 15-11-1926, 1587, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

6 'Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, inv. nr. R4/65/1, f. 6.

7 Chapter three, page 67.

broadcasting associations it was the VARA that was rewarded most generously by this long-awaited intervention that completed the emergence of the pluralist broadcasting system. Even so, chapter four showed that the SDAP remained sceptical about the makeup of this broadcasting system and that it still preferred a single public broadcasting organization over the present plurality of private broadcasting associations. Although its struggle against the pluralist or 'pillarized' broadcasting arrangement is most often associated with the sole figure of Cornelis Werkhoven, chapter four learned that Werkhoven was not the Don Quixote he is often portrayed to have been. On the whole, his approach to broadcasting was more consistent with the SDAP's outlook and agenda of the mid-1920s than has been recognized so far. Although the party leadership supported his ideas about an alternative arrangement for broadcasting, it changed its position towards the end of 1927 after concluding that the pluralist turn in broadcasting was definitive. From then on, the SDAP came out in support of its affiliated broadcasting association the VARA, albeit in a pragmatic and lukewarm manner. This was also reflected in the response of the SDAP's leadership to Reymer's decision in May 1930, which showed few signs of joy or enthusiasm. Although the SDAP had been dealing with the VARA for some years already, the latter's promotion would alter the balance between both organizations in the following years, and not necessarily for the better.

A phantom medium?

Part II

Between independence and control

Between independence and control

Introduction

There is no-one who has had such a profound impact on the history of British broadcasting as John Reith, the BBC's first Director General. It was explained in chapter three that Reith had played a vital part in building the BBC from the ground up in the early 1920s and that it was his faith in the enormous potential of broadcasting that had inspired the BBC's transition from a private company into a public corporation. This was not merely the achievement of John Reith, since it crucially relied on the willingness of those in power to effectuate this shift. Among those to endorse his views was also Ramsay MacDonald and chapter three showed that the Labour leader congratulated Reith by labelling the BBC as 'one of the great fairy creations of the ages'.¹ Other Labour leaders proved equally pleased with the BBC's new status as a public corporation which was hailed as a victory for socialism. However, Labour's delight would not last. Ten years later George Lansbury used rather different wordings to conclude that the BBC had failed to fulfil its promise. He partly blamed this on John Reith's 'dictatorial' qualities: 'I myself (..) have always felt, when speaking to Sir John (..) that he would have made a very excellent Hitler in this country (..).'² Lansbury was not alone in condemning Reith and the BBC in such harsh terms. In December 1936 this claim was taken up again by a Labour spokesman, this time by Bertrand Lees-Smith, a former Postmaster General. According to Lees-Smith the BBC was 'the nearest thing in this country to Nazi government that can be shown.'³ While this shows that Labour's faith in the BBC had dropped dramatically in the span of a decade, the question is what caused this process and, in addition, how it weighed up to the fortunes or misfortunes in broadcasting of the SDAP in the Netherlands.

Obviously, the SDAP found itself in a completely different position in broadcasting as the Labour Party. The previous chapter charted how the SDAP ended up with an affiliated broadcasting association which was granted with a far larger share of the airwaves than the party had first deemed necessary, or desirable. Then again, there was no denying that the VARA's promotion of May 1930 offered the party far better opportunities in broadcasting than it would have had if it had been more successful in advocating its own, alternative broadcasting system. What's more, these developments provided the SDAP with a substantial influence over the VARA's organizational affairs, which among other things was illustrated by the party's involvement in the dismissal and appointment of a number of senior figures in the VARA's hierarchy. A notable example in this respect was the resignation of the VARA's chairman Simon van der Woude in 1929; after losing the support of the SDAP leadership Van der Woude was discharged from the

1 Letter MacDonald to Reith 16-12-1926, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1436/978-80.

2 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 6-7-1936, 911, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

3 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 17-12-1936, 2730, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

chairmanship and his vacant seat was taken over by a candidate of the party's choice. Five years later a similar thing happened with the VARA's broadcasting secretary Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, whose revolt against the party leadership resulted in his dismissal from the VARA. Again, his position was taken over by a candidate of the party's choice. While both affairs will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, it suggests that the SDAP's hold over the VARA was strong enough to save the party leadership from the mounting frustration that caused the Labour Party to liken the BBC to a stronghold of dictatorial evil.

This suggestion is hardly ground-breaking and it is largely in keeping with the common view of the place of political parties in the Dutch and the British broadcasting systems. Of the two, the latter holds the foremost reputation and it is broadly understood that the BBC's ethos of independence and impartiality has historically defined its stance towards the political realm. So, writing about the British case, Hallin and Mancini note, for instance, that the BBC formed the centrepiece of a 'formally autonomous' broadcasting system, which was 'largely insulated from political control'; in a later section they use similar wordings to state that the BBC was 'separated from party politics and managed by neutral professionals without party ties'.⁴ These are only minor elements of a much more elaborate account, but what is important here is the contrast with the perceived proximity of political parties to the 'pillarized' broadcasting system of the Netherlands. Hallin and Mancini reflect on this issue as well, but we may as well look elsewhere for comments that endorse this view.⁵ So exploring the evolution of political journalism Kees Brants and Hetty van Kempen note, for instance, that the broadcasting associations 'formed the mouthpieces of the party elites' and that these organizations were closely tied to the party hierarchy in the form of 'interlocking directorships'.⁶ This is but one example, but it illustrates the widespread conception that broadcasting associations in the Netherlands were strictly subjected to the rule of their affiliated political party, chief amongst these the VARA. Against this background it would appear that the Dutch part of this comparison was very much the antithesis of the British part, with the former revolving around the notion of partisan control and the latter centring on the notion of independence.

And yet, it was noted in the introduction to this book that this research seeks to escape the schematic and oppositional mode of thinking which has long dominated the comparative understanding of media and politics in history. Although historians have offered a more nuanced take on these issues, it was noted as well that most historical studies remain indebted to the idea of national exclusivity. In developing an alternative perspective the following chapters trace the dichotomy between independence and control within the national context. More particularly, these chapters ask how both parties perceived the question of independence and control in broadcasting and it traces how their dealings with broadcasting throughout the 1920s and the 1930s were shaped by their ideas about this subject. This is partly informed by the findings of the previous chapters, which showed for instance that the Labour Party's approach to broadcasting was pervaded by a notion of democratic control that was wedded to its faith in the primacy of Parliament. It was also noted that the BBC's independence was not unconditional and that the Postmaster General remained the 'final arbiter' in broadcasting matters, which meant the

4 Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 31-32 and 235.

5 For instance Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 31-32, 151-152 and 165-166.

6 Kees Brants and Hetty van Kempen, 'The ambivalent watchdog. The changing culture of political journalism and its effects' in: Raymond Kuhn and Erik Neveu eds., *Political journalism: new challenges, new practices* (London 2002) 168-185, there 173-174.

government retained a definite degree of control over the BBC. And so the question is how this affected the Labour Party's dealings with the BBC throughout the 1920s and the 1930s and, more particularly, how the Labour Party came to reconcile its early assumptions of control with the unfolding reality of the BBC's independence. A similar question can be asked about the SDAP in the Netherlands. Because it was noted also that the VARA was established in 1925 with no direct involvement of the SDAP, which, at that point in time, remained opposed to the pursuit of private autonomy in broadcasting. With the party leadership standing by and watching the VARA's birth, this infused the broadcasting association with a spirit of independence which has received little recognition. Although the SDAP would in due time increase its hold over the VARA, the question is how this process evolved and, more particularly, which significance the latter's spirit of independence had for the former's involvement with broadcasting on the longer term. The answers to these questions should not only help to generate new insight in both parties' dealings with broadcasting within the national context, it should also open up a broader perspective on the comparative significance of these cases.

Of course, the larger question which this book asks is how the Labour Party and the SDAP contributed to the political construction of broadcasting and, in turn, how both parties' position in political culture was shaped by the emergence of broadcasting. Needless to say, the following chapters can only go so far in finding the answer to this question since they cover merely one part of this larger subject. While the previous part focussed on the construction of both broadcasting systems as the first stage in the institutionalization of broadcasting, this part covers the subsequent stage of this process. In exploring the decade and a half between the mid-1920s and the end of the 1930s, these chapters cover a period which presented both parties with severe hardship. Culminating in the early 1930s, it was the Labour Party which found itself marginalized in Parliament to a mere shadow of its former size, whereas the SDAP became increasingly concerned about its isolated position in national politics. It remains to be seen how these ordeals affected both parties' stance towards broadcasting and more specifically how it shaped their dealings with the respective broadcasting organizations which were operating the airwaves. The following chapters chart these developments by traversing a number of sites and occasions, ranging from party meetings and parliamentary debates to written exchanges and actual encounters between party figures and broadcasting officials. The focus in all this lies with the institutional dynamics between politics and broadcasting, but inevitably these chapters touch on a range of issues that were linked (directly or indirectly) to developments in the sphere of programmes. Even so, it is the third part of this book that enters this sphere more fully and in doing so it will not only build on the findings of the following chapters, but it should also answer those questions that are raised, but left unaddressed in this part of the book.

'We are the supreme authority'

The Labour Party and the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s

The early morning of January 1st 1927 marked a momentous occasion in the history of British broadcasting. On the night before radio listeners had last tuned into the British Broadcasting Company; a few hours later they could pick up the first sounds of the British Broadcasting Corporation.¹ This was a major departure and the previous chapter has illustrated how contemporaries, the Labour Party included, welcomed it as a bold step forward. As such this should have been John Reith's finest hour. However, in recent months his mood had turned increasingly sour. In October 1926 he concluded that the outlook for the 'new' BBC was 'most unsatisfactory' and he feared that the 'new body' was 'not getting any more autonomy than the old, which is a deliberate ignoring of the Crawford recommendations, apart from anything else.'² And so by January 1927 his optimism about the prospects of 'his' Broadcasting Corporation had suffered serious damage.

Reith was particularly offended by the Post Office's reading of the Crawford Report and the way in which it used the Crawford recommendations to impose its hold over the future Broadcasting Corporation. One issue which provoked Reith's anger was the Postmaster General's decision to re-install the ban on 'controversial broadcasting', so in spite of the Crawford Committee's recommendations to the contrary.³ While the Crawford Report had stated that the BBC should be granted with the 'maximum of freedom' which Parliament was prepared to concede, to Reith (and various others) this decision formed an outright denial of the BBC's responsibilities towards the public and democracy.⁴ But equally disturbing was the financial arrangement which the Post Office aimed to impose on the newly established BBC. As a public corporation the BBC was dependent for its income on the revenues of the license fees. However, it was the Post Office which was responsible for the collection and redistribution of these fees, and in Reith's eyes it refused to pay the BBC the share it needed to sustain and improve its broadcasting activities in the following years. And although he tried, there was little Reith could do to change the terms of the charter and license.⁵ This leads Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff to draw the conclusion that 'on the two crucial matters of financial and political independence, the charter was the denial of all that [Reith] had worked for since becoming General Manager of the British Broadcasting Company.'⁶

1 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 28.

2 As quoted in Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 356.

3 Also chapter three, page 85.

4 *Report of the broadcasting committee, 1925* (HMSO London 1926) 13.

5 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 354-356.

6 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 38.

This was serious enough, but there were various other issues which were casting a shadow over the transition to the new regime in broadcasting. Most notably, this concerned Reith's relationship with the newly established Board of Governors, which replaced the 'old' BBC's Board of Directors and which formally embodied the 'new' BBC's rights and privileges as a public corporation.⁷ As such it was assigned with the vital task of steering and controlling the BBC in the public interest.⁸ Still, it remained to be seen how the first Governors would deal with these responsibilities and, more specifically, how they perceived their own position in relation to the activities of John Reith, as the BBC's Director General. Although this was to some extent an internal affair, it also went to the heart of the constitutional status of the BBC as a public corporation. What emerged from this was a struggle between Reith and 'his' Board of Governors over the limits to their mutual responsibilities in the larger operation of broadcasting. This struggle would have long-lasting implications, not merely for the political perception of the BBC in general, but also for its unfolding relationship with the Labour Party. In fact, as the leader of the Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald was remotely, but critically involved in these developments as well, which makes this a crucial prelude to the subsequent parts of this chapter.

5.1 'Absolute supremacy'. Reith and the Board of Governors

In late 1926 the Board of Governors remained a lesser concern to Reith. At the time, Reith was fully engaged in securing a smooth transition from the old to the new regime in broadcasting, which he hoped to achieve by insisting on the continuity between the former and the later BBC.⁹ This was one reason why he had asked the Postmaster General to offer the chairmanship of the future Board of Governors to the BBC's present chairman, Lord Gainford. In the past years Reith had enjoyed a productive collaboration with Gainford and the Board of Directors, largely as a result of their limited involvement with his day-to-day and longer term affairs. This was epitomized by the words which were addressed to him by one of the Directors before the first Board meeting of 1922: 'We're leaving it all to you'.¹⁰ To Reith this was a real blessing, since he relished a style of management which was based on his faith in strong leadership. In his autobiography he confessed that he always 'functioned best when responsibility for decisions rested wholly and solely with me'.¹¹ It appears he was particularly well served during the larger part of 1926, as the last year of the Broadcasting Company, when the Board of Directors became a dormant body.¹²

At the same time Reith was well aware that things were about to change. In June 1926 he learned that the Postmaster General had rejected his appeal for the reappointment of Lord Gainford to the BBC's chairmanship. Although Gainford was invited to become vice-chairman of the Board of Governors, the chairmanship was offered to Lord Clarendon, who had earlier

7 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 424.

8 Asa Briggs, *Governing the BBC* (London 1979) and Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, *The BBC from within* (London 1953).

9 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 398.

10 As quoted in Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 53.

11 As quoted in Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 427.

12 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 384-385.

served as the Parliamentary Undersecretary for the Dominions.¹³ Clarendon did not have any experience with broadcasting, or let alone any knowledge of the difficulties of running a public broadcasting organization. Apparently, this was not considered a problem, since the same applied to the three other members of the BBC's new Board. Still, it did bother Reith, whose first impression of Clarendon set the tone for their future collaboration. After meeting him for the first time in the Postmaster General's presence Reith approached Clarendon to discuss his concerns. His comments in his diary are most revealing: 'I rang up Clarendon and asked him what he thought of things and whether he proposed doing anything. Evidently he did not in the least understand what was happening yesterday about money. I am afraid he is a stupid man and weak. I do not see him taking a strong line on anything. If he interferes I am afraid it will be through fear that trouble might come if he did not. I am afraid he might turn out to be a nuisance. I think he is a decent enough sort of fellow, but I ought to be very wary of him.'¹⁴ Of course, these words reveal more about Reith than about his object of scorn and it suggests that their relationship was doomed even before Clarendon had officially been appointed to the BBC's chairmanship.

However, Clarendon was not the only Board member who Reith came to despise within months of their first acquaintance. Altogether, the BBC's Board of Governors was made up of five members. Besides Clarendon, there was Gainford, the vice-chairman of the Board, who, Reith knew, was sympathetic to his outlook on broadcasting and his way of managing the BBC's organization. The three other Governors were John Gordon Nairne, a former controller of the Bank of England, Montague Rendall, a former Headmaster of Winchester College, and Ethel Snowden, who was married to Labour leader Philip Snowden, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer in Labour's first government of 1924.¹⁵ It was the combined influence of Snowden and Clarendon, which would haunt Reith's dealings with the Board of Governors in the years to come. Still, his first impression of her was not as nearly as bad as his later thoughts. After meeting her for the first time, in the co-presence of Montague Rendall, he noted that both were 'very cordial', even though he 'could not understand the latter [Snowden] at all' and that she 'spoke quite a bit in the way which amazed me'.¹⁶

Reith's judgement of Snowden was partly informed by what he had heard about her from Ramsay MacDonald. The previous chapter showed that Reith and MacDonald had established friendly relations in the years before, and that Reith had even introduce his mother to the then Prime Minister over a cup of tea at the House Commons. Despite a serious setback during the days of the general strike, Reith and MacDonald continued to meet in an informal setting. Such was for instance the case in early October, when the two had spoken extensively during an hour's walk along Hampstead Heath, also about the BBC's future as a public corporation. At that occasion MacDonald had voiced his frustrations over the appointment of Ethel Snowden to the BBC's Board of Governors. According to Reith, MacDonald was 'furious about it', since Snowden 'did not represent the Labour Party at all'.¹⁷ MacDonald was more right than he seemed to realize, and his frustration blinded him to the fact that the BBC's Board was not meant to be a representative board at all and that Snowden was only thought to stand for the female and labour

13 Ibidem, 354.

14 C. Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries* (London 1975) 140.

15 Ibidem.

16 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 141.

17 Ibidem, 98.

part of the public in an indirect manner, so without being somehow answerable to the organized interests of the labour movement.¹⁸ But apparently this was the sort of emotion which Ethel Snowden evoked. MacDonald confessed to Reith that she was 'loathed' in the labour movement, and that the labour leadership held her 'responsible for most of Philip's [BdJ: Philip Snowden] stupidities'.¹⁹ MacDonald was not alone in condemning her; a later observer has noted that 'her volatile personality, quick temper, and uncompromising stand on many issues caused her to be widely disliked in the labour movement'.²⁰

Reith would soon come to think of her in similar terms. The first meeting of the Board, in January 1927, was marred by a disagreement between Snowden and Clarendon over the appointment of a secretary and the form of the minutes. In the weeks afterwards Reith had various talks with Snowden and Clarendon, but this failed to improve the mood and his judgement of either. His diary reflects the rapid deterioration of his dealings with the Board of Governors. On January 11 he recorded his frustrations over the 'thoroughly nasty letter' Ethel Snowden – 'what a poisonous creature she is' – had written to Clarendon over the functioning of the Board and a month later he recalled Clarendon's complaint that if Snowden 'had her way the BBC would burst in about ten minutes'.²¹ His opinion of his chairman – 'what a stupid ass Clarendon is' – was hardly better, but he saved his venom for the only woman among the Governors – 'a truly terrible creature, ignorant, stupid and horrid'.²² Reith had thought of resigning from the BBC in early 1927 already – 'Beginning to feel that I ought not to be long with the BBC, but it is extremely difficult to find what the next job is to be. So few good jobs or ones that I would like at all. What a curse it is to have outstanding comprehensive ability and intelligence, combined with a desire to use them to maximum purpose.'²³ However, his urge to leave the BBC would only grow stronger throughout the first months of the new Corporation, even though he also thought the cause of broadcasting was worthy of having to put up with the 'insolent and unfounded statements' of the 'Red Woman' and the 'idiocy and futility' of Clarendon.²⁴

To concentrate solely on these private confessions, however revealing, would distract from the more fundamental issue which was at stake in the burgeoning conflict between Reith and the Board and Governors. Although this conflict was partly fuelled by the incompatibility of characters of Snowden, Clarendon and Reith, it also revolved around their competing conceptions of the Board's responsibilities. On their appointment Snowden and Clarendon had been told that their position with the BBC would be a demanding task. While Clarendon was informed that his chairmanship would take up around three-quarters of his time, Ethel Snowden expected to be 'almost fully occupied' by her membership of the Board.²⁵ Of course, her Labour background was important as well, since it explains why Snowden held high expectations about this experiment in public ownership and why she took it as a responsibility and honour to sit on the Corporation's Board and to act as a guardian of the public interest in broadcasting.²⁶

18 Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 146-147.

19 Ibidem.

20 J. Hannam, Snowden, 'Ethel Snowden (1881-1951)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (14-1-2013).

21 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 142.

22 Ibidem, 143.

23 Ibidem, 142.

24 Ibidem, 143 and 147.

25 As quoted in Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 57.

26 Ryan, *Labour and the media in Britain*, 114.

But equally significant in this respect were the terms of the BBC's charter, which stressed the centrality of the Board to the BBC's undertaking. Among other things it stated that the BBC's Governors should act as 'Trustees for the national interest' in broadcasting and that they (at least, in their collective capacity) were the bearers of the rights and privileges which were assigned to the Broadcasting Corporation.²⁷ Besides that the charter assigned the Board with the right to 'appoint such officers and staff as they may think necessary (..) for the efficient transaction of their business'.²⁸ It also stated that the Board had a right to 'remove any officer (other than a Governor) however appointed' and that it was entitled to appoint committees to advise them on 'any matters connected with the Broadcasting Service and the business operations and affairs of the Corporation'.²⁹

When Reith was first presented with these terms he was far from pleased. In an earlier stage he had urged the Postmaster General to grant him a place in the Board of Governors himself, so that he could discuss his affairs with the other Board-members on an equal footing. This was rejected. While Reith thought it was 'rather invidious' to deny him a seat on the Board, he dreaded 'the idea that the Board should have the power to co-opt the chief executive' of the Broadcasting Corporation.³⁰ This was precisely the prospect he was facing, and it explains the instant contagion of his relationship with those Board-members, notably Ethel Snowden, who were eager to take up the powers which were granted to them by the BBC's charter and who, moreover, were well prepared to defy Reith's hold over the BBC's organization. In Reith's eyes this was highly inappropriate and he condemned it as a flagrant abuse of their higher responsibilities as Board-members. This may seem strange in light of what was noted above, but Asa Briggs explains that Reith's ideas about the Board's role was based on a distinction between its *de jure* powers and his *de facto* responsibilities.³¹ So without disputing the charter's substance, Reith acknowledged that the BBC's authority was formally vested in the Board of Governors. However, he also held that he, as the BBC's Director General, was primarily responsible for the implementation of these powers in the day-to-day operation of the broadcasting service. In relation to that he felt that the BBC's Governors should keep their distance from the executive sphere and that the Board should mainly serve as a consultative body to the Director General and as a shield against outside pressures.³² But Reith's ideas were not uncontested and in the following years he and the Board of Governors would face a series of conflicts and incidents which contrasted sharply with the enlightened ethos of the BBC's public duty.

There is no need to explore this struggle in detail, but it is helpful to highlight some of the mutual grievances which were fostered by both sides throughout 1927, 1928 and 1929. As was noted above, Reith was quick to pass his judgement over the Board and in April 1927, only four months after the Corporation had been established, he stated that the new body was a 'humbug' and that he himself, and not the 'incompetent' Clarendon, should have been appointed to the chairmanship of the Board of Governors.³³ In September 1927 he confessed that he was feeling

27 *Royal charter BBC, 1927*, page 1, accessed at http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory_framework/charter_agreement/archive/1927.pdf

28 *Ibidem*, 5.

29 *Ibidem*, 6.

30 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 140.

31 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 424-425.

32 *Ibidem*, 431.

33 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 143.

‘very disgusted with the Board’, and half a year later he claimed that he didn’t ‘care a hoot about the BBC Board’ anymore.³⁴ These were private confessions, but apparently Reith had failed to hide his contempt for the members of the Board of Governors. Throughout this period Reith’s conduct formed a source of increasing tensions, notably with Snowden and Clarendon. In 1928 they concluded that the Board was kept in the dark about too many issues and that it was not sufficiently appreciated by the BBC’s staff, for which they held the Director General responsible.³⁵ These developments reached a new low in 1929, when Clarendon complained that Reith had given them ‘all the impression that he wants – if he does not agree with the Board – to over-ride us.’³⁶ The Board refused to accept this situation and it used its statutory powers to enhance its presence and influence in organizational affairs, notably with regards to the appointment and resignation of staff-members. Reith did not like this, since he didn’t want Governors ‘poking their noses in staff matter’.³⁷ Eventually, matters came to a head in September 1929 when Reith and Clarendon, the chairman of the Board, met at the latter’s house in an attempt to solve their disagreements. At that occasion Clarendon was said to have spoken to Reith as to ‘a subordinate requiring chastisement’; what’s, more, while blaming Reith for all their troubles, Clarendon urged him to acknowledge the ‘absolute supremacy’ of the Board.³⁸

Obviously, this was not what was needed to come to terms and the deadlock between the Director General and the Board of Governors remained. Reith detested this situation: ‘All sort of things are going wrong now which are a direct result of my being sick with the Board and all their muddling and wanting to interfere.’³⁹ While his thoughts about leaving the BBC resurfaced, Reith also contemplated ‘hanging on’ to make himself available to succeed Clarendon when the chairman’s first term in office would come to an end in 1931. However, he would not have to wait this long, since Clarendon would, quite unexpectedly, resign from his chairmanship in 1930 to become the next Governor General of South Africa.⁴⁰ Clarendon’s departure required the government of the day to appoint a new chairman, which, in turn, formed a rare opportunity for the government to intervene in the troubled relationship between the Board of Governors and the Director General. It was this moment which saw the re-emergence of Ramsay MacDonald. In recent years Reith and MacDonald had met on several occasions, and it seems unlikely that Reith had kept MacDonald uninformed about his dealings with the BBC Board and his problems with the ‘wretched woman’ Snowden and ‘the perfect ass’ Clarendon.⁴¹ In fact, in February 1929 Reith and MacDonald had talked with Clarendon over the rota of political speeches for the coming general election. At that occasion MacDonald had signalled Reith ‘in obvious derision’ of the BBC chairman.⁴² Although Reith thought this was ‘improper’, it seems that his confidentiality with the Labour leader yielded the BBC a chairman who was more sympathetic to Reith’s ideas as Clarendon had been.

34 Ibidem, 143-144.

35 Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 57.

36 As quoted in ibidem, 57.

37 Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 57-58.

38 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 149.

39 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 150.

40 Ibidem, 151, Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 58 and Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 430-431.

41 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 147.

42 Ibidem, 101.

5.2 Labour's second minority government and the BBC

At that point in time, it was five years ago since Stanley Baldwin's Conservative Party had ousted the first Labour government from office. In 1924, Labour's first taste of power had lasted only ten months and its experience of office was less sweet as it had hoped it to be. While many labour supporters were disappointed about the limited achievements of Ramsay MacDonald's minority government, its return to the opposition benches was accompanied by an upsurge in the anti-Labour mood which had haunted the party's rise to prominence in the years before. This was epitomized by the *Daily Mail's* publication of the 'Zinoviev letter'. Even so, the previous chapter noted that the Labour Party's leadership was convinced that the party's responsible conduct in power formed the most effective antidote against the persistent fears for Labour's radicalism and extremism. This was one of the reasons why the triumvirate of MacDonald, Henderson and Snowden sought to keep Labour on the parliamentary path of politics in the years after 1924, when facing the adversarial policies of Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government.⁴³ But the previous chapter highlighted as well that the party leadership failed to control the trade unions, which was dramatically illustrated by the events of the general strike. Still, the defeat of May 1926 helped to reinforce Labour's gradualist and moderate course as it offered a harsh lesson, also to the trade unions, of the detrimental effects of direct action.⁴⁴

And so, the Labour leadership used the years after 1926 to increase its hold over the wider Labour Party and to consolidate the gains it had made in the years before. As part of that the party leadership was also determined to learn from its mistakes of the past. Among other things, it decided to move away from the set of policies and proposals that were laid down in its 1918 party programme *Labour and the New Social Order*. With the passing of time this programme had lost its currency, partly as a result of the failure or inability of the first Labour government to build on its substance. A new programme, *Labour and the Nation*, was presented in October 1928 and it promoted a broad range of policies that were designed to appeal to a large cross-section of the electorate, and not to working-class voters alone. Although it aimed to open up new perspectives, on the whole it remained loyal to Labour's gradualist orientation which was personified by Ramsay MacDonald's leadership. As such, it drew a promising picture of a 'peaceful revolution' and a 'new era' with 'peace, freedom and justice' for all, which was to be realized, among other things, through 'step by step' reforms of industry 'into a co-operative undertaking, carried on for the service of the community and amenable to its control'; beyond that it also aimed to 'extend rapidly' reforms in housing, education, health, unemployment and pensions.⁴⁵ Quite significantly, it also advocated a programme of nationalisation and public ownership. But while *Labour and the Nation* was critically received for being too vague and overly enchanting, this also applied to its comments about public ownership, which steered away from specifics and practicalities and offered no clarification of the institutional ambiguities which were observed in the previous chapter.⁴⁶

The question was whether this was a problem, as it did allow MacDonald and the wider Labour leadership to claim the country was better off under a Labour government. Of course,

43 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 65.

44 Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 112 and Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 66.

45 As quoted in Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 117.

46 See also Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 118 and E. Eldon Barry, *Nationalisation in British Politics. The Historical Background* (London 1965) 283.

Baldwin and the Conservatives held different ideas and they entered the election campaign of 1929 with the slogan 'Safety first', which signalled their intent of capitalizing on the fears for Labour's disruptive impact.⁴⁷ However, in recent years the Baldwin government had failed to reduce unemployment figures which seemed to work in favour of Labour's chances at the polls.⁴⁸ This was confirmed by the results of this election, which, for the first time in history granted the Labour Party a victory over the Conservative Party. But, winning 287 seats in Parliament, this was not enough for a straight parliamentary majority, since the Conservatives claimed 260 seats and the Liberals 59. Although this meant that Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government was again a minority government, it did set to work in an atmosphere of hope and excitement. Among the members of his cabinet were Philip Snowden as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Arthur Henderson as Foreign Secretary and J.R. Clynes as Home Secretary.⁴⁹ However, Labour's optimism would not last, since MacDonald's Cabinet took office on the eve of most turbulent times. In October 1929 the Wall Street crash sent shockwaves through the global markets, and the British economy was severely hit by the subsequent downturn as well. Combined with steadily rising unemployment figures, this presented the Labour government with a crisis it was unable to solve.

Labour's choice of a new BBC chairman

Broadcasting was only a minor concern for the Labour government. On taking office the difficulties between Reith and the Board of Governors had been going on for quite some time and as a result of Clarendon's departure to South Africa it was the Labour government which was required to appoint a new name to this position. The significance of this task extended beyond the mere effort of finding a candidate who held the right credentials to hold the BBC's chair. For one thing, since this candidate should also be able to solve the troubled relationship between the Board of Governors and John Reith, as the BBC's Director General. But, beyond that, the choice for a new chairman would also have immediate implications for the agenda of the Board in the years to come and, more importantly, for the way it would conduct its role as a Trustee of the public interest in broadcasting. It would appear that this last aspect was particularly important for the Labour Party, as a confessed proponent of public ownership and public control. However, the government's dealings with this affair suggested that MacDonald's acquaintance with Reith and his consensual style of leadership were really the overriding factors.

To be clear, MacDonald's involvement in these matters was not self-evident. After all, broadcasting was the concern of the Postmaster General, a position which was held by Bertrand Lees-Smith. Lees-Smith had served as a Liberal MP before 1914, but he was also a member of the Fabian Society. Like so many other Liberals he had switched over to the Labour Party in the aftermath of the World War I, so he held quite some parliamentary experience when he was first elected as a Labour MP in 1922, after which he was re-elected in 1924 and 1929.⁵⁰ In his capacity as Postmaster General Lees-Smith had a number of encounters with Reith, before the question of the BBC's chairmanship was raised. His impression of Reith was far from good. In fact, the Postmaster General thought the BBC's Director General was neurotic and a megalomaniac;

47 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 71.

48 Pugh, *Speak for Britain*, 206.

49 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 71-72.

50 A. Thorpe, 'Smith, Hastings Bertrand Lees- (1878-1941)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb>, (23-6-2010).

that he was 'off his head' and that he wouldn't 'be at the BBC very much longer'.⁵¹ Based on this impression, it seems likely that Lees-Smith would have offered the BBC's chairmanship to a figure who was capable of standing up to Reith and of countering his authoritarian rule over the broadcasting service. However, Lees-Smith would soon find that his Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, would not allow him to deal with this question alone, among other things, since he held a more sympathetic opinion of Reith. Their dispute about who held the final say in this procedure, the Postmaster General or the Prime Minister, was only settled after legal officers had indicated it was MacDonald's word which was decisive.⁵²

Perhaps this explains why the Postmaster General was not present when, on February 18, 1930, MacDonald and Reith discussed the vacant chairmanship of the BBC's Board of Governors. When Reith was asked by the Prime Minister who he had in mind for the vacant chair, Reith first gave what he thought was the most correct answer: Lord Gainford, the present vice-chairman of the Board and former chairman of the Broadcasting Company, who had been his preferred candidate from the start of the Corporation. But when MacDonald dismissed this option (Lord Gainford was a coal-owner), Reith felt free to give a subsequent answer.⁵³ He told MacDonald that he would gladly take up the chair of the Board himself by combining it with his executive role as the BBC's Director General. It was noted above that Reith had earlier tried to find a seat on the Board, and apparently he was still thinking along similar lines. This was not unproblematic, and his suggestion to merge the two positions in one (or, better, his) persona would have surely reduced the critical faculties of the Board even further. This was an appealing prospect to Reith, but MacDonald dismissed it. He anticipated that the BBC and Reith were best served with the appointment of an outside figure. Nonetheless, when Reith first heard who MacDonald had approached, he was 'very disgusted with the PM' and he saw it as proof 'of the damage done by the Red Woman'.⁵⁴

In his search for a new chairman MacDonald had turned to a former occupant of a political post which placed the highest demands on impartiality, disinterestedness, tact and discretion. From 1921 to 1928 J.H. Whitley had served as the speaker of the House of Commons. The mood in the House had been volatile in those years, also as a result of the rise of the Labour Party, but Whitley had managed to retain a steady and calm control over the meetings of Parliament. On his retirement he was praised by MacDonald for his adequate approach: 'You have shown us in a remarkable way how to be patient and courteous without being lax, how to be strict and severe without being mechanical and formal; and you have also demonstrated to us...how gentleness can rule and how persuasiveness can subdue.'⁵⁵ But MacDonald's regard for Whitley traced back to the years before his speakership of the House of Commons. Because Whitley's name was also connected with the Joint Industrial Councils, which he had helped to establish in the wake of World War I. These consultative bodies were also known as Whitley Councils and their aim was to improve industrial relations (or prevent industrial unrest) by bringing together employer- and trade union representatives over work- and wage-related matters.⁵⁶ Although these

51 Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 58 and Ryan, *Labour and the media in Britain*, 111.

52 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 151.

53 Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 58 and 146.

54 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 152.

55 As quoted in H.J. Wilson, 'Whitley, John Henry (1866-1935)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (30-6-2010).

56 Wilson, 'Whitley, John Henry (1866-1935)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. See also Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 430.

bodies were much less effective as Whitley had foreseen, his background does explain why he was considered a perfect candidate to succeed Clarendon. It would take until April 1931 before Whitley would take up the chair, but his entry had an immediate impact on the atmosphere within the BBC's hierarchy. When later reflecting on this moment, Reith claimed his dealings with the Board were from then on 'free from internal strife, suspicion and distrust' and that 'one was able, undisturbed, to get on with the job'.⁵⁷ Whitley's arrival even had a calming effect on Ethel Snowden, whose dislike of Reith did not vanish, but who did serve out the remainder of her term as BBC Governor quite peacefully. She was succeeded in 1933 by Mary Agnes Hamilton, a former Labour MP who, in a similar way, was thought to stand for the female and labour part of the public.⁵⁸

This newfound harmony did come with a price. Because it was noted above that the task of appointing a new BBC chairman was not merely a matter of finding a suitable candidate who could bring peace, but that it was also a challenge of solving the conflict between the competing conceptions of the Board which had helped to cause these tensions in the past years. A closer look at Whitley's first steps as the BBC's newly appointed chairman learns he aimed to steer away from the problems of the past. One of the first things he did was to send Reith a letter of introduction which would have pleased his correspondent's ego: 'May I say with what pleasure I look forward to being associated with you in the great work of which you are the creator. I hope our association will be mutually helpful in the service to which you have given such unstinted devotion and to which I will bring my very humble contribution of an admirer and a learner.'⁵⁹ More important, however, were his subsequent actions as the BBC's chairman, which, on the whole, were pervaded by the same conciliatory spirit towards Reith. This was most clearly symbolized by their 'joint' effort to solve the lasting ambiguity about the position of the Board of Governors. For this purpose Reith had drafted a short statement, which was accepted by Whitley. This statement laid down Reith's ideas about the Board's place in the BBC's organizational structures and, more specifically, his thoughts about the scope and weight of its authority in relation to the Director General's responsibilities. Among other things it stated, that 'the function [of Governors] are not executive, their responsibilities are general and not particular, and they are not divided up for purposes of departmental supervision.'⁶⁰ Elsewhere it stressed: 'With the Director General they discuss and then decide on major matters of policy and finance, but they leave the execution of that policy and the general administration of the service in all its branches to the Director General and his competent officers.'⁶¹ Although it did acknowledge the Board's ultimate responsibility over the broadcasting service, it also drew up a high fence between the Director General's realm and the Board's abilities to act on these responsibilities. And since this fence was being guarded by the slightly intimidating figure of John Reith himself, it might be asked whether Whitley's acceptance of this document was, ultimately, good for the quality and effectiveness of the Board's duties.

57 As quoted in Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 431

58 Briggs, *Governing the BBC*, 31.

59 As quoted in Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 430-431.

60 As quoted in Wythenshawe, *The BBC from within*, 46.

61 Ibidem.

Reith's dictatorial habits

Similar questions were raised by Harold Laski and Leonard Woolf, two left-wing intellectuals who were (more and less closely) associated with the Labour Party. In early 1931 both men issued a public warning about Reith's supremacy and its possible implications for British broadcasting. Of the two, it was Laski – a political theorist and one of Labour's most prominent thinkers – , who first raised this issue in a portrait of the Director General ('Sir John Reith. He is Determined, Vehement, Masterful') which was published in Labour's newspaper the *Daily Herald*. Laski's comments were couched in praise, not merely for Reith's impressive achievements, but also for the 'superiority' of the British broadcasting system 'to that of any other country'.⁶² Yet, the drift of his article wasn't entirely positive, since Laski condemned the BBC for its conservative outlook and he held Reith responsible for this: 'There is a fanatic in him. It is one of his gifts and one of his limitations. It explains his power of work, his energy, and his drive. But it means also that he carries about with him a bundle of dogmas – social, religious, ethical, political – and he has a tendency to make them the measure of all things and men.' More seriously, he accused Reith of having 'dictatorial habits'.⁶³ While admitting that these habits may have helped him to build the broadcasting machinery, Laski argued that the Director General held too much power at present and that the BBC's internal structures, including the Board of Governors, as well as its programming policies were affected by this concentration of power in a negative manner. And so he warned that this formed a severe threat to the democratic potential of broadcasting.

A few weeks later, Laski's claims were taken up in a more extensive article in *The Political Quarterly* by Leonard Woolf, titled 'The future of British broadcasting'.⁶⁴ Like Laski, Woolf was a member of the Fabian Society and besides his publishing activities he was involved in the Labour Party's advisory committees on international and imperial questions.⁶⁵ Woolf focussed in this article on the question of democracy in broadcasting as well. He saw radio as an important instrument for promoting an 'educated, tolerant, open-minded and cultured democracy'; for this reason he thought that radio might well 'prove to be the most revolutionary invention in human history'.⁶⁶ However, Woolf observed many threats which jeopardized the democratic development of broadcasting, both in- and outside the BBC. Among these was the iron rule of John Reith, which he labelled an 'autocracy' and a 'dictatorship'. Equally distressing to Woolf were the shortcomings of the Board of Governors – it 'cannot and does not control the BBC' – which, he claimed, failed to counter Reith's influence. According to Woolf the present Board was composed of 'retired septuagenarians' which merely represented 'age, safety and respectability'. And so he suggested to replace those Governors for 'a younger, progressive and independent Board', which would be composed by 'persons of courage and independence'.⁶⁷ While Woolf had his eyes set on the moment when the BBC's first Governors would retire, he could not foresee that his and Laski's claims about the flaws of the British broadcasting system would all too soon gain a much wider currency. Ironically, looming over this development was the shadow of Ramsay MacDonald, not only since MacDonald's appointment of Whitley had helped to cement Reith's

62 *Daily Herald*, 21-3-1931.

63 Ibidem.

64 L. Woolf, 'The future of British broadcasting', *The Political Quarterly* 2 (1931) 172-185.

65 S.P. Rosenbaum, 'Woolf, Leonard Sidney (1880-1969)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (8-8-2010).

66 Woolf, 'The future of British broadcasting', 172 and 178.

67 Ibidem, 184-185.

rule over the BBC, but also since it was MacDonald's fall from grace which would help to expose the urgency of their diagnosis.

5.3 Labour in crisis

In the past years MacDonald's second Labour government had faced the daunting task of steering Britain through the economic crisis. In 1929 it had taken office under high hopes and its ambitions for the coming years were laid down in its 1928 party manifesto *Labour and the Nation*. However, similar as in 1924, the experience of government proved a harsh reality and in months' time MacDonald and his ministers were forced to adjust their short- and longer- term plans as a result of the national and international economic downturn. Among other things, the Labour government saw itself confronted with steadily rising unemployment figures; on taking office Britain counted 1.1 million unemployed, half a year later this number had grown to 1.5 million and throughout 1930 the number continued to rise until it reached 2.7 million towards the end of 1930.⁶⁸ These were dreadful figures for a party which prided itself for being a champion of employment. What made this all the more discouraging was the government's idle and ineffective response, as it proved unable to look beyond the pillars of economic orthodoxy – chief amongst these free trade and a balanced budget – to find a way out of the crisis. And so, instead, MacDonald, Snowden and the wider cabinet aimed to keep calm and carry on, and wait for the storm to blow over. This strategy did not pay off, and in 1931 it triggered the premature end of the Labour government in a most memorable fashion. The fall of MacDonald's second government was the outcome of a cabinet conflict over a package of austerity measures, which, among other things, included a reduction of unemployment benefits. Although MacDonald recognized it 'represented the negation of everything the Labour Party stood for', he did think these measures were necessary 'if the country was to be secured'.⁶⁹ However, nine members of MacDonald's cabinet would not agree, and by refusing to accept the suggested cuts they signed the end of Labour's second spell in office.

Still, this was only the first stage of the drama that would come to unfold in the following weeks and months. Paradoxically, the fall of the Labour government did not mark the end of MacDonald's premiership. When the Prime Minister went to offer his cabinet's resignation to the King, he was urged to stay on and continue as Prime Minister, albeit of a national government to prevent the country from sliding into an even greater crisis. MacDonald hesitated. The troubled state of the British economy convinced him to comply with this unusual request, but only as a temporary resolve.⁷⁰ On the 24th of August, 1931, MacDonald announced the formation of a national government in which he and Snowden would retain their position as resp. Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Besides them, this crisis-cabinet contained two other Labour ministers (J.H. Thomas and Lord Sankey), four Conservatives and two Liberals. In Labour circles these developments were watched with horror and dismay. The long-time Labour

68 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 73.

69 As quoted in Henk te Velde, 'Trust and the development of party politics: Ramsay MacDonald's "betrayal" and the British Labour Party' in: E.R. Ankersmit and H. te Velde eds., *Trust: cement of democracy?* (Leuven 2004) 71-88, there 73.

70 David Marquand, 'MacDonald, (James) Ramsay (1866-1937)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (16-5-2016).

leader, who had played such a prominent role in the rise of the party in the previous decades, now decided to turn his back on his former fellows to form a coalition with Labour's long-standing rivals. MacDonald's manoeuvre went down into Labour history as the 'betrayal' of 1931 and long after, even in the 1980s, his name remained associated in Labour circles with treason and collaboration.⁷¹ At the time, the parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) was 'bewildered and distressed' by the 'catastrophic turn of events'.⁷² Of the 287 Labour members of the House of Commons only twelve MPs followed MacDonald's national turn.

But Labour's ordeal was not over yet. In the days and weeks after August 24th many Labour figures remained hopeful about a possible repair of the break with MacDonald and Snowden. Among these was the newly elected party leader Arthur Henderson.⁷³ Many struggled to comprehend these unexpected turn of events which had ousted the Labour Party from government and which had plunged the party in a crisis of unprecedented proportions. They were soon caught up by new disturbing events, among which Britain's exit from the gold standard and a mutiny in the Royal Navy at Invergordon. In those circumstances MacDonald decided to call for a new general election, which he would fight under the flag of National Labour. The Labour Party was barely ready for this contest. Although it was united in its opposition against the national government, this was as much a unity of confusion as a unity of purpose. On the whole, the Labour Party failed to present a solid alternative to the national government's plans. What's more, the party was in a state of disarray and, apparently, its record of the past years failed to convince the voters to put their faith in its candidates. And so, the outcome of the 1931 election was devastating, since the Labour Party was left with a mere 52 seats of the 287 seats it had won in the 1929 election. In contrast, the national coalition claimed more than 550 seats, the majority of which were taken by the Conservatives.⁷⁴

5.4 Labour in opposition

These results gave the Labour Party leadership much to think about. How, for instance, could Labour regain the confidence it had lost from the public? What were the implications of its flawed response to the economic crisis for the party's understanding of socialism? How should the party deal with its heritage of MacDonaldist gradualism now that its main proponent had parted company with his former allies? While these were the more weighty questions, among the other issues which required scrutiny was the Labour Party's relationship with the BBC. The reason for this was that the broadcasting service had played a controversial part in the run-up to the elections, at least according to the Labour leadership which felt that the broadcasting service had ignored its impartiality in favour of the national government.

These events will be explored in more detail in the following part of this book, but one of Labour's accusations concerned a BBC news bulletin on the eve of the elections in which voters were called on to support the national government, or so it sounded to Labour ears. Another objection of Labour concerned the rules for access to broadcasting. In the run-up to the election Labour leaders had

71 More extensive on the 'betrayal' of MacDonald: Te Velde, 'Trust and the development of party politics', 71-88.

72 As quoted in Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, 132.

73 Ibidem, 133.

74 Pugh, *Speak for Britain*, 216.

grown increasingly frustrated about the BBC's refusal to allow them a right of reply to the various statements by government speakers. Labour complained later that 'under the guise of national appeals and statements on the financial emergency, Ministers and their supporters had a complete monopoly of broadcasts.'⁷⁵ Its resentment was stirred up even further by, what it saw as, the lack of balance in the allocation of election broadcasts. Of the eleven election broadcasts that were agreed, eight were granted to speakers who were aligned to the national government. The Labour Party, on the other hand, was granted with no more than three broadcasting opportunities. Although the BBC was only partly responsible for this arrangement, to the Labour Party, already agitated, this was another sign that the national government received crucial support from the broadcasting service.

The difficulties for the Labour Party were not over yet. Based on its marginal presence in the House of Commons, the BBC proved less responsive to its demands than the Labour Party deemed appropriate. As a result, Labour officials came to believe that the party's misfortunes during the 1931 crisis had only set a precedent. And while frustrations about the broadcasting service and its Director General, kept building up, this caused the leadership of the Labour Party to rethink some of its earlier ideas about public ownership in broadcasting.

Frankenstein in politics

The formal start of this process can be traced to November 10, 1931, only a few weeks after the election, when the National Executive Council (NEC) of the Labour Party met with the General Council of the TUC. At this meeting of the two bodies passed a resolution which contained an 'emphatic protest against preferential treatment accorded by the BBC to the National Government for political broadcasts'. This resolution was published in the *Manchester Guardian* as well and it stated that the actions of the BBC in the past months were a 'definitive breach' of its 'functions and powers as a public corporation divorced from politics.'⁷⁶ In addition, the Labour Party also sent a letter with a formal protest to the new Conservative Postmaster General, Sir Kingsley Wood. This letter expressed the party's 'strong sense of (...) grave injustice' about what had happened before and during the recent election campaign.⁷⁷ It did not take long for the Postmaster General to answer Labour's letter. However, his response was as swift as it was discouraging, since Kingsley Wood replied that he, as Postmaster General, had no responsibilities in these matters and that the arrangement for the various broadcasts was essentially a concern between the political parties.

Obviously, this failed to resolve Labour's sense of injustice and the party decided to address the issue in Parliament as well. This was done by Clement Attlee on December 11, 1931, only some weeks after the House of Commons had first met in its new composition. In the final months of MacDonald's Labour government Attlee had shortly served as Postmaster General after Lees-Smith had left this position to succeed Charles Trevelyan as president of the Board of Education. Until then Attlee had been a relatively low-key member of Labour's parliamentary party, but after the landslide election of 1931, he suddenly found himself among the more experienced MPs, for the simple reason that few Labour MPs managed to retain their seat in Parliament. As such Attlee would emerge as deputy to Labour's newly elected parliamentary leader, George Lansbury.⁷⁸

75 Seaton and Pimlot, *The Struggle for "balance"*, 135.

76 Report March 1933 National Joint Council 'Broadcasting', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS 292/787.18/1, f. 24-25.

77 Ibidem.

78 Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 139.

Attlee's speech to Parliament echoed some of the issues which Laski and Woolf had raised in March and April of that year. Among these was the role of the Board of Governors in its guidance and control of the BBC. This was merely a side-road in his talk, but Attlee expressed his concerns over the timid and mediocre spirit of the Board. More important, however, were his comments about the role of broadcasting in politics. Attlee stated that broadcasting was an 'extraordinarily powerful instrument for moulding public opinion' and since it was organized as a 'State monopoly' a 'dictator could want nothing better than to get hold of the broadcasting system'.⁷⁹ Although Attlee claimed he had 'a very great admiration for the British Broadcasting Corporation', after what happened recently his trust in the BBC's impartiality was shaken severely. In fact, these incidents made him question whether 'we have not (...) created a Frankenstein which is going to break up our political life'.⁸⁰ Instead, Attlee demanded 'absolute and complete impartiality' in political broadcasting. Since the BBC had shown it was unable to observe this command, Attlee claimed that the full responsibility for political broadcasting should lay with the parties in Parliament. Accordingly, his suggestion was to set up 'an advisory committee of Members of all parties', which would decide on the allocation of all political speeches in broadcasting.⁸¹

Attlee's appeal failed to make an impact in Parliament and his arguments were brushed aside by the Postmaster General. However, outside the House Attlee's suggestion was welcomed with more interest. Several months had passed since this December debate when the BBC anticipated that a committee of this type might well help to solve the problems it was facing in dealing with political broadcasting. In the subsequent part of this book we will see how the BBC's attempts to organize political programmes were time and again obstructed by the disagreements between the parties involved. However, in its effort to establish this 'Parliamentary Advisory Committee' the BBC made one crucial mistake. It invited various candidates to take a seat on this body, among whom Labour MP James Milner. Quite crucially, it forgot to discuss this initiative and the invitation with the leaders of the Liberals and the Labour Party.⁸² George Lansbury, parliamentary leader of the Labour Party, was very disturbed by this, notably since Attlee's earlier suggestion of a political advisory committee was aimed precisely at restricting the role of the BBC in politics. So the fact that the BBC tried to establish a committee of this type, without consulting the party leadership first, merely confirmed the Labour Party's diagnosis that there was a true need for this committee, albeit on different terms than were now proposed.

Real public control

All this happened at a very unfortunate moment, towards the end of September 1932. Within days Labour's sense of injustice was provoked again. This time, the BBC refused Labour speakers a right of reply to four speeches by government and former-government speakers. After a disagreement in the national government over protectionist policies Philip Snowden and Herbert Samuel had resigned from the cabinet. With the approval of the Prime Minister, Snowden and Samuel were each granted an opportunity to inform the nation in a special broadcast about their reasons for resigning. Both broadcasts were answered by a ministerial broadcast, explaining the line of the government in this disagreement.⁸³ When the Labour Party heard of these broadcasts

79 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 11-12-1931, 2307, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

80 *Ibidem*, 2313.

81 *Ibidem*.

82 Hollins, *The presentation of politics*, 425.

83 Ryan, *Labour and the media in Britain*, 473.

its immediate response was to request the BBC for similar facilities. According to the Labour Party the public had a right to hear the opinion of the opposition in this matter as well. But the BBC refused to meet this request, since it claimed that these type of government speeches were never answered by a broadcast from the opposition.

Labour's most immediate response was an emergency resolution which was adopted by the 1932 annual party conference, which happened to take place in the same week. Being the first conference since Labour's catastrophic election defeat a year earlier, this was a highly charged event. The broadcasting resolution expressed Labour's anger about the 'deliberate exclusion of the official Opposition from participation in the discussions and the failure to take the Opposition into consultation on a matter of political broadcasting'.⁸⁴ This message was also conveyed more directly to the BBC in the weeks after the conference by prominent Labour figures – Lansbury, Attlee, Greenwood and others – who paid several visits to the Broadcasting Corporation.⁸⁵ John Reith and his chairman of the Board, Whitley, were kind enough to receive these delegations, but, similar to what the Labour Party had heard before, they simply referred to the rules for political broadcasting, which stated that the government held a privileged access to the airwaves over the opposition.

The Labour Party could not accept this and it referred the issues to its newly established Broadcasting Sub-Committee. This committee was set up in November 1932 by Labour's National Joint Council (NJC), a body which united the party executive, the parliamentary party and the TUC. Among the members of this committee were Herbert Morrison, George Lansbury, Arthur Greenwood and Walter Citrine. Its founding was a product of Labour's growing frustration about its wanting position in broadcasting. With the BBC being unresponsive to Labour's latest complaints, this committee was asked to prepare a motion for a parliamentary debate. Besides that it would also draft a memorandum for a subsequent meeting with the BBC. The aim of these efforts was explained by George Lansbury in *The Labour Magazine*.⁸⁶ His article focused mainly on Labour's misfortunes in political broadcasting, but he also touched on an issue of a more structural nature. According to Lansbury the fundamental flaw of the British broadcasting system was its lack of public control, or its surplus of independence. So, while the government held various privileges in broadcasting, Lansbury stressed that the parliamentary opposition did not even have proper opportunities to discuss these matters in the House of Commons. It was particularly in the realm of political broadcasting where the effects of this flaw were felt most acutely. Against this background Lansbury claimed that if political broadcasting was to continue, 'then it must be brought under real public control'.⁸⁷ What this meant was that the House of Commons should have the power to 'discuss and remedy any alleged abuse of power and decide what use should be made of wireless under normal or abnormal circumstances, whereas today there is no appeal from the one or the two persons who decide these matters'.⁸⁸

Between hat and organ

This demand for 'control' also resounded on February 22, 1933, when Parliament saw the first major debate about broadcasting since 1931. In the past months the Broadcasting Sub-

⁸⁴ *Report Labour Party Annual Conference 1932*, 228.

⁸⁵ Memorandum 'The broadcasting situation', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS/292/787.18/2, f. 4.

⁸⁶ G. Lansbury, 'Labour and the BBC', *The Labour Magazine* 11 (November 1932) 293-295.

⁸⁷ Lansbury, 'Labour and the BBC', 294.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

Committee of the National Joint Council had come to the conclusion that the BBC should plan its political broadcasts in closer consultation with the parties in Parliament. It was Sir Stafford Cripps, with Clement Attlee one of the deputy leaders of the Labour Party in Parliament, who would advocate this cause to the other parties in Parliament. While acknowledging that it had been 'the most profound wisdom (...) to retain this great service in a single hand, the hand of a public corporation', Cripps stated that political minorities, the opposition included, were clearly disadvantaged in the present situation.⁸⁹ Another problem he observed was that the BBC held too much power over political broadcasting, for instance with regards to the selection of speakers and topics for discussion. According to Cripps this power was insufficiently circumscribed at present. And so, Labour's amendment suggested the establishing of a Select Committee which would have to reconsider the rules for political broadcasting, so quite similar to what Attlee had argued some years earlier.

Cripps' speech received limited approval in Parliament. Prominent independents like Lloyd George and Winston Churchill did agree about the urgency of these matters, as they themselves were also involved in a struggle for access to the airwaves. Nonetheless, they did not endorse the solution which was suggested by Cripps, and neither did the Conservative Postmaster General Kingsley Wood. He opposed Labour's demand for more control by emphasizing that the broadcasting service was organized as a public corporation, precisely because it had been deemed necessary to 'limit parliamentary interference' and to provide the BBC with a 'reasonable liberty of action'.⁹⁰ He also claimed it was undesirable that the Postmaster General would in any way become responsible for the programming side of broadcasting, which might happen if Labour's ideas were taken seriously. Paraphrasing a predecessor, he confessed that 'he did not mind going round with the hat', but that 'he refused to turn the handle of the organ'.⁹¹ In the following vote it turned out that the larger part of Parliament held a similar opinion. While Labour's amendment was rejected, more than 200 MPs voted instead to endorse a motion in support of the BBC and its independence. Labour's frustration over the whole affair was expressed a month later in *The Labour Magazine*. Looking back on this debate it stated that 'the House of Commons was invited to record its satisfaction with the BBC, and to declare that neither Government nor Parliament should have any more control over the BBC than is provided in the present charter and license: which amounts to none at all'.⁹² Its advice to Parliament was therefore 'to abandon this attitude of complacency and face the facts'.⁹³

Labour's problem, however, was not so much that facts were ignored or denied, but rather that its diagnosis was not shared. It was noted above that the Labour's Broadcasting Sub-Committee had set itself two objectives when it was established in November 1932, first to prepare a motion for a Parliamentary debate and second to draft a memorandum for a meeting with the BBC. While the first had yielded no result, its meeting with the BBC was yet to take place. After discussing various drafts, a memorandum was eventually presented to the BBC in July 1933. At that occasion Labour's National Joint Council was represented by a five men delegation, which included Labour leaders like George Lansbury, Arthur Greenwood and Herbert Morrison. Again, their meeting with Reith and his chairman and vice-chairman of the BBC's Board proved

89 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 22-2-1933, 1823-1831, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

90 *Ibidem*, 1833.

91 *Ibidem*, 1839.

92 *The Labour Magazine*, 11 (March 1933) 507.

93 *Ibidem*.

to be a discouraging affair.⁹⁴ On the basis of this memorandum, the Labour delegation claimed equal opportunities in broadcasting for the Labour opposition to the government, as well as more extensive opportunities in broadcasting for trade union representatives. However, the chairman of the Board explained that even if the BBC thought this claim was justified, then it would still not be able to meet Labour's demands. The simple reason for this, he explained, was that the BBC saw this conflict as a disagreement between the government and the opposition. And although it was caught in the middle, it did not want to become involved any further. Once again, the BBC claimed it merely abided by the rules for political broadcasting which had emerged in the previous years, and that it was not the right agent to discuss a change in the nature or application of these rules.

And so, after campaigning for two years, the Labour Party was still standing empty handed. While the Postmaster General had rejected its various complaints by claiming that his responsibilities in broadcasting were limited, the BBC had shown itself equally unresponsive by declaring the rules for political broadcasting as a question which the political parties should resolve. Obviously, for the Labour Party this was a most unsatisfactory situation and it became increasingly frustrated over this state of affairs. Among other things this was illustrated by a parliamentary debate on the Post Office Budget, on July 24, 1933, a few weeks after the delegation of the National Joint Council had presented its memorandum to the BBC. Broadcasting was only a minor issue in this debate, but the Labour Party summoned the Postmaster General to adopt a more rigorous approach towards the BBC. Attlee reminded Kingsley Wood that broadcasting was operated as a 'State monopoly', and that it should therefore be 'absolutely fair' in political broadcasting. He stressed that it was the Postmaster General who held a 'definite responsibility' in this.⁹⁵ Attlee's appeal to the Postmaster General revealed a note of despair, in particular when he urged him to use his right to veto government broadcasts if government speakers would touch on controversial issues while the opposition would not be offered a right of reply. He warned that Britain would be getting into a 'Hitlerite position' if the government of the day would continue to exploit broadcasting in the same one-sided manner.⁹⁶ Later on in this debate George Lansbury stated something similar when he branded the government and the Postmaster General a 'set of dictators' for its hold over broadcasting.⁹⁷

5.5 'What they do in Holland is illegal in England'

Against this background it may seem remarkable that the Labour Party remained a staunch defender of the British broadcasting system. Although this system helped to facilitate the perceived neglect of the Labour Party, in fighting its misfortunes Labour speakers never went as far to suggest that this system should be replaced altogether. On the contrary, attacks on the BBC or on its Director General often went hand in hand with praise for the British broadcasting system. Such was for instance the case when Stafford Cripps claimed that it had been 'the most profound wisdom (...) to retain this great service in a single hand, the hand of a public corporation', after

⁹⁴ Notes on a meeting held at broadcasting house on 11-7-1933, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/2.

⁹⁵ *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 24-7-1933, 2262-2264, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, 2264.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 2300.

which he continued by condemning the Labour Party's unequal position in broadcasting. A similar point was made by Clement Attlee when he stated he had 'a very great admiration for the British Broadcasting Corporation', after which he expressed his fears for having created a 'Frankenstein (...) which is going to break up our political life.'⁹⁸ Some months earlier Harold Laski had argued along similar lines when he warned for Reith's 'dictatorial habits', while at the same time paying tribute to the 'superiority' of the British broadcasting system compared 'to that of any other country'.⁹⁹

An interesting illustration of Labour's ambiguity was offered by its dealings with the 'Arbeiter Radio Internationale' (ARI), or Labour Wireless International. This was a relatively insignificant sub-department of the Socialist International. It was formally established in September 1930 in Prague; the initiative for its founding dated back to September 1927 when a gathering of socialist radio pioneers had first met in Berlin, coming from a limited number of countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Czechoslovakia and Austria.¹⁰⁰ The main objectives of the ARI were, firstly, to promote socialist broadcasting in various national contexts across Europe and, secondly, to establish an international sphere for socialist broadcasting which transcended these national contexts. But these objectives were never fully realized and the history of the 'Radio Internationale' is largely a history of failure and suppression.

Nonetheless, as a radical departure from the national trajectory in broadcasting it does offer an interesting case study, also because of its obscured character. With the Dutch socialist broadcasting association VARA emerging as its mainstay from 1930 onwards, chapter six will show how its internationalist aspirations met with fierce opposition from national authorities, albeit in the Netherlands. In Britain, on the other hand, the ARI failed to be noticed altogether, mainly since the Labour Party refused to commit itself to its cause despite being invited to join the ranks of the ARI. In November 1931 Labour leader Arthur Henderson received a letter from Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, the broadcasting secretary of the VARA who was also the international secretary of the ARI. Chapter six will show that Zwertbroek was hardly the most diplomatic figure, which was illustrated also by the tone of this letter. In seeking to raise the Labour Party's interest, Zwertbroek reminded Henderson, quite needlessly, of the recent troubles the Labour Party had endured: 'We followed with great interest the result of the last elections, and we now take the liberty to draw your attention to the fact, that it appeared again this time, that the Radio-"mike" was chiefly used for the propaganda of our political opponents.' He continued by explaining the cause of the ARI and by asking whether the Labour Party was prepared 'to establish an organisation of social-democratic listeners in England' so that it might improve its position in broadcasting.¹⁰¹

Henderson passed this request to William Gillies, head of the Labour Party's international department.¹⁰² Gillies was unimpressed and in an internal memo he noted that the Labour Party's executive committee had treated earlier communications with the ARI 'with scant respect'; in addition, he noted that he himself had explained 'on more than one occasion' to the 'Workers' Radio International (...) that what they do in Holland is illegal in England. This must

98 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 11-12-1931, 2313, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

99 *Daily Herald*, 21-3-1931.

100 'De Arbeiders Radio-Internationale gesticht, 27-9-1930', VARA, inv. nr. 122.2.

101 Letter G.J. Zwertbroek to A. Henderson 12-11-1931, LHASC, WG/LWI/1-28.

102 C. Collette, 'Sir William George Gillies (1898-1973)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (14-1-2013).

be said again'. But despite his condescending tone, Gillies did hesitate as well, since he could only agree that Labour's position in broadcasting was far from good: 'On the other hand, I think we might turn in our misfortune even to the Dutch for help. We may not be able to establish an organisation of Socialist listeners; but if that were indispensable, even that might be done, at least nominally. In brief, if the Dutch and Belgian Socialists have broadcasting time at their disposal which they pay for, is it not worth exploring whether we could buy time and address the British working-class from Hilversum or Brussel?'¹⁰³

And so Zwertbroek received an extensive letter from the Labour Party, asking him for more detailed information about broadcasting in the Netherlands, in particular with regards to political speeches in foreign languages. In response, Zwertbroek answered that the Dutch authorities would not allow this. While this helped to ease Labour's cautious interest in the ARI, as we shall see in the following chapter, Zwertbroek himself was not so easily discouraged. On behalf of the ARI he kept searching for opportunities to develop a socialist international alternative in broadcasting in the years to come. And so, in November 1932 he approached the Labour Party again. This time, Zwertbroek saw a golden opportunity in the anticipated opening of the new powerful radio transmitter in Luxembourg, which was strong enough to reach large parts of Europe. And since it was operated by a commercial company, he estimated that a sum of fifty thousand guilders was needed to hire one hour of broadcasting time per week for a whole year. In calling on the Labour Party to contribute to the initiative, he claimed it was 'of the highest importance that the voice of social democracy should call over Europe'.¹⁰⁴ Again, this plan failed to materialize. From all the socialist parties Zwertbroek had approached, it was only the Dutch SDAP which was prepared to participate. The Labour Party, on the other hand, was not convinced and William Gillies' advice was to 'keep on the right side of the BBC'.¹⁰⁵

The party would do so in the following years as well. Although Labour's dealings with the ARI are, undoubtedly, the most interesting example, it was not the only time that Labour was urged to circumvent the BBC's monopoly in broadcasting. Indeed, Laura Beers notes that similar suggestions were discussed at the 1933 and 1936 party conference. On this last occasion, a delegate of the Amalgamated Engineering Union proposed to 'buy time from a continental station in order to popularize the workers' demands for shorter hours and larger wages'.¹⁰⁶ However, this idea was rejected by the party leadership. Similar to what was noted above, Beers sees this as proof of Labour's continuing support for the BBC, despite its ongoing disputes with the Broadcasting Corporation. In addition, she sees this as evidence of Labour's urge to be recognized as an integral element of the British constitutional structures, which barred it from using a continental loophole of this kind.¹⁰⁷ Equally important in this respect was the 'national' element. The previous chapter showed that the Labour Party was often targeted with claims linking its internationalism to a taste for 'disorder' and 'extremism'. So by 'keeping on the right side of the BBC' the Labour Party denied its opponents a fresh opportunity to exploit these claims and apparently this was deemed more important than the possible benefits of an alternative entry into the British airwaves.

103 Inter-Departmental Correspondence 2-12-1930, LHASC, WG/LWI/1-28.

104 Letter G.J. Zwertbroek to Labour Party November 1932, LHASC, WG/LWI/1-28.

105 Inter-Departmental Correspondence November 1932, LHASC, WG/LWI/1-28. A year later a similar proposal was discussed by the Labour Party conference, and again in 1936. On both occasions, however, this idea was rejected.

106 Beers, *Your Britain*, 154.

107 Ibidem.

5.6 Discovering the public corporation

But if Labour's repeated praise for the 'superiority' of the British broadcasting system was remarkable, then it was even more remarkable that the Labour Party only came to discuss the ramifications of the public corporation-model from the early 1930s onwards.¹⁰⁸ It was explained in chapter three that Labour's conception of nationalisation was first laid down by Clause IV of its 1918 party constitution and that its 1918 party programme *Labour and the New Social Order* presented a long list of industries and infrastructures which, one day, would be owned and controlled by the public.¹⁰⁹ However, it was noted also that Labour's ideas about public ownership remained caught up in ambiguities during the larger part of the 1920s. An illustration of this was its 1928 programme *Labour and the Nation*, which, again, painted a promising picture of a collectivized future, without solving the indeterminacies of the institutional form or implications of this process. This was not unproblematic and it might be argued that it helped to exacerbate Labour's difficulties in broadcasting. Even so, Labour's thinking about public ownership received a vital impulse in the early 1930s by the work of Herbert Morrison, a figure we have come across in the previous chapter already.

In 1923, Herbert Morrison was among the first Labour leaders to show an active interest in broadcasting and his (or the London Labour Party's) memorandum to the Sykes Committee was the first comprehensive claim for public ownership in broadcasting. The previous chapter noted that Morrison was a fervent believer in the benefits of public ownership and that he had initiated various schemes for publicly owned services on a municipal level. But, what's more, the previous chapter argued as well that his early 1920s ideas about broadcasting reflected the broader ambiguities in Labour's thinking about public ownership that were referred to above. As such, it seems only fitting that it was Morrison, who, from the early 1930s onwards, would play a key role in converting the Labour Party to the public corporation-model, so in spite of its fraught relationship with the BBC as the most prominent public corporation of the time. This was largely the outcome of Morrison's achievements as Transport Minister in Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government. In this capacity Morrison had fathered the London Passenger Transport Bill which aimed for a radical overhaul of the London transport system, by the creation of a Transport Board along the lines of a public corporation.¹¹⁰ Although this Bill was adopted after the fall of the Labour government, Morrison was widely acknowledged as its architect. In the following years this would boost his efforts to tie the Labour Party to the public corporation-model.

This was a protracted process which extended well into the 1940s, when the Attlee government introduced a wide-ranging nationalization-programme which crucially relied on the principles of the Morrisonian public corporation. However, the subject of this book requires us to focus on Morrison's activities in the early 1930s since it opens up an interesting perspective on the Labour Party's dealings with broadcasting in the years to come. Most significant in this respect was the 1933 publication of Morrison's book, *Socialisation and Transport*, which reflected on his dealings with the London Transport Board and his broader ideas about the significance of public

108 A.H. Hanson, 'Labour and the Public Corporation' in: Idem, *Planning and the Politicians and Other Essays* (London 1969) 143-149, there 143 and Tomlinson, *The Unequal Struggle?*, 63-79.

109 Chapter three, page 54-55 and 68.

110 Donoughue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 141-150.

corporations to the Labour Party's agenda of reform.¹¹¹ On the whole, Morrison saw the public corporation as a modern and efficient alternative to capitalist enterprise and his ideas echoed Fabian ideals of administrative efficiency.¹¹² A central element of Morrison's conception of the public corporation concerned the Board of Governors, which would have to be composed of persons of ability and knowledge and which would be appointed by a Minister. Although the Board was ultimately responsible to the government and Parliament, Morrison argued it would have to run its business in the public interest with a significant degree of autonomy, so without being subjected to the demands of those in power.¹¹³ It was this same argument that caused Morrison to reject the representation of workers on the Boards of corporations, which, in turn, raised serious opposition from trade union circles where Morrison was criticized for disregarding the interests of workers.¹¹⁴ Although there was much more to his views of the public corporation than this, most interesting for us are his comments about the British Broadcasting Corporation.

To be clear, this does not mean that the BBC's example held a prominent place in his explorations of the corporation-model. In fact, Morrison's book counts 297 pages and only three of these deal directly with the implications of the BBC's status as a public corporation. This may seem remarkable, but the tone and substance of these comments indicate that broadcasting formed an exceptional case to Morrison, which was not fully compatible with his larger ideas about the subject. Among other things this was reflected in his cautious remarks about the relationship between the BBC's Director General and its Board of Governors: 'It is a matter of some doubt as to who is the more powerful, the Board of Governors or the strong-willed Director General, Sir John Reith, and it is a matter for argument as to whether the Director General of the BBC should or should not be a strong personality.'¹¹⁵ He continued by exploring some of the difficulties and dilemma's on the programming side of broadcasting, among which the need for balance and impartiality. In relation to that he also reflected on the government's role in broadcasting: 'Normally, I understand the Government does not interfere with the Corporation, except that it has a veto, can require the Corporation to make Government announcements, and it seems to have a fair voice with regard to the use of the microphone on controversial subjects, especially political discussions, a matter which is clearly one of some difficulty.'¹¹⁶ Although he felt the Labour Party had a legitimate point to complain about its treatment in broadcasting, he also thought it was a 'matter of doubt whether it is the BBC or the Government which is responsible'. While this shows that Morrison was reluctant to speak out more firmly about the complexities in broadcasting, this did not prevent him from crediting the BBC with the customary praise. After declaring that 'as a whole the BBC has done its difficult job well and fairly', he concluded by stating that he was 'more content that the BBC should be directed by Sir John Reith than that it should be directed by that rather slick politician, Sir Kingsley Wood, the present Postmaster General, even though he be theoretically answerable to the House of Commons.'¹¹⁷

But as reasonable as this sounds, most of his party fellows had voiced rather different ideas in the years before. Up to this point this chapter has offered ample evidence of the widespread

111 Herbert Morrison, *Socialisation and Transport. The Organisation of Socialised Industries with particular reference to the London Passenger Transport Bill* (London 1933).

112 Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought*, 178-180.

113 Tomlinson, *The Unequal Struggle?*, 63-79 and Donoughue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 141-150.

114 Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 153.

115 Morrison, *Socialisation and Transport*, 154.

116 Ibidem.

117 Ibidem, 155.

disillusion which had emerged in Labour circles about its treatment in broadcasting. There is no need to go through these controversies again, but on the whole the Labour Party had become highly critical about the BBC's workings as a public corporation and its analysis of its failings extended from the Director General's rule to his relationship with the Board of Governors and from the Postmaster General's role to the larger responsibilities of Parliament. What's more, the previous chapter learned that the Labour Party had held high expectations about the democratic control of broadcasting, but so far this chapter has shown the party's mounting frustrations about its perceived lack of control in broadcasting. There was a different side to this as well and others – Herbert Morrison included – felt that this lack of control was really the price of an independent broadcasting service. Although the Labour Party would come to adopt his views on the public corporation in due time, the remainder of this chapter will show that this did not cause his party fellows to adopt the same moderate stance towards the broadcasting service as well.

5.7 Labour and the Ullswater Committee of 1935

The Labour Party would soon find a new opportunity to voice its ideas about broadcasting. Granted in 1926, the BBC's charter and license were steadily nearing their ten-years expiry date, which required the government of the day to consider their renewal. Someone who was well aware of this development was John Reith and he anticipated in an early stage that the BBC's present charter only needed some 'minor' modifications and that this might well be handled by a small cabinet committee.¹¹⁸ Although he had started lobbying for this idea as early as December 1933, his suggestions were not adopted by those politicians who presided over this process, most notably the Postmaster General Kingsley Wood. The Postmaster General refused to treat this affair as a mere formality. In the past years he had all too often dismissed claims or demands – also from the Labour Party – to impose his authority on the Broadcasting Corporation, but apparently he did not want to let this moment pass without allowing the public to express its mind about the future of British broadcasting. As such, he informed Reith in June 1934 that the government would set up a more substantial committee, which would investigate the renewal of the BBC's charter and license on a similar basis as the Crawford Committee and the Sykes Committee had done in the early and mid-1920s.

Reith was not happy with this outcome and he thought Kingsley Wood's decision was symptomatic of his lack of 'courage or determination'.¹¹⁹ Reith was not happy either about the selection of figures who were invited to take a seat on this committee. Besides its chairman, Lord Ullswater, a former Speaker of the House of Commons, the Ullswater Committee counted six other members. These included three politicians, among whom the Conservative MP and owner of *The Times* J.J. Astor, who had also been involved with the 1923 Sykes Committee. The Labour MP in the Ullswater Committee was Clement Attlee. As Labour's deputy leader in the House of Commons Attlee had shortly held the position of Postmaster General in Labour's second minority and in the previous years he had raised his concerns about the threats of broadcasting to British political life. Attlee was not the only former Postmaster General on the Ullswater Committee. We have encountered the name of William Mitchell-Thomson already as the

118 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 476-477.

119 As quoted in *Ibidem*, 477.

Postmaster General who, in 1926, had burdened Reith with Ethel Snowden. Reith was highly displeased with the Post Office predominance on this committee (which also included a former Assistant Postmaster General) since it seemed to limit his chances to reduce the Post Office's hold over the BBC. More specifically, Reith thought it was time to relieve the Postmaster General of his 'general and cultural' responsibilities in broadcasting and to transfer these to a senior cabinet member, preferably the Lord President of the Council. While claiming that this would improve the government's dealings with the BBC, Reith hoped it would yield the broadcasting service a more authoritative spokesman in the House of Commons. What's more, it was beyond question that this suggested transfer should not in any way interfere with the 'measure of autonomy now enjoyed by the Corporation', as was stated by a BBC memorandum about this matter.¹²⁰

Fundamental change

And yet, this was precisely why the Labour Party welcomed this idea in its evidence to the Ullswater Committee. On the whole, the Ullswater Committee interviewed seventy-nine witnesses. It began its work in April 1935 and it presented its report almost a year later, in March 1936. Among the witnesses it heard, were also Arthur Greenwood and Walter Citrine, who presented their views about the future of British broadcasting on behalf of the National Council of Labour. This body was formerly known as Labour's National Joint Council, and it united both Labour Party- and TUC-interests. While Greenwood and Citrine had both been involved in the Council's Broadcasting Sub-Committee, Greenwood had also attended the series of meetings between the Labour Party and the BBC throughout 1932 and 1933. These visits were aimed to secure better facilities in broadcasting for the Labour Party, but this had offered little relief since its claims were simply rejected by Reith and the BBC's chairman as a subject which the Labour Party should discuss with the government. However, Labour's efforts with the government were futile as well, since the Postmaster General proved equally unresponsive to its demands. And so, this suggests that Greenwood and Citrine had plenty to talk about when they appeared before the Ullswater Committee on July 11, 1935.

Beforehand the Council of Labour had drafted a twelve paged document, a 'précis of evidence', which summarized its position in broadcasting on a range of subjects. These varied from 'The BBC and the Postmaster General', to 'The Membership of the Board of the BBC', to 'Relations between the Government and the Corporation' and 'Relations between the BBC and political bodies'.¹²¹ On the whole, it stated that the present charter and license of the BBC were the imperfect products of a time when 'the implications of broadcasting were not fully understood', not by the government of the time or by the BBC.¹²² However, in recent years broadcasting had clearly shown its larger potential, or in the words of the Council of Labour, it 'has become a force of unparalleled power in the community [and] the voices it chooses to bring to the radio reach a wider public than any statesman, preacher, poet, actor or warrior ever reached'.¹²³ It therefore urged that 'the power wielded by the wireless in the sphere of politics, economics, culture and recreation should be utilised in the best public interest.' Of course, statements like these often serve to introduce a perceived breach or anomaly, and this was no different here. Looking back

120 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*,

121 'Précis of Evidence' National Council of Labour (NCL), WAC, R4/77/6.

122 'Précis of Evidence' NCL, WAC, R4/77/6, f. 1.

123 Ibidem.

on the previous decade, the Council of Labour went through the various controversies which had overshadowed the Labour Party's and Trade Union's past dealings with broadcasting. Most notably, this concerned the BBC's role during the general strike of May 1926 and its handling of the events which followed the fall of the Labour government in 1931. There is no need to explore these complaints here again. More interesting are those elements of its evidence which expressed Labour's ideas about the future organization of broadcasting, since it argued that the existing charter and license required 'fundamental changes'.¹²⁴

Most significant in this respect were its suggestions about the BBC's relation to Parliament and the role of the Postmaster General in broadcasting. Among other things, the Council's evidence claimed the BBC was a 'national institution', which derived 'its powers from Parliament'. Of course, we have read similar statements before (in this and in the previous chapter) and it echoes Labour's commitment to the primacy of Parliament as the country's supreme authority. However, the previous chapter also explained that the BBC was established by a royal charter and not by an Act of Parliament as to prevent it from being seen as a 'creature of Parliament'.¹²⁵ But the Labour Party struggled to accept the implications of this decision, which was also reflected by some of Greenwood's and Citrine's comments in their interview with the Ullswater Committee. Among other things Greenwood claimed the Postmaster General had always tended to 'ignore the big issues on this question'.¹²⁶ And although Labour had no intention of 'putting the Corporation under more Government control', he did think that 'Parliament ought to be able to say something' about the BBC.¹²⁷ In a different way Citrine argued that the BBC's problem was that it had 'no direct constituency (...). It is not even like a company which has to report to the shareholders once a year. It has no one really to report to, unless it reports to Parliament, and that has been in the past a very limited sort of report necessarily, because Parliament cannot go into details of programmes, and so forth'.¹²⁸ It was for this reason that the Council of Labour's evidence claimed that the BBC's 'policies and activities should be directly answerable to the legislature, in a more satisfactory way than in the past'.¹²⁹ It argued, more specifically, that 'ministerial responsibility for general policy should be vested in some member of the Cabinet who is not heavily burdened with departmental duties'.¹³⁰ Indeed, this was not the Postmaster General. Although he should remain responsible for the technological, financial and infrastructural side of broadcasting, the Council of Labour also argued that the specific nature of these dealings with broadcasting 'virtually disqualified' him from 'representing the views of the BBC to Parliament'.¹³¹

From a Labour perspective this suggestion seemed a most logical answer to the problems which Labour speakers had observed in the years before. Even so, there are good reasons to assume that the substance of this proposal was not conceived in Labour circles, but that it was presented to the Council of Labour by John Reith. Although remarkable, it was noted already that the BBC's Director General had his reasons for seeking a different relationship with the government. As a skilled lobbyist, his activities in the run-up to the Ullswater Committee included a two-and-a-

124 Ibidem.

125 Chapter three, page 83.

126 The Broadcasting Committee 1935, Minutes of Evidence, Twentieth Meeting, July 11th 1935, MRC, TUC archive, MSS.292/787.13/4, f. 946.

127 Ibidem, f. 946-948.

128 Ibidem, f. 977.

129 'Précis of Evidence' NCL, WAC, R4/77/6, f. 1.

130 Ibidem, f. 2.

131 Ibidem, f. 1.

half hour conversation at Transport House, the Labour Party- and Trade Union headquarters.¹³² While this would explain the close resemblance between Reith's and Labour's suggestion of a Ministerial transfer, this did not prevent the Council of Labour from raising various other ideas in its evidence to the Ullswater Committee with which the BBC's Director General firmly disagreed. Among these was the suggestion that the BBC should present a yearly report to Parliament with a detailed statement of its activities and finances of the previous year. Another element concerned the composition of the Board of Governors. Similar to what Labour commentators had argued before, the Council's memorandum claimed that the Board should be more representative of 'the general public'.¹³³ Not only did this mean that the Governors of the BBC should be selected from more varied social backgrounds and from a wider age range (in particular from the "radio-minded" generation); the Council also argued that BBC's Board-members should have relevant expertise, for instance in education or journalism ('news dissemination').¹³⁴ Labour's aim in this respect was a Board with 'a balance between the man-in-the-street, so to speak, and the man with special knowledge'.¹³⁵ When Citrine and Greenwood were asked whether this meant the Board of Governors should really be a representative board, based on the representation of particular interests, this was denied. Instead, they thought the Board should remain, as it had been, only loosely representative of the public and that it should not become a board of experts or delegates, since this could only lead to division and conflict, or so it was assumed.

Ullswater Report

Labour's evidence to the Ullswater Committee was only of relative importance to its concluding recommendations, which were presented in March 1936. In a most general sense the Ullswater Report recorded its satisfaction with how broadcasting had been conducted by the BBC in the past years and it proudly acknowledged that the BBC's example had encouraged many other countries to adopt a similar broadcasting system. While it advised to renew the BBC's charter for another ten years, it emphasized that its various recommendations were 'directed towards the further strengthening and securing of the position which the broadcasting service of Great Britain has happily attained in the few years of its history'.¹³⁶

Taken together, the Ullswater Report covered a wide range of topics, varying from programming policies, financial revenues, empire broadcasting, television broadcasting, advertising and sponsored programmes, and so on. Some of these issues will be explored in more detail in the third part of this book which concentrates on political broadcasting. However, most important here are those recommendations which were connected to the subjects which the Council of Labour had addressed and the Ullswater Committee agreed there was certainly room for improvement. Most significant in this respect was the suggested transfer of the Ministerial responsibilities for broadcasting, which John Reith had campaigned for and which had also been advocated by the Council of Labour. While others had raised the same idea (among which the BBC's General Advisory Council), apparently this had convinced the members of the Ullswater Committee to adopt this suggestion. As such, the Ullswater Report concluded that the Postmaster

132 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 497.

133 'Précis of Evidence' NCL, WAC, R4/77/6, f. 2.

134 Ibidem.

135 C. Attlee, 'Reservations by Mr. Attlee', *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935* (HMSO London 1936) 48-51, there 48.

136 As quoted in Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 498.

General might well remain responsible for the technical and financial side of broadcasting, but that the responsibilities for 'the cultural side of broadcasting' should be transferred to a Minister of a senior standing.¹³⁷ It was anticipated that this would improve communications between the government and the BBC, and in turn that this would provide Parliament with more adequate opportunities to discuss the general policies of the broadcasting service. At the same time the Ullswater Committee was anxious to guard the BBC's independence by preventing Parliament from assuming further responsibilities in broadcasting. It stressed that public control should remain firmly vested in the Board of Governors. On this basis the Committee rejected the idea that the BBC should present a yearly report to Parliament. It was feared that this 'would tend to impair independence of day-to-day management' and that it 'would serve no useful purpose unless Parliament wished to withdraw that independence from the Board of Governors and to establish instead a system of direct control as in the case of a Government Department'.¹³⁸ In addition, the Ullswater Committee recommended a number of changes to the BBC Board as well, among which an extension from five to seven members and the inclusion of younger Governors to bring down its average age.¹³⁹ Besides that it also endorsed the Reithian conception of the Board, by insisting that Governors should not interfere too closely with the work of the BBC's officials.¹⁴⁰

All in all, this suggests the Labour Party had good reasons to be pleased with the overall outcome of this investigation. Yet, as the Labour member of the Ullswater Committee, Clement Attlee did not think this last recommendation went far enough. In his eyes the renewal of the Board should not be based on age alone, but also on the social background of Governors. He explained his objections in a three-paged reservation to the Ullswater Report. Among other things, he insisted that the present membership of the BBC's leaned all too heavily towards 'the well-to-do classes', while it should really 'represent the general public for whom the Corporation caters'.¹⁴¹ Still, the main part of this reservation referred to the BBC's role during the crises of 1926 and 1931. While some of these comments will be explored in the subsequent part of this book, on the whole Attlee's reservation offered little more than what he and his party had stated on many occasions before.

5.8 A 'problem of control'

Still, it was up to the government to decide whether it would adopt the recommendations of the Ullswater Committee unreservedly, or whether it would adjust these to match its own ideas about broadcasting. The Ullswater proceedings had lasted nearly a year and this period had witnessed a series of crucial political developments. Among these was the resignation of Ramsay MacDonald, as the leader of the national government which he had headed since 1931. In the past years MacDonald's health had deteriorated, which caused him to step down in June 1935 in favour of the Conservative party leader Stanley Baldwin. It was Baldwin's third time to serve the country as its Prime Minister, and he wasted little time by announcing a new general election, to be held in November 1935.

137 As quoted in *Ibidem*, 500.

138 As quoted in *Ibidem*, 501.

139 As quoted in *Ibidem*, 499.

140 *Ibidem*.

141 'Reservations by Mr. Attlee', *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935*, 48-51.

This election took place against the background of a looming international crisis, which was fuelled by the campaigns of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy to alter the balance of power on and beyond the European stage. On the domestic front the threat of war was casting a shadow over the Labour Party as well, as it gave a new urgency to its ongoing debate about the meaning of pacifism to its political outlook. In fact, in October 1935 these developments would lead to the resignation of party leader George Lansbury, after the party conference had voted in favour of economic sanctions against Italy to prevent it from proceeding with its invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia).¹⁴² For the time being, Lansbury's position was taken over by Clement Attlee, who had served as his deputy leader in the House of Commons throughout the past years. However, it was anticipated that his leadership of the Labour Party was a temporary affair and that a new party leader would be appointed after the next general election, which, most likely, would witness the return of more senior figures with better credentials to guide the party in the years to come.¹⁴³

Attlee's first challenge was to regain what the Labour Party had lost in the aftermath of the second Labour government's downfall in 1931. In those dark days its Parliamentary presence was reduced to 52 Members of Parliament, while it had won more than 280 seats in the general election of 1929. Against this background the 1935 election yielded an encouraging result, as it saw the Labour Party return to Parliament with 154 MPs. Nonetheless, this was not the comeback the labour movement had hoped for, since the national government managed to preserve its majority with little trouble. It won a total 429 seats, of which 8 were won by National Labour candidates and no less than 386 by candidates of the Conservative Party. This shows that Attlee and his Labour Party had a long way to go before they could even hope to return to the government benches, which were now firmly occupied by Stanley Baldwin and his Conservative fellows.

Ullswater in Parliament

Among these was George Tryon, the Conservative Postmaster General who was appointed to this position only months ago. In the past decade-and-a-half Tryon's predecessors had played a critical role in the evolution of British broadcasting and, as part of that, they had enjoyed a volatile relationship with the BBC's Director General, John Reith. This was one reason why Reith had lobbied so persistently for a transfer of Ministerial responsibility for broadcasting, which had found a willing support among the members of the Ullswater Committee. However, the question was whether Tryon and the Conservative government were prepared to follow these proposals. Reith's first meeting with Tryon had been promising. Afterwards he noted in his diary that the Postmaster General was 'very civil', and that he had informed him he would avoid 'the personal publicity which his predecessors had indulged in'.¹⁴⁴ And yet, Reith would soon find this was no guarantee; within weeks of its presentation he learned that the Postmaster General and the government might ignore those parts of the Ullswater Report which were most important to him. Reith was furious about this and his frustration caused him to adopt 'distasteful' and 'improper' methods, at least, to his own opinion.¹⁴⁵

All this happened in the run-up to the first of the three parliamentary debates about the Ullswater Report which the House of Commons witnessed in 1936. From a Labour perspective

¹⁴² Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 92.

¹⁴³ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁴ Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 167.

¹⁴⁵ Stuard ed., *The Reith diaries*, 170.

this series of debates offers an interesting view of the development which its ideas about the broadcasting service had gone through since 1927, the year that marked the end and birth of the 'old' and 'new' BBC. In all three debates Labour speakers were vocally present, but the tone of their words would become harsher and more venomous throughout the course of these occasions. Among the speakers who participated in the first debate, in April 1936, were Stafford Cripps and Charles Ammon. As one of the prominent figures of Labour's minimized party, Cripps had also been involved in a 1933 debate about broadcasting in which he had vainly demanded a parliamentary committee to consider the rules for political broadcasting. In recent years he had drifted to the left of the Labour Party, often making most radical and controversial claims.¹⁴⁶ Ammon's interest in broadcasting, on the other hand, went back to the last days of the British Broadcasting Company. In 1926 he was one of the Labour MPs who had welcomed the BBC's re-establishment as a public corporation as a victory for socialism.¹⁴⁷ After having lost his seat in the 1931 election Ammon had only recently returned to the House of Commons. But the main speaker for the Labour Party in this debate was Bertrand Lees-Smith, whom we have encountered as well as the Postmaster General in the 1929 Labour government. In this capacity, Lees-Smith had struggled with Ramsay MacDonald over who held the final say in the appointment of a new chairman to the BBC's Board of Governors, the Postmaster General or the Prime Minister. With MacDonald prevailing, this had been good news for John Reith, since it was noted above that Lees-Smith was not hardly as sympathetic to the BBC's Director General as his Prime Minister. In fact, at the time he had been highly critical of Reith, thinking he was a neurotic and a megalomaniac, and he did not expect Reith to 'be at the BBC very much longer'.¹⁴⁸

Ironically, six years later Lees-Smith found himself teaming up with John Reith in preparation for the April debate about the Ullswater Report. After learning that the Labour Party had requested a debate about the Ullswater recommendations Reith had phoned Clement Attlee. His reason for doing so was the government's decision to reconsider the various elements of the Ullswater Report. While Reith was annoyed he was kept in the dark about these deliberations, he was also most concerned about the possible rejection of this transfer of Ministerial responsibilities for broadcasting.¹⁴⁹ And so providing the Labour opposition with ammunition for the April debate was Reith's (rather desperate) attempt to turn or thwart this development. Eventually Attlee and Reith agreed that Lees-Smith would visit the BBC for this purpose. This happened on April 27th and Lees-Smith spoke extensively with Reith, with the chairman of the Board of Governors and with the corporation's control board. Reith wasn't too comfortable with the situation. In his diary he revealed it 'was distasteful (..) to be scheming with the Labour opposition', but he had no other option and it was all the 'Cabinet's fault'.¹⁵⁰

Of course, the Labour Party had its own reasons to accept Reith's invitation as it hoped to curb the BBC's 'uncontrolled' independence, which it had come to see as a serious flaw in the design of the British broadcasting system. Even so, Lees-Smith opened his speech to Parliament on April 29th by congratulating the country with its broadcasting system and he stated he was pleased with the Ullswater Committee's conclusion that this experiment in public ownership was completely

146 Peter Clarke and Richard Toye, 'Cripps, Sir, (Richard) Stafford (1898-1952)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (5-6-2016).

147 Chapter three, page 85.

148 Ryan, *Labour and the media in Britain*, 111.

149 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 169.

150 Ibidem, 169-170.

vindicated. However, he also stressed that the BBC's relationship to Parliament needed significant improvement, notably since the broadcasting service had leaned too heavily in the past years on the government. He emphasized that 'the British Broadcasting Corporation must regard it as a duty to pay the most careful attention to observations made in Debates in this House'.¹⁵¹ For that reason he welcomed the Ullswater Committee's recommendation to assign the responsibilities for the general policies in broadcasting to a senior member of the cabinet. Besides providing Parliament with more extensive opportunities to discuss the conduct of the broadcasting service, Lees-Smith expected that this would increase the responsiveness of the BBC to public opinion, as formulated in Parliament. It is uncertain whether this had anything to do with his meeting with Reith, but Lees-Smith was remarkably moderate in his words about the BBC. This was illustrated by his comments about the BBC's internal culture and its handling of staff issues, a subject which Attlee had also addressed in his minority reservation. Speaking about his days as Postmaster General, Lees-Smith remembered that the BBC 'was not particularly happy' and he still believed the BBC was a 'very temperamental institution from the top to bottom'.¹⁵² He therefore thought the Broadcasting Corporation should open up to trade unionism, or to allow another form of staff organisation.

This argument came at a delicate moment. At the time of this debate the BBC was controversially involved (albeit indirectly) in a libel case through one of its employees, R.S. Lambert. When the news got out that the BBC had pressured Lambert to drop his case – on the grounds that it might damage the interests of the BBC and, if so, his own interests – this caused a great stir, also in Labour circles.¹⁵³ What's more, it also provoked other Labour MPs to use less diplomatic language as Lees-Smith had done in his reflections on the Ullswater Report. According to backbencher John Parker there was 'great disquiet at the dictatorial position of the Director General', 'on all sides of the House'.¹⁵⁴ He argued that Reith could have assumed this position since there was no 'adequate link between the Corporation and this House' and he claimed the Governors failed to control the BBC sufficiently.¹⁵⁵ Stafford Cripps, added a little extra by labelling the BBC an 'unlimited dictatorial autocracy'.¹⁵⁶ Charles Ammon used similar wording when he condemned 'the extraordinarily autocratic situation which has arisen in the British Broadcasting Corporation'. And although he did think that in general Britain had 'been served excellently' by the BBC and that the British system compared 'very favourably with any other broadcasting service', he urged the government to adopt the Ullswater recommendations 'as soon as possible', in particular with regards to the Ministerial responsibility for broadcasting.¹⁵⁷ If it refused to do so the problem of an uncontrollable BBC might well grow 'to such dimensions that it will be very difficult indeed to buy it out or get rid of it under any circumstances'.¹⁵⁸

Self-denying ordinance

Apparently, the government was not impressed by these words. In June 1936 it published its white paper about the terms and conditions of the renewal of the BBC's charter and license.

151 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 29-4-1936, 957, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

152 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 29-4-1936, 959, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

153 This case revolved around Richard Lambert who was the editor of the BBC's magazine *The Listener* and Sir Cecil Levita, a public figure in London politics. See also Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 472-473.

154 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 29-4-1936, 999, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

155 *Ibidem*, 1000.

156 *Ibidem*, 974 and 1031.

157 *Ibidem*, 1034.

158 *Ibidem*.

The substance of its white paper was discussed by the Postmaster General in the House of Commons on July 6th. At that occasion he explained the government welcomed almost all of the recommendations of the Ullswater Committee. Most importantly this concerned the renewal of the BBC's charter for another ten years. In addition, this also included the Ullswater Committee's suggestion that the Board of Governors should be increased from five to seven members. Nonetheless, based on its own cabinet committee's deliberations, the government had decided to ignore some of the most crucial points of the Ullswater Report, among which the suggested transfer of the Ministerial responsibility for broadcasting. Tryon did not object to this transfer from a departmental point of view, but he explained it was a matter which had been considered from the perspective of the government as a whole. As such, it was anticipated that this transfer would lead to an undesirable increase in the 'extent of control' by the government over the BBC. More particularly the Postmaster General argued that the powers of this Minister would be too ambiguous and that he 'would find himself more and more obliged to exercise actual control', with the result that 'independent management by the Corporation would soon be at an end'.¹⁵⁹

The Labour Party was greatly annoyed by this decision. Again, Lees-Smith was the first to raise objections against it. While he agreed with the Postmaster General that politics should not 'interfere with the actual freedom of the Corporation', 'except as a last resort', he also insisted that the BBC's independence was not unconditional and that the 'Government and the House (...) have very wide powers indeed over the policy of the Corporation if they wish to exercise them'.¹⁶⁰ These included the Postmaster General's right to forbid the BBC from broadcasting anything he wanted, and the privilege of government departments to instruct the BBC to send out messages on its behalf. In addition, he also pointed to the yearly debate about the Post Office estimates, which included the BBC's finances. While insisting that 'this House can make or break Ministers', he claimed that 'through the Minister, we can have over the Corporation any influence we desire'. Yet, Labour's experience of the past decade had clearly shown a lack of desire across the House of Commons to enforce these rights. And so this caused Lees-Smith to complain that the 'Government and the House deliberately impose upon themselves a self-denying ordinance' in this matter.¹⁶¹

His fellow Labour MPs shared these concerns, but they used different wordings to voice their opinion about the present situation in broadcasting and the government's refusal to change it along the suggested lines. This time it was George Lansbury who lashed out most fiercely and he found his target in the BBC's Director General. Lansbury, who had resigned from his position as Labour's party leader less than a year ago, was overall positive about the 'tremendous advantage' which the BBC had brought to the people of Britain. But he also thought that John Reith had 'spoiled a very magnificent piece of work by what is called paternalism' and by his 'assumption of authority and responsibility apart from either Parliament or anyone else'.¹⁶² He added a personal note to this observation: 'I myself, who hate dictatorships, and hate the very idea of the demigod sort of man that dictatorship involves, have always felt, when speaking to Sir John [BdJ: Reith] on the two or three occasions on which I have met him, that he would

159 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 6-7-1936, 879, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

160 *Ibidem*, 880.

161 *Ibidem*, 881.

162 *Ibidem*, 911.

have made a very excellent Hitler in this country'.¹⁶³ Obviously, comments like these say more about the depth of Labour's frustration than about John Reith's rule over the BBC. According to Lansbury Parliament's role in broadcasting should be much more distinct – 'I want parliamentary control' – and he refused to accept that the independence of the BBC should not in some way be circumscribed: 'Why should the BBC be sacrosanct and the gentlemen in charge of it never be allowed to be questioned on the Floor of the House? It is nonsense.'¹⁶⁴ Similar to Lees-Smith he stressed that the relationship between the BBC and Parliament should be based on the primacy of the latter: 'we, and not the Director General of the BBC, are the supreme authority'.¹⁶⁵

After these frantic statements it was up to Clement Attlee, after all a former member of the Ullswater Committee, to present a more qualified judgment on the government's white paper. In his speech Attlee covered the various points of the Ullswater Report which were of particular interest to the Labour Party, such as the arrangements for political broadcasting, the protection of staff interests, the BBC's relationship with the government and Parliament and the composition of the Board of Governors. On the whole, Attlee regretted that the government's white paper neglected some of 'the biggest points' of the Ullswater Report, in particular with regards to what he called the 'problem of control'.¹⁶⁶ Referring to his minority reservation Attlee stated, for instance, that the Board of Governors should be better equipped to exercise control on behalf of the general public. Among other things, this implied that the BBC's Governors should not be 'ornamental directors', but instead that they should have 'strong character, wide vision and considerable vigour'.¹⁶⁷ Not only did they 'have to keep control over a machine', but also over 'the man at the head of the machine'.¹⁶⁸ There was a need for this, Attlee claimed, since John Reith was a Director General 'with very great strength', 'who had done immense service for the BBC', but who also 'tends to be dictatorial and a little impatient of criticism' and 'who tends to rule a little by fear'.¹⁶⁹ But, of course, the 'problem of control' extended beyond the observed antics of the BBC's Director General. In the remainder of his speech Attlee blamed the government as well for rejecting the recommended transfer of Ministerial responsibility, albeit without offering any new insights in what he and his party had argued about this subject on previous occasions.

The same applies to the third and last debate about broadcasting in December 1936, when the BBC's new charter and license were presented to Parliament. This debate was not very interesting, since much was repeated, what had been said before. What's more, most attention was paid to the secondary question of staff organisation at the BBC, in particular by the Labour Party speakers in this debate. The reason for this was the Lambert and Levita case, which had grown into a full-blown controversy – including a court case and an official inquiry into the BBC's conduct (at the BBC's request) – in the previous months.¹⁷⁰ For the Labour Party, the BBC's handling of this affair was symptomatic of the fundamental flaws in the makeup of the British broadcasting system. It was in these circumstances that Lees-Smith added a new image to the accusations of dictatorship and autocracy in British broadcasting. After repeating Labour's objections to the

163 Ibidem.

164 Ibidem, 912.

165 Ibidem, 913.

166 Ibidem, 973.

167 Ibidem, 976.

168 Ibidem.

169 Ibidem.

170 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 473. Although the outcome of this investigation was largely positive for the BBC, the corporation was advised to draw up more distinct rules for staff questions.

new charter, he labelled the BBC 'the nearest thing in this country to Nazi-government that can be shown'.¹⁷¹

5.9 A new era?

In his second part of the *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* Asa Briggs condemns these comments by stating that 'everything was out of perspective when language of this kind was used, and it did nothing to induce genuinely rational inquiry'.¹⁷² Briggs has a point, since this comparison was clearly disproportionate, not only from a contemporary perspective, but also in 1936 when the Nazi regime had yet to commit its worst crimes. Nonetheless, it might be asked whether Briggs' words are not somewhat off the mark as well and, more precisely, whether his disapproval does not distract from the broader significance of this moment.

When looking back on the previous years it would appear that Lees-Smith had no intention at all of 'inducing genuinely rational inquiry' about the broadcasting service. Indeed, the Labour Party had addressed its objections about the situation in broadcasting on many occasions before and in December 1936 it had clearly lost its faith in the effectiveness of its attempts to convince the other parties in Parliament to change this situation. Equally important in this respect was Lees-Smith's choice of words, which – inappropriate or not – was anything but accidental. In the years before various Labour figures had used similar 'dictatorial' claims to expose the failings of the BBC, its Director General, the Postmaster General and other constituent parts of the British broadcasting system. Of course, the subject matter of these comparisons was crucially linked to the democratic assumptions which had shaped the Labour Party's expectations about the BBC's future as a public corporation. But in facing a different reality – notably a more autonomous BBC –, the Labour Party became increasingly concerned about a democratic deficit in broadcasting. Although it sought to repair this deficit through its pursuit of 'control', the steady inflation of its claims exposed the failings of these efforts. Eventually, its defeat was signed by the presentation of the BBC's new charter in December 1936. As such, Lees-Smith's depiction of the BBC as 'the nearest thing (...) to Nazi-government' did not only mark a new low in Labour's assault on the Corporation, more importantly, it also marked the end to its thwarted campaign for 'control' of the past years.

Against this background it may be noted that Laura Beers paints a rather different picture of the Labour Party's relationship with the BBC in the 1930s. Beers' work was referred to in a previous paragraph in relation to the Labour Party's refusal to use foreign broadcasting facilities to circumvent the BBC's monopoly in the British airwaves. This is but one part of her explorations of the party's dealings with broadcasting, and her interest in these matters concentrates largely on the programming side of broadcasting and, more specifically, on Labour's use of radio as a medium of political communication. This implies that the subject of this chapter largely lies beyond the scope of her study. Although Beers recognizes Labour's hostility towards the broadcasting service, on the whole she argues that Labour's 'ongoing disputes' with the BBC were outweighed by the party leadership's 'determination to cooperate with the BBC'.¹⁷³ This

171 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 17-12-1936, 2730, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

172 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 512.

173 Beers, *Your Britain*, 151-158, there 154.

does seem difficult to reconcile with the findings of this chapter, but at this point it is too soon to argue for an alternative understanding of Labour's approach to broadcasting. Still, the following part of this book explores Labour's pursuits in the sphere of programmes. As such, this should offer further insight in the solidity of Beers' claims and, more generally, in the significance of Labour's struggle for 'control' for the evolution of political broadcasting.

Reith's departure

And yet, this chapter has shown that the Labour Party was prepared and capable to discuss its ideas about broadcasting with Reith in a constructive manner. In fact, ever since the general strike of May 1926 there had been a latent tension between both organizations, which flared up during their regular moments of conflict. However, paradoxically, these frictions seemed to have a stabilizing effect as well on the interplay between both organizations, and it appears that the Labour Party's and the BBC's leading figures more or less knew what to expect when dealing with each other. Apparently, occasional outbursts by Labour leaders were part of this *modus operandi* as well. As such, it could happen in June 1937, after Labour MPs had again asked questions in Parliament about staffing conditions at the BBC, that John Reith visited the House of Commons to meet up with a large crowd of ca. two-hundred Labour figures and trade union representatives to discuss these matters.¹⁷⁴ There is no verbatim report of this meeting between Reith and Labour, but Reith's diary reveals that he was clearly satisfied with the occasion: 'I spoke for about quarter of an hour and then questions. It seemed to go excellently and I made them laugh several times'.¹⁷⁵

At the time, the mood of the Labour opposition was only a minor issue to him. In the aftermath of the Ullswater Committee he was taken up by much more pressing concerns. Initially he had been greatly annoyed by the government's 'miserable' white paper, which, according to him, contained 'bits of rank humbug' and hypocrisy'.¹⁷⁶ He was particularly frustrated by the government's rejection of the transfer of Ministerial responsibility, for which he had lobbied so persistently. In addition to this Reith was also opposed to the expansion of the Board of Governors ('collective wisdom does not grow with numbers') to seven members and he thought that a renewal of the charter and license for ten years was a poor offer. But there were other reasons as well why he felt insufficiently appreciated for what he had achieved with the BBC. The entries in his diary throughout 1936 reflected his sombre mood, and varied from 'I was so very sick of everything', to 'I have been reflecting a great deal on the hopelessness of trying to hold out for the right in these days', to 'Very disgusted with everything and feeling that I cannot stand things longer in the BBC'.¹⁷⁷ Although he did manage to pull off a better deal for the BBC's new charter than he first expected, Reith kept 'feeling most unsettled about the BBC' and he saw 'no solution to the job question'.¹⁷⁸ Eventually, this caused him to accept an offer by the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who had succeeded Stanley Baldwin after the abdication of King Edward, to take over the management of Imperial Airways. This was not the honourable position which Reith had long hoped for (and counted on), but he felt unable to resist the Prime Ministerial request, and, in addition, it did provide him a way out.

174 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 21-6-1937, 979-986, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard> and Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 174.

175 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 174.

176 Ibidem, 171.

177 Ibidem, 172-173.

178 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 512 and Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 175.

Reith's departure from the BBC marked the end of an era, a period which he himself saw as an 'epic 15½ years'.¹⁷⁹ Even so, he left the BBC in bitterness. On his transfer to Imperial Airways Reith expected to be invited on the Board of Governors since he thought his knowledge and experience in broadcasting should not be lost to the BBC. To his great surprise, his membership of the Board of Governors was obstructed by a number of other Board-members, who anticipated that his dominating presence would trouble the work of his successor. This formed another cause of resentment. While Reith had some rough ideas about whom should be appointed as his successor, the Board of Governors insisted that he should not be involved in this procedure, but that the Board should be fully responsible for it.¹⁸⁰ Reith was deeply offended by these rejections. Eventually, the Board nominated Frederick Wolff Ogilvie, a relatively unknown professor of political economy who served as president and vice-chancellor of Queen's University, Belfast. This was an unexpected choice, but based on his personality, intellectual capacities and academic record Ogilvie seemed to have the right qualities to guide the BBC. Reith, however, was not convinced. While he agreed that Ogilvie was 'a man of fine character and outlook' with 'personal charm' and impressive qualifications, he was also 'quite sure that he was not the man for the BBC'.¹⁸¹

In Labour circles the appointment of Ogilvie (i.e. the departure of Reith) was welcomed with more optimism. In the *Daily Herald* Harold Laski, who happened to be a friend of Ogilvie, commented on these developments. It was Laski who had accused Reith in an earlier stage of having 'dictatorial habits'.¹⁸² Now, seven years later, Laski's words about the new Director General revealed that his qualities were mainly measured against his predecessor's flaws: 'He has quite personal charm and great personal integrity. By nature he won't hanker after any "power" or dictatorship of the BBC. Moreover he will not be browbeaten by the government'.¹⁸³ These were comforting thoughts for Labour. Yet, it remained to be seen whether his appointment would do anything to improve the relationship between the Labour Party and the BBC. The first signs were hopeful, both for the Labour Party and for the BBC. Ogilvie had assumed office in October 1938. Two months later he welcomed Clement Attlee, who had managed to hold on to the leadership of the Labour Party, and Arthur Greenwood for an introductory visit. However, Attlee and Greenwood used this occasion to inform the new Director General about the trials and tribulations of the Labour Party in political broadcasting.¹⁸⁴ But, in doing so, they also showed significant understanding for the difficult position of the BBC in these matters. Apparently, this offered a positive impulse to the BBC's dealings with the Labour Party and, as we will see in the subsequent part of this book, it resulted almost immediately in new initiatives in political broadcasting. Nonetheless, these effects were only short-lived, since everything would soon be overshadowed by the outbreak of the second World War, broadcasting and politics included.

179 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 177.

180 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 635 and Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 177.

181 As quoted in Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 637.

182 *Daily Herald*, 21-3-1931

183 'The BBC's New Boss', *Daily Herald*, 20-7-1938.

184 Notes of a meeting between Ogilvie, Attlee and Greenwood 1-12-1938, WAC, inv. nr. R/34/534/3.

A 'pleasant and productive' partnership?

The SDAP and the VARA in the 1920s and 1930s

In November 1930 it was five years ago since the socialist broadcasting association VARA was founded in a backroom of the Amsterdam hotel 'Parkzicht'. On the whole, this had been a low-key event which had attracted a crowd of ca. one-hundred people who were all somehow interested in the promise of radio for the labour movement. At the time, broadcasting was still in its infancy and of those present few would have guessed where the VARA would be in five years' time. Because the intervening period would not only see the steady rise of broadcasting as a mass pastime, it would also witness the VARA's protracted struggle for a 'fair' share of broadcasting time. Although its ambitions were subject of significant hostility and scepticism – some of which came from the leadership of its political ally, the SDAP – , the previous chapter showed that the VARA's victory was sweet and that it was rewarded in May 1930 with a significant stretch of the airwaves. For the VARA this was clearly the highlight of the year, but 1930 had more in store. Towards the end of that year the broadcasting association would also welcome its one-hundred-thousandth member.¹ While this illustrated the VARA's success in building a broad basis of support in such a short space of time, it also provided the broadcasting association with the much-needed means to finance its pursuit of larger broadcasting facilities. This was cheerfully celebrated on the occasion of the VARA's five-year anniversary, on 1 November 1930, by the laying of the foundation stone of a new VARA-broadcasting studio.²

Among the attendants were various officials of the labour movement. These included Evert Kupers of the trade union federation NVV, A. van Duuren of the Institute for Workers Education and Cornelis Woudenberg on behalf of the SDAP, who happened to be the SDAP's representative on the VARA's executive committee as well. While speaking on behalf of their respective organizations, each of these men congratulated the broadcasting association with its 'formidable' growth of the past years. Kupers, for instance, praised the VARA's executives for their spirit and dedication, and he reminded his audience of the many difficulties the VARA had conquered in five years' time. Equally positive was Van Duuren, who stressed the 'enormous' cultural importance of broadcasting and who praised the VARA's contribution to the 'cultural education' of the working class. Similar words were spoken by the SDAP's representative, Cornelis Woudenberg, who claimed that a 'strong VARA was a strong socialist labour movement' and who predicted the broadcasting association would 'blossom and flourish in close contact with the

1 Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 56.

2 'De eerste-steenlegging voor de VARA', *Het Volk*, 3-11-1930.

labour movement' in the years to come.³ And so, taken together, these kind words suggest the VARA had found its place among the other labour organizations and that it had grown into the labour movement's 'darling child', as was claimed by Koos Vorrink, the then chairman of the socialist youth organization AJC ('Arbeiders Jeugd Centrale', or Labour Youth Centre).⁴

However, there is a difference between rhetoric and reality. These were the sort of words one was expected to voice at an anniversary of an affiliated organization, but they did hide a considerable amount of uneasiness about the VARA among the labour leadership. A later part of this chapter will show that Vorrink, for instance, was highly critical about the VARA's contribution to labour movement culture, not only in 1930, but also in later years. This was not insignificant, since Vorrink would emerge in the mid-1930s as the SDAP's chairman and his chairmanship would have an immediate impact on the SDAP's relationship with the VARA. To grasp these later developments, we should first consider the SDAP's stance towards the VARA in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which was also less unproblematic than Woudenberg's words at the VARA's five-years anniversary suggested. In fact, at the time of this anniversary the SDAP and the VARA could look back on a series of incidents and conflicts, which explains why the SDAP was, initially, hardly inclined to attend the VARA's celebrations. So when the invitation to this occasion was first discussed by the party's executive committee, it was suggested to send the VARA a congratulatory telegram to compensate for the party's absence. Although someone suggested sending flowers instead, this was rejected as well, albeit 'after some discussion'.⁵ It was only after Cornelis Woudenberg warned his fellow executives that the party's non-appearance would 'make an extremely bad impression' – with all the other labour organizations being present –, that the SDAP's leadership changed its mind.⁶ It was decided that Woudenberg would attend the VARA's festivities, not only in his capacity as the party's delegated member of the VARA's executive committee, but also on behalf of the SDAP. And so, the SDAP chose to join the festivities and play along in the tale of a united and undivided labour movement, even though this did little to solve their troubles with the broadcasting association behind the scenes.

6.1 'An extremely unpleasant history' (1925-1928)

At this point it may not surprise that the SDAP's relationship with the VARA was somewhat strained towards the end of 1930. The previous chapter has shown that the leading figures of both organizations held different ideas about the institutional organization of broadcasting. While the SDAP had hoped to build a state-owned and centralized broadcasting system, the VARA, on the other hand, had followed the example of the confessional broadcasting associations by claiming a private piece of the airwaves. Of course, the SDAP had abandoned its pursuit of a single, national broadcasting organization towards the end of 1927, when it was forced to accept the feeble basis of its case. Although this caused the party leadership to support the VARA's ambitions more fully, this did not mean the party leadership was suddenly converted to the cause of a private-pluralist broadcasting system. What's more, it was hardly excited either about the

3 Ibidem.

4 As quoted in Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 64.

5 Minutes meeting daily executive committee SDAP 27-10-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 195.

6 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 1-11-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 69.

prospect of a full-blown broadcasting association in its midst. Still, broadcasting continued to be a relative novelty in these years and the larger part of the SDAP's hierarchy had yet to grasp how radio might be used in the name of socialism or, let alone, for the sake of the party. This was also reflected by the party's muddled dealings with the VARA in the years after 1925, which, above all, showed its lukewarm response to the rise of radio and its limited willingness to help the VARA to expand its presence in the airwaves.

A first glimpse of this was offered by the SDAP's refusal to delegate one of its executives to the VARA's executive committee. In early November 1925, just days after its founding, the broadcasting association had invited the SDAP to appoint a senior party figure to its executive body and it had sent a similar request to the trade union federation NVV. It indicated that the VARA was eager to commit itself to the established hierarchy of the labour movement. However, the SDAP was unconvinced about the need to establish this sort of connection with a broadcasting association which would soon be swallowed by the founding of a National Broadcasting Company. While this explains why it rejected the offer, it would all too soon come back on this decision when it learned that the VARA's invitation had been accepted by the trade union federation NVV. This was a precarious move, since the party and the trade union were engaged throughout these years in a broader struggle over the political agenda of the labour movement. A key figure in this respect was the NVV's chairman, Roel Stenhuis, who sought to enhance the NVV's political influence, which was met with significant opposition in party circles. But Stenhuis was also the chairman of the recently established Institute for Workers Education.⁷ To leave the VARA to the sole influence of the NVV would boost the trade union's voice in the labour movement's cultural realm even further, which was a risk the SDAP did not dare to take. And so, the party's executive committee concluded it had no other option than to follow the NVV's example. While the party secretary, Cornelis Werkhoven, insisted to keep 'this case as informal as possible', after some discussion Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper volunteered to take up the position in the VARA's executive committee. When doing so he stressed the party 'should practice great caution in this and that it should make sure not to lose control of its propaganda.'⁸

Kleerekoper was a prominent member of the labour movement and he was broadly respected and admired among the movement's rank and file for his ability to articulate the socialist ideal, both in speech and in writing. In the previous years he had served the SDAP's cause as a journalist, an MP, a public speaker and as the initiator of a large number of fundraising campaigns.⁹ We have encountered Kleerekoper's name in the previous chapter as well, where he emerged as the SDAP's first MP to promote the VARA's interests in Parliament. Even so, his early experience with the broadcasting association was far from positive and at one point – in June 1927 – Kleerekoper labelled his membership of the VARA's executive committee as 'an extremely unpleasant history'.¹⁰ He partly blamed this on the muddled relations between the VARA's leading figures, who compensated their inexperience in guiding a broadcasting organization with an all too feverish activism. But, in condemning this situation, he also criticized his fellow party

7 Chapter four, page 102. Also Piet Hoekman, 'Stenhuis, Roelof' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (23-6-2016).

8 Minutes meeting daily executive committee SDAP 11-12-1925, IISH, Archive SDAP, inv. nr. 187.

9 Philip van Praag, 'Kleerekoper, Asser Benjamin' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (23-6-2016).

10 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 11-6-1927, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 56.

executives, chief amongst these Cornelis Werkhoven, for their refusal to support the VARA more fully, both politically but also financially. He warned them that the SDAP would fall behind in broadcasting to the other political parties, which, he claimed, had responded much more decisively to the rise of radio, both in terms of propaganda and in terms of organization. And so he urged the SDAP to recognize the crucial significance of the VARA for the labour movement, more particularly by providing the broadcasting association with the financial aid (a subsidy of one-thousand guilders) it needed to keep its operation running. Quite crucially, he added that the NVV was prepared to contribute the same subsidy, but only if the SDAP would agree to do so as well.

This request came at an interesting moment. One day earlier, the government had published its bill to amend the Telegraph and Telephone Act of 1904, which was its formal (and belated) response to the report of the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck Committee. The previous chapter explained that the Ruijs report had included Werkhoven's minority report, which argued for a radical alternative to the pluralist broadcasting system which was dominated by private broadcasting associations. However, the government's bill of June 1927 did not only ignore Werkhoven's suggestions, it also rejected the main recommendations of the Ruijs report. It argued instead that broadcasting was still too much 'in flux' to introduce more permanent measures.¹¹ This was an effective victory for the broadcasting associations, – the VARA included – but one day later the ramifications of this news were yet to sink in in party circles. For the time being, it did little to change the party's stance towards the VARA. As most party executives were reluctant to support the VARA with the requested subsidy, a decision was postponed to a later date, when the SDAP and the NVV would meet to discuss their joint affairs, among which their mutual ties to the broadcasting association.

This was not the first time the SDAP was asked to fill the holes in the VARA's budget. Broadcasting was an expensive pursuit and in the first years of its existence the broadcasting association truly lived up to its self-proclaimed status as 'Radio Amateurs'. But while it was haunted by a constant lack of resources, this made it all the more difficult to develop its programming activities and to generate new support (and income) from new sympathizers. With Cornelis Werkhoven presiding over the party's finances, the VARA had come to learn that the SDAP was not a generous provider of credit and, moreover, that its aid was never unconditional. Such was for instance the case in April 1926, when the VARA was presented with an unexpected rise in the rent of the NSF's broadcasting facilities. For that reason it had asked the SDAP for help. Although the party had agreed to grant the broadcasting association a loan of five-hundred guilders, in return it had urged the VARA to improve its relationship with the SDAP and the NVV. Four months later, in August 1926, the VARA had returned with a similar request. This time the broadcasting association was in need of four-thousand guilders and it kindly invited the SDAP to contribute half of this sum. This caused a heated exchange between Kleerekoper and Werkhoven, as the two party figures who were most and least willing to support the VARA. At this point, it was still the latter's voice which weighed more and on Werkhoven's suggestion the party's executive committee agreed to offer the VARA a mere five-hundred guilders, but only on the condition that it would cover the whole of 1927 as well. The VARA failed to meet this demand. And so, less than a year later the SDAP found itself re-negotiating its support for the broadcasting association again, this time in the co-presence of the NVV's leadership.

11 Chapter four, page 113. Also Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 29-30.

At that occasion the SDAP was faced with severe criticism from the trade union representatives. In a year's time the prospects of the VARA had clearly changed, but the leadership of the SDAP was accused by their trade union-counterparts that they had failed to move beyond their initial scepticism and that it was high time to adopt a more cooperative stance, to begin with by supplying the VARA with the much-needed financial resources.¹² Among those to make this point was also the NVV's chairman, Roelof Stenhuis, who reminded the party leadership that the VARA had partly used its trade union donations for the radio propaganda of the party's point of view. A similar point was made by the Coen van der Lende, the NVV's representative in the VARA's executive committee. He warned that the broadcasting association was about to reach rock-bottom, if nothing would change. Still, what would have made more impression was his threat that the NVV would claim a greater say over the VARA, if the SDAP would persist in its reluctance to match the trade unions' aide to the broadcasting association. With this discussion going back and forth, the SDAP's representatives largely remained unmoved. The most emphatic protest came from the party secretary Cornelis Werkhoven, but the other party executives (with the exception of Kleerekoper) seemed hardly prepared either to reconsider their half-hearted stance towards the VARA. Although this dispute concentrated on the VARA's finances, the issue at stake was really the future and value of the socialist broadcasting association to the labour movement. With this discussion going back and forth, the SDAP and the NVV decided to postpone this case again, until further notice.

This was hardly conducive to the continuity of the VARA's activities. However, the previous chapter has illustrated that the SDAP was effectively fighting a lost struggle and that the fate of the VARA was settled elsewhere, i.e. in the backroom-dealings between the agents of the confessional broadcasting associations and their political counterparts in government. But the previous chapter showed as well that the party leadership would all too soon recognize it was caught up by these turn of events. This was illustrated by the party's last attempt in September 1927 to convince the Minister to save the country from the 'appalling disorder' in broadcasting which was caused by the 'ever increasing number of broadcasting associations'.¹³ It also made a final and uninspired appeal for the 'centralized state broadcasting company' which Werkhoven had drafted in his minority report. This was a futile effort, and it really marked the end of the party's backing of Werkhoven as the architect of its broadcasting strategy. As such, it also cleared the way for the SDAP to reconsider its current position in broadcasting and, more specifically, to reassess its relationship with the VARA. The VARA had urged the SDAP to do so in the months before, when it had invited the party and the trade union to discuss the mutual activities and even a possible merging of the VARA with the Institute for Workers Education.¹⁴ Still, its main aim was to find a solution for its persisting financial problems, without giving up its autonomy to the Institute for Workers Education. When the SDAP agreed to join these talks, this provided the party with an opportunity to repair some of the effects of its neglect of the broadcasting association in the years before.

The committee which was put together for this purpose included three representatives from the SDAP. Among these were the familiar faces of Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper and Cornelis Werkhoven. They were accompanied by Emanuel Boekman as the SDAP's third member of this

12 Minutes combined meeting SDAP and NVV 18-6-1927, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 56.

13 'Voorloopig verslag. 77.1. Aanvulling en wijziging van de Telegraaf- en Telefoonwet van 1904', 22-9-1927, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

14 Letter VARA to SDAP and NVV 19-5-1927, IISH, Archive SDAP, inv. nr. 1959.

committee. Boekman was the chairman of the SDAP in the Amsterdam city council and he had emerged in the previous months as a sympathizer for the VARA's cause.¹⁵ Among the other members of this committee were the VARA's broadcasting secretary Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, the VARA-chairman Simon van der Woude and a three-men trade union delegation. With the exception of Cornelis Werkhoven, the members of this committee were remarkably unanimous in their ideas about the VARA's future. As such, they only needed three meetings to draw up a report, which was presented to the SDAP, NVV and VARA on October 25th 1927.¹⁶ Altogether, this report promoted a conception of the VARA as an independent broadcasting association, similar in size and function to the confessional broadcasting associations KRO and NCRV. These broadcasting associations had only recently moved to the second radio station in Huizen and the report stated that the VARA should claim a similar share of the airwaves, which amounted to three days per week. Although it was initially suggested to consider a merging of the VARA with the Institute for Workers Education, this had been rejected in the first meeting already. One reason for this was that it would undermine the VARA's chances of being recognized by the government as an equal partner to the other broadcasting associations. Besides that it was noted that the activities of the VARA extended beyond the (more narrow) educational tasks of the Institute and that the broadcasting association ought to provide its audience with entertainment and political propaganda as well. Although the report pictured the VARA as an independent broadcasting association, it did make various suggestions to circumscribe the VARA's autonomy. Most important was the provision which stated that the 'overall responsibility for programmes' lay with a 'Broadcasting Council', which was composed around the SDAP's and the NVV's representatives in the VARA's executive committee and the VARA chairman.¹⁷ In addition, it was stressed that those same party- and trade union-representatives held 'the final say over propagandistic, polemic and organizational broadcasts'.¹⁸

For the SDAP these were vital concessions, and it provided the party with a decisive degree of control over the broadcasting association's programmes. Clearly, the aim of this was to prevent the VARA from broadcasting anything that might harm the party's interests, even though the report claimed this was in the VARA's interest since it released it of 'a larger labour movement it could never carry'.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the VARA did require something in return, namely the party's recognition of the VARA's pursuit of an equal share of the airwaves. But it might well take some time before it would achieve this goal, and so it was anticipated that the VARA would need a substantial war chest to finance its activities in the meantime. What this meant was that other labour organizations, the SDAP included, were invited to support the VARA until the moment the government would introduce its 'retribution', or license-fee which would partly be redistributed among the broadcasting associations. The previous chapter explained it would never come this far, but this was not known at the time and for the coming year the SDAP was charged to pay the VARA a subsidy of two-thousand guilders.²⁰ This was merely one eighth of the combined sum which the various trade unions were asked to contribute. As such, this was not a bad deal, also since it provided the SDAP with a ready access to the airwaves.

15 Minutes meeting SDAP, VARA and NVV 15-10-1927, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 435.

16 Report of the Committee Relations VARA – Institute for Workers Education, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 435.

17 Ibidem, f. 1.

18 Ibidem, f. 4.

19 Ibidem, f. 2.

20 Ibidem, f. 6-7.

Even so, one of the SDAP's representatives failed to agree with these conclusions. Not surprisingly, Cornelis Werkhoven felt that this report went much too far. He thought the broadcasting association should be no more than a small subsidiary organization of the Institute for Workers Education. He was appalled by the idea of claiming three days of broadcasting time for the VARA, which, in his words, would make the VARA 'an elephant on the upper floor'.²¹ Beyond that, he was also distressed about the consequences of the financial uncertainties in broadcasting and he explained this and his other objections in an extensive, seven paged letter. At this point there is no need to explore this letter in detail; if anything it highlights his inability to accept that the pluralist turn in broadcasting was now acknowledged by the labour hierarchy as well. This was painfully illustrated when the report was discussed in the party's executive committee in November 1927. At that occasion the recommendations of the committee were easily accepted by a large majority of the party leadership. Although Werkhoven had tried to prevent his party fellows from doing so, his conduct triggered a sharp response from senior party leader Willem Vliegen. In the years before Vliegen had endorsed Werkhoven's efforts as the SDAP's chairman and the previous chapter showed he would still favour Werkhoven's blueprint for broadcasting over the pluralist broadcasting system in May 1930, when the VARA was granted with its 'fair' share of broadcasting time.²² But now, in November 1927, he rightly concluded that the SDAP should abandon Werkhoven's isolationist course and that it should align itself more closely to the VARA and its pursuit of an 'equal' share of the airwaves. And so, he insisted he had only one complaint against Werkhoven, which was that he had failed to win his case in the committee and that he had come to stand alone. After advising his fellow executives to adopt the report's conclusions, he urged Werkhoven to rest his case and to move on.²³

6.2 'Within immediate reach of the party' (1928-1930)

Yet, the challenge for the SDAP in the coming period was not so much to move on, but rather to keep up with the rapid developments in broadcasting. It was explained in the previous chapter that the early months of 1928 would witness a crucial turn in the debate about the future of the Dutch broadcasting system.²⁴ A key moment in this respect was the parliamentary debate of February 1928, when Minister van der Vegte was ordered by the parties in Parliament majority to allocate the available broadcasting time 'in fairness'. But this debate was important for other reasons as well and it also saw the dismissal of Van der Vegte's plan to introduce a radio 'retribution', which should provide the broadcasting associations with a steady source of public funding.²⁵ And so, the combined result of this debate was that it offered the broadcasting associations a sense of certainty for the long term, but that it also required these organizations to become fully self-dependent on the shorter term. It sparked a new phase in the struggle of and between the various broadcasting associations.

Indeed, it also invigorated the VARA's efforts to establish itself as an equal partner to the other broadcasting associations which, eventually, would be rewarded in May 1930. In early

21 Letter C. Werkhoven to executive committees SDAP, NVV and VARA 29-10-1927, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 435.

22 Chapter four, page 122-123.

23 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 5-11-1927, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 58.

24 Chapter four, page 115-116.

25 De Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven*, 83-85.

1928 it still had a long way to go and it was barely ready to stand on its own feet. With hindsight we can say that this year marked the VARA's definitive breakthrough. This, however, was not known at the time, even though the broadcasting association did notice the positive effects of the surging interest for broadcasting among a wider public.²⁶ Of course, the VARA was crucially involved in this process as well. Among other things this was illustrated by a shift in the VARA's programming activities towards more popular forms of music and entertainment, which for instance saw the introduction of a weekly children's hour or the launch of a VARA-orchestra.²⁷ The rising interest for broadcasting was also reflected in the size of the VARA's membership, which would grow from ca. four thousand to twenty-seven thousand in 1928 and which would reach ca. sixty-seven thousand towards the end of 1929.²⁸ There was a particular significance to this last figure, since it highlighted that the VARA had now outsized the SDAP, at least in terms of its membership, with the party counting ca. six-thousand members less.²⁹ This was not all. In months' time the VARA would receive its greatest boost when it saw its presence in the airwaves jump from a mere ten hours per week to ca. fifty hours per week. The background of this process was explored in the previous chapter, which showed as well that these were the years when the SDAP's advance in national politics was beginning to stall. And so, the question here is how these developments affected the SDAP's relationship with the VARA and, more particularly, how the party leadership responded to the VARA's rampant growth.

'the young men of the VARA'

In January 1928 the SDAP had hoped to make a fresh start with the broadcasting association on the basis of their recent agreement. Among other things this was illustrated by the resignation of Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper from the VARA's executive committee. In the years before, Kleerekoper's involvement with the VARA had caused him considerable headache, but he had become a dedicated advocate of the broadcasting association, both in- and outside the party's executive committee. On leaving the VARA, Kleerekoper handed his responsibilities to Jan Oudegeest, a senior figure, who had held numerous positions in the labour movement's hierarchy, among which the chairmanship of the trade union federation NVV.³⁰ What's more, Oudegeest was only recently appointed to the chairmanship of the SDAP as well, as the successor of Willem Vliegen. And so he did not only carry a wealth of experience, he also commanded much respect. But it might be asked whether his appointment to the VARA was a fortunate one. Because Oudegeest was also relatively old and it seems he was not particularly interested in broadcasting either. Some of this resounded in the words he used to inform his party fellows about his first meeting with the VARA's executive committee. While confessing he was no 'radio maniac', he also noted that the 'young men who lead the VARA are doing a decent job, and that they are putting much effort and commitment in serving the interest of the labour movement'.³¹

Oudegeest would soon come to speak of the VARA in different terms. This was crucially triggered by the turn of events of February 1928 when the radio 'retribution' was rejected by a

26 Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 51.

27 Ibidem, 55-57.

28 Ibidem, 56.

29 Ibidem.

30 G. Harmsen, 'Oudegeest, Jan' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (24-9-2011).

31 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 14-1-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 59.

parliamentary majority. For the VARA this was a serious and unexpected setback and it forced the broadcasting association to cut back on its budget for the coming year. As part of that it also reminded the SDAP of their recent agreement and, more specifically, of its promise to provide the broadcasting association with a subsidy of two-thousand guilders. However, the SDAP had not seen this coming either and it informed the VARA that it was only willing to grant a first advance of six hundred guilders.³² The exact figures of this sum are less important than the impact of these developments on the party's fragile relationship with the VARA. Because the latter's executives were highly displeased about the former's obstinacy and they wrote the party a thorny letter, in which they threatened to charge the party for every broadcast it would request in the future.³³ The SDAP on its turn was greatly annoyed by this reaction, and it issued a public warning against the VARA at its yearly party conference, which happened to take place a few days later. At that occasion the attendants were informed by party chairman Jan Oudegeest about the party's troubles with the broadcasting association. This failed to settle the dispute and the executives of the VARA repaid Oudegeest with a public statement as well, published in the VARA's programming guide. It claimed that the party conference was misinformed by Oudegeest, that the VARA was silenced by the SDAP and that it did not receive a fair treatment from the party leadership.³⁴ Oudegeest, on his turn, felt offended by this statement and he informed the VARA that he was 'astonished' by its recent outbursts. Taking a defiant stance, he asked the VARA's executives whether they were truly intending 'to break off relations with the SDAP'. Although he insisted the party was still prepared to help the VARA out, he also added that the SDAP did not fear a 'conflict' if this was what the VARA's executive were aiming at, to which he added that he would not attend any VARA-meetings until further notice.³⁵

So, what started as a disagreement over financial support, resulted some weeks later in a standoff which could have had far-reaching consequences, not only for the VARA but also for the SDAP. Before any real damage was done the broadcasting association's executives yielded to the party's offer of a reduced subsidy. Oudegeest was informed about this in a most considerate letter, which, among other things, insisted that it was 'absolutely untrue' that the VARA sought to end its affiliation to the SDAP and that it appreciated the latter's contribution to its efforts in expanding the labour broadcasting association. After reassuring the party chairman that the VARA hoped to continue its 'pleasant and productive' partnership with the SDAP in the following years, it kindly asked Oudegeest to reconsider his refusal to attend the meetings of its executive committee.³⁶ Apparently, this convinced Oudegeest that the VARA had learned its lesson, and he turned up at the VARA's executive meeting on the same day. When doing so, he dismissed their recent troubles as a 'misunderstanding' and he promised the VARA his full support in its efforts to improve its position in the time ahead.³⁷ For the moment this was surely important, but it was far from enough to prevent the SDAP and the VARA from running into further trouble in the months ahead.

One lesson the VARA did learn in these years was that it could not depend on the SDAP if it hoped to find a permanent place among the other broadcasting associations. It was noted above

32 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 10-3-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 59.

33 Letter VARA to SDAP 4-4-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960b.

34 'The party conference of the SDAP and the VARA', IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960a.

35 Letter J. Oudegeest to executive committee VARA 16-4-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960b.

36 Letter S. van der Woude and G.J. Zwertbroek to J. Oudegeest 17-4-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960b.

37 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 17-4-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960b.

that 1928 was a critical year in its development; if 1927 had been a year of hardship and survival, then 1928 was the year that it would reach more solid ground. Still, the VARA was nowhere near where it wanted to be and in drawing up its plans for the nearby future it also recognized the need to find a more appropriate accommodation which could facilitate its anticipated growth. So far, the broadcasting association had worked from various locations, among which a cinema in Amsterdam and a small office at the premises of the labour newspaper *Het Volk* in the same city.³⁸ What's more, this last location happened to accommodate the SDAP's headquarters as well. If this shows that Werkhoven was not far off by likening the VARA to 'an elephant on the upper floor', it also explains why the VARA's executives felt it was time to move on. In searching for a new place the VARA, almost inevitably, ended up in Hilversum, which had grown into the epicentre of broadcasting during the last years. And yet, when the VARA's intended move to Hilversum was brought up in the SDAP's executive committee, a number of party leaders responded with concerns. The first of these was Emanuel Boekman, who confessed he had the impression the VARA was 'trying to break away from the labour movement most lately'. What's more, he warned it was highly important that the broadcasting association should stay 'within immediate reach of the party executive', since it might easily 'go the wrong way with this organization.'³⁹ Former party chairman Willem Vliegen shared Boekman's concerns and he raised the suggestion of appointing the VARA with a political advisor. Of course, the SDAP did already have a representative on the VARA's executive committee, i.e. party chairman Jan Oudegeest, and he tried to reassure his party fellows that he was keeping 'a very close watch' on the VARA. Even so, he was not sure himself that the VARA's departure from Amsterdam would work out well for the SDAP. However, apart from advising against it, there was little he or his party could do to prevent the VARA from moving to Hilversum, which, accordingly, took place in December 1928.⁴⁰

Oudegeest knew all too well what the risks were for the SDAP when it would lose its hold over the broadcasting association. In the weeks before the party chairman had clashed again with the executives of the VARA. This time, their 'misunderstanding' concerned a double meeting of the VARA with the Post Office's Director General and the Minister of Infrastructure. These meetings were requested to discuss the VARA's claim to a 'fair' share of broadcasting time. When Oudegeest showed up at the Director General's office he was informed that the VARA had cancelled this particular meeting, since it felt it was more useful to discuss this matter exclusively with the Minister. The chairman of the SDAP was highly embarrassed by this affair and he was particularly offended that the VARA had cancelled a meeting with a high official, without consulting the SDAP first. In an angry letter he accused the VARA's executives of damaging the fragile respectability of the labour movement. He also claimed it was utterly disrespectful to him that he had to 'serve as the living proof of the poor organization within the VARA'.⁴¹ To make things worse, Oudegeest had also learned that Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, the VARA's broadcasting secretary, had issued a public warning against the Minister on the eve of their appointment, by threatening with action and obstruction if the Minister would not listen to the VARA's demands. According to Oudegeest this was 'most offensive' of all, and he informed the VARA he would not attend these talks in protest against its inappropriate conduct. When seen in isolation this

38 Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 57-59.

39 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 13-10-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 61.

40 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 12-11-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960c.

41 Letter J. Oudegeest to executive committee VARA 19-11-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960c.

'incident' might seem a storm in a teacup, while it was really another example of the frosty relationship between the SDAP and the VARA.

Indeed, months later the party chairman Oudegeest found himself in a similar situation, when he signed yet another letter of complaint about the actions of the VARA's executives. Chapter eight will take a closer look at the circumstances and substance of this letter, since it was part of a broader conflict about the SDAP's and the VARA's responsibilities over the form and content of the party's election broadcasts.⁴² But what may be noted here was Oudegeest's personal swipe at Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek and Jan Willem Lebon, as the two salaried officials of the VARA, whom he boldly ordered 'to change their conduct very urgently and very thoroughly'. He added that he was fed up of having to deal with problems which were caused by 'non-authorized persons'.⁴³ But Oudegeest was not the only one whose patience was running out, and he was answered by Zwertbroek and Lebon in a four paged letter which expressed their irritation about the party chairman's 'groundless accusations' and 'reprimanding tone'.⁴⁴ There was a positive note to this argument as well. In contesting Oudegeest's reading of the recent events, they reminded the party chairman that the VARA was similar in size to the SDAP, but that the whole operation of broadcasting required much more effort and preparation than the business of running a political party.

This was nonsense, but there was no denying that the VARA's rapid growth had caused significant organizational pressures, which had not been beneficial either for its dealings with the hierarchy of the labour movement. Some weeks earlier the VARA's executive committee had discussed the possibility of making the chairman's position a salaried function as well. Expecting that it would help to relieve these pressures, the VARA hoped to deal with this matter as a mere formality. However, in doing so it had clearly misjudged its allies of the SDAP and the NVV. They responded with immediate alarm when they heard of the VARA's plans, since they shared serious doubts about the capacities of the present chairman. Their intervention would prove to have a decisive influence on the outcome of these events.

A chairman's downfall

All this came unexpectedly to Simon van der Woude, who had served as the VARA's chairman since 1927. In these years Van der Woude had combined his activities for the VARA with a full-time job as a technical advisor with the PTT, the Dutch Post Office, and, all in all, he had done a decent job in keeping the broadcasting association on track. Even so, he was hardly the figure one would expect to chair a labour broadcasting organization. His affiliation to the labour movement was relatively recent, since he had shown no sympathy or been involved with other labour organizations before he joined the VARA.⁴⁵ This should not have been a problem and it might well be considered as proof of the VARA's potential to raise new support among those parts of the public which had earlier lain beyond the reach of the labour movement. But, apparently, this was not how the leadership of the SDAP and the NVV perceived Van der Woude's chairmanship.

His position was discussed in a special meeting of the labour movement's General Council – the joint deliberative body of the SDAP and the NVV – which had summoned the VARA's

42 Chapter eight, page 300-302.

43 Letter J. Oudegeest to executive committee VARA 18-6-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961b.

44 Letter G.J. Zwertbroek and J.W. Lebon to J. Oudegeest 21-6-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961b.

45 Wijfes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 60-61.

executives to explain their case. The first part of the meeting took place behind closed doors and it allowed those present to voice their views about Van der Woude. In a general sense it was argued that the chairman of the VARA should be 'a man of grand style', who would have the qualities to represent the broadcasting association and the labour movement in public.⁴⁶ While it was generally agreed that Van der Woude lacked these qualities, it was also noted that he had failed to show an adequate grasp of the need for unity within the labour movement. Among those to reflect on this was Cornelis Woudenberg of the SDAP and he claimed he was glad the labour leadership still had something to say about the VARA, given their 'numerous difficulties' with the broadcasting association. Even so, the meeting was also informed by the NVV's Coen van der Lende (who was also a member of the VARA's executive committee) that the party and the trade union had really much less to say than would have been convenient. More particularly, he explained that the chairman's position was a matter of the recently established Associational Council ('Vereenigingsraad') of the VARA and that there was no statutory provision which granted the SDAP and the NVV a formal say over the VARA chairman. Then again, he also stated that both organizations were represented on the VARA's Broadcasting Council. He assured his audience that this gave them a final say over every VARA-program, which meant they could bring the broadcasting association to a standstill.⁴⁷ Of course, this was really an instrument of last resort, but the very fact that this suggestion was raised, indicates which weight this matter held to the labour leadership.

It would never come this far. Eventually, it was Van der Woude himself who managed to ruin his chances to stay on as the VARA's chairman. This happened during the second part of the General Council's meeting, when the VARA's executives were informed about the doubts within the labour hierarchy. Van der Woude was far from happy about this intervention, which he saw as a violation of the VARA's autonomy. His defiant response echoed some of the concerns which the General Council had discussed moments before in his' and his VARA-fellows' absence. Among other things he claimed that the VARA was 'fully independent' and that it was 'no branch of the SDAP and the NVV', which meant that the 'appointment of VARA executives was decided by the VARA's bodies'.⁴⁸ More particularly, Van der Woude stated that it was the VARA's Associational Council which held the decision over the appointment of the VARA-chairman, and not the SDAP and the NVV. This, surely, was not the message his audience would have liked to hear. But the VARA-chairman was not finished speaking yet. He also reminded them that the broadcasting association 'had emerged from the ranks of the broadcasting audience' and 'that it owed its success to the fact that it had always emphasized its independence from the SDAP and the NVV'.⁴⁹ As such, he argued as well that the VARA's chairman should by no means be a clear-cut party figure.

All this did little to help his case, on the contrary. There is no denying that his comments contained an element of truth, but this was a truth the labour leadership would rather ignore or suppress. By insisting on the VARA's independence without acknowledging its allegiance to the labour movement, Van der Woude had made a fatal mistake. Because in doing so he had proven his opponents were right to question his loyalty to the labour movement and it cost him

46 Minutes meeting daily executive committee General Council 19-6-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1834b.

47 Ibidem.

48 Ibidem.

49 Ibidem.

the support and sympathy from the few remaining labour leaders who might have given him the benefit of the doubt. What's more, he had also placed his fellow executives of the VARA in an awkward position in front of the labour hierarchy. Although Zwertbroek and Lebon continued to support their chairman, his defiant display had opened up a first gap between them. His fellow executives refused to adopt his confrontational stance and the remainder of this meeting proceeded in a tensed and uneasy atmosphere. For the moment it was agreed to postpone the decision about the VARA's chairmanship until further notice, but Van der Woude's conduct had made a definite impact. This was clearly illustrated by the words with which the General Council's chairman, F. van der Walle, concluded this meeting. He insisted that the VARA was and should remain 'an unbreakable part of the labour movement', to which he added the grim warning that 'he who tampers with the socialist movement, is cutting his own flesh. That can never be tolerated'.⁵⁰

Eventually, it was this confrontation which triggered the end of Van der Woude's chairmanship, since he failed to undo the damage to his position. In the months that followed the VARA-chairman became increasingly isolated, also within the broadcasting association's executive committee. This was a chaotic and painful process and the prospects for Van der Woude were turning bleaker and bleaker. At one point his fellow executives of the VARA saw no other option than to invite other candidates to apply for his position as well. It was explained above that the SDAP had no formal involvement in this procedure, but this turn of events presented the party with an opportunity to sway these developments by animating a candidate of its own choice to make a bid for the VARA-chairmanship. Although the SDAP's Jan Oudegeest had initially supported Van der Woude, he now approached Arend de Vries, a teacher from Zaandam, and he invited him to apply for this position with the VARA.⁵¹ Perhaps surprisingly De Vries was not the prominent figure some thought the broadcasting association needed. Even so, he did have a reliable background and significant experience within the labour movement's rank and file. Among other things he had been a regular contributor to a number of (local) socialist publications and he had proven his administrative skills as chairman of the SDAP's Zaandam federation.⁵² His experience with broadcasting was nil, but Oudegeest thought he was a suitable candidate to lead the VARA in the years to come, and, as part of that, to restore its relationship with the SDAP. Apparently, his potential was also recognized by the other VARA-executives. In February 1930 they asked De Vries to succeed Van der Woude as the VARA's new chairman, leaving the latter highly embittered about this 'betrayal'.⁵³ His downfall was partly of his own making, but it did show that the SDAP needed no statutory rights or provisions to impose its influence on the broadcasting association. Still, the question was whether the appointment of De Vries would keep the VARA in line and whether his presence would prevent its executives from falling back to their old habits of upsetting the party hierarchy.

50 Ibidem.

51 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 30-1-1930, IISH, Archive SDAP, inv. nr. 66.

52 H.W.A. Joosten, 'Vries, Arend de (1882-1959)' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, <https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn> (20-7-2016).

53 See also Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 61-62.

6.3 The VARA promoted

It was not until May 14th 1930 that De Vries was formally assigned as the VARA's new chairman. His chairmanship proved an instant success.⁵⁴ This had nothing to do with De Vries himself, and everything with Paul Reymer, the new Minister of Infrastructure who had taken office after the recent general election of July 1929. It was explained in chapter four that the Radio Council (the government's advisory body on broadcasting matters) had been pondering on a 'fair' allocation of broadcasting time for some time already and it presented its conclusions to Reymer in March 1930. The Council's advice was not unanimous, but it did prompt Reymer to do what his predecessors had passed on. On May 15th 1930 the government announced its 'broadcasting time decree', which granted the major broadcasting associations an equal share of the airwaves. As a result the VARA would see its presence in the airwaves rise to nearly half a week and it allowed the broadcasting association to send out a multitude of the programmes it had produced before. This was a tremendous boost, and De Vries' chairmanship could not have known a brighter start. However, the VARA's promotion did not only bring new opportunities, it also came with greater responsibilities. At the time there were many who doubted the VARA's capacities to deal with these opportunities in a responsible manner, not only within the SDAP's leadership but also in liberal and confessional circles.

The previous chapter showed already that the SDAP welcomed Reymer's verdict with approval and, more particularly, that it praised the new arrangement as a definite improvement compared to the earlier situation in broadcasting. In commenting on these developments party leader Willem Vliegen declared to Parliament – on the 28th of May – that this new arrangement differed from what the SDAP had initially advocated (and still preferred), i.e. a state owned National Broadcasting Company, but that his party was more than happy to accept the present outcome.⁵⁵ This, however, was the SDAP's public response which was not entirely consistent with the reaction behind the scenes. This was illustrated by the comments in the party's executive committee which came together on May 31st, a few days after this parliamentary debate. Vliegen was among the figures who attended this meeting and this time he used rather different wordings to reflect on the ramifications of the VARA's new status.⁵⁶ Among other things he stressed the need to maintain a most immediate connection with the VARA; although he thought the appointment of De Vries was promising, he confessed that he remained very wary of the VARA's antics. Other party leaders held a similar opinion, among whom Jan Oudegeest who feared the VARA might do 'significant damage' to the labour movement without close guidance and control of party officials. Equally alarming were the words of Emanuel Boekman, who warned that radio was such a powerful medium that it should be entrusted only to the brightest minds of the labour movement.⁵⁷ According to Boekman these were clearly missing among the leading figures of the VARA. Of course, this was hardly the first time the broadcasting association was discussed in these terms, but it was quite remarkable that these complaints prevailed even on this moment of triumph and recognition for the labour movement. And yet, none of those concerned were aware of the problems which were actually looming on the horizon for the broadcasting association and

54 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA, 14-5-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1963a.

55 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 28-5-1930, 2244-2246, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

56 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP, 31-5-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 67.

57 Ibidem.

the wider labour movement. Because it was noted above that the VARA's new status did not only raise concerns within the party leadership, but also in liberal and in confessional circles. It was this last development which would see the birth of a new form of control, which would cause the VARA and the SDAP a more severe headache than they had so far given each other.

6.4 Radio Broadcasting Control Committee

Up to that point the debate about broadcasting had concentrated on the question of the shape and structure of a national broadcasting system and, more recently, on the problem of a 'fair' allocation of broadcasting time. Of course, there was much more to broadcasting than this, and throughout the years a variety of other, important issues had been discussed in the shadow of this debate. One of these subjects concerned the content of programmes and, more specifically, the government's responsibilities in controlling the programming output of the various broadcasting associations. This was a most delicate issue, which raised all sorts of fundamental questions about the legal and moral implications of the rise of radio as a new means of communication, notably in relation to the freedom of speech.⁵⁸ In the previous years various commentators had claimed that the broadcasting associations should be subjected to a form of control, in order to prevent them from broadcasting unlawful or harmful statements.⁵⁹

Among those to address these issues was also Minister Van der Vegte, in 1927, but, at the time, it remained uncertain which form this should take and how exactly the broadcasting associations should be held to comply with these requirements. Even so, Van der Vegte's radio bill of 1928 stated that broadcasting may not be used to risk or violate 'the safety of the state, public order or public decency'.⁶⁰ This provision allowed him to introduce subsequent measure and in the following months he delegated the implementation of this issue to the Radio Council and his legal advisers. But Van Vegte's time in office was up before this question was solved. As such, it ended up on the desk of the next Minister of Infrastructure, P.J. Reymer, similar to the equally thorny issue of a 'fair' allocation of broadcasting time. Inheriting these matters from his predecessor, Reymer dealt with these issues as two sides of the same coin. On the 13th of May 1930, a few days before he would officially announce his 'broadcasting time decree', he discussed the final terms of his plan to set up a Radio Broadcasting Control Committee ('Radio-omroep Contrôle-commissie').⁶¹ It was this committee which had to see to it that the various broadcasting associations would not cross the boundaries of the permissible. For this purpose the Control Committee was assigned with both repressive and preventive powers, which meant that its inspectors were entitled to investigate programmes both before, during and after their airing; if needed, they could require the content of the statements to be changed and they could even impose a temporary suspension of the broadcasting association's license.⁶² The consequences of this were far-reaching and disturbing. Although a number of commentators (among whom the

58 More extensive on this Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 16-19 and 40-43.

59 Ibidem, 13-40.

60 'Memorie van antwoord. 77.2. Aanvulling en wijziging van de Telegraaf- en Telefoonwet van 1904', and 'Gewijzigd ontwerp van wet. 77.5. Aanvulling en wijziging van de Telegraaf- en Telefoonwet van 1904', 17/25-1-1928, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

61 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 50.

62 Ibidem, 50-52.

SDAP's Cornelis Werkhoven and Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper) had warned in the years before for the threat of censorship in broadcasting, it was only after this Control Committee had set to work – in July 1930 – that it was realized more broadly that this suggested form 'control' was really a neutral term for censorship.

To be clear, radio was not the only medium which triggered such anxious concerns about its possible 'harmful' or 'corrupting' influence on the minds or morals of its consumers. It was explained in chapter four that the 1920s and its preceding decades were marked by fears from contemporaries for the spoils of modern society. Some of these concerns were projected on the emergence of radio as a new form of popular culture, but other media, among which film, were exposed to a similar fate.⁶³ What's more, the following chapter explores in more detail how the Control Committee's rule came to shape the evolution of political broadcasting throughout the 1930s. This does not mean we can ignore this body here, for the main reason since its conduct had various implications for the relationship with the VARA as well. In fact, when the party leadership was first confronted with its regime in broadcasting, this caused the SDAP's parliamentary leadership to speak out much more firmly about broadcasting than it had so far done to promote the interests of the VARA. Although these developments have been studied elsewhere, exploring these from a party perspective should help to raise new insights about the perceived significance of broadcasting in party political circles.⁶⁴

'From no-one, nowhere and never!'

The SDAP was first confronted with the Control Committee's powers in September 1930. At the time, the VARA was making plans to broadcast a variety of speeches by the labour leadership from a two-day conference of the SDAP and the NVV from The Hague.⁶⁵ Mass meetings like these were key moments in the annual calendar of the labour movement. With thousands and thousands of people attending, these occasions did not only have an expressive function, they also served as a symbol of the collective spirit which bound the labour movement together in a shared struggle for socialism.⁶⁶

As a relative newcomer in the labour movement it was highly significant for the VARA to contribute to these occasions. In the years before it had done so in various ways, even though the labour hierarchy remained wary (as chapter eight will show) about the innovation which broadcasting brought to these traditions. This, however, did little to curb the shock and anger within the party leadership when they learned that the Control Committee's inspectors had asked the VARA to send in the texts of the speeches from this party conference beforehand. From the committee's perspective this seemed completely reasonable, since they aimed to determine whether the SDAP's speakers intended to say anything that was not allowed on the airwaves. But this was the narrow and legalistic point of view, which differed radically from what the SDAP and the VARA thought about the Control Committee's request. In their opinion this was nothing less than an attempt to censor the words of the chosen leaders of the second largest political party of the country. To the leadership of the SDAP this was clearly unacceptable and they could hardly believe this was not somehow based on a misunderstanding.

63 See also Frank van Vree, 'Media, morality and popular culture. The Case of the Netherlands, 1870-1965' in: B. Moore and H. van Nierop eds., *Twentieth-century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands* (New York 2006) 79-91.

64 Notably Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie* and Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*.

65 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 67-69.

66 More generally Rulof, *Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak*.

Nonetheless, the SDAP did take this very seriously. This was illustrated by the fact that it was Johan Willem Albarda himself, the SDAP's formal party leader and chairman of the SDAP's parliamentary party, who decided to step in and deal with this affair. What may be noted is that Albarda's name has not been mentioned so far in this chapter, and only twice in the previous chapter. This is no coincidence, and his marginal presence in these chapters was indicative of the lack of interest for broadcasting among the SDAP's leadership. This was not all, because the following chapter will show that Albarda had a personal distaste for radio as well. This, however, did not weigh up to his anger about the Control Committee's request. With the start of the conference just days away, Albarda approached Minister Reymer and he urged him to intervene and to stop the Control Committee from pursuing this act of 'political censorship'.⁶⁷ His series of telegrams and letters failed to impress Reymer, who simply stated that the Control Committee's actions were legitimate and that its inspectors were acting within their authority. So far, the SDAP and the VARA had refused to send the Control Committee the verbatim accounts of the speeches by Albarda and his fellow party leaders. While Reymer's stance failed to solve this conflict, this stalemate lasted into the final hour before the start of the VARA's coverage of the events in The Hague. Eventually, this standoff ended in a defeat for the SDAP and the VARA, since the Control Committee concluded it had no other option than to ban the VARA from broadcasting the speeches from this meeting.⁶⁸

Dramatic as this climax was, it was only a first incident in a conflict which would unfold throughout the following years. This was not known at the time, and in this early stage the SDAP and the VARA were still convinced the Control Committee's powers would soon be cut back as a result of the widespread indignation its actions were causing. Although it was the VARA and its affiliated labour organizations which made most noise in the aftermath of this confrontation, its case against the Control Committee's conduct did receive significant support from other parts of society, also from confessional circles.⁶⁹ Much was therefore expected from the parliamentary debate of October 23, 1930 which the SDAP would use to call on the other parties in Parliament to support its motion against the Control Committee's preventive powers. Again, it was Albarda himself who would lead the assault and in the weeks before the labour press had whipped up expectations about Albarda's 'grand' statement against the fundamental wrongs of the Control Committee's actions. His speech will be covered in some detail in chapter eight, since it offers an interesting perspective on his ideas about radio and the implications of its introduction for politics. On the whole, Albarda delivered a solid and reasoned defence of the freedom of speech in broadcasting. Although he remained fairly composed during the larger part of his statement, at one point his temper prevailed. Summing up his objections against the Control Committee's preventive powers, Albarda proclaimed this would open the door to political censorship, which, he boasted, was something his party 'would not accept (...) from no-one, nowhere and never!'⁷⁰

Albarda's appeal failed to have the anticipated effect. It was noted above that the Control Committee's actions had received a bad press outside the labour movement as well, but much to the SDAP's surprise this did not add up to much support from the other parties in Parliament.⁷¹ In fact, in the course of this debate the focus of the contributions shifted from the Control

67 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 68.

68 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 87-88.

69 Ibidem, 72-73.

70 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 23-10-1930, 250, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

71 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 1-11-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 69.

Committee's violations to the VARA's corrupting influence in the airwaves. This was largely the result of the efforts of the liberal member of Parliament, G.A. Boon. Some months ago, in May, Boon had loudly condemned Reymer's 'broadcasting time decree', and he now raised his objections against the politicization of the airwaves, for which he held the VARA responsible. It turned out that his concerns could count on more support than Albarda's rejection of political censorship. At one point it even seemed that a parliamentary majority would vote for his proposal to impose even stricter regulations on broadcasting, in order to prevent the political 'abuse' of the airwaves. This did not happen (yet), since Boon was prepared to rest his case – at least, temporarily – , after Reymer had promised he would take a closer look at these matters in a later stage. For the SDAP the outcome of this debate was unpleasant enough. Not only since Albarda's motions had all been rejected by a large majority, but also since Albarda had tied his party to an uncompromising position ('from no-one, nowhere and never!'), which might well prove impossible to hold.⁷²

This was also realized within the party's executive committee, which came together a day after Parliament had rejected the SDAP's case against the Control Committee. Looking back on these dramatic and unexpected turn of events, Albarda and his fellow party leaders agreed that his words had burdened the party and the VARA with a difficult dilemma. In boasting that he and his party would never accept the Control Committee's censorship, the first option was to stay loyal to this oath and to defy the Control Committee's demands. Among those to support this option was Piet Schmidt, who was the executive committee's most radical spirit.⁷³ More particularly, Schmidt claimed the party would make a fool of itself if it would suddenly comply to the Control Committee's rule. This, however, was precisely what the larger share of the party leadership saw as the only reasonable alternative. It was broadly anticipated that the price of resistance would be too high, not only since it would lead to a temporary or definitive withdrawal of the VARA's broadcasting licence, but also since this would mean that the SDAP would lose its access to the airwaves. And so, one day after this defeat in Parliament, the SDAP decided to concede to the demands of the Control Committee, albeit under protest and only by supplying it with the outline of party broadcasts, and not with the full texts. As such, this was not a complete surrender, but it did represent, what Albarda called, 'a minor tumble'.⁷⁴

6.5 'Severe resistance, if necessary very severe resistance'

And yet, this did little to solve the party's difficulties over the Control Committee. For the SDAP it was greatly disturbing that it was held responsible for the programmes and actions of the VARA, while it was hardly pleased with the broadcasting association's conduct either.⁷⁵ So far, this chapter has exposed the ambivalent struggle for control between the SDAP and the VARA. Although the SDAP's leadership was reluctant to become all too closely involved with the VARA, it was, at the same time, anxiously aware of the need to keep a close watch on the

72 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 30-10-1930, 409 and Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 31-10-1930, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

73 P. Hoekman, 'Petrus Johannes Schmidt' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (14-9-2011).

74 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 1-11-1930, IISH, Archive SDAP, inv. nr. 69.

75 Ibidem.

broadcasting association. These demands were not easily reconciled, which had much to do as well with the tendency of the VARA's executives to rely on the SDAP's support, while insisting on the VARA's autonomy at the same time. Ironically, it was the confrontation with this new and entirely different form of 'control' – as conducted by the Control Committee – which raised new concerns within the party leadership about its own lack of control over the broadcasting association. This was poignantly illustrated by the incidents and conflict between the SDAP and the VARA in the weeks and months that preceded and followed their first, mutual confrontation with the Control Committee.

One of these conflicts concerned the position of the SDAP's delegated member in the VARA's executive committee. In the past two years this position had been held by the party chairman Jan Oudegeest and it had offered him a fascinating and turbulent insight in the world of broadcasting. His membership of the VARA's executive committee had been a demanding affair and in June 1930, weeks after the VARA was promoted to its new size, Oudegeest decided to pass his membership to the party's secretary-treasurer, Cornelis Woudenberg. Woudenberg had been appointed to this position in February 1929, as the successor of Cornelis Werkhoven, the former party secretary-treasurer who had been closely involved with broadcasting in the years before.⁷⁶ Over time, Woudenberg would develop a more positive relationship with the VARA, but his entry to its executive committee did spark a minor crisis between both organizations. Because, strangely enough, Oudegeest had failed to inform the VARA about his decision to step down. Its executives only learned that the SDAP had assigned a new delegate to its organization when this was published in the newspapers.⁷⁷ The VARA was not amused about this neglect since it seemed to exemplify the party's limited commitment and lack of interest for broadcasting.

However, in the years before the broadcasting association had always repaid the party's negligence, and this was no different this time. Two months later the SDAP and the NVV were informed by the VARA about its plan to change the position of the two delegated members in its executive committee. This was only a minor element of a larger overhaul of the VARA's organizational structures, which was aimed at making the VARA's Associational Council the democratic heart of the broadcasting organization. Up to this point, the delegates of the SDAP and the NVV had held an equal position and an equal say to the other members of the VARA's executive committee. But while the other members of this body were elected and appointed by the VARA's Associational Council, this did not apply to the SDAP- and NVV-delegates. As such, it was 'suddenly' realized they held no formal obligations to the VARA's membership, as represented by the Associational Council. It was therefore suggested to limit their say in the broadcasting association's internal affairs and, more particularly, to change their position in the VARA's executive committee into an advisory role.⁷⁸ Although this was not unreasonable, the suggestion alone was enough to set the alarm bells ringing in party- and trade union headquarters. In response, they summoned the VARA's executive committee to a meeting of their General Council, as to prevent them from pursuing this 'most disastrous' idea.⁷⁹

This, at least, was the considered opinion of Johan Ankersmit, the editor of the party's newspaper *Het Volk*. Ankersmit was not alone in reminding the VARA's executives that the

76 R. Vuurmans, 'Woudenberg, Cornelis' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (14-9-2016).

77 Minutes meeting daily executive of the General Council 7-10-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1834 e.

78 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 11-9-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1964a.

79 Minutes meeting daily executive of the General Council 7-10-1930, IISH, Archive SDAP, inv. nr. 1834 e.

purpose of their plan was the opposite of what the labour leadership deemed necessary, i.e. more control and less autonomy in broadcasting. Among those was also Coen van der Lende, the NVV's delegated member with the VARA. He argued that the VARA had become such a crucial element of the labour movement – 'its words our reaching families day in, day out (...) One mistake of the VARA will have immediate repercussions for the entire labour movement' – that the SDAP and the NVV should have the 'closest control' over its affairs.⁸⁰ Similar words were spoken by Ankersmit who thought the VARA was too independent already and he warned that it would be highly undesirable when its 'relationship with the SDAP and the NVV would deteriorate even further'.⁸¹ In this heated atmosphere it was Johan Willem Albarda, who tried to calm the mood among the labour leadership. He began by confessing that he had misjudged the developments in broadcasting throughout the past years and that he was well prepared to admit that the leading figures of the VARA had anticipated these developments rightly. He continued by stating that radio had acquired 'an enormous political importance', also for the SDAP. And so he kindly urged the executives of the VARA to drop their plan, and to cooperate more closely with the leadership of the labour movement.⁸²

The executives of the broadcasting association were not impressed by these claims, and they responded with ill-disguised scepticism to Albarda's statement. The first to do so was Jan Willem Lebon, the VARA's treasurer, who expressed his surprise about the concerns among the labour leadership. He reminded his audience that the VARA had always tried to improve its relationship with the labour movement's hierarchy, but that it was the SDAP which had initially dismissed these attempts. This message was repeated by the VARA's broadcasting secretary, Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, albeit in slightly different wordings. Zwertbroek emphasized the VARA was not interested in increasing its independence, but he did insist that the VARA's independence had been a 'crucial factor in its rise to prominence'; he added that 'the VARA would have never defeated the AVRO in its struggle for airtime, if it would have been an immediate instrument of the labour movement'.⁸³ Zwertbroek was not the first to make this claim. A year earlier similar words had helped to speed up the downfall of the VARA's former chairman, Simon van der Woude. But Zwertbroek's position was undisputed, which he himself knew all too well. Although he explained that the principle of the suggested change was important to him, he assured the labour leadership that the VARA was more than willing to cancel this plan, if the SDAP and the NVV would insist on it.

This was only a pragmatic concession and it did little to solve the more fundamental disagreement about the extent of the VARA's autonomy and the limitations to the party's powers. This was also illustrated by the issue which the General Council and the VARA's executives discussed in the remainder of their meeting. This issue concerned the attempts of party chairman Jan Oudegeest to negotiate in the ongoing dispute between the VARA and the AVRO. More precisely, Oudegeest sought to mediate in the conflict between both broadcasting associations over their competing claims to host educational radio-courses for the Society of Adult Education, or 'Bond van Nederlandse Volksuniversiteiten' (BNVU).⁸⁴ In itself this conflict was not particularly

80 Ibidem.

81 Ibidem.

82 Ibidem.

83 Ibidem.

84 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 63-64. Also F.P. Gout and A. Metz, *Waarde luisteraars! De RVU en haar plaats in twee eeuwen volwassenenvorming en maatschappijgeschiedenis* (Assen and Maastricht 1985) 48-49.

interesting, since it was largely a continuation of the VARA's longer-running rivalry with the AVRO. So far, the leadership of the SDAP had watched this dispute with concern, since it had stirred up so much negative publicity already. It was anticipated that this might backfire on the labour movement or that it might even affect the party's electoral appeal.⁸⁵ This was one reason why Oudegeest had tried to reconcile this conflict before, much to the frustration of the VARA. His renewed attempts formed an interesting subplot of the ongoing struggle between the SDAP and the VARA. It also sent a strong warning to the SDAP that the VARA's leading figures were all but ready to tone down their defiant stance towards the party leadership.

This did not mean Oudegeest's efforts were fruitless, because he did succeed in forging a compromise between the VARA and the AVRO about the educational broadcasts. But his ambitions reached further. In his talks with the AVRO's representatives Oudegeest had also discussed the possibilities and implications of a joint initiative to build a new radio transmitter. Again, the details of this plan are less important than the response of the VARA's executives when they learned that Oudegeest had explored this idea without consulting the broadcasting association first.⁸⁶ In a four paged letter Oudegeest was accused of wilfully obstructing the VARA's demands on this subject. It stated that the party chairman had went beyond his duties by plotting out his own strategy, while he had only been authorized to negotiate with full consent of the VARA. In doing so, it claimed, Oudegeest had not only 'severely damaged' the interests of the VARA, but he had also broken 'the unified front of the labour movement in broadcasting'.⁸⁷ Of course, we know that this 'unified front' was really held together by endless frictions and tensions, of which this letter was just another example. What may be noted is that this letter was signed by Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek and Arend de Vries, the VARA-chairman who had been appointed half a year earlier, after he was recommended for this position by Oudegeest himself. This was not all. Because the letter concluded with a thinly veiled threat to the address of the SDAP and Oudegeest. More particularly, it stated that anyone – 'whoever that might be' – who would try to undermine the VARA's authority in broadcasting matters would face 'severe resistance, if necessary very severe resistance'.⁸⁸ But finishing with an optimistic note, De Vries and Zwertbroek were confident that this would not happen and that Oudegeest and the SDAP would meet the 'reasonable demands' of the VARA, if only since 'the labour movement would otherwise suffer serious damage'.⁸⁹

To Oudegeest and his fellow party leaders this exchange must have formed one of the more memorable moments in their dealings with the VARA throughout the past years. Weeks earlier the VARA had celebrated its five-year anniversary, as was referred to in the opening pages of this chapter. This was a cheerful occasion for the labour movement, but at this point it needs no explanation why the SDAP's leadership had been reluctant to join these festivities. Although they did decide that Cornelis Woudenberg would attend this occasion on behalf of the party's executive committee, all in all his sole presence was much less important than their collective absence.

85 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 4-10-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 68 and minutes meeting daily executive committee of the General Council 7-10-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1834e.

86 More extensively on this plan: Undated report 'Principieele grondslagen voor de samenwerking tussen VARA en AVRO' ('Principled basis of cooperation between VARA and AVRO'), IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 68.

87 Letter VARA executive committee to J. Oudegeest 12-12-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1834f.

88 Letter VARA executive committee to J. Oudegeest 12-12-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1834f.

89 Ibidem.

6.6 Parliamentarism and its discontents (1931-1933)

And yet, broadcasting was only a minor concern to the party leadership in the early 1930s. At the time, the world was facing an unprecedented economic crisis and the effects of this crisis were increasingly felt in the Netherlands as well. Among the sectors which were hit by the economic downturn were agriculture, trade and industry and, inevitably, these developments were reflected as well in steadily rising unemployment figures.⁹⁰ These were unsettling developments, which asked for decisive measures. However, the main response by the confessional coalition of Ruijs de Beerenbrouck was to cut back on its expenditures, to sit tight and wait for better times to arrive.⁹¹ This caused more harm than good, on the long term and on the short term.⁹² Even so, the opposition against the government remained largely ineffective as well, also from the SDAP. Although the SDAP had long maintained that its breakthrough would come on the back of the downfall of capitalism, its failure to seize these developments exposed the labour movement to an uncomfortable truth and it plunged the party in a crisis of its own making.

Things had been brewing for some time already. The previous chapter explained that the mood in the SDAP had been relatively optimistic throughout the second half of the 1920s and that this was partly due to the moderate and unifying influence of the SDAP's party leader Johan Willem Albarda.⁹³ Nonetheless, Albarda's position was never undisputed. Among the figures who had challenged his leadership was Roel Stenhuis, the chairman of the trade union federation NVV and he had aimed to increase the unions' influence in the political realm. But while Stenhuis' personal problems caused him to end his campaign towards the end of the 1920s, his role as the party leadership's foe was soon taken over by one of his early sympathizers, Piet Schmidt. In the years before Schmidt had travelled the world and he had worked, among other things, as a journalist in London, where he had joined the Independent Labour Party. On his return to the Netherlands, in 1924, he had imported some of the ILP's radicalism and he had become the driving force behind the left leaning publication *De Socialist*.⁹⁴ His scepticism about the party's parliamentary approach to politics was shared by a number of socialist intellectuals, such as Franc van der Goes and Jacques de Kadt, as well as by a (heterogeneous) group of younger socialists.⁹⁵ While their concerns were vindicated by the disappointing election results of 1929 (when the SDAP's support had increased with one percent only), it was the crisis of the early 1930s which brought Schmidt and his sympathizers in immediate conflict with the party leadership. What's interesting here is that broadcasting played a minor, but crucial part in these developments in more than one way.

Indeed, it may be noted that Schmidt's name was mentioned already in relation to the defeat which the SDAP had suffered in the debate about the Control Committee's powers.⁹⁶ The day after the party's executive committee had come together to discuss the consequences of this debate; at that point Albarda had confessed it was necessary for the SDAP to make a 'minor

90 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 82.

91 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 211.

92 Friso Wielenga, *Nederland in de Twintigste Eeuw* (Amsterdam 2009) 118-120.

93 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 77.

94 Hoekman, 'Petrus Johannes Schmidt' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (14-9-2011).

95 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 79-81. See also Cohen, *Om de vernieuwing van het socialisme*, 159-175.

96 See page 192.

tumble', i.e. by complying to the Control Committee's demands, albeit in protest. While the majority of his fellow party executives agreed with Albarda's conclusion, it was Schmidt who claimed that this would be a major mistake and that the party should stand up to the Control Committee's rule and, moreover that it should support the VARA to do the same. Schmidt's presence in the party's hierarchy may seem remarkable, but he had only recently been admitted to the executive committee in the hope that it would help to appease his oppositional conduct.⁹⁷ This strategy did not pay off and Schmidt (and his allies) continued to criticize the party's tame and moderate course throughout the following months. This was also illustrated by his rejection of the party's 'toothless' stance in broadcasting. An example of this was offered by the events in June 1931, when the VARA was banned from broadcasting a programme in commemoration of the Italian socialist Giacomo Matteotti.⁹⁸ This formed a new low in the VARA's struggle with the Control Committee, and the executives of the broadcasting association seized this moment to renew its campaign against the Control Committee. According to Schmidt the SDAP should do the same. In a meeting of the party's executive committee he urged his party fellows to finally take the lead in the fight against censorship. While dismissing the party's parliamentary methods, Schmidt insisted that the time had come to apply more rigorous action, notably by resorting to parliamentary obstruction and mass demonstrations throughout the country.⁹⁹ Schmidt's appeal was futile and it was explained to him that Albarda had already voiced his disapproval of the situation in a letter to Minister Reymer and that he had submitted a series of questions about the affair to the government as well.¹⁰⁰ Of course, this failed to alter the Control Committee's treatment of the VARA, and neither did it settle the dispute between Schmidt and the party leadership. In fact, their conflict escalated towards the end of 1931, when Schmidt (and his allies) were effectively silenced by the SDAP, not only in the labour press, but also in broadcasting.

Up to that point, the party leadership had tried to keep the opposition on board, notably by allowing them space for debate and discussion within its periphery, first in the columns of *De Socialist* and later in its successor *De Sociaal-Democraat*.¹⁰¹ However, the ongoing accusations had worn the party's patience down, which Schmidt found out in November 1931, whilst preparing a radio talk for the VARA. In this talk he would discuss the recent electoral developments in Germany, where the SDAP's sister-party was increasingly losing ground to national socialists and communists. But based on Schmidt's reputation, Cornelis Woudenberg (who was the party's delegated member in the VARA's executive committee) had decided to check the text of Schmidt's broadcast beforehand and he had issued the removal of two passages which challenged the party's outlook on communism and Soviet-Russia.¹⁰² Woudenberg was entitled to do so on the basis of his membership of the VARA's Broadcasting Council, but it caused great outrage with Schmidt.¹⁰³ This was not an isolated incident and some days later the party would also ban an article of Schmidt from publication in *De Sociaal-Democraat*.¹⁰⁴ At this point, the damage was beyond repair. While it caused Schmidt to resign from the party's executive committee,

97 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 83.

98 More extensive on this affair Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 92-100.

99 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 13-6-1931, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 73.

100 Ibidem and Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 93-94.

101 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 82-85.

102 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 106.

103 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 5-12-1931, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 76 and Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 105-106. Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 9-3-1932, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

104 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 55-58.

eventually their conflict escalated during a heated three day party-conference in March 1932. On that occasion Schmidt and his allies declared they would leave the SDAP and one day later they announced the founding of a new party, the 'Onafhankelijke Socialistische Partij' (OSP, Independent Socialist Party). For the SDAP this was a painful outcome, also since one of its founding fathers, Franc van der Goes, joined the OSP with more than three-thousand other former party members.¹⁰⁵

In the following months the party leadership faced the difficult task to restore peace and order in the party's rank and file. As part of that it was also required to keep a close watch on the VARA, since it had received strong signals that these recent developments had helped to stir up the mood of resistance within the broadcasting association. At the centre of these concerns stood the figure of Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, the VARA's broadcasting secretary. Zwertbroek had always been the more radical spirit of the VARA's leading figures and from 1925 onwards he had been involved in most (if not all) of the VARA's troubles with the SDAP. So far, these conflicts had largely focussed on broadcasting related matters, but Zwertbroek had become increasingly hostile to the SDAP's political conduct. It was the party's treatment of Schmidt which caused him to come out as an opponent of the party leadership in a series of articles which were published in *De Sociaal-Democraat*.¹⁰⁶ In his first article Zwertbroek attacked the SDAP's leadership for its 'appalling' decision to interfere with Schmidt's broadcast, which he claimed was symptomatic of its 'alienation' from the party's rank and file.¹⁰⁷ While he blamed the party for its uninspired response to the crisis of the past years, he also observed a lack of 'proletarian sentiment' among its leading figures.¹⁰⁸ In the following two articles he continued on the same, militant footing, among other things by arguing that what this time needed were labour leaders who would act like the 'generals of the class struggle', and not as its 'administrators'.¹⁰⁹ And so, he advised his party seniors to guide the labour movement in an all-embracing propaganda campaign, not only in Parliament but also on the streets throughout the country.

In itself these articles were not particularly interesting as they largely echoed the complaints of the party's leading critics. Even so, Zwertbroek's conduct was important, not so much for his impact on this affair, but mainly since it instigated a second chain of events which would have far-reaching consequences for the VARA, as well as for its relationship with the SDAP. This was also recognized within the VARA's executive committee, where Zwertbroek's actions were condemned by the larger part of his VARA fellows.¹¹⁰ But, what's more, his actions had not passed unnoticed either in the party's executive committee. In the previous years, Zwertbroek had established a solid reputation among the party's senior figures, not only since he had managed to provoke most of them on one or more occasions, but also since he had been a driving force behind the VARA's rise to prominence. As a key figure in the VARA's organization his recent outbursts did cause the party leadership to ponder what would happen if Zwertbroek would use his influence to turn the broadcasting association against the SDAP. It was this scenario that yielded Zwertbroek

105 Kneegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 85.

106 G.J. Zwertbroek, 'Klassebewustzijn of formalisme. Schmidt's radiorede', *De Sociaal-Democraat*, 26-12-1931, G.J. Zwertbroek, 'De "leiding" der Partij. Waar is de actie voor het Socialisme?', *De Sociaal-Democraat*, 16-1-1932 and G.J. Zwertbroek, 'Over de leiding der Partij. Positieve beginselpropaganda noodzakelijk', *De Sociaal-Democraat*, 20-2-1932.

107 Zwertbroek, 'Klassebewustzijn of formalisme. Schmidt's radiorede'.

108 Ibidem.

109 Zwertbroek, 'De "leiding" der Partij. Waar is de actie voor het Socialisme?'

110 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 24-2-1932, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

an unexpected invitation. After Schmidt's exit, the party's executive committee had a vacant seat. While its former occupant had been invited in the hope that it would take the edge off his crusade, now, two years later, this dubious honour fell to Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek. Apparently, Zwertbroek hoped to make the best of this opportunity as well. In his first meeting with the party's executive committee he called upon the party leadership to bolster its fight against the forces of fascism, more particularly by establishing a 'Labour Resistance Corps' ('Arbeidersweerstand-organisatie').¹¹¹ These suggestions failed to win him any support or sympathy, as they were seen to conflict with the party's pacifist stance.¹¹² According to Zwertbroek this was highly naïve, but he would make sure to remind the party leadership of this idea in due time.

6.7 General election of 1933

In the world outside the labour movement the crisis had not yet blown over. In the previous years the government of Ruijs de Beerenbrouck had persisted in its attempts to beat the depression by balancing its budget and by tightening its belt. It had initiated a number of emergency measures, mainly in support of the agricultural sector, but on the whole the economic outlook remained bleak.¹¹³ However, the sorry state of the economy was hardly the government's only concern. So far, unemployment figures had kept rising as well and it was generally feared that the spreading malaise would at some point spill over in social unrest or political turmoil. An important factor in this were the recent developments in neighbouring Germany, where Adolf Hitler and his NSDAP had completed their march to power in the early months of 1933. Although the size and nature of the problems in the Netherlands were completely different from those of its eastern counterpart, the Nazi-takeover of Germany did offer a dire warning of what might happen when these forces were unleashed.

Indeed, this explains why the government responded with great alarm when a mutiny broke out on the naval vessel 'De Zeven Provinciën' ('The Seven Provinces') in protest against a suggested wage cut. This vessel was stationed in the seas of the Dutch East Indies, but when the news was received in the Netherlands it sent a minor shockwave through the country. And yet, reactions varied. While most parties condemned the mutiny as an unlawful revolt against the authorities, the SDAP's response was more ambivalent, since it was largely sympathetic to the case of the insurgents.¹¹⁴ After a week of nervous uncertainty, the mutiny was ended with force when the ship's front deck was bombed, causing 23 casualties and many more wounded.¹¹⁵ It is not entirely clear whether this was intentional, or whether the bomb should have been dropped besides the ship as an ultimate warning. In either way, these events caused great consternation since it seemed to signal that the country was increasingly exposed to the perils of disorder and extremism. But, what's more, it also marked the legacy of Ruijs de Beerenbrouck's third government, which stumbled to its end only days after the mutiny was crushed. Although the government's fall was the outcome of a conflict over further expenditure cuts, the election campaign that followed was dominated by the growing burden of the economic and political

111 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 2-4-1932, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 80.

112 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 31-32 and 103.

113 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 210-212.

114 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 77-78.

115 Wielenga, *Nederland in de Twintigste Eeuw*, 104 and De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 211.

crisis. With various parties beating the drum of law and order, these elections witnessed the emergence of a 'strong' man who would lead the country in the years to come.¹¹⁶

For the SDAP the elections of 1933 turned into a bitter ordeal. In the past years labour supporters had anxiously waited for the moment that the SDAP would launch its assault against the 'brutal forces of reaction'.¹¹⁷ However, these hopes were shattered in the course of this election campaign, when the SDAP found itself increasingly cornered by its opponents, who had formed a united front against the 'radical', 'subversive' and 'anti-democratic' agents of the left. The SDAP formed the main target of this campaign and it was charged heavily for its stance during the mutiny on 'De Zeven Provinciën'.¹¹⁸ Albarda was most concerned about the anti-socialist turn, as it denied all his efforts to promote his party as a moderate and responsible party. Although he tried to counter the accusations by pledging the SDAP's loyalty to democracy, this failed to alter the outcome of these elections.¹¹⁹ On the whole, the SDAP lost two seats as it went from twenty four to twenty two seats in Parliament. What made this result even worse was that, for the first time in its history, the party's support at the polls had declined.¹²⁰ The overall winner of this election was the ARP of Hendrik Colijn, whose stern reputation earned him the hope of many that he would steer the country through the crisis. Yet, the basis of the confessional coalition which had governed the country since 1918 was reduced to a narrow majority. And so, as the country's new Prime Minister, Colijn invited the two main liberal parties to join his government. At the start of his time in office, Colijn announced that his government would 'act decisively against extremism, from whatever side it may come'.¹²¹ The labour movement would soon find that this was no idle promise.

6.8 Crossing borders and boundaries (1933-1934)

Among the organizations which were hit by these developments was the VARA. Of course, in the years before the broadcasting association had faced severe opposition already as its activities were closely monitored by the Radio Broadcasting Control Committee. This committee had begun its operation in 1930 and after a hesitant start it had gradually tightened its hold over the airwaves. This was illustrated by the upward trend in the number of interventions in VARA programmes, which had increased from 26 in 1930, to 54 in 1931, to 72 in 1932 and which would continue to rise to a staggering 199 interventions in 1933.¹²² However, these statistics do not merely show the Control Committee's rule, they also reflect the VARA's refusal to accept that rule. Because in challenging the legitimacy of the Control Committee's actions, the VARA kept pushing the boundaries of what was and what was not allowed in broadcasting. Such was for instance the case on November 9, 1932 when the VARA invited Paul Löbe, a former president of the *Reichstag* and a senior party leader of the German SPD ('Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands') to

116 Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 50-51.

117 As quoted in Kneegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 91.

118 Kneegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 80-81.

119 Kneegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946' 91.

120 Kneegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 84.

121 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 212.

122 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, table 7, 344.

broadcast a speech (in German), which had been banned from the radio in his own country.¹²³ While the VARA saw this as an act of solidarity with their fellows from across the border, others held a different opinion about this broadcast, which was widely condemned as a provocation of the German authorities.¹²⁴

This was hardly the first time the VARA had made itself the subject of public outrage. While the aversion against its conduct had reached a critical level, it was this incident that caused a broad coalition of liberal and confessional parties to demand tighter restrictions in broadcasting. In doing so, they found a willing ear in Minister Reymer, who used the yearly debate about the Post Office budget, in December 1932, to inform Parliament that he would take 'the necessary measures to ban politics from broadcasting, at least to a certain extent'.¹²⁵ This was a rather general promise, but Reymer did come up with a more elaborate provision in the final weeks of his time in office. It stated that programmes 'may not contain an immediate, an indirect or a covered undermining of religion, morality, authority and national strength, nor may programmes be directed at foreign audiences, if it is known that these programmes would have been prohibited in a befriended state. Moreover, announcements of a political nature may only contain a positive statement or an explanation of political principles'.¹²⁶ As wide-ranging and imprecise as this formula was, it did provide the Control Committee with the tool it needed to strengthen its hold over the airwaves. And so, its introduction marked a new and decisive stage in the struggle between the Control Committee and the VARA, which in turn would have far-reaching consequences for the VARA's relationship with the SDAP as well.

'Dancing on the edge of a volcano'

A key role in these developments was played by the new Minister of Internal Affairs, J.A. de Wilde.¹²⁷ As a prominent member of the ARP, De Wilde was a close ally of Prime Minister Colijn, who had agreed to a transfer the responsibilities for broadcasting to the Department of Internal Affairs during his cabinet's formation talks.¹²⁸ While Colijn had pledged the electorate that he would purge the country from the ills of 'extremism' and 'radicalism', in his dealings with broadcasting De Wilde quickly showed his commitment to Colijn's agenda of law and order. Of course, it was the Control Committee's task to turn up the heat on the broadcasting associations and although the VARA was the primary target of its reinvigorated campaign – hence, the record number of 199 interventions in 1933 – the other broadcasting associations did not escape its inspectors' attention.¹²⁹ And yet, according to De Wilde its efforts did not go far enough.

In contrast to his predecessor, De Wilde claimed a more proactive and confrontational stance towards the VARA, which he saw as the rotten apple of the Dutch broadcasting system.¹³⁰ At one point, he informed the Control Committee that he would 'bless the day that he could dismantle the VARA'.¹³¹ This remained a distant prospect, his only alternative was to force the VARA to

123 Ibidem, 150.

124 Ibidem, 150-151.

125 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 96.

126 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 136.

127 J. Bosmans, 'Wilde, Jacob Adriaan de (1879-1956)' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, <https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn> (20-11-2016).

128 Van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuimd*, 47-48 and Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 141-142.

129 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 142-143.

130 Ibidem, 162-165.

131 As quoted in Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 165.

change its demeanour and to stop it from stirring up controversy. In launching his offensive against the broadcasting association, De Wilde chose a highly symbolic target in the anthem of the international labour movement, *The Internationale*. Ever since its founding *The Internationale* had formed a key element of the VARA's programming output, and it had resounded through the airwaves on numerous occasions. However, it was now identified as a song of revolution and uprising, which according to De Wilde might have 'a fatal influence on receptive spirits in our present times'.¹³² And so, in October 1933 the Control Committee informed the VARA that, from then on, it was banned from playing *The Internationale*, not only in its musical setting but also in its textual form.

For the VARA this formed a severe blow, since this new ban went directly to the heart of its identity as a socialist broadcasting association. What's more, in the previous months it had endured increasing pressures from the Control Committee and the effects of this were beginning to sink in among the VARA's executives. Although it did ask the SDAP to question De Wilde in Parliament about this ban, Albarda and his parliamentary party were not prepared to do so, and they only agreed to draw attention to this affair in the yearly debate about the Post Office estimates.¹³³ At this point, the SDAP's refusal may not surprise, since it was largely in keeping with the position the party had adopted after Albarda's first assault on the Control Committee had gone wrong. In fact, in December 1932, the VARA had staged a series of mass meetings throughout the country in protest against Reymer's vague promise to ban politics from broadcasting ('to a certain extent') and the SDAP had kept a low profile (both in- and outside Parliament) in those days as well.¹³⁴ Even so, there was no hiding from the fact that the SDAP was closely affiliated to the VARA and so keeping its distance from the broadcasting association did little to shield the party from the backlash of these recent developments.

With the VARA's broadcasting secretary Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek in their midst, the SDAP's leadership had good reasons to worry about the effects of this backlash. In recent months the party's executives had witnessed from nearby how Zwertbroek's militant stance had hardened, largely as a result of the dramatic developments in Nazi Germany and the subsequent threat this posed to the surrounding countries. Among other things this was illustrated by Zwertbroek's membership of the 'Internationale Socialistische Anti-Oorlogs Liga' (AOL, International Socialist Anti-War League), a left leaning labour resistance corps which harboured numerous members of the SDAP.¹³⁵ The party leadership was most concerned about the clandestine nature of this organization and to its horror Zwertbroek had become one of its leading figures. In the party's executive committee Zwertbroek's involvement with this group was labelled as 'sheer lunacy' and as a 'potential disaster for the labour movement'.¹³⁶ However, it was Zwertbroek's dealings with radio which are most important here, and it was his embrace of clandestine methods in broadcasting that would precipitate his fall from grace.

These events were triggered by the ban of *The Internationale* which reached the VARA on the 17th of October 1933, so a few days after Zwertbroek's confrontation with his fellow executives of the SDAP. In spite of its protests against this new restriction, the VARA could only accept

132 As quoted in *Ibidem*, 159.

133 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 23-10-1933, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

134 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 131.

135 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 7-10-1933, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 92 and Kneegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 125.

136 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 7-10-1933, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 92.

this ruling of the Control Committee, since it would otherwise risk further sanctions. However, Zwertbroek was not the accommodating type and he could not resist to taunt the Control Committee once more. In response to this ban of *The Internationale* Zwertbroek introduced a new interval tune which was based on the opening chords of that same song. This was a minor provocation, but it did yield the VARA another angry letter from the Control Committee.¹³⁷ More importantly, it also fuelled the doubts about Zwertbroek's actions which had been simmering for some time already among the VARA's leading figures. Because somehow Zwertbroek had 'forgotten' to inform his fellow executives about this new interval tune and as such they were unpleasantly surprised by the Control Committee's reprimand. But the gravity of the situation really began to dawn on them a few weeks later when Minister de Wilde used the yearly debate about the Post Office budget to send out a public warning to the VARA. His message was plain and simple. After stating that it was his intention to keep the VARA on board, he insisted that it would have to change its 'offensive' and 'provocative' demeanour and that he would not hesitate to ban the broadcasting association altogether if it failed to do so.¹³⁸

While this caused a genuine shock among the VARA's leading figures, it didn't help that Zwertbroek himself was not present when these events unfolded, as he was visiting Prague in his capacity as secretary of the 'Arbeiter Radio Internationale' (ARI), or Labour Wireless International. This organization featured also in the previous chapter, where we encountered Zwertbroek when he tried to commit the Labour Party to the ARI's plans of developing international broadcasting activities in the name of socialism.¹³⁹ While his stay in Prague was informed by similar plans, during his absence his fellow executives of the VARA found out that Zwertbroek had failed to notify them about his other activities as well. This included his plan to broadcast *Die Massnahme* (or *The Decision*), a composition with a communist connotation by Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler.¹⁴⁰ This had not happened yet, but his fellow executives were seriously alarmed by Zwertbroek's secretive conduct. And so, on his return to Hilversum Zwertbroek found that the mood in the VARA's executive committee had turned against him. According to Jan Willem Lebon, one of the co-founders of the broadcasting association, the VARA 'was dancing on the edge of a volcano' with Zwertbroek in an executive position.¹⁴¹ His opinion was shared by the larger part of the VARA's executive committee and after confronting Zwertbroek with their concerns, they decided to delegate the question of Zwertbroek's future to a special committee which would investigate his case more thoroughly.¹⁴²

In the months that followed the VARA was plunged into chaos when this committee discovered that Zwertbroek's activities in the previous period had far exceeded the facts that were held against him. In fact, the findings of this committee were so explosive that they were only discussed with the utmost caution and in highest secrecy.¹⁴³ What emerged from the committee's hearings was that Zwertbroek had been involved in a number of underground operations that

137 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 169.

138 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 28-11-1933, 653-654, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

139 We have encountered Zwertbroek in his capacity as secretary of this organization in the previous chapter, where he tried to commit the Labour Party to the ARI's plans to develop international broadcasting activities. Chapter five, page 156-158.

140 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 3-12-1933, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

141 Ibidem.

142 Ibidem.

143 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 24-1-1934, minutes meeting executive committee VARA 28-2-1934 and minutes meeting executive committee VARA 3-3-1934, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

were aimed against the regime of Nazi Germany and that he had partly done so by using his position with the VARA as a cover. This included his efforts to set up a chain of short-wave radio transmitters in and along the German borders. It turned out that Zwertbroek had made a stopover in Berlin on his recent visit to Prague and that he had placed two devices in both cities for this purpose. What's more, he had planned these activities right under the nose of his VARA- and SDAP fellows. One of these transmitters had first been hidden on the floor above the VARA studio, and it was later moved to the premises of the labour movement's publishing house 'De Arbeiderspers'. But there was more that Zwertbroek had managed to hide from view. On his travels to Germany he had also helped to escape a number of prominent SPD-members across the border and some of these had found refuge in his Hilversum home. These included Karl Höltermann, the leader of the socialist paramilitary organization 'Reichsbanner, Schwarz, Rot, Gold'.¹⁴⁴ Although it seems unlikely that the VARA- and the SDAP-leadership were completely unaware of these dealings, when these pieces were put together it formed a most disturbing picture. It was feared that it might well provide Minister de Wilde with the excuse he needed to withdraw the VARA's broadcasting license if these findings would find their way to the public. And so, the question for the VARA was how to proceed in this affair without provoking Zwertbroek – whose mental and physical health had taken a serious blow in the past months – into actions which might expose everything after all.¹⁴⁵

After a series of long discussions the VARA's executive committee decided to opt for a diplomatic solution by offering Zwertbroek another position in the broadcasting association's structures. Zwertbroek, however, refused to play along and in his anger he turned to the communist newspaper *De Tribune* to stir up controversy about his 'mistreatment' by the VARA.¹⁴⁶ This failed to do his case any good and in response the VARA's Associational Council decided for the crude alternative of expelling Zwertbroek altogether. This did not mean the end of this affair. So far the SDAP's leadership had followed these development with distant concerns. While it was kept informed by Cornelis Woudenberg, the party's member of the VARA's executive committee, it treated this case as if it was an internal matter of the VARA only. Although reassuring, this was clearly at odds with the narrow ties that bound the SDAP and the VARA together. The SDAP was reminded of this when Zwertbroek turned up in a meeting of its executive committee (of which he was still a member) to demand the party to arbitrate in the conflict. Zwertbroek was well aware he would not face a sympathetic audience, but he did manage to win its attention. He first offered a detailed confession of his underground activities of the past year. While this caused great alarm with his fellow executives, he then threatened to publicize this account if the party would not meet his request.¹⁴⁷ This was an act of despair, and it would cost him his seat in party's executive committee.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the party leadership did not dare to dismiss his threats immediately, also since it was just hours away from its yearly party conference. This was always a moment of great significance for the labour movement, but this year's conference was even more important, among other things since it would see the appointment of a new party

144 Zwertbroek's testimony to the SDAP's executive committee is taken up in minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 31-3-1934, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 96. See also Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 190.

145 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 3-3-1934, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

146 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 102.

147 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 31-3-1934, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 96 and minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 7-4-1934, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 97.

148 Zwertbroek's membership of the party's executive committee was also terminated as a result of the party's decision to ban all members of the 'Anti-Oorlogs Liga'. See Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 125.

chairman.¹⁴⁹ It was anticipated that Zwertbroek might well sabotage this event by spreading his stories and accusations. Although Zwertbroek did show up that afternoon, the party leadership only managed to calm his temper by promising him that it would seriously consider to arbitrate in his conflict with the VARA.¹⁵⁰

In the next week the SDAP agreed to establish its own committee of inquiry to investigate this affair and to conclude whether the VARA had acted rightfully. According to Albarda the SDAP 'had no involvement with this affair', but he did hope to spare the VARA and the labour movement from further damage.¹⁵¹ At this point Zwertbroek's fate was more or less settled. Zwertbroek did not wait for the conclusions of this inquiry either. In the following months he stepped up his crusade, most notably by publishing two pamphlets *Hallo! Is hier de VARA? Wáár blijft dan het vrije woord?* and *S.O.S. VARA!*¹⁵² In these titles he accused the broadcasting association of many things – treachery, servitude, dishonesty and much more – but, most crucially, he did not expose the details of his underground actions. Nonetheless, when the SDAP's committee of inquiry finished its report in June 1934, it put all blame on Zwertbroek for causing this conflict. The VARA was only condemned for its poor judgement in dealing with these complications.¹⁵³ This could not repair the damage which had been done to the broadcasting association, to Zwertbroek himself and, more indirectly, to the SDAP as well, but the outcome could have much worse. What's more, Zwertbroek's departure from the VARA did open up new opportunities as well. While the SDAP's leadership had long looked down on the broadcasting association's actions – both in- and outside the airwaves –, it was readily understood that Zwertbroek's successor would hold the keys to change things for the better.

6.9 Towards a brighter future? (1933-1937)

Zwertbroek's expulsion from the VARA formed the dramatic conclusion to his eight-year involvement with the broadcasting association he had helped to build from the ground up. Of course, the significance of these events extended well beyond the walls of the broadcasting association and so far this chapter has shown that Zwertbroek's radicalization was symptomatic of the larger problems the SDAP was facing in these years as well. Most notably, this concerned the party's enduring isolation in national politics in combination with its ambiguous response to the political and economic crisis of the early 1930s. While this provoked the likes of Schmidt and Zwertbroek to stand up against the party leadership and to call for radical action, in rejecting their case the latter failed to provide the party's supporters with a more promising prospect. Against this background it had come to understand that the SDAP needed a new perspective which could help to break its deadlock and, more particularly, that it should rethink the cornerstones of its political beliefs. This was a protracted process, which had been going for some time already, and

149 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 96-97.

150 This promise was made by Willem Banning. Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 7-4-1934, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 97.

151 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 7-4-1934, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 97.

152 G.J. Zwertbroek, *Hallo! Is hier de VARA? Wáár blijft dan het vrije woord?* (Hilversum 1934) and G.J. Zwertbroek, *S.O.S. VARA* (Hilversum 1934). After being expelled from the VARA and the SDAP Zwertbroek drifted from the radical left to the far right side of the political spectrum. During World War II he would retake the public stage on behalf of Dutch national-socialist organizations. In the 1960s he would again re-emerge as a prophetic preacher in Amsterdam, suffering from mental illnesses. Van der Merwe, 'Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek'.

153 Wijfes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 195.

it would require some more years before it was completed. But in early 1934 the party leadership was ready to debate its first findings at its yearly party conference, which happened to be the same conference that Zwertbroek had picked to cause havoc.

The basis of these debates was formed by the Revision Report (*Herzieningsrapport*), a document which had been drafted by a special committee in the months before.¹⁵⁴ This committee had been presented with a number of sweeping questions about the SDAP's current outlook, which ranged from its stance towards the democratic order, to its views on disarmament and the nature of its responsibilities towards society.¹⁵⁵ Due to its varied makeup this committee failed to reach solid conclusions, but its report did lay down a set of preliminary recommendations for further debate. Among other things it stressed the party's allegiance to democracy. More particularly, it stated that democracy was a principle, a means and a purpose and that the SDAP was ready to join a coalition with other parties. It also showed a cautious shift in the party's traditional republican stance, since it suggested that a constitutional monarchy was acceptable to the SDAP if it rested on the support of a national majority.¹⁵⁶ But the most delicate issue which this committee discussed was the party's pacifist belief and its accompanying agenda of national and international disarmament. In light of the rising international tensions, some members deemed it was all the more important to uphold the party's pacifist principles, while others renounced this as an act of denial which would make the country too vulnerable against outside aggression. Of all the issues that were discussed at the 1934 party conference, it was this subject which stirred up most emotions. On the whole this conference ended in confusion and disagreement, since many party supporters were still reluctant to renounce their long-held principles. Even so, this was an irreversible process and the heated debates at this conference prepared the party for the changes that were forthcoming. In the following years the SDAP would continue its reorientation along the path that was outlined by the Revision Report.¹⁵⁷

For Jan Oudegeest the conference of 1934 was his last as party chairman. Oudegeest had chaired the party since 1927 and he had come to the conclusion that it was time for a younger generation to take over. The party's executive committee had found a new chairman in its midst in the figure of Koos Vorrink.¹⁵⁸ Until then Vorrink had been active in the youth section of the labour movement as the leader of the AJC.¹⁵⁹ In this capacity he had become one of the leading advocates of a cultural-socialist outlook which relied on ethical-humanistic principles as an answer to the flaws of the party's Marxist orientation. His understanding of socialism was highly idealistic and it was pervaded by a romantic, almost utopian vision of politics and society.¹⁶⁰ What's more, Vorrink was also strongly convinced about the need to stand up against the forces of fascism and national socialism. In fact, he saw it as a higher responsibility to defend the spirit of democracy as the hallmark of civilization which the SDAP and the wider labour movement

154 Kneegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 96-105.

155 Ibidem, 100.

156 Ibidem, 102.

157 Ibidem, 108-112.

158 C.H. Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink. Gezindheid, veralgemening, integratie. Een biografische studie (1891-1940)* (Groningen 1986) 250.

159 C.H. Wiedijk and Ger Harmsen, 'Jacobus Jan Vorrink' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (7-10-2016).

160 This was notably reflected in Vorrink's writings, which explored the creation of a new communal culture for a new mankind. K. Vorrink, *Om de vrije mens der nieuwe gemeenschap. Opvoeding tot het democratische socialisme* (Amsterdam 1933).

could not forsake.¹⁶¹ Although these ideas were not easily translated to the practical realm of politics, based on his inspirational presence, his authoritative manners and his organizational capacities it did seem that Vorrink held the right qualities to guide the party in the years to come.

But important as these developments were, at the time the truly ground-breaking work was taking place in a remote corner of the party, at the newly founded scientific bureau of the SDAP. In response to the positive impact of Hendrik de Man's *Plan du Travail* in Belgium, the party's executive committee had asked – without expecting much of it – the relatively unknown economist Hein Vos to draft a Dutch version of this Plan of Labour as well.¹⁶² Parallel to this it had also established a propaganda committee which would be responsible for the promotion of the plan. It took Vos and his co-authors more than a year before they were ready to present their work. When they did, the party leadership came to realize that the ambitions of Vos and his fellow planners had far exceeded their own expectations. Altogether, they had drafted a three-hundred paged report, *Het Plan van de Arbeid*, which promoted an elaborate scheme of short- and long-term policies – public investments, industrialization, economic planning, etc. – to ward off the economic crisis and, more ambitiously, to build a society in which 'social security with decent living standards' would be available to all.¹⁶³

Other than what the SDAP's leadership had anticipated, this Plan would become the main vehicle of the party's reorientation in the following years. On the whole, it provided the party with a revised conception of the economy in which the fluctuations of the market were met and tamed by the hand of politics. In contrast to the government's policy of deflation and austerity, the SDAP's Plan argued for an interventionist economic approach. This suggested agenda was firmly rooted in the parliamentary democratic order, it also gave the party an opportunity to testify of its democratic character. Equally important was the Plan's emphasis on the public interest and its focus on the middle classes, and it highlighted the SDAP's aim to be recognized as a 'people's' party, rather than as a 'workers' party. It was the promotional dimension of the Plan of Labour that is most significant for this book. To win the public for its Plan, the SDAP launched a propaganda campaign which lasted no less than eighteen months, so from October 1935 until May 1937, which happened to be the month of the next general election. The scale and methods of this campaign were unprecedented in modern Dutch politics as it combined methods of marketing and advertising with more conventional elements of public politics, notably mass meetings, training courses and party conferences.¹⁶⁴ With the broadcasting facilities of the VARA readily available, radio was used in this campaign as well and the following chapter will offer a more detailed analysis of its place and significance in the wider makeup of this campaign.

In the meantime these developments had also exposed the outdated character of the SDAP's 1912 party programme (or 'Beginselprogram'), which contained various elements which were no longer compatible with the basic assumptions of the Plan of Labour. And so in 1935 the SDAP had decided to resume the talks about the issues that were explored by its 1933 Revision Report, among which the party's stance towards the nation and the monarchy, its character as a 'class' or a 'people's' party and its position in the democratic order.¹⁶⁵ This process culminated in 1937

161 Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink*, 252-253.

162 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en Democratie*, 165-167.

163 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 97-103 and Knegtmans, *Socialisme en Democratie*, 159-179.

164 Bernard Rulof, 'Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen? Reclame en "massa-psychologische" actie van de SDAP', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 2 (2005) 84-104.

165 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 196-201.

with the adoption of a new party programme which in many ways consolidated the course the party had chosen in the years before. What's interesting is that it had relied in this process on its relationship with the VARA, which had improved significantly in the years after 1934 and which had allowed both organizations to advance together in more than one way.

6.10 Pacification (1934-1937)

A crucial role in these developments was played by the new party chairman Koos Vorrink, whose appointment coincided with the final stage of Zwertbroek's downfall. This was a dramatic moment, and it epitomized the conflict over the political course of the labour movement which had haunted the party in the years before. With Zwertbroek on the losing end, it was Vorrink who personified the party's pursuit of a new perspective and, as such, it was only fitting that he claimed a decisive role in the appointment of Zwertbroek's successor.

Vorrink was no stranger to broadcasting and he had followed the achievements of the VARA in the years before with an ambivalent eye. It was noted in the opening page of this chapter that Vorrink was among the speakers at the VARA's five-year anniversary. On this occasion he had labelled the broadcasting association the labour movement's 'darling child', to which he had added he had 'no hard feelings' about this.¹⁶⁶ This was a mere side-note, but this confession was not insignificant since Vorrink did have serious doubts about the VARA and, more generally, about the place of radio in contemporary society. This is not the place to elaborate on these issues, but a few quotes from his 1933 book (*Om de vrije mens der nieuwe gemeenschap*) offer a first taste of what chapter eight shall explore in more detail. At the time of writing Vorrink was still the chairman of the AJC, which he saw as a vanguard of a socialist counterculture. Among other things he labelled radio as a 'means of distraction from the struggle for a higher social order' and he claimed that it lured the public 'in a dream-world of sensation and pleasure'.¹⁶⁷ Still, Vorrink's rejection of radio was not absolute and he recognized the need to develop a socialist alternative in broadcasting.¹⁶⁸ However, he also thought there was much to improve in the VARA's interpretation of this responsibility, notably by aligning its programmes more closely with the cultural-socialist outlook. And although the SDAP had no formal say over the appointment of the VARA's broadcasting secretary, this did not deter Vorrink from using his new-found authority as the party's chairman to insist on the nomination of a candidate of his choice.¹⁶⁹

The only problem, however, was that the candidate whom Vorrink had in mind, Arie Pleysier, was not interested in taking up the vacant position with the VARA.¹⁷⁰ Pleysier was a close friend of Vorrink (and a distant cousin) and they shared a background in the educational branch of the labour movement, which traced back more than two decades ago.¹⁷¹ In recent years Pleysier had mainly worked as a journalist and a writer, but he had also remained actively involved with

166 Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 64.

167 Vorrink, *Om de vrije mens der nieuwe gemeenschap*, 15.

168 Ibidem, 16.

169 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 97.

170 See also Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 104-105 and Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink*, 254.

171 J. Vos, 'Arie Pleysier' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (14-11-2016).

organizations like the AJC and the Institute for Workers Education. As such, his outlook and aspirations were pervaded by a similar faith in the cultural and educational ethos of socialism as Vorrink's. But what also spoke for Pleysier was his character. Unlike Zwertbroek, Pleysier was a consensual and mild mannered figure with moderate political views, which seemed to make him the right man to restore peace within the VARA. However, when Pleysier was informed about all this he was hardly convinced that he was indeed the right man for this job, not only since he 'had no affinity with radio, and even less so with popular programmes', but also since he was loath to accept the executive responsibilities of this position.¹⁷² While this caused him to decline Vorrink's 'invitation', the latter refused to accept this. And so it was only after Vorrink had put significant pressure on his friend that Pleysier surrendered to this call, seeing it as a 'grave obligation towards the labour movement'.¹⁷³

Moderation and integration

Pleysier's appointment in October 1934 formed a decisive moment in the pre-war history of the VARA. On his entry to the broadcasting association, Pleysier faced the daunting task of steering the broadcasting association in a new direction – away from the confrontational and oppositional course it had followed in the Zwertbroek era. As the VARA's broadcasting secretary Pleysier was responsible for the overall output of programme. His position was therefore of critical importance to improve the VARA's relationship with the Control Committee. This was easier said than done, for one thing since the programmes of the VARA formed the backbone of its identity, so these could not be changed overnight. More importantly, the Control Committee's regulations were hardly clear-cut either and as such it was a most thorny endeavour to stay within the boundaries of the acceptable, without discarding the VARA's essence altogether. This was illustrated by the number of interventions (129) which the VARA had to endure in 1935, which was the second highest after the 'record' year 1933.¹⁷⁴ It took Pleysier a year before he realized that the VARA should consider a different strategy if it hoped to escape the Control Committee's suffocating hold. When raising this matter in a meeting of the VARA's executive committee, Pleysier argued that the VARA should acknowledge the Control Committee's authority more fully and, more particularly, that they should find a seat at its table. To be clear, the Control Committee was not a representative body in the narrow sense of the term, but its makeup did reflect the plurality of interests in broadcasting, albeit with the exception of the labour movement's interests. Based on his encounters with its inspectors, Pleysier asked his fellow executives to tone down their opposition against this body and to request the Minister to appoint a labour member to its ranks. He hoped that this would help to build some understanding for the VARA's case within the Control Committee.¹⁷⁵ His appeal received a mixed response, but his fellow executives did agree with the suggested change of strategy, but only if the SDAP would consent to this as well.

Convincing the party leadership proved less difficult. In party circles the VARA's lasting conflict with the Control Committee had been a source of concern for some time already. More than a year ago various party leaders had expressed their ideas about the situation in a meeting of

172 A. Pleysier, *Schoolmeesters en schriftgeleerden. Memoires van een sociaal-democratische schoolmeester voor volwassenen*, Unpublished memoires A. Pleysier (1974), Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid, Archive A. Pleysier, Map S, p 36.

173 A. Pleysier, *Schoolmeesters en schriftgeleerden*, 36.

174 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, table 7, 344.

175 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 11-9-1935, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2. See also Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 200-201.

the General Council after De Wilde had promised to ban the VARA if it refused to toe the line. Among those to attend this meeting was parliamentary leader Johan Willem Albarda, who was still haunted by his 1930 cry that the SDAP 'would not accept (political censorship), from no-one, nowhere and never!'¹⁷⁶ He had made his 'minor tumble' years earlier, but he now confessed more fully that it had been wrong altogether to take this uncompromising stance.¹⁷⁷ While Jan Oudegeest 'regretted that this subject had not been brought for discussion some years earlier', according to Ankersmit, the editor of the party's newspaper *Het Volk*, the VARA should show its 'utmost composure', now that the pressure had reached a critical point.¹⁷⁸ Although Pleysier had not been present at this meeting, when he approached the SDAP in September 1935 he found that the large majority of the party leadership had only grown more convinced of the need to accommodate to the Control Committee's rule. And so, a few weeks later the SDAP asked the Minister to open this body to a member with a labour background. Grasping the weight of this request, De Wilde duly invited J.W. de Vries (who was a member of the Radio Council as well) to take a seat on this body.¹⁷⁹ This was a moment of crucial importance. Although it marked a bitter defeat for the VARA and the SDAP that they were now partaking in a practice which they had earlier condemned with such indignation, it also signalled that their commitment to the democratic order was more profound than their sense of injustice about this form of control.

And yet, this was only one part of the more elaborate shift that was taking place in the VARA's programming policies under the guidance of Arie Pleysier. Equally important in this respect was the changing position of the VARA on days of national celebration or commemoration. Up until the mid-1930s the broadcasting association had always refused to contribute to national festivities or royal holidays – among which the Queen's birthday – but in 1934 it had come to decide to participate in the memorial programmes for the recently deceased Queen-mother Emma and a few months later for Prince Hendrik.¹⁸⁰ This had caused some commotion among the VARA's supporters, but it was recognized at the same time – also within the party leadership – that broadcasting offered an adequate platform to renegotiate the labour movement's national credentials and to adjust its position towards the monarchy.¹⁸¹ Nonetheless, it would take two more years, until September 1936, before the VARA would take the subsequent step in this process. This would happen on the occasion of the engagement of Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhard and the VARA agreed to contribute to the celebrations on the air. Among other things this meant that the VARA would play the national anthem, *Wilhelmus*, which formed a radical departure from its republican past.¹⁸² It did not do so without consulting the SDAP and the NVV first, since the labour leadership would not allow the broadcasting association to march too far ahead on this most delicate issue.¹⁸³ But with the labour movement moving in the same direction it was readily understood that the VARA could pave the way for the national integration of other labour organizations. It was for this reason that party chairman Koos Vorrink – who was one of the leading advocates of a national turn – praised the broadcasting association for its efforts

176 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 23-10-1930, 250, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

177 Minutes meeting daily executive committee of the General Council 1-3-1934, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1841a.

178 Ibidem.

179 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 29-11-1935, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

180 Minutes meeting daily executive committee of the General Council 11-9-1936, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1841c.

181 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 4-5-1934, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 97.

182 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 207-209.

183 Minutes meeting daily executive committee General Council 11-9-1936, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1841c and minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 26-9-1936, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 105.

and he argued more particularly that it had done the labour movement an important service.¹⁸⁴ Outside the labour movement the VARA's contribution to these festivities were welcomed with approval as well. Even Prime Minister Colijn had listened to the VARA's broadcast, and he informed Albarda that he thought the broadcasting association had done a 'very decent' job.¹⁸⁵

6.11 'Vulgarities and narcotics' (1937-1940)

The question was whether all this was enough to break the SDAP's isolation in national politics. It was noted above that the end of its campaign for the Plan of Labour coincided with the general election of May 1937 and the SDAP had hoped that its efforts of the past year and a half would inspire a much-needed victory at the polls and, moreover, that it would help to weaken the predominance of the confessional parties. This, however, turned out rather differently. Although the SDAP managed to make some gains compared to the dramatic election of 1933, by winning twenty-three seats in Parliament it did not even match its results of the 1925 and 1929 elections.¹⁸⁶ This was a real setback, and it meant that the SDAP had to sit by and watch how the real winners of the election – the ARP of Prime Minister Colijn and the RKSP – revived their confessional coalition with the CHU. While this implied that the SDAP's stay in the antechamber of government was again extended for an unknown number of years, it also forced the party to admit that its attempts to broaden its support among the public had not yet paid off.¹⁸⁷

Popular turn

Accepting this was notably difficult for party chairman Koos Vorrink, who after all had been the main architect of the Plan-campaign. The following chapter will take a closer look at the makeup of this campaign and the way in which was shaped by Vorrink's ideas about the place of politics in society. What should be noted here is that Vorrink grew increasingly critical about the VARA in the aftermath of this campaign and, more particularly, that the broadcasting association came to occupy a central place in his analysis of why the SDAP was struggling to reach out to the broader public. This was a painful process, among other things since it caused a rift in the friendship between Vorrink and Arie Pleysier, the VARA's broadcasting secretary who had only been appointed to this position on Vorrink's behalf. The pages above explain in detail how Pleysier's arrival was followed by the normalization of the VARA's relationship with the Control Committee and how he had helped to release the VARA of its oppositional and confrontational style. However, Pleysier's influence had reached further and in the years after 1934 he had done much to broaden the VARA's appeal beyond the labour movement's rank and file, most notably by developing new programmes with a lighter and more popular touch. One of these programmes was the VARA's *Maandrevue*, which combined music and satirical sketches and which allowed the VARA to reflect on current affairs in a light-hearted manner.¹⁸⁸ Equally significant in this

184 Minutes meeting daily executive committee General Council 25-10-1936, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1841c and Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink*, 271-272.

185 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 207.

186 Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 216-218.

187 Ibidem, 218-219.

188 Pleysier, *Schoolmeesters en schriftgeleerden*, 43. See also Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 111.

respect were the VARA's broadcasts of the Jazz-orchestra of Theo Uden Masman, *The Ramblers*. Although their music had little to do with socialism, it did attract a great number of listeners to the VARA, among whom many non-labour supporters.¹⁸⁹ We don't know whether these listeners would at some point cross over to the labour movement, but the upward trend in the membership figures of the VARA did show that the broadcasting association was reaping the benefits of its programming strategies.¹⁹⁰

This was also recognized by Koos Vorrink, who saw the VARA as a vital link in his plans for the reorganization of the labour movement's cultural branch. In the previous years the party's executive committee had held various discussions over the party's organizational makeup, which was largely motivated by its inadequate response to the political and economic crisis. Vorrink claimed a dominant role in these talks, and he was strongly in favour of granting a greater degree of power to a smaller number of people.¹⁹¹ A similar idea informed his approach to the labour movement's cultural branch. In the past few years all cultural organizations had suffered a decline in membership figures, which, in turn, had affected their financial position.¹⁹² It was generally understood that the difficulties of these organizations were partly caused by a lack of coordination from above. This was not a new problem, and the solution which was suggested was hardly original either. We have seen already how the SDAP, the NVV and the VARA had held a series of talks in 1927 to discuss a possible merging of the broadcasting association with the newly established Institute for Workers Education. At that point, this idea had been rejected, mainly since it was understood that the labour movement and the SDAP were best served with an independent broadcasting association. Ten years later this conclusion seemed fully vindicated. Even so, in January 1937 the VARA was asked again whether it was prepared to consider a merging with the Institute for Workers Education.¹⁹³ Much had changed in the intervening years and the VARA met little protest when it dismissed this option in March 1937. There was one person who refused to accept the VARA's rejection, party chairman Koos Vorrink.¹⁹⁴ A year later Vorrink launched a new effort when he invited Arie Pleysier to his home, to discuss his plan to regroup all cultural organizations – the VARA included – in two larger bodies, one for adult education and one for youth activities.¹⁹⁵ Although Pleysier was prepared to convey Vorrink's ideas to the VARA's executive committee, this was really a futile effort since there was no willingness whatsoever among his fellow executives to sacrifice the broadcasting association's autonomy to the ambitions of the party chairman.

This was by no means unreasonable, but Vorrink failed to stomach the VARA's refusal. While he blamed the broadcasting association for obstructing his plan, his anger about this affair released his aversion of the VARA's popular course of the previous years. Although he had justified its popular turn earlier on the ground that it would help to mobilize new support, he now came to see the VARA as an incarnation of the problems the labour movement was

189 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 111-113.

190 Ibidem, 56 and 114-115.

191 Kneegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 211.

192 José van Dijk, *Het socialisme spant zijn houden net over de wereld. Het kunst- en cultuurbeleid van de SDAP* (Amsterdam 1990) 154-156 and W. Blockmans, "'Beziel tot hooger Leven!' Sociaal-democratische cultuurpolitiek tijdens het interbellum' in: J. Berting, J. Breman and P.B. Lehning eds., *Mensen, macht en maatschappij: een bundel sociaal-wetenschappelijke opstellen* (Meppel 1987) 189-209, there 194.

193 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 27-1-1937, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

194 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 24-3-1937, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

195 Pleysier, *Schoolmeesters en schriftgeleerden*, 58 and Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink*, 289.

facing. These complaints first surfaced in 1937 and Vorrink continued to target the broadcasting association throughout 1938 and 1939.¹⁹⁶ Eventually, these tensions culminated towards the end of 1939. On Christmas Day the party-chairman was asked to address a combined meeting of the SDAP and the Institute for Workers Education, but when he found that the hall was only partly filled he lashed out against the 'vulgarity' of radio. After claiming that 'the hall would have been filled if they had booked a Jazz band', Vorrink bitterly remarked that the labour movement had no task in supplying the public with 'narcotics'.¹⁹⁷ This incident was followed some days later by another unfortunate encounter with the public at a New Year's meeting of the VARA in Amsterdam. This meeting was well attended by many VARA-supporters, but to Vorrink's frustration those present were hardly interested in what he had to say, and his words were lost in the permanent noise and movement of the crowd.¹⁹⁸ According to Pleysier, Vorrink's speech was a 'fiasco' and it helped to seal their alienation which had set in some years ago.¹⁹⁹ It was Pleysier who would claim the last word in this affair. A few weeks later he condemned Vorrink's actions in an article which was published in the VARA's programming guide. In doing so, he offered a poignant advice to his former friend when he stated that the party's problem was not so much the threat coming from popular culture, but rather its inability to present politics in such a way that it could compete with popular culture.²⁰⁰

A new normal?

This was a piercing remark and the following chapter will show that it went to the heart of the task that Vorrink had set himself years earlier as the party's new chairman. The question here, however, is which significance this conflict had for the SDAP's relationship with the VARA. At this point it needs no explanation that the dealings between the two organizations had improved significantly throughout the second half of the 1930s and the contrast with the period before 1934 could not be greater. Among other things this was reflected in the number of times the broadcasting association was brought up within the party's executive committee. Before 1934 the VARA formed a regular subject of debate among the party leadership, but in the years afterwards the litanies about the VARA suddenly fell quiet. Throughout these years there were only two occasions when the broadcasting association appeared on the agenda of the party's executive committee – firstly, when it decided to comply to the rule of the Control Committee and secondly, when it agreed to participate in national celebrations and commemorations. What's more, it was recognized on both sides that these were crucial steps for the SDAP as well, and, as such, these moments exemplified the newfound consensus which had emerged between the party and the broadcasting association in these years. Although Vorrink had played a key part in guiding this process, his actions in the latter half of the 1930s formed a potential threat to their mutual understanding. Even so, at this stage Vorrink was fighting a lonely struggle and he failed to increase the party's hold over the broadcasting association. What was highly important in this respect was the absence of other party leaders from this conflict. We don't know whether this was because they were indifferent or unconcerned about the VARA's future, but in either way this was a significant improvement compared to earlier times when controversy was always around the corner.

196 Pleysier, *Schoolmeesters en schrijfgeleerden*, 64. See also Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 116-118.

197 As quoted in Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink*, 301.

198 Pleysier, *Schoolmeesters en schrijfgeleerden*, 64.

199 Ibidem.

200 Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink*, 301 and Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 117.

All this was taking place against the background of far more important developments. For the SDAP Vorrink's conflict with the VARA was merely a minor incident in a year which was mainly remembered for different reasons. In 1939 it was twenty-six years ago that the SDAP was offered its first and last invitation to join a government with a coalition of liberal parties. After rejecting this offer it had spent the following decades pondering on the question whether this had been the right decision, or whether it had prolonged the party's stay on the side-lines of national politics. In August 1939 it was finally absolved from this predicament when it received a second invitation. In the previous years the confessional coalition had slowly but steadily reached its expiration date and in the summer of 1939 this would lead to the end of the political career of Prime Minister Colijn.²⁰¹ What's more, it would also mark the end of the RKSP's doctrine of 'last resort', which had blocked a catholic partnership with the SDAP for so many years.²⁰² Being offered two Ministerial posts in a cabinet of confessional and liberal makeup, the SDAP seized this opportunity with both hands and it celebrated this moment as the final step in the emancipation of the labour movement.²⁰³ At the same time this was also a first, minor step in the larger process of national reconstruction the SDAP had talked about for so long. With the shadow of Nazi Germany growing darker and darker this would all too soon become a much more daunting prospect than the SDAP would have imagined on that moment of joy in August 1939.

201 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 223.

202 See also chapter four, page 91.

203 De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 46.

Part II

Between independence and control

Comparison and conclusion

With the 1930s coming to a close the SDAP and the Labour Party could look back on a tumultuous decade-and-a-half in which they had come to learn the blessings and ordeals of broadcasting. The first part of this book offered a relatively straightforward picture of how both parties were involved in the construction of two rather different broadcasting systems. This is much less the case for the previous chapters, which each touch on a variety of issues that were very distinct to these cases in their national context. As such, these chapters twist and turn in diverging directions. So, among other things, we have seen how the SDAP got caught in an endless series of quarrels and conflicts with the VARA and, moreover, how the party leadership grew increasingly wary about its ties to the broadcasting association when it came on the verge of being banned in the early- to mid-1930s. What's more, we have also witnessed how the Labour Party was engulfed by crisis in the early 1930s and that its problems were exacerbated by its treatment by the BBC. Although it felt increasingly ignored by the Broadcasting Corporation, it also continued to proclaim the superiority of the British broadcasting system. These are but some examples and although it might seem there is little common ground to bring these chapters together in one comparative perspective, this is precisely what this conclusion aims to do. After being submerged in the specificities of both cases, it is time to take some steps back as to grasp a broader picture of the challenges and difficulties which broadcasting posed to the SDAP and the Labour Party.

Clearly, the main theme of the previous chapters was the need for control which was felt in both parties throughout the 1920s and the 1930s. As such, this part marks a sharp contrast with the first part of this book, which found that both the SDAP and the Labour Party remained relatively unconcerned about the political implications of broadcasting throughout the early 1920s. Of course, the Labour Party had received a dire warning in May 1926 when it was sidelined by the BBC during the general strike, but chapter three ended on a positive note since the Labour leadership anticipated that the BBC's new, public status would prevent such injustice from happening again. However, chapter five has shown that it would take more time and, notably, an additional portion of neglect before the Labour Party came to recognize that this was not the case. When it did, it came to conclude that its assumption of control which had shaped its early understanding of broadcasting had been crippled by the weight of the BBC's independence. In the Netherlands the situation was completely different, but chapter six learned that the notion of control came to occupy a central place in the debate about broadcasting as well. In contrast to the Labour Party the SDAP had little reason to complain about a lack of control over the VARA, (which did not prevent the party leadership from doing so), but here it was the Control Committee's rule that cast a shadow over the SDAP's dealings with broadcasting. Although these few comments illustrate that this demand for control emerged in various guises, the previous chapters suggest this was really a multi-headed creature which was awoken by the

larger renegotiation of power between politics and broadcasting. So charting its traces in the Dutch and the British context does not only offer new insight in the evolution of the SDAP's and the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting, it also offers further evidence of how both parties were affected by this process in the course of the interwar decades.

Of the two, it was the Labour Party which had least involvement with broadcasting throughout the later part of the 1920s. It was explained in chapter five that the BBC was re-established as a public corporation in early 1927 and while the Labour Party had welcomed this development as a crucial step forward, the first part of this book noted that it had so far shown a limited grasp of the wider implications of this shift. Indeed, what this meant was illustrated by the turn of events that followed the transition from the old to the new BBC and, more particularly, the replacement of the BBC's Board of Directors by the Board of Governors. These bodies held a similar place in the BBC's hierarchy, but their status was completely different, since it was the Board of Governors which formally embodied the BBC's rights and privileges as a public corporation. Among other things this implied that the newly appointed Governors carried the crucial task acting as the 'Trustees for the national interest' in broadcasting.¹ However, chapter five learned that this was not a clearly delineated task and that these Governors faced significant confusion and conflict over what their exact duties and responsibilities were. This was also reflected in the response of Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald, who was 'furious' about the appointment of Ethel Snowden to this body, not only since his party had not been consulted about her invitation, but also since she 'did not represent the Labour Party at all'.² MacDonald was absolutely right about this last point, but it was surely remarkable that the Labour leader failed to recognize that the BBC's Board of Governors was not meant to represent particular interest (and certainly not partisan interests), but only the public at large. Although this was only a minor incident, it was also symptomatic of the flawed understanding of the BBC's constitutional task among the Labour leadership.

Then again, few Labour figures would have pondered on these matters in the immediate years after 1927, which, on the whole, was a period of calm and peace between the BBC and the Labour Party. This did not mean that this subject was insignificant and chapter five has illustrated in detail that a conflict emerged in these years between the BBC's Board of Governors and its Director General that would have far-reaching implications, not only for the BBC itself, but also for the Labour Party. What is referred to here is the struggle between John Reith and a few members of the BBC's Board, notably the chairman Lord Clarendon and 'the Red Woman' Ethel Snowden.³ Their dispute revolved around the duties and function of the Board in relation to the powers of the BBC's Director General. While Clarendon and Snowden referred to the BBC's charter to claim the right to scrutinize Reith's activities, chapter five showed that the latter became highly disturbed about their 'interference', since he expected 'his' Governors to advise and support him in the larger effort of establishing the BBC as a national institution. There is no need to go through this struggle again, but underlying it were two competing conceptions of the Board of Governors, with the first seeing its function in terms of accountability and the second in terms of consultation. While Reith was a proponent of the latter conception, Clarendon and Snowden felt it was their task to establish a degree of control over the BBC's management on behalf of the public. This was a source of constant strife and at one point the BBC's chairman

1 *Royal charter BBC, 1927*, page 1, accessed at http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/regulatory_frame-work/charter_agreement/archive/1927.pdf

2 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 98.

3 *Ibidem*, 152.

tried to lecture Reith by reminding him that it was the Board of Governors, and not the Director General, which held the ‘absolutely supremacy’ over the BBC.⁴ Having said that, chapter five showed that it was Reith who came out victorious after Clarendon left his chairmanship in 1930 for a new position in South Africa. What’s more, since the Labour Party had triumphed in the 1929 elections, it was a Labour government that was required to appoint a new chairman to the BBC’s Board who would resolve this dispute between the Board and the Director General. In doing so Ramsay MacDonald, as Labour’s Prime Minister, would claim a decisive say. Given his acquaintance to Reith, it seems no coincidence that the subsequent appointment was more consistent with the Director General’s views than with the ideas about broadcasting which some of his party fellows had voiced in the years before.

At that point in time the SDAP had gone through a frantic five years in dealing with its affiliated broadcasting association the VARA. While the Labour Party and the BBC had spent these years in a state of mutual indifference, the SDAP and the VARA had been much more closely involved than the SDAP had initially wanted. Chapter six illustrated that the party leadership was at first reluctant to establish a formal link with the VARA in late 1925 and that it first declined the latter’s invitation to appoint a delegate to the broadcasting association’s executive committee. At the time the SDAP was still anticipating the creation of a National Broadcasting Company and it did not want to give too much prominence to the VARA’s cause. The architect of this strategy was the party’s secretary Cornelis Werkhoven. It was only after the trade union federation NVV accepted the VARA’s invitation that the SDAP yielded as well, since it refused to allow the VARA to become a mere instrument of trade union interests. These tensions would continue to shape the party’s involvement with broadcasting in the time to come. Throughout these years the VARA remained short on funds, and while the NVV was a more generous provider of credit, the SDAP proved more economical in its provision of support. While this explains why the SDAP and the VARA got off on an ‘extremely unpleasant’ start, the party leadership did come to recognize it should bolster its interests in broadcasting while the prospect of a national broadcasting organization was fading. A key moment in this respect were the 1927 negotiations between the SDAP, NVV and VARA. While these talks endorsed the VARA’s independent position within the labour movement, they also granted the SDAP and NVV a seat on the newly established ‘Broadcasting Council’. This provided the SDAP and NVV with a final say over the VARA’s broadcasting activities, in return the SDAP was required to support the VARA more fully, both financially and politically.

Chapter six has illustrated that this did little to curb the growing concerns among the party leadership about the VARA’s advance. All in all, the SDAP’s leadership proved unable to grasp the novelty of broadcasting, which made them highly apprehensive about the VARA’s actions. This was clearly reflected by the series of conflicts which haunted the SDAP and the VARA throughout 1928, 1929 and 1930. These conflicts revolved around different issues, but the standard response among the party leadership was to bemoan the lack of control over the broadcasting association. What’s more, this urge for control was connected to an assumption of authority which placed the VARA far beneath the SDAP in the labour hierarchy. However, chapter six also showed that the former’s executives were far from impressed by the seniority of the party leadership and, more particularly, that they were not prepared to acknowledge the rule of SDAP unconditionally. This was only exacerbated by the VARA’s steady growth, which did not only boost its defiant stance,

4 Ibidem, 149.

but which also fuelled the SDAP's concerns. This was exemplified by the reactions among the party leadership to the VARA's move to Hilversum, which triggered fears that the VARA was trying to 'break away' from the labour movement and which was met by a call that it should stay 'within immediate reach' of the SDAP.⁵ Obviously, this was not an isolated incident and what's most remarkable about these repeated outcries from the party leadership was that the SDAP did manage to exert a significant influence over the VARA. An poignant illustration of this was offered by the turn of events in 1929 which saw the dismissal of the VARA's chairman Simon van der Woude. Having shocked the labour leadership by stating that the VARA owed its success to its independence from the SDAP and the NVV, this bold would cost him dearly. Although the SDAP had no formal say over his position, when it renounced its faith in Van der Woude this signalled the end of his chairmanship. In fact, it even managed to designate a candidate for his vacant seat. Although Arend de Vries was not a prominent labour figure, he was a loyal and reliable party member. As such, the party leadership could reasonably expect that he would be more responsive to the urge for control and the assumption of authority which had shaped the SDAP's dealings with the VARA so far.

It was a mere coincidence that the Labour government was faced with the task of finding a new chairman for the BBC's Board of Governors at roughly the same moment, in early 1930. If the appointment of Arend de Vries exemplified the VARA's place within the partisan political order, the appointment of J.H. Whitley as the new BBC chairman seemed to exemplify the centrality of Parliament to Labour's understanding of broadcasting. It was explained in chapter five that Whitley, a Liberal, had served in the years before as the speaker of the House of Commons, which had earned him substantial praise for his diplomatic and impartial manner, also from Ramsay MacDonald. But Whitley's name was also connected to the so-called Whitley Councils, consultative bodies which were aimed at improving relations between employers and employees. And so, in light of what was noted above it might seem that Whitley was a perfect fit as the BBC's new chairman. However, chapter five has learned that the choice for Whitley was also, indirectly, an act of support to Reith in the conflict that had emerged between the BBC's Board and its Director General. In seeking to resolve this dispute the Labour government could have opted for the confrontational course, for instance by looking for the type of chairman who would counter and oppose Reith's dominant style of leadership. But by appointing Whitley the Labour government chose a conciliatory approach instead, since he was a more consensual figure. Indeed, this did have a positive impact on the relationship between Reith and the Board of Governors, which, under Whitley's guidance, came to adopt the (consultative) role which Reith had always had in mind. Others, however, were less pleased with this outcome. Among those were the two Labour commentators Harold Laski and Leonard Woolf, who noted that the BBC had virtually become a one-man reign, with no effective control from its Board or from Parliament. In reminding their readers of the democratic promise of broadcasting, they warned that Reith's supremacy might well turn the BBC into a danger to democracy. Ironically, it was the fall of Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government, in 1931, that would awake the Labour Party to these warnings and that would cause it to rediscover the urgency of the question of control in broadcasting.

In the Netherlands the SDAP had come to recognize as well that broadcasting and democracy formed a fragile partnership and, more particularly, that the forces of democracy could be mobilized to undermine the democratic potential of broadcasting. What is referred to here is

5 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 13-10-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 61.

the founding of the Radio Broadcasting Control Committee, which was set up as part of the larger deal that saw the 'fair' allocation of radio time in May 1930. While this deal granted a great degree of freedom to the private groups in broadcasting, the Control Committee's task was to protect the public interest in broadcasting, which amounted to a most illiberal form of censorship. Although the SDAP was, in a whole different way, consumed by the question of control in broadcasting as well, chapter six showed that the party leadership was greatly offended the Control Committee's rule. Rejecting this as a crude violation of the freedom of speech, it was explained that this provoked the SDAP's party leader Johan Willem Albarda to state in Parliament that his party would not accept political censorship 'from no-one, nowhere and never!'⁶ Albarda's aim had been to rally support against the preventive powers of the Control Committee, but the SDAP had clearly misjudged the aversion against the VARA and its 'poisonous' programmes and at one point it even seemed plausible that the parties in Parliament would vote for more stringent restrictions in broadcasting. While this helped to convince the party leadership to (quietly) back down on Albarda's pledge, it would also find that these developments made the VARA's leadership even more determined to stand up against outside pressures, whether these came from the Control Committee or from the SDAP.

Chapter six offered ample evidence of how the struggle between the SDAP and the VARA entered a new stage after the former obtain its equal share of the airwaves. On the short term, this caused the party leadership to complain about the poor quality of the VARA's programmes and to reiterate the need for a greater degree of control to prevent the broadcasting association from damaging the interests of the labour movement. Clearly, this was not the intention of the VARA's executives, but they did have a different opinion about the value of broadcasting to the labour movement and, more particularly, about the style and standard of their programmes. What's more, the newfound prominence of the VARA encouraged them to renegotiate their place within the labour hierarchy, which inevitably caused them to take on a more assertive stance towards the party leadership. Among other things, this was illustrated by the suggestion to turn the party- and trade-union delegates in the VARA's executive committee into advisory members. Although the VARA was talked out of pursuing this 'most disastrous' plan, the party's alarming response was symptomatic of the party's profound apprehension about broadcasting. But chapter six showed as well that this failed to appease the VARA and that it made sure to demarcate its territory every now and then. Such was for instance when party chairman Jan Oudegeest dared to 'breach' the VARA's authority by negotiating with the AVRO. It yielded him and the SDAP a stinging reproach that they would face 'severe resistance, if necessary very severe resistance' if they would continue their efforts without the VARA's consent.⁷ Looming over this was the larger question of the Control Committee's rule, which was another source of contention between the SDAP and the VARA. While the VARA was waging a permanent campaign against this body, it only received limited and lukewarm support in this from the SDAP. Although the party continued to raise questions in Parliament, the party leadership refused to march with the VARA at the multiple protest meetings the broadcasting association had organized throughout the country. Chapter six showed that this was largely in keeping with the position the party leadership had adopted after Albarda's defeat in Parliament. However, it was hardly beneficial to the party's relationship with the VARA, which remained strained and agitated up until the mid-1930s.

6 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 23-10-1930, 250, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

7 Letter VARA executive committee to J. Oudegeest 12-12-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1834f.

At the same time, these were only minor discomforts compared to the hardships which the early 1930s had in store for the Labour Party. The prelude to these developments was formed by the fall of Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government in 1931. Dramatic as this was, chapter five explained that the real drama was yet to unfold after MacDonald decided to part with his former fellows by heading a new national government, together with Conservatives and Liberals. In the cataclysm of events that followed the Labour Party found itself marginalized in Parliament, with a mere 52 seats it had managed to hold on to in the general election of October 1931. What added to its misery was the 'grave injustice' in broadcasting, because the Labour Party grew increasingly angry about the perceived advantages which the national government enjoyed in broadcasting over the opposition parties. While the previous part learned that the Labour Party's early understanding of broadcasting had revolved around a conception of democratic control, it was in the dire circumstances of the early 1930s that this demand for control resurfaced. In fact, chapter five showed that Labour's difficulties in broadcasting were far from over after 1931 and that this demand would reverberate louder and louder in Labour circles. This steady culmination was also reflected in Labour's choice of words, which grew starker and starker and which exposed the Labour Party's inability to come to terms with the new reality of broadcasting.

Initially, the Labour Party aimed its anger about its treatment in broadcasting against the BBC. Chapter five showed that it was Clement Attlee who asked his fellow MPs in the aftermath of the 1931 elections whether 'we have not created a Frankenstein which is going to break up our political life'. While this 'Frankenstein'-image seems to epitomize Labour's fears for the radical novelty of broadcasting, Attlee's suggestion was to take back control by setting a parliamentary advisory committee which would oversee and regulate the BBC's activities in the field of political broadcasting. In addition, the Labour Party had also sent a formal protest to the Conservative Postmaster General, but while he had answered that he held no responsibility in these matters, Attlee's appeal to Parliament suffered the same fate. In the following years this pattern would repeat itself, in the sense that Labour's complaints about the lasting 'injustice' in broadcasting were kindly listened to by the various agents involved – i.e. the Postmaster General, the BBC's Director General, the Board of Governors and the parties in Parliament –, but that all of these agents pointed elsewhere when it came to answering whose responsibility it was to solve the situation. Obviously, this was most unsatisfactory for the Labour Party, and it convinced the party leadership that the problem in broadcasting extended far beyond the BBC's flawed interpretation of its duties and that it was really a chain of neglect that was keeping this 'grave injustice' intact. This was exemplified, for instance, by the 1933 comments in *The Labour Magazine* which called on Parliament 'to abandon this complacency and face the facts', or by Attlee's appeal to the Postmaster General in the same year to veto government broadcasts since he held a 'definite responsibility' in these matters.⁸ Again, these words failed to have the intended effect and, this time, Labour responded by likening the government and the Postmaster General to a 'set of dictators' (Lansbury), and by warning that the government was getting into a 'Hitlerite' position (Attlee). And so, its mounting frustration caused the Labour leadership to embrace a rhetoric which did not only express its profound disillusion about the democratic development of broadcasting, but which also portrayed these developments as a threat to British democracy

8 *The Labour Magazine*, 11 (March 1933) 507 and *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 24-7-1933, 2262-2264, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

itself. The, irony, of course, was that the Labour Party's demand for control was also directly at odds with the BBC's independence, which was an important provision for the democratic future of broadcasting. However, the Labour leadership had so far shown little interest for the question of independence in broadcasting, which it largely saw as a poor cover behind which the government was hiding and enjoying its disproportional benefits in broadcasting.

In the Netherlands the SDAP had been forced to reflect on these matters from an opposite perspective. Here, it was not a lack of control which troubled the party leadership, but rather the excess of control as conducted by the Control Committee. Although its rule formed an outright denial of the party's beliefs, in contrast to the Labour Party the SDAP had, by 1933, largely fallen silent in its disapproval of the situation. Among other things this meant that it was (still) keeping its distance from the VARA's protest meetings, but beyond that it had also toned down the volume and temper of its parliamentary statements against the Control Committee. Its passive display was certainly remarkable, also since it stood in marked contrast with the mounting pressures on the VARA, which kept building up throughout 1931, 1932 and 1933. Then again, chapter six has shown that the SDAP's steady dissociation from this development was crucially shaped by its ambition to become a full-fledged part of national political life. In the previous years the party leadership had come to understand that the key to its political future was its credibility as a reliable and an acceptable coalition partner. Against this background the VARA's struggle with the Control Committee was most unwelcome to the SDAP, not only since it was an infinite source of negative publicity, but also since it placed the VARA on the margins of the democratic political order. While this was nowhere where the party leadership wanted to be, the turbulent years of the early 1930s proved a further test of its fragile respectability. However, chapter six illustrated as well that the VARA was relishing its place on the margins and that its interpretation of its task as a socialist broadcasting association was taking a radical turn as a result of the deepening politico-economic crisis of these years. Being caught in the middle, the SDAP would soon find that its silence did not shield it from the backlash of this conflict.

It was the VARA's broadcasting secretary Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek who claimed the lead in this process and in doing so he would prove his reputation as the VARA's foremost agitator. The background to these developments was the dispute between the SDAP's leadership and the party's left flank, which culminated in 1932 with the formation of the breakaway OSP. What's more, these developments would also see Zwertbroek's coming out as a vocal critic of the party leadership, which he accused, among other things, of acting as the 'administrators' of the class struggle.⁹ While it yielded Zwertbroek a seat on the party's executive committee, it also gave new urgency to the party's concerns about the VARA. Indeed, chapter six showed that these concerns were not unfounded and that Zwertbroek's spirit of resistance would lead the VARA and (indirectly) the SDAP in dangerous waters. An important factor in this was also the crackdown on all forms of 'extremism' by the new, Colijn government, which put the VARA under increasing pressure to comply with the Control Committee's regulations since it would otherwise be banned from the airwaves altogether. Among other things, these developments saw the introduction of a (highly symbolic) ban on *The Internationale*, but it would also cause a rift between Zwertbroek and his fellow executives of the VARA. Indeed, it was equally symbolic that this formed the prelude of Zwertbroek's end with the VARA, since he kept pushing and crossing the borders and boundaries without consulting or informing his fellow executives about

9 Zwertbroek, 'De "leiding" der Partij. Waar is de actie voor het Socialisme?.'

his plans. Although the party leadership was only remotely involved in this affair, Zwertbroek's downfall did have an immediate significance for the SDAP as well. Because chapter six explained that Zwertbroek's actions were in many ways symptomatic of the political outlook which the SDAP was seeking to steer away from. And so, his departure offered the SDAP an opportunity to forge a new understanding with the VARA and a chance to realign their activities in search of a shared position within the democratic political order.

Clearly, these developments would have passed unnoticed across the North Sea, but, quite remarkably, chapter five illustrated that Zwertbroek had, at different points in time, urged the Labour Party to look beyond the national boundaries in broadcasting. Such was for instance the case in 1932 when Zwertbroek invited the Labour Party on behalf of the ARI ('Arbeiter Radio Internationale', or Labour Wireless International) to join the ARI's plan of renting a weekly hour of radio time on the newly opened Luxembourg transmitter, so that 'the voice of social democracy' would 'call over Europe'.¹⁰ However, chapter five showed as well that the Labour Party was wary of being associated with the internationalist aspirations of its continental counterparts. Although its anger about its treatment in broadcasting was mounting, it was not inclined to use this offshore loophole as it decided to keep 'on the right side of the BBC'.¹¹ Obviously, this was only a minor occurrence in the larger scheme of things, but apart from being a curious encounter between the two part of this comparison, it offered telling proof as well of Labour's faith in the constitutional structures of the British broadcasting system. This was illustrated most clearly by Labour's repeated claims about the 'superiority' of this system and, more generally, by the party's embrace of the public corporation-model throughout these same years. Heading this process was Herbert Morrison, who played a minor but crucial role in the first part of this book as well, as one of the first Labour figures to advocate public ownership in broadcasting. In the early 1920s Morrison had argued more particularly that broadcasting should be transferred from the BBC to the Post Office and while this had caused him to stress the importance of Ministerial responsibility in broadcasting, beyond that he had also insisted on the supreme authority of Parliament 'as representative of the general body of citizens'.¹² Although this was more or less consistent with what his party fellows would claim throughout the following years, chapter five showed that Morrison had come to change his mind in the early 1930s about the question of control in broadcasting. Because in claiming that the BBC was on the whole doing its 'difficult job well and fairly', Morrison concluded that the BBC's independence should be upheld against calls for further control.¹³ Of course, this was only a minor element of his broader reflections on the merits of the public corporation-model, but it showed that Morrison had arrived at a conclusion which his party fellows were yet to accept. Although Morrison did manage to gather the broader party behind his ideas about the public corporation-model, his arguments failed to dispel or relieve the party's demand for control over the BBC, which would only grow stronger in the years ahead.

The Labour Party found an unexpected ally in this pursuit in John Reith, the BBC's Director General. Reith had his own reasons to be displeased with the BBC's present situation and he had come to reject its fate as an object of endless political wrangling between the government and the opposition. Although Reith's aim – to bolster the BBC's independence – was contrary

10 Letter G.J. Zwertbroek to Labour Party November 1932, LHASC, inv. nr. WG/LWI/1-28.

11 Inter-Departmental Correspondence November 1932, LHASC, inv. nr. WG/LWI/1-28.

12 'Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, inv. nr. R4/65/1, f. 6.

13 Morrison, *Socialisation and Transport*, 154-155.

to the Labour Party's demand for control, chapter five showed that he managed to rally the Labour Party behind his plan of a transfer of Ministerial responsibility for broadcasting from the Postmaster General to a senior cabinet member. It was the Ullswater Committee of 1935-1936 that provided Reith and the Labour Party with the opportunity to state their views about the future of broadcasting. While Clement Attlee was the Labour Party's invited member of this committee, Arthur Greenwood and Walter Citrine were Labour's witnesses to appear before this body. In claiming that the BBC's present charter and license had failed to circumscribe the 'unparalleled power' which broadcasting had turned out to be, they argued for 'fundamental changes' to the BBC's constitutional structures. More particularly, their claims focussed on the flawed mechanism of accountability in broadcasting, and while Labour's written evidence stated that the BBC derived 'its powers from Parliament, this caused Arthur Greenwood to insist that 'Parliament ought to be able to say something' about the BBC. These statements were not new and similar comments had been made in the early 1920s, but by now it was almost becoming a routine practice for Labour figures to advocate the primacy of Parliament over the BBC. Although its repeated calls for parliamentary scrutiny had been ignored throughout the past years, with the Ullswater Committee adopting the suggested transfer of Ministerial responsibility it seemed for a moment that Labour's persistence would pay off.

However, the final verdict over the Ullswater recommendations lay with the Baldwin government that took office after the general election of November 1935. Chapter five showed that the government was not prepared to change the stance earlier government had taken in the years before. So claiming that it had no desire to increase the 'extent of control' over the BBC, or to limit the Broadcasting Corporation's independence, the new Postmaster General simply used the words of his predecessors to dismiss the transfer of the responsibility for broadcasting, even though it had been recommended by the Ullswater Report. For the Labour Party this was a bitter pill to swallow and it caused its various commentators to turn up their rhetoric to the highest pitch. So, among other things this provoked George Lansbury to note that John Reith 'would have made a very excellent Hitler in this country', while it triggered former Postmaster General Bertrand Lees-Smith to label the BBC as 'the nearest thing in this country to Nazi-government that can be shown.'¹⁴ At this point it needs no explanation that these statements were somewhat disproportionate, but chapter five has argued as well that these claims had little to do with the brutalities of Nazi Germany, and everything with the democratic conception that had shaped the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting from the early 1920s onwards. In a different way, this was also reflected in Lees-Smith's ultimate appeal to Parliament that 'we, and not the Director General of the BBC, are the supreme authority', or in George Lansbury's forthright call – 'I want Parliamentary control'.¹⁵ These were statements with a defeatist undertone and there was no denying that the Labour Party's decade-and-a-half pursuit of control had left the party frustrated and empty-handed. Although uncomfortable, it seemed the moment had arrived for the Labour Party to reconsider its stance towards the BBC, perhaps to begin with by accepting the implications of its independence more fully. Obviously, this was not an overnight process, but chapter five showed that the party was offered a much anticipated opportunity to renew its relationship with the BBC when John Reith announced his departure in 1938. Reith's exit left a big hole, but it also cleared a heap of resentment that had piled up from the 1920s onwards.

14 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debates 6-7-1936, 911 and 17-12-1936, 2730, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

15 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 6-7-1936, 912-913, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

Although the first meeting between the Labour leadership and the BBC's new Director General seemed to open the door to a brighter future, their acquaintance was violently interrupted in its initial stage by the outbreak of the second World War. And so one question the following part of this book will have to answer is whether this cautious reconciliation was somehow reflected in the sphere of programmes, or whether it was much too soon to observe such an effect.

At that point in time the SDAP's leadership was fully aware as well of the merits of moving beyond the clouds of frustration that had loomed above its dealings with broadcasting from the early 1920s onwards. It was noted already that the SDAP was not so much faced with a lack of control, but rather with an excess of control, in the form of the Control Committee's censorship of broadcasting. Although the SDAP had initially rejected the Control Committee's actions, in the years afterwards it had steadily toned down its protests against this body, albeit without tempering its fundamental objections against its conduct. While this process was paralleled by the party's efforts to cement its place within the democratic order, the SDAP was only released from this predicament when the VARA decided to accept the Control Committee's rule as unjust, but inevitable. This move was effectuated by the VARA's new broadcasting secretary Arie Pleysier, whose appointment was orchestrated by a close friend of his, the SDAP's chairman Koos Vorrink. His role in this process highlighted that the SDAP had the capacity to exert a decisive influence over the VARA, even though it did not have much formal authority over the broadcasting association. What's more, in the previous years the SDAP had also learned that it should only use its influence sparingly and without provoking the VARA's executives into counterproductive responses. By pushing Pleysier's candidacy Vorrink hoped to steer the broadcasting association in a new direction, which was more in tune with his ambitions for the SDAP and the larger labour movement. Indeed, chapter six learned that the VARA's accommodating stance towards the Control Committee was really part of a broader shift that was set in motion after Zwertbroek's departure. While the latter's influence had kept the VARA on a collision course with the authorities in- and outside the labour movement, Pleysier's arrival paved the way for a more productive partnership. Among other things this was illustrated by the VARA's acceptance of the nation and the monarchy in its programmes. Chapter six showed that these steps were not only taken in close consultation with the party leadership, but that it also allowed the SDAP to follow in the VARA's footsteps.

Obviously, this was a most welcome break from their troubled past, but it would not take long before party chairman Vorrink came to think the VARA was marching too far ahead of the party's line. This was partly informed by the VARA's popular turn, which Vorrink came to condemn as a threat to the moral and political spirit of the labour movement. However, it was also fuelled by the disappointing results of the party's campaign for its Plan of Labour. It was explained that this campaign formed an unprecedented promotional spectacle, both in scale and methods, and while it lasted a year and a half, the following part of this book will ask what the VARA's contribution to this campaign was. The previous chapter observed that the campaign failed to boost the party's support to the extent the SDAP had hoped for, and that this formed a severe setback to party chairman Vorrink, as the main architect of this campaign. In the aftermath of these developments Vorrink launched his plan for a radical overhaul of the labour movement's cultural branch, which would require the VARA to merge with the Institute for Workers Education. Anticipating that this would provide the SDAP with a greater degree of control over the various organizations – the VARA included –, this plan formed a most remarkable conclusion to the party's struggle with the broadcasting association throughout the past decade-and-a-half. However, chapter six illustrated as well that it received no support

whatsoever, not only since it misjudged the size and status the VARA had acquired in these years, but also since the wider party leadership was not inclined to turn back the clock on the party's relationship with the VARA. Although this affair ended in a personal rift between Vorrink and Pleysier, chapter six explained that it did not disturb or damage the party's relationship with the VARA. As such, it seemed to suggest that the SDAP had finally and fully come to accept the VARA as an integral and independent part of the labour movement.

And so, with this we have reached the end of the interwar decades as a period in which the SDAP and the Labour Party were rudely awoken to the political implications of broadcasting. Throughout these years both parties encountered serious difficulties in their dealings with broadcasting. Although the context and causes of these difficulties were completely different, looking back on the two chapters that make up the second part of this book it remains most remarkable how deeply problematic the introduction to broadcasting was for both parties. Of course, this conclusion noted that the emergence of broadcasting evoked a demand for control in both countries, not only with the SDAP's and the Labour Party's leadership, but also with other inhabitants of the political realm. While the pages above offer a broad overview of the various guises in which this demand dressed itself and how it affected both parties' dealings with broadcasting, they leave the larger and more fundamental question unanswered of what the significance of this demand was for the relationship between politics and broadcasting. Although the previous chapters contain various clues about the possible meaning of this demand, this is not the place to elaborate on this question for the simple reason that we have only covered the first half of the task that was laid down in this book's introduction. What's more, it is a particular argument of this book that the impact of broadcasting on politics is a product of the interplay between institutional and cultural forces. So far, this book has mainly dwelled in the institutional sphere, and it is really the third part that enters the cultural sphere more fully. In doing so, it takes a closer look at the dealings of both parties with radio as a medium in relation to their involvement in political broadcasting. And so this brings us to, what was earlier referred to as, the epicentre of broadcasting. As such it is the third part of this book which offers the most immediate view of the transformative impact of radio on politics. While this should help to expose what lay beneath this demand for control, beyond that it should also help to highlight the nature and degree of change which radio brought to Dutch and British political culture, notably of course with regards to the SDAP and the Labour Party.

A phantom medium?

Part III

'Jazz politics'

Part III

'Jazz politics'

Introduction

By the end of the 1920s the BBC was a regular guest in millions of British households. With a history spanning a near-century, these were still the early years of broadcasting and although the Broadcasting Corporation was by now an established institution, it had really just begun to open the world to its listeners. In the years before the BBC had served its audience with an endless supply of music, information and entertainment, but in doing so it had also met with significant distrust and scepticism. Indeed, among those areas of public life which remained apprehensive about the BBC's aspirations was the world of politics and, so far, the keepers of the political realm had kept the Corporation on a very tight leash with regards to its efforts to develop political broadcasting. Some of this resounded in a letter which the BBC's Director General, John Reith received in August 1930 from the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald. Writing the BBC's Director General in his capacity as Britain's acting Prime Minister, MacDonald warned Reith that the 'only way the BBC can protect itself is by planning its political broadcasting in close co-operation with the Parties' and he lectured him that 'just as [the BBC] supplies Jazz rubbish (not even good Jazz) for popular consumption so, if it is not careful with its politics, it will have to supply Jazz politics.'¹ Although Reith was the last person in Britain who needed this warning – he had a profound distaste for Jazz and his aim in broadcasting was to elevate the public taste, instead of catering to it – MacDonald's words did offer an unpleasant reminder that the BBC's ideal of democratic enlightenment was crucially circumscribed by the scepticism about broadcasting among the leaders of the country.²

Ramsay MacDonald was not the last to blend the connotations of Jazz and popular culture to warn for the corrupting influence of broadcasting on politics. In fact, chapter six revealed a similar example from the Dutch case, when the SDAP's party chairman Koos Vorrink lashed out against the 'vulgarity' of broadcasting and the popular appeal of a 'Jazz band' to bemoan the poor turnout at a party meeting. Vorrink voiced these complaints in December 1939, towards the end of a tumultuous decade that had seen a stormy but steady improvement of the SDAP's relationship with its affiliated broadcasting association the VARA. Still, in the previous years Vorrink's own appreciation of the VARA had taken a negative turn and this would result in a bitter feud with the VARA's broadcasting secretary, and his former friend Arie Pleysier. While this conflict was partly shaped by the VARA's refusal to support Vorrink's plan for a reorganization of the labour movement's cultural branch, chapter six indicated that it was also informed by Vorrink's ideas about the influence of broadcasting on party political culture.³ Of course, in making these claims Vorrink and his SDAP faced entirely

1 'Minute on BBC papers', WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

2 Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 250-251 and Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting*, 37-39.

3 Chapter six, page 211-214.

different circumstances than Ramsay MacDonald and his Labour Party, but the question is how important these shared concerns have been in shaping both parties' involvement with broadcasting in the realm of programmes. More particularly, the following chapters chart the role and contribution of both parties to the evolution of political broadcasting. Although the VARA's and the BBC's outlook differed greatly, exploring these developments from a party perspective should help to gain new insight in the significance of radio to interwar political culture.

So with this we return to the early- to the mid-1920s, as the years that witnessed the first entry of broadcasting in Dutch and British political culture. At the time, radio was unlike any other medium of communication that was being used by politicians and parties, and this period is commonly associated with the display of mass politics at public gatherings, notably in the form of political meetings or mass demonstrations. What's more, it was explained elsewhere that both Britain and the Netherlands had seen the introduction of (male) universal suffrage a few years earlier and that this had, by and large, tripled the size of the electorate in both countries.⁴ Yet, the influx of millions of new voters did not lead to the political upheaval which many observers had feared beforehand. In fact, historians of Dutch and British political culture have noted that the early 1920s marked a shift towards a period of relative calm and quiet, at least in terms of the public's involvements with politics. Among those to reflect on these issues is Jon Lawrence and, in charting the evolution of political meetings in interwar Britain, he argues that the years after the First World War paved the way to a more orderly and restrained style of public politics.⁵ In the Netherlands circumstances were completely different, but a parallel development has been observed by Dutch historians, for instance by Henk te Velde.⁶ Among these is Henk te Velde labels these decades as a period of 'normal politics' which increasingly came to revolve around the 'pillarized' communities, a stable, deferential public and the primacy of the established political parties.⁷

However, this is not to say that the perceived 'normality' or stability of interwar politics remained unchallenged. Indeed, the previous chapters have shown that the emergence of broadcasting caused a real sense of crisis among the political establishment in both countries. Reactions varied, but it was generally felt that radio was such a powerful instrument that it ought to be used with the greatest caution and restraint. Of course, the arrival of radio did not stand on its own, but was part of a broader media-technological shift that included the emergence of film and the rise of the popular press. While this changing mass media complex would have a profound impact on the display of politics throughout the 20th century, here, our concern lies with the advent of radio in interwar political culture. Various authors have reflected on this issue, and it has been noted, for instance, that the introduction of radio saw the birth of a new kind of public, i.e. the broadcasting audience, and that politicians were required to adjust their rhetoric and manner of speaking to the medium-specific qualities of radio.⁸ Although some of these insights have found their way into the historiography of

4 Introduction part one, page 50.

5 Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics', 185-216.

6 Te Velde, 'Perceptions of the Masses in Dutch Politics', 19-22 and Loots, *Voor het volk, van het volk*, 181-184 and Jaap van Rijn, *De eeuw van het debat. De ontwikkeling van het publieke debat in Nederland en Engeland 1800-1920* (Amsterdam 2010) 257-259.

7 Henk te Velde, 'Het wij-gevoel van een morele gemeenschap. Een politiek-culturele benadering van partijgeschiedenis', *Jaarboek Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen 2004* (Groningen 2005) 106-123, there 108. Te Velde borrows the term 'normal politics' from Ido de Haan, who juxtaposes this with periods of 'constitutional politics' when the entire constitution of politics was being contested or under construction. See also De Haan, *Politieke reconstructie*.

8 For example Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age. The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York and Oxford 1988), Craig, *Fireside Politics*, Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public*, Wijffes, 'Spellbinding and Crooning', Wijffes, 'Echt en oprecht'.

Dutch and British political culture as well, there are other subjects which require further attention. Because whenever radio is mentioned, it is often portrayed as a medium of secondary importance, which was only used by individual politicians on certain occasions, notably in the run-up to general elections.⁹ This does not only ignore the ongoing efforts of politicians and parties to use radio outside election times, it also ignores the various programmes which did open the political realm to the broadcasting audience throughout these years. Although the historiography of broadcasting provides some insight in these matters, inevitably it only offers a partial picture of the motives and strategies which informed the party political dealings with radio.¹⁰ And so, in turning the spotlight on the SDAP and the Labour Party, the following chapters set out to provide a more comprehensive account of how these parties were involved and affected by the emergence of radio.

In doing so, these chapters follow Michael Schudson's work on the 'politics of narrative form' and they explore, what might be called, the 'politics of programmatic form'.¹¹ To be clear, Schudson's study has little immediate relevance to the subject under consideration here, but, among other things, it stresses the need to look beyond the medium itself to understand the place and role of this medium in political culture. So in arguing for a broad contextualized approach, Schudson insists that 'it is true that a new technology can condition politics and society, such a technology appears and comes into use only in certain political and social circumstances. The way the technology is used has a relation to, but is not fully determined by, the technology itself'.¹² While these words seem particularly important to a comparative undertaking of this kind, elsewhere Schudson also emphasizes that the 'power of the media lies not only (...) in its power to declare things to be true, but in its power to provide the forms in which the declarations appear'.¹³ His argument is too elaborate to be covered here, but among other things it reminds that programmes were no neutral conveyors of a given political reality, but that the making of programmes formed an intrinsic part of the construction of political reality and, moreover, that the form of programmes was crucially inscribed with assumption about the political world. And so, in a most general sense this leads the following chapters to chart the making and evolution of those programmes in which the SDAP and the Labour Party were most immediately involved. Although these chapters will show greatly divergent pictures, it is anticipated that this can offer further insight in both parties' understanding of radio and their broader ideas about its place in political culture. What's more, one particular category of programmes the following chapters will also look at are the party election broadcasts. The form of these broadcasts was rather basic, a straight talk, but they do make an interesting opportunity to compare the rhetoric of the SDAP's and the Labour Party's leaders before the radio microphone. What's more, charting the changing language of these talks should offer an indication as well of the extent to which both parties learned to master the intricacies of this medium throughout these decades.

When looking at these issues it is equally interesting to consider the relationship between the emergence of broadcasting and, what might be called, the changing spatiality of politics. Key to this were the medium-specific qualities of radio and, more particularly, its capacity to transcend the boundaries

9 For instance Te Velde, *Strijlen van leiderschap*, 135, Lawrence, *Electing our masters*, 97-99, J. Antcliffe, 'Politics of the Airwaves', *History Today* 34 (1984) 4-10, Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, 23. An exception in this case is the work of Beers, *Your Britain. Media and the Making of the Labour Party*, which offers a broader perspective on the Labour Party's dealings with broadcasting, even though it still shows far more interest in the party's dealings with the press.

10 For instance, Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 22-118, Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics', Scannell and Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 23-102.

11 Michael Schudson, 'The Politics of Narrative Form' in: Idem, *The Power of News* (Cambridge Mass. 1995) 53-71.

12 Schudson, 'The Politics of Narrative Form', 54.

13 Ibidem.

of space by sending a signal from one location to an endless range of receivers at other locations. What's more, this signal was immediately available to those receivers and it created, what the media sociologist John B. Thompson has called, a sense of 'despatialized simultaneity'.¹⁴ Among other things this meant that radio allowed its users access to events that were taking place elsewhere – say parliamentary debates, mass demonstrations or party meetings – without having to leave the seclusion of their own living room. However, the mere presence of a radio microphone also changed the nature and performative dynamics of these events, as it required the speakers to address the present public and the unseen audience, both at the same time. What made things even more difficult was the fact that the broadcasting audience was unlike any other public – the crowds or gatherings – politicians had so far faced. While its size was potentially enormous, its temper was not so much defined by its collective shape, but rather by the mood of the individual listeners. This is why Jason Loviglio has labelled the broadcasting audience an 'intimate public', and his work highlights how radio urged politicians to redefine their public persona and to cultivate a more personal or private style.¹⁵ While he uses this notion to explore F.D. Roosevelt's 'fireside chats', the question here is how the SDAP and the Labour Party leaders dealt with this 'intimate public' and to which extent the leaders of both parties managed to shake off their platform manners and to cultivate a new presentation that suited the domestic setting of broadcasting.

Looming above these matters is a final, larger question. If radio has played a marginal role in the writings of political history, the same cannot be said about the notion of politics as theatre. Admittedly, this comparison may strike a little odd, since the latter is mostly used as a metaphor or a model to capture the performative side of politics, whereas the former serves here as a medium of political communication and publicity. However, broadcasting and theatre make two contrasting cultural institutions as well, which rely in a most fundamental sense on two contrasting modes of communication, i.e. with the absent audience and the present public.¹⁶ This is also acknowledged by, for example, Jon Lawrence, who charts the changing culture of elections in modern British politics in terms of the changing relationship between, what he calls, 'the theatre of public politics' and the rise of 'mediated forms of campaigning'.¹⁷ A similar interest pervades the work of the Dutch historian, Henk te Velde. He has written several books and articles which use the notion of politics as theatre to explore the performative dynamics of politics throughout the 19th and the 20th century.¹⁸ Although Lawrence and, to a lesser extent, Te Velde have noted the role of radio in these developments, this was no subject of any real priority to either and, similar to what was noted above, they have mainly acknowledged its significance as a medium for individual politicians on select occasions.¹⁹ This is notably different from the purpose of the following chapters, which will look at radio in a more elaborate and detailed way. As such, it remains to be seen whether this can tell us anything new about the implications of broadcasting for the performative side of politics and, moreover, whether it can shed a new light on the significance of radio for the notion of politics as theatre.

14 John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*, 32-33. The same notion is applied by Wijffes, 'Spellbinding and Crooning', 150.

15 Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public*.

16 Interesting in this respect is what Walter Benjamin writes about the opposition between radio and theatre and the broadcasting experiments in the early 1930s in Weimar Germany to develop a kind of collaboration between the two forms. Walter Benjamin, 'Theatre and Radio. On the mutual supervision of their educational roles' in: Lecia Rosenthal ed., *Radio Benjamin* (London and New York 2014) 365-368.

17 Jon Lawrence, 'The Culture of Elections in Modern Britain', *History* 96 (2011) 459-476, there 462.

18 For instance Henk te Velde, *Sprekende politiek. Redenaars en hun publiek in de parlementaire gouden eeuw* (Amsterdam 2015) 25-35 or Henk te Velde, *Het theater van de politiek* (Amsterdam 2003).

19 Lawrence, *Electing our masters*, 97-99 and Te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap*, 133-135.

'So glad that progress is being made'

The Labour Party, the BBC and party politics in programmes

7.1 'You will never broadcast a great stage scene'

For some-one who once claimed to be 'indifferent' to broadcasting, the Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald developed a keen eye for radio. Over the years Ramsay MacDonald established a friendly relationship with the BBC's Director General, John Reith, and although their dealings were often clouded by political concerns, among the many subjects both men came to discuss was the intricacies of programme making. It was noted above that this caused MacDonald to warn Reith for the spectre of 'Jazz politics' and to urge him to seek a close collaboration with the political parties. However, the subject of Jazz had also featured in an earlier letter of MacDonald. Some years earlier (in January 1927) MacDonald had approached Reith to recommend an acquaintance of him for a position with the BBC and he had seized this opportunity to inform his fellow Scotsman about the many hours he had spent near his radio-set during 'the last week or so'.¹ As a 'regular listener-in' MacDonald had noted that the BBC's programmes had received a rather bad press, and, apparently, he felt the need to encourage Reith ('I know your difficulties, and no man alive can keep at a steady and even flow of production') and to offer him some advice on what he had heard in the past weeks or so.²

So one of the things MacDonald noted was that the 'gulf between your jazz (..) and your high-brow stuff (..) was far too clearly marked' and he argued it would do the BBC much good if it managed to find the right balance between the needs and the demands of the broadcasting audience. Key to this was a strategy of patience and commitment: 'You certainly must give us good classical music, but I think if you time it so that the people who appreciate it would be in so that you would not encroach too much upon your mass tastes, whilst at the same time, you encroach enough upon your mass to educate them, and thus enable you to expand, you would be following the line of best educational value.'³ If this shows MacDonald's commitment to Reith's pursuit of cultural enlightenment, more interesting is what he had to say about the BBC's drama programmes. Because he frankly informed Reith that 'somehow or other' he did not 'enjoy these dramatic items'. The reason for this, he thought, was that broadcasting was not capable of evoking the 'total effect' which gave the great works of drama their tremendous power: 'In devising the art of the radio drama you have to work as it were on two dimensions: the actual dramatic

1 Letter J.R. MacDonald to J.W. Reith 12-1-1927, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1437/2.

2 Ibidem.

3 Letter J.R. MacDonald to J.W. Reith 18-1-1927, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1437/2.

value of the words and the tone of voice. Can you ever devise a drama with such limitations?⁴ MacDonald knew the answer to this question already. He had written Reith in a previous letter that radio was deprived of its dramatic value by the missing of the visual factor – 'to me drama is not, and never will be, merely the spoken word, and that, I think, is your problem' – to which he had gloomily added 'you will never broadcast a great stage scene.'⁵

Looking back a near-century later it is easy to dismiss these words, but in early 1927 MacDonald's scepticism seemed less ill-founded. At the time, the BBC was still pondering on the question of how to devise a new form of broadcasting drama on the basis of the particular qualities and limitations of radio. Among those to reflect on these developments are Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff and they refer, for example, to the appointment of a BBC research group in 1928, which was charged to experiment with the forms, techniques and presentation of radio programmes.⁶ Still, our interest lies with the presentation of politics in programmes and it is notably from this perspective that MacDonald's statements ask for a further exploration. Because it was noted above that historians of political culture have used the analogy between theatre and politics to analyse the changing manifestation of politics throughout history. Against this background the Labour leader's claims can be read as a commentary on the political value of broadcasting as well. Although the term politics did not feature in these letters, it seems unlikely that MacDonald wrote these words without somehow thinking about his own experience with radio, which offered a poignant illustration of the difficulties it posed to its first users in the early 1920s.

'A local success, but a national disaster'

What is referred to here is MacDonald's encounter with the radio microphone in the campaign for the general election of October 1924. It was explained in chapter three that the 1924 campaign witnessed the introduction of radio as a medium of party propaganda, after the Labour Postmaster General Vernon Hartshorn had allowed the BBC to organize three election speeches by the leaders of the main parties.⁷ This was a significant departure in the history of British politics, but it did not go too well for the Labour Party, which was fighting this election as the party that had governed the country in the past year. What's more, the 1924 campaign was overshadowed by the *Daily Mail's* publication of the so-called 'Zinoviev letter', which called upon British communists to prepare for the takeover of power. This document was a forgery, but its message stirred up fears across the country for the forces of extremism and disorder. The Labour Party was a common target of these concerns and it was widely portrayed in the popular press as a bunch of militants and radicals, who were waiting for their chance to wreak chaos upon the British shores. In those circumstances it was up to Ramsay MacDonald to make the most of the opportunities which radio offered. However, the Labour leader's did not only make a 'disastrous' impression, unintentionally it also added to the image of his party as an agent of turmoil and disruption.⁸

And yet, this would not have been a unanimous verdict. Among those to have heard MacDonald's election talk on the eve of 13 October were the thousands of people, who had

4 Ibidem.

5 Letter MacDonald to Reith 12-1-1927, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1437/2.

6 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 135-137.

7 Chapter three, page 74-75.

8 A. Salter, *Personality in politics. Studies in contemporary statesmen* (London 1947) 57-58.

gathered in Glasgow's City Hall. MacDonald's speech in Glasgow formed the conclusion of a long day travelling, which had begun at ten o'clock in the morning in London and which had taken him to deliver three long addresses during the day already.⁹ This was nothing compared to the next day, when MacDonald's grand speaking tour took him to no less than sixteen places, where, each time, he would draw large crowds of people to hear him speak. While this placed a serious strain on his voice, it appears that it did not prevent MacDonald from electrifying Glasgow's City Hall with his presence and message. A commentator in *The Times* reported how the Labour leader worked up the crowd: 'He raised his voice to its highest pitch and he dropped to a whisper. He turned to the right and to the left, and even behind him, and spoke to all parts of the hall. He strode up and down the platform (..).'¹⁰ According to Mary Agnes Hamilton – a journalist and an aspiring Labour MP, who was writing a biography of MacDonald at the time – the Labour leader made an enormous impression as he drove his public to 'white heat'.¹¹

Unfortunately for MacDonald and the Labour Party, his audience was far larger than the thousands of people who had flocked together to see and hear him in person. With ca. one million licensed radio sets, the size of the crowd at Glasgow's City Hall was a mere fraction of the audience that may have tuned in to MacDonald's speech from their homes.¹² What's more, to those listening-in through their radio-sets the Labour leader's address made an a rather different impression, not only since large parts of his speech were lost to the microphone by his movements on stage, but also since MacDonald's style (and volume) of speaking was poorly matched to the setting of the home. This did not come as a surprise to John Reith, who had urged the party leaders to deliver these talks from the BBC-studio. But while MacDonald had rejected his advice, Reith thought the result was 'quite hopeless', and he noted in his diary that it would do the Labour Party 'considerable harm'.¹³ Others held a similar opinion and a later commentator wrote of 'a local success, but a national disaster': 'to the fireside listeners, serious, attentive, comprehensive of every type of opinion, hearing only a disembodied voice and able to see neither the speaker nor each other, his platform oratory seemed inconsecutive and irresponsible ranting'.¹⁴ What made things worse is that MacDonald's opponent, the Conservative party leader Stanley Baldwin, proved to be a much more effective radio speaker. Other than MacDonald, he had listened to the advice of Reith, and he had even taken the effort to visit the BBC's premises the day before his talk to make himself familiar with the routine of speaking from the studio. According to Reith this had helped him to deliver an 'excellent twenty minute talk', which, he thought, would 'win the election for him'.¹⁵

7.2 Party politics in public

Reith was right about the outcome of the 1924 election, which yielded a sweeping victory for the Conservative Party, and a modest loss for the Labour Party. Even so, broadcasting played a minor part during this election campaign and there is no proof whatsoever that it was really

9 Ryan, *Labour and the media in Britain*, 445 and D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London 1977) 379.

10 As quoted in J. Antcliffe, 'Politics of the Airwaves', *History Today* 34 (1984) 4-10.

11 Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, 379.

12 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 22.

13 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 90.

14 Salter, *Personality in politics*, 58.

15 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 90.

Baldwin's election broadcast that sealed his party's triumph. The same can be said about Ramsay MacDonald's election speech which could not prevent Labour's loss at the polls, but which does not explain the party's defeat either. So, instead of speculating about the impact of these talks on the election results, it is more useful to take a look at some of the broader developments that were shaping the public manifestation of politics in the 1920s. Because it was explained in the introduction to this part that this was a period of significant change, which did not only see the arrival of a new mass electorate, but also a steady shift towards a more quiet and orderly style of public politics. This is a far larger subject than can be covered here, but exploring some of the practices and ideas that shaped the Labour Party's dealings (mediated and non-mediated) with the public indicates that the promise of radio was more consonant with the party's outlook in the mid-1920s than MacDonald's 'disastrous' election broadcast seems to suggest.

To be clear, MacDonald's unfortunate encounter with the microphone was a telling sign of his inexperience with broadcasting, but the choice to dismiss Reith's advice to come to the studio was not wholly unsound. In deciding to relay MacDonald's speech from a public event, the Labour Party sought to reconcile the novelty of radio with the significance which public meetings and public speaking had had to the party in the past decades.¹⁶ From its earliest beginning the Labour Party had crucially relied on the power of the spoken word and the unrelenting activity of its agents to propagate its message on street-corners, in parks, halls and all sorts of other venues in between. Commenting on the Labour Party's electoral triumph in the 1906 election, *The Times* observed for example that 'public speaking is their principal weapon and they use it to the utmost'.¹⁷ Among those to be elected to Parliament in that year was Ramsay MacDonald, and his long-standing commitment to the labour movement gave him a vast experience in addressing publics of all shapes and sizes. While this was essentially the same for any labour figure, in MacDonald the Labour Party had a leader who is generally recognized as one of the foremost platform orators of his age.¹⁸ Rodney Barker notes in this respect that MacDonald's 'grand and flexible style of oratory' was particularly well suited for the public meeting.¹⁹ What's more, he refers to an eye-witness account of the scene at a 1924 meeting – 'the hall was packed to suffocation and the street outside was crowded with people, many with tickets, who had failed to get in' – to highlight MacDonald's capacity to excite, encourage and inspire the public with his manners on stage.²⁰

At that time things had already begun to change and the purpose of political meetings was different from ten or twenty years ago. Part of this followed from the unprecedented increase in the size of the electorate and MacDonald himself once noted that the introduction of universal suffrage was like 'a flood of waters for which no preparation had been made'; elsewhere he claimed that 'it may seem (..) sheer folly and perversity to allow this mass to pass important judgments upon the highest and most complicated matters of State'.²¹ Equally important in this respect was the widespread fear for the 'brutalization' of society which haunted Britain in the immediate

16 Owen Peterson, 'The role of public speaking in the early years of the British Labour Party', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 48 (1962) 254-260.

17 As quoted in Peterson, 'The role of public speaking in the early years of the British Labour Party', 254-255.

18 For instance Te Velde, 'Trust and the development of party politics: Ramsay MacDonald's "betrayal"', 77-83, there 78, Peterson, 'The role of public speaking in the early years of the British Labour Party' and Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 104-105.

19 Rodney Barker, 'Political myth. Ramsay MacDonald and the Labour Party', *History* 61 (1976) 46-56, there 51.

20 Barker, 'Political myth. Ramsay MacDonald and the Labour Party', 51.

21 As quoted in Griffiths, 'Dubious Democrats', 33.

years after the First World War. Among those who were troubled by the spectre of disorder and violence were the leading politicians of the three parties.²² Although these parties had learned to embrace and tolerate the boisterous, assertive and sometimes volatile nature of the people they were meant to represent, in the early 1920s these developments prompted a broad debate about the ills of 'rowdiness', 'disturbance' and 'disruption'.²³ While the Labour Party was often accused of being a party of violent extremists, this was all the more reason for the Labour leadership to distance themselves from the 'rough and tumble' of old-style public politics and to advocate a shift towards a more orderly state of affairs. What's more, Jon Lawrence notes that interwar Labour leaders were prone to see themselves as the voice of an organized, self-disciplined and rational public. Closely connected to this was the conviction that the party's meetings were not about entertainment, but about education, and that their main purpose was to encourage the public to take a serious interest in the political issues of the day.²⁴

This was part of a broader outlook. Pervading Labour's socialism was an educational ethos which held that society was moving towards a higher moral order and that it was the labour movement's task to awaken the people to this cause through an endless educational and propagandist effort.²⁵ In a most narrow sense this was reflected in the activities of organizations like the Workers' Educational Association or the Socialist Sunday Schools, but it had a profound impact as well on Labour's approach to publicity and propaganda.²⁶ A key example in this respect was the Labour newspaper, the *Daily Herald*. According to Laura Beers the *Herald* revealed a 'near monomaniacal obsession with political education'.²⁷ So supplying its readers with a heavy diet of politics and propaganda, the editors of the *Herald* were firmly convinced of the need for facts, information and rational debate and their ideal was an educated democracy. In the words of Ernest Bevin 'Labour's press must be a real educational factor, provoking thought and stimulating ideas'.²⁸ This also meant there was no space in the *Daily Herald* for the frivolities or sensationalism that spiced up the popular (or 'capitalist') press, indeed much to the public's approval. Although this was far from beneficial for the appeal (and sales) of the *Herald*, in the mid-1920s the dominant conviction was still that Labour's pursuit of a 'new Jerusalem' was a long-term project, which required patience, persistence and a diligent belief in its educational values.

But this is not the whole story. Because various developments were brewing underneath this established doctrine, which would eventually lead to a larger shift in the party's understanding of its relationship with the public. Greatly important, for example, was the realization that the newly created mass electorate was really a different creature from the crowds and gatherings which had defined the display of public politics in the decades before. It was increasingly recognized that the extension of the franchise had not caused 'the flood of waters' which some (Ramsay MacDonald) had feared, but that it had created a vast sea of quiet voters instead, or a 'silent majority', which required a new approach to publicity and propaganda. In the early 1920s the Labour Party's journal for party agents, the *Labour Organiser*, argued for instance that the new mass electorate

22 Lawrence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom', 563-564.

23 Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics', 196-203.

24 Ibidem, 210-211.

25 Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought', 11-12.

26 D. Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Basingstoke and New York 2005) 16-17.

27 Beers, *Your Britain*, 90.

28 As quoted in Beers, 'Education or Manipulation?', 139.

wanted 'higher things (..) than the old-time election methods' and that it wanted 'reasoned argument, devoid of the band, banner and shouting'; at a later point the same journal claimed that Labour should 'adopt quieter methods' to reach out to 'the quiet, ordinary citizen who keeps his politics to himself'.²⁹ Comments like these often resonated with gendered undertones, which was the immediate result of the two-step inclusion (in 1918 and 1928) of women into the mass electorate.³⁰ Still, the challenge to reach out to this 'silent majority' was much more complex than merely finding a way to speak to male or female voters, since the overall body of citizens was really composed by a multitude of (competing and overlapping) interests and identities. Someone who was quick to recognize the implications of these developments was the leading Fabian Sidney Webb. In 1922 he coined the term 'stratified electioneering' as the need to appeal 'to each section of the electorate in the language which that section understands'. In Webb's words this meant 'emphasising just the points in which that section is interested; subordinating the questions that each sections find dull or unpleasant; (..) and generally seeking to substitute, for the "greyness" of mass propaganda, the warmer and more individual colours of each man's speciality'.³¹ According to Dominic Wring these insights were crucial in the slow modernization of the Labour Party's dealings with the public. This process took years to materialize, but it would eventually lead to the demise of its 'educationalist' ideal and the parallel embrace of a 'persuasionalist' strategy in the party's quest for public opinion and popular support.³²

While this was something for the future, in the meantime the emergence of broadcasting was one of the particular developments which went to the heart of the Labour Party's relationship with the public. Unlike any other medium of the time, radio provided an immediate access to the 'silent majority' of millions of listeners, i.e. the broadcasting audience. What's more, this was a faceless public that could not be seen, could not be heard and that was scattered all over the country. Politicians had every reason to be daunted by this public, but on closer inspection they would also recognize that this audience was made up around the different parts of society, ranging from the young to the old, from the regional to the suburban and from the lower- to the upper-classes.³³ In light of what was noted above it seemed particularly well suited to appeal to the various segments (or strata) of the newly expanded electorate. Indeed, last but not least, radio was also a domestic medium, which favoured the private mood of the living room over the noisy scenes at a public meeting. It offered the Labour Party (and any other party) a perfect instrument to cultivate a new style of politics, as well as a most welcome means to inform, educate, or persuade the 'quiet citizen' about its plans for the future.

29 As quoted in Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics', 198 and as quoted in Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 122.

30 Ibidem, 125.

31 As quoted in Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, 39.

32 Ibidem, 38. Among the other authors to observe this shift in the Labour Party's approach to publicity and propaganda is Laura Beers, for instance Beers, *Your Britain. Media and the Making of the Labour Party* and Beers, 'Education or Manipulation?'

33 More extensive on the figure of the listener and the social and cultural makeup of the broadcasting audience in the interwar decades Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 356-380.

7.3 An integrator of democracy?

In a general sense, this was also a view of broadcasting to which John Reith subscribed. We have encountered Reith on many occasions and it may not surprise that historians have portrayed the BBC's Director General as a dubious democrat. Among those to do so is Jean Seaton and she argues that Reith's distaste for politics ('the whole horrid technique of politics should be abolished') helped to produce the BBC's 'denial of politics' in the 1920s and the 1930s.³⁴ However, chapter three explained as well that it was Reith's ambition to create a 'more intelligent and enlightened electorate' and that his conception of broadcasting was closely connected to his ideal of radio as an 'integrator of democracy'.³⁵ As the personification of this mission, Reith gave a more elaborate account of these ideas on various occasions. Here, it is worth while to take note of his essay 'Broadcasting, the State and the People' which was published in the literary magazine *The Nineteenth Century and After*, as it offers an interesting background to the BBC's early attempts to develop political broadcasting.

On the whole, Reith's essay made the bold claim that the emergence of broadcasting was equally important to modern society as the invention of printing had been to pre-modern society. More particularly, Reith situated radio alongside Parliament, the press and political meetings as the principle forms for the expression of public opinion and he argued that broadcasting provided the ultimate solution to, what he saw as, the crisis of modern democracy. While Reith blamed the parliamentary system for dividing 'the elements of the community geographically', he claimed that the press divided these 'on the basis of opinions and prejudices'.³⁶ In the same vein he dismissed political meetings as mere 'propagandist and partisan display' with their 'quasi-theatrical oratory'. According to Reith it was broadcasting that offered a remedy to these problems, since it was based on the 'art of establishing a quiet and secure linkage between the performer or speaker (...) and the individuals of a fireside audience'.³⁷ As such, he claimed, it was capable of binding the 'governors and governed, the holders and the sources of power, in a *real* ensemble' and he boldly predicted that it would 'give democracy (for the first time under modern conditions) a real chance of operating as a living force throughout the community'.³⁸

It was the scope of these ideas that helped Reith to win support across the political spectrum for his plans to develop broadcasting as a public service. Then again, Reith's understanding of the unifying or harmonizing promise of broadcasting was not unproblematic, among other things since it ignored that politics was divisive by nature and, moreover, that division was a constitutive principle of democracy, and not a symptom of a flawed system. What's more, it was one thing to formulate a grand vision of the overhaul of democracy through the means of radio, but it was yet another thing to convince those in power to allow broadcasting to achieve this promise. In pursuing these ambitions Reith and the BBC would find that they were crucially dependent on the government and the parties in Parliament. Although Reith's ideas were based on the perception of broadcasting as a potential good, it was not uncommon to consider radio as a source of potential harm. If Reith's ideal was to make broadcasting an instrument of democratic

34 Seaton, 'Reith and the denial of politics', 114.

35 Chapter three, page 59-60.

36 J.C.W. Reith, 'Broadcasting, the State and the People', *The Nineteenth Century and After* 102 (1927) 667-674, there 670.

37 Reith, 'Broadcasting, the State and the People', 668 and 670.

38 Ibidem, 668.

enlightenment, in the years that followed it was this latter conviction that would give the BBC's development of political broadcasting a belated start and that would keep the broadcasting audience in the dark on some of the most important political issues of the day.

7.4 A ban on controversy (1923-1928)

An early illustration of these dynamics was offered in chapter three, when the Labour Party Whip in the House of Commons, Charles Ammon, had summoned the Postmaster General about a 'biased' talk of the BBC on a London building dispute.³⁹ This had happened on the eve of the Sykes Committee, which would discuss the future of organized broadcasting in Britain, which also included the question of 'controversy' in programmes. Among the members of this committee was the Labour MP Charles Trevelyan and his contribution to the inquiry did not only focus on the perceived threats of broadcasting to politics, but also on the risks of political censorship in relation to the democratic promise of broadcasting. While similar considerations informed the Sykes Report, all in all this committee advised the government to take a very cautious stance. Above all this was encapsulated by its claims that the BBC had to meet the 'reasonable satisfaction of the Postmaster General', who should remain 'the final arbiter' of 'what kind of matter may or may not be broadcast'.⁴⁰

This was largely in keeping with the Labour Party's outlook. On the whole, the Labour Party had urged the Sykes Committee that broadcasting should be publicly owned and publicly operated, which implied that it saw an immediate task for the government to prevent the BBC from abusing its privileged position in the airwaves. This was also reflected in the choices of Vernon Hartshorn, Labour's Postmaster General in Labour's 1924 minority government. On several occasions Reith approached Hartshorn to ask permission to host political speeches or debates, for example, in August 1924 when he proposed to organize a radio debate between the three party leaders that would be chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons.⁴¹ Hartshorn, however, would not allow this, and he explained Reith that he regarded this as 'innocuous in itself and not without interest', but that he also expected it would lead to more proposals of a similar character and 'that it would be (...) extremely difficult to draw the line between what should and what should not be permitted'.⁴² A similar position was taken by his Conservative predecessor, Mitchell-Thomson in 1925. In dismissing a request from Reith to host a debate about unemployment, Mitchell-Thomson argued that the subject of 'controversial broadcasting' was of such importance that it ought to be discussed by the Crawford Committee, which, later that year, would advise on the future of (what was still) the British Broadcasting Company.

To Reith, all this was greatly disturbing and he expressed his mind about the situation in a memorandum to the Crawford Committee. Among other things, he claimed that the BBC had been 'cramped and restricted' in its attempts to contribute to an 'informed and enlightened democracy', and that 'the present rigorous censorship' was smothering 'one of the most important sides of the work' of the BBC. He also argued that the BBC should be granted more latitude to

39 Chapter three, page 63.

40 Ibidem..

41 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter (excluding religious broadcasts): history and present practice', November 1942, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4.

42 As quoted in 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 3.

host 'debates on political and other controversial topics' and that it should be allowed to invite 'leaders of opinion to place their case before the public, enabling them to judge for themselves'.⁴³ But Reith's plea was part of a larger cause and in the preceding period he had lobbied extensively for his plan to re-establish the BBC as a public institution. He had done so with notable success, and while the Crawford Committee shared his ideas about this higher cause, it also agreed that the BBC should be allowed to move forward on the question of controversial broadcasting. On this point, the Crawford report stated that 'a moderate amount of controversial matter should be broadcast, provided the material is of high quality and distributed with scrupulous fairness'.⁴⁴

However, with the dramatic events of the general strike taking place a few months later, the Baldwin government refused to adopt this latter recommendation. Instead it chose to 'maintain the existing restriction upon the broadcast, by speech or lecture, of matter on topics of political, religious or industrial controversy'.⁴⁵ The Postmaster General defended this by stating that 'the power of moulding public opinion which is inherent in broadcasting is so great', that the government had thought it unwise 'to start introducing political controversy into this new service without very careful consideration and the fullest discussion in the House and in public'.⁴⁶ This was surely remarkable, since this was precisely what the Crawford Committee had done before arriving at its conclusions. While Mitchell-Thomson explained that he hoped this decision would spark a broader debate, he finished with the grave warning that 'if you once let politics into broadcasting you will never be able to keep broadcasting out of politics'.⁴⁷

'Falling behind enlightened practice'

The ominous tone of his words could not conceal how limited Mitchell-Thomson's defence was to justify this veto. However, it was the BBC's future status as a public corporation that stirred up most debate. While the Labour Party welcomed this move with a sense of triumph, a number of Labour figures raised their concerns about the prolonged restrictions in the realm of programmes. Chief amongst these was William Graham, who had been Labour's representative on the Crawford Committee and he feared that the ban on controversy would lead to 'an inanity or rule of platitude' and that it would prevent the BBC to discharge its duty towards the public.⁴⁸ He added an interesting analogy by claiming that the 'outside world' resembled 'very much the British House of Commons, where we meet for the express purpose of differing from another, in order (...) that the truth may emerge'; it was for this reason that the Crawford Committee had defended the BBC's right to include 'some kind of considered controversy', 'however violently sections of listeners might differ from the precise statements which were made'.⁴⁹ From a contemporary perspective it is difficult to argue against Graham's point. However, the fate of the BBC's programmes was defined by those in power and it was not long ago that Graham's own party had obstructed the BBC's attempts to develop political broadcasting when it was seated on the benches on the opposite side of the House of Commons. What's more, Graham's words also distract from the issue that was really at stake. It was not so much the sensitivities of the

43 Ibidem.

44 *Report of the broadcasting committee, 1925* (HMSO London 1926) 15.

45 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 15-11-1926, 1581, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

46 Ibidem, 1582.

47 Ibidem, 1582-1583.

48 More extensive chapter three, page 85-86.

49 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 15-11-1926, 1582-1583, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

broadcasting audience that informed this renewed ban on controversial broadcasting, but mainly the fears and concerns between the government and the parties in Parliament about the potential impact of broadcasting on politics.

Reith was greatly annoyed by these developments.⁵⁰ Instead of overplaying his hand by pushing for the immediate withdrawal of this ban, he chose to wait a year before he would ask the Post Office to reconsider its standpoint on this matter. When he did, in January 1928, he explained that the BBC was 'attracting a growing volume of substantial criticism from its listeners' and he could only agree with their verdict: 'On most problems of immediate interest the service is silent, and if controversial subjects are broached at all it is done in a halting, inconclusive and even platitudinous manner.'⁵¹ Beyond that, he also claimed that the BBC was 'falling behind enlightened practice in other countries'. Among the countries Reith referred to were Germany, where 'controversial subjects are not only permitted but are encouraged', Italy, Russia and the Netherlands, where 'broadcasting stations are regularly rented by different religious organisations for purposes of propaganda'. Yet, Reith insisted that the BBC had no intention of becoming an instrument of propaganda as it would never broadcast 'views contrary to the interests of the State, or on subjects likely to offend religious or moral susceptibilities'. In claiming that 'the broadcaster himself is the most competent censor of the form and extent of controversial matter', Reith emphasized that the BBC understood it would have to deal with this responsibility with 'most careful consideration' and with the 'adequate safeguards for impartiality and equality'.⁵²

Apparently, the tone and substance of this letter had hit the right nerve in government circles since it convinced the change to change its stance. It was the Postmaster General who was the 'final arbiter' of what might and might not be broadcast, but the lifting of the ban on 'controversy' was announced in the House of Commons by Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister himself, in March 1928.⁵³ This was a much anticipated moment, but it did not represent a total victory for Reith and the BBC. Because the Broadcasting Corporation was explained by the Post Office that it was only allowed to move ahead as an 'experiment (...) in the direction of greater latitude'.⁵⁴ This was a provisional arrangement only, which would be re-invoked in case the BBC failed to meet the requirements or standards in its treatment of controversial subjects. Although this was not the government's intention, it did crucially narrow the BBC's path through the minefield of 'controversial broadcasting'. But, what's more, the removal of this ban was also a partial concession, since the Postmaster General had decided to keep the ban on 'editorializing' in place, which meant that the BBC was still not permitted to broadcast its own views and opinions about matters of public policy. While this implied that the BBC would have to rely on external, or non-BBC speakers, it also gave these speakers significant influence over these programmes, which would have far-reaching consequences in terms of political broadcasting.

50 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 41.

51 Letter from the BBC to the Post Office 16-1-1928, 'Annex: "A". Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 34-35. See also Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 41-42.

52 Letter from the BBC to the Post Office 16-1-1928, 'Annex: "A". Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 34-35.

53 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 42.

54 Letter secretary Post Office to BBC 5-3-1928, 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 7.

7.5 An attempt at party broadcasting

Outside the BBC the lifting of the ban on controversy was greeted with approval. Among the newspapers to report on the news was the *Daily Herald* and it welcomed this move by claiming that it was fully in keeping with the 'feelings and opinions of the great mass of the public' and that it expected the experiment would prove a 'stimulation and a success', provided the BBC would preserve its 'scrupulous fairness'.⁵⁵ Equally positive was the *Manchester Guardian's* response, which saw 'clash of opinion' as the way to truth and sound judgement and which stated that 'if the true policy of an open forum is adopted the BBC may become one of the greatest educational forces in the country'.⁵⁶ Not all reactions were favourable. Prior to Baldwin's announcement, the *Morning Post* had warned that the removal of the ban would open up 'a vista of horrible possibilities', claiming that the 'average man or woman (...) has not the slightest desire to be plunged into disputes on any of these subjects' [of political, religious and industrial controversy].⁵⁷ While other newspapers struck a more pragmatic tone, they all pondered on what the BBC's next step would be, now that it had the government's permission to finally move ahead.

Mindful of the need to operate most cautiously, one of the first things the BBC did was to establish a 'controversy committee', which would meet on a weekly basis to monitor the Corporation's efforts in handling with controversial matter.⁵⁸ In addition, it was set out by Reith that the broadcasting service should stick to the line he had laid down in his letter to the Postmaster General. This was also reflected in the answer he gave to the Labour Party, which was the first of the three parties to approach the BBC with a request for airtime. Only a week after Baldwin had announced the lifting of the ban, Arthur Henderson wrote Reith to ask if the BBC would broadcast a speech by Ramsay MacDonald from Kingsway Hall, in London. Henderson explained that MacDonald would speak at this occasion on a topic of major importance, i.e. the forthcoming general election.⁵⁹ Although it seems unlikely that Reith would have had much interest in relaying MacDonald's speech from a live-event, he answered Henderson that the need for impartiality required him to offer similar facilities to the leaders of the other parties before deciding to meet with Labour's request. While the issue of party political broadcasting had been part of the larger and undefined category of 'controversial broadcasting', it was inevitable that at some point the question would emerge in what form and on what conditions party leaders were allowed to appear before the BBC-microphone. As the Labour Party's request had broached this subject, those involved would soon find that answering this question was a most complicated affair.

'Attack and reply in the narrow party sense'

Reith's responded by inquiring with the two other parties about their interest in these matters. Both intimated they were willing to join the initiative, and the Conservative Party asked Reith to draw up a proposal concerning the rules and scope of the microphone opportunities the parties

55 'A Ban Lifted', *Daily Herald*, 6-3-1928 and 'New Era for the BBC', *Daily Express*, 6-3-1928, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Controversy, 1928.

56 As quoted in 'Controversy No Longer Banned From Programmes', *Public Opinion*, 9-3-1928, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Controversy, 1928.

57 As quoted in Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 130.

58 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 8.

59 Ibidem.

could expect from the BBC. In doing so, Reith drafted an 'experimental procedure' as a basis to open these talks with the leadership of the three parties. Most significantly, this document suggested to grant each party half an hour per week for an 'uncensored enunciation of Party policy'; besides that it also proposed to provide the government with a half-hour opportunity per week to discuss its policies with the public, while each of the opposition parties were allowed to respond to these government's statements at fortnightly intervals.⁶⁰ This was merely a first draft, but it would have made an interesting start to a series of party broadcasting if it had been put into practice. Many questions remained, for example, whether the parties should stick to the same approved format, or whether they were free to experiment with the form and content of these half-hours meetings with the broadcasting audience. Then again, the most important question was whether the three parties would be able to reach an agreement over the suggested arrangement.

When the answers came in, it turned out that the Conservative Party, which was still in office at the time, had no major objections to Reith's proposal. This must have had something to do with the fact that the government would enjoy a certain advantage over the opposition parties. While the Labour Party indicated at first that it was generally pleased with the suggestions, it was the Liberal Party which had serious reservations as it felt that the arrangement would grant the government too much privilege. Such was the situation when the three parties came together in May 1928 to discuss these matters.⁶¹ One minor question which came up at this occasion was if it was possible to use these opportunities to broadcast speeches from public meetings, but Reith was quick to dismiss the suggestion by claiming that studio talks were more much effective with 'the speaker addressing himself solely to the broadcast audience'.⁶² However, it was the allocation of speeches that stirred up most debate and with various counter-proposals going across the table, the parties were not prepared to move and they were soon caught up in a stalemate. And so, with this first attempt stranded, the meeting ended with the BBC's promise that it would communicate further proposals in due course.

It was the Liberal Party which had created this stalemate, but apparently these events had caused the Labour leadership to reconsider its position as well. Within days the Labour Party informed Reith that it had changed its mind about the allocation of broadcasting opportunities. One of its point concerned the content and style of these radio talks. Initially, the Labour leadership had fully agreed with the idea that this series of political broadcasts would focus on the discussion of government policies between the opposition parties and the government. However, after further consideration it now had serious doubts about this approach, not only since it feared that it would bring 'broadcasting (..) into disrepute', but also since it thought it would end up in an unilluminating display 'of attack and reply in the narrow party sense'. It argued instead that these speeches should be 'only of an expository and constructive character (..) that they should, in fact, be of an educational character in the wide popular view'.⁶³ Although this highlights that the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting was pervaded by its educational ethos, it appears this was also an effort to protect the party (and the airwaves) from the kind of sentiments that were reverberating in the popular press. This was not all. Because the Labour Party had

60 Ibidem and Report March 1933 National Joint Council 'Broadcasting', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS 292/787.18/1, f. 16.

61 Political Broadcasting. Minutes of Conference held at the House of Commons 21-5-1928, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

62 Ibidem.

63 Letter Labour Party to J.W. Reith 24-5-1928, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

also changed its mind about the government's advantage over the opposition parties. A few days earlier it had tended to accept this as reasonable, but it now stressed that the only solution was a 'strictly equal allocation of the time and opportunity to each of the three of the national parties'. Its reason for this was that the BBC, since its inception, had always acted as a trustee for the people as a whole' and according to the Labour Party this implied that it should 'preserve in all matters a strict impartiality of treatment'.⁶⁴

Perhaps this was not unreasonable either, but what should be noted is that Labour's demand for absolute equality ignored the fact that the three parties did not only participate in this process as parties, but that they were sitting at the table as the party in office, or in opposition. Of course it was fully acceptable for the Labour Party to turn a blind eye to this distinction, but it also put a further strain on these negotiations. What's more, it reminded Reith and the BBC of their ultimate dependence on their political masters. Despite the fact that the ban on 'controversy' was lifted – at least partially and provisionally – without an agreement between the political parties the BBC remained grounded in its efforts to initiate party political broadcasting. A month after their first meeting Reith informed the three parties that 'the Governors have reluctantly come to the conclusion that, for the present, the project of a rota of political speeches cannot be undertaken'.⁶⁵

De-rating bill broadcast

And so, after months of cautious optimism, uncertainty had returned. To be clear, this did not mean that the BBC had no other opportunities to inform its audience about the political issues of the day. One particular category of talks which was unaffected by the stalemate over party broadcasts were the talks by members of the government. In the second half of 1928 there were around twenty occasions when Ministers from the Baldwin-government appeared before the BBC's microphone, for example Neville Chamberlain, as the Minister of Health, who spoke about 'Milk and its Importance to Public Health'.⁶⁶ While these talks were meant to steer clear from 'any acute current political controversy', this was becoming more difficult due to the forthcoming general election. So when Reith received another request from Chamberlain, later that year, to speak about a bill ('De-rating bill') that had passed through Parliament in the months before, Reith tended to decline this request. However, by that time the BBC had also been asked by the Liberals to organize a series of election broadcasts. Seeing a possible opening in the stalemate between the parties, Reith suggested the three parties to suspend their disagreement temporarily and to join in a 'special' debate about this 'De-rating bill' as a prelude to the forthcoming election campaign.⁶⁷ After strenuous negotiations the three parties agreed to do so and it gave the BBC the opportunity to organize its first ever party debate.

Taking place on the eve of January 22nd 1929 those participating in this occasion were Kingsley Wood for the government, Arthur Greenwood for the Labour opposition, and Ramsay Muir for the Liberal opposition. While each of these men spoke for about twenty minutes, the debate was finally wound up by Kingsley Wood with a final ten-minute reply on behalf of the

64 Ibidem.

65 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 9.

66 Memorandum on political broadcasting 6-11-1930, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

67 Report March 1933 National Joint Council 'Broadcasting', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS 292/787.18/1, f. 15-17.

government.⁶⁸ This was a rather straightforward formula and the BBC had gone a long way to avoid that this encounter would end up in discord, or an actual clash of opinion. One of the things it had done was to place the two non-speaking debaters in a separate studio, as to keep them away from the microphone and the speaker who was delivering his talk. Although this approach did not necessarily offer the best programme value, in the given circumstances the BBC's main objective was to prolong this experiment and to persuade the parties to extend their contribution to the project of party broadcasting. Above all, this was a historic departure in the life of British democracy, which had been in the making for quite some time, and it was accordingly welcomed in the British press in the days after the debate was broadcast.

Most positive were the comments in the *Manchester Guardian* which hailed this exchange as a hopeful example of how the enormous electorate ('alarmingly big') might be educated into rational citizens: 'Instead of going to a few political meetings devoted to increasing the faith of those whose minds are already made are already made up, the voter will in time become accustomed to following a reasoned debate in which his opponents as well as his own leaders will state their case. It would be difficult to think of any more subtle and certain method of encouraging voters to think. For the case stated on the microphone must be a reasoned one; it will be submitted to immediate examination by the speaker of the opposite party, and, in any case, the wireless does not lend itself easily to propaganda.'⁶⁹ So it argued that this was something completely different from 'the art of politics in the past', which was 'largely the art of persuading an audience by rhetoric or personality'. And while predicting that 'the art of the demagogue must, under these circumstances, decline', it anticipated as well that 'personality and direct contact must remain important. But their part will be a diminishing one if the habit of wireless discussion grows. And, though the change will involve some loss of colour and excitement, democracy as a whole will gain and flourish better if politics becomes less of a game and more of a science.'⁷⁰

Not all newspapers were equally excited about this prospect. Most outspoken was a commentator from the conservative *Morning Post*, who judged this first broadcasting debate 'an ordeal for the listener' and who claimed it was 'impossible to believe that the response will be enthusiastic'.⁷¹ Although this commentator thought the speeches by Wood, Muir and Greenwood were 'admirable examples of parliamentary style', he also argued they did not suffice for broadcasting: 'delivered in long, level flow, unpunctuated by cheers or laughter – spoken, as it were, to an empty room – they were just a little tedious'. To those who knew the subject, these speeches were 'superfluous', and to those who did not they were 'bewildering'. What's more, he anticipated that these talks 'kept the listener looking at the clock to see how near the ordeal was to its end', and when the hour had finally passed 'the multitudinous audience no doubt began to wonder how often this sort of thing was to happen; and whether they ought not to ask to have their money back'.⁷²

68 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 9. Unfortunately the BBC Written Archive Centre holds no texts or production files of this debate.

69 'Mechanised politics', *Manchester Guardian*, 23-1-1929, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

70 Ibidem.

71 'Triangular debate broadcast', *Morning Post*, 23-1-1929, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

72 Ibidem.

7.6 'A mechanical election' (1929)

The ordeal was not over yet and the *Morning Post's* commentator might have done himself a favour by keeping his radio set switched off in the time ahead. Because this debate marked the prelude to the election campaign that would begin in a few months' time. Although the 1924 election was Britain's introduction to election broadcasting, with one speech for each party leader the scope had still been rather limited. And so various observers saw the election campaign of 1929 as the country's real entry into a new era of electioneering.⁷³

Much had changed in the intervening years, not only in broadcasting but also in politics. The BBC was now a well-respected public corporation and its programmes reached a much larger audience than in 1924. In that year the Post Office had issued nearly one million radio licenses, a figure that had increased ca. three million in 1929. Nonetheless, the number of listeners reached much higher and it is estimated that some BBC programmes drew an audience of ca. fifteen million listeners towards the end of the 1920s.⁷⁴ And yet, this was still roughly half the size of the overall electorate in 1929, which counted nearly twenty-eight million voters after the Equal Franchise Act had passed through Parliament in the year before.⁷⁵ This was a ground-breaking moment not only since it granted women the same voting rights as men, but also since the electorate was now dominated by a female majority for the first time in British history.⁷⁶ However, the presence of women was increasingly felt in other domains as well. In fact a parallel development had taken place in the realm of broadcasting, which, by 1929, had moved beyond its past as a male-dominated hobby and which was now increasingly orientated towards a family- and female audience.⁷⁷ This explains as well why it formed such a welcome platform for parties and politicians to embrace the new electorate and to invite the various parts of the broadcasting audience to vote in their favour.

A 'thoroughly unsatisfactory' arrangement

This was also recognized by the Labour Party, which, in Ramsay MacDonald's words, was 'most anxious to use the wireless' for the campaign of the general election of May 1929.⁷⁸ Of course, the two other parties were equally eager to use radio for this campaign and in the months leading up to the election the three decided to continue their talks over the arrangement of party political broadcasting. Almost immediately these talks ran up against the same problems that had thwarted their earlier efforts. The main points of conflict concerned the amount of election speeches before and after the dissolution of Parliament, and in relation to this the number of talks the government would get against the two opposition parties. Although none of the parties dared to miss out on the opportunity to address the broadcasting audience, this could not prevent that the BBC and John Reith got caught up again in the middle of these negotiations. Among other things this was illustrated by the tensions which emerged between the latter and Ramsay

73 For instance 'Old time electioneering', *The Listener*, 1-5-1929; 'A Mechanical Election', *Manchester Guardian*, 16-5-1929 and 'The BBC and the Election', *The Observer*, 2-6-1929, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

74 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 22.

75 P. Norton, 'The House of Commons, 1911-1949' in: C. Jones ed., *A Short History of Parliament: England, Great Britain, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Scotland* (Woodbridge 2009) 271-282, there 271.

76 Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 125.

77 Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 23.

78 Letter J.R. MacDonald to J.W. Reith 9-3-1929, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1174.

MacDonald. The Labour leader and Reith had first discussed the series of election broadcasts on February 14 and Reith noted in his diary that the Labour Party was 'so dependent on the wireless' that MacDonald was willing 'to agree to almost anything'.⁷⁹ MacDonald sent a similar signal later that month in a telephone call with Reith and the chairman of the BBC's Board of Governors, whom he explained that the Labour Party had 'most to gain by the microphone' since they 'possessed only one small newspaper'.⁸⁰

Even so, the Labour leadership was determined to drive a hard bargain and in that same call MacDonald threatened to publicly attack the BBC if it failed to provide the parties with a series of election broadcasts. MacDonald knew all too well that the BBC was not the deciding factor in this, since it primarily relied on the parties themselves. A few weeks later the Labour leader wrote Reith to ask him if he had reached an agreement yet with the Liberals and the Conservatives, thereby informing him that 'his colleagues here are getting very restive about the whole business'.⁸¹ Although the BBC was making progress, the Labour Party was far from pleased when it was informed about the result. While the opposition parties would each receive two election broadcasts before the dissolution of Parliament against four for the government, afterwards all three parties would have two more broadcasts.⁸² The Labour Party only agreed with this result under protest, and MacDonald informed Reith that this schedule was 'thoroughly unsatisfactory to us' to which he added that the 'whole thing has a most unpleasant savour in my nostrils. It may all have been perfectly innocent, but I really must say that an innocent creature has never been cursed with a more suspicious countenance'.⁸³

'I place myself in your hands'

MacDonald's anger was short-lived and although Reith felt MacDonald 'had not behaved at all well over the political broadcasts' the two were soon back on friendly terms again. What's more, MacDonald was keen to avoid the mistake he had made five years earlier and this time he did not only follow Reith's advice by speaking from a broadcasting studio from Newcastle, he also asked Reith to help him with the preparations and rehearsals of his speech on the 28th of May.⁸⁴ The Labour leader was speaking as the last of the four Labour speakers in this series of election broadcasts, which had included Arthur Henderson, Philip Snowden and Margaret Bondfield as well. The latter's talk was part of an all-female round of election broadcasts, which had been suggested by the Labour Party as a special opportunity for each party to present their views about women's issues in politics.⁸⁵ On the whole, all four Labour speakers received moderate to positive reviews from the press. According to the *Daily Express*, Arthur Henderson delivered 'a perfect broadcast' and it noted that apparently 'it did not trouble him that he was addressing an unseen audience', although it did add as well that Henderson 'always speaks as if the audience was in the next room'.⁸⁶ Snowden's speech was better appreciated, not only by John Reith (who thought him the best of the four Labour speakers), but also by the *Daily Herald* which labelled him 'one

79 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 100.

80 Record of telephone conversation between Reith, MacDonald and Clarendon, 26-2-1929, WAC, inv. nr. R34/535/1.

81 Letter J.R. MacDonald to J.W. Reith 18-3-1929, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1174.

82 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 9.

83 Letter J.R. MacDonald to J.W. Reith 8-4-1929, NA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1174.

84 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 103.

85 Report March 1933 National Joint Council 'Broadcasting', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS 292/787.18/1, f. 20.

86 'Mr. Henderson Broadcasts', *Daily Express*, 12-4-1929, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

of the best broadcasters in Britain'.⁸⁷ And while one listener confessed to be 'charmed' by the 'straightforward manner and message' of Margaret Bondfield, her talk was followed two weeks later by MacDonald's closing address.⁸⁸ All in all, his broadcast was better appreciated as in 1924, but he was speaking towards the end of the election campaign and his public appearances had clearly taken their toll. Reith noted that MacDonald's voice was 'hoarse and tired' and that he 'got very declamatory and bitter towards the end'.⁸⁹

Similar as five years earlier, Reith was much more impressed by Stanley Baldwin's talk. Although the Conservative leader seemed to have a natural bent for broadcasting, talent alone did not explain his appeal as a radio speaker. Equally important was his interest in the particular demands of broadcasting. So in preparation of his 1929 election broadcast Baldwin went to great lengths to make sure his talk would strike the right note with his listeners and he wrote Reith to ask about the makeup of the broadcasting audience. Targeting potential Labour voters, he was particularly interested in knowing 'what proportion may be working class' and whether the 'workman listener (...) would be likely to listen at a club or a pub?'⁹⁰ Reith seemed glad to advise Baldwin and he explained that the 'social centre of gravity' of the audience was 'much nearer the bottom than top of the social scale'; he also answered Baldwin that he would have 'every sort of individual listening to you, and a large proportion of working class people, mostly in their homes, not in clubs or pubs. The workman and his wife will certainly be there, but so will the ordinary middle-class fellow and his, mostly at the fireside.'⁹¹ In seeking to help Baldwin Reith even went as far to prepare a closing statement of three to four minutes which would give Baldwin's election broadcast a worthy and convincing ending.⁹² This was surely remarkable, but Reith himself saw nothing wrong with it. In fact, he was equally willing to help out MacDonald, and based on what we have read about him, Reith may well have considered this as a service to democracy, and not as a breach of the BBC's impartiality.

Of course, Baldwin is merely the antagonist in this story that focusses primarily on the Labour Party. Even so, it is helpful to explore his example a bit further since it offers an interesting counterpoint to the election broadcasts of the four Labour speakers. At this point it may not surprise that Baldwin is broadly recognized as the 'master of the new medium' of broadcasting.⁹³ Perhaps this had something to do with his personality, which, unlike MacDonald's, seemed well suited to the qualities of radio. It has been noted that Baldwin was uncomfortable at larger social events and one of his daughters once claimed that he 'abhorred noise and shouting'.⁹⁴ More important was his style of speaking, since Baldwin managed to strike the intimate and conversational tone which many saw as the most adequate style of delivery for broadcasting. Presenting himself as a humble and homely figure, Baldwin's message was consensual and positive and while his language transcended party boundaries, it conjured up images and values

87 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 153 and 'Snowden's "ether dose" for Churchill', *Daily Herald*, 4-5-1929, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

88 'Utopia not yet', *Daily Dispatch*, 18-5-1929, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

89 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 103.

90 Ibidem, 102.

91 Ibidem.

92 Ibidem and Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 135.

93 Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 99.

94 Stuart Ball, 'Baldwin, Stanley, first Earl Baldwin of Bewdley (1867-1947)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (6-4-2017).

of Britishness to which many people could relate.⁹⁵ What's more, his radio talks leaned heavily on private confessions and Baldwin made frequent use of the personal pronoun (notably the 'I' and 'you') to evoke an impression of a one-to-one conversation. This was also exemplified by the closing statement (which may have contained a Reithian element) of his 1929 election talk: 'The personal note does not come easily to an Englishman, but I am speaking to you, my fellow-countrymen mostly in the quietness of your own homes in every corner of the land and may I put it to you in this way in half a dozen words? You trusted me before; I ask you to trust me again.'⁹⁶

Baldwin's appeal for trust was not the only way to address the broadcasting audience. The purpose of the four Labour speakers was essentially the same – to convince as many listeners to vote for their party – , but their approach differed substantially from Baldwin's 'easy conversational style'.⁹⁷ One of the things that stand out in their talks is the grave tone of their message to the broadcasting audience, which contrasted sharply with the light-hearted touch of Baldwin's words. So emphasizing the tremendous importance of the forthcoming elections, Arthur Henderson spoke for instance of the 'great responsibility' resting upon the twenty-eight million voters in deciding which of the three parties they will 'entrust the political destinies of the nation'.⁹⁸ Margaret Bondfield spoke in a similar vein when she stressed that 'more depends upon the women's vote in the General Election than I can hope to explain to my invisible audience'.⁹⁹ Ramsay MacDonald, on his turn, reminded his listeners that they were 'going to take a decision which is to be one of the most important ever recorded at an election'.¹⁰⁰ Of course, they were absolutely right to stress the significance of this election. However, what matters here is that they placed a heavy burden on the electorate, or broadcasting audience, to be thoroughly informed and to take the right decision for the future of the country. Although this was fully in keeping with the gravity of the task the Labour Party had set itself, it also seems somewhat at odds with what was required to reach out to the individual listener or 'quiet ordinary citizen' at home, who had yet to make up their mind.

This points to another issue. Because it seems that Labour's ability to appeal to the listeners at home was partly obscured by its apparent desire to explain the substance of the party's policies and ideas. This was notably so in the case of Arthur Henderson's and Margaret Bondfield's broadcasts, which were structured as a straight monologue. Although both used the opening and closing statements of their talks to strike a personal note, the individual listener or the broadcasting audience were largely absent from their statements. Of the two, Margaret Bondfield spoke about the Labour Party's stance in women's issues – healthcare, education, housing – , while Arthur Henderson explored the party's policies and principles, as outlined in its 1928 party programme *Labour and the Nation*. This was not the most inspiring literature, but it did not prevent Henderson from providing an exhaustive summary: 'A Labour government would sign the Optional Clause and the General Act of Arbitration, Conciliation and Judicial Settlement, drafted by the Ninth Assembly of the League of Nations, and would resume its efforts of 1924 for

95 Ball, 'Baldwin, Stanley'.

96 As quoted in Rowe, 'Broadcasting and the 1929 General Election', 118. Eventually Baldwin spoke for twenty-three minutes, which was still fifteen minutes less than Ramsay MacDonald whose broadcast took thirty-eight minutes. Hollins, *The presentation of politics*, 370.

97 This label came from the next-day review of Baldwin's broadcast by *The Times*. See Rowe, 'Broadcasting and the 1929 General Election', 118.

98 A. Henderson, 'A Labour Address', *The Listener*, 17-4-1929, 526.

99 M. Bondfield, 'A Labour Address', *The Listener*, 22-4-1929, 735.

100 J. R. MacDonald, General Election Broadcast, 28-5-1929, WAC, Scripts, J.R. MacDonald.

the general and progressive reduction of armaments by international agreement.'¹⁰¹ This is only one fragment of his larger speech, but Henderson's broadcast continued in more or less the same vein for ca. thirty minutes, so it seems far from certain that his listeners would have made it until the end of his talk. Although Bondfield's tone was more considerate and less bureaucratic, she too gave a long reading of her party's purposes and intents, while only occasionally addressing the female parts of her audience – 'every wife and mother knows' – more directly.¹⁰²

It was this that marked an important difference between Henderson's and Bondfield's talks, and those of Snowden and MacDonald. Because if the former two were primarily talking *to* the broadcasting audience, the latter made a more serious effort of talking *with* their listeners. Of course, this was a virtual distinction, but based on the popular appeal of Baldwin's conversational style, it was also a vital element in the reception of a radio talk. What is interesting in this respect is that both Snowden and MacDonald made more frequent use of the personal pronoun ('I' and 'you'), whereas Bondfield and Henderson presented themselves primarily as the agents of a collective (the Labour Party), which was reflected in their use of plural or neutral terms ('we', 'us', 'them', 'they' and 'it'). In Snowden's case this was illustrated by his insertion of brief comments or questions – 'Will you make a note of the following fact?', 'I am sure that every voter who is listening' or 'May I say a word to Liberals who are sincerely anxious to get rid of the present Government'.¹⁰³ While Ramsay MacDonald used similar phrases, albeit less often, his personal statements disclosed a more dramatic style – 'In deciding how you are to vote on Thursday I would beg of you to remember', 'I regret, I must confess finally', 'I make this statement and challenge anyone who has studied the facts to deny its truth' or 'I place myself in your hands, and ask for your favourable verdict. Give Labour a fair chance!'¹⁰⁴ Against this background we can understand why Reith felt MacDonald's broadcast turned 'very declamatory' towards the end. Then again, his verdict was of minor significance only, since it was up to the electorate whether they would trust Baldwin again or whether they would answer MacDonald's appeal instead.

7.7 'Jazz politics' (1929-1931)

Eleven days later Ramsay MacDonald was addressing the audience again, this time in the form of a surprise broadcast to the nation as Britain's new Prime Minister.¹⁰⁵ It was explained in chapter five that the general election of May 1929 produced a straight victory for the Labour Party against the Conservatives and the Liberals. This was a jubilant moment for the labour movement and across the country the party's representatives were cheered by thousands of supporters. Ramsay MacDonald received a similar treatment. When he travelled back to London from the North East of the country he was hailed at every stop of his train journey, with an estimated crowd of twelve thousand people cheering him at his final stop at King's Cross Station.¹⁰⁶ However, what MacDonald and his supporters could not know was that this second Labour government would again fail to redeem the high expectations of its return to office. With the Wall Street-crash

101 Henderson, 'A Labour Address', 527.

102 Bondfield, 'A Labour Address', 736.

103 P. Snowden, 'A Labour Address', *The Listener*, 8-5-1929.

104 MacDonald, General Election Broadcast, 28-5-1929, WAC, Scripts, J.R. MacDonald.

105 Report March 1933 National Joint Council 'Broadcasting', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS 292/787.18/1, f. 20-21.

106 Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, 122.

and the world-wide economic downturn just looming on the horizon, MacDonald's government faced a severe ordeal which, as we know, would end in 1931 in a most dramatic fashion.

In the preceding years the Labour government would leave its mark on the BBC's internal organization, since it was required to appoint a new chairman to the BBC's Board of Governors. This was not a straightforward matter, and chapter five offered ample detail about the protracted struggle of power between Reith and a number of the BBC's Governors that was poisoning the atmosphere in the hierarchy of the BBC's organization.¹⁰⁷ This conflict went to the heart of the BBC's status as a public corporation. With Reith and the Board contesting their mutual claims to authority, the choice of a new chairman was also a decision about the degree of autonomy (or the level of scrutiny) which Reith would enjoy in his future dealings with the Board. The outcome of this process is known, as the Labour government offered the BBC's vacant chair to a former Speaker of the House of Commons, J.H. Whitley. His appointment worked out in favour of Reith, since Whitley held a similar, consultative understanding of the Board's role as the BBC's Director General. Accordingly, Whitley had no intentions whatsoever to circumscribe Reith's authority or to interfere with his plans and activities. And so, indirectly the Labour government helped Reith to strengthen his hold over the Broadcasting Corporation. However, this did not mean it was equally forthcoming to Reith's demands in other respects.

The whip hand

A point of ongoing contention concerned the BBC's efforts to develop political broadcasting. The ban on controversy had been lifted over a year ago, but so far this had not produced the results the BBC had hoped for. This was also recognized by the BBC's controversy committee, which, in April 1929, just prior to the election, had passed a hard judgement on the BBC's political broadcasts. It was unanimously agreed that these had been 'lacking in interest', were 'not good programme value', 'tended to discredit politics' and 'entirely failed to fulfil the expectations from a broadcasting point of view'.¹⁰⁸ While it thought that these broadcasts should not be concerned with 'vague generalities', but that it should provide the parties with the opportunity to 'to tackle particular issues and to educate the vast electorate in political and parliamentary issues', it also laid the blame for the situation on the political parties. As such, it urged Reith to take up this subject and to inform those concerned that 'a great opportunity was being lost', but that there was still time to 'repair the damage if these considered opinions were brought to the notice of those concerned immediately'.¹⁰⁹

This message was not lost to Reith, but with a general election on the way this was hardly the right moment to raise this matter. What's more, Reith knew all too well that the leaders of the parties would not be swayed by the alarming tone of these comments. Experience had learned that progress in political broadcasting was easily sacrificed by partisan interests. Although these two were not necessarily at odds, the BBC preferred to let the subject rest for a while and to devote its efforts in political broadcasting to a non-partisan treatment of the issues of the day. Among other things, this resulted in the *Points of View*-series in the autumn of 1929, which, over a number of weeks, presented the broadcasting audience with the views on the larger questions of the time by a variety of leading thinkers. None of these speakers were partisan figures and

107 Chapter five, page 140-144.

108 Minutes of meeting Controversy committee 19-4-1929, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/1.

109 Ibidem.

although there was a political element to what they had to say, the BBC had made sure that the whole series offered a balanced and 'semi-philosophical' overview of their ideas.¹¹⁰ If this helped the BBC to find a way around party headquarters, it did little to soothe the distrust that came from those same headquarters. Provoking an angry response from the Conservative Party, this series reminded the BBC that even the outer limits of 'politics' were closely guarded by the parties that were at the centre of things.

This was nothing compared to the backlash the BBC faced when it dared to take up a subject of a more immediate political significance, without consulting the political parties first. This was what happened in mid-1930 after Reith had welcomed a request from the press baron Lord Beaverbrook, who wanted to broadcast his views on the subject of free trade and the need for protectionism. This was a highly contentious subject already, but Reith's decision to accept Beaverbrook's proposal took a different twist when Beaverbrook became one of the main protagonists of a newly founded political party, the United Empire Party.¹¹¹ For Reith this was no reason to withdraw his decision, but it did cause the Labour Party and the Conservative Party to communicate their concern over this development. It was the Labour Party's chief whip Thomas Kennedy who warned Reith that 'the arrangements for such a broadcast discussion must necessarily raise the whole question of the use of the broadcasting medium for political and controversial subjects.'¹¹² Apparently, this was the signal Reith had waited for. He responded through his new chairman, J.H. Whitley, by informing the Prime Minister that the BBC would be glad to host an arrangement with the three parties to discuss this matter, while insisting (in diplomatic wordings) that it hoped to proceed with the planned broadcast without much further delay, since it was held back for too long already by the parties' obstructive stance.¹¹³ Although this letter was signed by Whitley, it was written by John Reith. In his diary Reith complained about 'fuss' with the Prime Minister over political broadcasting and although he thought this letter preserved 'the dignity and autonomy of the BBC', he anticipated that it 'might cause a row between the PM, who is being very unreasonable, and us.'¹¹⁴

He was right. One day later the BBC received a note from the Prime Minister's office which warned that the BBC should not make the mistake of proceeding with this matter in defiance of the government. While it stressed that MacDonald would first consult Labour's chief whip before deciding what his government's position would be, it was also absolutely clear about one thing: 'The government has no desire to interfere with BBC programmes, but it cannot be disinterested regarding the political use made by it of its opportunities. Just as it supplies Jazz rubbish (not even good Jazz) for popular consumption so, if it is not careful with its politics, it will have to supply Jazz politics. (...) The only way the BBC can protect itself is by planning its political broadcasting in close co-operation with the Parties. That co-operation has not been sought with any degree of businesslike capacity in this case and final steps have been taken without proper consideration and upon palpable misunderstanding – certainly without a conclusion of negotiations having first of all been reached. There I leave it until I have seen the Chief Whip', signed J.R.M., 9-8-1930.¹¹⁵

110 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 10.

111 Ibidem.

112 Letter T. Kennedy to J.W. Reith 23-7-1930, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

113 Letter J.H. Whitley to Prime Minister 8-8-1930, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

114 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 104.

115 'Minute on BBC papers', WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

In the given situation there was little the BBC could do than to wait for further instructions, at least other than defying the government and proceeding with the matter as it saw fit. Reith, however, was not prepared to stand up to his political masters, since the BBC's position was still too fragile to risk a full-out conflict. And so, it would take until November 4, 1930 before the three parties would meet to discuss the situation with John Reith and Lord Gainford, the vice-chairman of the BBC's Board of Governors. At that point, matters had come so far that the BBC had set a fixed date for Beaverbrook's talk to be broadcast three weeks later as the BBC 'had no desire to break faith' with him.¹¹⁶ It was now up to the three parties to decide what their response would be. In an earlier stage the BBC had offered to make the Beaverbrook broadcast part of a broader series of talks on the same subject and it had invited the three parties to contribute to this series. The offer was still standing, but none of the parties accepted it, since it would only give greater prominence to Beaverbrook's cause. And although the BBC had also suggested to balance Beaverbrook's talk by inviting the Liberal leader Lloyd George, this was not acceptable either to Labour and the Conservatives. Eventually the three parties agreed that the Beaverbrook talk could go ahead, but that an authoritative and non-partisan commentator would be asked to deliver a counter-talk. What's more, with the three parties talking again, it turned out that all felt there was a need to break the impasse in political broadcasting.

Two weeks later the parties would meet again with the BBC to continue their talks. Distinguishing between three categories of programmes (party political speeches, discussions and symposia), the BBC presented the parties with an ambitious scheme that would allow the Corporation to finally move forward in political broadcasting. Among other things it proposed to designate two or three months a year for a series of party statements. Besides that it also suggested to organize regular discussions as well as series of weekly talks on issues of current political interest.¹¹⁷ While this seemed to offer an adequate starting point, running through this schedule was the question whether it was the BBC or the parties who held the right to decide on the subjects and speakers of these programmes. Among other things this was exemplified by the insertion of the BBC's demand that the nomination of speakers by their parties should be 'subject to microphone suitability'.¹¹⁸ This was only a minor detail, but in a nutshell it highlights the tensions between the presentational values of politics and broadcasting that were thwarting this process. While its insertion showed that the BBC was seeking to boost its (limited) autonomy, the parties were not prepared to go along unconditionally. Although they recognized that the BBC was not in every case bound to secure the agreement of the political parties, they also insisted that 'the question of the proper use of the Corporation's discretionary power might be re-opened', while adding a warning that 'the present arrangement by which the three Parties had agreed to participate in political broadcasting might be brought to an end'.¹¹⁹ The meeting ended with an optimistic note. Marking their renewed agreement, plans were made for a symposium of seven talks about 'The Problem of Unemployment' for early 1931, of which the first four would be delivered by independent experts and the last three by party spokesmen.¹²⁰ In the months that followed the BBC would also host a series of informative talks on India, where a fierce struggle

116 'Memorandum. Meeting at the House of Commons in the Lord Privy Seal's Room', 4-11-1930, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

117 'Political Broadcasts Schedule', WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

118 Ibidem.

119 'Political Broadcasting', Meeting 18-11-1930, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

120 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 11.

for independence was being fought out. Although the BBC did not intend to include party opinion, it did plan these series in consultation with the three parties, since this was a subject that was steeped in controversy and the BBC hoped to protect its fragile understanding with the parties.¹²¹

'Nothing but the advocates of various causes'

Against this background one would almost forget that politics was not the exclusive domain of the three political parties, but that there were many other people and organizations that had something to say about the present state of the country and the problems it faced. However, the BBC's subordination to the government and the three parties did not only trouble a fuller development of political broadcasting, it also narrowed the scope of the political voices that were heard before the microphone. Those who were affected by this situation included Winston Churchill, who had become increasingly estranged from Baldwin and the Conservative party leadership in recent years.¹²² As such, he had grown increasingly frustrated as well that the BBC would not allow him to express his views to the broadcasting audience, and in early 1930 he had even gone so far to offer the BBC £100,- for a half hour of its broadcasting time.¹²³ Clearly, this was a mere stunt, but Churchill's outrage was real, and so was the anger about the backroom politics of broadcasting across the floor of the House of Commons.¹²⁴

In March 1931 these issues were brought up for discussion in a debate about the Post Office estimates. At that occasion it was the Conservative MP Terence O'Connor who asked the Labour Postmaster General whether he agreed that the influence of the party whips on the BBC's political broadcasting did not produce 'a very narrow view of public controversy in this country'.¹²⁵ While he added that he saw 'no earthly reason why broadcasting controversy should be placed within the comparatively narrow limits represented by the party Whips', he argued instead for 'as much freedom of expression of opinion within the parties as we can'.¹²⁶ Answering this question on behalf of the Labour government was Clement Attlee, who had taken over the Postmaster General's position only weeks ago. In doing so, Attlee adopted the typical evasive stance which other Postmaster Generals before him had taken when faced with questions about the BBC's programmes. On the whole, Attlee claimed that the issue of controversial broadcasting was a matter of 'very great delicacy', not only since the BBC had to hold it balance absolutely fair but also since 'you have to consider not boring your audience and not overdoing the politics'.¹²⁷ Because of that, Attlee argued that it was only reasonable that the BBC was seeking to reach an adequate allocation of political talks between the three parties only: 'if parties multiply and if all kinds of individuals are to admitted as parties (...) and if you once begin to open the door very widely, the unfortunate listener hears nothing but the advocates of various causes'. Although he admitted that a different arrangement might be necessary for the future, at the present moment he thought the BBC was 'carrying out a very difficult task with very great success'.¹²⁸

121 Ibidem.

122 P. Addison, 'Churchill, Sir Winston Leonard Spencer (1875-1965)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (28-7-2013).

123 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 10.

124 See also Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 54.

125 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 19-3-1931, 2177, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

126 Ibidem.

127 Ibidem, 2230.

128 Ibidem.

7.8 'Bolshevism run mad' (1931)

Based on what we have read so far it seems unlikely that Attlee was genuinely impressed by the BBC's achievements. There was no denying that the BBC had struggled to live up to its ambition of creating an 'enlightened democracy' and it appears that Attlee's words were, above all, meant to conceal that the Corporation's thwarted progress in political broadcasting was the result of partisan and government pressures. This was not all. Because in answering O'Connor's complaint Attlee also claimed that any judgment of the BBC was highly subjective: 'Some hon. Members say that there is too much of one things, others that there is too much propaganda going on. I used to think so myself when in Opposition.'¹²⁹ While these words were meant to distract from the uncomfortable truth of the BBC's subjection, they also pointed ahead to developments in the very near future, which would see Attlee adopting a rather different stance himself.

What is referred to here are the events in the summer of 1931, which saw the dramatic fall of Labour's second minority government. In the years before the government had struggled to cope with the consequences of the economic crisis, and in facing this daunting task the government collapsed in August 1931. It was explained in chapter five that the cause of this breakdown was the question whether a reduction in unemployment benefits should be part of the overall package of expenditure cuts which the government was forced to consider to meet its growing budget deficit. Among those who thought this was inevitable were the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden and Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. When it turned that this break was beyond repair, MacDonald decided to hand his government's resignation and prepare for a new general election. However, this was a highly precarious moment for a political crisis and in the most unlikely turn of events MacDonald was persuaded to stay on as Prime Minister of a national government, that would include Conservatives and Liberals as well.¹³⁰ In Labour circles, these developments were watched with horror and disbelief. It was painful enough that the second Labour government had stranded on such a symbolic issue as unemployment benefits, but MacDonald's decision to lead a national government and to break with the larger share of his party fellows made it even worse. It caused the Labour Party to sever its ties with its long-standing party leader, as well as with some of their other former fellows, among whom Snowden, who had sided with MacDonald.

Broadcasting played a crucial role in the turbulent days and weeks that followed the fall of the Labour government. This was dramatically illustrated by MacDonald's appearance before the microphone on the eve of the 25th of August 1931. On that evening MacDonald was speaking directly from No.10 Downing Street, where the BBC's engineers had installed a provisional broadcasting studio from where he would lodge an appeal for national unity and announce the formation of the national government. Looking back on these events himself MacDonald later stated that he thought that broadcasting had had a steadying influence on the country in this moment of uncertainty and that his use of radio had done 'more good than columns of printed matter'.¹³¹ Others held a similar opinion and, ironically, various commentators claimed that MacDonald delivered his best radio talk ever on that evening. According to the *Manchester Guardian* the Prime Minister's speech 'must surely have been one of the most dramatic ever made

¹²⁹ Ibidem, 2229.

¹³⁰ Marquand, 'MacDonald, (James) Ramsay (1866-1937)' in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹³¹ 'Broadcasting from no.10 Downing Street', *Amateur Wireless*, 24-10-1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

by one man to millions'.¹³² *The Daily Telegraph* thought MacDonald's speech showed that he had now 'mastered to perfection the exclusive art of addressing an invisible audience' and it felt that 'his earnest sincerity and the force of a great emotion held in check were, perhaps, the best guarantees that the unseen millions would feel the full weight and meaning of his words'.¹³³ A similar point was made by the *Evening Standard* which observed that the Prime Minister's voice was 'strong, clear and dignified' and that his speech 'gave an impression of immense sincerity'.¹³⁴ And while a commentator from *The Star* sensed 'his tiredness, his anxiety – and his earnestness', he too concluded that broadcasting formed 'a vast power for preserving our national stability and for helping us to think straight'.¹³⁵

'Reading aloud the genealogical chapters of the Old Testament'

With a general election on the way, the country's unity would soon be challenged by the competing parties and the BBC was happy to facilitate their efforts, just as it had done in 1929 and 1924. However, reaching an agreement about a series of election broadcasts was now more difficult than ever, since the formation of the national government had torn apart the political landscape. While the Labour Party had split in two parts, the Liberal Party had broken down in three parts, of which two had come out in support of the national government. What made this even more complex was the status of the government in relation to the opposition. As a coalition of three parties the government represented a broad cross-section of the political nation, but the Conservative Party was the only party which was not divided by conflict and which had a strong parliamentary basis. After strenuous negotiations an agreement was reached in the second week of October, albeit with 'equal discontent on all sides'.¹³⁶ The Labour Party had good reasons to be aggrieved, as it received three election broadcasts, against two for National Labour. Even so, in the events that followed this was merely a minor issue and Labour's anger would be provoked much more severely, firstly, when Philip Snowden came out in full armour against his former party fellows and, secondly, when the BBC made a controversial appeal in its news bulletin on the very eve of the election.

The idea for this statement sprang from the mind of John Reith, who had observed the political developments of the past months with a keen interest. Throughout the year before Reith had grown increasingly agitated about the partisan machinations in politics and he had developed a strong aversion against the Labour government as well. As such, he did not shed a tear when the government came to its end and, based on his ideas about the need for national unity, he welcomed the formation of the national government as a promising development.¹³⁷ Of course, Reith was fully entitled to hold his own political beliefs, but it seems that these views did lead him to cross a line in the build-up to the election of 1931. On the day before the election Reith issued a statement that urged the broadcasting audience to go out to vote: 'on your action or failure to act may depend your own and your children's future, and the security and prosperity

132 'The Premier's Wireless Appeal', *Manchester Guardian*, 26-8-1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

133 'The Art of Broadcasting', *The Daily Telegraph*, 27-8-1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

134 'Mr. MacDonald's Broadcast', *Evening Standard*, 26-8-1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

135 'The Prime Minister's Talk', *The Star*, 26-8-1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

136 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 108.

137 *Ibidem*, 103-104.

of your country'.¹³⁸ These words may seem harmless, but Reith himself suspected that the BBC might be condemned for the undertone of favouritism for the national government. In fact, he expected that it would upset the Labour Party – 'I have no doubt that this will be regarded as tendentious by the Labour party' – but this did not withhold him from inserting it anyway.¹³⁹ And so, he wilfully risked being accused of violating the BBC's impartiality, which would indeed stir up a great deal of resentment in Labour circles against the BBC and its Director General.

Serious as this was, at that point in time the Labour Party had also itself to blame for its failure to make better use of the three broadcasting opportunities it had been rewarded in early October. Speaking for the Labour Party were John Robert Clynes, William Graham and Arthur Henderson, but neither of these men made much impression. The *Manchester Guardian* observed with some amazement that most politicians still 'seem unable to visualize the simple and widely scattered audience they are addressing on the radio and to grasp the chance that particular medium gives them if they use it properly'.¹⁴⁰ According to the socialist newspaper *Clarion* Labour's spokesmen 'did not make the best of the Party's case' and failed to deliver 'a rousing or inspiring speech'.¹⁴¹ More to the point was Clifford Sharp, former editor of the *New Statesman*, who was now writing for the *Week-end Review*. He observed that Clynes 'seemed to think he was standing on the plinth in Trafalgar Square' and that 'one could almost hear the thumping of the tub'.¹⁴² William Graham, on the other hand, was 'in his different way (..) worse still' as 'his sentences were firm and clear, but they left one unconvinced that even the speaker himself believed a single word of what he was saying.' And then there was Arthur Henderson, 'who spoke in the dreary level tones of a curate reading aloud, and not very well, one of the genealogical chapters of the Old Testament'. Sharp noted also that Henderson 'seemed utterly tired, and so dispirited that he could hardly rouse himself to the effort of keeping his glasses adjusted and deciphering his manuscript'.¹⁴³

Someone who did manage to deliver a rousing and controversial speech was the former Labour Party leader Philip Snowden. Having made a significant impression as a broadcaster in the 1929 election campaign, Snowden had not addressed any public meeting, since his ill health had forced him to stay at home at Downing Street 11.¹⁴⁴ However, perhaps to compensate, Snowden sought (and managed) to make a definitive impact on the campaign with his election talk. Showing a streak of ruthlessness, the former Labour leader decided to tap into the language of the 'red scare' campaign, which he had endured for so many years as well, when he was still one of the Labour Party's prominent figures. As such Snowden also introduced a new element to the practice of election broadcasts, which, so far, had served as a platform of reasonable debate and considered criticism. So referring to the red light which he saw before him on the microphone set, Snowden began his radio talk by reminding his audience that 'a red light is a warning of danger to be avoided' and he added that he was about 'to give you this warning to-

138 As quoted in Hollins, *The presentation of politics*, 413.

139 Stuart ed., *The Reith diaries*, 109.

140 'Last night's broadcast. Mr. Henderson's microphone fault', *Manchester Guardian*, 24-10-1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

141 'Freedom of the Ether', *Clarion*, undated 1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

142 'The Recent War on the Air', *Week-end Review*, 31-10-1931, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

143 Ibidem.

144 Antcliffe, 'Politics of the Airwaves', 9.

night'.¹⁴⁵ He continued by giving a personal account of the recent political developments which had led to the fall of the second Labour government and which had caused him to switch to the national government. In seeking to justify his actions, Snowden lashed out against his former party fellows, among other things by branding the Labour Party's election programme 'the most fantastic and impracticable programme ever put before the electorate'. Yet, this was not why his election broadcast caused such a stir. Because the most poisonous part of Snowden talk's was his claim that a Labour government would raid the people's savings and he sealed this by likening his former fellows to a bunch of radicals and extremists: 'this is not Socialism, it is Bolshevism run mad'. And so, turning his back on the Labour Party in style, Snowden predicted that if its programme was taken seriously, it 'would destroy every vestige of confidence and plunge the country into irretrievable ruin'.¹⁴⁶

7.9 Picking up the pieces

It was the Labour Party that found itself in shatters after the election results had been announced. Winning a mere 52 seats in the House of Commons, Labour's defeat did not come unexpected, but the scale of the massacre left many labour supporters in a state of shock. In the 1929 election the Labour Party had won a record-number of 287 seats and while this had moved the party into office, the most recent developments had reduced it to a marginal faction in the House of Commons. What made things worse is that the leadership of the parliamentary Labour Party was more or less decapitated. Of course, the greatest damage had been done by the breakup with MacDonald and Snowden, but in the events that followed almost none of the other senior party figures managed to retain their seat in Parliament. Among those who were toppled in the 1931 election was the official party leader Arthur Henderson, who was turning out to be a rather poor successor to Ramsay MacDonald.¹⁴⁷ Also defeated were the upcoming party leaders Arthur Greenwood and Herbert Morrison. This did not signal the end of their political career, but it did mean that the task of reclaiming the party's voice in Parliament rested on the relatively inexperienced shoulders of the likes of George Lansbury, Stafford Cripps and Clement Attlee. Although these were hardly the commanding figures which were needed at this moment of crisis, in the given circumstances there was little else to do than to start by restoring faith among the party's rank and file.

To be clear, it was not all doom and despair for the Labour Party. Andrew Thorpe notes for instance that the Labour Party's organizational base was unaffected by the recent downfall and that the years after 1931 would actually see an increase in the party's individual membership.¹⁴⁸ More significant here is what Laura Beers observes about the end of the second Labour government in relation to the Labour Party's media strategy. We have seen already that the Labour Party had a dedicated foe in the popular press, which for years now had been engaged in a red-scare campaign against the party. As such, it may not surprise that Labour had faced a near-united front in the national press throughout this calamitous year.¹⁴⁹ Even so, Beers explains that the

145 'Politics at the Microphone. V – The Rt. Hon. Philip Snowden', *The Listener*, 21-10-1931, 680.

146 Ibidem, 681.

147 Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 81.

148 Ibidem, 85.

149 Beers, *Your Britain*, 140-142..

Labour leadership had not stood idle in the years before and that it had come to recognize the need to change its relationship with the media, and the popular press in particular.¹⁵⁰ What's more, its main challenge, in this respect, was to shed its sectional, working-class identity and to develop a national, inclusive and cross-class appeal instead. Although this was a daunting task, by 1931 the Labour Party had already taken a major hurdle in the form of the *Daily Herald's* relaunch. In the previous years the *Herald* had continued to suffer a poor circulation, and while its lagging appeal had formed a growing concern among the labour hierarchy, it was decided towards the end of the 1920s to give the *Herald* a much-needed overhaul. The new *Daily Herald* was presented in March 1930 and its new popular style proved an enormous success; reaching a public of one million readers in two weeks' time, this number would increase to two million in 1933. While this would eventually see the *Herald* grow into the largest circulating newspaper, both nationally and globally, it would also give the Labour Party access to millions of households. Given its marginalized status in Parliament, this was a most welcome development.¹⁵¹

In fact, Beers argues that these same strategic considerations would lead to a significant improvement in the Labour Party's relationship with the BBC in the years after 1931. This was by no means self-evident, since the BBC's conduct throughout these months had caused considerable outrage in Labour circles. George Lansbury called the events of 1931 'the greatest setback' in Labour's history, and he largely blamed the party's electoral misfortunes on broadcasting: 'the chief factor against us was that (...) the wireless (...) was to a large extent organised and monopolised against us'.¹⁵² Other Labour leaders held similar views, and these claims were repeated on various occasions throughout the early 1930s. However, according to Beers, this did not prevent the Labour leadership from pursuing a more productive partnership with the Broadcasting Corporation. So, among other things, Beers claims that the Labour leadership 'gradually came to accept that the propaganda value of the wireless outweighed its desire to snub an institution which it perceived to be inveterately biased against the interests of Labour'.¹⁵³ Elsewhere she makes a similar point by stating that the Labour leadership's approach to broadcasting was marked by 'a policy of cooperation with and conciliation of [the BBC]' and a 'willingness to accept what they perceived to be iniquitous compromises rather than risk losing access to the airwaves'.¹⁵⁴ But although this is partly consistent with the findings of this chapter, it does reveal a remarkable contrast with the mounting agitation throughout these same years which the previous chapter revealed. To remind, this was exemplified most clearly by the repeated calls of the Labour Party in the House of Commons for parliamentary control over broadcasting and by the steady culmination in its references to Nazi-Germany and Hitler to discredit the Corporation and its Director General.¹⁵⁵ And so, the question is what significance Labour's struggle for 'control' had for its dealings with the BBC in the realm of programmes. And so, taking a closer look at these matters here should offer more substantial evidence if Labour did indeed, as Beers claims, make progress with broadcasting throughout these years, or whether the accumulated findings of these chapters really ask for a different conclusion.

150 Ibidem.

151 Ibidem, 131-138 and 145-146.

152 Lansbury, 'Labour and the BBC', 294.

153 Beers, *Your Britain*, 151.

154 Ibidem, and also 154 and 158.

155 Chapter five, page 169-171.

7.10 The Week in Westminster (1931-1933)

One of the programme Beers refers to is *The Week in Westminster*, albeit only in passing.¹⁵⁶ This programme has a curious place in the historiography of broadcasting, since historians have largely ignored it. Launched in November 1929, *The Week in Westminster* was the BBC's answer to the introduction of universal women's suffrage as it was meant to inform the female part of the broadcasting audience about the weekly proceedings in Parliament. This programme was presented by a fixed panel of MPs of all three parties, on the basis of strict equality, so with each MP delivering a talk about the debates in Parliament in every other three weeks. Perhaps this is why this programme was not troubled by the kind of problems and controversies that were casting a shadow over the BBC's other endeavours in the political realm.¹⁵⁷ At the same time this was also a typical example of a programme that matched Reith's ambition to develop broadcasting as an 'integrator of democracy'. From early on Reith had recognized that Parliament ought to have a central place in the body of programmes that would keep the broadcasting audience informed about the political developments of the day.¹⁵⁸ In fact, a few years earlier (in 1925) it had even been suggested to set up a regular, live transmission of the parliamentary debates, and to enable this experiment the BBC's chief engineer had drafted an intricate scheme that would see a number of fixed- and a moveable microphone being placed in the House of Commons.¹⁵⁹ However, when the idea was brought up in Parliament, it was immediately killed off by the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin. And so, in looking for other ways to report on the happenings in Parliament, *The Week in Westminster's* formula proved a viable alternative.

Originally, this programme had relied on women MPs only – Labour Party MP Mary Agnes Hamilton was its first presenter in 1929 – but practical considerations had caused the BBC to invite male MPs as well.¹⁶⁰ Among those was Clement Attlee, who was invited to become a regular contributor to *The Week in Westminster* in the wake of the 1931 election, and it was his involvement in the programme which offers an interesting view of the dilemmas and tensions that were evoked by the BBC's attempts to open the doors of Parliament to the public, as well as of Attlee's stance towards the BBC and his ideas about broadcasting. The purpose of the programme was explained to Attlee by John Reith as a series of talks 'which are intended to be very popular, non-partisan accounts of the week's parliamentary business'.¹⁶¹ What's more, Reith informed Attlee that this was a morning programme and that the fifteen-minute talks were aimed at a 'large miscellaneous audience' consisting of 'women, invalids, shift-workers, etc.', but also 'unemployed men and women'.¹⁶² He admitted it was 'not always easy to obtain an impartial record of events in Parliament', but he thought this series was both 'of value as well as of interest' to the broadcasting audience and democracy at large. Apparently, this was a welcome opportunity for Attlee as well. His party had only recently been reduced to a marginal presence in the House of Commons so the strict equality between the three parties on which

156 Beers, *Your Britain*, 157.

157 Hollins, *The presentation of politics*, 377-378.

158 Scannell and Cardiff, 'Serving the Nation', 163-164.

159 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 29-30.

160 J.E. Grenier, 'Hamilton, Mary Agnes (1882-1966)' in: Matthews and Harrison eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (23-8-2013).

161 Letter BBC to C. Attlee 30-11-1931, WAC, Contributor 910, Clement Richard Attlee, File 1: 1931-1941.

162 Ibidem.

these talks were based offered the Labour Party a deal which was more than fair. What's more, Attlee must have recognized the strategic value of this opportunity to address the programme's 'miscellaneous audience' on such a regular basis, as it provided him a chance to improve his and his party's esteem among the public. However, in answering Reith Attlee did note he had 'not hitherto spoken at the microphone'.¹⁶³ While accepting the invitation, he did insist he liked to come round and rehearse at the broadcasting studio, before actually going on the air.

Attlee's contribution to *The Week in Westminster* made a moderate success.¹⁶⁴ It has been noted that Attlee was the antithesis of Ramsay MacDonald, and that he possessed a modesty and soberness that MacDonald lacked.¹⁶⁵ It seems that this was also reflected in Attlee's contribution to *The Week in Westminster*. Delivering these talks was a delicate task, since they were intended to be 'non-partisan' and 'very popular' at the same time, which was somehow at odds with the (partisan) status of an MP. Although Parliament was in essence a place of conflict, the BBC had every reason to make sure that these talks would cause no stir or controversy, so among other things this meant that its presenters were required to give equal treatment to the government's position and the opposition's views. At the same time, this did not mean there were no undertones of sympathy or criticism to be heard. Attlee's solution was to deploy a subtle style, which did reveal his partisan background but which also avoided stepping on the toes of his adversaries. So speaking about the government's intention to tax co-operative societies he claimed that it did not need the revenue, but that it had to 'satisfy the agitation of the private traders'. Or when discussing his former party leader Ramsay MacDonald, he stated that the whole House awaited his opinion, but that MacDonald sat down 'to the general surprise (...) just when everyone was expecting that he was going to explain his position'.¹⁶⁶ Then again, for a Labour MP this was a considerate manner to speak about Ramsay MacDonald, who, after all, was talked about in more hostile terms among labour supporters throughout the country.¹⁶⁷

On the whole, the BBC was fairly content with Attlee as a regular broadcaster and it kept him on *The Week in Westminster* panel for two successive years. This did not mean it had no reservations about the Labour leader's talks, which was crucially informed as well by its larger concerns about the overall appeal of this programme. In March 1933, a producer of the programme, Margery Wace, approached Attlee and asked him to consider a different style in reporting on the debates and to use a different choice of words. So, among other things, she suggested to concentrate on one or two interesting debates of the past week, instead of giving a summary of the whole week's proceedings.¹⁶⁸ Besides that, she also encouraged Attlee to 'devote far more time to a description of personalities and to any little incidents that may happen in the House, that would assist you in stimulating the listener's imagination'; 'in fact', she continued, 'make the listener see the House of Commons as a stage on which human figures move and play their part.' This was not all, because she also urged Attlee to speak out more plainly and to 'venture, here and there, on letting your own opinions be known, provided, of course, that you always give a faithful summary of the

163 Letter C. Attlee to H. Matheson 14-12-1931, WAC, Contributor 910.

164 John Swift, *Labour in Crisis. Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-1940* (Basingstoke and New York 2001) 83-84.

165 Te Velde, 'Trust and the development of party politics: Ramsay MacDonald's "betrayal" and the British Labour Party', 77.

166 As quoted in Swift, *Labour in Crisis*, 83.

167 Te Velde, 'Trust and the development of party politics: Ramsay MacDonald's "betrayal" and the British Labour Party'.

168 Letter M. Wace to C. Attlee 14-3-1933, WAC, Contributor 910.

other standpoints'. After insisting that this did not resolve 'the need for strict impartiality', Wace finished her letter by asking Attlee about his views on the foregoing suggestions.

So what the BBC wanted was a more impressionistic, personalized and opinionated account from Attlee about the weekly events in the House of Commons, rather than a detached and objective report. It is not difficult to see why it hoped this would stimulate the public's interest in these talks, even though it would, at the same time, open the door for controversy somewhat further. Then again, balancing the interests of the broadcasting audience and the risk of controversy was a dilemma which the BBC faced every day. Still, what is interesting about this particular example is that Attlee was not only a contributor to the programme, but that he was also a central figure in the political machinations which were so important in shaping and curtailing the BBC's attempts to develop political broadcasting. The two roles were not easily separated, and it seems that Attlee had read this letter primarily in his latter capacity, so as an agent who was determined to decide on what the BBC was allowed to do, rather than as a contributor who was asked to enliven his talks. Welcoming these suggestions with approval, Attlee replied that 'incidents and personalities can be dealt with to a certain extent, but one must be wary of tender corns. The ridiculous is often the most interesting, but the human subject may object to being butchered to make an unemployed holiday.'¹⁶⁹ In a similar fashion he endorsed the idea of an opinionated approach to these talks: 'I think one must frankly recognize that however great the desire of any of those who do *The Week in Westminster* talks to be impartial, a certain amount of bias is inevitable and necessary. We all wear coloured glasses and these used with discretion brighten our talks and probably together give a better picture of Parliament as it is than if we all looked through clear spectacles.'¹⁷⁰ And so, although Attlee was willing to move along with the suggested changes, what was most remarkable about his answer was that it simply ignored that these comments were also directed at him, personally. This suggests that he did not so much consider the BBC's letter as an instruction to change the style of his own talks, but rather as a request for permission to adjust the overall tone of the series.

On the surface this confusion may not seem to have mattered much, but the exchange was really symptomatic of the fundamental conflict between the BBC and the various agents of the political realm about what were the rightful margins of the BBC's autonomy in politics and what was the acceptable measure of its transformative impact on politics. In this particular case the outcome suited both Attlee and the BBC, since it allowed *The Week in Westminster* to continue along the suggested path. However, it failed to resolve the apparent dissatisfaction within the BBC about Attlee's contributions to *The Week in Westminster*. And so, four months later, in July 1933, Attlee received another letter from the programme's producer, who informed him that the time had to come to change the group of MPs who were part of this series. While expressing 'how very much we have valued your help in the past', it insisted that the decision was taken with 'real regret'.¹⁷¹ Although this may well have been the case, an internal memo noted that Attlee's talks had gone from good to not so good – 'starting well, and finishing well below power' – and it blamed this on his rise to prominence in the Labour Party and his subsequent lack of time to prepare these talks.¹⁷²

169 Letter C. Attlee to M. Wace 15-3-1933, WAC, Contributor 910.

170 Letter Attlee to Wace 15-3-1933, WAC, Contributor 910.

171 Letter M. Wace to C. Attlee 15-7-1933, WAC, Contributor 910.

172 Letter Director of Talks to Assistant Controller of Programmes 28-1-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R51/115/1.

But after saying goodbye to Attlee, finding a Labour MP who did meet the BBC's requirements proved a difficult task. A year later the programme's producer complained that 'the official Labour Party offers such a poor choice of speakers at the moment'.¹⁷³ Admittedly, she was hardly satisfied either about the Liberal and Conservative MPs who contributed to the series on an equal basis. These included, for instance, the Conservative MP Cunningham-Reid, who, as the same producer claimed, had 'proved himself a dull and rather stupid broadcaster, but it would probably be difficult to convince him of this, since after each talk he broadcasts, he rings me up telling me the number of compliments he has received from friends and constituents'.¹⁷⁴ Although these dealings with MPs were far from ideal, for the moment the BBC decided to stick to the present formula, among other things, since it was felt that 'listeners do like to hear Members of Parliament'.¹⁷⁵ Besides that, it was anticipated that 'the privilege of doing these talks is very highly regarded in the House'; although they did not necessarily make good programme value, it was recognized also that 'these talks by members of Parliament are responsible for the creation of a certain amount of good will in the House of Commons'.¹⁷⁶

7.11 'Perverted values of the party game' (1931-1933)

Of course, the BBC's primary purpose was to serve the British public, and not to win support or sympathy from the members of the House of Commons. Still, at this point it might be clear that these two functions were closely intertwined and that the BBC's only chance to move forward in political broadcasting was by building and sustaining a sympathetic relationship with the various agents in the political field. As complicated as this task was, it was also, and more importantly, contrary to the ethos of independence which ought to guide the BBC's relationship with politics. This was also recognized higher up in the BBC's hierarchy, which is illustrated by a memo which Charles Siepmann, the BBC's Director of Talks, wrote to John Reith in June 1932 to express his 'very deep concern' over the current situation in political broadcasting.¹⁷⁷

On the whole, Siepmann's memo paints a bleak account of the forces the BBC was subject to in seeking to bring politicians before the microphone. More particularly, Siepmann feared that the integrity and prestige of the BBC was at stake and that this was largely the result of a looming conflict between the BBC's ideal of public service and the pursuit of private gains by politicians. According to Siepmann the recent political developments (the fall of the second labour government and its turbulent aftermath) had not only damaged the reputation of many individual politicians, it had also harmed the electorate's esteem for politics in general. What's more, Siepmann realized that the BBC held a precious antidote to those who were tarnished by these events – publicity – but he warned that the Corporation should be most careful in dealing with these political machinations. If it failed to do so adequately it would be in 'great danger' on two counts: 'If they succeed we are at once infected with and party to the perverted values of the party game. In the second place, once we become subject to the requirements of

173 Internal memo M. Wace to Director of Talks 11-7-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R51/115/1.

174 Internal memo M. Wace to G.N. Pocock 19-12-1934, WAC, inv.nr. R51/115/1.

175 Internal memo G. Murray to Controller of Talks 3-10-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R51/115/1.

176 Letter G. Murray to Controller of Talks 3-10-1935 and Letter Controller to Director of Talks 4-10-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R51/115/1.

177 Internal memo C. Siepmann Director of Talks to J. Reith Director General, 21-6-1932, WAC, inv. nr. R/34/534/2.

politicians for purposes of self-advertisement under the guise of the political education of the masses, our programmes are jeopardised on their artistic side and our independent efforts at furthering the education of the people give place to more ignoble ends.¹⁷⁸ And so, the challenge for the BBC in political broadcasting was to keep clean hands, while wading through the mud of the negotiations with politicians and parties.

Of course, we know this was a near impossible task, and that the price for this was limited progress and programmes of a poor quality. This was also recognized by Siepmann, and the remainder of his memo was highly critical about the present forms and lack of urgency of the BBC's political programmes. Among other things Siepmann questioned the inclusion of politicians in so-called symposia – a series of lectures on the same subject over a longer period – and Siepmann branded these as 'cumbrous things' that were 'embarrassing' on 'programme grounds'. Besides that, he was fiercely opposed to the idea of offering political parties a number of straight talks on subjects of their own choice, since this would not escape the 'petty level (..) of party politics'. The parties were not his only target, because he was also highly critical about individual politicians and their refusal or failure to take broadcasting more seriously: 'Part of my objection to talks and discussions by politicians generally is due to the fact that they claim to be so busy and important as to be exempt from the precautions which we have to take to secure efficient presentation'. Worse still was that these same politicians did not write their own texts, but got 'their stuff written for them by junior secretaries who have no inkling of our requirements and who cannot be got at to get revisions made.' Siepmann argued that the BBC ought to do more to break the hegemony of the parties and to escape their hold over political broadcasting. Striking a defiant tone, he insisted that it was the Corporation's urgent responsibility to ensure that 'the public shall have the views of eminent and experienced men, quite apart from what the politicians have to say'.¹⁷⁹

Stalemate

And yet, this did not mean the BBC was no longer interested in what politicians had to say or that it could allow itself the liberty to ignore the parties when seeking to inform the audience about the political issues of the day. What's more, Siepmann's memo did not discriminate between politicians of a particular persuasion, or between the different parties, but in the second half of 1932 it was the Labour Party which stood at the centre of a chain of events which exemplified the troubled relationship between politics and broadcasting. While these events were crucially informed by the perceived 'injustice' which the Labour Party had suffered in broadcasting in the wake of the fall of the second Labour government, its stance towards the BBC was also shaped by its marginalized presence in the House of Commons. Although Attlee's involvement in *The Week in Westminster* seemed to reflect what Beers labelled as Labour's policy of 'cooperation with and conciliation of [the BBC]', there was little that reminded of this in the conflict that unfolded between the Labour Party and the BBC in September and October 1932.

Trouble had been brewing for some time already, but what set these developments in motion was an invitation from the BBC to the Labour leader Arthur Greenwood to participate in a radio debate on the subject of unemployment. Having lost his seat in the 1931 election, Greenwood had recently returned to Parliament and the purpose of this debate was explained to him by

178 Ibidem.

179 Ibidem.

Reith. The BBC's Director General informed Greenwood that he would face a speaker of an opposite school of thought, and that they would both have fifteen minutes to state their case on the subject of choice, which would then be followed by a brief recap by an independent expert, who would also give a more lengthy introduction on the subject in the week before the actual encounter. While Reith informed Greenwood the BBC had asked the Conservative MP R.S. Hudson to deliver the rejoinder, it had approached William Beveridge to take up the role of independent expert.¹⁸⁰ On the whole, this seemed a relatively straightforward formula, which might have made an informative debate. Even so, the intended makeup of this programme is less important than Greenwood's response. Because in answering Reith, Greenwood replied with ill-disguised indignation and he stated that he found it highly remarkable that the BBC had dared to take up an issue of such enormous political significance without consulting the parties first. Apparently, Greenwood had coordinated this answer with his fellow party leader George Lansbury, who conveyed the same message to a higher level – the BBC's chairman, J.H. Whitley. Explaining that he was 'somewhat surprised' about the invitation to Greenwood, Lansbury claimed this raised 'a question of grave public and constitutional importance'.¹⁸¹ While noting that broadcasting was 'the most important forum for the discussion of every kind of subject and has of course, an audience far larger than can be commanded by any other medium', the Labour leader insisted that the BBC should always consult the official leaders of the parties when selecting the subjects and speakers for political discussions.¹⁸²

Ironically, this was precisely what the BBC had hoped to do, albeit on slightly different terms than the leadership of the Labour Party deemed acceptable. While this exchange took place in the closing days of September 1932, it crucially coincided with another conflict that was taking shape between the BBC and the Labour Party. This second conflict revolved around the former's attempts to set up a 'Parliamentary Advisory Committee' which should advise the Corporation on matters of political broadcasting. The idea for this committee had been suggested in December 1931 by Clement Attlee, but in taking up the suggestion the BBC had made the fatal mistake to invite a Labour MP on this body without consulting the Labour Party first. And so, within days of Lansbury's and Greenwood's angry exchange with Reith and Whitley, Labour's anger was provoked again and, in response, the Labour Party decided to boycott (and effectively torpedo) the 'Parliamentary Advisory Committee'.¹⁸³ Although both issues may seem somewhat futile from a contemporary perspective, there was a fundamental significance to these matters since it shows that the Labour Party refused to accept the BBC's right of initiative in political affairs. Still, this was not the end to this sequence of events, since there was more trouble on the way. Chapter five showed that these developments coincided with the resignation of Philip Snowden and Herbert Samuel from the national government, and that both men were offered the chance to inform the nation about their departure through the wireless.¹⁸⁴ With two government speakers answering their statements, to its great indignation the Labour Party did not receive the same opportunity. A few weeks later its yearly party conference passed an emergency resolution which condemned the 'deliberate exclusion of the official Opposition' from the airwaves and 'the

180 Report March 1933 National Joint Council 'Broadcasting', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS 292/787.18/1, f. 28.

181 Letter G. Lansbury to J.H. Whitley 27-9-1932, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/2.

182 Ibidem.

183 Chapter five, page 153.

184 Ibidem.

failure to take the Opposition into consultation on a matter of political broadcasting'.¹⁸⁵ In the weeks that followed the Labour Party and the BBC held a number of meetings to discuss their mutual grievances, but as these efforts failed to bring the adversaries together, it only helped to consolidate their conflict.¹⁸⁶

To be clear, the Labour Party was not alone in growing increasingly frustrated about the situation. Reviewing their recent troubles in an extensive letter, the BBC's chairman, J.H. Whitley, kept a diplomatic tone, but he made it absolutely clear that he held the Labour Party partly responsible for the BBC's failure to meet its responsibilities towards the public. So, although the Labour Party claimed to recognize the democratic value of political broadcasting, according to Whitley Labour's claim to partisan control made it nearly impossible for the BBC to bring the parties before the microphone – 'such a process was cumbersome in ordinary times, and it is impracticable under present conditions'.¹⁸⁷ While he condemned the fact that there had been no political discussions on the wireless for over a year, he warned the Labour Party that he had come to realize the BBC might have to adopt a different stance. More particularly he insisted that 'the ultimate responsibility for determining what subjects can best be dealt with and when and by whom must be taken by the Corporation itself.' This was directly at odds with the Labour Party's demand that the choice of subjects and speakers ought to lie with the leaders of parliamentary parties. Still, in facing up to Labour's impossible stance, Whitley argued that the BBC was always willing to receive suggestions by the Labour Party and any other party, and that it recognized and appreciated the value of such 'representative advice', but only without 'abdication of its ultimate control'.¹⁸⁸

With this the stalemate was complete, and the question was whether the BBC or the Labour Party was most determined to hold firm to its claim to control. Another question that was still on the table was whether the Labour Party would join the radio debate on the subject of unemployment. It was Arthur Greenwood whom the BBC had invited to contribute to this debate and despite his initial indignation about the BBC's conduct, Greenwood had decided to accept the offer. This debate was scheduled for December 16th 1932, but while Greenwood was originally told he would cross swords with R.S. Hudson, three weeks before the occasion he was informed that the Conservative MP Harold Macmillan would take Hudson's place, since the latter was unable to attend. Greenwood was not amused by this notice, and he responded by cancelling his contribution as well, claiming he had a 'long standing public engagement in his constituency'.¹⁸⁹ This happened only a week after the BBC's chairman Whitley had expressed his complaints over the Labour Party's stance in political broadcasting, and it seems unlikely the two events were not somehow related. As the BBC now had to find a replacement for Greenwood, instead of making the same 'mistake' again, it asked George Lansbury to provide a name of a Labour MP whom it might approach for this debate. However, despite complying with Labour's demand, Labour headquarters went on the counterattack by rejecting the BBC's invitation altogether, and it stated that it could not find a suitable candidate at such short notice.¹⁹⁰ While this shows that the Labour Party was prepared to lose access to the airwaves over its conflict

185 *Report Labour Party Annual Conference 1932*, 228.

186 Memorandum 'The broadcasting situation', MRC, TUC, inv.nr. MSS/292/787.18/2, f. 4.

187 Letter J.H. Whitley to G. Lansbury 14-11-1932, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/2.

188 *Ibidem*.

189 Report March 1933 National Joint Council 'Broadcasting', MRC, TUC, inv. nr. MSS.292/787.18/1, f. 29-30.

190 *Ibidem*, f. 30.

with the BBC, the BBC did find a way settle the score with the Labour Party. With the debate already scheduled, it asked James Maxton, the former chairman of the Independent Labour Party, to take the place of Greenwood. In recent years Maxton had come out as one of Labour's fiercest critics on the party's left flank, and other than the Labour leadership, Maxton seized the opportunity with both hands to address a million-wide audience about a topic that was of such crucial importance to Labour politics.

The Debate Continues

Still, this was not in the best interest of the BBC either. Although the BBC had tried to defy the Labour Party's demands, the harsh truth was that it could not continue to ignore Labour's claims for too long, since the BBC remained crucially dependent on the overall support from the political system of which the Labour Party formed an integral part. What's more, the BBC held few instruments to convince the Labour leadership to change its stance, and sooner or later it would have to come knocking on the party's door again if it hoped to engage its speakers for any new political programme or series of talks. And yet, this was not the preferred strategy of the BBC's Director of Talks, Charles Siepmann, who informed Reith in February 1933 about his visit to the House of Commons, where, among other things, he had met with the Labour leader Stafford Cripps. Although his conversation with Cripps had been 'most reasonable', Siepmann indicated he had serious doubts about how the BBC was trapped in the political machinations of Westminster: 'The more I see and learn of the very tiresome but very real jealousies of the House of Commons, the more I am inclined to the view that while we should deal in politics, we should tend to draw our speakers from outside the House than from within it. I believe that by doing so we shall be in a position to maintain our policy in respect of controversy and to avoid the irritations of conflict with parties and individual members of the House which are upsetting and provoke a lot of undesirable publicity over minor issues.'¹⁹¹

This was a long term prospect, and in the coming period the BBC continued to rely on the established routines and players in its dealing with political broadcasting. Such was the situation in June 1933 when the BBC came to draw up new plans for another series of political debates (aptly titled *The Debate Continues*) which was scheduled for that year's autumn. A first proposal for this series was formulated by Lionel Fielden, head of General Talks, and he noted there were two lessons to be drawn from the BBC's earlier efforts to organize political debates, first 'that front-rank politicians will seldom commit themselves to a debate on the microphone, and second 'that arranged studio debates are nearly always boring and platitudinous'.¹⁹² Even so, he was convinced 'there was good broadcasting value to be obtained by such a series if we can find a way of moulding the right politicians to the requirements of the microphone.' Suggesting a list of fourteen speakers (among whom prominent figures like Philip Snowden, George Lansbury, Stanley Baldwin, Winston Churchill, Lloyd George, etc.), Fielden raised the idea to stage these debates before a present audience. However, he also admitted that this was 'clearly a gamble', and that the safer option was to organize a series of separate talks, alternating between government and non-government speakers. He expected that this would make 'a really interesting series' and, 'what is more important still, (...) that the people concerned would agree to talk under these conditions'.¹⁹³

191 Internal memo BBC from Director of Talks to Director General 23-2-1933, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/2.

192 Letter L. Fielden to C. Siepmann 20-6-1933, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/2.

193 Ibidem.

Fielden was certainly right about the last point, although it was not easy to convince the Labour Party to give up its demand of absolute equality to each government speaker. Eventually, the Labour Party accepted a ratio of five government speakers to three Labour speakers and one Liberal speaker, but only 'under strong protest'.¹⁹⁴ While the Labour Party asked Lansbury, Greenwood and Cripps to speak on its behalf, what's more, the BBC decided to give these speakers and the other participants in the series a free hand in choosing the subject and content of their talks.¹⁹⁵ This was certainly remarkable, and it was directly opposed to what the BBC's chairman Whitley had said a year earlier ('the ultimate responsibility for determining what subjects can best be dealt with and when and by whom must be taken by the Corporation itself.'). If this represented a significant victory for the Labour Party, perhaps these were the kind of concessions that were necessary to develop a positive momentum in political broadcasting. This was not something the BBC could admit in public and the BBC's programme guide, the *Radio Times*, promoted this series instead as a bold step forward and a daring attempt at genuine controversy.¹⁹⁶ Claiming that this series would see a real clash of opinion, its announcement suffered a backlash for a different reason. Because the original plan for this series had included the names of prominent independent political figures, like Lloyd George, Austen Chamberlain and Winston Churchill. In the previous years these men had spoken out on more than one occasion against the suffocating hold of the parties over the airwaves, and the obstacles which individual politicians faced when seeking access to the radio microphone. Although the BBC was not unreceptive to these complaints – it was really stuck in the same boat – somewhere in the process of planning this new series of debates their names had been dropped again, when the list of speakers was reduced from fourteen to nine. This had not gone unnoticed to Churchill, Chamberlain and Lloyd George. With the three men sending an emphatic protest to the BBC, the national press covered the story widely. As such the BBC's claim to progress was overshadowed by a wave of criticism against its inability or failure to truly open broadcasting to a wider range of political opinions and figures.¹⁹⁷

7.12 A hierarchy of political discourses on radio

In 1933 it was five years ago since the ban on controversy had been lifted, but in terms of political broadcasting this had offered the BBC little relief. So far this chapter has shown that the BBC was only partly to blame for the sorry state of its attempts to develop broadcasting as a platform of political debate and information. In its efforts to bring politicians before the microphone the BBC was severely circumscribed by the pressures it was meeting from the different sides of the political spectrum. What's more, the Labour Party played a crucial role in this as well. It often felt aggrieved by the BBC's actions, but just as often it was the Labour Party that burdened the BBC with its demands and objections. Indeed, so far we have found little evidence of the

194 Letter NJC to J. Reith 18-7-1933, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/2.

195 The Labour Party selected George Lansbury, Arthur Greenwood and Stafford Cripps to speak about resp. 'The futility of the "National Government"', 'Immediate steps towards reconstruction' and 'The ultimate aims of the Labour Party'. Letter G. Lansbury to J. Reith 10-7-1933, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/2 and *The Times*, 'Politics by Wireless', 9-8-1933, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

196 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 54.

197 For instance 'Angel Voices', *Morning Post*, 9-8-1933 and 'Broadcast Politics', *The Times*, 12-9-1933, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

pragmatic turn and overall improvement in Labour's relationship with the Corporation that was referred to above. Of course, we're not even halfway the 1930s yet, but it does seem that Beers' observations are somewhat on the optimistic side. Although compromise and cooperation were crucial elements of the Labour Party's dealings with the Corporation, it might be argued as well that conflict was the all-defining feature of their mutual affairs. This had been more or less the case since the birth of the BBC in the early 1920s, and the pages above suggest that Labour's antagonism with the BBC remained very real in the wake of the fall of the second Labour government.

To be clear, in concentrating on the Labour Party this chapter offers a partial picture only of the variety of programmes that were somehow connected with political issues or that relied on speakers from a political background. Among the historians who have looked beyond the party element in the evolution of political broadcasting are Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff.¹⁹⁸ On the whole, their study acknowledges the crucial significance of the entanglement of negotiations and consultations in which the BBC was caught and it argues that this caused the emergence of, what they call, 'a hierarchy of political discourses on radio'.¹⁹⁹ The highest point in this hierarchy was occupied by the government, which held a privileged access to the airwaves. In fact, the Prime Minister was entitled to address the country at any moment on matters of national importance, whereas Ministers of state could claim access to the radio microphone to inform the public about new legislation or to explain government policy. While the opposition had no right to reply to these statements (except at Budget time), below this came the level of partisan politics which was defined by the dynamics between the BBC and the main parties and where the shape of programmes was crucially defined by the rule of the leadership of these parties. Finally, underneath this was the lower level of this hierarchy, which was made up around the talks, lectures and other forms of programmes which focussed on the discussion of contemporary affairs. While Scannell and Cardiff note that, on this level, the choice of topics and speakers was up to the BBC, the vertical arrangement of this constellation explains why the views and demands of the agents on the upper levels crucially weighed down on the BBC's opportunities on this lower level. According to Scannell and Cardiff this explains why the BBC's efforts to open up the field of controversy more widely were hampered by these combined pressures, and why the Corporation became overly cautious and prone to avoid any real controversy.²⁰⁰

All this is more or less consistent with what this chapter has shown as well and the question is what role the Labour Party has played in shaping this 'hierarchy of political discourses' in the subsequent years. However, in building on Scannell and Cardiff it is equally important to consider what lay beyond the scope of this 'hierarchy'. What is interesting in this respect is what Jon Lawrence observes about the significance of radio to interwar political culture. Lawrence's work has been referred to before, and although he acknowledges the novelty of radio as a domestic medium, he also challenges the popular assumption that the emergence of broadcasting caused a decline in the interest for political meetings. More particularly, Lawrence contends that political meetings 'survived in pretty good health between the wars', so despite the emergence of radio as, what he calls, a rival claimant on mass leisure time.²⁰¹ This is not to argue against

198 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 23-102.

199 Ibidem, 55.

200 Ibidem, 56.

201 Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 103.

Lawrence, or to challenge his conclusion, but what it shows is that his argument is based on an opposition between broadcasting and public politics that somehow falls outside the scope of this 'hierarchy of political discourses'. What's more, in charting the Labour Party's involvement with broadcasting from the mid- to second half of the 1930s, the following pages explore a similar but arguably more significant opposition, that is between broadcasting and parliamentary politics. While Parliament was an integral part of the 'hierarchy of political discourses', it was also more important to the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting than historians have recognized so far. In fact, the previous chapter showed that Parliament stood at the heart of Labour's campaign for control that culminated throughout these years. However, Parliament was also the heart of the political nation and it provided a most immediate view of Britain's democracy in action. As such, it also formed a primary reference point for the BBC and it was the latter's attempts to bring Parliament closer to the British people that opened a new stage in its struggle with the Labour Party.

7.13 Reporting Parliament

Shifting our perspective to Parliament we find ourselves in the proximity of what is arguably the most highly regarded institution in the history of modern democracy. Often hailed as the 'Mother of Parliaments', the history of the British parliamentary system traced back centuries and it had long been seen as a symbol of stability and progress, both in- and outside Britain.²⁰² What's more, the prestige of Parliament had stood at its highest in the second half of the 19th century, and it was no coincidence that this was the same period that saw the publication of Walter Bagehot's renowned analysis of the workings of the British political system.²⁰³ Drawing a distinction between the 'dignified' and the 'efficient' parts of government, Bagehot saw the combination of both as the key to the stability and continuity in the exercise of power throughout British political history.²⁰⁴ This did not mean that Parliament was immune to the great transformations that were taking place outside Westminster and by the early 1930s Parliament did not only have a different place in public life, its workings and makeup had changed significantly as well since the days of Bagehot.

These developments were intricately connected with the emergence of the Labour Party in national politics. In the decades before the Labour Party had went from a small parliamentary pressure group to the largest party in Parliament (after the 1929 election) and its growing presence was both a sign and a cause of the changing face of British parliamentary politics. Historians of the Labour Party have generally recognized that Parliament enjoyed the same prestige and admiration in labour circles as in other parts of society. Among those is Ross McKibbin, who uses Bagehot's notion of 'deference' to argue that the working class was firmly attached to the Crown and Parliament as the two symbols of the political order.²⁰⁵ In relation to this McKibbin points to the popularity of the so-called 'mock Parliaments', or debating societies, and he argues that

202 Te Velde, *Sprekende politiek*, 15.

203 Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* was originally published in 1867. W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. M. Taylor (Oxford 2009).

204 Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', *English Historical Review* 99 (1984) 297-331, there 311-312.

205 McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', 311-312.

offered an invaluable experience to many aspiring Labour MPs – Ramsay MacDonald included – as it familiarized them with the rules and conventions of the ‘real’ House of Commons.²⁰⁶ And yet, Richard Toye has argued that Labour’s ‘parliamentarism’ was more ambiguous than has been recognized so far.²⁰⁷ Among other things he points to the class antagonism in the dynamics which guided Labour’s entry into the House of Commons and he argues that Labour MPs did not only adjust themselves to a static, upper-class culture, but that they also helped to shape the ever-developing conventions of the House.²⁰⁸ At the same time, Toye argues that the Labour Party learned to know the limitations of Parliament throughout the interwar decades and that its faith in its working was seriously undermined by its two spells in office. Although no Labour leader would have denied the importance of Parliament’s function as a forum of debate, in the wake of the fall of the second Labour government it was increasingly thought among the Labour leadership that Parliament’s primary function was to get things done.²⁰⁹ It was in these same years that the Labour Party became evermore vocal about the need for parliamentary control over the BBC and it was part of the reason why the Labour leadership was reluctant to meet the BBC’s efforts to improve its reporting of Parliament.

A view from the gallery

For a number of years now the BBC had managed to serve the broadcasting audience with a weekly account – *The Week in Westminster* – of the proceedings in Parliament. The formula of this programme was quite unique, as it relied on the contribution of MPs by the main parties. However, it was explained above that the Corporation was not entirely satisfied with these talks, not only since most Members of Parliament struggled to capture the right rhetorical note before the radio microphone, but also since they proved difficult to manage for the programme’s producers.

Then again, offering its facilities to MPs was not the only way to inform the broadcasting audience about the developments in Parliament. Britain had a long and proud tradition of parliamentary reporting that traced back well into the 17th century when the first newspapers began to emerge. Even so, it is the 19th century that is commonly recognized as the golden age of parliamentary reporting.²¹⁰ With the readership of newspapers rapidly expanding and the emergence of a mass electorate on the horizon, the House of Commons attracted a growing interest from the press and the public alike as the stage on which the country’s fate was spelled out. Closely connected to this were the changes in the form and style of parliamentary reporting, which evolved in the later decades of this century from verbatim reports of the actual debates to impressionistic accounts of the personalities and scenes in Parliament.²¹¹ Standing at the heart of this process was the class of parliamentary reporters, who were seated in the press gallery, an upper part of the House that was located just above the Speaker’s chair. And so, in looking beyond the contribution of MPs to cover parliamentary debates, the obvious alternative for the BBC was to send one of its own reporters to Westminster to witness the events on the floor of the House as they unfolded.

206 Ibidem, 315 and more extensive about this subject Van Rijn, *De eeuw van het debat*, 195-201.

207 Toye, “‘Perfectly Parliamentary’?”, 1-29.

208 Ibidem, 22.

209 Ibidem, 24-29.

210 Andrew Sparrow, *Obscure Scribblers. A History of Parliamentary Journalism* (London 2003) 8-9 and 24-56.

211 Marcel Broersma, ‘Mediating parliament. Form Changes in British and Dutch Journalism, 1850-1940’ in: Wijffes and Voerman eds., *Mediatization of Politics in History*, 167-184. Also Te Velde, *Sprekende politiek*, 170-174.

This, however, was hardly a straightforward matter, since access to Parliament was closely regulated and highly restricted, also for political reporters. In fact, the struggle for access was as old as the practice of parliamentary reporting and although the press had won various privileges throughout the ages – for instance the right to take notes while attending parliamentary debates – as a newcomer in Westminster these privileges did not apply to the BBC.²¹² For some years the BBC had made no problem of this, and it chose to rely instead on the reports of Reuters to deal with the main events in Parliament in its news bulletins.²¹³ And yet, the agreement with Reuters was far from ideal as well, and an internal memo notes that its reports were ‘often very dull’ and ‘noticeably heavier in style than the rest of the [BBC’s] bulletins’.²¹⁴ The author of this memo thought that Reuters should be asked for ‘an impression of the debates’, rather than a detailed resume, and, moreover, that it should be urged to drop the ‘clumsy Parliamentary phraseology’ and adopt a ‘simpler language’ instead.²¹⁵ Apparently, these concerns were shared higher up in the BBC’s hierarchy as well, since the Controller of Programmes wrote Reith in response to this memo that the BBC’s parliamentary reports formed ‘an embarrassing factor in the presentation of our news’.²¹⁶

This does not mean the doors of Parliament remained closed for the BBC’s own staff throughout the entire year. On certain occasions the BBC was allowed to take a seat in one of the other galleries of the House, for example on Budget Day, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer presented his yearly Budget. Still, access to the galleries was regulated by the Speaker’s office, and the BBC had to go through tremendous difficulties to receive the required permission. Against this background it was a real breakthrough for the BBC when, in March 1932, one of its commentators, Gerald Barry, received regular access to the foreign press gallery for a weekly account (*Here and Now*) of the proceedings in Parliament.²¹⁷ The reason for this was explained by the Speaker of Parliament, who informed the BBC that it was realized the Corporation ‘now occupies a special place in the life of the nation’; however he also insisted that this was a temporary arrangement only that could be revoked at any moment.²¹⁸ The BBC was anxious to prolong the experiment and when the end of the initial agreement was nearing, Reith approached the Speaker’s office again. Insisting that the BBC was keen to extend its coverage of Parliament, he inquired whether the BBC could receive the same rights and privileges as the daily press.²¹⁹ However, the parties in Parliament remained unconvinced about the BBC’s need for access to the press gallery on a regular basis. And so, the BBC was informed by the Speaker that his consultation with the parties and the Prime Minister had yielded the unanimous conclusion that it was ‘undesirable’ that the BBC would broadcast a daily account of the proceedings in the House.²²⁰

212 Sparrow, *Obscure Scribblers*, 25. The ban to take notes in the House of Commons was lifted in 1783, but it was kept in place for those parts of the gallery, the strangers gallery, that were reserved for other visitors.

213 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 41.

214 Internal memo to Director of Talks ‘Parliamentary Reports in the News’, 9-1-1933, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

215 Ibidem.

216 Internal memo Controller of Programmes to Director General ‘Parliamentary Reports in the News’, 29-1-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

217 Letter E.A. Fitzroy to J.H. Whitley 15-3-1932, WAC, inv. nr. R31/52/1.

218 Ibidem.

219 Letter J. Reith to Sir Colin Richard Keppel 7-10-1932 and Letter J. Reith to E.A. Fitzroy 9-11-1932, WAC, R31/52/1.

220 Letter E.A. Fitzroy to J.H. Whitley 2-11-1932, WAC, inv. nr. R31/52/1.

'Gratuitously offensive comments'

This letter gave no further details about the background of this decision, but it appears that some parties were a little more opposed to the BBC's permanent presence in Parliament than others. It was in this same period that the Labour Party came to appeal for a greater degree of parliamentary control over broadcasting, which, as we have seen, would lead to its culminating claims about the 'dictatorial' state of affairs in the Corporation. What's more, developments in the following years suggested that the Labour Party grew increasingly apprehensive about the influence of broadcasting on Parliament as well. An interesting illustration of this was offered by a series of letters that were exchanged between Reith and the Labour MP Morgan Jones towards the end of 1934. Although the BBC's reporters were kept from attending the press gallery on a regular basis, by now the BBC had developed quite a routine in making the most of the alternative passages into Parliament. Every now and then it managed to send one of its reporters to Westminster and it was the account of one of these reporters that caught the attention of Morgan Jones, who, in turn, turned to Reith to let him know that he was greatly offended by the reporter's comments.

'Dear Sir John Reith, I gather from my wife who "listened in" last evening that a "gentleman" who was sent down from the BBC to listen to the debate last night had a gibe at myself as spokesman for the Labour Party. Many of my colleagues, as well as myself find it hard to tolerate some of the gratuitously offensive comments by some of these gentlemen. Last night, I gather, this gentleman (I use the word with some hesitation) thought it necessary to criticize my manner rather than my matter. (...) I am a left and am perhaps a little more volatile than this censor of manner. But he had to remark, I gather, that the next speaker, Sir Archibald Sinclair, was, among other things, more "rational". I have no Oxford drawl nor a Cambridge one either. I speak clear English and all this with some emphasis. People do understand what I say at any rate. But no one has yet suggested that I have lost the faculty of being "rational", nor even slightly suggested it. That discovery has, happily, been reserved for "your commentator". A perusal of my speech may perhaps enable you to resolve this apparently debatable point. It may be worth arguing if only to enable you to judge the reliability of your "commentators". Yours Morgan Jones'.²²¹

Jones' letter to Reith makes an interesting source, as it offers a fascinating view of the sensitivities and scepticism in the perception of the BBC in Labour circles. What's more, it also sheds an interesting light on the forces that were at work between the Labour Party's and the BBC's efforts to serve the public within the walls of Parliament. There was, for instance, a strong element of class consciousness to Jones' complaints, and his confessions about his manner of speaking highlights the intricacies of class that were manifest in the meeting of MPs from various backgrounds on the floor of the House of Commons. What's more, it also shows that the same issue resonated in the perception of the BBC and the elitist assumptions of its spoken English among Labour MPs. But equally interesting was that Jones' comments were informed by a conception of parliamentary politics as a rational debate, which, he thought, the reporter had disregarded by concentrating on his 'manner', instead of his 'matter'. Of course, we have seen as well that this was precisely what the BBC aimed to do, since it sought to convey an impression from the scenes and personalities in the House to improve the appeal of these reports with the broadcasting audience. Apparently, this was not sufficiently appreciated or understood by Morgan Jones, so it was up to Reith to resolve his anger.

221 Letter M. Jones to J. Reith 29-11-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

In his reply to Jones, Reith apologized for the confusion and he tried to explain Morgan Jones the difficulties and dilemmas of parliamentary reporting: 'Unlike newspapers (which, of course, reflect the views of one party or another), we cannot add interest or colour to our accounts by partisanship. We therefore welcome the opportunity to report actual clash of opinion, and for this reason alone we do all in our power to present opposite points of view. This is a practical argument which I am sure will appeal to you.'²²² However, Reith's letter failed to have the intended effect, since Morgan Jones continued to be greatly offended by the affair: 'It is not a nice thing for anyone to be held up to one's friends in various parts of the country as a ranting raving fool. And that certainly was the impression conveyed.' He did not accept Reith's reading of the events: 'You say your objective is complete impartiality. (...) My whole complaint is that your observer did add colour to his account, that he did not report the clash of opposite opinion, that he failed to present opposite points of view. If he had done all those things I would have had no complaints.'²²³ While the two men agreed it was unlikely they would solve their dispute through correspondence, Reith convinced Morgan Jones to meet the BBC's news editor, John Coatman, who was responsible for these parliamentary reports.

Apparently, Coatman was better suited to this challenge since he informed Reith a week later that he had 'established thoroughly friendly relations' with Morgan Jones and that 'there ought to be no further misunderstandings'.²²⁴ However, what Coatman did not mention was the price he had to pay to appease Morgan Jones. A few months later Coatman was informed by Jones that he had arranged a ticket for Coatman to attend a parliamentary debate from one of the galleries in the House of Commons. This happened to be an occasion which Morgan Jones would use to raise his voice in Parliament, and apparently, Coatman had promised Jones that his contribution would be mentioned in the BBC's report of this debate. To thank Morgan Jones for his ticket to the gallery, Coatman wrote him a short note with an extract of the concerning report, and he stressed that the reference to his speech was 'really quite a satisfactory reference, and that it was meant to be quite definitely complimentary'.²²⁵ This was clearly at odds with the 'completely impartiality' which the BBC was meant to uphold, and Morgan Jones did not waste his chance to rub this in: 'To say that I was mentioned as one of the three high lights simply ignores the issue. It is not publicity for myself about which I am concerned, it is the right of the Opposition to have its arguments presented and that was not done on this [Bd]: the former] occasion.'²²⁶

The larger picture

Charting these individual grievances of one Labour MP is certainly insightful, but it should not distract from the larger issue that was at stake, i.e. the BBC's access to Parliament and its opportunities to cover parliamentary politics in its programmes. The dispute between Morgan Jones and the BBC unfolded between November 1934 and February 1935 and it was the timing of this affair which helps to understand why Reith and Coatman went to such great lengths to smooth out their difficulties with Morgan Jones. Because the previous chapter showed that 1935 was an important year for the BBC, since it would witness the start of the Ullswater Committee which would discuss the renewal of the BBC's charter and license. Of course, this

222 Letter J. Reith to M. Jones 7-12-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

223 Letter M. Jones to J. Reith 10-12-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

224 Internal memo J. Coatman to J. Reith 19-12-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

225 Letter J. Coatman to M. Jones 14-2-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

226 Letter M. Jones to J. Coatman 14-2-1935, WAC, Policy, inv. nr. R34/561.

is not to suggest that one angry Labour MP was capable of derailing the BBC's future, but one of the subjects the Ullswater Committee would consider was the BBC's progress in political broadcasting. Moreover, Reith would make sure to raise the issue of parliamentary broadcasting as well since he hoped to find a broader recognition of the need for permanent access to the galleries of the House. Against this background it seems only fitting that the Labour Party's member of the Ullswater Committee was Clement Attlee, whose previous involvement with *The Week in Westminster* provided him with ample insight in the intricacies of these issues. And yet, Attlee had many other things on his mind as well. Because in October 1935 he suddenly found himself as the Labour Party's new party leader, after George Lansbury's pacifism had forced him to resign from this position due to a conflict with the wider party over the rising tensions on the European continent. As if this was not enough, Attlee faced an immediate test as the new Labour leader in the shape of the general election of November 1935, which would reveal whether his party's record of the past years was enough to restore the damage it had suffered in 1931.

7.14 'Election By Wireless?'

In 1935 more than ten years had passed since radio was first used as an instrument of electioneering. Throughout these years the arrangement of these election talks had seen significant controversy, but apparently the BBC and the major parties were determined to avoid the same sort of trouble this time. Having heard on so many occasions that the parties held the ultimate authority in political broadcasting, the BBC decided to stand aside in the negotiations over these election talks.²²⁷ It was the Conservative Party which proposed to have a series of twelve election broadcasts, with five for the government, four for the Labour opposition and three for the Liberals. This was more than reasonable, and while both parties accepted the offer, the Labour Party did make an additional request that was granted as well. Four years earlier Labour had been taken by surprise by the statements in the last week of the election campaign, chief among these Snowden's infamous 'Bolshevism run mad'-claim. To prevent a similar last-minute backlash from happening again, Labour suggested to plan the final election broadcast a week before election day. The idea was that this would allow the voters to make up their own mind, without being swayed by the voices who happened to have the last word on the final eve of the election campaign.²²⁸

This may seem farfetched, but it illustrates the influence which the Labour Party ascribed to broadcasting. Even so, it appears that the novelty of radio was beginning to wear off and that broadcasting had become an established part of political culture. This, at least, was suggested by the fact that newspapers did not report on the 1935 election talks with the same fascination and excitement that had coloured their reports in earlier years. One newspaper even noted that 'it is beginning to be realised that wireless is not going to be the political power in this country that some imagined it would be.'²²⁹ This, however, was not a unanimous observation and someone who disagreed with this view was the Labour Party's Arthur Greenwood. Looking back on a decade of political broadcasting, Greenwood confessed he was a late convert to radio. While he

227 Letter C.C. Graves (Controller of Programmes) to C. Attlee 22-10-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R34/535/3.

228 Antcliffe, 'Politics of the Airwaves', 10 and Hollins, *The presentation of politics*, 462.

229 'Election By Wireless?', *Liverpool Daily Express*, 9-11-1935, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks, 1935-1936.

used to think that the wireless was a 'cold' medium – since it lacked the 'glowing atmosphere' of the public meeting – he now understood it was 'rapidly becoming the most powerful agency for the dissemination of political views'.²³⁰ Then again, we have read similar predictions before, and the more interesting part of Greenwood's article was his comments about the 'terrifying' nature of broadcasting: 'Most of you have been listeners; but few have been broadcasters. "Listening-in" is easy; broadcasting to a politician who has been used to the public platform, the crowds, the hecklers and the excitement of big gatherings is something which at first is terrifying. Imagine yourself in a studio, all alone, talking to a lifeless microphone, not seeing a soul, unable to weigh the effect of your words on the enormous unseen audience who are "listening-in" by the fireside.'²³¹ If these words can be read as a postscript to Labour's flawed performances at the microphone in the run-up to earlier elections, the underlying suggestion was also that Labour's speakers were more experienced by now and, therefore, better able to deliver a decent election talk.

'I ask you all'

On the whole, the general election of 1935 turned out to be a rather quiet affair. This was the first election that broadcasting reached a majority of the British homes, although this did not mean that the election talks were actually listened to by the larger part of the British people.²³² At the time, the BBC had not yet begun to collect audience figures, but a poll that was conducted by the *Daily Express* estimated that less than half the population had shown an interest in these radio talks.²³³ The overall impression of people who had listened to these broadcasts was largely favourable to Stanley Baldwin, who once again showed his mastery of the microphone. While this was largely in keeping with the previous campaigns, what's more significant for us is that the Labour Party managed to break the cycle of criticism its election broadcasts had faced so far.²³⁴

The four speakers for the Labour Party were Clement Attlee, John Clynes, Arthur Greenwood and Herbert Morrison. Of these Clement Attlee was the most experienced broadcaster, but it was Herbert Morrison who was widely praised for his election talk. Morrison's name figured prominently in the previous chapters as well, not only since he was one of the first Labour figures to promote public ownership of broadcasting, but also since he was the driving force behind Labour's embrace of the public corporation model. Having recently inspired the London Labour Party to a victory in the elections for the London County Council, Morrison was a skilled campaigner with a keen eye for publicity.²³⁵ However, he also appreciated the value of professional advice, and in preparing for this election talk Morrison had found someone from the BBC Talks Department to coach him for the occasion.²³⁶ It seems that this worked out well. One observer praised the 'straightforward simplicity' of Morrison's broadcast, while another commentator labelled his talk 'a revelation'; praising his 'quiet but clear voice' he noted that Morrison gave 'a reasoned statement of fact which held the listener's attention throughout'.²³⁷ This was a welcome

230 Arthur Greenwood, "Fireside politics", *Labour* 3 (1935) 86.

231 Ibidem.

232 Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 97.

233 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 141.

234 Ibidem, 140 and Antcliffe, 'Politics of the Airwaves', 10.

235 Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, 30-32.

236 Hollins, *The presentation of politics*, 465.

237 'The political broadcasts', *Manchester Guardian*, 14-11-1935, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks, 1935-1936.

endorsement for the Labour Party, but it seems that the three other Labour speakers fared not nearly so well. Probably Arthur Greenwood's speech was least appreciated. While Reith thought it was 'really disgusting' and a 'prostitution of broadcasting', another listener thought it was 'too partisan to be pleasurable'.²³⁸ As Clynes' talk was dismissed for its 'dour aggressiveness', Attlee's talk received a milder response.²³⁹ It was noted that 'his anonymous southern accent was too quick', whereas another listener thought his talk was 'sensual and factual', although 'perhaps he packed rather too much into his talk'.²⁴⁰

These comments give some insight in the public perception of Labour's election broadcasts, but they offer no clues as to whether these talks marked a change in Labour's rhetorical approach to radio. An earlier part of this chapter looked in some detail at the style and substance of Labour's election broadcasts during the 1929 election campaign, and it noted a discrepancy between the speeches of Margaret Bondfield and Arthur Henderson on the one hand, and those of Philip Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald on the other hand. While the talks of the former two were heavy on policies and short on personality, the talks of the latter leaned more clearly towards the conversational style. What may be noted is that Labour's 1935 election broadcasts revealed a similar discrepancy, in the sense that Clynes and Greenwood delivered a scathing attack on the national government with minimal personal references, whereas Attlee's and Morrison's talks drew more heavily on the personal element to evoke the impression of a dialogue. Whether or not this was a deliberate strategy is uncertain, but we do know that Clynes' and Greenwood's depersonalized approach did not work out too well with the broadcasting audience. This is not to say that Attlee's and Morrison's election broadcasts showed no change compared to Snowden's and MacDonald's talks of six years earlier. In applying the lessons of the past, both Attlee and Morrison showed a more advanced understanding of broadcasting than their predecessors in 1929, 1924 and 1931.

In Attlee's case this was crucially shaped by his experience as a contributor to *The Week in Westminster*. We have seen how the producer of this programme advised Attlee to 'make the listener see the House of Commons as a stage on which human figures move and play their part'. With this lesson in mind Attlee opened his election broadcast by painting a dramatic picture of Europe, threatened by war: 'As you listen to this speech, people are being killed in Abyssinia'.²⁴¹ Somewhat further he claimed that 'talking of millions makes one forget the individual', after which he paused to make his audience a request: 'I want you to picture clearly in your minds an ordinary family of father, mother and children. That is the simple element which is the basis of a nation.' So laying down a social map that began with the individual, but that extended to the family and the nation, Attlee argued that the Labour Party was committed to the welfare of the people as a whole. In key parts of his talk he used a personal narrative to appeal to basic human instincts: 'I think that every politician should always have this picture clearly before his mind, for it is his duty to give security to the citizens, and to banish fear from their minds.' There was an adversarial side to his talk as well. In condemning the national government's economic policies – 'it sounds quite mad doesn't it?' or 'this is the economics of the madhouse' – Attlee even made

238 Stuart ed., *The Reith Diaries*, 122-123 and 'The political broadcasts', *Manchester Guardian*, 14-11-1935, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks, 1935-1936.

239 'The political broadcasts', *Manchester Guardian*, 14-11-1935, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks, 1935-1936.

240 Ibidem and 'A London Diary', *New Statesman and Nation*, 9-11-1935, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks, 1935-1936.

241 C. Attlee, 'Election broadcast', *The Listener*, 6-11-1935, 821.

a subtle reference to Philip Snowden's controversial statement of four years earlier. And yet, the thrust of his talk focussed on Labour's claim to bring comfort and security to every family. This was exemplified by the anecdote about his encounter in East London with a 'small, barefoot, child' with which he ended his talk. After explaining that this helpless child symbolized Labour's higher purpose in politics, Attlee turned directly to his audience: 'I ask you all, whatever your position in life, to apply to the affairs of State the same commonsense and ethics that you apply in your family life: "Each for all and all for each".'²⁴²

It has been noted that the use of the family-theme in Labour's election broadcasts was indicative of the party's attempt to direct its propaganda efforts to a broad and diverse audience, and to appeal specifically to female voters.²⁴³ However, beyond that, it was also a sign of Labour's improved understanding of broadcasting, which, as a domestic medium, was closely intertwined with the nation as a family.²⁴⁴ Even so, it was Herbert Morrison's election broadcast that offered the clearest proof of the increased grasp of radio among the Labour leadership. Among other things this was exemplified by the conversational style of delivery, which Morrison applied more rigorously than Attlee. His election talk contained a variety of phrases that brought the 'I' and the 'you' together – 'I can assure you', 'You know as well as I do', 'I want to know the reason why, and I am sure you do as well', 'If you desire, as I think you do', 'It is my believe that if you vote', 'It is up to you and me', 'Let me remind you', etc. – and his aim in doing so was to establish a sense of agreement or understanding with the multitude of individual listeners.²⁴⁵ Equally interesting in this respect was how Morrison spoke about himself and his role as a politician. He opened his talk in a most modest way: 'I have been asked to wind up these Election broadcast talks for the Labour Party. As one citizen to another, I shall try to put as clearly and sharply as I can the issues upon which you will be voting next Thursday.' What stands out in these words is its egalitarian undertone. Although he delivered these talks as one of the Labour Party's prominent figures, Morrison sought to win the confidence of his audience by appearing before them as one among equals, and not by imposing his authority as Labour leader. It was this same tone and message that resonated in his appeal which concluded his talk: 'I ask you with all the earnestness I can command to join with us in our efforts for the reconstruction and advancement of Britain, and for laying secure the foundations of permanent peace throughout the world. The decision is in your hands.'²⁴⁶

It may be noted that these last words are somewhat similar to the statement which concluded Ramsay MacDonald's election broadcast of 1929 – 'I place myself in your hands, and ask for your favourable verdict'. Then again, the connotation of these claims was completely different, and it can be argued that these appeals did not only come from two different egos, but also from two different eras. There was just six years separating Morrison's and MacDonald's election broadcasts, but it seems that the latter's words were reminiscent of a time when the (present) public required a dramatic display, whereas the former's words offered a glimpse of the more subtle strategies to court an (absent) audience. As such Morrison's and Attlee's election broadcasts of 1935 can be seen to mark a turning point in the Labour Party's dealings with radio as an instrument of electioneering. At the same time this was really a minor step in what was

242 Attlee, 'Election broadcast', 821.

243 Beers, *Your Britain*, 154-155.

244 For instance Cardiff and Scannell, 'Broadcasting and national unity', 163-164.

245 H. Morrison, 'Election broadcast', *The Listener*, 13-11-1935, 881-882.

246 Morrison, 'Election broadcast', 882.

an ongoing and highly uneven process and we should not forget that the personal element (i.e. the rhetorical capacities of Morrison, Attlee, etc.) formed a vital factor in this development as well. What's more, electioneering was but one part of the broader political process and, so far, this chapter has shown that the Labour Party was determined to curb the BBC in covering this process. When some months after the election the Ullswater Report was published, it turned out that Attlee and the Labour Party had used this inquiry to reinforce this effort by preventing the BBC from finding a permanent seat in the galleries of the House of Commons.

7.15 Labour and the Ullswater Committee

The general election of November 1935 produced a sweeping victory for the national government and it allowed Stanley Baldwin to reclaim the position of Prime Minister for the coming years. Winning 154 seats the Labour Party did manage to regain some of its former presence in Parliament, although the party had really aimed for a bigger comeback. Although the election was the most important political event of the year, for the BBC 1935 was above all dominated by the Ullswater Committee. Chapter five showed that this committee had begun its work in April 1935, with Clement Attlee as the Labour Party's representative. It was explained that the National Council of Labour had used the occasion to argue for more parliamentary control over broadcasting, which was largely the result of the troubled dealings between the Labour Party and the BBC of the years before. This had also caused the Labour Party to support a proposal to transfer the responsibility for broadcasting from the Postmaster General to a more senior member of the Cabinet. Although this proposal was endorsed by the Ullswater Committee, eventually the Baldwin government decided against it. As the BBC's constitutional position remained unaltered, this helped to stir up Labour's anger about the Corporation and its Director General even further, and it culminated in 1936 in its claims about the dictatorship and autocracy at the heart of British broadcasting.

'The focal point of politics'

A subject which chapter five did not explore, but which was discussed by the Ullswater Committee concerned the BBC's efforts to develop political broadcasting. This had been a source of controversy for many years and it was impossible for the Ullswater Committee to ignore it. Among those to raise the subject were Arthur Greenwood and Walter Citrine, who testified on behalf of the National Council of Labour. We have seen already that the NCL had drafted a 'précis of evidence' beforehand, which explained its position on a number of questions. With regards to political broadcasting this document presented what was largely a summary of Labour's past complaints, notably about the BBC's conduct during the general strike and the treatment of the party in the run-up to the 1931 election. Beyond that it argued to extend the use of radio for political broadcasting, although it insisted as well that the choice of speakers and subjects ought to reside with the parties, and not with the BBC.

We have read plenty of this already, and there is no need to go through these arguments again. More interesting, therefore, was what the NCL had to say about the reporting of Parliament. In the previous years the BBC had continuously pressed the Speaker of the House of Commons for better facilities to report on the parliamentary proceedings in its news and programmes. While the BBC's diplomacy had stalled on the mutual objections of the leadership of the main parties, it was noted above that one of its reports had provoked a sharp response from the Labour MP

Morgan Jones, who felt he was being portrayed as a 'ranting raving fool'. For the BBC this affair came at a highly unfortunate moment, since it hoped the Ullswater Committee might help to improve its opportunities in this respect. It seems unlikely that these events caused the NCL to take a firm stand against the BBC, but there was certainly an immediate connection between Jones' indignation and the statements in the NCL's evidence to the Ullswater Committee.²⁴⁷ Although it urged that the 'power wielded by the wireless' should be 'utilised in the best public interest', it also insisted that this meant there was a limit to what the BBC could do: 'As regards commentaries on political events over the wireless, the Council's view is that purely objective and impartial statements cannot be expected. An "eye-witness in the House of Commons (..) is almost inevitably bound to exhibit his personal bias in recording his impressions."²⁴⁸ These words seem to refer directly to the Morgan Jones-incident, but there was a trace of Attlee to the NCL's evidence as well. It continued by stressing its 'strong opinion that if proper provision is made for the leaders of political life to appear before the microphone, there is little need for "unofficial" commentators on the proceedings of the House of Commons or other political events.'²⁴⁹

These statements are largely consistent with what this chapter has so far revealed, but apparently the members of the Ullswater Committee were somewhat surprised when they learned about Labour's objections. Apart from the written evidence, Greenwood and Citrine were also invited to testify before the Ullswater Committee and this gave its members an opportunity to question the two men on Labour's stance. Among those to do so was the chairman, Lord Ullswater, who happened to be a former Speaker of the House of Commons. In answering his question, Greenwood explained his party thought it was inevitable for a commentator to import political bias into his report. This did not settle the question and later on in the meeting Greenwood and Citrine were asked whether they did not think it was good for the British public to get a picture of Parliament at work, certainly given the fact that parliamentary debates were receiving less and less attention in the press. Again, Greenwood simply rejected the suggestion: 'if it is a spectacular occasion in the House and feeling is running high your commentator is going to tell ten or twelve million people his own personal impression, which may be entirely different from the impression of the people who were actually on the floor of the House.'²⁵⁰ Greenwood's objections did not merely concern the spectacular occasions, and he had stated in a different context that the broadcasting of parliamentary debates would make 'a waste of time', since the 'dullness of most debates' would 'undermine the confidence of the people in our Parliamentary institutions.'²⁵¹ It was in this same context that Greenwood had insisted that he and his party hoped that radio would become 'a great medium of political education' and that he thought 'large numbers of citizens would be glad to hear the voices of those who are helping to shape our political life expressing their views on the problems which face the nation and the world.'²⁵² What's more, in elaborating on these matters before the Ullswater Committee, Greenwood repeated Labour's claim there was no need for parliamentary commentators at all, since the leading politicians were well capable to deliver these reports without having to suppress their political colour or bias.

247 'Précis of Evidence' NCL, WAC, inv. nr. R4/77/6.

248 Ibidem.

249 Ibidem.

250 'The Broadcasting Committee 1935. Minutes of Evidence', 11-7-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R4/87.

251 Greenwood, "Fireside Politics".

252 Ibidem.

These claims did not stand on their own. Because the larger part of Greenwood's and Citrine's meeting with the Ullswater Committee was spent on questions about the intricacies of the relationship between Parliament and the BBC in its various dimensions.²⁵³ Although most members of the Committee were not very sympathetic to Labour's outlook, there was one figure who did show a more acute interest in these issues, Clement Attlee. In facing his party fellows, Attlee asked a variety of questions, although it seems his purpose was mainly to elucidate his own views. There was a thin line between questions and answers: 'Q. Do you recognise that there is a possible danger that the BBC might (...) make political reputations by the power of the wireless? – A. Yes;'; 'Q. Your view is that political broadcasting should be carried on House of Commons lines? – A. Exactly, and through the House of Commons machinery;'; 'Q. On the question of an eyewitness in the House of Commons, does not the impression depend very much on how much you hear of it? – A. Yes, of course it does.'²⁵⁴ However, Attlee was not convinced that the other members of the Committee understood the fundamental significance of these issues. And so, at a later point during the investigation he moved to lay down a number of principles that ought to inform the Ullswater recommendations. Referring to the 'history of this country and the nature of its political institutions', he urged them to acknowledge that the House of Commons was and should remain 'the focal point of politics in this country'; that there was 'such a thing as His Majesty's Opposition' in the House; that there should be 'as much equality between the contending parties as possible' and, lastly, that there should not be 'a special advantage given to (...) the Government of the day'.²⁵⁵

Apparently, the other members of the Ullswater Committee shared the basic thrust of Attlee's concerns, but in considering the consequences they arrived at a conclusion that was diametrically opposed to Attlee's. On the whole, the Ullswater Report acknowledged the primacy of Parliament 'as the focal point of political thought' and it emphasized that 'it is in the Parliamentary contest that the issues before the country should emerge'.²⁵⁶ If this was a near echo of Attlee's claims, it also observed that the 'amount of Parliamentary news in the popular Press is small and diminishing' and that broadcasting was therefore 'an instrument of great potential value in keeping Parliament before the minds of the people.' Although it dismissed the possibility of 'any direct broadcasting of Parliamentary proceedings', it did praise the BBC for its past efforts to report on the debates in the House of Commons in its news bulletins. In fact, it claimed that the experiment of sending a reporter to a Parliamentary debate was 'excellent in intention'. It agreed this was a task which demanded 'special skill and experience on the part of the reporter', who should 'endeavour to give an objective account rather than a personal impression, taking particular care to avoid any distortion due to individual bias or to the desire for descriptive effect.' On this basis it concluded that 'if the experiment is to be pursued, the reporter should be given all necessary parliamentary facilities, especially as regards admission and note-taking'.²⁵⁷

This clearly was not a conclusion which Clement Attlee could agree with and he recorded his objections to this and a number of other recommendations of the Ullswater Report in a three-page reservation.²⁵⁸ Even so, the Ullswater Committee's recommendations were not binding and the actual decision to allow a BBC reporter into the galleries still resided with the Speaker's office,

253 See also chapter five, page 162-164.

254 'The Broadcasting Committee 1935. Minutes of Evidence', 11-7-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R4/87.

255 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 19.

256 *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935*, 29.

257 Ibidem.

258 'Reservations by Mr. Attlee', *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1935*, 48-51. Also chapter five, page 165.

and therefore with the parties in Parliament. What's more, it was the government which held the last word over the larger package of the Ullswater recommendations and, as it turned out, it was not prepared to follow this body's advice on all counts. While the previous chapter showed that it decided to dismiss the suggestion of a transfer of Ministerial responsibility for broadcasting, it also kept silent about the clauses on political broadcasting, including those which advised to give the BBC the 'necessary parliamentary facilities'. So refusing to commit itself to black and white pledges, the government chose to stick to the regular, backroom channels to exert its influence over the BBC. When these matters were discussed in Parliament, the Labour Party responded with some surprise about these omissions. Nonetheless, in answering the government's White Paper, Attlee warned, once again, against the use of a parliamentary reporter – 'here we are to have one single person going straight away to give an impression, and I think that would be a most dangerous thing'.²⁵⁹ This, however, could not conceal the note of satisfaction that the government had not pressed the issue any further.

A hierarchy restored?

And yet, what matters here is not so much the outcome of the Ullswater Committee, but mainly what Labour's contribution to this inquiry reveals about its conception of broadcasting. It might be noted at this point that there was little in Labour's stance that supports the idea of a pragmatic turn and an overall improvement in the party's relationship with the Corporation (as is argued by Beers). In fact, the previous chapter revealed a steady culmination in Labour's demand for parliamentary control – 'we (..) are the supreme authority' – throughout the 1930s, and this chapter has shown that this was intricately connected to its efforts to bar the BBC from becoming a permanent presence in the House of Commons. A key argument in this respect was the question of impartiality, and while the Labour Party claimed it was impossible for reporters to deliver a truly unbiased account of Parliamentary debates, this was crucially informed by what had recently happened between the BBC and the Labour MP Morgan Jones. Equally important was Clement Attlee's growing prominence among the Labour leadership. It was his earlier involvement in *The Week in Westminster* which had caused him to draw a similar conclusion – 'We all wear coloured glasses and these used with discretion brighten our talks and probably together give a better picture of Parliament as it is than if we all looked through clear spectacles'.²⁶⁰ But beyond that it had also shown him it was perfectly possible to cover Parliament by relying on MPs only, even though the BBC had rather different ideas about this.

Looming above these issues was another, larger subject. Because Labour's stance in these matters was not merely informed by its doubts about the BBC, but also by its concerns about the primacy of Parliament in public life. It was explained above that the Labour Party's esteem for Parliament had changed significantly throughout the last decades and, more particularly, that its two spells in office had provided the party with a more acute awareness of its workings and limitations. Following this process the Labour leadership had also grown increasingly concerned about the impact of broadcasting on Parliament as 'the focal point of politics in this country', since broadcasting was both seen as a tremendous force of public opinion and as a rival forum of debate. Obviously, this did not mean that Attlee and his fellow Labour leaders saw no role for broadcasting in political life, but they thought that the BBC should only have a facilitating role

259 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 6-7-1936, 978, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

260 Letter Attlee to Wace 15-3-1933, WAC, Contributor 910.

and that political broadcasting should be organized entirely along 'House of Commons lines' and in accordance with the 'House of Commons machinery'. This might seem a reasonable suggestion, but it really required a radical overhaul of the 'hierarchy of political discourses' which had been taking shape in the years before. If Labour's purpose was to restore the primacy of Parliament at the top of this hierarchy, it would also grant the whips of the parties an even greater power over the airwaves than they already had. Perhaps the Labour leadership was genuinely convinced that this would help to preserve the confidence of the people in Parliament and politics at large. However, based on what we have read so far it seems more likely this would have had a disastrous effect, not only on the public's appreciation of these programmes, but also on its esteem for the parties and politicians who were responsible for this output.

7.16 'Live political issues'

For some reason, this was not sufficiently understood by the Labour Party, even though there were ample signs that the BBC's attempts at political broadcasting failed to attract much interest from the broadcasting audience. Someone who was more susceptible to these signals was the Liberal MP Megan Lloyd George, and she was highly critical about the current state of affairs in political broadcasting in the wake of the Ullswater Committee. This was exemplified by her contribution to the parliamentary debate about the Ullswater recommendations. Referring to the great political uncertainties of the time, Lloyd George condemned the near-silence on political affairs in broadcasting in strong terms and she made a forceful appeal to the parties in Parliament to acknowledge the political value of broadcasting more fully. Although she admitted there were all sorts of talks on the BBC about subjects which held some political relevance, she also noted that the Corporation's treatment of these subjects was not only 'very academic', but also 'very safely removed from political realities'.²⁶¹ In arguing for a different approach, Lloyd George referred to other countries, including the Netherlands, where, she explained, political parties had ample access to the airwaves and were allowed to use radio in any way they like. We know this was not entirely true, but if this picture helped to stir up a sense of horror among her fellow MPs, Lloyd George rushed to assure her audience that Holland was still 'the least revolutionary country in Europe'.²⁶² Suggesting that Britain might learn something from its neighbours, Lloyd George argued that the notion of controversy had crippled the BBC's attempts to develop political broadcasting from the start and that it had made the BBC overly cautious in its treatment of political issues. She was not far off either by claiming that controversy was the 'very life and soul of the whole business' of politics and that it ought to have a central place in broadcasting as well.²⁶³ While this caused her to speak out against those who tried to bar the BBC from Parliament, she challenged the BBC to open its own doors instead: 'We are told it is not practicable to bring the microphone to the House of Commons. Then I suggest that we ought to bring the House of Commons (..) to the microphone. If the general public cannot listen to debates in this House, then debates on important issues should be staged by the BBC.'²⁶⁴

261 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 6-7-1936, 936, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

262 *Ibidem*, 937.

263 *Ibidem*, 939.

264 *Ibidem*.

Lloyd George's appeal did little to change the government's stance towards political broadcasting, but it did land her an invitation from the BBC to join its newly established Talks Advisory Committee. This body was set up in early 1937 and its purpose was to advise the Corporation on matters of talks policy, to make suggestions for particular series of talks, to consider the BBC's proposals and to act as consultants in the planning of programmes.²⁶⁵ But if the BBC had hoped it had found an ally in Lloyd George in its struggle with the political hierarchy, it would soon find she was rather critical about the Corporation's methods as well. In the second meeting of the committee Lloyd George tabled a resolution which called upon the BBC to explore what it could do to cover what she called 'live political issues', as issues of current political interest which, for instance, were subject of debate in the House of Commons.²⁶⁶ The subsequent response from the BBC showed to which extent its ethos had come to coincide with the rules and principles that had been imposed on the Corporation throughout the past decade.

Still, the second half of the 1930s did see a number of interesting developments in the treatment of controversial subjects. In the previous years the BBC had primarily relied on the formula of a straight talk, delivered by leading experts or eminent figures, but in the mid-1930s the Talks Department came to develop a variety of new forms and techniques to present the public with delicate or difficult material.²⁶⁷ One of these concerned the use of an interviewer, or, as it was called, an 'interlocutor', whose questions and comments formed a welcome interruption of the individual talk as it provided listeners with an alternative viewpoint on the statements of the main speaker. For the BBC the 'interlocutor technique' was also a most promising means to control the controversial character of the talks in question, as it gave the interviewer a chance to balance any contentious claims which might cause public outcry.²⁶⁸ Equally important in this respect were the BBC's experiments with unscripted discussions and debates, in some cases before a live audience or with members of the audience participating in the discussions or debates.²⁶⁹ What these formats had in common was the inclusion of a diversity of voices and opinions and a pursuit of a more spontaneous atmosphere, which was part of a broader shift towards a more popular style in the presentation of talks. Although these new forms and techniques seemed highly useful to deal with 'live political issues', politics was still a far too delicate subject to be treated with anything other than circumspection and caution.

An interesting illustration of this was offered by the fate of a programme which had allowed the BBC to present its public with a captivating picture of Parliament. Throughout 1937 the BBC had run a programme that revisited parliamentary debates of the past – *Great occasions in the House of Commons* – on the basis of the printed transcripts that were published by Hansard. By staging a dramatic replay of these debates, the BBC had found its way around the restrictions that kept it from sending a reporter to the House of Commons. Although this was not the real deal, according to the producer of this programme it had been a success, among other things since this form was 'more or less satisfactory' to bring the House of Commons and the

265 'BBC Announcement. A Talks Advisory Committee', 10-3-1937, WAC, inv. nr. R6/203/2. Also Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 83.

266 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 22. See also Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 83.

267 D. Cardiff, 'The serious and the popular. Aspects of the evolution of style in the radio talk 1928-1939', *Media, Culture and Society* (1980) 29-47.

268 Internal memo Director of Talks to Controller of Programmes 'The "Interlocutor Technique"', 4-3-1938, WAC, inv. nr. R51/397/1.

269 Cardiff, 'The serious and the popular', 36-40.

speeches 'to life'.²⁷⁰ While insisting on the significance of familiarizing 'the mass of people' with Parliament, he came up with the radical suggestion to extend the scope of the programme into the present age by restaging more recent 'great debates'. However, the BBC's Director of Talks was not nearly as excited about the idea. He anticipated 'it would land us in more trouble than it is worth'. The only way it could work was by laying down 'a self-denying ordinance as regards the broadcasting of speeches of living politicians'; otherwise it would seem 'as if we were taking side in current party issues by reproducing the speeches of politicians who are still taking an active part in affairs.' For instance, 'we might be regarded as wishing to revive memories of a defeat for the Prime Minister, or by broadcasting some former speech of Mr. Winston Churchill as wishing to discredit the different views which he might be holding now.'²⁷¹ While this sealed the fate of this proposal, it shows that the BBC had become so apprehensive about the controversies of the present, that it even chose to steer away from the politics of the past.

In the meantime, the BBC had taken other steps to find what it could do to broadcast 'live political issues', albeit with little result. In April 1937 it had approached the Postmaster General to ask his advice on these matters, who had taken a year (!) to reply the BBC that he saw no other options at the present time.²⁷² Equally discouraging were the BBC's encounters with the Labour Party, which confirmed that Clement Attlee was indeed the party leader who kept the doors to Parliament closed. One of these meetings took place in March 1938 when the BBC and the Labour Party came together to discuss Labour's request to broadcast a statement about the looming crisis in international politics.²⁷³ The BBC was not unsympathetic to this request, but it was not prepared to defy the government on this sensitive issue and it decided to delegate the question first to its Talks Advisory Committee.²⁷⁴ At the same time, the Labour Party proved unwilling to change its mind about the BBC's access to Parliament, so the meeting failed to bring the reporting of 'live political issues' any nearer. Inside the BBC it was increasingly recognized it was futile to pursue Lloyd George's appeal any further, at least for the moment, and that it was best to look beyond the parties and Members of Parliament to inform the public about the political developments of the day.²⁷⁵

All this was taking place against the background of the rising tensions in the international sphere. While the autumn of 1938 witnessed the unfolding of the Munich Crisis, it was broadly felt by those in power that these times were far too critical for party broadcasting. As a result it was only in December 1938 that the question of 'live political issues' was taken up again with the parties, eighteen months after Lloyd George had first raised it. When this happened the BBC was a different organization, since it had seen a vital change in the shape of the retreat of John Reith from the BBC and the arrival of Frederick Wolff Ogilvie as its new Director General.²⁷⁶

270 Internal memo G. Burgess to Director of Talks 6-12-1937, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

271 Internal memo Director of Talks to Controller of Programmes 7-3-1938, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/3.

272 Letter R.C. Norman to G.C. Tryon 7-2-1938 and letter G.C. Tryon to R.C. Norman 18-2-1938, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

273 Letter R.C. Norman to G.C. Tryon 7-2-1938, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561 and 'Meeting on Wednesday, 30-3-1938, between a Deputation of the Labour Party and A Committee of the Board of Governors and the Director General', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/3.

274 More extensive on the BBC's approach to foreign affairs in the late 1930s and its dealings with the labour movement Seaton and Pimlott, 'The Struggle for "balance"', 141-150 and Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 72-102.

275 Internal memo B.E. Nicolls, 'political broadcasts', 30-5-1938, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/3 and Internal memo B.E. Nicolls, 'political broadcasts G. 71/38', 3-6-1938, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/3.

276 Chapter five, page 172-173.

7.17 A fitting finale

Reith's departure left a gaping hole in the hierarchy of the Corporation which he had served and guided in his idiosyncratic manner throughout the past decade-and-a-half. At the same time it also gave the BBC and its allies a chance to make a fresh start. This was also recognized by the Labour leadership, which had endured a highly strained relationship with John Reith throughout his decade-and-a-half reign over the BBC. Perhaps this explains why the first meeting between Ogilvie and the Labour Party got off to a productive start. This meeting was merely intended as a first acquaintance, but apparently both Ogilvie as well as Attlee and Greenwood (who represented the Labour Party on this occasion) were keen to discuss, what was to them, the most important matter, political broadcasting. Among other things Ogilvie explained that the BBC was 'very anxious' to include as much balanced controversy as possible, but that this was impossible without cooperation of the parties. In agreeing with Ogilvie, Attlee and Greenwood promised the Director General they would approach the government whip to seek the much-needed breakthrough. Perhaps surprisingly, Ogilvie did not raise the issue of parliamentary broadcasting, which had stalled on the objections of Attlee and the Labour leadership. It seems unlikely that Ogilvie was unaware of this, or that it held no priority to him, but he probably thought it was best to avoid antagonizing the Labour leadership at this point and to save the subject for later.

This strategy seemed to pay off. In February 1939 Ogilvie was informed that the parties had managed to reach an agreement about a series of monthly party political debates on the basis of a one on one ratio. While the parties would decide for themselves who would speak on their behalf, they would also select the subjects of the debates, albeit in rotation and with one party each month being responsible for choosing this subject. They had agreed on some restrictions as well. Although these debates would discuss topics of current interest, for instance bills which had recently passed the House of Commons, the government whip had stipulated that questions of foreign affairs would be kept out of this series of debates. Beyond that, the parties had also agreed they would only use backbenchers, as they sought to avoid that genuine controversy would emerge over these talks.²⁷⁷ The BBC had last organized a similar series of party political debates in the autumn of 1933, with the telling title *The Debate Continues*. At that time it was known already that the BBC ought to have a firm say over the form and content of these talks and that the parties were prone to waste these opportunities if they were given a free hand in arranging these broadcasts. This, however, was exactly what the parties had asked for in the past, and this was no different in 1939. As such, the BBC's role was reduced, yet again, to being the mere facilitator of these debates, with all due consequences.

This did not prevent Ogilvie from urging the parties to approach the first debate in this series as an experiment and to consider changing the format of these talks if the initial results asked for this. This was not inconceivable, since the parties had agreed to divide the 45 minutes of these debates in three separate parts, with each party speaking for 15 minutes. While this represented a rather rigid idea of a debate, in a letter to all three parties Ogilvie suggested that the first broadcast might 'serve to crystallize ideas on points of procedure' and that 'the various questions that may arise as to the ultimate form and balance of the broadcasts should be left over for settlement until after some experience had been gained.'²⁷⁸ Although the BBC had a

277 Hollins, *The presentation of politics*, 478.

278 Letter F.W. Ogilvie to C. Attlee 9-2-1939, WAC, Political Broadcasting, Political Debates, 1939, inv. nr. R51/417.

limited responsibility, Ogilvie indicated it 'would of course be glad to co-operate and make suggestions on any point of procedure' and that it would be 'pleased to give advice on the actual broadcasting of the programme and provide rehearsal facilities.'²⁷⁹ Answering this letter on behalf of the Labour Party was Clement Attlee, and his lukewarm response was short and simple. Attlee informed Ogilvie that he would discuss these matters with his party's executive committee, to which he added that he was 'so glad that progress is being made'.²⁸⁰

But if this was progress, it was progress on the narrow terms of the parties. Still, Ogilvie anticipated that if he would get the parties moving, he might also find the space to open up new inroads. In a previous part of this chapter it was explained how the hand of the party whips had barred the BBC from inviting independent political figures and that this had caused a figure like Winston Churchill to voice his disaffection about the situation at various moments. When it was reported in the press that the BBC would present a new series of party debates, this prompted Churchill to approach the BBC's chairman and to ask for similar opportunities at the microphone for prominent independents, like himself.²⁸¹ In acknowledging Churchill's request, Ogilvie answered he was 'considering further stages in the developments of political broadcasting, including the one you are good enough to outline.'²⁸² However, in doing so, he made the fatal mistake of seeking permission from the patrons and main beneficiaries of this arrangement, i.e. the leadership of the parties. So, approaching Attlee, Ogilvie asked the Labour leader whether his party was prepared to join a broadcasting debate with Stafford Cripps, whose sway to the radical left had caused rising tensions with the Labour leadership in recent years and months.²⁸³ Ogilvie insisted this would make an interesting experiment, and that it would give Attlee or one of his fellow party leaders a welcome opportunity to explain Labour's position in this dispute.

This was the last thing Attlee was interested in. Ogilvie's request was poorly timed, since Cripps's conflict with the Labour leadership was coming to a head in these same months and it would eventually lead to his expulsion from the party. Rejecting the invitation, Attlee argued 'it would be setting an entirely new precedent in political broadcasting to initiate public discussions on domestic differences between members or ex-members of the same political Party.'²⁸⁴ He was adamant that the present practice of confining the discussions to issues between the recognised parties should be upheld, to which he added a subtle reminder that 'the difficulty of admitting fortuitous collections of individuals has always been recognised as opening the door very wide to all kinds of cranks.' Therefore, the conclusion of Attlee and his colleagues was that Ogilvie's suggestion was not one 'which should be entertained'. Clearly, this was not the answer the BBC's Director General had hoped for, but it did give him an opportunity to remind Attlee that the present practice remained imperfect. Although he was still new to the job, he had noticed that everybody agreed there should be more politics in broadcasting. However, he had also found that 'when any particular suggestion is put forward, it happens all too often that, for some reason, one or other of the parties to the discussion declines – and the BBC is consequently accused of failure to cater adequately for free speech.'²⁸⁵ He continued by reminding the Labour leader that

279 Ibidem.

280 Letter C. Attlee to F.W. Ogilvie 10-2-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

281 Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 94.

282 As quoted in ibidem.

283 Ibidem and Worley, *Labour inside the Gate*, 209-213.

284 Letter C. Attlee to F.W. Ogilvie 16-3-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/3.

285 Letter F.W. Ogilvie to C. Attlee 23-3-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/3.

the present series of political debates was not 'the sum total of what political broadcasting can and should become': 'The line between cranks and non-cranks is admittedly difficult to draw (..), but that is the kind of difficulty which it is the business of the BBC to face.' While insisting on the BBC's duty to listeners and to the country, Ogilvie concluded by stating he hoped to talk over these matters with Attlee and the leaders of the other parties 'when times are a little rosier'.

'Fiasco'

Attlee's refusal was not the only reason why there was a note of frustration to Ogilvie's letter. At the time of writing, March 1939, the first of the series of party political debates had been broadcast already, and the overall response had been rather negative. The subject of this first debate was 'old-age pensions', which had been suggested by the Labour Party, which had nominated Charles Edwards as its speaker. Beforehand various newspapers had reported on this new series of political talks with modest expectations, but the day after the first debate reactions were hardly encouraging. One newspaper noted the result was 'not impressive' and its reporter had phoned several people to hear their opinion. Although one listener thought it had been 'jolly good', another listener thought it had been 'very dull', since there had been 'no argument' and 'no disagreement', whereas several others had simply switched off, since they felt it was not worth hearing at all.²⁸⁶ The harshest comments came from listeners who had taken the effort to complain directly with the BBC. Their criticism varied from 'dreadfully lamentable', to 'unutterably boring', to 'political squabble that few want or appreciate'. One correspondent even claimed that 'anything more painful to listen to it would be difficult to imagine' and that it seemed 'the speakers seized the opportunity to unburden themselves of material which should have been disposed of in Hyde Park, where appropriate comments would doubtless have been made.'²⁸⁷

Still, these comments did allow the BBC to press for a radical change in the format of these debates, as had been agreed beforehand. The second debate was scheduled for next March, and when the BBC was informed that Charles Brown would act as the next Labour Party's speaker, it approached him and the other contributors to discuss a different procedure. Among other things it explained that it had received 'serious adverse criticism from listeners' after the first debate and it felt that this was mainly caused by the fact that the first speakers were allowed 'to go on without interruption from or interjections by his opponents'.²⁸⁸ Therefore, it asked the second round of speakers to consider breaking up their contribution to this debate after six minutes, as to allow the other speakers to make comments, after which they would resume to finish their argument. This seemed a logical and relatively minor alteration, but, answering the programme's producer on behalf of his fellow debaters, the Labour Party's Charles Brown replied they had discussed this matter and agreed that 'it would be rather difficult' to carry out.²⁸⁹ Brown confessed also that he had no experience in broadcasting, but that he did understand that 'if such Broadcasts are to be of any use they must be made interesting to listeners.' The BBC, however, was anxious to avoid a repetition of, what it saw as, 'last month's fiasco' and it approached the three speakers once more to make a final appeal. Their subsequent meeting at the House of Commons did not deliver the desired result, and again they agreed it was 'safer to stick to three straight speeches',

286 'Politics by radio not impressive', *News Chronicle*, 28-2-1939, WAC, Broadcasting press cuttings, Book 3c, Political talks.

287 'Correspondence in connection with category "A" debate', WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

288 Letter V. Alford to C. Brown 15-3-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

289 Letter C. Brown to V. Alford 20-3-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

since it would require too much effort to construct 'in almost dramatic form a broken-up debate with interjections'.²⁹⁰ One concession these three speakers were prepared to make was to alter the order of appearance; while Charles Brown, the Labour Party MP, would now speak first he also agreed to inform the other speakers beforehand about the points he would make, so that their contributions would at least correspond to his statement.

This was not what was needed to give these debates a real sense of urgency or significance. The BBC made its last attempt to persuade the parties to adopt a different approach in May 1939, after Attlee had indicated that his party was willing to consider a 'slightly different handling of the debate'.²⁹¹ The BBC responded with immediate interest, and it wrote Attlee to suggest a range of alterations which would allow a more 'informal discussion and argument' and a 'much more attractive broadcast'.²⁹² For the record, it also stated that it would be 'willing to go to any amount of time and trouble in providing facilities for rehearsal of the speakers' and that it would be 'very glad to arrange an extemporary rehearsal of the whole debate on the morning or afternoon of the debate.' If the tone of these words suggests that the BBC was reaching a point of desperation, this was no reason for the parties to change their mind. In fact, less than a week later the BBC was informed by the Labour Party whip that the parties had failed to reach agreement over a different setup of these debates and that in these circumstances 'there does not appear to be any need for a rehearsal'.²⁹³ As such, it was hardly surprising that these debates continued to draw fierce criticism. Towards the end of May one newspaper passed a damning verdict on this programme – 'the Labour speaker did not as much as mention a single point raised by the speaker who preceded him. He seemed, indeed, quite unaware that he was taking part in a broadcast with anybody, and went grimly on reading the duller bits from the more official Labour pamphlets'.²⁹⁴ While the other contributions proved equally woeful, its conclusion was that these debates were a waste of broadcasting time, were not doing any good to politics and that they probably helped to increase the growth of political apathy, rather than to diminish it. Its hope for the future was that the organisation of political debates should pass 'out of the hands of the Party machines and into the trained hands of the BBC.'

The ordeal would soon be over. At the time of writing, there were only two of these party political debates left on the BBC's schedule, with the last taking place on July 3rd 1939. Although it was originally intended that the series would continue after the parliamentary recess, the summer of 1939 saw a cataclysmic turn of events that would change everything, the BBC's programming schedule included. In the dramatic developments that followed the demise of this programme would have been regretted by few. Also because of that its failure was symbolic of a decade of thwarted progress in political broadcasting.

290 'Record of interview at the House of Commons' 22-3-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

291 Letter BBC to C. Attlee 5-5-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

292 Letter BBC to C. Attlee 5-5-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

293 Letter C. Edwards to B.E. Nicolls 11-5-1939, WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

294 'Debates that lack debate', *Co-operative News*, 27-5-1939, WAC, R51/417.

Chapter 8

'A little devil'

The SDAP, the VARA and party politics in programmes

8.1 A squeaking sound

Change was in the air in the summer of 1925 when the Netherlands was preparing for a new general election. The SDAP was in bright spirit and it felt that the world was slowly, but steadily moving towards a socialist future. Two years earlier the confessional government of Ruijs de Beerenbrouck had ran ashore, after its Navy Act was voted down by a parliamentary majority of liberals, socialists and a renegade bunch of Catholic MPs.¹ It was the SDAP which had staged a massive protest against the government's plans to modernize the navy's fleet, among other things by collecting ca. one million signatures as well as by organizing a mass demonstration in Amsterdam which was attended by nearly seventy thousand people.² The SDAP was much encouraged by the support it was meeting, but it would take until 1925 before the country would go to the polls again. The reason for this was that the Queen had refused to accept the government's resignation, which meant that the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck government stayed in office for two more years. Still, these developments put serious pressure on the coalition of the three confessional parties, and the following years would see the emergence of the ARP's Hendrik Colijn, the Minister of Finance, as the government's strongman. As such, it was the figure of Colijn and his stern austerity measures which would dominate the campaign for the general election of 1925. In making Colijn the target of its propaganda efforts, the SDAP hoped to boost its electoral support, most notably by luring away catholic voters from the RKSP.³

One of the means which were used for this purpose was radio. It was explained in chapter four that the upcoming election of 1925 was the reason why the SDAP's Cornelis Werkhoven had initially agreed to join the talks about a National Broadcasting Company, since he hoped it would allow his party to use broadcasting for the 1925 campaign.⁴ This prospect was all too optimistic, but in the months that followed the SDAP was invited, together with other parties, to take part in a special election programme on the evening before polling day. Although it would have to pay a significant sum for this (fl. 150,-), the SDAP's leadership had found Florentinus Wibaut prepared to travel to Hilversum and to deliver the party's first-ever election talk from a broadcasting studio.⁵ Of course, these were the early years of broadcasting and radio was still a relative curiosity. And so, to expand the scope of the occasion the SDAP encouraged its supporters to organize loudspeaker-meetings, where people could come together to listen to these

1 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 206-207.

2 Kneegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 74.

3 Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 34-39.

4 Chapter four, page 99.

5 Minutes meeting daily executive committee SDAP 6-6-1925, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 187.

election talks.⁶ At the same time, the SDAP's Cornelis Werkhoven could not resist to remind the party's rank and file that this historical occasion did not excuse them from going out and promoting the SDAP's case on this last evening of the campaign. In fact, he even urged those party fellows who owned a radio-set to make these available to non-labour listeners: 'Please do not listen! You don't need to be converted anymore! Make sure that as many others may benefit from it, perhaps by playing it to the street through a loudspeaker.'⁷

Although remarkable, it seems unlikely this would have stopped labour listeners from tuning in to these talks. Among those to listen to these first-ever election broadcasts were a number of journalists, who had been invited to the studio in Hilversum to attend this historical occasion. The following day, a report of one of these men was published in the catholic newspaper *De Tijd* and it noted 'a solitary figure' standing 'in front of a small instrument', speaking to 'a whole nation, in rooms, in houses, in remote cities and in small towns'.⁸ This figure was Hendrik Colijn, and according to this reporter he was talking 'in a pleasant manner', in 'short and polished sentences', with a 'strong and powerful voice'. What's more, this was not his first radio talk, and Colijn's microphone skills would make him a widely admired radio speaker in the later stages of his political career.⁹ Someone who did face the microphone for the first time was the SDAP's Florentinus Wibaut, and he explained to the present reporters that this was also the first time he had actually prepared a speech on paper. The day after one of these reporters noted that it must have been awkward for the speakers to miss a crowd of cheering supporters, but that Wibaut seemed hardly distracted by this: he 'raised his voice' and 'hurled his accusations against Colijn into the air with great force'.¹⁰ After producing a final outcry against another Colijn-ministry, the reporter heard a squeaking sound coming from the radio-set, just before silence set in, suggesting that Wibaut had been a little too rough on the microphone and that he had stretched the new technology to its limits.

'We can hear everything'

And yet, this was Wibaut's first encounter with the radio microphone and in paving the way for his fellow party leaders, this was certainly not the last time that the SDAP's message was lost in a surge of sounds and noises. What's more, all this was of little concern to the SDAP, since it turned out that many voters agreed with the substance of Wibaut's words. Winning twenty-four seats, the 1925 election produced a sweeping victory for the SDAP, although it could not prevent the return to office of the confessional coalition, headed by the ARP's Colijn as the country's new Prime Minister. But what matters here is that Wibaut's election broadcast had apparently triggered the party's interest in broadcasting. Because a few months later the SDAP turned to radio once again. This time the occasion was rather different, but no less important, since it concerned the conference which was organized to honour the SDAP's long-standing party leader Pieter Jelle Troelstra, who had resigned just before the election, due to ill health. While the SDAP went to great lengths to give Troelstra the tribute he deserved, this included making arrangements to broadcast this event. As such, this honorary conference would not only mark Troelstra's departure from political life, it would also see his first appearance before the radio microphone.

6 Wijffes, 'Spellbinding and crooning', 176 and Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 39.

7 'Uit de Partij. Een radiorede van Wibaut', *Voorwaarts: sociaal-democratisch dagblad*, 26-6-1925.

8 'Politieke radio-avond', *De Tijd: godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad*, 1-7-1925.

9 More extensive on this Wijffes, 'Spellbinding and crooning' and H. Wijffes, 'Echt en oprecht.'

10 'Voor den Microfoon. Politieke potpourri', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 1-7-1925.

The scene of this occasion was the great hall of the zoo in The Hague, which was a popular venue for cultural and political manifestations. Although it offered plenty of seating, it would never fit the entire party so, with the microphone placed on stage, the SDAP was assured that many more people were able to attend this occasion, albeit in hearing. But at the same time, it also posed a whole new challenge to those who were addressing this conference. Indeed, among these was Troelstra himself, and he recalled in his memoirs how the microphone proved to be a sudden burden; his party fellows had urged him to stay near the instrument, and 'the first minute all went well, but, then I got the taste of it, I forgot all about this microphone and began to walk back and forth on the podium. My dear friend and old comrade Jan Schaper was forced to draw me back, pulling my jacket; I needed to take my place again'.¹¹ But Troelstra was not the only party leader, who suffered this fate. Another speaker at this conference the SDAP's chairman Willem Vliegen. He too had to be reminded to stay near the microphone, and it caused him to joke that people had always held him to be a man of the political centre, but that he was now, apparently, drifting off, too far to the left.¹²

But the arrival of broadcasting did not only change the performative setting of the event, it also broadened its horizon. Reporting on this conference the day after, *Het Volk* noted with a sense of wonder that radio had allowed listeners from afar to attend the Troelstra-tribute without actually being present.¹³ Various party branches had organized loudspeaker-meetings, and the article described how some of these had sent a telegram to the meeting in The Hague, as to testify of this historical occasion. One of these came from Dronrijp, a small town in Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands, and *Het Volk* noted how this telegram was read out aloud to the party meeting – 'We salute our great party leader as well. We can hear everything!' – after which it was answered with loud cheers by those who were present in the great hall of the zoo.¹⁴ And so, with telegraphy and radio working alongside, *Het Volk* was much impressed by how these means of communication helped to bring out the unity of the labour movement. Elsewhere it noted in a similar vein that party members from Zutphen were 'overjoyed' by listening to the event, and that they had 'seen the great leader on stage in their imagination', while hearing 'the waves of applause building up to an enormous ovation'.¹⁵ Its conclusion was that radio had helped to make this a moment of tremendous significance: 'They who were present that Saturday afternoon in the hall of The Hague' Zoo will never forget that moment. Still, the spirit in all our hearts would not have been that high, if we had not known that thousands, ten-thousands, hundreds of thousands throughout the country were there with us in their minds'.¹⁶

8.2 Politics of the red family

Perhaps these claims are somewhat inflated, but this does not deny the overt symbolism of this moment. In the decades before Troelstra had seen the SDAP evolve from a small circle of intellectuals, trade unionists and idealists into a tightly organized mass organization. Although

11 As quoted in Wijfjes, 'Spellbinding and crooning', 162.

12 'De radio-uitzending van de Troelstrahulde', *Het Volk*, 21-9-1925.

13 Ibidem.

14 'Het demonstratief kongres van SDAP en NVV', *Het Volk*, 21-9-1925.

15 'De radio-uitzending van de Troelstrahulde', *Het Volk*, 21-9-1925.

16 'Dat vertrouwen is niet beschaamd', *Het Volk*, 21-9-1925.

his authority had suffered a serious dent after his 'mistake' of November 1918 (when he had kindly, but vainly requested the government to hand his party the keys to power so that it could lead the revolution in an orderly manner) Troelstra remained highly popular with the party's rank and file.¹⁷ This had much to do with his oratorical skills and commanding presence, and his ability to captivate a crowd had played a crucial role in mobilizing the 'masses' throughout the previous decades.¹⁸ Clearly, his departure was a defining moment in the party's history and Troelstra recognized that the future belonged to a different type of leader. When looking back on the previous decades, Troelstra claimed that the 'heroic era' of the party was over and that the 'prophetic element' of politics was fading; he also felt that the new generation of party leaders were 'more ordinary people', which he thought was perfectly natural since the SDAP was increasingly becoming an established part of political life.¹⁹

Historians have largely agreed with Troelstra's analysis, in the sense that the 1920s are commonly recognized as a period of relative political calm. With the 'pacification' of 1917 the two major political questions had been solved – the 'school struggle' and the introduction of universal suffrage – and it is generally understood that this paved the way to an era of established party politics.²⁰ Against this background it appears that the SDAP had made the right choice to appoint Johan Willem Albarda as Troelstra's successor. An engineer by education, Albarda had been elected to Parliament in 1913 and he would guide the party in a cautious and pragmatic manner. His political convictions steered him towards the party's middle ground, and he felt that the SDAP should keep a firm belief in the proximity of a socialist future. This was also reflected in his rhetorical style. He did not have Troelstra's charisma, but Albarda was a gifted speaker, who inspired hope and confidence among the party's rank and file and who was capable of reconciling tensions or conflicts.²¹ In taking over the SDAP's leadership from Troelstra these were invaluable traits. Because it was unlikely that the party's electoral fortunes in the near future would see the same upward trend as it had done in the decades before. However, the SDAP had always claimed that the forces of history were working in its favour, so the challenge for Albarda and the broader party hierarchy was to consolidate the party's position in politics, while keeping this faith in progress alive.

Various historians have reflected on this dilemma, and in doing so they have noted that the mood in the labour movement remained relatively unconcerned throughout large parts of the 1920s.²² There were ample signs that the cause of labour was attracting a growing support throughout these years, which was exemplified most clearly by the rise in the number and membership of the associations, unions and clubs that were affiliated to the labour movement. Commonly referred to as the 'red family', these organizations covered many aspects of socialist life and they ranged from the Union of Social-Democratic Women's Clubs to the Union of Workers' Choral Societies and from the Dutch Workers' Sport Association to the Workers' Youth Centre AJC. In serving the same higher purpose there were a number of occasions every year when labour supporters came together to share their mutual commitment and to celebrate the spirit of

17 More extensive on this episode, chapter four, page 90-91.

18 Henk te Velde, 'Een aparte techniek. Nederlandse politieke acteurs en de massa na 1870', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 110 (1997) 198-212, there 201-202 and Wijffes, 'Echt en oprecht', 138.

19 As quoted in De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 33.

20 Te Velde, 'Het wij-gevoel van een morele gemeenschap', 108-109.

21 Peter Jan Knegtmans, 'Johan Willem Albarda: democratisch socialist' in: Frans Becker a.o. eds., *Van Troelstra tot Den Uyl. Het vijftiende jaarboek van het democratisch socialisme* (Amsterdam 1994) 59-100, there 71-75.

22 For instance De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 34-39 and Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 64-69.

socialism in public. A notable example in this respect were the annual May Day festivities, which saw tens of thousands of people flocking together to meet the other members of the 'red family', at different locations throughout the country. But equally important were the mass rallies and set-piece demonstrations, which were organized at a yearly basis by the SDAP and the NVV and which allowed the labour movement to present itself and its demands to the outside world. While the 1920s and 1930s witnessed many of these occasions, the historian Bernard Rulof sees these displays of mass politics as the most quintessential feature of interwar political culture.²³

Of course, standing at the heart of this was the SDAP, which was passing through a period of significant growth as well. The basis for this was the major overhaul of the party's organization of 1917 and this changed its loose federative makeup into a 'pyramidal hierarchical' structure.²⁴ While this had bolstered the hold of the party leadership over the party's organization, it had also seen an increase in the party's membership figures from 37,000 in 1918 to nearly 70,000 in 1930.²⁵ All this was certainly encouraging, but it has been argued as well that these developments have helped to conceal a number of fundamental problems that were brewing within the party's perimeters.²⁶ These included the lukewarm interest among the party's rank and file for the party's attempts to renew its political agenda around the notions of 'socialisation' and 'corporate democracy'. We have seen in a previous chapter how these efforts shaped the SDAP's initial approach to broadcasting, and that it failed to do the party (or the VARA) any good. With the party's supporters remaining largely indifferent to these notions and the party's efforts to promote these, some felt this was indicative of a sense of alienation that was creeping up between party headquarters and the party's rank and file.²⁷ These concerns were fuelled by other issues as well. Although the wider labour movement remained deeply wedded to the party, it was noted as well that local party life had become more quiet, some would say apathetic, in the wake of the party's reorganization of 1917.²⁸ At the time, it was too soon to determine whether this was merely a temporary matter, or whether it pointed to a structural decline in the interest for party politics, but over the years it would help to raise new concerns about the party's broader ability to appeal to the public.

A parallel development can be observed in the difficulties which the party newspaper *Het Volk* faced. This paper had been founded in 1900 and throughout the decades there had been a close connection between the size of the party membership and the paper's readership. In 1901, for instance, four thousand people were affiliated to the SDAP, whereas *Het Volk* counted five thousand subscriptions, and in 1920 these numbers had grown to nearly fifty thousand, both for the SDAP and for *Het Volk*.²⁹ Again, this was certainly a promising trend, but in the course of the 1920s it was increasingly recognized that these numbers were not necessarily a sign of the paper's appeal, but also an indication of its status as a required element of the party diet. This was also reflected by the content of *Het Volk*, which focussed heavily on party statements, socialist theory and social questions, so hardly the stuff that makes a pleasant read.³⁰ In fact, one

23 Rulof, 'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak', 9-24.

24 Loots, *Voor het volk, van het volk*, 181-183.

25 Knechtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 64.

26 De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 37-38.

27 Ibidem.

28 Loots, *Voor het volk, van het volk*, 181-183.

29 Van Vree, *De Nederlandse pers en Duitsland*, 387, note 2.

30 De Vrankrijker, *Het wervende woord*, 181-184.

commentator noted that *Het Volk* was 'a cold, bleak and a dead thing, sort of a daily course', whereas another observer claimed that it failed to grasp the mind of its readers, and their needs and desires.³¹ Although a majority of the party leadership thought this was perfectly reasonable and that *Het Volk* was primarily a platform of party opinion, the larger, more pressing question was whether the SDAP should not do more to reach beyond the family-circle. If it hoped to expand its support beyond the party faithful, then surely there were good reasons to change the style and content of *Het Volk*, notably by taking the demands of the broader public more seriously. With the arguments weighing in favour of this option, it was eventually decided in 1928 that the paper would see a major overhaul in the years to come, together with all other publishing activities of the labour movement.

But, of course, these were also the years that witnessed the rise of radio and the emergence of the VARA as a new member of the 'red family'. At this point, we know that these developments caused significant tensions between the SDAP and the broadcasting association, which was largely the result of the contrasting ideas about the political and cultural value of broadcasting for the labour movement. What's more, radio was unlike any other means of communication the SDAP had so far used, and while it changed the performative setting of politics, it also altered its social context. As such, the previous chapter showed that the leadership of the Labour Party had a hard time adjusting their rhetoric to this new environment as it required a fundamental shift to address an absent audience, instead of a present public. Beyond that, radio offered an enormous potential and it may be noted that its domestic setting seemed perfectly suited for the SDAP to cultivate its presence at the heart of the 'red family'. But, what's more, it also opened the world beyond the labour movement, since its signal was both accessible to the party faithful as well as to opponents, or to people who were on the verge of being 'converted'. While the VARA's proximity gave the SDAP ample opportunity to target these groups, previous chapters showed that the party leadership remained sceptical about broadcasting during the larger part of the 1920s and that it was prone to keep its distance from the VARA. And so, the question is how these different issues resonated in the party's approach to broadcasting in the years after 1925.

8.3 A hesitant start (1925-1928)

The VARA was established on November 1st, 1925, and on its founding this 'Association of Workers' Radio Amateurs' was very much a hybrid of technological enthusiasm and political and cultural aspirations. To those involved broadcasting was still virgin territory and although there were talented and devoted figures among the VARA's founders, chief amongst these Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, none of these had any experience in organizing or running a broadcasting organization, let alone in making programmes.³² What's more, the VARA had a minimal budget only and although it had managed to rent two hours of broadcasting time on Saturday-evenings, every other two weeks, this left the broadcasting association with hardly any funds to develop its programming activities. Even so, the VARA was born within the 'red family' and while its ultimate purpose was to serve its audience with a diversity of programmes, for the moment it could rely on the speakers and musicians that were readily available through befriended labour organizations.

31 As quoted in Van Vree, *De Nederlandse pers en Duitsland*, 80-81.

32 Van der Merwe, 'Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (29-11-2013).

Among these was the SDAP's Wibaut, who had delivered the party's first ever election broadcast in June 1925. Perhaps because of this he was also invited to address the broadcasting audience on the VARA's opening night, on Saturday November 7, 1925. On that occasion, Wibaut welcomed the broadcasting association as the youngest organization of the labour movement and he praised the 'immense cultural importance' of radio.³³ In the days afterwards the VARA was informed by ca. 2000 people they had listened to its first evening.³⁴

This was a modest start, but in the following weeks the VARA would develop further initiatives to find a foothold in the labour movement. Most interesting in this respect was its efforts to broadcast the proceedings of the SDAP's Christmas-meeting from the Amsterdam Concert Hall. The history of this meeting went back to the years before 1900, and it was one of the highlights in the annual calendar of the labour movement. In December 1925, Albarda would address this meeting for the second time and he spoke on this occasion about the political events of the past year and the prospects of the time ahead. However, this year Albarda's audience was significantly larger than the year before. With all the seats in the Concert Hall taken, the VARA had offered the SDAP to broadcast this meeting. Again, a few days later *Het Volk* reported on this achievement with a sense of pride and, similar to the reports about the Troelstra-conference, it described how one of the introductory speakers had claimed that the VARA's service had allowed a group of patients in Noordlaren to listen to the meeting from their bedside. After the same speaker had called upon the public to support the fledgling VARA 'in great numbers', it was up to Albarda to deliver his grand speech to the Amsterdam Concert Hall and the broadcasting audience.³⁵

Finding a foothold

And so, in the space of six months this was the fourth time that the SDAP's words were sounding from loudspeakers and headsets throughout the country. The number of listeners was still modest – it was estimated that ca. thirteen thousand people had listened to Albarda's speech at so-called loud-speakers meetings – but it seems that these first steps in broadcasting were promising enough for the SDAP to explore the potential of radio more fully in the year ahead.³⁶ And yet, for some reason this did not happen. Previous chapters have illustrated that the mode of interaction between the SDAP and the VARA was one of conflict, rather than collaboration. This had much to do with the party's stance in the debate about a national broadcasting system. Although developments were moving in a different, pluralist direction, it would take some years before the SDAP's leadership was ready to acknowledge there was insufficient support for a publicly owned, and nationally organized Broadcasting Company. While this fuelled the tensions with the VARA, it also kept the party from casting off its scepticism about the need for a broadcasting association within the labour movement. Perhaps this explains why the SDAP made such little use of broadcasting in the years after 1925, so despite its privileged access to the airwaves. This at least is the picture which emerges from the VARA's annual broadcasting reports of 1926 and 1927, which contains a list of all VARA broadcasts in this period. Counting a total of 87 broadcasts, two of these were organized by the SDAP and the NVV together, while only one

33 'De radio-rede van Wibaut', *Het Volk*, 9-11-1925.

34 Wijfjes, VARA. *Biografie van een omroep*, 40-41.

35 'De kerstrede van Albarda', *Het Volk*, 28-12-1925.

36 Wijfjes, VARA. *Biografie van een omroep*, 41.

of these was organized on behalf of the SDAP alone. This was significantly less than the six broadcasts of the NVV, or even the three broadcasts of the Metalworkers Union.³⁷

Although remarkable, these numbers do not only remind that the VARA remained a marginal presence in the airwaves, but, moreover, that its programming output was still caught in the web of mutual loyalties which bound the labour movement together. With two-and-a-half hours of broadcasting per week it was difficult for the VARA to expand its programming activities and, in turn, to enhance its popular appeal and financial revenues. Things about to change towards the end of 1927, which caused the SDAP and the VARA to sit down and discuss their mutual relations, as well as their ideas about the future place of broadcasting in the labour movement. Two developments spurred this process. The first of these was the anticipated opening of a second radio transmitter in Huizen, and the second concerned the parliamentary ruling which called upon the Minister to allocate the available radio-time 'in fairness'.³⁸ While both developments promised the VARA a greater share of the airwaves, both on the short- and the longer term, it also implied that the VARA would have a prominent role in the labour movement than the SDAP had initially anticipated. Against this background the SDAP's only option was to accept the VARA more fully, among other things by speaking out more strongly in favour of a 'fair' allocation of broadcasting time. Still, chapter six learned that the party did require something in return. In an earlier stage the SDAP had insisted that the VARA would consult the party first when it was planning a 'political-agitational speech'.³⁹ In the same vein it was now decided to set up a three-men 'Broadcasting Council' in which the VARA's chairman would have a seat, together with the NVV and the SDAP and with the latter two having 'the final say over propagandistic, polemic and organizational broadcasts'.⁴⁰ In a more general way it was also agreed that the VARA should not only cater to the taste of labour listeners, but that it should appeal to a mass public as well.⁴¹ It was anticipated that this would help the VARA to build a mass membership and, moreover, that it would give the labour movement access to households where the gospel of socialism had not sounded before.

These talks formed a vital step in the developing relationship between the SDAP and the VARA, but the question is whether it inspired the party to make more of its opportunities in broadcasting. Apparently, this was not something that changed overnight, and a quick look at the VARA's annual report of 1928 reveals a slight increase only in the number of times that the SDAP's speakers showed up before the VARA microphone.⁴² These included Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper and Willem Banning, who both delivered a talk as part of the VARA's May Day programme. While the VARA had continued to broadcast Albarda's speech to the SDAP's Christmas-meeting in 1926 and 1927, it would do the same in 1928. In this same year the VARA audience was also presented with a talk by Albarda to commemorate the end of the First World War. And yet, most interesting was the programme which the VARA had put together for the 15th and 16th of September, 1928. It was noted above that the labour movement had made a habit of marching in great numbers and it was on Sunday the 16th that the SDAP and the NVV had organized their traditional demonstration on the eve of the State Opening of Parliament

37 'Verslag van den Omroep-Secretaris over het tijdvak 1 Juli 1926 – 31 Dec. 1927', *Radio*, 18-2-1928.

38 More extensive on this chapter four, page 115.

39 Minutes meeting daily executive committee SDAP 26-1-1926, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 187.

40 Report of the Committee Relations VARA – Institute for Workers Education, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 435, f. 4.

41 Ibidem.

42 *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1928*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

('Prinsjesdag'). These events were a yearly highlight in the labour movement's calendar, and this year would see a series of demonstrations in five cities throughout the country. And so, on the evening before the VARA drew attention to these demonstrations by offering its microphone to the party secretary Cornelis Werkhoven.⁴³ It had no opportunity to broadcast a live report the next day, but it did present its listeners with a twenty-minute report about the main events, later that Sunday.⁴⁴ These were minor steps, but it does illustrate that the VARA was carving out a place for radio in the labour movement's political culture.

Even so, the VARA's contribution to the occasion largely went unnoticed. The next day *Het Volk* ran three full pages on, what it called, 'Red Sunday', and it stated that these mass demonstrations had proven a major success. Among other things, it claimed that more than one hundred thousand people had come together, using 'all sorts of transportation' (ranging from trains, boats, busses and bicycles) to join in this triumphant moment.⁴⁵ It proudly boasted that all these people had come from different places, and although they had never met before, 'they were all part of the same family, a family so large that its numbers can hardly be counted'; 'they fill the streets with thousands, singing cheerfully (...) and, above all, following the bright colour of their red flags.'⁴⁶ Obviously, this was a fine piece of partisan propaganda. Although it did not mention a word on radio, in the following years the VARA would become a more prominent presence at similar occasions.

8.4 The noise and trouble of an election campaign (1929)

A key moment in this development was the general election of 1929. The VARA had its eyes set on a larger share of the airwaves, and it was the forthcoming election campaign which offered the broadcasting association a fresh opportunity to prove its value to the labour movement, and to show the country that it was worthy of an equal place among the other broadcasting associations. This explains why the VARA and the SDAP had started making plans for a series of election broadcasts as early as October 1928. The cabinet of Prime Minister De Geer was expected to step down in the summer of 1929 and the VARA aimed to use the upcoming period to host a series of twenty-four election talks.⁴⁷ This was not a random figure, as it corresponded with the number of seats the SDAP had won in the election of 1925, so the idea was that all of the SDAP's members of Parliament would appear before the VARA-microphone on consecutive Saturday-evenings. This was an ambitious plan, but eventually the number of election broadcasts for the SDAP was cut down to eleven, after Minister Van der Vegte intervened by drawing up an official arrangement of election talks for all parties.⁴⁸ Beyond that the SDAP had other opportunities to access the airwaves, and the VARA thought it had done the party a great favour by laying its hands on additional broadcasting time, on July 3, the evening before election day.⁴⁹

43 'Radio Programma', *Het Volk*, 14-9-1928

44 'Radio Programma', *Het Volk*, 15-9-1928.

45 'De opmarsch der Arbeidersklasse', *Het Volk*, 17-9-1928.

46 Ibidem.

47 Minutes meeting daily executive committee SDAP 28-9-1928 and minutes meeting daily executive committee SDAP 21-12-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 192.

48 Ibidem, 24 and 283, fn 70.

49 Wijfes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 24.

While the executives of the broadcasting association felt this was a great coup, as it provided the SDAP with a chance to address the broadcasting audience on the final evening of the campaign, apparently the party leadership was not nearly as excited. Because this election-eve programme would spark a heated debate between the SDAP and the VARA in the following months. As such its fate was symptomatic of the broader tensions which were emerging as a result of the VARA's involvement in this election campaign.

Our youngest darling

For the SDAP the general election of 1929 formed a much anticipated moment. Four years earlier, the party had won its best-ever result and the question was whether it was capable to extend this upward trend. It was broadly recognized that the SDAP had most to gain from the catholic part of the electorate, so its propaganda efforts were aimed to tempt catholic voters away from the RKSP, which was still the largest party in Parliament.⁵⁰ With this purpose in mind the SDAP's election campaign offered a spectacular display. In 1925 the party had first turned towards the sky, by dropping ca. two million propaganda leaflets from a chartered aircraft, and in doing so again this year, the pilot was asked to fly towards the south of the Netherlands, which was the catholic heartland of the country.⁵¹ The SDAP had also issued a series of gramophone records with a selection of election speeches and socialist songs. While it had borrowed this idea from its German sister-party, the SPD, and it promoted the sale of these records as an opportunity for remote party branches to organize public hearings. What's more, the SPD's example had also learned that these records could be played aloud to streets and squares by 'loudspeaker-trucks', which drove around from town to town.⁵² If all these means were expanding the scope of the party's message, it was radio which was by far the most effective means of propaganda. Then again, the party leadership would also find that it was much easier to steer a loudspeaker-truck or to play a gramophone-record, than to deal with the demands and personalities in broadcasting.

The formal start of the SDAP's election campaign was the party conference of February 1929, in Nijmegen and the run-up to this event offers a first glimpse of the difficulties which were emerging between the SDAP and the VARA. Clearly, this was an important moment for the entire labour movement, which was why the VARA had hoped to broadcast its proceedings. More particularly, the VARA had suggested the SDAP to broadcast the opening speech from this conference by party chairman Oudegeest and its keynote address by party leader Albarda. However, the offer was not greeted with unanimous approval in the party's executive committee. In fact, it was Albarda himself who hesitated to accept it, even though he had faced a microphone in a similar setting (i.e. the SDAP's Christmas-meeting) four times already. But it was precisely because of this why he was reluctant to do so again at this occasion, and the SDAP explained the VARA that Albarda felt 'handicapped when speaking before the microphone'.⁵³ Even so, it was readily understood that his hesitations were outweighed by the propaganda value of broadcasting, so in accepting the offer the SDAP asked the VARA if it was possible to devise a stage setup with minimal microphone discomfort. While the VARA complied with this request, in the end it turned out that Albarda was prevented from attending the party's election conference for

50 Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 42.

51 'Verkiezingspropaganda uit de lucht', *Het Volk*, 1-7-1929.

52 Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 42. Also 'Verkiezingsmomenten in Duitschland', *Het Volk*, 18-5-1928 and 'Met den luidspreker-wagen in Zwolle', *Het Volk*, 21-6-1929.

53 Letter SDAP to VARA 12-2-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961a.

different reasons. Days before the occasion, Albarda had returned ill from a visit to London, so his place was taken over by Willem Vliegen. And so, as a twist of fate, Albarda might have actually listened to the radio himself, just like his predecessor Troelstra. Similar to what we have seen on earlier occasions, it was Troelstra who sent a telegram to this conference to congratulate Vliegen, as Albarda's 'backup horse', with his fine speech.⁵⁴ If Albarda did listen to the VARA's report, he would have also heard how the broadcasting association was praised by party chairman Oudegeest as 'the youngest darling of the labour movement, whose phenomenal growth is a miracle in our eyes'.⁵⁵

These were warm words, but what Oudegeest did not mention were the constant battles that were fought out between the leadership of the party and the broadcasting association's executives. In fact, as the SDAP's delegated member in the VARA's executive committee, Oudegeest served in the front line of this running conflict and chapter six showed that he had recently clashed with the VARA about an aborted meeting with the Post Office's Director General and the Minister of Infrastructure.⁵⁶ However, more important here was the series of letters which were exchanged between the SDAP and the VARA between April to June, as these offer further insight in the party's difficulties and dilemmas in broadcasting. The first of these was addressed to the SDAP's executive committee and it informed the SDAP about a dispute between Zwertbroek and Albarda over the latter's decision to cancel a radio talk on June 22, a few weeks before the election. Albarda's reason for cancelling this talk was a promise to attend a meeting elsewhere, which Zwertbroek found hard to accept. As such, he asked whether Albarda really thought 'this meeting was more important (..) than a radio speech which would be heard by some tens of thousands of listeners'.⁵⁷ He added to this that Albarda would deliver this broadcast on behalf of the SDAP, and not on behalf of the VARA, and so, he insisted, it was the party's responsibility to persuade Albarda to come back on this decision, or to arrange another speaker instead. A similar tone was struck by Zwertbroek in a later letter, in which he informed the SDAP about the eleven election talks. Resuming his spat with Albarda, Zwertbroek warned 'that the party and the VARA should not to be disgraced' by speakers who thought it was more important to appear somewhere in the country than to speak before the VARA microphone.⁵⁸ He also pointed at the fortunate fact that the SDAP had been awarded with the last election talk of the entire series, on the evening before election day, and he reminded the SDAP that it was of the highest importance that Albarda should speak on that occasion.

Zwertbroek might have had a point, but talking down to those who saw themselves as the legitimate leaders of the labour movement did not change much for the better. In fact, in the following weeks the rift between the SDAP and the VARA would only grow wider, while the SDAP remained reluctant to accept the VARA's guidance in broadcasting matters. This was illustrated by the turn of events which preceded the election-eve programme, on July 2, which the VARA had secured for the SDAP in an earlier stage. What followed was an unpleasant fight over finances, content and control of this special programme. The first sign of trouble was a complaint from party chairman Oudegeest about the VARA's request to Willem Vliegen to deliver a speech as part of this programme. Oudegeest was most surprised about the invitation

54 'Een telegram van Troelstra', *Het Volk*, 18-2-1929.

55 'Het Verkiezings-congres der SDAP', *Het Volk*, 18-2-1929.

56 Chapter six, page 183-184.

57 Letter VARA to SDAP 5-4-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961a.

58 Letter VARA to SDAP 23-5-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961b.

to Vliegen, and he informed the VARA that its 'highly unusual conduct' had caused 'great consternation' in party circles, which could have easily been avoided if the VARA's executives 'had obeyed the standard rule not to invite speakers for such important occasions, without consulting the party first'.⁵⁹ He finished the letter by warning the VARA's executives that they should immediately stop interfering in matters in which they had no authority whatsoever. Inevitably, Oudegeest's reprimand triggered an angry response from the VARA's executives, who countered his 'groundless accusations' and 'false allegations' in a detailed exposé.⁶⁰ Among other things they explained that Vliegen was one of the few party leaders with good microphone-skills, which was why they had asked him to be available. What's more, they acknowledged the party had every reason to claim full control over this election programme, but they also insisted that the VARA had its own responsibility towards the broadcasting audience. Their message, therefore, was that the SDAP should start to take the VARA more seriously.

However, it was obvious that broadcasting held little priority to the SDAP. This was also illustrated by the party's announcement of the VARA's election programme in *Het Volk*. Although the party secretary promised that this would be 'something special and that it would most certainly convince a number of doubters to vote red', he reminded his readers this was the last stretch of the election campaign.⁶¹ While the SDAP encouraged its local branches to organize loudspeaker-meetings, it also warned this was only allowed for those branches which had not organized a traditional meeting on this evening. In fact, it stressed that these meetings were the party's first priority and it finished in style: 'Let all party members agree not to listen to this programme until they have finished all the work that needs to be done (...). We expect that this will be carried out accordingly and that the work which has to be done for an election will not suffer from the organization of a fine election broadcast.'⁶²

'Vote red tomorrow, list 23. I repeat, list 23'

Perhaps to remind, this was very much an echo of the warning ('Please do not listen!') which the SDAP had issued four years earlier, when Wibaut had delivered the party's first-ever election broadcast. At that point in time the VARA was still non-existent, and although its broadcasting time was still limited, in 1929 it had won a growing appreciation among the audience. The key to this were its programmes and artists, and its 1929 election programme offered an interesting taste of what the VARA had in store. Combining music, speech and entertainment, apparently its purpose was to attract as many listeners as possible and to inform these in a light-hearted manner about the SDAP's aspirations. One of the ensembles that contributed to this programme was the orchestra of Hugo de Groot, which was highly popular with the audience, both in- and outside the labour movement. The evening would also include a speech by Willem Vliegen, of course, after the SDAP had complied with this. But the highlight of this occasion was the radio play *U bent gewaarschuwd...* ('You have been warned...'), which incorporated the various components of the programme into a larger whole, and which offered a most interesting example of the merging of politics and broadcasting into new political forms.⁶³

59 Letter J. Oudegeest to executive committee VARA 18-6-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961b.

60 Letter G.J. Zwertbroek and J.W. Lebon to J. Oudegeest 21-6-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961b.

61 'Organiseert luisterbijeenkomsten', *Het Volk*, 27-6-1929.

62 Ibidem.

63 This play was written by the VARA's Martien Beversluis. 'U bent gewaarschuwd....', IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961c and Letter J. Oudegeest to executive committee VARA 18-6-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961b.

This radio play was directed by the VARA's Willem van Cappellen, who, in the year before, had emerged as the creative spirit behind the VARA's *De familie Mulder* ('The family Mulder'). This was a serialized radio play that was part of the VARA's weekly children-hour and it attracted a wide audience of children and adults alike, with many non-labour listeners among these.⁶⁴ Perhaps this explains why the family-theme figured prominently in the VARA's election-eve programme of July 2, although it was highly useful from a propagandistic perspective as well. Centring on the various members of a household, the first part of this radio play followed the conversation between a grandmother, her son, his wife, and a catholic neighbour. The subject of their exchange was the political state of the country and the forthcoming general election, and while the purpose of this programme was to promote the SDAP, the heterogeneous makeup of the family allowed the makers to do so through a variety of voices. Among other things this was illustrated by the references to state-pensions and disarmament – two key issues in the SDAP's election campaign –, which were propagated by the grandmother and her daughter-in-law as issues of particular importance to the elderly and female parts of the electorate. What's more, it was the presence of the catholic neighbour which was used to target catholic voters and to assure them that the SDAP had nothing against religion and that its pacifism was fully in keeping with Christian morality.⁶⁵ What this shows is that the SDAP and the VARA aimed to use radio to reach out beyond the labour heartland and to break new electoral ground.

And yet, the innovative potential of broadcasting spoke most clearly from the second part of this radio play, which saw the members of this family listening to the other items of the VARA's election-eve programme. This was only possible by the use of a narrative trick, since all this was taking place within the confines of the same programme. The key to this was the family's radio-set, which, at one point, was switched on by the grandmother as she hoped to listen to her favourite artist performing for the VARA. This was a clever find, as it opened the family's living-room to the outside world, in this case the VARA-studio where the other parts of the election programme were being staged. And so, after tuning into the VARA, the first sounds that were heard was the concluding statement of an election talk by one of the SDAP's party leaders: 'and therefore, honourable listeners, for all these great qualities, for all the good things Social Democracy has done, is doing, and promises to do in the future, vote red tomorrow, list 23. I repeat, list 23.'⁶⁶ The same message resounded in the following parts of this radio play, among which in the election songs, but also in the subsequent comments of the different members of this family. As such the suggestion was that broadcasting, or more specifically this election-eve programme, helped to confirm this family in its support for the SDAP. But while these fictional characters were not allowed to vote the next day, the question was whether the listeners in real life were equally impressed by this radio play and its message to vote for list 23.

Party election broadcasts

Of course, this was not the only occasion that the broadcasting audience was asked to vote for the SDAP. It was explained above that the three weeks before this election would also see fifty-four

64 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 55.

65 'U bent gewaarschuwd....', IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961c.

66 Ibidem. The VARA had initially intended to insert Vliegen's election speech at this point, but this had been prohibited by the Minister of Infrastructure since it would give the SDAP an extra broadcasting opportunity, on top of the agreed series of party election broadcasts. See also 'Afwijking verkiezingsredevowering', NA, PTT RÖDI, 2.16.25, inv. nr. 348 and Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 24-25.

election broadcasts, which were divided among the larger and smaller political parties. This was an impressive number, but it stood in marked contrast with the limited attention for these elections talks in the national press. This was most remarkable, certainly when compared with the British example where, as we have seen, newspapers reported extensively on the novelty and implications of election broadcasting, as well as on the rhetorical skills of the various political speakers. Then again, in the pluralist landscape of the Netherlands the airwaves were far more accessible to politicians as in Britain, which may help to explain why this series of election talks did not cause the same excitement. What's more, this may also explain why these talks have left little traces and, with no texts surviving, this makes it near impossible to assess the rhetoric or radio skills of the SDAP's speakers.

One publication which did reflect on this series of election talks was *De Notenkraker* ('The Nutcracker'), a weekly satirical supplement to *Het Volk*. The author of the article claimed that these election talks had offered a most valuable lesson. Looking back on years of hardship, the author recalled how most radio speakers had made a habit of boring their audience asleep with dreadful and uninspired monologues. Although broadcasting associations had tried to limit the length of these talks, the author claimed that most speakers were too self-absorbed to stop talking when facing the microphone: 'oh, the struggle which has been fought out behind the scenes between broadcasters and these speakers, who failed to recognize their own interest.'⁶⁷ It was against this background that he hailed the recent election talks as real progress, not only since they lasted no more than fifteen minutes, but also since speakers were simply cut off if they exceeded the time-limit: 'And see! Suddenly, there was light! Some speakers even managed to deliver a plain and clear message in twelve, or thirteen minutes. That's the value these elections have had for broadcasting. Let's hope, it may help to make radio an even more powerful means of communication than it already is.'⁶⁸

This, however, was hardly the whole story and there are reasons to believe that the words of some SDAP speakers did not come over too well, when they appeared before the microphone. The first of these was Jan Schaper, a senior party leader, whose election talk caused one VARA-member to send the broadcasting association a small note. It reported that the speaker who preceded Schaper, as well as the VARA-announcer both spoke very clearly, but that Schaper's talk was 'unbearable to listen to'. The impression of the correspondent was that Schaper spoke 'too close to the microphone' and while 'his voice was harsh, he was talking fast and in a stumbling manner'; as such it was difficult to make sense of what Schaper was saying, at least according to this listener.⁶⁹ More serious were the problems that troubled the SDAP's election talk on July 2, the last evening before election day. This broadcast was delivered by Albarda, whose discomfort with broadcasting had earlier earned him the scorn of the VARA's Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek. While the latter had warned the SDAP about the crucial significance of this final address, Albarda had chosen to spend the final days of the campaign in the east of the Netherlands, which prevented him from travelling back to the VARA-studio in Hilversum. This would have been perfectly acceptable, at least if the chosen alternative of relaying this speech from Enschede would have worked out well. This, however, was not the case, since there was so much noise on the line that the sound of Albarda's talk was blurred with the result that his words came out very poorly from loudspeakers throughout the country. Probably, the SDAP had not failed to notice this, but

67 'Voor den luidspreker. Sprekers-school', *De Notenkraker*, 6-7-1929.

68 Ibidem.

69 Enclosed note with letter VARA to SDAP 28-6-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961c.

Zwertbroek would not let this opportunity pass to rub it in and to lecture the party leadership that Albarda should have come to the studio: 'it would have been better to have an average speaker delivering a speech from the studio under good technical conditions, than to have a very good speaker giving a talk from more than one-hundred kilometres away.'⁷⁰

8.5 The poison of politics (1930)

When the SDAP received Zwertbroek's note the party leadership had other things on its mind. On the whole, the 1929 election had yielded the SDAP no gains, although it had managed to hold on to the twenty-four seats it had won in the 1925 elections. This amounted to a quarter of the electoral vote, but it was a matter of some doubt whether this was a result to be proud of or a reason for concern. What's more, this was the first election that had seen the use of party election broadcasts on such a large scale and with the relative size of most parties remaining the same, radio had failed to leave its mark on the makeup of the political landscape. Then again, if the impact of broadcasting on these elections remains uncertain, what is certain is that these elections had a definite impact on broadcasting, or, more particularly, on the makeup of the broadcasting system. Because it was the new Minister of Infrastructure, Paul Reymer, who would cut the knot of 'fairness', which had tied the broadcasting associations in uncertainty throughout the past years. While this promoted the VARA to an equal status as the KRO, NCRV and AVRO, it gave the broadcasting association a far larger share of the airwaves than it had held before. The question is how this sudden wealth of airtime affected the SDAP's presence in the VARA's programming output and, more particularly, whether it helped the party leadership to overcome its ambivalence towards radio.

However, to explore this question we ought to take a closer look first at the developments which followed Reymer's 'broadcasting time decree' of May 1930. What is referred to here is the creation of the Radio Broadcasting Control Committee, which was set up in July 1930 to prevent the broadcasting associations from harming or violating 'the safety of the state, public order or public decency'.⁷¹ These developments have been explored in some detail in the previous chapter, which showed for instance that the SDAP and the VARA were greatly offended when they came to understand the nature and extent of the powers which this body was granted with. What's more, it was explained that the party's anger was first provoked when the Control Committee summoned the texts of the speeches which a variety of party leaders intended to deliver before the radio microphone from the party conference of September 1930 from The Hague. On the short term this culminated in a standoff with the Control Committee and a partial ban of the VARA's coverage of this event. Beyond that, it also formed a prelude to a painful defeat of the SDAP later that year, when its parliamentary protest against the Control Committee was voted down by a liberal-confessional majority. At this point, all this is known and there is no need to go through these turn of events again here. However, the previous chapter took no note of the statements that were made in the context of these developments that can help to grasp the party's understanding of radio as a medium of political publicity and communication. For this reason it is helpful to reflect on some of these statements here, since it offers an interesting view of the perception of radio among the party leadership.

70 Letter VARA to executive committee SDAP 6-7-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961c and letter SDAP to VARA 9-7-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961c.

71 Chapter six, page 189-190.

A little devil

To be clear, the SDAP's concerns over the threat of censorship were not new as they traced back to the early 1920s, when it was first faced with the sensitivities in confessional circles about the use of radio to disseminate 'hurtful' or 'offensive' matter. At that point in time the SDAP was still involved in the talks about the founding of a National Broadcasting Company and these confessional fears caused the SDAP's Cornelis Werkhoven to object against proposals that were aimed to curtail the freedom of broadcasting. Among other things Werkhoven argued that radio should be treated no different than any other means of communication and he thought that it should offer ample space to 'the people to voice its opinions, its ideas and ideals, and even its idiocies'.⁷² This did not settle the case, and while the next half decade was marked by the debate about the pluralist organization of broadcasting, every now and then the question was raised whether broadcasting associations were free to broadcast what they liked, or whether they should be subjected to a form of control. A key issue in this respect concerned the medium-specific qualities of radio and its place in the private sphere, which caused many observers to reflect on the potential good or damage it might bring to the social, cultural or political realm. Perhaps remarkably, this did not apply to the SDAP's commentators, who, in speaking out against the threat of censorship, were prone to defend the freedom of speech in broadcasting, while ignoring radio's specific qualities.

An interesting example in this respect were two articles which were published by *De Groene Amsterdammer*, a liberal progressive weekly, in January 1928.⁷³ These articles were written by the SDAP's Willem Vliegen and the former party chairman asked the simple and straightforward question whether it should be allowed to use radio as an instrument of political propaganda. For Vliegen there was no doubt what the answer to this question was, and he raised a series of similar questions ('should political propagandists be allowed to travel by train?', 'should the Post Office be allowed to distribute political writings?') to ridicule those who sought to restrict the freedom of broadcasting. In doing so Vliegen referred to the freedom of the press and the freedom of assembly, and he argued that these liberties should naturally apply to broadcasting as well. While warning against the 'anti-parliamentary' and 'anti-democratic' spirit of the times, he called it a 'sacred duty' of the state to uphold and protect these freedoms against any abuse.⁷⁴ Without disputing these words, what may be noted is that radio played a minor role only in Vliegen's appeal. In fact, his only remark about radio concerned its control panel and he suggested that anyone who was offended by what their radio was playing, should simply turn the switch and tune into a Jazz-band or a cookery lesson instead. Although Vliegen was absolutely right, the question was far more complex than he suggested. Most important, in this respect, was the fact that radio was a different means of communication than the press or assemblies and, more particularly, that it held a more ambiguous status as an intermediate between the public and the private sphere than Vliegen recognized or was willing to acknowledge.

This did not mean that all SDAP figures were prone to turn a blind eye to the medium-specific qualities of radio. One notable exception was Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper, who had served as the party's first delegated member of the VARA's executive committee. According to Kleerekoper this had been 'an extremely unpleasant history', but it seems that it did help to open him up to

72 Memorandum of Cornelis Werkhoven, *Rapport van den Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, Bijlage IV, 68.

73 W.H. Vliegen, 'Radio en Politiek', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 7-1-1928 and W.H. Vliegen, 'Nog eens: Radio en Politiek', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 21-1-1928.

74 Vliegen, 'Radio en Politiek'.

the novelty of broadcasting. What's more, this might explain as well why Kleerekoper showed a more informed understanding of what distinguished radio from other means of communication. Speaking in the context of a parliamentary debate about the future of broadcasting, Kleerekoper praised the capacity of radio to escape the public eye and to enter the private realm unobserved. According to Kleerekoper this made it an instrument of unparalleled power, since it allowed its users to listen beyond the boundaries of their daily lives within the secluded confines of their living-room. Comparing this with the delivery of a newspaper, or the act of visiting a public meeting, Kleerekoper labelled radio 'a little devil', and he reflected on the benefits it might have for catholic or protestant listeners (but also for socialists) to tune into new ideas and other ways of thinking.⁷⁵ He was well aware that his delight about these qualities was not shared in the same degree by some of the other parties in Parliament and he urged the government to impose no restrictions on broadcasting. At that point in time, in March 1929, the Control Committee was still beyond the horizon and Kleerekoper ended his speech on a defiant note by claiming that the more people would listen to their radio-set, the sooner they would join of the ranks of labour.

However, celebrating radio as 'a little devil' was not the best strategy to ease the concerns in confessional circles. And so, eighteen months later there was little that reminded of Kleerekoper's bravado when Albarda lodged his protest against the Control Committee's actions. Albarda's speech to Parliament covered many of the arguments his party fellows had used before him. This included his claim that the Control Committee's rule undermined the freedom of speech and that it violated fundamental rights which were vital to a political democracy.⁷⁶ Albarda's protest was aimed more particularly against the preventive powers of the Control Committee and he tried to convince his public that it had only received these powers as an optional device and that it was not necessary to impose these regardless.⁷⁷ This was not a new argument either and it had been pressed a year earlier by the SDAP's George van den Bergh.⁷⁸ More interesting, however, was what Albarda had to say about the 'impracticalities' of the Control Committee's demands, since it offers a glimpse of the conception of politics which informed his understanding of broadcasting. Most notably, this concerned his claim that the art of public speaking asked for improvisation and, moreover, that politicians who were speaking at a public meeting were often required to respond to the mood or comments from the crowd or to elaborate on subjects they did not intend to cover.⁷⁹ While this caused Albarda to claim it was absurd to ask politicians to write down and send in the texts of their speeches days earlier, it shows that his idea of broadcasting leaned heavily on a conception of politics as a public pursuit, taking place at a public location in front of a co-present public. But, moreover, it also suggests that Albarda failed to see or acknowledge that the private context or the absent audience were equally important in broadcasting. Still, at one point Albarda did admit there might be 'some doubts' about the public character of broadcasting, but this could not conceal that he had very little to say about the place of radio in the private realm, and what its implications were for the issue under debate.

The same did not apply to his opponents, chief amongst these the Minister of Infrastructure Reymer. The arguments of the different sides in this debate have been explored elsewhere and although these pages are primarily concerned with the SDAP's views, Reymer's response to

75 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 6-3-1929, 1610-1611, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

76 Ibidem, debate 23-10-1930, 248-252.

77 Ibidem, 248-249.

78 Ibidem, debate 10-12-1929, 966-967.

79 Ibidem, debate 23-10-1930, 251.

Albarda's statement indicates that the domestic setting of broadcasting was more important to his judgment than Albarda recognized.⁸⁰ In answering the SDAP's party leader, Reymer first elaborated on the previous history of the debate about broadcasting to emphasize that Parliament had voted in favour of a form of preventive control at various stages and that he was simply following in its footsteps. This was a poor excuse, but Reymer continued by explaining that the freedom of the press or the freedom of assembly did not naturally apply to broadcasting, for the simple reason that radio was a different means of communication. While he argued that its medium-specific qualities should be taken into account when defining what was and what was not acceptable, a crucial factor in this respect was the private setting of broadcasting. Among other things Reymer stated that radio 'entered the domestic sphere, as it were, unexpectedly', and he gloomily noted that 'damage is done and trouble is caused, before it can be prevented'.⁸¹ Since he thought that 'every unsuspecting listener in this country holds the right not to be offended in his most intimate feelings by radio', his conclusion was that some form of preventive control in broadcasting was 'indispensable'.⁸² After raising various other arguments, his message to the SDAP was that he saw no reason whatsoever to adjust or reverse the present arrangement.

Frustrating as this was for the SDAP, the situation would only grow more serious as a result of the efforts of the liberal member of Parliament G.A. Boon, who renewed his assault on the politicization of the airwaves.⁸³ Perhaps surprisingly, Boon did pay support to Albarda's cause, since he was equally displeased with the Control Committee's preventive powers and he condemned these as a 'great danger to our freedom'.⁸⁴ However, what was of more immediate concern to him was the political 'abuse' of radio and Boon was particularly offended by the gap between those parties and people with regular access to the airwaves, and those who were silenced. What's more, his sense of injustice was fuelled by his profound aversion of the style of politics which spoke from the VARA's programmes. While he referred to Britain as a lighting example (since politics was only allowed to enter the BBC's programmes in the two to three weeks before an election campaign), Boon submitted a motion to Parliament which urged the Minister to deal with the excessive politicization of the airwaves.⁸⁵ Although his objections were welcomed with significant approval, Reymer asked Boon to withdraw his motion while promising to look into the matter at a later stage. As Albarda's appeal suffered an inglorious defeat, it was Boon's crusade against the 'poison of politics' that would cast a long shadow over the VARA's and the SDAP's presence in the airwaves in the coming years.⁸⁶

8.6 Between studio and platform (1930-1933)

The years after 1930 were a frantic period in the history of the VARA. In the previous period the broadcasting association had managed to find solid ground between the other broadcasting associations,

80 More extensive on this debate and the positions of the various parties Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 64-102.

81 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 23-10-1930, 254, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

82 Ibidem.

83 Chapter six, page 191-192. More extensive Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 77-78.

84 Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 23-10-1930, 263, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

85 Ibidem, debate 30-10-1930, 406-407.

86 Ibidem, debate 31-10-1930. Boon coined the term 'the poison of politics' in the parliamentary debate of May 28, 1930. Handelingen Tweede Kamer, debate 28-5-1930, 2230, <https://statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>.

but its situation had always verged on the edge of crisis and it had only survived on a tight budget, and with the much-needed support of befriended organizations. Outside the labour movement the VARA had always met significant distrust and its needy state had caused its opponents to condemn the VARA as a troublemaker with a loud mouth and an empty wallet. While this helps to understand the delight in VARA-circles when it was elevated to its 'equal' status, it also shows the scale of the task the VARA faced. As a result it was now required to put together a programme of fifty hours per week, about five times more than its weekly output of the years before.⁸⁷ Clearly, this was also a moment of tremendous opportunity, since the VARA was now finally able to step forward and play its part as a large broadcasting association for the entire 'red family'.

The VARA had started making plans to prepare for this moment as early as October 1927, when its agents had first sat down with the SDAP and the NVV to formulate an expanded view of a labour broadcasting association.⁸⁸ At that point it was agreed that the VARA had an important task in promoting the outlook of these organizations, but it was also recognized that the purpose of socialism was much broader and that the VARA should offer a heterogeneous mixture of music, information and entertainment, both in a serious and light-hearted manner.⁸⁹ Although the VARA had made a decent start with this in the years before 1930, its newfound prominence gave its programmes a substantial boost. Among the artists who enjoyed significant success was the cinema-orchestra of Hugo de Groot, whose concerts were also highly rated by non-labour listeners.⁹⁰ Equally renowned, but for different reasons, was *Teun de Klepperman*, a satirical review of the week's events. While this series was greatly popular among labour listeners, it was widely condemned outside the labour movement, where it was seen as proof of the VARA's poor taste and flawed morality.⁹¹ If these examples show that the VARA's programmes came in various shades of red, an average week contained numerous lectures, courses and talks which testified more clearly of the socialist ideal which pervaded the VARA's activity. Inevitably, this also meant that politics was never far away when tuning into the VARA. While this chapter is primarily in party politics, so the question here is how the SDAP figured in the VARA's programmes and, more particularly, what the SDAP's direct involvement with VARA's programmes after 1930 tells us about the evolution of its appreciation and understanding of radio.

For this purpose it is useful to distinguish between two broad categories of programmes in which the SDAP or leading figures of the party were involved. To be clear, both categories made up a small portion only of the VARA's overall programming output. The first of these concerned the VARA's coverage of political events and manifestations on days of symbolic or political importance. We have already come across a number of examples that fit this category, for instance the VARA's reports of the SDAP's annual Christmas-meeting from Amsterdam or the coverage of its honorary conference for Pieter Jelle Troelstra. As such, it was noted that the introduction of radio was welcomed as a means to expand the scope of these events, but that it also changed its performative dynamics in the sense that its speakers were now addressing the present public and the absent audience at the same time. While it remains to be seen how the SDAP came to reconcile these tensions, the second category of programmes offered the party a more straightforward access to the broadcasting audience. This category opens up the new world

87 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 64.

88 Chapter six, page 178-180.

89 More extensive on the VARA's programmes in the 1930s Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 68-118.

90 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 57.

91 Ibidem, 81-82.

of the broadcasting studio and it covers the regular VARA-programmes which were organized in consultation with the SDAP. While these were planned and produced for the explicit purpose of broadcasting, these included lectures, series of talks and courses, which meant to inform or educate the VARA's listeners about the party, its views or its past. A typical example in this respect was a series of nineteen lectures in 1932 about the party manifesto (*Het Beginselprogramma der SDAP*) or a series of personal talks by leading labour figures about their conversion to socialism (*Hoe werd ik socialist?*).⁹² Although there were various other programmes which included party speakers, or which reflected party opinion, most interesting for us are those programmes in which the SDAP was most directly involved, as they offer the clearest view of the considerations which shaped party's dealings with broadcasting. For this reason the following pages take a closer look at one particular example from both categories, first the *SDAP-quarter*, a series of weekly party talks that started in 1930, and, secondly the VARA's coverage of the labour movement's mass demonstrations of September 1930 and November 1932. As different as these examples are, they show that the SDAP was struggling to reach out to the broadcasting audience, whether its representatives were speaking from the VARA-studio or whether they were standing in front of a massive crowd.

Party talks

To those who are familiar with the Dutch context it may seem an odd choice to explore the history of the *SDAP-quarter*. This is the kind of programme that is commonly associated with the 'pillarized' logic of the partnership between the SDAP and the VARA. Providing the SDAP with a regular access to the microphone, the form of this programme was a straight talk of ca. fifteen minutes, which, arguably, was the most basic and least imaginative way to deal with politics in broadcasting. Perhaps this explains why the 'party quarter' has largely gone unnoticed in the historiography of broadcasting, but there is a different side to this as well. Although the form of this talk was most straightforward, by now we know that delivering an effective radio talk was a delicate art which most politicians found difficult to master. Indeed, it is often noted in this respect that radio imposed new demands on the choice of words, the use of voice and the presentation of personality. While these same issues resonated in the party's dealings with its *SDAP-quarter*, a closer inspection shows that the series was troubled even more so by difficulties of a more rudimentary kind.

The history of the *SDAP-quarter* traced back to October 1927, when the SDAP and the VARA had first sat down to discuss the latter's future as an expanded broadcasting association for the entire labour movement. In doing so, they had also agreed to develop a programme that would allow the party to comment on the political developments of the past weeks or months. However, apparently the SDAP was in no rush to proceed with this plan and when the VARA came up with the name of a commentator (Max Zwalf) who would deliver these reports, the SDAP stepped in and vetoed his appointment, since it had 'serious objections' against his candidacy.⁹³ It did not come up with an alternative name and while this caused the VARA to shelve the plan, it took two more years before SDAP and the VARA would take up the issue again. Again, the initiative for this came from the VARA. After receiving its 'fair' share of broadcasting time, it offered

92 *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1932*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

93 Minutes meeting daily executive committee, 28-9-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 192 and Letter SDAP to VARA, 9-11-1928, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1960c.

the SDAP fifteen to thirty minutes of its airtime on the early Saturday-evening, every week.⁹⁴ This was a prominent place in the VARA's broadcasting schedule, and the programmes for this evening were designed to attract a large audience. If this guaranteed the party a large hearing, the SDAP responded with lukewarm interest, since it worried about the financial implications of the offer. Although it would not have to pay to use the VARA's facilities, it would have to arrange a speaker and a text for these talks, which might involve additional costs. Refusing to carry these costs, the VARA's offer was kindly rejected by the party leadership.⁹⁵ Still, some months later, the SDAP came back on this decision, apparently since it had come to realize that the benefits were well worth the minimal investment, and that it was really a small effort to draft and deliver a fifteen-minute talk, certainly when the responsibility for this was shared among a number of party leaders.⁹⁶

It soon turned out that this was no solution, but rather a recipe for problems and conflicts. It is not entirely clear when this series of party talks made its formal start, but it was the SDAP's Jan van den Tempel who claimed the dubious honour of being the first speaker of this series to upset Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek. One week after Van den Tempel's radio talk, the SDAP received a note from the VARA's broadcasting secretary, who complained that Van den Tempel's talk had lasted nearly twice as long as the agreed fifteen minutes, and that this had caused serious problems for the remainder of the schedule of the rest of the evening. Zwertbroek added to this that experience had learned that the VARA's 'mass audience' was not interested in such lengthy talks and that it also had a negative impact on the appeal of its other programmes.⁹⁷ He therefore advised the SDAP to make sure that its speakers would not make this mistake again and he warned that the VARA might otherwise cut off those speakers who would take too much time. The most important part of this note was the attachment, a handout ('Mededeelingen en Wenken voor de sprekers in den VARA-omroep') which laid down a set of rules and guidelines for radio speakers.⁹⁸ Apparently, Zwertbroek felt that the SDAP could well use some advice, since he made sure to enclose twenty copies of this handout in the envelope which carried his note to the SDAP.

These guidelines were written for speakers who would deliver their talk from the broadcasting studio and they shed an interesting light on the waning novelty of radio and the dichotomy between its communicative demands and the performative requirements of the stage or platform. While these eight commandments read as a crash-course in broadcasting, they also expose the pitfalls of the broadcasting studio for speakers who were used to meet their public in a different setting. So, among other things, it stated that radio-speeches ought to deliver a constructive argument and that criticism of dissenting views should not be offensive. It also advised to put a radio talk on paper, since 'experience has learned that speeches before an invisible audience lack the inspiration which a visible public exerts'.⁹⁹ For the same reason the seventh instruction stressed to 'speak slowly, with a clear voice and clear articulation. Whatever you do, stay natural and don't speak too slow, or with too much emphasis.' The eighth commandment was the most extensive and it insisted on the importance of capturing the imagination of the broadcasting audience from the start, since this was the only way to keep the audience listening. What's more,

94 Letter VARA to SDAP 17-6-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1963b.

95 Letter SDAP to VARA 8-7-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1963c.

96 Letter SDAP to VARA 14-10-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1964a.

97 Letter VARA to SDAP 3-12-1930, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1964c.

98 'Mededeelingen en Wenken voor de sprekers in den VARA-Omroep', IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1964c.

99 Ibidem.

it concluded by urging against 'elaborate comments about the wonder of radio or the sensation of speaking before a microphone', and it wryly added there was 'nothing spectacular anymore about these things to the average listener, who, having heard such confessions over and over again, is utterly bored of these by now.'¹⁰⁰

This was hardly the constructive tone this handout asked of its readers, and with fourteen of the twenty copies still to be found – undistributed – in the SDAP-archive, it appears these instructions fell on deaf ears. What's more, in the meantime the *SDAP-quarter* continued to stir up tensions between the SDAP and the VARA. In fact, the unfolding sequence of events showed that the party's speakers did not only struggle to adjust their style and manner of speaking to the microphone, but that they found it equally difficult to conform to the logistics of broadcasting. Typical incidents happened in May and June 1931 when two party prominents, Monne de Miranda and Eduard Polak, missed their appointment to deliver the SDAP talk. With the latter arriving too late at the VARA-studio, and the former simply forgetting his radio talk altogether, this triggered an angry response from Zwertbroek. Writing De Miranda, Zwertbroek fumed that De Miranda was probably the first radio speaker to forget about his broadcast, which, he added, was all the more painful since socialists were barred from the airwaves altogether in so many other countries.¹⁰¹ There was more to his frustration than these individual cases. A few weeks later Zwertbroek informed the party's executive committee that the *SDAP-quarter* was attracting a marginal audience only, which he blamed on its lack of urgency, the poor choice of subject matter and the constantly changing set of speakers.¹⁰² Apparently the party leadership was not entirely satisfied either with the present form, and in October 1931 the party and the broadcasting association agreed to change the format of these talks into a bi-weekly talk of ca. thirty minutes, that was delivered by party chairman Jan Oudegeest as its regular presenter.¹⁰³

Oudegeest was no stranger to the VARA, since he had served as the party's delegated member of its executive committee between 1928 and 1930. As such, he was well informed about the organizational dilemmas in broadcasting and, perhaps more importantly, he had gained first-hand experience in dealing with the volatile spirit of Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek. This, however, was not enough to ward off conflict and although the new bi-weekly, thirty minute format seemed to have cleared the air, mutual discontent was still building up. One source of frustration was the Control Committee. Every now and then its inspectors asked Oudegeest to submit the text of his party talk in advance, which was highly inconvenient since these talks were meant to offer a topical review of the political developments of the past weeks.¹⁰⁴ However, again it was the logistics of these talks that caused these tensions to boil over. Part of the problem was Oudegeest's busy agenda as the SDAP's chairman, since he always had party meetings or activities to attend, also on those Saturdays when he was expected to deliver his radio talk. Although the VARA had promised him access to its auxiliary studio in Amsterdam, so that Oudegeest was spared from travelling to Hilversum, this did not work out well at all. In fact, it caused the party chairman to become increasingly frustrated about these talks and after a string of incidents he decided to discontinue the *SDAP-quarter* altogether in June 1932.

100 Ibidem.

101 Letter G.J. Zwertbroek to S.R. de Miranda 29-5-1931, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1967a.

102 Letter VARA to SDAP 17-6-1931, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1967a.

103 Minutes meeting daily executive committee 27-10-1931, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 195.

104 For instance Letter VARA to J. Oudegeest, 12-6-1931, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1967a.

He did so in a rather bold fashion. Without informing the VARA first, Oudegeest published a short statement in *Het Volk*, which announced the immediate ending of the 'party quarter' due to the flawed arrangements for these talks.¹⁰⁵ This was an open invitation to Zwertbroek, who struck back in *Het Volk* some days later with an explanation from the VARA's point of view. His statement contained a short list that counted fourteen occasions on which Oudegeest should have delivered the party's talk, but instead the party chairman had only spoken on four of these occasions, so missing ten of the agreed fourteen talks, and Zwertbroek claimed the VARA was only (partly) responsible for two of those.¹⁰⁶ While this exchange was symptomatic of the acrimonious state of the relationship between the SDAP and the VARA (and the fragility of their 'pillarized' partnership), eventually it was the response of ordinary party members which created an opening out of this conflict. After receiving various letters which testified of the appreciation for these talks among its rank and file, the SDAP decided to come back on its decision to cancel its 'party quarter' altogether.¹⁰⁷ And so, towards the end of the month *Het Volk* published a short notice that the SDAP and the VARA had settled their dispute and that the *SDAP-quarter* would continue accordingly.¹⁰⁸ Although there was a petty side to all these incidents, the history of this series was more than a storm in a teacup; when put together these troubles highlight the difficulties or the inability of the SDAP to make more of its opportunities in broadcasting and, moreover, to acknowledge the political value of radio more fully.

And yet, the irony was that the SDAP had ample know-how of broadcasting at its disposal, but that it continued to run into conflict with the VARA, instead of relying on its expertise in a more positive way. A crucial role in this process was played by Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, who was the personification of the party's problems with the VARA, but who was also a skilled radio speaker himself. As such, it appears that he might have done a good job to improve the party's presence in the airwaves. Proof of this were his *Zondagmorgentoespraken* ('Sunday morning talks') and, having delivered these since 1929, it had made Zwertbroek a voice to be reckoned with within the labour movement. While this explains why Zwertbroek was invited on the party's executive committee in April 1932, in contrast to the senior figures of the SDAP Zwertbroek understood the importance of speaking to 'the hearts of the masses of workers'.¹⁰⁹ So, talking to his listeners in plain language, Zwertbroek used private confessions, rhetorical questions and other techniques to establish a sense of understanding with his audience. Also interesting was his use of letters from listeners, and by answering their questions in his talks Zwertbroek opened up a dialogue about the political developments of the day.¹¹⁰ In this way he was years ahead of the SDAP's leading figures, who, apparently were not ready yet to abandon the straight talk and to face the individual listener in such a forthright fashion. Although the SDAP would come to use this form in a later part of the decade, by that time Zwertbroek was gone, and in the intervening period the party would first take an opposite turn before it came to 'rediscover' the figure of the individual listener.

105 'VARA – SDAP-kwartiertje', *Het Volk*, 13-6-1932.

106 'SDAP-kwartiertje der VARA', *Het Volk*, 14-6-1932.

107 For instance letter SDAP Bussum to executive committee SDAP 23-6-1932, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1969c.

108 'Partij-kwartiertje hersteld', *Het Volk*, 28-6-1932.

109 As quoted in Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 108. Zwertbroek's role in the party's executive committee was explained more fully in chapter six, page 198-199.

110 For instance 'Zondagmorgentoespraak', 2-4-1933 and 'Zondagmorgentoespraak', 18-6-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 79. A selection of Zwertbroek's 'Sunday morning talks' was published in two volumes, G.J. Zwertbroek, *Slaven van het kapitalisme of vrije mensen? Een bundel radio-toespraken gehouden voor de VARA* (Amsterdam 1931) and G.J. Zwertbroek, *Egoïsme of gemeenschapszin? Een tweede bundel radio-toespraken gehouden voor de VARA* (Amsterdam 1932).

'I greet you, now we are here, one of will and one of mind'

To grasp these developments it is equally important to consider the party's dealings with, what was defined above as, the second category of programmes, the VARA's reports from mass demonstrations and public meetings on days of symbolic or political importance. While the example of the *SDAP-quarter* suggests that party leaders found it difficult to find their way to, or to feel at ease in the broadcasting studio, this second category of programmes shows that the VARA was always prepared to bring the microphone to the SDAP. It was explained above that the labour movement's public manifestations were a vital element of the political identity of the 'red family', and by broadcasting the speeches and happenings from these occasions, the VARA sought to cement its place in the labour movement's political culture. While this was also a service to the SDAP and the broadcasting audience, placing the microphone to the disposal of party leaders did leave its mark on these events as well, among other things since it made the public at home a factor in these occasions.

Indeed, this was part of the reason why the Control Committee intervened in September 1930 when it was informed about the VARA's plans to broadcast the speeches from the party conference of Saturday, September 13th and a live report of the mass demonstrations the following Sunday, September 14th. It was explained elsewhere that this caused the Control Committee to ban the VARA's coverage of the speeches on Saturday, and while this sparked a massive row with the party leadership, quite crucially, the Control Committee did not prevent the VARA from broadcasting its report of the mass demonstrations the next day.¹¹¹ It was noted earlier that the broadcasting association had done a similar thing on September 16th, 1928 when its evening-programme had included a short twenty-minute report about the demonstrations which had taken place earlier that day. At that point in time the VARA's resources and airtime were still limited, but this year the VARA's plans were more ambitious as it aimed to bring an eyewitness account of the demonstration from Amsterdam. It was the live-character of this occasion which prevented the VARA from submitting a text beforehand and this was why the Control Committee allowed the VARA to go ahead with its plans, of course without violating the rules which it was meant to uphold.¹¹² Although this report has left little traces, what has survived offers an interesting clue about the perceived significance of radio in relation to the larger meaning of the event.

Delivering this report for the VARA was Meijer Sluijser, who was a journalist for *Het Volk* and a member of the VARA's executive committee.¹¹³ What's more, Sluijser had contributed on various occasions to the VARA's programmes, but he later stated that the experience of covering this mass demonstration was incomparable to his earlier encounters with the microphone. Writing about this event in the VARA's programme guide, Sluijser recalled how he was most impressed about the liveliness of the event and he noted a remarkable contrast with the atmosphere of a silent and empty studio, where he 'always felt to be babbling to himself', which, he thought, was 'a most embarrassing experience'.¹¹⁴ But standing with a microphone 'in the middle of the masses' was something completely different and Sluijser confessed to have felt 'as the link between the hundred-thousand demonstrators, who have something to say to the country and the thousands,

111 More extensive on this chapter six, page 190-192.

112 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 72.

113 P. van Praag, 'Sluijser, Meijer' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (9-3-2014).

114 M. Sluijser, 'Met de microfoon midden in de massa!', *De Radiogids*, 20-9-1930.

who want to experience this demonstration in their homes near their radio-sets.¹¹⁵ The article from which these quotes come, offers a partial idea only of the place of broadcasting in this manifestation, but two things can be noted. What is first remarkable is Sluijser's comment about the number of demonstrators participating ('hundred thousand') in the event and the number of listeners ('thousands') at home. Without knowing the actual size of both, this ratio does seem somewhat disproportionate, notably on the side of the broadcasting audience. In connection to this it is equally remarkable that Sluijser understood his responsibilities as a radio reporter mainly in relation to those demonstrators, on whose behalf he claimed to be speaking, and not, or much less, in relation to the listeners at home to whom he was speaking. These are only minor details, but they do illustrate that radio was still primarily seen as a means to expand the scope of the actual event, and much less, or only in a secondary sense, as a service to the broadcasting audience.

Equally interesting, in this respect, was how *Het Volk* reflected on the occasion in the days afterwards. On the whole, the newspaper hailed this latest rendering of 'Red Sunday' a great success and it claimed that it had surpassed all previous editions. Similar to what was noted earlier it praised the various means of transportation, which had been used – trains, boats and auto-busses – by the demonstrators to come together and it used the image of a 'red tidal wave' to praise the inevitable force of this demonstration.¹¹⁶ Although *Het Volk* did reflect on the VARA's contribution to these events, in doing so it mainly focussed on the sense of injustice which was provoked by the Control Committee's actions, and it merely referred to the VARA's eyewitness account in passing.¹¹⁷ While this was perfectly acceptable, somehow it appears that the writings of *Het Volk* were shaped by the same perception of broadcasting which underlay Meijer Sluijser's comments. To recognize this it is helpful to take a closer look at what *Het Volk* wrote about the soaking conditions of the day. Because the image of a 'tidal wave' also referred to the rainy weather, which, according to the newspaper, only to the triumph of 'Red Sunday': 'On the most unfortunate moment, heavy weather broke out. The rain is pouring and the wind is lashing water in our faces. Thousands are on their way to the meeting area, but thousands are still at home. It would have been all too human if they would have stayed at home. Yet, they have come! (...) Because for our people more is needed than showers and thunderstorms to forsake their duty to demonstrate.'¹¹⁸ Of course, there is no immediate connection between rain and radio, except perhaps that the home is the preferred location for both to be, either to escape the former or to enjoy the latter. Although this was mere rhetoric, the implications of these words was that those 'brave' demonstrators had not only defied the weather, but also the homely distractions of radio.

Clearly, this was not stated in so many words and given the nature of these occasions it would have been more remarkable if *Het Volk* or the SDAP had encouraged people to stay away and listen to the VARA instead. Perhaps we should not read too much into these words, even though it is undeniable there was a certain tension at work between the politics and culture of assembly which marked these occasions, and the capacity of radio to relay a message from one location to an endless range of receivers at different locations. Moreover, the question is what the VARA's involvement in these events tells us about the party's understanding of broadcasting, and against

115 Sluijser, 'Met de microfoon midden in de massa!', 20-9-1930.

116 'Roode Vloedgolf frischt Amsterdam op', *Het Volk*, 15-9-1930.

117 'Na de demonstratie te Amsterdam', *Het Volk*, 16-9-1930.

118 Ibidem.

this background we may observe a number of interesting elements in the VARA's coverage of the mass demonstration of November 1932 from The Hague. This meeting was organized by the SDAP and the NVV and with a general election approaching, the labour movement sought to make a statement against the policies of the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck government. As such, the VARA was eager to contribute to this occasion as well, even though it faced serious hurdles in preparing for this day.¹¹⁹ Most important in this respect was the fact that this demonstration was planned on a Tuesday and that the VARA had no access to the airwaves on that day. Although the broadcasting association was entitled to claim extra airtime on three labour movement-heydays per year, when it did its request was turned down by the Minister, who had no desire to facilitate this protest against the government.¹²⁰

Even so, it was Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek who came up with the luminous idea of making a recording of the event and to broadcast these a day later. When he informed the SDAP about this plan, it was objected by Albarda, who claimed his speech to this meeting was unsuitable to be recorded on a gramophone-record, and who was reluctant to submit the text of this speech to the Control Committee.¹²¹ This was no real argument, since Albarda had sent in his texts to the Control Committee on many occasions before.¹²² While Zwertbroek challenged Albarda's 'one-sided, intellectualistic and parliamentary outlook', he questioned his lack of feeling for the 'mentality of the masses'.¹²³ A few months earlier Zwertbroek had reproached Albarda in a similar manner when he blamed him of neglecting his responsibilities in broadcasting and of betraying the VARA's audience.¹²⁴ Perhaps, there was a kernel of truth to these claims, at least with regards to Albarda's reluctance towards radio, but what was equally important here was that Zwertbroek's own outlook was taking a radical turn throughout this same period. Apparently, Albarda's fellow party leaders felt there was no reason not to pursue Zwertbroek's idea of recording the happenings at the mass demonstration in The Hague. And so, when the Control Committee allowed the VARA to send in the verbatim accounts of the recordings just hours before its report would start, it was decided by the SDAP that the VARA could go ahead with this plan.

As such, the scene of this demonstration in The Hague would not only see a VARA-microphone on stage, but also an improvised recording-facility. Despite all this effort, there was much that was familiar to the words which Albarda and his fellow party leaders would speak before the VARA-microphone. The opening speech of this demonstration was delivered by Jan Oudegeest, the party chairman. Overlooking the entire terrain he welcomed the 'sixty-thousand who were present, and who were brought here by all means of transportation which were available, arriving on foot and by bicycle, by car and by the thirty-six extra trains, on top of the regular trains which have carried the many ten-thousands.' Seeking to capture the higher significance of this moment, he continued: 'I greet you, now we are here, one of will and one of mind'.¹²⁵ After praising the sacrifices everybody had made to be present at this occasion, Oudegeest read aloud

119 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 123-126.

120 More particularly this arrangement allowed the VARA to demand an exchange of airtime with the AVRO on a maximum of three days per year, besides the 1st of May and the day of its annual Christmas-meeting. In return, the VARA would have to concede the same number of broadcasting hours to the AVRO. Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 123.

121 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 29-10-1932, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 85.

122 For instance months earlier: Text of J.W. Albarda, 'Het congres der SDAP over het rapport Welter', 18-9-1932, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 253.

123 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 29-10-1932, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 85.

124 Letter G.J. Zwertbroek to J.W. Albarda 23-7-1932, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1969e and minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 29-10-1932, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 85.

125 Text of recorded radio report of demonstration The Hague, 8-11-1932, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 253.

some telegrams from sympathizers who had not been able to travel to this demonstration, but who did want to pay their support. Apparently, this was a common element of the ritual of party meetings and Albarda did not abandon this either. Delivering the concluding speech of this demonstration, he too spoke in familiar wordings when he claimed that all the opposition and all the difficulties had not prevented these ten-thousands of people to come together to 'express the unbreakable firmness and activism' of the labour movement.¹²⁶

Obviously, Albarda and Oudegeest spoke much more extensively, but what is interesting is that neither said anything about or to the broadcasting audience, which, after all, did form a significant part of the people who would hear their speeches. While this suggests that the public which was present still remained their primary reference point, other elements of the VARA's report indicate that a shift was beginning to take shape. Most important in this respect was the role of the radio reporter, Meijer Sluijser, whom we have already encountered as the reporter on 'Red Sunday', in 1930. On that occasion he had claimed to be speaking to the ('thousands') of listeners on behalf of the ('hundred-thousand') demonstrators, but apparently his allegiance had shifted and he had now discovered the face of the broadcasting audience more fully. In fact, while addressing the audience, Sluijser claimed to act 'in their spirit' by inviting a number of party leaders to appear before his microphone and to ask them to present the radio listeners with a short impression of the meeting.¹²⁷ Among those to do so were Willem Vliegen, Floor Wibaut, NVV-chairman Kupers and AJC-chairman Koos Vorrink. Also interesting was the informal tone of Sluijser's comments about these figures. While he joked that Kupers would chase him if he wouldn't stop talking, he called Wibaut 'our grey champion', whereas he spurred Vorrink to answer his question by telling him 'Koos, go ahead'.¹²⁸ Again, these were minor details, but it may be noted that Sluijser's approach did not only grant the listener at home a more genuine place in the meeting, but that it also established an alternative connection between the party leadership and the broadcasting audience. Still, the question is whether these were haphazard changes or whether this was really part of an emerging pattern. But at the same time we should not forget that the VARA's report from this demonstration was not a live-report, but that it was recorded and broadcast a day later. Although this was a makeshift solution, inadvertently it did allow those ten thousands of demonstrators to take on the guise of the broadcasting audience the next day and to 'attend' this meeting again by listening to the VARA's report from their homes.

8.7 A heated general election (1933)

In the troubled circumstances of the time few people would have been aware of these minor shifts or of the intricate interplay at these meetings between the present public and the absent audience. In the previous years the SDAP had struggled to formulate an answer to the economic crisis and its wavering opposition to the Ruijs de Beerenbrouck government had not only exposed the party's ideological desperation, it had also opened its rank to internal divisions. The previous chapter explained that the party's left flank had grown increasingly hostile to the party's moderate and parliamentary course; and although the SDAP's leadership had tried to keep the opposition

126 Radio report of demonstration The Hague, 8-11-1932, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 253.

127 Ibidem.

128 Ibidem.

on board, eventually these developments had culminated in March 1932 the founding of the breakaway OSP.¹²⁹ Dramatic as these developments were, the SDAP had no time to mourn, since the following months would see a cataclysm of events that would keep raising new and evermore serious concerns. Chief amongst these was the Nazi takeover of Germany, and while the country was holding its breath for what would come next, its nerves were tested by the mutiny on the naval vessel 'De Zeven Provinciën'.¹³⁰ This mutiny was ended with force, and the SDAP was among the organizations which suffered from its backlash as it had failed to condemn the revolt unambiguously. It was against this background that the country was heading for the general election of April 1933. While the SDAP found itself on the receiving end of those parties calling to restore law and order, the party's answer was to declare its loyalty to democracy and to appeal for moderation and restraint instead. At the same time, this did not stop certain SDAP-speakers from lashing out against the party's opponent in the harshest terms.¹³¹

Some of this resonated in broadcasting as well. On the whole, the party's campaign for the 1933 election relied on the same means and methods of the campaign of 1929. So this meant that the SDAP had again issued a series of gramophone records which were meant to be played in public by loudspeaker-trucks; beyond that it had also ordered an impressive quantity of printed matter, including ca. 6 million party manifestoes, and it had chartered the necessary airplane to distribute some of this paperwork from the air.¹³² In preparing for this campaign the SDAP had also asked the VARA to reflect on its party manifesto and the broadcasting association had readily agreed to do so, for instance, on March 8 in its weekly 'woman's hour'.¹³³ A few days earlier the VARA had also presented its audience with a selection of speeches from the SDAP's two-day election conference. This included the introductory speech by Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper, whose opening words – 'Party fellows in this hall! Listeners throughout the country! Friends!' – was a telling proof of his grasp of radio as he managed to embrace the public and the audience with one stroke.¹³⁴ Kleerekoper continued by calling Colijn a 'false prophet', who was out to make use of the current confusion and he criticized his dictatorial leanings ('Heil Colijn' and 'the afterbirth of Mussolini').¹³⁵ On the whole, however, his speech was a positive appeal for confidence and determination and as such it sent a similar signal as the keynote speech of this conference, which was delivered by Johan Willam Albarda. Albarda's speech was broadcast a day later (on Zwertbroek's advice they had again used a recording facility) and it made an urgent appeal for 'self-control' – 'We must prove our self-control!' – and Albarda concluded with a dramatic call – 'for socialism, for democracy' – as the party's battle cry of this election campaign.¹³⁶

But while these reports were part of the regular schedule of the VARA, in the weeks that followed the broadcasting audience would also hear the voices of a number of other SDAP-figures, as part of the arrangement of general election talks. Four years earlier the SDAP had been granted with a total of eleven election talks, this year the number had dropped to six. Although

129 Chapter six, page 196-198.

130 Chapter six, page 199-200.

131 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 90-91.

132 'Ontwerpplan voor de verkiezingsactie 1933', IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 2219a.

133 Text of speech by H. Straalman Kremer, 8-3-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 256.

134 Text of speech A.B. Kleerekoper at party conference SDAP, 5-3-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 256.

135 More explicit references to Nazi-leaders and accusations of the fascist character of the main parties were not uncommon in SDAP-circles during this campaign. Knegtmans, *Socialisme en democratie*, 80 and Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 51.

136 Text of recorded speech J.W. Albarda at party conference SDAP, 8-3-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 256.

the government had briefly considered cancelling these talks altogether, it had decided to go ahead with the arrangement, since it knew that these talks would be scrutinized by the Control Committee beforehand.¹³⁷ Although the Control Committee's inspectors granted the parties a greater latitude than in non-election times, from a democratic point of view this was still highly questionable. Even so, it does explain why the texts of these election talks have survived, and it offers us the chance to take a closer look at the rhetoric of the SDAP's speakers and to ask what this reveals about the party's perception of the broadcasting audience.

'We ask for your help tomorrow'

The list of speakers which the SDAP had put together for this purpose offered a twofold picture. On the one hand it was composed around the party's 'old elephants', Oudegeest, Vliegen and Albarda.¹³⁸ These men were not chosen for their microphone skills, and although each of these men held significant experience with broadcasting, it was Vliegen who was probably considered the better broadcaster of the three. More interesting was the choice of the three speakers who complemented the line-up. The names of two of these have not been mentioned so far. These were Suze Groeneweg, who in 1918 had been the first woman to be elected to Parliament, and Wiebe van der Sluis, who was the party's agricultural expert. However, it was the third name that features prominently in the pages of this book, which makes it all the more remarkable that this figure was asked to deliver one of the SDAP's election talks. Because Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek was not exactly a sympathetic ally of the party leadership, and he had mainly had been invited on the party's executive committee as an attempt to curb his volatile temper. Then again, Zwertbroek's rhetorical qualities were beyond question and if anyone was capable to appeal for support among the party's malcontents, it was Zwertbroek. Indeed, it appears that a similar consideration informed the choice for Van der Sluis and Groeneweg; while the former was meant to address the electorate in the non-urban regions, the latter was meant to appeal to the female parts of the public. While this can be considered as an attempt at, what the previous chapter called, 'stratified electioneering', at the same time the SDAP seemed to attach more weight to the senior voices of Oudegeest, Vliegen and Albarda. Because their talks were planned in the second half of this series. And so, although its choice of speakers indicate that that the SDAP's campaign was targeted to win the votes of the different segments of the electorate, the order of appearance highlights that the party faithful remained the primary focus of the party's efforts.

Perhaps, this should not surprise, but what is interesting is that this dichotomy was also reflected in the rhetorical styles of the different speakers, and, more particularly, that the election talks of the first three speakers revealed a different approach than the talks of the last three speaker. Wiebe van der Sluis, for instance, opened his talk with a simple tale about one-hundred pigs he had bred and which he intended to sell on the market next early morning.¹³⁹ Van der Sluis was himself a farmer's son and in painting three different scenarios he explained his audience the logic of the market, and the fate of his 'grumping little animals', to argue that farmers had been suffering too long under the government's failing agricultural policies. In making this point, Van der Sluis spoke in a most down-to-earth fashion, combining common sense with

137 The Control Committee did summon minor changes in some election talks and it even terminated two broadcasting, since it claimed the speakers departed from the texts they submitted beforehand. More extensive on this Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 140 and 306 e.n. 4.

138 The term 'old elephants' comes from De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 42.

139 Text of election broadcast W. van der Sluis, 28-3-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

peasant wisdom. Although his talk was sprinkled with personal opinions – 'I think', 'I believe', 'I don't know, but I do know', 'I feel', 'I hope', etc – only occasionally did Van der Sluis address his 'honourable listeners' in a direct manner. On the whole, his style of speaking matched his plain and, in his own words, 'tedious' message. This was that the government had time and again failed to solve the problems of the agricultural sector and Van der Sluis made this point by drumming on the same phrase – 'when the government introduced a bill to support') in twelve successive turns. While his talk was devoid of socialist symbolism or lyricism (he referred to his party as 'the s.d.'), this may have been characteristic of his manner of speaking, but it would have helped him as well to appeal to those listeners who were on or beyond the margins of the party's support. Or as Van der Sluis himself concluded his speech: 'We've got to change course. I hope this heartfelt cry will be heard in wide circles.'¹⁴⁰

After the sober pragmatism of Van der Sluis, it was up to Zwertbroek to speak his mind about the state of the country and to call upon his audience to vote for the SDAP. However, quite remarkably, at no point in his talk did Zwertbroek actually use the term 'SDAP', and instead, he claimed to be speaking on behalf of 'the hundred-thousands of unemployed and their relatives', 'the class of the un-propertied' and 'the workers'. His election broadcast launched a scathing attack on the government and the 'ruling, capitalist class', which he held responsible for the 'misery, need and sorrow' of the 'proletariat'.¹⁴¹ While his talk was pervaded with Marxist phraseology, he inserted a Zolaesque 'J'accuse' at the heart of his assault: 'I accuse! – I accuse our present rulers'.¹⁴² What's more, Zwertbroek continued more or less in the same manner and what may be noted was that the style of his talk was strangely at odds with the status of radio as an intermediate between the studio and the living-room. In fact, the text of this talk suggests that Zwertbroek was not so much addressing his public as if he was a guest in their homes, but that he was speaking, instead, as if he was standing on the platform, or better, the barricades. Although his 'Sunday morning talks' learned that Zwertbroek was well capable to adopt a conversational style and a personal perspective (that relied heavily on the 'I' and 'you'), apparently the purpose of this election broadcast was different. It was 'us' and 'them' that formed the main categories of this talk, and by fuelling the opposition between these collectives, it appears that his main aim was to convince the voters on the fringes of the party's left flank that their cause was better served when they joined the ranks of 'us'.

The election broadcast of Suze Groeneweg was informed by the same purpose, albeit with the vital difference that she spoke primarily from a female perspective. Again, this election talk showed a remarkable contrast with the previous talks, most notably in its opening section. Groeneweg began her talk in a light-hearted tone by noting that the larger part of the electorate consisted of women voters: 'with a joke we might say that it will be Women's Day in the Netherlands on April 26. But in these most serious of times we better not make jokes about this.'¹⁴³ After expressing her hope that all women would go out to vote, she continued by giving her audience a detailed and motherly advice about what could be expected on polling day. Her words were aimed to encourage those women who had never voted and who were perhaps insecure about to expect: 'It

¹⁴⁰ Text of election broadcast W. van der Sluis, 28-3-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

¹⁴¹ Text of election broadcast G.J. Zwertbroek, 1-4-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

¹⁴² Ibidem. It was striking that a poster of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), with an image of its party leader Henk Sneevliet and 'De Zeven Provinciën', carried the exact same text 'Ik beschuldig' (I accuse). See Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 53.

¹⁴³ Text of election broadcast S. Groeneweg, 8-4-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

is best to stay calm and quiet, so please don't rush or hurry. Leave home early, and don't forget your glasses.' She also advised to take a careful look at the ballot paper: 'Don't be ashamed if it takes a little longer. Even those who are used to dealing with paperwork, need their time. You can count on it, that I myself for instance shall do the job in the voting booth with careful precision.'¹⁴⁴ While this shows that Groeneweg used her own personal experience to strike a note of sympathy with her public, in the remainder of her speech she reflected on a range of issues (varying from education, marital law, maternal care, labour law, etc.) to promote the SDAP as a party of equality and emancipation. If her election talk was a modest contribution to these causes, at the same time her tone and choice of words make a striking illustration of the depth of the gendered divide that was still running through politics and society.

After these three speakers had addressed the heterogeneous parts of the audience, it was up to the grandfatherly trio of Oudegeest, Vliegen and Albarda to deliver the SDAP's last election broadcasts. On the whole, their three election talks were less interesting than those of their predecessors, not only since Oudegeest, Vliegen and Albarda delivered a more conventional message on behalf of the party as a whole, but also since the straight style of their talks contrasted sharply with the distinctive approach of Van der Sluis, Zwertbroek and Groeneweg. What's more, throughout this campaign the SDAP was besieged from various sides and in response to the many accusations the party's leadership chose to use these last talks to counter some of the most serious misconceptions about the party and to explain its goals and objectives once again. In doing so, they also turned a critical eye on the confessional parties which had governed the country in the last decade and a half. Both Oudegeest and Vliegen insisted that these parties were responsible for the many problems the country was facing, including the perceived crisis of authority for which the SDAP was often held accountable.¹⁴⁵ In facing the broadcasting audience, both Vliegen and Oudegeest adopted an explanatory tone and they made ample use of questions and answers to seek a sense of agreement with their listeners. Although they did occasionally use personal expressions – 'I wish to say something', 'I believe it's good', etc. – the individual listener (the 'you') was largely absent from their talks.¹⁴⁶ Instead their message was primarily aimed towards the collective 'we' of labour supporters, which suggests that Vliegen and Oudegeest found it more important to appeal to this shared identity, than to persuade the individual listeners to vote for the SDAP.

A similar impression is conveyed by Albarda's concluding election talk. Albarda was speaking on the evening before election day, and although it would seem that this was a perfect opportunity to make a final appeal to the group of undecided voters, Albarda held a different opinion. He began his talk by stating that he did not expect to win any new support on the final evening of the campaign, and that he assumed that by now nearly all four million voters would have made up their mind about whom to vote for.¹⁴⁷ So instead, Albarda sought to inspire confidence and faith among his hearers and he delivered an impassioned speech which reflected on the major problems of the time in relation to the higher purpose of socialism. Similar to Vliegen and Oudegeest, Albarda spoke extensively, or almost exclusively about 'we' and 'us' (and to a

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁵ Text of election broadcast J. Oudegeest, 12-4-1933 and text of election broadcast W. Vliegen, 22-4-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

¹⁴⁶ These examples come from Oudegeest's broadcast of April 12. Text of election broadcast Oudegeest, 12-4-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

¹⁴⁷ Text of election broadcast J.W. Albarda, 25-4-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 101.

lesser extent about 'them' and 'they'). While the former two made frequent use of the pronoun 'I', for some reason Albarda used it only twice in the opening sentences of his talk and he was equally sparing in his use of the term 'you'. We can only guess what his reason was for doing so, but it suggests that Albarda chose to tone down his own individuality and the individuality of his hearers as to emphasize that he was speaking on behalf of the labour movement as a whole. Quite crucially, he did speak of 'my party' and 'my word' as if he wanted to stress that he was delivering this election broadcast as the party's official leader. It was only in the concluding part of his talk where he made a direct and 'urgent appeal to them, who have yet to join our party and our army of voters'.¹⁴⁸ After insisting, once more, that a strong SDAP was the best defence against the forces of darkness, Albarda called upon his public for support: 'We ask for your help tomorrow, so that the election result shall yield an impressive testimony of unshaken faith in the future, a testimony of deep-rooted trust in the coming victory of socialism, that is a testimony for freedom, for peace, and for the brotherhood of man.'¹⁴⁹

8.8 A sense of radio fatigue? (1933-1934)

The outcome of the 1933 election revealed a different, more gloomy picture. To be clear, the SDAP did win many votes on April 26, nearly eight-hundred-thousand. But while this was not enough to challenge the RKSP for the status of the largest party in Parliament, more importantly it amounted to a loss of two seats for the SDAP. With its number of MPs falling from 24 to 22, the SDAP was now back to where it had been in 1918. Instead of a testimony of faith in the 'coming victory of socialism', the 1933 election presented the SDAP with a painful reminder that its achievements were lagging behind its rhetoric of a forthcoming triumph. This was not its first set-back and although the SDAP's leadership had so far managed to maintain the support of the larger part of the party faithful, it was increasingly recognized that things needed to change. At the same time, there was still much uncertainty and disagreement about what the party should do to overcome its problems, and whether this required a radical overhaul of its outlook, its strategies or of its acting leadership.¹⁵⁰ As these questions were being discussed in the party hierarchy in the months and years after April 1933, these developments were paralleled by its dealings with broadcasting, where the SDAP and the VARA were forced to carve out a new beginning as well, after first facing a major crisis of a different kind.

The 1933 election was instrumental in this process as well. This election was won by the ARP of Hendrik Colijn and on taking office Colijn promised the country that his government would 'act decisively against extremism, from whatever side it may come' and the VARA would soon find that this promise extended into broadcasting as well.¹⁵¹ The previous chapter explained that it was the new Minister of Internal Affairs, J.A. de Wilde, who was assigned to purge the airwaves of its 'subversive' elements. Still, the basis for this was the promise of his predecessor Reymer, who, in December 1932, had assured the parties in Parliament that he would take 'the necessary measures to ban politics from broadcasting, at least to a certain extent'.¹⁵² Eventually

148 Ibidem.

149 Ibidem.

150 Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 92-95.

151 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 212. See also chapter six, page 200-201.

152 Wijffjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 96.

the formula Reymer came up with formed a patchwork of restrictions, which did not ban all 'politics' from the airwaves, but which did make it ever-more difficult to bring politicians before the microphone or to discuss political subjects. All broadcasting associations were affected by these developments, but not to the same extent. It was the VARA which was hit most strongly and as such it also affected the SDAP. Although the previous chapter showed that the party leadership was not prepared to join the VARA in its protests against the Control Committee's regime, this did little to ease the Control Committee's tightening hold over the party's presence in the airwaves.

In fact, it was the party's *SDAP-quarter* which was the first VARA-programme to fall victim to the new restrictions in broadcasting. On the whole, the Control Committee's regulation stated that 'programmes may not contain an immediate, an indirect or a covered undermining of religion, morality, authority and national strength, nor may programmes be directed at foreign audiences, if it is known that these programmes would have been prohibited in a befriended state. Moreover, announcements of a political nature may only contain a positive statement or an explanation of political principles.' This was quite a mouthful, and while it shows that it was nearly impossible to steer clear of trouble when speaking about politics, among other things it meant that the SDAP's speakers were no longer allowed to criticize the government or to condemn political opponents.¹⁵³ As such, it may not surprise that that the SDAP and the VARA came to agree at an early stage there was no use to pursue these talks in the present circumstances. Even so, we should be cautious to see the Control Committee's rule as the sole factor behind the alterations in the VARA's programming schedule, and the example of the *SDAP-quarter* indicates that it is equally important to consider the party's ambivalent dealings with radio.

Indeed, the suggestion of cancelling these talks was first raised in May 1933, when the VARA's executives came to discuss a recent argument with the SDAP's chairman Oudegeest. The cause of this argument was the text of his *SDAP-quarter*, which Oudegeest had submitted to the Control Committee. However, its inspectors had pressed for so many changes that the party chairman had simply refused to deliver his talk altogether. Reasonable as this may seem, the VARA was greatly annoyed by the affair, not only since it thought Oudegeest should have known that the wordings of his text would provoke this response, but also since it felt that his conduct was dangerous for the VARA.¹⁵⁴ This was not the first time the *SDAP-quarter* was subject of discussion and it was noted earlier that this programme was hardly a proud example of the SDAP's relationship with the VARA, but rather a bleak symbol of their troubled partnership. Still, Oudegeest had come to value the opportunity of these talks and he had declared only recently, in February, that it was important for the SDAP to hold on to these talks, despite the fact they had come under increasing scrutiny by the Control Committee.¹⁵⁵ He had even shared his thoughts on this subject with the broadcasting audience, when he claimed 'it was so pleasant' to have these fourteen-day talks, that he hoped to 'continue our conversation on a regular basis', 'even under these troubling circumstances'.¹⁵⁶ Apparently, some months later Oudegeest and the SDAP's leadership had changed their mind. Although the series would continue for a few months more, eventually it was dropped in September, when Oudegeest delivered his last *SDAP-quarter*.¹⁵⁷

153 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 146.

154 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 19-5-1933, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

155 Minutes meeting executive committee SDAP 25-2-1933, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 87.

156 Text of 'party quarter' J. Oudegeest, 8-3-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 256.

157 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 20-9-1933, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

When reflecting on the end of this party talk, there is no denying that the Control Committee's rule had much to do with this. However, this decision was also shaped by the sense of disappointment in VARA-circles about the perceived lack of impact of broadcasting on the party's overall appeal and electoral results. This subject was discussed weeks after the election, and while one observer noted that the public was losing its interest in broadcasting, and that it was beginning to show a sense of 'radio-fatigue', another argued the VARA should do much more to reach out to people who did not belong to the labour movement yet.¹⁵⁸ According to Meijer Sluijser it was high time to acknowledge that the public was not primarily interested in the spoken or the written word, but that the masses were increasingly craving for sensation and emotion. A similar opinion was voiced by Zwertbroek, who claimed that the regular political talks, such as the *SDAP-quarter*, were 'numbing' the public's interest for politics. He argued it would be better if party leaders would only appear before the microphone if they truly had something important to say, for instance on the grand occasions which marked the labour movement's calendar. While this was part of the reason why he had decided to reduce the overall number of speeches, talks and lectures in the coming year, it also explains why the VARA shed no tears when the *SDAP-quarter* was cut from its schedule.

Then again, the Control Committee's rule did not only offer a legitimate excuse for the VARA. One of the occasions which Zwertbroek did value as a moment for party broadcasting was the yearly Christmas-meeting of the party's Amsterdam federation. The history of this meeting went back to the early 1900s, and the VARA had managed to make itself a part of this tradition by broadcasting the keynote speech by the SDAP's party leader from 1925 onwards. As such, the VARA could rightly claim it had expanded the scope of this meeting from a local event for a limited public to a national occasion for the entire labour movement. In fact, in announcing its report of the 1933 Christmas-meeting, the VARA's programme guide even claimed that it offered 'a word of encouragement (..) for all to whom these dark times offer no consolation'.¹⁵⁹ Having said that, we have also seen that one particular person was less delighted with the VARA's involvement in the event, i.e. the SDAP's party leader Albarda. There were different reasons for this, among which his discomfort with the microphone-setup on stage, but also the Control Committee's influence on what he was and what he was not allowed to say. Still, up until 1933, Albarda had been permitted to send in the outline of his speech only, but things were different this year and Albarda was summoned to send in the full text of his statement he was planning to deliver.¹⁶⁰ Although Albarda complied with this request, somehow it appears he was steering for a head-on confrontation with the Control Committee as well.

The text of Albarda's speech can be found in the Radio Council's archive and nearly half of its pages contains the markings and traces of an inspector's pencil. On the whole, the Control Committee's inspector had no objections to those parts of Albarda's speech which reflected on the difficulties and hardships of the past years in abstract generalities. However, he was far less lenient in his judgement of those sections which referred to political developments in concrete terms. Albarda had realized this would happen, and he aimed to inform his audience he had imposed restrictions on himself, 'since he valued the fellowship with all who hope to join us in

158 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 19-5-1933, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

159 'Kerstvergadering SDAP. Uitzending zondag', *De Radiogids*, 23-12-1933.

160 Schema kerstredevoering J.W. Albarda 25-12-1930, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 244 and schema kerstredevoering J.W. Albarda 25-12-1930, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 254.

their spirit in these hours'.¹⁶¹ He also noted that his moderate words did not match his violent thoughts, but that it was impossible for him to express his 'burning indignation' without being cut off from the air. Although this sounded quite reasonable, the Control Committee's regulations prohibited speakers from discussing these matter in such a forthright fashion. In fact, the remainder of Albarda's speech was hardly the 'positive statement' or 'explanation of political principles' which its rules prescribed. With Albarda criticizing the 'destructive policies' of the Colijn-government and commenting explicitly on the 'appaling' developments in Nazi-Germany, there was not much else the Control Committee could do than to ban large parts of the speech.¹⁶² Albarda, however, refused to accept its verdict and instead of adjusting his text or delivering the shortened, mutilated version before the microphone, he decided to cancel the VARA's broadcast altogether. A few months later he declared that he had not expected these troubles, but somehow this does not seem entirely plausible.¹⁶³ Perhaps this was really Albarda's way to take a stand against the Control Committee. Because not only had he defied the Control Committee by refusing to bow to its requirements, at the same time he was now free to speak frankly again to those party-fellows who were present in the Amsterdam Concert Hall, which was something he would not have regretted.

So, with two distinguished party programmes falling prey to the Control Committee's rule, 1933 was not a good year for party broadcasting. This did not mean the SDAP or party figures were disappearing from the airwaves, since there were still other VARA-programmes which testified, directly or indirectly, of the broadcasting association's ties to the SDAP. Chief amongst these were the series of lectures which reflected on broad questions of political or ideological interest, such as 'Capitalism, socialism and socialisation', 'Democracy and legitimacy', 'Half a century of socialist struggle', or 'Emergency program of the SDAP and NVV'.¹⁶⁴ While these lectures were hosted by a variety of front-rank labour figures, these included the prominent faces from the SDAP's hierarchy as well. Still, these kind of talks held little immediate party political significance and it appears that these were the type of programmes which Zwertbroek thought were 'numbing' the public's interest for politics. But although these lectures were not the most appealing broadcasts, they did pass the scrutiny of the Control Committee's inspectors, which was not unimportant either in the circumstances of the time. And so, this explains why the VARA continued to host these series of lectures throughout 1933 and 1934 and why they became something of a refuge for the SDAP to keep its conversation with the broadcasting audience alive.

But, undoubtedly, the larger story of these years was the culminating conflict between the VARA and the Control Committee. The main characters in this story were the VARA's Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek and Minister de Wilde and chapter six explained that the latter's determination to domesticate the VARA was met by the former's resolve to oppose the forces of oppression. These developments were taking place against the background of the ongoing nazification of Germany and it was explained as well that Zwertbroek got himself tied up in clandestine activities that were aimed to counter this development, both in- and outside the airwaves. At the same time, the VARA was faced with ever-increasing pressures which was symbolized most clearly by the ban on *The Internationale* of October 1933. While this ban was enforced on the explicit demand

161 Text of Christmas speech J.W. Albarda, 24-12-1933, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 264.

162 Ibidem and extensive on this also Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 148-149, 155 and 191.

163 Minutes meeting daily executive committee General Council SDAP and NVV, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1841a.

164 *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1933* and *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1934*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

of Minister de Wilde, later that year De Wilde insisted he would not hesitate to ban the VARA from the airwaves altogether, if it failed to observe the Control Committee's rule wholeheartedly. It was these developments which drove a wedge within the VARA's ranks between the many who thought the risk was too high to defy De Wilde's warning, and the few who saw this as an incentive for further action. With Zwertbroek emerging as a solitary agent of the latter side, this would eventually lead to his dismissal when his VARA-fellows and the SDAP's leadership learned about his clandestine activities in the Netherlands and abroad. And yet, what matters here is the significance of these events for the party's presence in the airwaves. In the past years Zwertbroek had played a crucial role in bringing the SDAP before the microphone. And so, with Zwertbroek gone the question was whether the SDAP and the VARA should try to continue on the same footing, or whether it was time to consider a different approach.

8.9 A 'Listener's-Diary'

Before elaborating on these issues, it is helpful to make a minor detour and to reflect on a remarkable series of articles which were written for the VARA's programme guide between 1933 and 1937.¹⁶⁵ The author of these articles was Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper, whom we have encountered on various moments already, for instance as the SDAP's first delegated member of the VARA's executive committee. Although he had found this a significant ordeal, Kleerekoper had continued to defend the VARA's cause in the following years, both as a journalist, a regular speaker for the VARA and as a member of Parliament for the SDAP. However, in 1929 his life was turned upside down when he suffered a sudden illness, which kept him hospitalized for nearly four years and which left him paralyzed in both legs.¹⁶⁶ It was in these circumstances that his early interest in radio took on a more serious form. In 1933 he began to report on his fascination for broadcasting in his 'Listener's-Diary' (*Luisteraars-Dagboek*) which was published by the VARA's programme guide. What makes these writings so interesting is that they offer a wealth of observations about the 'wonder' of broadcasting, which were not only based on his impressions as a radio listener, but also on his own encounters with the microphone, so as a radio speaker.

Publishing his first entry in July 1933, Kleerekoper opened this series by looking back on his introduction to broadcasting and he confessed that, at the time, he watched radio with 'suspicion' and even 'contempt', and that personally he wanted nothing to do with broadcasting.¹⁶⁷ Although he would come to appreciate the value of radio in the years ahead, he explained it was only after he was discharged from hospital that he came to embrace broadcasting more fully: 'On that wonderful moment when I returned home, and that life was returning in its bright full colours, I heard music. Music like I had not heard in years. (..) On that moment I sealed an unbreakable pact with radio. And as I began my life as a listener, I would soon learn there was more to enjoy than music alone.'¹⁶⁸ A week later he described how radio had helped him to 'reconnect with the outside world' again and how the 'living sound' from outside had been 'an overwhelming

165 The first entry of this diary was published in July 1933 and the last in August 1937. A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Een nieuwe rubriek', *De Radiogids*, 15-7-1933 and A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Afscheid!', *De Radiogids*, 28-8-1937.

166 Philip van Praag, 'Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper (ABK), 1880-1943', *Bulletin Nederlandse Arbeidersbeweging* 15 (1987) 44-54, there 52-53.

167 Kleerekoper, 'Een nieuwe rubriek'.

168 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Hoe ik het leerde', *De Radiogids*, 22-7-1933.

comfort' to him after having spent such a long time on the margins of public life.¹⁶⁹ In the following years Kleerekoper would write ca. two-hundred 'entries' about what had caught his ear, varying from a live relay of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* to the radio coverage of the funeral of Queen Mother Emma.¹⁷⁰ But, inevitably, his 'Listener's-Diary' would also reflect on the shapes of the political in broadcasting and it shows how Kleerekoper treasured radio as a medium of exploration, which allowed its users an unparalleled access to ideas and personalities both in- and outside their own environment.

Among the subjects Kleerekoper reflected on was the sensation of listening to a political speaker within the seclusion of his private quarters and he was most impressed about what he saw as the capacity of radio to convey the personality of a speaker. An interesting example in this respect were his comments about Prime Minister Colijn's radio talks. It was noted already that Colijn was a skilled radio speaker, and Kleerekoper claimed that radio allowed the public to sense Colijn's 'confidence, his calm reasoning, and above all his iron nerves.'¹⁷¹ A few weeks later he used similar wordings to describe Colijn's style of delivery: 'nothing is more uniform and has less variation and change of tone than a talk by Colijn. It is almost completely monotonous, and precisely because of this it is so remarkable that the effect of his words is all the more stronger. (...) The impression of his talks on his audience (..) is one of unbreakable strength, of absolute certainty and of exceptional value.'¹⁷² However, he also thought that Colijn's display of personality could not conceal his lack of political vision, and it was also in this respect that he praised the capacity of radio to expose what was meant to be hidden. In fact, in reflecting on another example, a radio talk by the liberal Minister of Education, H.P. Marchant, Kleerekoper argued that radio had an enormous significance in an 'intimate sense' – 'in my living room, sitting beside my loudspeaker, I was struck by the unspoken emotions of a fellow human being' – and he concluded that it was an invaluable instrument for the people to form an image of the leading personae on the political stage.¹⁷³

But if radio helped Kleerekoper to see the human side of his political opponents, he was even more excited about its potential to reach out to his political allies. At various points throughout these years Kleerekoper reflected on the moment when the VARA had first asked him to deliver a radio talk, as part of its May Day-programme. This was in May 1928, and he confessed that he had only accepted the invitation with 'serious distaste' and 'a bleeding heart', since it meant he would have to miss out on meeting his friends in real life.¹⁷⁴ He also explained that his first impression of the broadcasting studio was not much better, and that it was the opposite of what he had come to appreciate so dearly: 'Instead of a platform, a hall with people and the mysterious atmosphere of a public meeting, there was nothing but a yo-yo (BdJ: the microphone), tied to a rope, hanging from the ceiling (..). Beyond that, there was an empty void, which absorbed me and obliterated me.'¹⁷⁵ Of course, we have read similar words before, but in contrast to those earlier statements, Kleerekoper continued by sharing his thoughts on what had happened next.

169 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Wonderbare zegen', *De Radiogids*, 29-7-1933.

170 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Nog eens: televisie', *De Radiogids*, 23-2-1935 and A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Verschillende stemmen', *De Radiogids*, 7-4-1934.

171 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Het oor wil ook wat hebben', *De Radiogids*, 15-6-1935

172 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Niet ter navolging!', *De Radiogids*, 3-8-1936.

173 Kleerekoper, 'Het oor wil ook wat hebben'.

174 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Een groot gezin', *De Radiogids*, 28-4-1934.

175 Kleerekoper, 'Een nieuwe rubriek'.

Because once he had begun to speak ('with a pounding heart, and a high voice') his imagination took over, which opened him up to a whole new experience: 'the yo-yo on the rope became a mystery which connected me with thousands of hearers in unknown places. I closed my eyes, and saw theirs, in full devotion to the word that entered the chambers of their heart. And suddenly, my sense of alienation turned into the closest intimacy, as if I was speaking face to face with each of my hearers separately.'¹⁷⁶ A few years later he used similar wordings to describe the sensation of speaking to an unseen audience and he even likened this to a 'mystical reality': 'They too are listening in a separate place, each of them alone, or together with their nearest. And they cannot see either. They can only hear. (...) All that is heard is one voice! And so, what emerges, back and forth, is a familiarity, an intimate sphere, as if one had a personal and highly intimate conversation, face to face, with each one of all those ten-thousands listeners separately.'¹⁷⁷ Undoubtedly, this was a highly subjective reading of what was taking place between a speaker and his audience. Still, Kleerekoper argued it was also in keeping with the many letters he received from listeners which were often more 'meaningful' than personal encounters in daily life.¹⁷⁸

For all his admiration of radio, Kleerekoper did harbour some reservations as well, notably about the influence of broadcasting on the fabric of social life. He was most outspoken about this in the third 'entry' of his 'Listener's-Diary', where he identified radio as 'an immediate threat to the need for living contact', and he even labelled this as 'one of the most important questions' which radio raised.¹⁷⁹ This might sound strange in light of what was noted above, but what Kleerekoper referred to was the act of people coming together as a collective entity, for instance to attend a concert or a religious service. After arguing that radio could never offer the same musical or religious experience, he continued by stating that this was a 'thousand times' more so for the spoken word, and again a 'thousand times more so' when it concerned the message of socialism: 'Even though one hears the words of a speaker best in seclusion, how can this match up to what we may experience at a socialist meeting? Is it not the yeast in the bread of life to experience our fellowship in the presence of others, for all humans, but for socialists in particular? (...) The main principle is and must remain, that one should go out, to listen, to sing and to experience together, with others. That may never be suppressed by listening in our private chambers, or we shall become poorer, rather than richer, in mind and spirit.'¹⁸⁰ Kleerekoper returned to this subject on various moments, for instance when he elaborated on the distinctions between mediated and unmediated sound: 'A socialist in particular may never forget that he, who listens alone in his room can never experience what the hearer undergoes, who is part of a listening community. A shared experience is the source of an enormous power.'¹⁸¹ But although these comments contained an undertone of radio criticism, Kleerekoper was absolutely clear that the 'threat' of radio was far outweighed by its positive potential. In fact, he always made sure to follow comments like these with the assertion that radio was, above all, a 'wonderful blessing', since it allowed all those people, who were not able to go out and see the artist or politician in real life, to enjoy these occasions anyway.¹⁸²

176 Ibidem. There was a religious connotation to Kleerekoper's words about the wonder of broadcasting and in the following sentence he quoted the Bible, psalm 19:3-4 'They have no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard'.

177 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Anders.... maar niet minder', *De Radiogids*, 7-9-1935.

178 Kleerekoper, 'Het oor wil ook wat hebben'.

179 Kleerekoper, 'Wonderbare zegen'.

180 Ibidem.

181 A.B. Kleerekoper, "'Mechanisch'", *De Radiogids*, 5-1-1935.

182 Kleerekoper, 'Wonderbare zegen'.

Of course, Kleerekoper himself was all too aware of the limitations to go out and there was no denying that his personal fate coloured his perception of broadcasting. Even so, there was a broader significance to his observations and the question is how this can add to our understanding of the SDAP's dealings with radio. Two things stand out in this respect. The first concerns Kleerekoper's praise of radio as a medium of 'intimacy' and it may be noted that his ideas on this subject reveal a striking resemblance with Jason Loviglio's notion of the 'intimate public'.¹⁸³ But while Loviglio uses this notion to elaborate on the appeal and style of F.D. Roosevelt's 'fireside chats', so far we have found little evidence that the SDAP's leadership was equally interested in the potential of radio to cultivate a similar kind of relationship with the broadcasting audience. This leads to the second point of interest to Kleerekoper's observations. Because we have found ample evidence of the party's commitment to a different kind of 'intimacy', or 'togetherness', in the form of its various meetings, demonstrations and celebrations. Indeed, many of these were broadcast by the VARA as well, which, as we have seen, was equally committed to cultivate the same sense of 'togetherness' through broadcasting. But there was a different side to this as well, and it was Kleerekoper's comments about radio as an 'immediate threat' to 'the need for living contact' which remind of the tensions that were at work between radio and the labour movement's ideal of 'togetherness'. Clearly, this is not our first encounter with these tensions, and it was noted earlier, for instance, that the rhetoric of assembly, which was an intrinsic part of the labour movement's mass demonstrations, was somehow at odds with the use of radio on those same occasions. Beyond that it was also noted that radio brought a new element to these meetings, in the form of the unseen audience at home. But while much of this remained implicit, it was Kleerekoper who was the first to explicitly state that radio formed an 'immediate threat' to the labour movement's culture of assembly. Still, he did not elaborate on these issues any further, at least apart from urging his readers to go out and enjoy the fellowship of others. While this suggests that he expected these tensions to be resolved with the passing of time, it was the party leadership which was pulling the strings in these matters. And so it remains to be seen whether the SDAP would somehow pick up on these issues in the years ahead, and, if so, how its dealings with broadcasting would be affected by it.

8.10 A new beginning? (1934-1935)

It was the SDAP's new party chairman Koos Vorrink who would play a leading role in these developments. In the previous years Vorrink had been in charge of the youth organization AJC and he had won many admirers among its members with his energetic and charismatic appearance and his elevated ideas about the future of socialism. So far, Vorrink had kept a low profile in party circles, but he did have strong ideas about where the SDAP had gone wrong in recent years, since he felt that it had focussed too narrowly on the political and economic side of socialism, and that it had neglected its cultural task. But in 1933 Vorrink thought the time was ripe to join the party's ruling few, after it was announced that Jan Oudegeest would resign from the SDAP's chairmanship. On his appointment in 1934 Vorrink was determined to breathe new life in the party's rank and file and to restore the party's faith in a brighter future. Although his appointment was but one part of the broader process of renewal in which the SDAP was involved, these developments would have a decisive influence as well on the party's relationship with the VARA.

183 Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public*.

In fact, it was explained in chapter six that Vorrink's appointment coincided in a remarkable manner with the dismissal of Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek from the VARA and that Vorrink seized this opportunity to nominate a close friend of his, Arie Pleysier, as the VARA's new broadcasting secretary.¹⁸⁴ Pleysier was a journalist and a writer, who had a background in the labour movement's educational branch.¹⁸⁵ What's more, unlike Zwertbroek, Pleysier was a mild-mannered and a contemplative figure who was far less inclined to stir up conflict. Although the SDAP formed the bedrock of his political persuasion, he was no steeled party activist and he was not the kind of person to seek political influence or power.¹⁸⁶ Above all, Pleysier considered himself as a 'schoolteacher for adults' and while his primary interests lay with the social and cultural side of socialism, these were important reasons why Vorrink deemed him the right figure to steer the VARA in a new direction.¹⁸⁷

Indeed, chapter six showed that Pleysier's entry with the VARA was followed by a popular turn in its programming policies.¹⁸⁸ Among other things this was illustrated by an increase in the VARA's coverage of sports, as well as by the influx of new artists, among which the Jazz-orchestra of Theo Uden Masman, *The Ramblers*.¹⁸⁹ But while these developments have been explored elsewhere, most notably in the VARA's 'biography' of 2009, much less is known about what happened to the party's presence in programmes under Pleysier's command. Of course, this was crucially shaped by the VARA's continuing struggle with the Control Committee and in the previous years the SDAP had also faced increasing pressures to comply to its rule, with its discontinued *SDAP-quarter* and its banned Christmas speech as two telling examples. And so, in early 1934 the SDAP's leadership had come to conclude that it was time for the broadcasting association to develop a better understanding with this body.¹⁹⁰ However, these were long-term processes, which required years, rather than months to materialize. And so, despite the VARA's intentions to ease the Control Committee's hold, it was still faced with a total of 118 and 129 interventions in its programmes throughout 1934 and 1935; this was considerably less than the 199 interventions in the most turbulent year of 1933, but it was higher than the VARA, the Control Committee and all others involved deemed acceptable.¹⁹¹

With this development still pending, the SDAP and the VARA showed little impulse to develop a new approach to party broadcasting. And so, throughout 1934 and 1935 the VARA continued to rely primarily on the series of lectures to bring party leaders before the microphone, among which 'Democracy and dictatorship' (1934), 'Highlights of the parliamentary history of social democracy' (1935) or 'Great democrats' (1935).¹⁹² While the titles of these series mirrored the party's newfound democratic persuasion, such was also the case with the mass demonstration 'For Socialism and Democracy' of September 16, 1934 that was organized by the SDAP and the

184 Chapter six, page 209.

185 J. Vos, 'Arie Pleysier' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (14-11-2016).

186 Vos, 'Arie Pleysier'.

187 This at least is suggested by the title of his unpublished memoirs A. Pleysier, *Schoolmeesters en schriftgeleerden. Memoires van een sociaal-democratische schoolmeester voor volwassenen*, Unpublished memoirs A. Pleysier (1974), Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid, Archive A. Pleysier, Map S, p 36.

188 Chapter six, page 211-213.

189 Wijffes, VARA. *Biografie van een omroep*, 108-112.

190 Chapter six, page 210.

191 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, table 7, 344.

192 VARA *Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1933*; VARA *Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1934* and VARA *Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1935*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

NVV in four cities throughout the country.¹⁹³ This was the kind of occasion the VARA had covered before and apparently this was still possible under the Control Committee's tightened regime. Among the speakers who addressed the audience on this day was Koos Vorrink, the SDAP's freshly appointed chairman.¹⁹⁴ However, a few weeks earlier Vorrink had also delivered another speech for the VARA, and it was this speech which raised the most interesting perspective on the party's dealings with broadcasting in these years.

Our movement is still marching

Vorrink's speech was part of an elaborate series of talks and lectures which the VARA and the SDAP had prepared for the last week of August 1934. That week, it was forty years ago since the SDAP was founded by its 'twelve apostles', among whom Troelstra and Vliegen. To celebrate this occasion the VARA had dedicated a large part of its weekly schedule to the SDAP and it had also provided ample space to the party's representatives to reflect on the party's achievements and hardships throughout the previous four decades. Among those to appear before the VARA-microphone were the familiar figures of Oudegeest, Vliegen, Albarda and Kleerekoper. Also speaking on behalf of the SDAP were Suze Groeneweg and Wiebe van der Sluis, the former about the party's fight for women's rights and the latter about socialism and the agricultural sector. Among the other speakers was also Johan Ankersmit, the editor of *Het Volk*, whose talk explored the party's fate at the polls in relation to the habits of old-time electioneering. While Koos Vorrink addressed the broadcasting audience on August 29th about the labour movement's evolution 'from a political sect into a popular movement', this was not the talk that was referred to above.¹⁹⁵ Because Vorrink had also made his appearance a few days earlier, on August 26th, which was the SDAP actual 'birthday', when he had contributed to the radio play *Veertig jaar ordening* ('Forty years planning'). This play was written for this specific purpose by Arie Pleysier. As such, it did not only offer a first view of his personal take on party broadcasting, it also reminded there were other, more innovative forms than the straight talk – i.e. the lecture, the speech or radio talk – to reflect on party issues in programmes.

To be clear, this was not the first time the VARA had composed a radio play on behalf of the SDAP. Five years earlier the broadcasting association had presented its audience with a radio play – *U bent gewaarschuwd...* ('You have been warned...') – that was part of its election-eve programme for the general election of July 1929. Perhaps to remind, that play explored the political conversation between the various members of a household and it used the family's radio-set to switch between their living room and the VARA-studio from where the other items of this programme were being broadcast. With the members of this family listening, on and off, to these items, the highlight of this play was the election talk by the SDAP's Willem Vliegen, at least if it had not been banned.¹⁹⁶ Still, this was five years ago, and in the intervening years the VARA had staged numerous other radio plays, albeit none with a similar explicit focus on the SDAP.¹⁹⁷ It is not entirely clear why Pleysier chose to reconnect with this particular form, but it seems that it was not only informed by the public's

193 Rob Hartmans, *Vijandige broeders? De Nederlandse sociaal-democratie en het nationaal-socialisme, 1922-1940* (Amsterdam 2012) 169.

194 *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1934*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

195 *Ibidem*.

196 The members of this family would only hear the closing words of this election speech since the authorities had banned Vliegen from speaking on election-eve, since this particular talk was no part of the agreed allocation of election broadcasts. See page 303.

197 Wijffes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 70.

appreciation of these plays or by the VARA's know-how in making these. Because what is interesting is that the notion of 'play' formed an integral element of the cultural conception of socialism which Pleysier and Vorrink were committed to. Among other things this was exemplified by the activities of Vorrink's former AJC (which revelled in folk dancing, amateur theatre and making music), but it was no coincidence either that Pleysier titled his fictional autobiography 'The playing field'.¹⁹⁸ While this might mean that this 1934 radio play was an attempt to bring out the 'playful' element of party politics in broadcasting, there is another element that requires our attention here. Because there was something remarkable about this anniversary play as well, at least when compared to the election play of 1929. When we take a closer look at the makeup and content of the 1934 play we come to see a number of differences, which cast a curious light on some of the things we have read so far.

On the whole, the SDAP's anniversary play told a relatively straightforward story about the founding of the party in 1894 and the hardships throughout the country which had fuelled the party's growth to prominence in the following decades. Still, the structure of this story was less straightforward. Using sound-effects, music and a diversity of voices, this radio play traversed the boundaries of time and space to link a string of historical locations, ranging from a dockyard to a pub, a party meeting and a working-class house.¹⁹⁹ Connecting these locations was an allegoric figure, 'memory', who travelled through history to visit a variety of scenes which showed the SDAP's role in the emancipation of the working-classes. Among these scenes was a meeting of Parliament in October 1908, where Troelstra had spoken out in support of the unemployed and part of his speech was re-enacted by an actor. As the storyteller came towards the end of his historical journey, eventually he arrived in the present time. At that point his role was taken over by a radio reporter of the VARA, who gave an eyewitness account of a mass demonstration in familiar phrases: 'Dear listeners.. our movement is still marching past in powerful waves (..) they are marching in bright spirit in rows of four (..) more than thirty-thousand people must have passed me already...and the end of the procession is still not in sight...'²⁰⁰

Of course, this was a fictional eyewitness account and it was the prelude to the speech by Koos Vorrink which served as the climax of this radio play. However, what's interesting is that Vorrink had actually delivered this speech a few months earlier at a public meeting (on his farewell to the AJC) and that he would re-deliver parts of it for the purpose of this radio play.²⁰¹ As such the broadcasting audience would hear Vorrink speak of the national allegiance of the labour movement – 'National, yes! (..) Our entire being, all our work, our songs, our music, our dancing, our play is rooted in the cultural soil of this country'. What's more, Vorrink also insisted on the labour movement's belief in the power of community and its desire to cooperate – 'From this place of assembly we reach out our hand' – with all those who sought to oppose the enemies of democracy and the enemies of peace, justice and freedom.²⁰² While this shows how this radio play was used to emphasize the SDAP's national and democratic persuasion, this was not its most interesting aspect. What may be noted is that Vorrink's speech was not a radio talk and that his words were not aimed, at least not directly, at the broadcasting audience, but rather at the people who had come together at the meeting, where he had first delivered this speech. Although this

198 A. Pleysier, *De speelweide* (Amsterdam 1938). More extensively on the AJC and its activities J. Meilof, *Een wereld licht en vrij. Het culturele werk van de AJC 1918-1959* (Amsterdam 1999).

199 Text of 'Veertig jaar ordening. Luisterspel door A. Pleysier', 26-8-1934, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 270. The Control Committee had no objections against this radio play being broadcast, apart from two minor sections.

200 Ibidem.

201 *De Radiogids*, 25-8-1934. More extensive on this radio play A. Pleysier, 'Luisterspel. Opgedragen aan de SDAP in Nederland bij haar 40-jarig bestaan door de VARA', *De Radiogids*, 25-8-1934.

202 Text of 'Veertig jaar ordening. Luisterspel door A. Pleysier', 26-8-1934, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 270.

was largely in keeping with Vorrink's bent for public oratory and mass assemblies, in a different way it also marked a curious contrast between this radio play and the 1929 radio play.

Because the 1929 play would have included a talk by Willem Vliegen, had it not been banned. However, other than Vorrink, Vliegen would have delivered a genuine radio talk that was set to come from the VARA's broadcasting studio. Of course, this was part of a more elaborate composition, which saw the family's radio being used as a focal point of their conversation, as well as a means to switch to the other items of the VARA's election-eve programme. But this was five years ago, and in the intervening period many other party leaders had appeared before the VARA-microphone, not only from the VARA's broadcasting studio but also from the platform, while facing crowds of thousands of people. Although it may seem a minor detail that Vorrink's speech in the 1934 anniversary play was not a radio talk but a (re-enacted) public speech, it does somehow remind of the tensions between the workings of radio and the labour movement's culture of assembly which was referred to in the pages above. We should not forget that Vorrink did deliver this speech from the VARA-studio and, moreover, that his talk was part of a sophisticated attempt to use radio to promote the party's cause. As such, this anniversary play seemed to mark a promising start to Pleysier's rule as the VARA's new broadcasting secretary and Vorrink's chairmanship of the SDAP. Then again, it also raises the question whether this change in the oratorical setting of Vliegen's and Vorrink's radio talks had any broader significance, or whether this was merely a trivial detail in the larger order of things.

8.11 A phantom medium? (1935-1937)

There is no better subject to explore these issues than the SDAP's campaign for its Plan of Labour, or 'Plan van de Arbeid'. It was explained in chapter six that this Plan epitomized the party's pursuit of renewal in the 1930s and that it provided the party with the outlook and principles that would guide its actions in the coming decades.²⁰³ Drawn up by the party's scientific bureau, this Plan of Labour offered the party's long-awaited answer to the economic crisis and it laid down a comprehensive programme of public investments and economic reforms. More important for this study was its promotional dimension and it was noted in chapter six as well that the presentation of this Plan was followed by a publicity campaign of an unprecedented scale. Starting in October 1935, this campaign would last until the general election of May 1937, and it would see countless branch meetings, an endless supply of Plan paraphernalia, various mass demonstrations, excessive flag-waving and an infinite stream of pamphlets, posters and other forms of printed matter. While this explains why this campaign has not passed unnoticed in the party's historiography, most historians have described this unparalleled propaganda drive mainly in passing.²⁰⁴ However, in recent years the subject has drawn new interest as well, most notably from the political historian Bernard Rulof, who sees the Plan campaign not only as the culmination of the era of mass politics, but also, and ever more so as a prelude to a new political future.²⁰⁵

203 For instance De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 215-216. Also John Jansen van Galen et. al, *Het moet, het kan! Op voor het Plan! Vijftig jaar Plan van de Arbeid* (Amsterdam 1985). Chapter six, page 207.

204 For instance De Rooy, 'Begeerten en idealen', 44 and Kneegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 102-103.

205 B. Rulof, 'Selling Social Democracy in the Netherlands: Activism and its Sources of Inspiration during the 1930s', *Contemporary European History* 18 (2009) 475-497, Rulof, 'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak', and B. Rulof, 'Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen?', 84-104.

Rulof has written several studies on this subject and, combined, these offer an elaborate insight in the ideas, strategies and sources of inspiration which shaped the Plan campaign. On the whole Rulof argues that this campaign marked a decisive shift in the party's approach to publicity and propaganda in the interwar decades and he highlights, for instance, that its efforts were meant to raise the appeal of the SDAP beyond its traditional rank and file.²⁰⁶ But, in relation to this, he also charts how the campaign's organizers looked towards the lessons of marketing and advertising and how they sought to 'sell' the Plan's message by appealing to the tastes and instincts of the different groups in society.²⁰⁷ In a different way, he also points to the campaign's use of film as a means to spark the attention from those parts of the public which had shown a lukewarm interest in the Plan only.²⁰⁸ While these examples can be seen to epitomize the modern and innovative qualities of the Plan campaign, at the same time it also saw on numerous Plan meetings and Plan demonstrations. Although these were more established forms of politics, it is also in this respect that Rulof stresses the modern ambitions of the Plan campaign and he charts, more particularly, how its organizers sought to move forward from the past by tapping into new ideas and new forms to enhance the collective experience of these events. In fact, it was Koos Vorrink, who played a leading role in these developments, and Rulof traces his influence, among other things, in the so-called 'mass plays' that were dedicated to the Plan and the broader theatrical turn in the form and style of the Plan's meetings and demonstrations.²⁰⁹

We will come back on these subjects in the pages ahead, but what should be noted here is that Rulof's work has a curious blind spot and that it does not in any way reflect on the significance of radio for this campaign. This is certainly remarkable, not only since radio was readily available to the SDAP, but also since it was a most modern means of communication that seemed to suit the purpose of the Plan campaign perfectly. However, Rulof does not only ignore radio, he even claims that the interwar decades were a period 'when politicians were not yet able to enter the living room and to address the individual voter as they would be in later decades after the arrival of television'.²¹⁰ While this raises the question whether he has simply failed to take note of the VARA's contribution to this campaign, or whether broadcasting was perhaps irrelevant to this undertaking, this last option does not seem very plausible. Because it is the media historian and the VARA's 'biographer' Huub Wijfjes, who has argued that radio was really more important for the Plan campaign than has been recognized so far.²¹¹ Although he notes that the SDAP and the VARA were restricted in its efforts by the Control Committee, he also offers a number of examples of how the VARA contributed to this campaign. However, his focus lies primarily with the VARA, the question here is what the broader significance of radio was for the Plan campaign and, moreover, how the campaign's organizers perceived the value of radio, also in relation to the other means of publicity and propaganda. To answer these questions the following pages will first chart how radio was actually used during this campaign. After that these findings will be placed in a broader context, and while this should help to shed new light on the significance of radio in

206 Rulof, 'Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen?', 92-93 and 100-101.

207 Ibidem, 93-97 and Rulof, 'Selling Social Democracy in the Netherlands', 495.

208 Rulof, 'Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen?', 97-100.

209 Rulof, *'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak'*, 199-222.

210 Rulof, *'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak'*, 15. Rulof makes the same point at various places in his book, where he refers to television as the medium which had first opened the domestic sphere to politicians. He also refers to radio twice, both times in passing and without reflecting on the contribution or significance of broadcasting to this campaign. Rulof, *'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak'*, 9-10 and 116.

211 Wijfjes, *VARA. Biografie van een omroep*, 106-107. Also Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 241-244.

relation to the perceived modernity of the Plan campaign, perhaps it might also provide a clue to why Rulof has failed to notice radio in the first place.

'Woman and man, support the Plan!'

Someone who was greatly impressed by the value of radio was Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper. Kleerekoper was not directly involved in the organization of the Plan-campaign, but he did inform the readers of his 'Listener's-Diary' that broadcasting could serve the purpose of this campaign perfectly.²¹² With this Plan the SDAP aimed to appeal to a public which was both large and varied and, in Kleerekoper's eyes, there was no other instrument which was so well suited for this task as radio, since it was both capable of speaking to the multitude and the individual at the same time. And so he claimed that the VARA should acquire a leading role in the Plan-campaign and it was his solid conviction that the VARA would then prove the enormous significance, which broadcasting held to the labour movement.²¹³

Kleerekoper made this statement in October 1935, two weeks before the Plan was officially presented by the SDAP and the NVV from a meeting in Utrecht. In the months before the outline of the Plan-campaign had been discussed by the Central Plan Committee, which included the names of Koos Vorrink, Cornelis Woudenberg and Johan Albarda. In preparing for this unprecedented propaganda crusade this committee had also contacted the VARA and the initial idea was that the broadcasting association might contribute to this campaign with a series of radio plays or a range of talks and lectures that were meant for the different segments of the public.²¹⁴ With the VARA agreeing to join this effort, some of these ideas were actually realized. This was illustrated by the VARA's programming schedules of October and November 1935, which contained various talks and lectures about the economic or political merits of the Plan or the significance of the Plan for students and the wider academic community.²¹⁵ What's more, references to the Plan were also made in programmes or talks which were dealing with different subjects, for instance in a talk by the former party chairman Willem Vliegen about the ten year anniversary of the VARA. After congratulating the VARA with this memorable achievement, Vliegen concluded his speech with a short and simple word of advice to his hearers: 'Woman and man, support the Plan!'²¹⁶

Yet, in their efforts to promote the Plan, the VARA and the SDAP were crucially tied to the Control Committee's restrictions. It was explained above that the Control Committee had tightened its hold over the airwaves since 1933. While this had helped to trigger the downfall of Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, towards the end of 1935 the VARA had managed to establish a more effective, less antagonistic relationship with this body. Although this was a step in the right direction, at least according to those who wanted the VARA to shed its radical streak, in this same period Minister de Wilde had taken subsequent steps to curtail the possibility to discuss politics on the air even further.²¹⁷ Indeed, this did leave a mark on the place of broadcasting in Plan-campaign as well. Although the lectures above were approved by the Control Committee,

212 A.B. Kleerekoper, 'Werk van de eerste rang', *De Radiogids*, 12-10-1935.

213 Ibidem.

214 'Organisatie van de "Plan-actie"', 13-6-1935, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 487a.

215 Texts of lectures J. Tinbergen, 'De economische richtlijnen van het Plan', 27-10-1935 and G. van den Bergh, 'De politieke aspecten van het Plan', 26-10-1935 and S. Kleerekoper, 'De wetenschap, de studenten en het Plan van de Arbeid', 9-11-1935, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 283.

216 Text of speech W.H. Vliegen, 9-11-1935, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 283.

217 Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 238-240.

its inspectors did intervene on other occasions, for instance when Koos Vorrink and Johan Albarda planned to deliver two short propaganda-talks on consecutive Saturday-evenings in November 1935. This caused a minor row with the SDAP, but the Control Committee dismissed its complaints by stating that these talks were uncut party political statements, which did not even reflect on the content of the Plan.²¹⁸ Due to these restrictions, the SDAP and the VARA had to rely on lectures to inform the broadcasting audience about the Plan. All throughout 1936, the VARA would broadcast a total of twelve lectures, each about a different aspect of the Plan, among which its significance for trade and export, the achievements of Plan politics in other countries or the financial underpinning of the Plan.²¹⁹ Since these lectures were recorded, most of these were repeated at some moment or another throughout this or the next year.

Still, there was a lighter touch as well to how the Plan was promoted by the VARA. Most significant in this respect were the two official Plan-songs which were first played by the VARA as part of its 1936 May Day programme, which was largely dedicated to the Plan. The text of these songs had been approved beforehand by the Control Committee and they told a story of darkness and suffering and the arrival of light and hope, of course as a result of the promising prospect which the Plan of Labour offered.²²⁰ A similar tone was struck in the so-called 'Plan May-play', which was sung and performed by large groups of people on the 1st of May at ca. forty different locations throughout the country.²²¹ Parts of this play, the poetic narrative, were broadcast by the VARA in an adapted form in its May Day programme.²²² As various prominent party figures – Vorrink, Vliegen and Kleerekoper – appeared before the VARA-microphone on this same day to deliver their May Day message, each of them touched on the Plan of Labour as well, so similar to the many other party figures who were speaking throughout the country.²²³ What's more, similar to the Plan lectures, the poetic parts of this May-play were recorded by the VARA and they were replayed four months later, in September 1936, on the eve of the series of mass demonstrations which the Central Plan Committee had organized in support of the Plan in eleven cities throughout the country.²²⁴

This overview is not complete, but it does give an adequate picture of how the VARA was involved in this campaign. Although the VARA would have referred to the Plan in other programmes, this would have merely added to the background noise of this campaign. As such it seems hardly justified to claim that radio played a key role in the promotion of the Plan of Labour or to suggest that broadcasting was conducive to the modern and innovative nature of this campaign. In fact, it might even be argued that radio played a more prominent part in the 1934 celebration of the SDAP's forty-year anniversary, in the last week of August of that year, as in the entire campaign for the Plan of Labour. On the former occasion the VARA presented its audience with a total of thirteen talks and lectures by prominent party figures in one week, whereas its output in the entire year of 1936 counted twelve Plan-lectures. Although remarkable, this might explain why radio is largely ignored in the literature about the Plan. However, at

218 Copy of letter Control Committee to Minister of Internal Affairs 5-12-1935, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 80. Also Wijfjes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 241.

219 VARA *Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1936*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

220 Texts of 'Planlied' and 'Voor het Plan, kameraad!' 1-5-1936, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 80.

221 Rulof, *'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak'*, 212.

222 Text of 'Parts of "Plan May-play"' 1-5-1936, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 290.

223 Rulof, *'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak'*, 130-131.

224 Text of 'Parts of "Plan May-play"' 4-9-1936, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 290.

the same time, it does raise the intriguing question why radio held such a modest place in this campaign, and why its organizers did not rely more extensively on the VARA's facilities and expertise. Of course, the beginning of an answer can be found in the Control Committee's regime, which would have surely helped to discourage the SDAP from exploring the possibilities of broadcasting more fully. Still, this had not prevented the SDAP from using broadcasting on earlier occasions. What's more, at this stage the VARA had already begun to change its stance towards the Control Committee, also on the SDAP's instigation, and it would have seemed perfectly reasonable if the party had followed in its footsteps for the sake of the Plan. But for some reason this did not happen. To clarify these issues we should look beyond the Control Committee's influence as well. In doing so, it is useful to take some steps back and to take a closer look at some of the ideas which helped to shape the Plan-campaign, since this should provide a further answer to this question.

The art and politics of celebration

In doing so, we come across two figures whom we have both encountered on several occasions in the pages above and Bernard Rulof has portrayed these figures as the two creative minds behind the Plan-campaign. The first of these was Meijer Sluijser, a journalist and a propagandist, who, among other things, stood at the basis of the recent success of the labour weekly *Vrijheid, Arbeid, Brood* ('Freedom, Labour, Bread').²²⁵ However, Meijer Sluijser was also closely involved with the VARA and we have met him in a previous part of this chapter as the radio reporter who was standing with his microphone 'in the middle of the masses' at the mass demonstrations of September 1930 and November 1932. It was at one of these occasions that Sluijser had spurred Koos Vorrink – 'Koos, go ahead' – to share his impression of the scenes at this meeting with the broadcasting audience.²²⁶ In recent years Sluijser had emerged as one of the earliest and most vocal advocates of plan socialism and, in writing a booklet and several articles about the merits of the Belgian Plan, Sluijser had helped to pave the way for the introduction of a Dutch Plan of Labour. What's more, his interest in these matters was not merely informed by the policies and principles of plan socialism, it was also inspired by his faith in its propaganda value. Because he thought that it could offer a much-needed boost to the labour movement's appeal and that it could break the fatalistic mood which fuelled the threat of fascism and communism.²²⁷

Against this background the question is how Meijer Sluijser thought about the value of radio for the Plan-campaign. An interesting example in this respect is the series of four articles which were written by Meijer Sluijser in early 1936 and which elaborated on his ideas about propaganda and publicity, also in relation to the campaign for Plan of Labour.²²⁸ Yet, perhaps surprisingly, Sluijser referred to radio only once in these writings and merely in passing. He did so in the third article, which reflected more particularly on the meaning of meetings and mass demonstrations for the labour movement. According to Sluijser this was the oldest and most primitive form of propaganda and he claimed that no other means of communication had played such a vital role

225 Rulof, 'Selling Social Democracy in the Netherlands', 483-484. P. van Praag, 'Sluijser, Meijer' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (9-3-2014).

226 Radio report of demonstration The Hague, 8-11-1932, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 253.

227 Rulof, 'Selling Social Democracy in the Netherlands', 484-486.

228 M. Sluijser, 'Om de sleutelpunten der publieke opinie', *De Sociaal-Democraten*, 1-2-1936; M. Sluijser, 'Doeltreffende fotografie van de parlementaire arbeid', *De Sociaal-Democraten*, 15-2-1936; M. Sluijser, 'Over onze demonstraties', *De Sociaal-Democraten*, 29-2-1936 and M. Sluijser, 'Propaganda is een zaak van individueel gedrag', *De Sociaal-Democraten*, 28-3-1936.

in shaping the labour movement's methods of propaganda.²²⁹ However, Sluijser noted as well that technological innovation had changed the function of mass meetings. It was in this light that Sluijser referred to radio – alongside the telegraph, telephone, gramophone records and the rotary press – as one of the means of communication that allowed modern man to reach out to his fellow men far beyond the local and physical boundaries. Indeed, Sluijser was all too aware of this potential, but although he stressed the 'revolutionary impact' of these media, he failed to see this in a positive light. He did not go as far as to dismiss radio or to blame broadcasting for the waning value of the labour movement's mass meetings. Still, with the remainder of his article exploring the need to boost the appeal of these occasions, there was certainly a suggestion pointing in that direction.

In reflecting on these issues Sluijser referred to the notion of 'feestcultuur', or 'celebration culture'.²³⁰ This was the title of a pamphlet which was published a year earlier by the SDAP's and the NVV's Cultural Council and its subtitle explained that it offered 'simple and practical advice for the organization of meetings and festive assemblies'.²³¹ The author of this pamphlet was no one less than Koos Vorrink, the recently appointed party chairman, who is identified by Bernard Rulof as the second architect of the Plan-campaign.²³² Although Vorrink did not mention radio once in the 64 pages that make up this pamphlet, paradoxically it does provide further clues to why broadcasting played such a modest part in the Plan-campaign. To recognize these it is first necessary to highlight some elements from Vorrink's 1933 book (*Om de vrije mens der nieuwe gemeenschap*, 'On the free man of the new community') which formed the cornerstone of his notion of a 'celebration culture'.²³³ Offering a broad overview of his conception of socialism, this book made a spirited appeal for the pursuit of a new socialist culture and a new socialist community. We have already come across this title in the previous chapter, which referred to Vorrink's comments about radio as a 'means of distraction' and a source of 'vulgarity', 'hysteria' and 'sensationalism'.²³⁴ What matters here is that his criticism of broadcasting was not merely informed by his aversion of mass culture in its popular or commercialized form, but that it was also rooted in his more fundamental critique of the role of technology in modern society. So among other things Vorrink argued that technology was a major cause behind the 'disintegration' of 'communal life' and the waning of the 'spirit of fellowship' of the past.²³⁵ What's more, in making such claims Vorrink referred more particularly to the catholic Middle-Ages, which he saw as the last era of Western culture that was founded on an all-pervasive and all-embracing sense of unity.²³⁶ Although his ideal of a 'new community' was firmly based on liberal and modern values, this shows there was an anti-modern side to Vorrink's thinking as well. In fact, it

229 Sluijser, 'Over onze demonstraties', 6.

230 Ibidem, 7.

231 Koos Vorrink, *Feestcultuur. Eenvoudige praktische wenken voor het organiseren van vergaderingen en feestelijke samenkomsten* (Amsterdam 1935).

232 Rulof, 'Selling Social Democracy in the Netherlands', 483.

233 Vorrink, *Om de vrije mens der nieuwe gemeenschap*.

234 Chapter six, page 208. It was noted in chapter six that Vorrink's rejection of broadcasting was not absolute and that he did acknowledge the need for the labour movement to make use of radio and to develop a socialist alternative in broadcasting to undo the wider harmful effects of broadcasting. Above all, however, Vorrink labelled the press, cinema and radio as creations of capitalism and, as such, as means which were intrinsically hostile to his ideal of a new community and a new culture. For instance Vorrink, *Om de vrije mens der nieuwe gemeenschap*, 15.

235 Vorrink, *Om de vrije mens der nieuwe gemeenschap*, 35.

236 For instance Ibidem, 31-33. Vorrink's admiration of the Middle-Ages has been observed by other authors as well, but the anti-modern impulse to his thinking has so far received little attention. Wiedijk, *Koos Vorrink*, 404-405 and Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 95.

appears that this anti-modern impulse was more important to the notion of 'celebration culture' than has been recognized so far and, moreover, that this was exemplified by Vorrink's neglect of radio in his writings about this subject.

With this we return to Vorrink's 1935 pamphlet and his exalted ideas about the importance of a lively 'celebration culture' for the labour movement. On the whole, this document offers a curious taste of Vorrink's thinking and it combines an elevated style and a visionary appeal with an excessive eye for detail and a profound concern for order. In the introduction to this pamphlet Vorrink gave a broad statement about the vital function of celebrations in culture and society and he claimed that the ideal celebration was both the 'visible manifestation' of a 'vibrant community spirit', as well as 'a powerfully flowing source' of fellowship which strengthens the bonds between the participants as 'an organic part of the community'.²³⁷ After explaining the purpose of this text, Vorrink continued by distinguishing between different categories of meetings and celebrations (ranging from the parade to indoor- and outdoor-meetings) and by offering a vast range of guidelines and instructions for the organization of these events: 'no smoking at indoor-meetings', 'no pushing at the toilets', 'sellers of all sorts of merchandise are an element of disorder', 'make sure to avoid interference from street-noise', 'adults are disinclined to sit on the ground', etc.²³⁸ It was this level of detail that makes this pamphlet such a remarkable source. However, what may be noted is that these same details work deceptively and that they distract from the more fundamental convictions which underlay these orders. Although this pamphlet was indeed what its subtitle claimed it to be – a guideline with 'simple and practical advice for the organization of meetings and festive assemblies' –, it was also a testimony of Vorrink's faith in a particular form of public politics. While this faith was partly based on the rejection of alternative forms of politics, it is here that Vorrink's neglect of radio comes into view.

Because it was noted above that Vorrink did not refer to radio or broadcasting once in the pages of this pamphlet.²³⁹ This is at least remarkable. Not so much because we may expect to read about radio in every piece of party literature, but mainly because broadcasting had become an integral part of the labour movement's meetings and demonstrations throughout the previous decade. At one point Vorrink did confess he had 'deliberately decided to ignore all sorts of novelties and possibilities which have been adopted in the labour movement over the past 10 to 15 years'.²⁴⁰ Although there is no proof that Vorrink wrote these words with radio on the back of his mind, his pamphlet does contain various other examples which suggest that broadcasting did represent the opposite to his ideal of a 'celebration culture'. Proving this point is not straightforward, and it requires us to read against the grain of this text. Interesting for instance is what Vorrink wrote about the use of light effects at an indoor-meeting. Stressing the importance of 'living contact' between a speaker and his public, Vorrink rejected the excessive use of these effects: 'For a celebration we mutually need each other and darkening the hall, and not being able to see each other, would break the spirit of celebration and it would also interfere with the natural contact between hall and platform. There is no greater nonsense than a speaker addressing a dark hall, standing in a bright footlight, as it deprives him of every living contact with his audience.'²⁴¹

237 Vorrink, *Feestcultuur*, 6.

238 Ibidem, 45-46 and 51-53.

239 Vorrink made one reference to the VARA in this pamphlet in a caption to an illustrated plan of the VARA's open air summer-festival of 1934. Ibidem, 16.

240 Ibidem, 62.

241 Ibidem, 48-49.

Clearly, there was no immediate connection between the use of radio and the use of light-effects, but the analogy between the 'invisible' audience in both situations is certainly striking. Equally interesting in this respect is what Vorrink claimed about the use of loudspeakers. Although he did not object to this, he urged his readers to be highly cautious with its use: 'at smaller meetings they often spoil the unity of the gathering and they keep listeners from gathering around the speaker and instead they remain scattered, standing or laying, around the area.'²⁴² Again, there is a remarkable analogy to be found between the fragmented and absent nature of the broadcasting audience and the 'scattered' public.

These are but two examples and although this does not add up to an explicit rejection of radio, it does expose some of the hidden and implicit tensions that were at work between Vorrink's ideas about meetings and celebrations and the dynamics of broadcasting. What's more, the examples above focus specifically on the incompatibility between Vorrink's perception of the attending public and the nature of the broadcasting audience, but these tensions were working in other directions as well. What may be noted for instance is that Vorrink's quest for 'unity' resulted in a near absolute fixation on the 'here' and 'now' as the spatiotemporal horizon of these events and, moreover, that this caused him to show a profound distrust towards anything that might break up or interfere with the 'unity' of the event, including mass media which were no immediate part of the occasion. So asking, for instance, why 'the representative officials of the labour movement' should march up front of a parade, Vorrink answered: 'To be "seen" by all means? To be photographed, so that their image will appear in the newspapers? Or perhaps to be cheered by the crowd? Pitiful thoughts of minor spirits. They belong up front, because they are the vanguard of our movement.'²⁴³ While this example shows Vorrink's contempt and distaste for the (potentially disruptive) influence of newspapers and photography, clearly this effect was far greater in the case of radio, which, as a live-medium, would spark an instant shift in the spatiotemporal setting of the event. But while this was something Vorrink chose to ignore, there was a different side to these considerations as well. Because it might be noted that Vorrink's reasoning on this subject was marked by a steady inflation of what may count as a medium. By reflecting on every aspect of meetings (ranging from the flexibility of flagpoles to the physical height of flag bearers and from flowers in the hair of marching girls to the unpleasant smell of damp coats) Vorrink radically expanded the notion of medium to incorporate all those aspects as meaningful elements of what the actual event, as a greater whole, was aimed to represent. Apparently, broadcasting challenged or undermined what Vorrink saw as the essence of the event – i.e. to celebrate and propagate the spirit of fellowship in the co-presence of the members of the community. While this would explain why radio was relegated beyond the margins of his writing, as such it suffered the reverse fate of all those other aspects which were raised to prominence.

Politics as a Gesamtkunstwerk

The question is how these observations can help to shed new light on the place of broadcasting in the Plan-campaign and, in turn, whether this can raise a new perspective on the SDAP's dealing with radio on the longer term. To answer these questions it is necessary to return, once more, to the campaign for the Plan of Labour and to reconsider some of the forms

²⁴² Ibidem, 54.

²⁴³ Ibidem, 15.

that were used in relation to the perceived tensions between broadcasting and the purpose of the Plan meetings and demonstrations. In doing so, the following pages rely primarily on the work of Bernard Rulof, who, as was explained, has portrayed the Plan campaign as a highly modern undertaking which was both an ultimate expression of the era of mass politics as well as a step into the political future. Although Rulof has failed to observe the VARA's contribution to the campaign, his study does provide ample clues to elaborate on these issues. Then again, re-exploring this campaign through the lens of radio will suggest that Rulof's neglect of broadcasting is not unproblematic and, moreover, that it has helped to conceal a side of the campaign which was partly at odds with his assumptions about its modern character.

To catch a glimpse of this we first turn to the Plan-campaign's use of film. Similar to radio, film was a most modern medium and the SDAP had used it on earlier occasions to promote the party's cause.²⁴⁴ Indeed, the organizers of the Plan-campaign aimed to do so as well. Instead of producing a film itself, which was way too costly, the Plan committee decided to buy the rights of a Czechoslovakian production, *Svitani*, to make some adjustments to its narrative and to reissue it under a new Dutch title, *Ochtendgloren* ('Break of Day').²⁴⁵ This film told the story of an unemployed artist and the crisis he and his family faced as a result of his sudden blindness. Most interesting about this film was the final scene that was added by the Plan committee as an alternative ending, so that it would suit the purpose of the campaign. Sending out a message of hope and optimism, this scene depicted a Plan-demonstration that was accompanied by singing and flag-waving and that ended with a speech by the party chairman Koos Vorrink. As a sheer wonder, this happened to be the same moment that the film's protagonist regains his sight and his recovery symbolized the promise of the Plan as a prelude to a brighter future. Although the screenings of the film attracted a substantial audience, according to Rulof the organizers of the campaign were somewhat disappointed about the film's impact, since it failed to attract the interest of non- or lukewarm labour supporters, as they had hoped it would.²⁴⁶

There is a different element that requires our attention here. Because it may be noted that the ending of this film – the scene of a mass demonstration and a speech by Vorrink – was remarkably similar to the ending of the 1934 radio play that was broadcast by the VARA for the SDAP's fortieth anniversary. Perhaps to remind, it was this (1934) radio play that 'travelled' through time to explore the party's history, and that ended in the present age with a radio reporter covering a mass demonstration and, eventually, with Vorrink delivering a speech to a gathered crowd.²⁴⁷ While it was noted there that this marked a curious contrast with an earlier 1929 radio play (which was meant to include a radio-talk from the broadcasting studio), it is even more remarkable that a similar ending was used to incorporate the medium of film in the Plan-campaign. Of course, we know that the party's appreciation for these media was ambivalent, so it might be argued that these parallel endings exemplified the hierarchy of forms that underlay the SDAP's conception of politics and, more particularly, its ideal of 'togetherness' and belief in non-mediated forms of public politics. However, it appears we may take these observations a few steps further. Because there are good reasons to consider these examples as an indication of a fundamental antagonism at the heart of the SDAP's conception of politics. In turn, this leads to

244 Rulof, 'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak', 136.

245 Ibidem and 268-269 and Rulof, 'Hoe het Plan van de Arbeid te verkopen?', 98-99.

246 Ibidem and ibidem.

247 Chapter eight, page 332.

the more radical suggestion that the Plan-campaign was partly designed to remedy or overcome the perceived impact of these media on the labour movement's culture of assembly.

To clarify these points it is necessary to pick up on Bernard Rulof's work and to focus more specifically on his explorations of the party's theatrical turn in the mid-1930s. This development traced back to the mid-1920s when it was increasingly recognized that the appeal of the party's meetings and demonstrations was fading, which, moreover, helped to fuel concerns about the maxim to the party's growth. We have read about these concerns before, but what matters here are the efforts of the party leadership to turn this trend by experimenting with new forms and new routines. Because Rulof explains how this development spurred the 'discovery' of theatre – both as a source of inspiration and as a model in itself – to enhance the overall appeal of these events.²⁴⁸ Among other things this resulted in a renewed attention for the dramatic side of politics and in a greater emphasis on the visual style of mass meetings. However, the most interesting part of this theatrical turn were the so-called 'mass plays', which were tightly scripted and orchestrated mass events and which aspired to a near total fusion of theatre and politics. An example of this was the 'mass play' *Naar den Nieuwen Tijd* ('Towards the New Age'), which was staged in the Amsterdam Olympic Stadium on the 1934 May Day meeting and attended by twenty- to twenty-five thousand people. Combining music, dance, drama, singing and a lot of flag-waving, this play was performed by hundreds of (mostly youthful) labour supporters and it included a short speech by the party chairman Koos Vorrink as well. While all these different elements were meant to represent the higher ideal of socialism, the main purpose of the event was to establish a sense of unity between the spectators and the actors and, as such, to enhance the spirit of togetherness among the labour movement's rank and file. Although this might seem far removed from the party's dilemmas with broadcasting, it is argued here that this theatrical turn was really symptomatic of the party's attempts to ward off the perceived impact of radio and the wider forces of modernity which radio was part of.

What may be noted in this respect is Rulof's occasional reference to the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or 'total work of art', to denote the unifying or totalizing impulse that shaped these events.²⁴⁹ In its most basic form this notion is understood as the intention to integrate different forms of art into one greater whole, but the connotation of this concept is much broader and it has played a critical role in the cultural and political history of modern times.²⁵⁰ Among the authors who have engaged with this concept is David Roberts and his fascinating study provides crucial insight to grasp the contradictions and tensions that were at work at the heart of the idea of the total work of art. What's more, Roberts argues that this search for a new synthesis of the arts was rooted in a fundamental critique of contemporary society and he charts how it shaped the quest for a transformation of society, both in the realm of arts and in the realm of politics. Of course, our interest lies with radio and as such it is interesting to learn that 'the collective dimension of reception' was 'integral to the idea of the total work' and that its function was 'predicated on the overcoming of the (modern) separation of actors and spectators'.²⁵¹ In a later section, Roberts makes a similar point when he states that the idea of the total work of art was tied to 'the topical space of community – or rather the consciousness of its loss in modernity'; while this leads him to

248 Rulof, 'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak', 199–222.

249 Ibidem, 74, 180 and 221.

250 For instance David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (Ithaca, United States 2011) and Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art. From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (London 2007).

251 Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism*, 9–10.

observe a 'perpetual quest for the lost common space of collective participation', he crucially adds that this was 'a phantasm that haunted modern politics no less than modern art'.²⁵² As Roberts insists that the total work of art was recognized as the ultimate means to restore or recover the lost unity of culture and society, against this background we can see why radio figured partly as an antithesis to the SDAP's attempts to enhance the communal spirit of the labour movement.

This does not suggest that the party's rejection of radio was absolute, because it continued to rely on broadcasting in a range of different ways. A most interesting illustration in this respect concerned the party's 'Plan May-play' of May 1936, which was dedicated to the Plan of Labour. To remind, we have already come across this 'mass play' in the pages above, since parts of it were broadcast by the VARA. This may sound strange in light of what is argued here, but it really highlights the party's ambivalent appreciation of radio. Written by Hein Vos and Aar van der Werfhorst, this 'Plan-May play' combined music, singing, dance and speech and it focussed more particularly on the content of the Plan-song. Notably interesting was the opening scene of this play, which saw a number of loudspeakers, scattered across the playfield, producing an enormous cacophony of music, sirens and claxons, while large groups of people were following the noise and crisscrossing the area. It was only after a moment of silence that these people stopped moving and when the first tunes of the Plan-song were heard, the area was taken over by a different group of people who signalled the dawn of a new, brighter age.²⁵³ Of course, this did not amount to an explicit critique or rejection of radio, but based on what we have read so far we may safely consider broadcasting as an integral part of the cacophony of modernity which was staged here. Equally interesting was how this play sought to overcome, what Roberts called, the 'separation of actors and spectators'; in seeking to develop a sense of interactivity this play used a narrator, who asked the different parts of the public – the unemployed, women, adolescents – to answer his questions with a 'yes' or a 'no'. Again, this was no explicit rejection of radio, but it did mark a clear contrast with the (one-way) workings of broadcasting and its dissociated and individualized context of reception. Indeed the purpose of this was to resolve the divide between the active and the passive parts of the event. This was also reflected in the ending of this play, which first saw the narrator asking the public to pledge their allegiance to the labour movement, after which everybody was invited to join in and sing the last couplet of the Plan-song together.²⁵⁴ The VARA had played this song earlier that day, but this could not conceal that its overall contribution to the event was rather limited, certainly when compared to earlier years when it had stood with the microphone 'in the middle of the masses'.

We may not forget that the Control Committee formed an important factor in this development as well. Even so, the Control Committee's influence on broadcasting has been described elsewhere, and so far this chapter has shown that it is equally important to look beyond the rule of this committee and to reconsider the dynamics of the 'pillarized' partnership between the SDAP and the VARA on its own terms. In doing so, the pages above have shown that the Plan-campaign was not only largely in keeping and partly ahead of its times, but that it was also crucially at odds with the times. Key to this was the contradictory place of broadcasting. Although radio was used to promote the Plan-message to the broadcasting audience, in a different and more fundamental way it also formed an antithesis to the quest for community which lay at the

252 Ibidem, 260.

253 Rulof, 'Een leger van priesters voor een heilige zaak', 212.

254 Ibidem.

heart of this campaign. This was closely connected to the party's theatrical turn of these years, which was marked by the pursuit of a sense of togetherness and a retreat into a spatiotemporal order that was partly at odds with the workings of radio. And so, against this background we may note that the Plan-campaign contained an anti-modern side, which was vital to understand its overall makeup and particular forms. What's more, this suggests that it is necessary to adjust the image of this campaign as a thoroughly modern undertaking and to replace it for an understanding which acknowledges a more ambiguous struggle for modernity at the heart of this campaign. Indeed, this implies taking seriously the inherent tensions and contradictions that shaped its hierarchy of forms, chief amongst these the simultaneity of its modern and anti-modern character. Although Bernard Rulof acknowledges that the Plan-campaign was partly designed to overcome the perceived alienation of modern society, the example of radio shows that the implications of this anti-modern impulse were far more profound than he and other historians have recognized so far.²⁵⁵

Most important here is not what this episode tells us about the nature of the Plan-campaign, but rather what it reveals about the SDAP's dealings with radio on the longer term. At this point it may be clear that the Plan-campaign was but one part of a more protracted development which saw the party struggling with the implications of radio in various ways. Looking back on a decade of party broadcasting there is ample evidence of the latent tensions between the party's culture of assembly and the privatized, fragmented nature of broadcasting. What's more, throughout these years we have encountered various party figures who were concerned about the rise of radio and its potential disruptive impact on the party's meetings and demonstrations, among whom Cornelis Werkhoven, Johan Willem Albarda, Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper and Koos Vorrink. It was Vorrink who was most outspoken in his ideas on this subject and, more importantly, who was most firmly convinced of the need to counter this development. Indeed, we have seen how this led to the relegation of radio to the margins of the Plan-campaign and, more generally, to the cultivation of politics as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or a total work of art. While this formed a culmination of a decade of radio reluctance among the party leadership, the following pages will show that it also marked a new beginning to the party's dealings with broadcasting.

8.12 A silent election (1937)

Still, it would take some time before this development would materialize. On the short term the SDAP's main concern was the general election of May 1937. It was explained earlier that the end of the Plan-campaign coincided with the campaign for this general election and the SDAP hoped that its efforts of the past year-and-a-half would boost the party's electoral support. However, leading up to these elections, the signs for the SDAP were not very encouraging. One reason for this was the lack of impact the Plan of Labour had so far had, both in- and outside the labour movement. While this Plan was meant to bridge the SDAP's divide with other parties, with the elections drawing nearer it was increasingly recognized that the Plan was perhaps too ambitious and that it might even prolong the party's isolation in politics.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Ibidem, 271-272.

²⁵⁶ Knegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 102-103.

Looming above this was a concern of a whole different nature. Because the previous years had seen the emergence of the national-socialist NSB ('Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging', National-Socialist Movement) as the leading force of home-grown fascism. Founded in 1931, this 'movement' had caused a minor political earthquake when it had claimed eight percent of the overall votes in the 1935 provincial elections.²⁵⁷ With large parts of the country still suffering from the effects of the economic crisis, the main question was whether the NSB would manage to build on its victory of two years ago. As all the parties took up the struggle against the NSB with grave vigour, the SDAP's Plan of Labour was among the lesser discussed subjects during this campaign.²⁵⁸ However, the NSB's influence on these elections was also felt in a different way. Because ever since the general election of 1925 the main political parties had turned to radio to inform the broadcasting audience about the political state of the country. However, we have seen how fear for political extremism had caused earlier governments to look at broadcasting with serious concern. And so the question was whether the NSB should be included in the allocation of party election broadcasts or whether it should be banned from the airwaves altogether.

Eventually, neither option proved acceptable to the government. It was not only anxious about the potential impact of an NSB election broadcast, it also feared the backlash and turmoil when the NSB was kept from the microphone, while all other parties were allowed to do their say. And so the Colijn government decided to go for the radical third option of keeping all political parties from the airwaves during the election campaign. If this was not enough, the government also pressed the broadcasting associations to be extra cautious in their programmes and to withhold from anything that might cause controversy or conflict with the NSB. Ironically, it was the anti-revolutionary Minister De Wilde (who was behind the tightened restrictions in broadcasting of the past years), who failed to comply to these imperatives. His public speech at a youth rally on May 6 was broadcast by the NCRV and it made a fine piece of party propaganda which would have well suited a proper election broadcast.²⁵⁹ Although this caused some controversy, when the Control Committee asked the VARA whether it thought other parties, including the SDAP, should be offered a chance to reply to De Wilde's speech, the VARA kindly rejected the suggestion.²⁶⁰ It shows that the VARA had come a long way since the days it was charged as the voice of extremism on the air. Apparently, it had now come to agree with the government that in some circumstances silence could be a useful instrument to ward off political extremism.

For those worrying about the rise of the NSB the outcome of the 1937 election offered a temporary relief. Because this party won a 'mere' four percent of the overall vote, which amounted to four seats in Parliament.²⁶¹ Although this was also reassuring for the SDAP, it failed to resolve its disappointment about its own result. Winning a total of twenty-three seats, the SDAP gained one seat only compared to the election of 1933, while it still stayed below the results of twenty-four seats of the 1929- and the 1925-elections. While part of its efforts of the past one-and-a-half year had been aimed at winning support outside the confines of the labour movement, this had hardly paid off either. It was the catholic RKSP which emerged triumphant from the 1937 election, together with the ARP of Prime Minister Colijn. With each winning three seats, this gave these parties a sufficient majority to continue their coalition with the CHU,

257 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 218.

258 Elzinga and Voerman, *Om de stembus*, 62.

259 Wijffes, *Radio onder restrictie*, 246-247.

260 Minutes meeting executive committee VARA 19-5-1937, VARA, inv. nr. 141.2.

261 De Rooy, 'Een zoekende tijd', 218.

as the confessional partnership which had formed the backbone of government politics since 1918. Accordingly, it also kept the SDAP waiting on the side-lines of national politics, precisely where it had been since its founding more than forty years ago.

8.13 The shape of things to come (1937-1940)

Then again, there was no denying that the SDAP was by now a different party. Although its Plan of Labour had failed to deliver on its promise, it had helped to complete the party's transition from a democratically ambivalent workers' party to a democratically committed people's party. Of course, this process had been a long time in the making and its traces can be charted all through the years that are explored in this book. But towards the end of the 1930s other things had changed as well. In the past decade and a half the confessional coalition had collapsed on several occasions, but, so far, the RKSP's doctrine of 'last resort' (which barred it from joining hands with the SDAP) had caused these parties to end up back together again. However, in the previous years the stern, economic policies of Prime Minister Colijn had steadily eroded the RKSP's belief in this coalition. With this long-lasting collaboration on its last legs, chapter six explained that the fourth Colijn-government came to its end in June 1939, when the RKSP withdrew its support for Colijn. While this sealed the fate of this coalition, it also signalled the moment the SDAP had long waited for.²⁶² This time it did not decline the invitation when it was asked to form a government together with representatives of five other parties. It was Johan Willem Albarda and Jan van den Tempel who joined this government in August 1939 as the SDAP's first ministers.²⁶³

This was weeks before Nazi Germany would invade Poland and in the circumstances of the times there was little place for enthusiasm or excitement. Nonetheless, this was a historic occasion as it marked a symbolic end to the SDAP's integration in national politics. The previous chapter showed that a similar process had taken shape in broadcasting and that the VARA's national turn – epitomized by its playing of the national anthem *Wilhelmus* – had helped to pave the way for the SDAP. All this had happened after close consultations between the party and the broadcasting association, which was a definite improvement compared to the Zwertbroek-era. Although the years after 1937 were marked by relative peace and harmony between the SDAP and the VARA, there was one figure who was less happy with the situation, Koos Vorrink. He felt that the VARA enjoyed too much liberty and that it wasted its responsibilities by dealing in the 'vulgarity' and 'narcotics' of popular culture.²⁶⁴ This was an old complaint, but it was surely no coincidence that Vorrink's struggle with the VARA boiled over in the wake of the Plan-campaign. Still, by now this was largely a private feud and it appears that the failing of this campaign had a positive effect as well, in the sense that it caused the SDAP and the VARA to develop a new approach to politics in programmes. This development was still rudimentary, but towards the end of the 1930s there were clear signs that the figure of the radio journalist had entered the political stage and that he would acquire an important role as an intermediate between politicians and the broadcasting audience in the years ahead.

²⁶² Ibidem, 224.

²⁶³ Kneegtmans, 'De jaren 1919-1946', 106-109.

²⁶⁴ Chapter six, page 211-214.

'You? You are one of us, aren't you?'

Little is known about the emergence of political journalism in interwar broadcasting, but it is generally recognized that broadcasting associations began to develop new journalistic forms around the mid-1930s.²⁶⁵ In the pages above we have seen early examples of the VARAs radio reports of mass demonstrations and party meetings, but it was only in these later years that the radio reporter became a more prominent voice in the airwaves. A key example in the VARA's case was a programme which began in October 1936, *Politiek Radio-Journaal* ('Political Radio-Journal'), which provided a weekly overview of the news in national and international politics. This programme was presented by Herman Bernard Wiarda Beckman, the deputy-editor of *Het Volk* and a prominent figure of the SDAP's upcoming generation.²⁶⁶ In recent years Wiarda Beckman had strongly supported the party's national and democratic reorientation and, apparently, he considered his work for the VARA in similar terms. In his opening talk, for instance, he praised the national virtues of common sense and reason as crucial values in the present turbulent times. He also insisted on the need for self-control as a 'democratic duty', and he added that he hoped his talks would help the public 'to meet the requirements of a healthy democracy'.²⁶⁷ Although it was obvious where Wiardi Beckman's party political loyalties lay, the style of these talks was remarkably detached and leaned towards an objective rendering of the facts. While this was partly informed by the need to keep the Control Committee at bay, it also marked a clear difference with earlier times, when the VARA's speakers were prone to mobilize political opinion or to engage in political debate themselves.

Still, this was a slow process and, in this early stage, developments were hardly eye-catching. In the whole of 1938, for instance, there were only a few examples which suggested that anything was changing in the VARA's approach to politics and party politics more particularly. This was a relatively quiet year and while Wiardi Beckman's *Radio Journaal* was taken over by another journalist from *Het Volk*, G. van Overbeek, the VARA welcomed only a handful of SDAP-speakers before the microphone. Among these was Willem Drees, the later Prime Minister, who spoke to congratulate Albarda on his twenty-five years in Parliament.²⁶⁸ More interesting was the form which was chosen to celebrate the same achievement of Jan ter Laan. Instead of a straight talk by a party prominent, the VARA chose to hold an interview with Ter Laan. Although the interview form was not entirely new (the VARA had broadcast interviews before, for instance with sport figures or film actors), this was its first actual political interview.²⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the text of this talk has not survived, but the mere use of this form signalled the direction in which the VARA and the SDAP were moving. But arguably, the most interesting broadcast of 1938 was an eyewitness account by Koos Vorrink from two refugee camps in the North of France (Merlimont and Berck-Plage), where child refugees who had fled the Spanish Civil War were sheltered.²⁷⁰ Again, the text of this report has not survived, but in light of Vorrink's troubled

265 Huub Wijfjes, 'Veelkleurige radiogemeenschappen, 1930-1960' in: Bert Hogenkamp, Sonja de Leeuw and Huub Wijfjes eds., *Een eeuw van beeld en geluid. Cultuurgeschiedenis van radio en televisie in Nederland* (Hilversum 2012) 58-99, there 82-83; Wijfjes, 'Tussen de "avond van Oud" en de "nacht van Schmelzer"', 255 and Wijfjes, *Journalistiek in Nederland, 1850-2000*, 156-157.

266 Johan S. Wijne, 'Wiardi Beckman, Herman Bernard' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek van het Socialisme en de Arbeidersbeweging in Nederland*, <https://socialhistory.org/bwsa> (1-4-2014).

267 Text of *Politiek Radio-Journaal* H.B. Wiardi Beckman 2-10-1936, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 296.

268 *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1938*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

269 For instance *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1934*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

270 *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1938*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

dealings with radio it is certainly remarkable that the party chairman took on the guise of a travelling reporter to call attention to the fate of these children in need. Although this was a one-off experiment, it shows that the journalistic form was also used to experiment with new ways of bringing the party leadership before the microphone.

Yet, it was the VARA's radio reporter F.A. Hof, who emerged throughout 1939 as the main figure behind this development. Different elements came together, for instance, in the series of broadcasts which focussed on the SDAP's and NVV's mass manifestation of April 10, 1939 in The Hague. This demonstration was organized a week before the provincial elections and the VARA had planned to promote the SDAP's case in a number of its programmes, of course only to the extent that the Control Committee would allow it. Because despite its improved relations with this body, the Control Committee was still keeping a close watch on the VARA. Among other things, this was illustrated by its banning of some sections of the VARA's *'Maandrevue'* of March 1939, which was dedicated to this demonstration.²⁷¹ Still, the VARA faced no trouble in planning two reports and one interview about the same occasion. While the first report and the interview were broadcast in the days before the demonstration, the second report was broadcast on the evening of the actual event. This was a recorded eyewitness account by F.A. Hof, which included the opening statements of different speeches and a number of short interviews with prominent figures.²⁷² But it was the interview which was broadcast on April 1st, which offered the most revealing insight in the complicated genesis of a new programmatic form.

This interview was conducted by Hof and he spoke with Coen van der Lende, a prominent NVV-figure, who was involved in the organization of the demonstration. On the whole, their talk was marked by a light-hearted tone, but this playful setting could not conceal that both men still seemed somewhat ill at ease with the interview form. In his opening question Hof asked Van der Lende for instance about the organizational details of the demonstration which 'you' (BdJ: the labour movement) were planning to hold; he was immediately reproved by Van der Lende: 'You? You are one of us, aren't you?'.²⁷³ Later on, Hof used a similar phrase ('where you are going to demonstrate') and after he was told off for the second time for using "you" again, he swiftly conceded 'All right, "we" then'.²⁷⁴ This was meant to produce a comical effect, but it was also part of a broader pattern which exposed the sense of alienation between Hof, as the reporter, and Van der Lende, as a prominent representative of the labour movement. While Hof garnished his questions with feigned naivety, it seems that the aim of this was to explain the workings of the labour movement's mass meetings to those listeners who were less familiar with their conventions and rituals. What's more, in doing so he appeared to make himself a spokesman for people from outside labour circles. Then again, the mocking tone of Van der Lende made it quite clear as well that Hof was not allowed to drift too far off to meet these people and that his professional responsibilities were still primarily defined by his allegiance to the labour movement.

There was no reason for concern, and Hof's subsequent activities as an interviewer throughout 1939 suggest he was well prepared to subordinate his questions to what the figures in front of him were prepared to disclose. Still, at this point the substance of his questions was less important than the mere act of questioning the leadership of the labour movement, which marked a clear break

271 Text of VARA-*Maandrevue* 'Meer werk, meer welvaart' 29-3-1939, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 332.

272 Letter VARA to Control Committee, 5-4-1939, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 332 and 'Reportage van de demonstratie in Den Haag', *De Radiogids*, 8-4-1939.

273 Text of interview F.A. Hof with C. van der Lende, 1-4-1939, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, 2.27.05, inv. nr. 332.

274 Ibidem.

with the monologue which had long dominated the party political approach to broadcasting. In the remainder of this year there were a number of other occasions when Hof asked his questions to SDAP figures. Such was for instance case on the eve of May Day 1939, when he interviewed former party chairman Willem Vliegen about the fifty-year history of May Day.²⁷⁵ A somewhat different approach was chosen on the occasion of the SDAP's forty-five year anniversary, in August 1939, when Hof served as the introductory speaker of an anniversary programme, which included a 'roundtable-conference' with the present and former party-chairmen, among whom Vorrink, Oudegeest and Vliegen.²⁷⁶ At the end of the year a slightly different format was used to look back on the year passing, with Hof interviewing a range of different speakers, among whom Wiardi Beckman, Drees, Van den Tempel and Albarda.²⁷⁷ Although Hof's role remained very modest, it does show that the interview was now an accepted form to bring party leaders before the microphone.

Even so, there was still a long way to go before the senior figures of the party were actually prepared to face an adversarial interviewer or to meet serious scrutiny. Indeed, just how fragile these developments still were, was illustrated by Koos Vorrink, who, towards the end of 1939, agreed to deliver a series of talks for the VARA, together with Wiardi Beckman and one other speaker. The purpose of this series – '*Wat wil de SDAP?*' ('What is the SDAP's aim?') – was explained by Vorrink himself in a short article for the VARA's programme guide. Focussing on the SDAP's 1937 party programme, Vorrink stated that this series would explore the 'great transformation' the party had gone through in recent years. What's more, according to Vorrink there were still many people who failed to grasp the rationale of this process, or who thought it had gone too fast. And so, this was why Vorrink would use every third and final talk about a certain subject to answer questions or comments which listeners were invited to send in.²⁷⁸ Of course, there was nothing revolutionary about answering letters from individual listeners in radio talks, as was illustrated for instance by Zwertbroek's *Sunday-morning talks*. However, this was not something any prominent SDAP-figure had done in the years before. As such, it provided a further example of the shape of things to come, even though Vorrink's initial manner in dealing with these questions suggests he was somewhat reluctant to face the individual listener and, moreover, that he might have preferred to stick to the monologue instead.

In answering the first round of questions, Vorrink responded with ill-disguised impatience. Above all, he used these questions to re-explain the points he had made in earlier talks or to correct some common misunderstandings among the party's supporters. While he reproved one questioner for his apparent inability to adapt to the changing circumstances of the time, he dismissed the question of another correspondent as too simple, and therefore hardly helpful to the purpose of this series.²⁷⁹ Yet, it was the introduction to the second round of questions, which offered the most curious incident. Because Vorrink used the introduction to this talk to voice his frustration about the 'foolish' request of one listener, who had asked him to answer his question with a 'yes' or a 'no'. Vorrink, however, refused to be put on the spot like this and he even blamed the questioner for abusing the opportunity to ask questions: 'The method to which this writer seeks to submit me reminds me of the impatient judge, who refuses to listen to the accused and

275 Text of interview F.A. Hof with W. Vliegen, 29-4-1939, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 333.

276 *VARA Jaarverslag en Omroeprapport 1939*, VARA, inv. nr. 1.

277 Ibidem.

278 K. Vorrink, 'Het beginselprogramma der SDAP', *De Radiogids*, 30-9-1939.

279 Text of '*Wat wil de SDAP?*' K. Vorrink, 20-10-1939, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 340.

who offers him the mere choice between the bullet and the rope.²⁸⁰ Although remarkable, there was a note of irony to these words as well. What's more, Vorrink did show a more sympathetic face, for instance when he thanked another listener for reminding him about the intricacies of the term 'class' or when he used the comments of another questioner to reflect upon the relationship between equality and freedom in the SDAP's conception of politics. Indeed, a similar picture emerges from the third round of questions which Vorrink answered in February 1940, which contained no resentful remarks or comments about his listeners' conduct.

We don't know whether or not this was deliberate or intentional, but this really is not what matters here. Because when looking back on a troubled decade-and-a-half, what seems most important about this series of talks was the mere attempt of the SDAP to meet and listen to the voice of the individual radio listener. In fact, this chapter has shown that, of all party leaders, it was Koos Vorrink who personified the SDAP's ambivalence towards broadcasting most clearly. It was his faith in the power of assembly and his ideal of a gathered crowd that, eventually, helped to push radio towards the margins of the Plan-campaign. Although 1940 was no year to speak about a happy ending, Vorrink's involvement in this series of talks and his renewed acquaintance with the broadcasting audience did form a perfect conclusion to the SDAP's troubled introduction to radio.

280 Text of '*Wat wil de SDAP?*' K. Vorrink, 26-1-1940, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 344.

Part III

'Jazz politics'

Comparison and conclusion

And so, with this we have reached the end of our exploration of the SDAP's and the Labour Party's introduction to radio in the interwar decades. Having charted both parties' involvement with broadcasting from the early 1920s onwards, the previous chapters have shown two widely diverging pictures of how radio found its way into Dutch and British political culture. In both cases this was a complicated process which was met with serious opposition from inhabitants of the political realm, the SDAP and the Labour Party included. Both parties faced entirely different circumstances, and while the former was tied up to the partisan VARA, the latter was forced to navigate between an independent BBC and the interest of its rival parties. As such, the previous chapters offered two equally diverging pictures of both parties' place and role in the evolution of political broadcasting. In the Labour Party's case there was ample conflict and discord about the use of radio for political purposes, but this was not reflected in a similar willingness among those involved to discuss or debate political issues before the radio microphone. If this explains why the Labour Party remained a rare appearance in the airwaves throughout the interwar decades, clearly the same did not apply to the SDAP which was a cornerstone of the VARA's political outlook. In fact, the previous chapter revealed that its spokesmen did not only address the broadcasting audience on numerous occasions throughout the interwar decades (both from in- and from outside the VARA studio), but that the party figured also as a subject of propaganda tunes and radio plays in the VARA's programming output. Although we have found little evidence that the SDAP was any more excited about the prospect of 'Jazz politics' than the Labour Party, it did show that the SDAP's leadership was more receptive to the innovative potential of radio than the Labour Party's.

This, of course, is but a brief summary of what the following pages will explore in more detail. Before doing so, it is helpful to draw attention to some of the parallels which were revealed by the previous chapters as well. Because for all the differences between both cases, these chapters have also learned that the SDAP's and the Labour Party's response to radio was somehow similar, in the sense that both parties' approach to broadcasting was marked by a fundamental ambivalence which grew more serious throughout the 1920s and the 1930s. In the Labour Party's case this was exemplified most clearly by the party's efforts to prevent the BBC from developing parliamentary broadcasting. What's more, this struggle was closely connected to the party's demand for parliamentary control which took centre-stage in the previous part of this study, and it culminated in the mid-1930s when the Labour Party stepped forward to obstruct the BBC's request for a permanent entry to Parliament. This development was interesting in itself (also since it has largely escaped the attention of historians), but what makes it all the more fascinating is the parallel with what was happening in those same years in the Netherlands. The terms and outer manifestation of this development were completely different, but chapter eight showed that the SDAP's campaign for its Plan of Labour was somehow at odds with the workings

of radio. While this was partly shaped by its theatrical turn and its pursuit of a 'celebration culture', what's important here is that it exposed a similar distrust of radio as the Labour Party's efforts to preserve Parliament against the disruptive influence of broadcasting. Although both developments may seem only remotely related at this point, this conclusion will argue instead that these were in fact closely connected and, more particularly, that there was a corresponding logic to these developments which can help to shed new light on the significance of radio as a medium of political change in the interwar decades.

For this purpose it is necessary to return to the early- to mid-1920s as the years that witnessed the emergence of broadcasting in Dutch and British political culture. Of course, radio was essentially the same medium in both countries and as such it posed a similar challenge to the SDAP and the Labour Party's speakers when they were first confronted with its novelty. However, the previous chapters showed that the perception of radio differed greatly between both countries and that its place in political culture was not merely shaped by its medium-specific qualities, but also by the ideas and assumptions about its political value. An interesting illustration of this were the first encounters with the radio microphone, in 1924 and 1925, by the Labour Party's and the SDAP's long-standing party leaders Ramsay MacDonald and Pieter Jelle Troelstra. At the time, both men were widely considered as the foremost political orators of their age, a reputation they had earned by appearing in public and by addressing gatherings and meetings of different shapes and sizes. However, in facing the broadcasting audience for the first time their many years' experience in public speaking suddenly proved a burden. A poignant illustration of this was offered by Ramsay MacDonald's 1924 election speech, which was relayed from an election meeting at Glasgow's City Hall. Chapter seven explained that this was the Labour Party's first-ever election broadcast, but according to the BBC's John Reith the result was 'quite hopeless' and he largely blamed this on the fact that MacDonald treated the radio listener at home as the average member of the crowd that was in front of him. With a later commentator writing of 'a local success, but a national disaster', the example taught the Labour Party a vital lesson about the tensions between the public nature of politics and the private or domestic context of radio. While Ramsay MacDonald would later warn Reith he would 'never broadcast a great stage scene', the experience seems to have had a formative impact on the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting as well, in the sense that it sparked a sense of doubt about the use of radio to broadcast political meetings or events.

Other elements played a role in this as well, chief amongst these John Reith's own ideas about the political purpose of broadcasting. Chapter seven showed that Reith held highly ambitious ideas about the role of radio 'as an integrator of democracy', and while he thought that modern politics was increasingly haunted by the forces of 'division', he was strongly convinced that broadcasting was capable of binding the 'governors and governed, the holders and the sources of power, in a *real* ensemble'.¹ What's more, Reith's ideal of an enlightened democracy was partly based on the rejection of political meetings – with their 'propagandist and partisan display' and 'quasi-theatrical oratory' – and against this background he hailed the potential of radio to establish 'a quiet and secure linkage between the performer or speaker (..) and the individuals of a fireside audience'.² Reith wrote these words in 1927, and it was these kind of ideas which shaped the BBC's early attempts to develop political broadcasting. What's more, chapter seven noted as

1 Reith, 'Broadcasting, the State and the People', 668.

2 Ibidem, 668 and 670.

well that these ambitions with radio were partly in keeping with the Labour Party's ideas about what the newly expanded mass electorate needed. Among other things this was exemplified by Labour's interest in 'the quiet, ordinary citizen who keeps his politics to himself' and its belief that it should adopt 'quieter methods' and 'reasoned arguments' to reach out to the 'silent majority' of voters.³ While this was indicative of the Labour Party's educational ethos, this, in turn, helps to understand why the Labour Party was prone to endorse the BBC's overall conception of broadcasting as an instrument of rational information and reasoned debate. Nonetheless, there was plenty to disagree about, to begin with about the most fundamental question of who was entitled to decide on the subjects, speakers and form of political broadcasting.

In fact, chapter seven showed that the BBC's hope of building an 'enlightened democracy' was long held back by the powers of the day. At the centre of this was the 'ban on controversy' which was imposed by the government to keep the BBC from causing public outcry over any subject of 'political, religious or industrial' interest.⁴ Of course, this could not prevent the BBC was sparking controversy (as was illustrated by the events of the general strike of May 1926), and while this was proof of the BBC's precarious position, it was only in March 1928 that the 'ban on controversy' was lifted, at least partially and provisionally. When this happened it was broadly anticipated that it would finally allow the BBC to move ahead, and to become, as the *Manchester Guardian* put it 'one of the greatest educational forces in the country'. The Labour Party was quick to respond to this move by urging the BBC to offer its facilities to the main parties. Although the Labour leadership had initially welcomed the idea of a series of political discussions on subjects of government policy, it later withdrew its support on the grounds that it feared it would bring 'broadcasting (..) into disrepute', and since it thought that it might end up in an unilluminating display 'of attack and reply in the narrow party sense'. It argued instead that these speeches should be 'only of an expository and constructive character (..) that they should, in fact, be of an educational character in the wide popular view'.⁵ If this was proof of Labour's educational conception of broadcasting, at the same time this did not prevent the Labour leadership from insisting on its interests 'in the narrow party sense' in a different way. Because equally important was the party's demand for strict equality with the other parties. In this it had the Liberals on its side, but with the (Conservative) government demanding a preferential treatment, this exposed the competing claims which underlay the BBC's attempt to bring the parties before the microphone. The BBC was unable to resolve this conflict, and so after years of waiting, the Labour Party (much like everyone else) had to wait a little longer before the Corporation would proceed with its plans for party broadcasting.

But before elaborating on these developments, we should first look towards the SDAP's dealings with broadcasting in the Netherlands, where a different pattern had emerged after Troelstra's first encounter with the radio microphone in September 1925. A few months earlier Florentinus Wibaut had delivered the SDAP's first-ever election broadcast, but it was Troelstra's example which is most interesting here. One reason for this is the striking resemblance with MacDonald's ('disastrous') 1924 election speech, since Troelstra's neglect of the microphone ('the first minute all went well, but, then I got the taste of it, I forgot all about this microphone and began to walk back and forth on the podium') on that occasion was very similar to what

3 As quoted in Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics', 198 and as quoted in Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 122.

4 Chapter seven, page 240-242.

5 Letter Labour Party to J.W. Reith 24-5-1928, WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

had happened to MacDonald. If this was indicative of both men's inexperience with radio, more important was the contrast in the reactions to MacDonald's and Troelstra's dissonant speeches. Because perhaps to remind, chapter eight observed that this caused no backlash in the latter's case. In fact, it was noted that the substance or effectiveness of Troelstra's words seemed far less important than the sheer opportunity which radio offered to the audience to 'attend' this occasion in hearing.⁶ Among other things this was exemplified by the telegrams which were sent to The Hague and which were read out aloud to this party meeting – 'We salute our great party leader as well. We can hear everything!'⁷ A similar tone was struck in the comments about the occasion in *Het Volk* and, combined, it pointed towards a conception of radio as an instrument of mediated togetherness. This was also illustrated by the subsequent developments in the years after 1925. Although the SDAP remained a marginal presence in the airwaves, it was the political meeting which served as the basic model for party broadcasting, as was illustrated for instance by the VARA's coverage of the SDAP's annual Christmas-meeting from 1925 onwards. Indeed, this stood in marked contrast with the consensus which was emerging in Britain where it was felt that these partisan forms of public politics were ill-suited for the quiet setting of the living room.

Then again, this did not mean that the SDAP's leadership was unequivocally pleased with the opportunity radio offered to address a public meeting and the broadcasting audience at the same time. If this helps to explain why the SDAP remained lukewarm to the use of radio for party purposes throughout the second half of the 1920s, it was Johan Willem Albarda, Troelstra's successor, who was the leading character in the story of the party's introduction to broadcasting. Feeling 'handicapped when speaking before the microphone', chapter eight showed that Albarda's reluctance towards radio was a cause of constant strain between the VARA and the SDAP in these years.⁸ It was the general election of 1929 when things came to a head. This was the first election in the Netherlands that saw the use of broadcasting on a large scale and in the run-up to this election the SDAP and the VARA clashed on regular occasion. With Albarda serving as its main target, the VARA's executives (chief amongst these Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek) were greatly displeased when the SDAP's party leader chose to cancel a radio talk since he preferred to address a public meeting. With the VARA condemning the SDAP for neglecting its responsibilities towards the VARA's listeners, the example exposed the tensions between broadcasting and the culture of politics as a public pursuit. Indeed, it was these same tensions that resonated in the SDAP's 1929 election talks. On the whole, there was far less attention for these talks in the Netherlands as in Britain – which in itself is quite remarkable –, but the traces and snippets of comments which have survived indicate that the SDAP's speakers struggled to adjust their tone and choice of words to the domestic setting of radio. These included Johan Willem Albarda, whose election talk was relayed from the east of the country, where he had attended an election meeting. Albarda might have been unlucky to be troubled by technical misfortune, but his decision to stay away from the VARA-studio was also symptomatic of the fledgling status of radio among the party hierarchy.

At the same time the 1929 election campaign did see the use of radio in a different, more interesting manner. Because in the months before the election the VARA had managed to lay its hands on the final evening of this campaign, and it had offered the SDAP to compose a

6 Chapter eight, page 292-293.

7 'Het demonstratief kongres van SDAP en NVV', *Het Volk*, 21-9-1925.

8 Letter SDAP to VARA 12-2-1929, IISH, SDAP, inv. nr. 1961a.

special election-eve programme. Again, consulting with the SDAP over the form and content of this programme proved a contentious affair. However, with the SDAP allowing the VARA some latitude, the broadcasting association came up with the political radio play *U bent gewaarschuwd...* ('You have been warned...'), which offered a fascinating view of the innovative potential of radio. It was explained in chapter eight that this play revolved around the various members of a household, and that the family's radio-set was used in an ingenuous way to link the different elements of the VARA's election-eve programme. Although this play was originally intended to include a radio talk by the SDAP's Willem Vliegen, this talk was banned on the grounds that it would make an extra election talk, that was not part of the agreed rota of talks. Still, there was plenty of talk about the SDAP in this play, with the different members of the family claiming to vote for the party the next day. While the family-theme allowed the VARA to promote a diversified message to the different segments of the audience, the homely setting of this play established a sense of continuity with the domestic context of reception. As such, this 1929 radio play did not only make an interesting departure in the early history of party broadcasting, it also provided a pleasant change from the public speech and straight talk which had so far dominated the party's approach to radio. Even so, it was clear as well that the innovative impulse came from the VARA, and not from the SDAP. In fact, it was only in 1934 that the SDAP and the VARA would take up this form again, and when they did, much had changed, also – or so it appeared – in the party's appreciation of radio.

The Netherlands was not the only country to go to the polls in 1929 and chapter seven showed that the British electorate (including millions of newly enfranchised women) was invited to vote in that same year. What's more, it was the upcoming election of 1929 which caused a temporary relieve in the stalemate between the parties about political broadcasting which had emerged after the 'ban on controversy' had been lifted, and which had prevented the BBC from pursuing its plans for party broadcasting. However, if the VARA's proximity to the SDAP allowed it to come up with the form of a political radio play, the BBC was operating within far more narrow margins, as it had to find a formula which all three parties could agree with. With conflict as the principle that brought these parties together, it was perhaps inevitable that the BBC's first attempt at party broadcasting was cast in the form of a debate – with each party speaker delivering a twenty minute statement – on the subject of the 'De-rating bill'. Although the result did little to redeem the years that were lost – one commentator noted that this debate 'kept the listener looking at the clock to see how near the ordeal was to its end' – its main significance lay in the fact that it formed a historical 'first'. As such, the BBC's priority was to ensure the parties' long-term commitment as to make sure that this debate was followed by a 'second', a 'third' and, hopefully, many more occasions on which the parties would appear before the microphone, perhaps also in other forms than a three-way debate.

Undeniably, it was the series of election talks which formed the highlight of the year in terms of political broadcasting. Chapter seven showed that the Labour Party was determined to make better use of radio during this campaign than it had done in 1924. Although Ramsay MacDonald thought the Labour Party was ill-served with the number of election talks – the 'whole thing has a most unpleasant savour in my nostrils (...) an innocent creature has never been cursed with a more suspicious countenance' – this time he did seek and listen to Reith's advice on how to deliver an adequate radio talk. So speaking from the broadcasting studio, MacDonald's talk was better received than five years earlier, when his speech was relayed from Glasgow's City Hall. However, his voice was hoarse and tired from the many public speeches he had delivered already, and by reverting to, what Reith saw as, a 'declamatory' mode towards the end, his talk was still

marked by the strains and style of the platform orator. While this showed that MacDonald struggled to adjust his manner and rhetoric to the requirements of the microphone, the same did not apply to his Conservative opponent, Stanley Baldwin, whose conversational and personal style was carefully crafted to the domestic setting of radio. Speaking extensively about the 'I' and the 'you', Baldwin's example helped to see where two of the three other Labour speakers went wrong in their election talks. Among other things it was noted that Arthur Henderson's and Margaret Bondfield's talks lacked a personal and persuasive touch, that they were heavy on substance and that they were primarily targeted towards a collective 'we' of established Labour supporters. The final Labour speaker in this series was Philip Snowden and Reith considered him the party's most effective broadcaster, which was partly due to the fact that he did manage to speak to the individual radio listener. Although his example might have helped his fellow party leaders to come to grips with radio, as a cruel twist of fate Snowden would, in a few years' time, use his oratorical skills against the Labour Party instead, also in broadcasting.

What is referred to here is Snowden's controversial role in the aftermath of the collapse of Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government which took office after the 1929 election. As such, it was the Labour government which was required to oversee the BBC's subsequent efforts to develop political broadcasting. So far, the Labour Party had been reluctant to allow the BBC a sense of freedom in this respect, and this was no different during its time in office. Inside the BBC complaints were growing about the limited opportunities to discuss political issues or to bring politicians before the microphone, and in April 1929 this caused the BBC's controversy committee to conclude that these efforts had so far 'tended to discredit politics' and had 'entirely failed to fulfil the expectations from a broadcasting point of view'.⁹ Apparently, the verdict was shared within the BBC's hierarchy, and while this spurred Reith to choose a confrontational strategy with the new Labour government (by offering the press baron Lord Beaverbrook a chance to broadcast his views on the subject of free-trade), he soon found that the Labour government not prepared to allow the BBC a greater latitude: 'The government has no desire to interfere with BBC programmes, but it cannot be disinterested regarding the political use made by it of its opportunities. Just as it supplies Jazz rubbish (not even good Jazz) for popular consumption so, if it is not careful with its politics, it will have to supply Jazz politics. (...) The only way the BBC can protect itself is by planning its political broadcasting in close co-operation with the Parties.'¹⁰ As the BBC was forced to stay within the boundaries that were guarded by the government and the party whips, throughout these years it did organize a number of political debates and series about politically controversial subjects. But not only did this fail to relieve the dissatisfaction within the BBC, it also stirred a growing resentment outside Corporation, i.e. with independent political figures such as Winston Churchill, who felt they were barred from broadcasting since they were operating beyond the reach of the party whips. Even so, in facing these complaints the Labour government felt this was perfectly acceptable. It was Clement Attlee, as the acting Postmaster General, who argued in March 1931 that 'you have to consider not boring your audience and not overdoing the politics', to which he added 'that if you once begin to open the door very widely, the unfortunate listener hears nothing but the advocates of various causes'.¹¹ As reasonable as this may sound, Attlee's comments failed to conceal that the present situation was not in the best

9 Minutes of meeting Controversy committee 19-4-1929, WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/1.

10 'Minute on BBC papers', WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1.

11 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 19-3-1931, 2230, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

interests of the broadcasting audience, but that it was really the result of the excessive demand for control by the government and the party whips. Against this background it was slightly ironic that the Labour Party found itself calling for access to the airwaves in six months' time, also by reiterating some of the claims Attlee had earlier rejected.

At that point in time, the question of 'control' had also emerged high on the agenda of broadcasting in the Netherlands, but here it had been placed in the (non-partisan) hands of the so-called Control Committee. This subject has been explored in the previous part of this study, and the main development of these years was the VARA's promotion to an 'equal' share of the airwaves, which had greatly increased the SDAP's opportunities in broadcasting as well. However, in the previous years the party leadership had shown a lukewarm interest in radio only, and the VARA's promotion did little to change this. An illustration of this was the troubled history of the *SDAP-quarter*, a series of party talks which began (after the SDAP had first declined the VARA's offer) in late 1930. The form of these talks was most basic, a straight talk, and while this series saw a variety of party speakers appearing before the VARA-microphone, it was a cause of endless conflict between the party and the broadcasting association. While this was partly due to the VARA's confrontational stance, it also revolved around the struggle of the party's speakers to adjust their manners to the performative setting of radio. The VARA responded by sending the SDAP a batch of copies of its rules and guidelines for radio speakers ('speak slowly, with a clear voice and clear articulation', 'experience has learned that speeches before an invisible audience lack the inspiration which a visible public exerts', etc.), but this did not end the difficulties over these talks. With various party speakers arriving too late at the VARA studio, one forgetting his appointment altogether and others cancelling their talks due to other obligations, the history of the 'party quarter' revealed a chain of incidents and conflicts. Although there was a sense of futility to all these examples, it showed that the SDAP's leadership was struggling to adjust their schedule and routines to the logistics of broadcasting. If this was proof of the depth of the divide between politics and broadcasting, it also emphasized that party politics was still very much understood as a public pursuit.

In a different way this was also reflected in the SDAP's contribution to the debate about the Control Committee's rule. This body was set up in July 1930 to guard the boundaries of the permissible in broadcasting and the VARA and the SDAP soon found that its rule amounted to a rigid form of censorship. These developments have been explored in an earlier part of this study, but in charting the SDAP's perception of radio as a medium of political publicity and communication, chapter eight shed a new light on this debate as well. Among those to condemn the Control Committee's activities was the SDAP's party leader, Johan Willem Albarda, and while his comments suggested that he saw radio primarily as extension of the platform, he had very little to say about the domestic setting of radio, or its ambiguous status as an intermediate between the public and the private sphere. This was very similar to most of his fellow party leaders, who were prone to defend the freedom of speech in broadcasting, albeit without acknowledging that the private setting of radio gave this question its intricate twist.

There was a broader significance to these observations and chapter eight showed as well that these same tensions were at work in the VARA's coverage of the labour movement's mass demonstrations. Two of these occasions were explored in some detail, the mass demonstrations of September 1930 and November 1932, and it was the VARA's Meijer Sluijser who delivered these reports, albeit in a slightly different way. Because in 1930 Sluijser understood his role as a radio reporter primarily in relation to the people who had come together to demonstrate, as he claimed to be speaking as the 'link' between those 'hundred thousand demonstrators' and the 'thousands' of radio listeners

in their homes.¹² However, in 1932 his role had changed and he now claimed to be acting in the 'spirit' of the audience instead by inviting some of the SDAP's leaders before the microphone. While this can be seen as proof of the (slow, but inevitable) emancipation of the broadcasting audience, at the same time it was noted that the rhetoric of these occasions was crucially at odds with the reality of radio. Among other things this was exemplified by the image of a 'red tidal wave' and the claims of triumph about all those demonstrators who had defied the rainy weather and who had left the seclusion of their home (!) to march together for the higher purpose of socialism. This was in 1930, but similar claims were made in 1932, for example by the SDAP's Jan Oudegeest. His message to the crowd in front of him – 'I greet you, now we are here, one of will and one of mind' – might well be read as a testimony of this ideal of assembly. Oudegeest spoke these words before the VARA- microphone, but he said nothing about radio or the broadcasting audience. However, he did mention the various means of transportation (boats, trains, bicycles) which had brought the people together. Although this was a minor detail only, in a curious way it did expose the ambivalent appreciation of radio in party circles and the problematic status of the absent audience in relation to the present public which would grow more acute in the years to come.

Much of this remained implicit, but it was Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper's 'Listener's-Diary' which offered a more clear-cut view of the ideas which shaped these tensions. Kleerekoper had been involved with the VARA from its earliest emergence and unlike most party figures he had developed a keen eye for the qualities and value of radio. In 1929 this had caused him to praise radio's unprecedented propagandistic power by hailing it (in front of a multitude of confessional members of Parliament) as 'a little devil'. However, chapter eight showed that his life would take a radical turn in that same year, and after being hospitalized for nearly four years, Kleerekoper came to appreciate radio in rather different ways. Among other things, his 'Listener's Diary' showed how radio had helped him to reconnect with the outside world after his illness. Still, most significant for us were Kleerekoper's comments about radio as a medium of 'intimacy' and his ideas about the value of radio in relation to other, public forms of 'intimacy' or togetherness. Because on the one hand Kleerekoper cherished the capacity of radio to establish a direct, communicative relationship between a speaker and a listener, and he noted that it allowed the audience to grasp the personality of the figure (or politician) speaking to them. On the other hand Kleerekoper also insisted that 'the main principle is and must remain, that one should go out, to listen, to sing and to experience together, with others' and he kept reminding his readers about the need 'to experience our fellowship in the presence of others'.¹³ At one point he even went as far to label radio 'an immediate threat to the need for living contact'. Although his 'Listener's-Diary' marked a positive contrast with the troubled perception of broadcasting among the party hierarchy, it also indicated that Kleerekoper was equally sensitive to the radio-hostile element which underlay the labour movement's ideal and culture of assembly. In fact, Kleerekoper was the first to express his concerns on this subject in such a straightforward manner and, as such, chapter eight showed that his comments help to shed a new light as well on the SDAP's dealings with radio in the years after 1935.

By that time there had been ample hostilities between the Labour Party and the BBC and although these revolved for the larger part around the question of ultimate responsibility in broadcasting, in time this would also show that the Labour Party held similar concerns about the

12 Sluijser, 'Met de microfoon midden in de massa!', 20-9-1930.

13 Kleerekoper, 'Wonderbare zegen', 29-7-1933.

influence of radio on the primacy of assembly, albeit of a different (parliamentary) kind. Clearly, the Labour Party's relationship with the BBC was never uncomplicated, but it was the events which followed the Labour government's fall in 1931 that sparked a new phase in Labour's struggle with the Corporation. This was partly caused by the BBC's conduct, or more precisely by the statement it sent out on the eve before the election to urge its audience to go out and vote. While Reith expected that this message would upset the Labour Party, the Labour leadership did indeed detect a note of favouritism in the wordings of this statement for the national government. At the same time, the Labour Party forgot to take advantage of its own opportunities in broadcasting and it was explained in chapter seven that Labour's three election talks raised serious criticism from the press. However, it was Philip Snowden's election talk that stirred up most controversy and in condemning his former party ('this is not Socialism, it is Bolshevism run mad') he helped to seal Labour's lapse in Parliament (falling from 287 to a mere 52 seats) in a Shakespearean manner. This was an enormous setback, also in relation to its position in broadcasting. Although the Labour Party was still the second party in Parliament, in the years after 1931 the Labour leadership grew increasingly convinced that its rights in broadcasting (as the official Opposition) were insufficiently recognized by the BBC and the national government. In fact, the second part of this study showed that this would lead to a steady culmination in Labour's demand for parliamentary control – 'we (..) are the supreme authority' –, and the previous chapter revealed that a similar struggle was fought out over the terms of political broadcasting. So clashing with the BBC on a regular basis, the Labour Party claimed full control over the choice of speakers, subjects and the form of political broadcasting. While this was crucially informed by Labour's faith in the primacy of Parliament, eventually it would also cause the Labour Party to veto the BBC's request for access to Parliament.

An interesting prelude to this was Clement Attlee's involvement in the BBC's *The Week in Westminster*, the series of talks about the weekly events in Parliament that was hosted by a rota of MPs from the main political parties. So far, the BBC's attempts to commit the parties to its plans for political broadcasting had yielded little result, but somehow these troubles did not affect *The Week in Westminster*. For the BBC this was an important programme, because in seeking to serve as an 'integrator of democracy', it was vital for the Corporation to inform its audience about what was going on in Parliament, at the heart of the political nation. While using MPs seemed a perfect way to bring the House of Commons into the homes of millions of Britons, another advantage was that it helped to create significant goodwill for the BBC in Parliament. Yet, there was a drawback to this as well, since MPs were not necessarily good broadcasters. What's more, they were not very receptive either to the BBC's instructions or advice. In Clement Attlee's case this was reflected in his correspondence with the programme's producer. When the latter invited Attlee to adopt a more personal and impressionistic approach, the Labour leader responded as if the BBC had asked him for permission to change the overall makeup of this programme. This might explain why these suggestions failed to improve Attlee's contribution to *The Week in Westminster* – 'starting well, and finishing well below power'.¹⁴ However, what was most important about this exchange was not its immediate outcome, but rather the underlying assumption of authority. Although Attlee answered in a most reasonable fashion, his response was symptomatic of his party's stance that the BBC was ultimately tied to the parties in Parliament. When Attlee emerged a few years as the Labour Party's new party leader, the BBC would find

14 Letter Director of Talks to Assistant Controller of Programmes 28-1-1935, WAC, inv. nr. R51/115/1.

that his involvement with *The Week in Westminster* had made him all the more reluctant to allow the Corporation a greater latitude in political and in parliamentary broadcasting.

Inside the BBC these developments were subject of continuous discontent and it was increasingly recognized that the parties' influence in broadcasting was thwarting the Corporation's ambitions of building an 'enlightened democracy'. Among other things this was exemplified by the succession of memos on this subject which circulated among the BBC's executives and the terms that were used – 'boring', 'platitudinous', 'embarrassing', etc. – to condemn the limited value of its political programmes. Although this situation was largely blamed on 'the perverted values of the party game', it was increasingly recognized as well that the Corporation ought to do more to find its way around the party whips, for instance by relying on its own reporters, instead of MPs. Yet, this was hardly straightforward either, as was illustrated by the conflict which unfolded between the Labour Party and the BBC in the mid-1930s over the latter's attempts to improve its parliamentary reporting. This was a fundamental struggle which went to the heart of the question about the limits of control and independence between politics and broadcasting. Just how delicate these things were, was illustrated by the angry reaction of the Labour MP Morgan Jones, when he learned that a BBC reporter had commented upon his parliamentary demeanour. His exchange with the BBC – 'Many of my colleagues, as well as myself find it hard to tolerate some of the gratuitously offensive comments by some of these gentlemen' or 'It is not a nice thing for anyone to be held up to one's friends in various parts of the country as a ranting raving fool' – offered a rare insight in the tensions and sensitivities that were at work between the Labour Party and the Corporation.¹⁵ Beyond that it also spelled trouble for the BBC on the longer term, since it had its eyes set on the upcoming Ullswater inquiry to appeal for permanent access to the House of Commons' galleries. Indeed, in doing so, it was met with opposition from the Labour Party, which did not only question the BBC's claim to impartiality, but which also made a larger point about the need to uphold the primacy of Parliament against the disruptive influence of radio. It was Clement Attlee who argued that Parliament should remain 'the focal point of politics in this country', and although this was no different from what the BBC wanted, it caused Attlee and his party to prevent the BBC's reporters from acquiring a permanent seat in the galleries of Parliament.

And so, with this the struggle between the Labour Party and the BBC had reached a most symbolic stalemate. Still, when reflecting on these issues it is equally important to acknowledge that the mid-1930s did not only witness the culmination of this conflict over the place of Parliament in broadcasting, but that it also saw a cautious improvement in the Labour Party's grasp of the medium-specific qualities of radio. This, at least, was suggested by the example of Labour's 1935 election talks, which was the first occasion on which the Labour Party's election broadcasts were met with genuine praise from the press. One speaker in particular made a positive impression, Herbert Morrison, which had much to do with his conversational and personal style of delivery. In claiming to speak 'as one citizen to another', Morrison made frequent use of the 'I' and 'you', and it gave his talk a persuasive touch which had been missing from Labour's earlier election broadcasts. Among the other Labour speakers was also Clement Attlee. His election broadcast did not receive the same approval as Morrison's, but a closer look at the text of his talk revealed that his message was carefully attuned to the family-setting of radio and, moreover, that he partly

15 Letter M. Jones to J. Reith 29-11-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561 and Letter M. Jones to J. Reith 10-12-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561.

drew on his experience as a contributor to *The Week in Westminster*. Although the response to the two other Labour speakers was less favourable, combined the impression of Labour's four election talks suggested that the party had made a decisive step in its understanding of radio as a homely, individual and intimate medium, and that it was steadily coming to terms with the public's new presence as the broadcasting audience.

Chapter seven noted that this is also recognized by Laura Beers, who sees this upturn in Labour's electoral use of radio as part of a broader shift in the party's media strategies and as proof of its improving relationship with the BBC. And yet, chapter seven noted as well that Beers has not only failed to observe Labour's attempts to impose the primacy of Parliament upon the BBC – 'we (..) are the supreme authority' – , but that she has also failed to notice Labour's struggle with the BBC over the terms of access to Parliament for the Corporation's reporters. Although Beers is in good company here (since these issues have largely escaped the attention of other historians as well), based on everything we have read so far it needs little explanation that these latter turn of events was, on the whole, far more important for Labour's dealings with broadcasting than the relative success of its 1935 election broadcasts. But while this raises the question of what the broader significance of this development was in relation to the role of radio as a medium of political change, to answer this question it is equally important to take note of what was happening between the SDAP and the VARA throughout these same years. Because despite all the differences between the SDAP's and the Labour Party's fortunes in broadcasting, chapter eight showed that the SDAP's dealings with radio was shaped by a similar duality, in the sense that its leadership did not only come to appreciate the positive potential of radio, but that it also grew increasingly concerned about its negative impact. What's more, these concerns were crucially informed by the labour movement's ideal and culture of assembly, which above all was exemplified by the party's theatrical turn and its campaign for its Plan of Labour. Although the outward appearance of both developments differed greatly, a closer look at both cases indicates there was a corresponding logic to the attempts of both parties to preserve the primacy of assembly against the influence of broadcasting. While this has largely gone unnoticed to Dutch and British historians alike, it is this correspondence between these highly contrasting cases which opens up a new perspective on the significance of radio to interwar political culture.

But before elaborating on these issues it is necessary to return to the main events which shaped the SDAP's involvement with broadcasting up until the mid-1930s. It was the general election of 1933 that marked a key moment in this development. This was the third election in the Netherlands which saw the use of radio as an instrument of electioneering. The SDAP was granted with six election talks, and chapter eight showed that its strategy in broadcasting was twofold, in the sense that its first three talks were targeted at specific subgroups or segments of the broadcasting audience (or electorate), whereas its final three talks were aimed at the party's established supporters. If this showed the SDAP had made a serious attempt to make the most of its election talks, it was the first three talks which made the most interesting examples. Delivered by Wiebe van der Sluis, Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek and Suze Groeneweg, these talks were targeted resp. at agricultural workers, voters on the fringes of the party and the female part of the electorate. This was also reflected in their rhetorical style, with Van der Sluis speaking in a most down-to-earth fashion, Zwertbroek delivering an inflammatory talk and Groeneweg offering an encouraging and motherly word to her listeners. In contrast, the three other speakers (Oudegeest, Vliegen and Albarda) delivered a more straightforward, conventional message and they addressed the audience primarily as members of the established leadership of the party. This was most clearly exemplified by Albarda's talk, which did not only differ significantly from

the first three 'stratified' talks, but which also revealed a sharp contrast, for example, with the conversational and personal style that Attlee and Morrison would turn to a few years later. In fact, Albarda used the personal pronoun 'I' only twice throughout his entire talk. In insisting that he was not seeking to win votes, apparently his purpose was not to persuade those undecided listeners, but rather to strengthen the shared conviction and identity of his anticipated audience. Although remarkable, this was also closely in keeping with how the SDAP had used broadcasting so far, which, above all, was dominated by the perception of radio as a means of togetherness. At the same time, chapter eight offered various examples which exposed the hidden tensions between the workings of radio and this ideal of togetherness, and with the party leadership growing increasingly concerned about the impact of these tensions, the following years would see (albeit, not visibly) a crucial change in the party's stance towards radio.

What is referred to here is the party's pursuit of a 'celebration culture' which formed a vital part of its campaign for its Plan of Labour that was running from October 1935 until May 1937. Preceding this were a number of other developments between the SDAP and the VARA. Among these was the radicalization and dismissal of Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, the VARA's broadcasting secretary. This conflict was a long time in the making, but it was the Control Committee's tightening rule (and his knack for insubordination) which eventually led to his departure. Zwertbroek was not the only victim of this development, and among the programmes which were discontinued in 1933 were the SDAP's 'party quarter', as well as the annual speech by the SDAP's party leader from the its Christmas-meeting. Although this was greatly upsetting to the SDAP and the VARA, chapter eight showed as well that both organizations came to question the political value of radio throughout these same years, and it was generally felt that it had failed to deliver the political gains which had been hoped for. With one observer noting a sense of 'radio-fatigue' among the labour movement's rank and file, among those to ponder on the future of broadcasting was also Koos Vorrink, the SDAP's new party chairman, who had highly ambitious plans to fight the labour movement's malaise. As part of that he would also use his influence to have Arie Pleysier, a friend of his, appointed as the VARA's new broadcasting secretary. As both men were seeking to lead their organization in a new direction, they also collaborated on certain occasions. An interesting example in this respect was the programme which the VARA had put together for the last week of August 1934 to celebrate the SDAP's forty-year anniversary. The highlight of this week was the political radio play *Veertig jaar ordening* ('Forty years planning'), which was written by Pleysier and which included a speech by Koos Vorrink. While the use of this form was indicative of Vorrink's and Pleysier's cultural conception of socialism, the most significant aspect of this play was the oratorical setting of Vorrink's speech. Because five years earlier the VARA had also composed a similar radio play (on the occasion of the 1929 elections), and while that play should have included a studio talk by the SDAP's Willem Vliegen, the centrepiece of this anniversary play was a (re-enacted) speech by Vorrink from a public location. Although this was a minor detail only, it did remarkably point ahead to where things were moving in the SDAP's dealing with radio under Vorrink's chairmanship.

At the centre of this was the party's campaign for the Plan of Labour. Chapter eight explained that this Plan is broadly recognized as a vehicle and a symbol of the party's modernization push of the mid-1930s and in a similar way this propaganda campaign has been identified as the ultimate expression of the age of mass politics and, moreover, as a step into the political future. However, against this background it was noted as well that radio (as a most modern means of communication) held a rather ambiguous place in the Plan-historiography, with the main author on this subject (Bernard Rulof) ignoring its contribution altogether, and another author

(Huub Wijfjes) insisting on its significance. And so, in asking what the actual importance of radio was to the Plan-campaign, chapter eight found that radio held a far greater significance to this undertaking than any author has recognized so far, albeit not in a positive, but rather in a negative sense. Proving this point was not straightforward, and it required a reading between and against the lines of some of the key texts and statements of the Plan-campaign's main architects through the lens of radio. Among these was the series of articles about the labour movement's methods of publicity and propaganda by Meijer Sluijser. Although Sluijser had been closely involved with broadcasting (also as the VARA's reporter covering the mass demonstrations of 1930 and 1932), he only referred to radio once, that is by hinting at its problematic influence on the labour movement's culture of assembly. What's more, in doing so, Sluijser did refer to Vorrink's writing on 'celebration culture'. This was the title of a pamphlet which Vorrink had written on behalf of the SDAP's and the NVV's Cultural Council and which offered 'simple and practical advice for the organization of meetings and festive assemblies'.¹⁶ Although this pamphlet made no mention of radio whatsoever (at least, not explicitly), Vorrink had voiced his reservations about radio in an earlier work, which offered a more clear-cut view of his aversion of mass culture in its popular or commercialized form and of his critique of the role of technology in modern society. As such, chapter eight argued that Vorrink's neglect of radio was really symptomatic of his negative perception of radio as a medium that stood in opposition to his ideal of (unmediated) togetherness.

This was also reflected in the makeup and purpose of the Plan-campaign. Although radio was used on several occasions to spread the Plan's message, chapter eight showed that the campaign's pursuit of a 'community spirit' or 'celebration culture' was crucially shaped by a desire to overcome or undo the influence of radio, and the wider forces of modernity it was seen to be a part of. A striking example in this respect was the campaign's use of film, as another most modern means of communication. Perhaps to remind, this film had a similar ending as the 1934 radio play, which was mentioned above and, as such, it propagated a similar belief in the higher value of an unmediated form of togetherness within the mediated setting of film. As paradoxical as this may sound, it was argued as well that these discrepancy was tied up to a broader development which saw a theatrical turn in the party's public manifestations around the mid-1930s. Again, this development was crucially spurred by the ideas and influence of Koos Vorrink and while this theatrical turn was meant to enhance the appeal and collective experience of the party's meetings and demonstrations, it was also informed by the critique of modernity that shaped his negative perception of radio. The ultimate symbol of this were the so-called mass plays, the overly dramatized and carefully orchestrated mass displays that stood at the heart of the Plan-campaign. Although these mass events formed no explicit rejection of radio, chapter eight noted that their setting (of unmediated togetherness) and purpose (of restoring the bonds of unity and community) were fundamentally at odds with the individualized, fragmented nature of broadcasting. Of course, this does not deny that radio was used during the campaign, but against this background it was argued that radio served, in a more fundamental sense, as an antithesis to the Plan-campaign and, moreover, that it exposed an anti-modern side of the campaign which the Plan-historiography has so far failed to observe. While this requires us to recognize an ambiguous struggle for modernity at the heart of this campaign, more important is what this turn of event revealed about the party's dealings with radio on the longer term. As

¹⁶ Vorrink, *Feestcultuur*.

such it was argued that the Plan-campaign really brought the tensions between the present public and the absent audience to a head and, moreover, that it marked the culmination of the party's problematic introduction to broadcasting from the mid-1920s onwards.

Much more could be said about this subject, but the question that follows from these observations is what the broader implications of this development were and, moreover, what the perceived correspondence between the SDAP's and the Labour Party's response to broadcasting might tell us about the significance of radio to interwar political culture. This question, however, is far larger than can be answered here, notably since it is intricately bound up with the larger question this study asks about the reciprocal relationship between politics and broadcasting and the role of radio as a medium of political change. As such, it is the overall conclusion to this study that will seek to answer these questions, not only by bringing together the various findings of the previous parts of this study, but also by returning to the various theoretical notions – 'representation', 'public sphere', 'integration', 'time and space' and 'constitutive moment' – that were laid down in the overall introduction. Indeed, as was noted above, it is the findings of the previous chapters that go to the heart of what the overall conclusion will argue. Because in building on the corresponding logic between both parties' attempts to preserve the primacy of assembly against the influence of radio, this conclusion will make a case to acknowledge the dual nature of the process of change that was triggered by the arrival of radio. The most visible part of this process concerned the parties' growing understanding and knowledge of the medium-specific qualities of radio. Yet, the most important part concerned their efforts to put a halt to broadcasting and to prevent radio from interfering with the prioritized space of politics (i.e. mass meetings and Parliament) that stood at the centre of both parties' conception of democracy. While it had been up to the likes of MacDonald and Albarda to guide their parties' initial dealings with broadcasting, it was the leading figures (Attlee and Vorrink) of a new generation of party leaders who took the lead in this latter development. If this suggests that these figures had a better grasp of radio's transformative impact on politics than their predecessors, against this background the overall conclusion will make a similar case that its influence on interwar politics was more profound than has been recognized so far, and, moreover, that this was crucially encapsulated in this parallel turn of events in the mid-1930s.

However, before taking up this task we have yet to explore the final turn of events towards the end of the 1930s, which in the SDAP's case saw the (re)-emergence of the radio reporter on the political stage and which in the Labour Party's case saw this same development being thwarted by the lasting impasse in political broadcasting. This did not mean that the BBC did not seek to find its way around the parties, but its attempts to develop a journalistic approach to party politics had so far come up against the objections of those same parties. If this was most clearly epitomized by the Labour Party's efforts to keep the BBC's reporters out of Parliament, the years after the Ullswater inquiry did show a momentary upsurge in the debate about the BBC's role in politics. The leading figure behind this development was the Liberal MP Megan Lloyd George, who was highly critical about the current, stagnant state of affairs: 'We are told it is not practicable to bring the microphone to the House of Commons. Then I suggest that we ought to bring the House of Commons (..) to the microphone. If the general public cannot listen to debates in this House, then debates on important issues should be staged by the BBC'.¹⁷ Although her appeal landed her an invitation to join the BBC's Talks Advisory Committee, once inside she found that the restrictive

17 Hansard, House of Commons, debate 6-7-1936, 939, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

climate had made the BBC most wary to adopt a confrontational stance and to stand up against the political powers that were keeping it in check. Indeed, a poignant illustration of this was the series of party political debates which were organized in 1939, so two years after Lloyd George had called upon the BBC to do much more with regards to 'live political issues'. While this delay was symptomatic of the lack of progress in political broadcasting, the same was true for the form of these debates. By 1939 the BBC had had ample experience with new programmatic forms (among which unscripted discussions or the 'interlocutor technique') which seemed to hold real promise for political broadcasting as well, but the suggestion of applying these methods to the series of party political debates proved far too radical, not just for the Labour Party, but also for the other parties. Turning a deaf ear to the BBC's advice, the parties chose to rely instead on the trusted routine of a three-way debate, which would grant each party's speaker an opportunity to deliver an uninterrupted statement before the radio microphone. This was the kind of approach which had stirred such scathing comments (from the public and the BBC alike) in the past, and chapter seven showed that this was no different this time, with reactions varying from 'dreadfully lamentable, to 'political squabble that few want or appreciate', to 'unutterably boring'.¹⁸

And so, in a nutshell this series of party debates formed a perfect illustration of the past decade-and-a-half in political broadcasting, with the parties and the BBC failing to reconcile their conflicting interests, and the proven inadequacy of these party debates as the unsatisfactory result. While the Labour Party was just as much responsible for this situation as the other parties, in the Netherlands the SDAP was in a much better position, having to deal only with the VARA (and indirectly with the Control Committee). As such, chapter eight showed that a remarkable shift was taking shape in the wake of the Plan-campaign. From a broadcasting point of view this campaign had offered a misleading sight, and it was explained above that it was partly shaped around a conflict between two competing conceptions of politics (as a mediated and unmediated endeavour) and two contradictory incarnations of the public, i.e. the absent audience and the present public. Although the Plan-campaign had failed to resolve this conflict, its aftermath did see the (re)-emergence of the radio reporter, as an agent whose task it was, or so it appeared, to ease these tensions, or to 'mediate' in this conflict. Indeed, a most interesting example in this respect, was F.A. Hof's interview with Coen van der Lende in the weeks before the labour movement's mass demonstration of April 1939. In the previous decade-and-a-half these were the kind of occasions which had raised the most urgent questions about radio's capacity to reach an absent audience, but it was now up to Hof to ask questions or to inquire about the purpose of the event on behalf of the same audience. At the same time it was noted that his mere act of asking questions was enough for Van der Lende to (playfully) lecture Hof – 'You? You are one of us, aren't you?' – that he was no independent intermediate and that his place was within and not outside the labour movement. As tentative as these developments still were, in light of the previous decade-and-a-half it appears that this journalistic turn formed a turn for the better, not only for the broadcasting audience, but also for the party leadership.

In fact, when overseeing this period, the most intriguing element of this newly, dawning shift was the role of Koos Vorrink, who, in many ways, personified the struggle between politics and broadcasting. Because it was Vorrink whose concerns about the 'disintegrating' forces of modernity had caused him to advocate his ideal of a 'celebration culture', which was partly at odds with the workings of radio. As such, it was also Vorrink who had played a key role in the

18 'Correspondence in connection with category "A" debate', WAC, inv. nr. R51/417.

labour movement's theatrical turn, which was partly aimed to overcome the forces of division and to establish an all-embracing unity that was being lost in modern culture. What's more, it was also Vorrink who saw himself as the charismatic leader of the labour movement, and who lashed out in 1939 against the 'vulgarity' of broadcasting and the popular appeal of a 'Jazz band' to bemoan the poor turnout at a party meeting, where he was meant to deliver a speech.¹⁹ Against this background it was his appearance before the VARA-microphone towards the end of the 1930s that was most remarkable. On the first occasion Vorrink went to the North of France, as a travelling reporter to give an eyewitness account for the VARA of the situation in two refugee camps. While this was far removed (literally and figuratively) from his taste for platform oratory, the same was true for the series of talks he agreed to deliver for the VARA from late 1939 until early 1940. Because chapter eight showed that this series invited members of the audience to send in their questions. Although it took Vorrink some effort to take these questions seriously (or, to keep himself from snapping at the questioners), when he did this was a clear sign that the individual radio listener was now fully recognized among the party leadership as a voice and an audience to be reckoned with.

19 Chapter six, page 211-213.

A phantom medium?

Concluding part

Chapter 9

Between presence and absence

The theatre of politics

Conclusion

There are many reasons to delve into the work of the Groninger philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit, but learning about the history of radio or television is certainly not one of these.¹ However, it is one of Ankersmit's later essays that opens up an interesting perspective on some of the issues that have been explored in the previous chapters.² More particularly, this essay takes the notion of representation to elaborate on the idea of the citizen in political philosophy and it draws attention to a scene from a 1998 Jim Carrey film, *The Truman Show*, about a character ('Truman') and his discovery that he has always served as the unknowing subject of a real-life television show. Ankersmit is particularly struck by the moment when this character crashes his sailing-boat through the blue, clouded cardboard horizon and it is this moment that he discovers that the world he had always considered as 'real', was really set within an enormous broadcasting studio, and after finding a hidden door in this 'horizon', Truman decides to step beyond his former, fabricated life into the 'actual' world. This, surely, is a dramatic scene, but according to Ankersmit it forms 'one of the most stunning moments in all of contemporary film-making'.³ As a philosopher of history, Ankersmit likens Truman's ordeal to the experience of major historical events, which, as he argues, make us enter 'a new political reality with a new equilibrium between the private and the public'.⁴ While he sees the French Revolution as the ultimate example of an event of this kind, he also points to our present age and the triumph of the private as its all-defining feature. And yet, our interest here lies with the parallels than can be observed between these observations and the findings of this study, which have not just revealed a similar (albeit more limited) rearrangement in the relationship between the public and the private, but which have also shown that the first encounter with radio caused some politicians to experience a similar (albeit less liberating) 'Truman-moment'.

What is referred to here are the confessions of the likes of Arthur Greenwood and Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper about their first steps into the broadcasting studio. As we have seen, it was the former

1 Ankersmit's oeuvre extends from his early work on the 'narrative logic' in the writing of history to his later explorations of the 'sublime historical experience' F.R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague 1983) and F.R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford 2005). There is a substantial body of scholarship on Ankersmit's philosophy of history and politics, for instance Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen, 'A Retrieval of Historicism: Frank Ankersmit's philosophy of history and politics', *History and Theory* 57 (2018) 33-55 or Sofia Näsström, 'Representative Democracy as Tautology. Ankersmit and Lefort on Representation', *European Journal of Political Theory* 5 (2006) 321-342.

2 F.R. Ankersmit, 'Political Representation and Political Experience: An Essay on Political Psychology', *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 11 (2007) 21-44.

3 Ankersmit, 'Political Representation and Political Experience', 34.

4 Ibidem, 35,

who stated that broadcasting was something which at first was ‘terrifying’ to a politician: ‘Imagine yourself in a studio, all alone, talking to a lifeless microphone, not seeing a soul, unable to weigh the effect of your words on the enormous unseen audience’.⁵ It was the latter who evoked a similar sense of *horror vacui* by describing the broadcasting studio as an ‘empty void’, which ‘absorbed’ him and ‘obliterated’ him and which set his heart pounding and his voice squealing.⁶ For both men this experience stood in direct contrast to what was most familiar to them – i.e. the sight and sounds of a hall or political meeting packed with people – and in speaking from the studio for the first time, they were now required to address an unseen and unresponsive public, while being reduced to an acoustic version of themselves. In fact, it was this latter ‘detail’ that conceals a further parallel with the French Revolution or, more specifically, with the instrument which has come to serve as its gruesome symbol, the guillotine. The most famous victim of the guillotine was Louis XVI and his beheading in 1793 epitomized what the political philosopher Claude Lefort has called, the disincorporation of political power.⁷ Clearly, the effects of radio were not nearly as fatal, but it may be noted that radio had a similar, disembodied effect as the guillotine, in the sense that it separated a speaker’s voice from his bodily presence. Of course, it also allowed those speakers to return to public life, so after being reduced to a political nobody, and it was Kleerekoper who offered a glowing description of the new reality that was opened up by radio. At various points Kleerekoper expressed his wonder about the kindness and sympathy he received from his hearers in the days after his radio talks, and it serves to remind that radio may have ‘absorbed’ or ‘obliterated’ a certain aspect of political life, but that it also offered politicians a chance to establish a whole new understanding with the public.

And yet, the previous chapters have also shown that the political implications of radio extended far beyond the fortunes of individual speakers and the purpose of this study was to explore the broader significance of radio for interwar political culture. Taking a comparative approach to these issues, this study has focussed on the SDAP’s and the Labour Party’s involvement with broadcasting throughout the interwar decades and, in doing so, it has not only looked at the party political encounters with the microphone, but also at both parties’ wider, institutional dealings with broadcasting from the moment of its inception to the late 1930s. Exploring these issues through a comparative perspective has been a laborious affair, but not only has it yielded important insights about both parties’ understanding of broadcasting within the national context, it has also helped to shed new light on the transformative capacity of radio as a medium that was essentially the same in both countries. In fact, in looking back on the different parts of this study, this conclusion will argue that the rise of radio caused a more profound break in the political order than has been recognized so far and, more particularly, that its emergence should be understood to have marked the birth of, in Ankersmit’s words, a ‘new political reality’. This clearly is not how political historians or political scientists have seen this development so far and it was explained in the introduction to this study that radio remains something of a phantom medium in the overall understanding of modern political history. Although the arrival of radio in the 1920s has not gone completely undetected, it is still common among the observers of the interwar decades to turn a blind eye to its political significance or to consider its emergence as an unimportant prelude to the post-war advent of television, as the foremost catalyst of media-driven political change.⁸

5 Greenwood, “Fireside politics”, 86.

6 Kleerekoper, ‘Een nieuwe rubriek’.

7 For example Claude Lefort, ‘Het vraagstuk van de democratie’ in: Idem, *Wat is politiek?*, 81–100, there 95–96 or Claude Lefort, ‘Democratie & vertegenwoordiging’ in: Idem, *Ibidem*, there 103.

8 More extensively, chapter one, page 11–15.

And so, in making a case to the contrary, the following pages will first provide a broad overview of the main findings of the separate parts of this study. This will see us passing through the subsequent parts in consecutive order, so starting with both parties' initial involvement in the institutional organization of broadcasting, moving to their subsequent dealings with broadcasting after both broadcasting systems had acquired their 'definitive shape', and eventually ending with their involvement in political broadcasting and, more specifically, their use of radio as a means of political communication and publicity. However, this will also see the return of the various notions and concepts that were laid down in the second chapter of this study, among which Michael Saward's notion of 'the representative claim', John B. Thompson's notion of 'despatialized simultaneity' and the Habermasian concept of 'the public sphere'.⁹ As was explained there, it is these notions that can help to look beyond the particularities of both cases and to elaborate on the meaning of the comparative findings of this study from a unifying perspective. Eventually, this was also lead us back to the ideas of Ankersmit and Lefort and, more specifically, to the notion of politics as theatre which can be seen to stand at the heart of the tensions and difficulties in both parties' understanding of and dealings with radio. In taking up this notion, it will be argued that the rise of radio may have gone some way to change the display of politics on the political stage, but that we should also explore its significance to political culture beyond the political stage. In turn, this will allow us to see that the rise of radio can really be understood as having changed the theatre of politics at large. Finally, it will be asked what all this means for the status of television. Without denying its major significance, it will be suggested that its reputation is crucially built on the neglect of radio and a flawed understanding of its role in carving out a 'new political reality' from which television could emerge so triumphantly.

Part I Red blueprints

Clearly, these were hardly the sort of issues which shaped the early response to broadcasting when it made its first appearance in Britain and the Netherlands in the early 1920s. At that point in time both countries had already seen a growing number of wireless amateurs searching the airwaves for listenable material, and it was the Dutch radio pioneer Hans Schotanus à Steringa Idzerda who had first recognized the potential of this development by launching a series of pre-announced radio shows from his experimental studio in The Hague. Other experiments would soon follow, also in Britain, and although the Dutch and the British authorities were hesitant, if not reluctant to welcome the new phenomenon of broadcasting, the appeal of this development was unmistakable, and so were the pressures coming from the radio manufacturing industry and amateur circles to open the airwaves more widely. As such, it was clear that the authorities in both countries would at some point have to come up with a more permanent arrangement for broadcasting, and it was these developments that would see the SDAP and the Labour Party first waking up to the new reality of broadcasting.

Perhaps to remind the introduction to this study referred to Paul Starr's notion of a 'constitutive moment' as a notion which captures these brief historical phases when a new medium or communication technology emerges and acquires its institutional form.¹⁰ What's more, as was explained, Starr sees these phases as a moment of temporary openness in the political and regulatory framework that shape the patterns and structures of communication throughout history and, as

9 Chapter two, page 27-42.

10 Chapter two, page 29-30.

such, he argues that these moments have much to offer to the historian seeking to understand what role a medium would come to play in politics and society over time.¹¹ In relation to this it was noted also that Starr has coined the term ‘constitutive choices’ as the elementary parts of the decision-making process which helped to steer the institutionalization of a new medium in a particular direction. According to Starr these choices come in different categories – legal, technological, infrastructural, etc. – but emphasizing the deeply political nature of these processes, Starr’s work makes a strong case to consider the myriad political forces that were at work at the moment of a new medium’s arrival. Perhaps needless to say, this is closely in keeping with what this study has sought to do as well, and in exploring the SDAP’s and the Labour Party’s contribution to the constitutive moment of broadcasting in Britain and the Netherlands, chapter three and chapter four have asked how both parties thought about the institutional organization of broadcasting and, in turn, how they perceived the role of radio as a medium of political communication or debate. Of course, closely connected to this was yet another, larger question. Because these years did not just witness the emergence of broadcasting, it also saw the introduction of universal suffrage, both in Britain as well as in the Netherlands. With both countries moving into the age of mass democracy, it was this development that sparked a further interest in both parties’ ideas about the wider democratic value and purpose of broadcasting.

But before taking up these issues, it is worth recalling that the introduction to this study linked the work of Starr to a broader historical-institutionalist turn in the scholarship of media-political relations. Among the authors that were referred to in this respect were Rodney Benson and Michael Schudson, and although the latter’s work hardly fits the historical-institutionalist mould, it is Schudson’s ‘institutionalist’ reading of the ‘public sphere’ concept which offers a further, helpful perspective to reflect on the findings of this study’s first part. There are different reasons for this, but most important here is Schudson’s questioning of the dichotomy between the state and society which pervades the Habermasian understanding of the public sphere concept. According to Schudson the public sphere is too often portrayed as standing in opposition to the state and its governmental structures, and in contrast he argues that these should rather be seen as the constitutive parts of the public sphere, which historically have not only played a vital role in shaping the public sphere, but which have also formed a major locus of debate and opinion in itself.¹² Among other things this leads Schudson to emphasize the role of Parliament as ‘a pre-eminent public forum’ and as a ‘publicity-generating body’, but beyond that he also refers to the role of political parties as bodies of opinion-making.¹³ Although there is more to Schudson’s understanding of the public sphere than this, above all these observations highlight the need to consider both parties’ assumptions about the place of politics in the public sphere which underlay their early ideas about the institutional organization of broadcasting. As we have seen, it was these assumptions that proved crucially important to grasp the later turn of events in both parties’ dealings with broadcasting.

This is something that will be explored in the pages ahead, and we first need to return to the constitutive moment of broadcasting in Britain and the Netherlands and the constitutive choices that were advocated by the SDAP and the Labour Party. Of the two, it was the latter which

11 Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 1-19.

12 Schudson, ‘The “Public Sphere” and its Problems’.

13 Ibidem, 535-536 and 539. Schudson partly draws his argument about the importance of Parliament in the public sphere from Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’ in: Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the public sphere* (Cambridge MA 1992) 109-142. A similar argument is made by Peters, ‘Distrust of representation: Habermas on the public sphere’.

was first required to formulate its views on the organizational future of broadcasting when it was invited to join the 1923 Sykes Committee. At that point in time the British Broadcasting Company had already been established on the instigation of the British Post Office. Bringing together the wireless industry and amateur interests, we have seen that the early BBC was very much a hybrid of private and public interests. Its priorities lay very much on the public side of its task, but according to the Labour Party this did not go nearly far enough and its message to the Sykes Committee was that the entire operation of broadcasting should pass into the hands of the state and that broadcasting should be publicly owned and publicly controlled. In 1923 Labour's appeal found no support, but this did not prevent the party from sending a similar message to the 1925-1926 Crawford Committee a few years later, and, in doing so, it found that the tide of opinion had now changed in its favour and that a broad consensus had emerged about the need to grant the BBC a more solid public basis. And so, with the Conservative government largely adopting the Crawford Committee's recommendations, this development saw the BBC being re-established as a public corporation, indeed, as we have seen, much to the Labour Party's delight.

This happened in January 1927, at a moment when the future of broadcasting in the Netherlands remained very much undecided. Chapter three showed that the BBC's founding was crucially inspired by the spectre of 'chaos' which a Post Office-official had observed, while touring the United States to study the country's response to the early 1920s radio boom. However, the power of example also worked the other way around. In the Netherlands it was the BBC's example which caused some figures to advocate the founding of an equivalent Dutch broadcasting company, while it caused others to warn for the spectre of 'neutrality' and 'uniformity'. The SDAP was firmly on the former side, and although it was initially prepared to contribute to the founding of this company, we have also seen that the party leadership really thought that broadcasting ought to be publicly owned and publicly controlled. Much like the Labour Party, this caused the SDAP, or more precisely its party secretary Cornelis Werkhoven, to lay down a design of a 'State Broadcasting Company'. Yet, his proposals were doomed to be rejected, since it was the latter side which held the keys to this debate, and its cause was a pluralist broadcasting arrangement that would keep the airwaves open to a variety of broadcasting associations instead. The rationale behind this was the confessional quest for autonomy (or 'sphere sovereignty' as the Protestants called it) and with successive confessional governments endorsing this pursuit, it was this development that would see the different broadcasting associations evolve into the cornerstones of the 'pillarized' broadcasting system that was, eventually, formalized in May 1930. Quite crucially, this included the VARA, the socialist broadcasting association that was closely affiliated to the SDAP. Although the SDAP's leadership welcomed the VARA's promotion with approval, it also insisted that the pluralist outcome was fundamentally different from the broadcasting arrangement it thought the country needed.

Of course, all this is well-known by now, and although it leaves much unmentioned, it allows us to take up a few further issues here, which proved significant from a comparative point of view or in light of the developments that were yet to take to shape. A key element in this was the shared attachment of both parties to the idea of public ownership, which in the SDAP's case was modelled on the notion of 'socialisation' and which in the Labour Party's case focussed on the idea of 'nationalisation'. At this point there is no need to elaborate on these notions again, but it may be noted that both conceptions of public ownership were based on a particular understanding of the relationship between the state and society, with the one (socialisation) putting its faith in the self-organizing capacity of society and the other (nationalisation) praising the merits and virtue of a centralized state. However, picking up on what is argued above, it may

be noted that these conceptions of public ownership are somehow reminiscent as well of Michael Schudson's understanding of the public sphere and its emphasis on the interconnectedness of the state and society in the historical makeup of the public sphere. Against this background it is useful to elaborate a bit further on what both parties' ideas about the institutional organization of broadcasting revealed about their understanding of the place of broadcasting in the public sphere. Although much of this remained rather rudimentary, it does offer a first idea of how both parties' perceived the place of politics in the public sphere, and its subsequent relation to the anticipated broadcasting structures.

On the whole, it was the SDAP's example which offered the more immediate view of how this party saw the role of broadcasting in the public sphere, and it was Cornelis Werkhoven's minority report to the 1925 Posthuma Committee, which contained a number of interesting suggestions about the public's involvement in the projected 'State Broadcasting Company'. Key to this was the idea of a 'broadcasting committee' that would be composed around the (elected) representatives of the broadcasting audience, and that would allow the public a say over the output and organization of the broadcasting company. This may have seemed a concession to the pluralist forces that were gathering momentum, but chapter four argued that it was also very much in keeping with the participatory ideal which shaped the notion of 'socialisation'. In a different way, the same ideal resonated in the report's emphasis on the accessibility of broadcasting to the public. More particularly, it was argued that broadcasting should allow the public 'to express its mind freely and indiscriminately' and that it should offer ample space to 'the people to voice its opinions, its ideas and ideals, and even its idiocies'.¹⁴ While this was a most liberal ideal, inevitably it would also open the airwaves to political parties, or any other organization or individual seeking to advocate its political beliefs. However, at the same time, chapter four showed as well that the SDAP's leadership seemed hardly interested itself in the political promise of radio. This was certainly remarkable, also given the recent influx of the numerous newly enfranchised voters. Above all, however, these early developments can be seen to epitomize the party's participatory ideal of democracy, and it was the third part of this study which would show that this ideal was in fact the source of a more deep-seated antagonism towards radio than might have been anticipated on the basis of these early proposals.

This was quite similar to the Labour Party's case, although chapter three showed as well that Labour's initial understanding of broadcasting was shaped by a notion of democratic control instead. As was suggested above, this was crucially informed by its conception of public ownership as 'nationalisation', which spurred the party to mark broadcasting as a state responsibility. Beyond that, it also helps to understand why the Labour Party's proposals were less interesting than the SDAP's, at least in terms of what these revealed about their idea about the place of radio in the public sphere. In fact, chapter three argued that the Labour Party's approach to broadcasting was closely bound to the perception of radio as a potential threat to democracy. This, of course, was not wholly unfounded and it was the BBC's contribution to the events of the general strike, which helped to cement these concerns at the heart of the Labour Party's understanding of broadcasting. Taking place in May 1926, the perceived unfairness of the BBC's actions during this clash, were part of the reason why the Labour Party welcomed the BBC's new status as a public corporation as a victory for socialism. More important, here,

14 Memorandum of Cornelis Werkhoven, *Rapport van den Regeerings-Commissie voor den Nationalen Draadlozen Omroep*, Bijlage IV, 68.

however, is that these same developments would also reinforce Labour's idea about the primacy of Parliament over broadcasting, which had formed a centrepiece of the party's approach to broadcasting from the very beginning. In 1923 one of its spokesmen argued, for instance, that 'the last word [in broadcasting matters] must obviously rest with Parliament as representative of the general body of citizens' and this same conviction resonated three years later in the words of another Labour speaker, who insisted that the BBC's broadcasting licence 'really originates with the masses of the British people; they are giving it to this new body, and they must have a representative spokesman in the House of Commons.'¹⁵ What's more, in light of Schudson's understanding of the public sphere, there is an obvious significance to comments like these, and they highlight that the Labour Party was less interested in carving out a separate place for radio in the public sphere and more interested in making sure that Parliament would have a definite degree of control over broadcasting within the public sphere. Of course, we have also seen that Parliament would only grow more important to the Labour Party's dealings with broadcasting in the years ahead, which had much to do with the fact that it was really quite impossible to control radio to the extent the Labour Party deemed necessary.

But before considering those developments, there is a last issue that requires our attention here, that is both parties' reference to the Post Office, in the Labour Party's case as the state agency which ought to preside over broadcasting matters and in the SDAP's case as an example of the benefits of state ownership. However, our interest here does not so much concern the nature of these references, but rather the fact that the Post Office was also the embodiment of a particular conception of communication. This idea of communication relied essentially on the sending of a message from one designated place to another, and it was deeply engrained in the forms of exchange which had long defined the spread of ideas and information. Among the authors who have reflected on this subject is James W. Carey, who was also referred to in the introduction to this study, and it is his distinction between a 'transmission view' and a 'ritual view' of communication which opens up an interesting perspective here.¹⁶ More precisely, Carey describes the former 'transmission' view as the extension of a message through space and time and against this background it might be argued that it was this idea of communication which underlay both parties' references to the Post Office.¹⁷ Although this idea of communication had also shaped the earliest emergence of radio as a means of wireless telegraphy, the point here, of course, is that radio did not fit in with this particular idea of communication and that the novelty of broadcasting was crucially defined by its accessibility to each and everybody with a radio-set. Clearly, this had not passed unnoticed to the SDAP's and the Labour Party's leadership, but it casts an interesting light on the growing concerns of both parties in the subsequent years as they learned to recognize the implications of the rise of radio more fully. In fact, it may be noted that Carey associates his 'transmission view' of communication with a particular idea of power as well, that is of controlling people and territories from a distance.¹⁸ Against this background it seems most fitting that the term 'control' would come to epitomize both parties' approach to broadcasting in the subsequent stage of its integration, that is after both broadcasting systems had acquired their 'definitive' shape.

15 'Memorandum of evidence submitted by the Executive Committee of the London Labour Party', WAC, inv. nr. R4/65/1, f. 6 and *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 15-11-1926, 1587, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

16 Chapter two, page 38.

17 Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 12-15.

18 *Ibidem*, 12-13.

Part II Between independence and control

At that point in time – in January 1927 and May 1930 – both the Labour Party and the SDAP could look back on a first half decade of dealing with the BBC and the VARA, but it was the next ten years that proved the more important phase in both parties' introduction to broadcasting. In both cases this process was steeped in conflict, and while it saw the SDAP being haunted by the VARA's newfound prominence, it also saw the Labour Party's expectations about the BBC's status as a public corporation turning increasingly sour. What's more, both broadcasting systems were organized around a notion of independence – the British on a centralized corporatist basis and the Dutch in a pluralist associational mould – but chapter five and chapter six showed that this did little to reduce or ward off the political pressures on the day-to-day operation of broadcasting. Our interest lies with the SDAP and the Labour Party, and, as was noted above, it was these developments that evoked a parallel demand for 'control' among the leadership of both parties. And although this demand was closely intertwined with the specific circumstances of both cases, it does provide an important clue to rethink the significance of radio to interwar political culture more generally.

Taking up the SDAP's case first, it was hardly surprising that 'control' emerged as a key term in the party's dealings with the VARA. As was explained elsewhere, it is broadly recognized that the main political parties had a key role in the 'pillarized' broadcasting system of the Netherlands, and while this included the SDAP, it is commonly understood that this party had a firm say over the VARA's conduct and affairs. Indeed, this is largely in keeping with what this study has shown as well, although chapter six provided ample evidence that the party's relationship with the VARA was more problematic than is mostly recognized from a 'pillarized' point of view. In fact, what may be noted in this respect is that the party's hold over the VARA was never undisputed, and always subject of debate and conflict. While this was part of the reason why the party hierarchy remained concerned about the VARA's actions, on its turn, the VARA's executives were always prepared to fuel these concerns, for instance, by insisting that the broadcasting association was formally independent of the SDAP or by stressing that it had its own responsibilities towards the broadcasting audience.¹⁹ In fact, at different points in time the VARA threatened to break with the SDAP altogether, and although this never happened, it was very much symptomatic of the struggle between both organizations behind the closed doors of the labour movement's hierarchy. At the same time, these issues were overshadowed by the conflict between the VARA and the 'Radio Broadcasting Control Committee'. Although the SDAP was just as much opposed to its rule of censorship as the VARA, chapter six showed that the party leadership grew increasingly reluctant to rally behind the VARA's protests against this body and that it chose to keep a low profile in Parliament on this subject instead. While this was crucially informed by its aim to be recognized as a party of moderation and reason, it offered a further indication of the tensions and ambiguities that were shaping its relationship with the VARA. There was a different side to this picture as well, since the SDAP did manage to exert its influence over the VARA on crucial moments throughout these years. A most notable illustration of this was its role in the dismissal and appointment of a number of key VARA-executives, among whom the VARA chairman Arend de Vries in 1930 and the broadcasting secretary Arie Pleyzier in 1934.²⁰ While these examples are closely consistent with the conventional understanding of the SDAP's relationship

19 Chapter six, page 185-187 and 192-195.

20 Chapter six, page 187-188 and 208-209.

to the VARA, what stands out in all of this is the deeply conflictual nature of this relationship. If the idea of ‘pillarization’ bears a close affinity to the idea of order and stability, it is these sequence of conflicts and disputes which suggests that the rise of radio has had a more disruptive impact on the political order than has been recognized so far.

Of course, this suggestion is also informed by the Labour Party’s example, which, just like the SDAP, faced a period of profound struggle and conflict in its dealings with the BBC in its capacity as a public corporation after 1927. Here too, these developments revolved around the notion of ‘control’, albeit more explicitly than in the SDAP’s case, and chapter five showed that the Labour Party would grow increasingly vocal throughout these years about the need for a greater degree of parliamentary control. Indeed, in spite of the fact that the BBC was re-established by a royal charter to prevent that it would be seen as a ‘creature of Parliament’. A key moment in this development was the downfall of the second Labour government in 1931, which did not just spark a massive defeat for the Labour Party in the subsequent general elections, but which also triggered a series of conflicts with the BBC which brought back the unpleasant memories of the general strike. Although marginalized in Parliament, the Labour Party was still the official Opposition and it would grow increasingly frustrated with its lack of access to the airwaves, and, what it saw as, the privileged treatment of the national government by the BBC. With the BBC and consecutive Postmaster Generals rejecting these complaints, chapter five showed as well that the Labour leadership came to see this situation as nothing less than a menace to democracy. So, in 1931 it was Clement Attlee who asked his fellow MPs whether ‘we have not created a Frankenstein which is going to break up our political life’, and a few years later Attlee and other Labour spokesmen turned to a more provocative repertoire by labelling John Reith, the BBC’s Director General, as ‘an excellent Hitler’ and by likening the BBC to ‘the nearest thing in this country to Nazi government that can be shown.’²¹ Of course, these comparisons were grossly disproportional (in spite of the fact that Reith was known for his authoritarian manners and views), but it was argued in chapter five that this rhetoric was very much indicative of the conflict between the Labour Party’s democratic conception of broadcasting and the reality that was unfolding. Eventually, all this came to a head in 1936, after the Conservative government chose to reject the Ullswater Committee’s advice to rearrange the Ministerial responsibilities for broadcasting, a suggestion the Labour Party had strongly supported in the year before. Labour’s response made it very clear that it did not agree with this decision – ‘I want parliamentary control’, or ‘we (...) are the supreme authority’ – but its words were as much an illustration of how it felt the political relationship with the BBC ought to be organized as a reminder that the actual developments had moved in a different direction. Still, it was the third part of this study which showed that the Labour Party remained determined to settle this struggle for ‘control’ in its favour, thereby ignoring the ample signs which suggested that this was not necessarily in the best interest of politics, broadcasting, the Labour Party or democracy at large.

Before elaborating on those issues, the question is what the broader significance of this parallel demand for ‘control’ might have been and what these conflicts might tell us about the break in the political order that was the result of the rise of radio. Asking these questions does not deny the numerous differences between both cases and it does not suggest either that the SDAP’s pursuit of a partisan form of ‘control’ was every bit the equivalent of the Labour Party’s

21 *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 17-12-1936, 2730, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>. More extensively, chapter five, page 168-170.

demand for a parliamentary form of 'control'. However, the aim of this comparison is to shed new light on the role of radio as a medium of political change and this requires us to look beyond the contrast between both cases as well. In order to do so, we may return to Michael Schudson's reflections on the public sphere and, more specifically, to pick up on the centrality of the notion of 'representation' to Schudson's ideas about the public sphere. It was explained in the introduction to this study that Schudson's use of this notion marks a further point of contrast with Habermas' understanding of this concept, which, as Jon Durham Peters has observed, is pervaded by a 'distrust of representation'.²² This is not something Schudson discusses in any detail himself, but among other things it leads him to argue that 'the presence of representative governmental institutions engenders public spaces, and the presence of particular forms of representation will give rise to particular types of public space'.²³ In other words, Schudson places the notion of representation at the heart of the dynamics that shape the historical transformation of the public sphere and he argues more specifically that this process is bound to a reproductive logic which sees the patterns of representative political structures as a formative influence on the wider makeup of a public sphere. This may sound somewhat abstract, but it may be noted that a similar logic can be observed in the developments which this study has looked at, in the sense that the shape and structure of both broadcasting systems came to resemble or mirror the makeup of both political systems. However, in looking at these developments from the SDAP's and the Labour Party's perspective, we have also seen that this was a highly contentious process, and it was this parallel demand for 'control' within both parties which can be seen to expose the shared concerns among both parties about the apparent limitations to steer this development. To clarify what is meant here it is useful to take up the notion of the 'representative claim', which can help to highlight some of the further assumptions underlying both parties' struggle for 'control'.

Coined by the political theorist Michael Saward, this notion was also referred to in the introduction to this study and it was explained there that Saward's work on this subject seeks to move the concept of political representation beyond its static and narrowly institutional understanding.²⁴ More particularly, Saward's efforts in this respect aim to re-conceptualize representation as a multi-layered and multi-dimensional process, that involves a greater diversity of actors and a broader variety of platforms than standard accounts in political science have long held. Among other things Saward argues that the claim-perspective can be used to chart, what he calls, 'shifting power relationships' and that it may help to grasp how power is 'created and exploited through representation'. Stretching Saward's argument, it was suggested in the introduction to this study that the claim-perspective can also be applied to a media context, which, after all, forms a vital part of the infrastructure for the making and communicating of such 'claims'. Indeed, it is against this background that we may observe a clash of competing 'representative claims' underneath both parties' struggle for 'control' over broadcasting as well. Probably, this was most clearly exemplified by the Labour Party's repeated insistence on the primacy of Parliament as 'the supreme authority' or as 'representative of the general body of citizens'.²⁵ In a different way, a similar claim can be heard in the continuous warnings which the VARA received from the SDAP to respect the party's authority and to acknowledge the party's

22 Peters, 'Distrust of representation: Habermas on the public sphere'

23 Schudson, 'The "Public Sphere" and its Problems', 533.

24 Chapter two, page 34-35.

25 Chapter three, page 66 and chapter five, page 169-170.

place in the labour movement hierarchy. At the same time, it seems we should also look to the other side of this struggle, where the VARA and the BBC were growing increasingly aware of their own representative status and responsibilities towards the audience and the public at large, and which, as we know, was equally important in stirring up the sense of agitation among both parties. To be clear, these conflicts might very well be seen as an inevitable part of the developments which occur when a new medium enters the public sphere. However, when looking at these turn of events from Schudson's and Saward's perspective, it appears that this struggle did not just revolve around the limits to both parties' hold over broadcasting, but also about the implications of the rise of radio for the representative status or order of politics. In other words, it might be argued that these developments really pointed to a more profound shift at the heart of both parties' conception of politics, which, indeed, was affecting the very primacy of Parliament (in the Labour Party's case) and the party (in the SDAP's case) as those bodies that were keeping the representative order of politics together, or so it was thought.

Admittedly, these suggestion are crucially informed as well about the findings of the third part of this study, which offered further and more substantial evidence in this direction. It was this part which engaged more directly with broadcasting in its mediated capacity and, as such, it showed that this institutional struggle for 'control' was crucially connected to a growing concern among the leadership of both parties about the disruptive impact of radio on political culture. And yet, before elaborating on those developments, we may briefly return to James Carey's distinction between a 'transmission view' and a 'ritual view' of communication and the comments that were made in relation to both parties' early references to the Post Office. As was explained above, it was the former view which conceives communication as the sending or transmitting of a message through space and time, so as a form of exchange that can be seen to centre on a postal logic. But while both parties' references to the Post Offices stemmed from the earliest days of broadcasting, by the mid-1930s it was increasingly understood, also within both parties, that broadcasting worked along entirely different lines and that its emergence had really helped to fuel, what John B. Thompson has called, the 'uncoupling of space and time' and the discovery of a new sense of 'despatialized simultaneity'.²⁶ What's more, the third part of this study showed that it was these insights which went to the heart of both parties' concerns about the disruptive impact of radio on political culture. Against this background it may be noted that Carey associates his 'ritual view' of communication with 'the maintenance of society in time' and 'the projection of a shared symbolic order' and, as such, it seems most fitting that the impact of broadcasting was most acutely felt in the ritual and symbolic heart of both parties' conception of politics.²⁷ Of course, the influence of radio worked in other directions as well, and in bringing these various lines together, the following pages will also highlight the broader shift that was taking shape in political culture as a result of the rise of radio.

Part III 'Jazz politics'

For this purpose it is necessary to return to the mid-1920s as the years that witnessed the first emergence of broadcasting in Dutch and British political culture. Perhaps to remind, chapter seven and chapter eight opened with two rather similar scenes of the challenges and promises which radio brought to interwar political life. These were Ramsay MacDonald's 1924 election broadcast from Glasgow's City Hall and Pieter Jelle Troelstra's 1925 speech from the great hall

26 Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*, 32.

27 Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 15-16.

of The Hague's Zoo. As greatly admired platform speakers, it was these occasions which saw both men struggling to adjust their manners and rhetoric to the newly-placed microphone on stage. Their difficulties were largely the same, but while MacDonald's speech was condemned as a 'local success, but a national disaster', Troelstra's audience seemed more forgiving.²⁸ This, at least, was suggested by the SDAP's newspaper *Het Volk*, which emphasized the sheer excitement among radio listeners about the opportunity of tuning in to this speech, without being physically present. Of course, the significance of these moments extended far beyond the challenge of radio to these individual speakers, but it would take both parties about a decade (and a change of leadership) to grasp the implications of broadcasting more fully. As was suggested above, these developments were closely informed by the spatiotemporal workings of broadcasting and although both parties would mostly face the microphone in the broadcasting studio, it was the use of radio outside the studio which raised the most urgent questions about its influence on politics. Although these developments unfolded along entirely different lines, this makes it all the more remarkable that both parties arrived at such a similar conclusion about the political significance (or threat) of radio in the mid-1930s.

Of the two, it was the Labour Party which faced the most serious obstacles in adjusting to the new reality of broadcasting. Chapter seven showed that the rise of radio had raised high expectations in Britain and although it was widely anticipated that broadcasting would make a great service to the millions of newly enfranchised voters, when the 1930s came to a close it was difficult to deny that the BBC had yet to fulfil this promise. Much like the other inhabitants of the political realm, the Labour Party was both a cause and a casualty of its this failure. In denying the BBC its adequate say over the form, content and output of its political programmes, the Labour leadership maintained that the right to decide on these matters was essentially the prerogative of the parties in Parliament. A telling illustration of this was Ramsay MacDonald's advice to the BBC as Labour's acting Prime Minister, when he warned Reith for the spectre of 'Jazz politics', while insisting that 'the only way the BBC can protect itself is by planning its political broadcasting in close co-operation with the Parties'.²⁹ Clearly, this was hardly the first time the BBC received a message of this kind, and although chapter seven charted various attempts at party broadcasting, more importantly it also showed that the BBC succeeded only rarely in bringing the parties or its MPs before the microphone. Probably, the most notable exception to this rule was *The Week in Westminster*, which managed to circumvent the pitfalls in political broadcasting as a result of its focus on Parliament and its strictly equal allocation of party speakers.³⁰ Even so, it was Clement Attlee's contribution to this series which illustrated *The Week in Westminster* was not free from strife and tensions either. Part of this revolved around the rhetorical challenge of radio to MPs, who were so accustomed to addressing an audience in a different House, and when the series' producers encouraged Attlee to adopt a more informal and impressionistic tone, Attlee's response offered a subtle reminder that these issues ought to be decided, first and foremost, by MPs themselves and not by the BBC. Again, this was very much in keeping with the centrality of Parliament to Labour's outlook on broadcasting, but, beyond that, it also formed an immediate continuation of the struggle for 'control'. In fact, it might be argued that these issues offered a closer look of the clash of competing representative

28 Salter, *Personality in politics*, 58. See also chapter seven, page 235 and chapter eight, page 293.

29 'Minute on BBC papers', WAC, inv. nr. R34/563/1. See also chapter seven, page 253.

30 Chapter seven, page 261-264.

claims, and the ultimate point of contention was whether it was the BBC or the parties which held the authority to decide what the representation of politics in broadcasting ought to look like. With no consensus on this subject emerging, this would cause the BBC to grow increasingly frustrated about, what it saw as, the 'perverted values of the party game', while it would also see the Labour Party growing ever-more convinced of the need for partisan and parliamentary control in broadcasting.³¹

It was some of these same issues that shaped the Labour Party's dealings with broadcasting during election campaigns. On the whole, the interwar decades witnessed four general elections (in 1924, 1929, 1931 and 1935) that saw the use of radio as an instrument of electioneering, but in terms of broadcasting these four election campaigns proved a rather disappointing affair. This was largely due to the same forces that were referred to above, which, among other things, kept the BBC from inviting more politicians before the microphone or from drawing up a broader variety of programmes to cover the electoral contest. With regard to radio these campaigns were largely dominated by the series of election broadcasts, and although the Labour Party managed to avoid MacDonald's 'mistake' of 1924 (of choosing to relay a platform-speech), chapter seven found that most of the Labour Party's speakers struggled with the performative setting of radio and its domestic context of reception. But if Labour's speakers found it difficult to make their (acoustic) presence being felt across the country, this, clearly, did not apply to the Conservative Party leader Stanley Baldwin who, as we have seen, very much set the example with his personal, informal and conversational manner of speaking. Chapter seven showed that these lessons were not lost to the Labour Party, and that its speakers would eventually come to embrace a new style of delivery as well, which was better adjusted to the public in its privatized, fragmented form. This was most clearly exemplified by Clement Attlee's and Herbert Morrison's 1935 election broadcasts, with the former delivering a family-themed address and the latter speaking as 'one citizen to another'.³² While these examples indicated that the Labour leadership's grasp of radio had taken a turn for the better, obviously there was a different side to this development as well, since it would also bolster Attlee's conviction (and that of his fellow Labour MPs) that broadcasting or the BBC had no place in Parliament as the country's foremost locus of debate and decision-making.

The background and implications of this will be discussed below, but we should first turn to the Netherlands, where, most remarkably, the SDAP's leadership had hardly proved more excited about the promise of radio as their British counterparts. In fact, chapter eight showed that the SDAP's leadership was not just hesitant about broadcasting when it made its first appearance, but that its doubts continued to shape the party's dealings with radio throughout the 1920s and the 1930s. Much of this remained hidden to the VARA audience, which, throughout these years, was presented with a wide variety of programmes and speakers singing the party's praise. Indeed, a most interesting example in this respect were the radio plays which were produced by the VARA in 1929 and 1934, the first to propagate the SDAP's message on the eve of the 1929 general election and the second to celebrate the party's forty-year anniversary.³³ Offering a fascinating view of how radio was used to propagate party interests, these plays were also marked by conflict and disagreement about the actual value of broadcasting to party politics. In fact, once observed, it is remarkable

31 Internal memo Siepmann Director of Talks to Reith, 21-6-1932, WAC, inv. nr. R/34/534/2.

32 Morrison, 'Election broadcast', 882 and chapter seven, page 277-279.

33 Chapter eight, page 303 and 329-332.

how pervasive this conflict was to the SDAP's dealings with the VARA throughout these years, and it can be seen to have resonated in, for example, Cornelis Werkhoven's early appeal to the party's faithful to ignore the VARA's election eve programme, as well as in Johan Willem Albarda's persistent reluctance to face the radio microphone as the SDAP's party leader. A most poignant example in this respect was the series of weekly party-talks, the *SDAP-quarter*, which first began in 1930 and which seemed a perfect example of the SDAP's partnership with the VARA, but which turned out to be highly symptomatic as well of the deeper antagonisms between both organizations. Part of these difficulties centred on the rhetorical challenge of radio to party speakers, but, in a more basic sense, chapter eight found as well that various party speakers struggled to adjust to the logistics of broadcasting, that is of showing up in the VARA-studio on time. As trivial as this may sound, underlying this was the more fundamental conflict about the party political value of radio. On the whole, the SDAP's leadership tended to prioritize the established forms and practices of party politics over broadcasting, and quite often this meant sharing the same location in space and time with a gathering of party supporters, instead of addressing a far larger, but absent and unseen audience from the VARA-studio.

Clearly, these two options were not mutually exclusive, but it was the VARA's coverage of party meetings and mass demonstrations, which highlighted they were not easily reconciled either. From early on the VARA had shown a keen interest to cover such outside events, since these occasions stood very much at the heart of the labour movement's self-image as a 'red family'. On the surface it seemed that radio suited this purpose perfectly and chapter eight charted various examples of the excitement in labour circles about the promise of radio to cultivate a sense of mediated togetherness. An interesting illustration of this were the telegrams that were sent by listeners to these occasions – 'We salute our great party leader as well. We can hear everything!' – and that were read out aloud as a sort of ritual testimony of the bond that tied the present and absent parts of the meeting together.³⁴ And yet, this sense of joy was not unanimous, and chapter eight observed as well that the working of radio was crucially seen to conflict with the ideal of togetherness that was shaping these events. Such was for instance illustrated by Jan Oudegeest's, the party chairman, welcome to the crowd in front of him in November 1932 – 'I greet you, now we are here, one of will and one of mind'.³⁵ If these words can be seen to epitomize this ideal of togetherness, the irony, of course, was that Oudegeest spoke these words while standing before a radio microphone, without saying anything to that part of the collective 'we' which had stayed at home, near their radio set. In a different way these same tensions were seen to resonate in the repeated references to the various means of transportation which had allowed those people to come together and it was a telling sign of the ambiguous status of radio that it was never praised on these occasions to the same extent as those trains, boats, busses and bicycles. In fact, chapter eight observed that this discrepancy was even embedded in the writings of Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper (his 'Listener's-Diary' for the VARA's programming guide), who was probably the most devoted radio-enthusiast of all party prominents. Although deeply impressed by its potential to reach out to distant others, Kleerekoper also recognized that radio formed 'an immediate threat to the need for living contact' and he reminded his readers on more than one occasion that they should, above all, go out 'to experience our fellowship in the presence of others'.³⁶

34 'Het demonstratief kongres van SDAP en NVV', *Het Volk*, 21-9-1925.

35 Text of recorded radio report of demonstration The Hague, 8-11-1932, NA, CRM, 2.27.05, ROCC, inv. nr. 253. See also chapter eight, page 314-317.

36 Kleerekoper, 'Wonderbare zegen'. See also chapter eight, page 326-329.

Of course, there was a broader context to these examples as well, and in charting this clash between the established forms of assembly and the new 'despatialized' form of togetherness, it was argued that this perception of radio was very much symptomatic of the concerns in party circles about its ability to mobilize 'the masses'. Much of this remained implicit, but a close examination of the party's campaign for its Plan of Labour (1935-1937) revealed that this campaign was, in fact, partly designed to remedy the perceived impact of radio on the labour movement's culture of assembly. As was explained, this is not something historians have recognized so far, and while this campaign is commonly seen as a vehicle of the party's push for modernity, chapter eight argued that it was this hidden opposition to radio which exposed an anti-modern side that was equally significant to its makeup and purpose. Among other things this was exemplified by the writings of the recently appointed party chairman Koos Vorrink on the labour movement's 'celebration culture'.³⁷ Quite remarkably, his pamphlet on this subject contained no (explicit) reference to radio, despite the fact that the VARA had contributed to various of the occasions which Vorrink described, and chapter eight argued this neglect was very much indicative of the tensions and conflict between Vorrink's ideal of togetherness and the workings of radio. To be clear, this did not mean that the SDAP was not interested in using radio for this campaign (and its efforts to do so were crucially foiled by the Control Committee's interference), but on the whole it was this negative perception of radio as a cause of absence that held the greater significance. Indeed, equally important in this respect was the party's embrace of theatre, or its theatrical turn that was taking shape throughout these same years. Key to this were its so-called 'mass plays' and, as we have seen, it was these highly orchestrated mass events that formed the very essence of the campaign's pursuit of togetherness, fellowship and community. Again, chapter eight argued that these 'mass plays' did not so much offer an explicit critique of radio, but that the rationale and purpose of its theatrical form concealed the same, hidden opposition to radio as, for example, Vorrink's writings. In a more general sense this was highly symbolic as well for the SDAP's overall relationship with the VARA throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, which has long been seen and studied as a 'red family' tale, but which, as this study has found, concealed a far more profound antagonism and incompatibility with radio as has been recognized so far.

In a different way the same can be seen to apply to the Labour Party's interwar dealings with broadcasting. As was explained elsewhere, it is widely recognized that the Labour Party and the BBC were locked in a troubled and often hostile relationship throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, but it has largely gone unnoticed that many of these conflicts ultimately boiled down to the question of the relationship between broadcasting and Parliament. Such was also the case with regard to their mutual involvement in political broadcasting, which, as we have seen, came to focus to an increasing extent on the question of the BBC's access to Parliament. At the centre of this was the Labour Party's newly appointed party leader Clement Attlee, and if his involvement with *The Week in Westminster* had shown Attlee how Parliament might be brought into the homes of millions of Britons, it appears it had also made him averse to the idea of opening the doors of Parliament to the radio microphone or a BBC reporter. This was not merely a private opinion, and chapter eight observed that his fellow Labour MPs shared his reservations and objections. A most telling example in this respect was the controversy between the Labour MP Morgan Jones and the BBC which surfaced towards the end of 1934. With the former being greatly offended by the comments of the BBC's parliamentary reporter – 'It is not a nice thing for

37 Chapter eight, page 336-340.

anyone to be held up to one's friends in various parts of the country as a ranting raving fool' – the resulting exchange offered an interesting view of the sensitivities between both organizations, also with regard to their respective position in Parliament.³⁸ We have also seen that the timing of this row was most unfortunate, notably for the BBC, which had its hope set on the forthcoming Ullswater inquiry (1935-1936) to endorse its request for greater access to the House of Commons' galleries. An important impetus in this was the growing frustration inside the BBC about the lack of progress in terms of political broadcasting and by seeking to enhance its parliamentary reporting it sought to escape the suffocating hold of the party whips. However, chapter seven showed that it was this same Ullswater inquiry which the Labour Party used to make a stand against the perceived impact of broadcasting on Parliament. Indeed, among those to do so was Clement Attlee, who insisted that Parliament should remain 'the focal point of politics in this country', to which he added at a later stage that it would be 'a most dangerous thing' to have a parliamentary reporter 'going straight away to give an impression'.³⁹ It was on this same basis that the Labour Party would continue to obstruct the BBC's presence in Parliament throughout the following years, despite the latter's ongoing efforts to the contrary. Again, much like the SDAP's example, this was greatly symbolic for a decade and a half of prolonged conflict between the two organizations. When looking at these developments through a comparative perspective it seems most remarkable that both parties' dealings with broadcasting would culminate in these corresponding attempts to ban radio from the very heart of political life at such a similar point in time.

And yet, this does not mark the end of our inquiry, because the question remains what the broader significance of these parallel turn of events was and, more specifically, whether we should consider this culmination of events in the mid-1930s as proof of the limited importance of radio to interwar political culture, or rather as evidence of its fundamental significance as a medium of political change. Admittedly, asking this question at this point may seem somewhat curious, because although the pages above make ample reference to the transformative or disruptive potential of radio, above all the findings of this comparison point towards the seemingly successful attempts of both parties to preserve a particular conception of politics against the influence of broadcasting. What's more, the introduction to this study referred to radio as a phantom medium, which was informed by the fact that political historians and political scientists have largely ignored its emergence in the interwar decades as a factor of political significance. Against this background it might be argued that these parallel turn of events were very much symptomatic of the broader developments that would, eventually, see radio ending up as a near blind spot to so many scholarly observers of those decades. Still, it is one thing to reflect on, what radio historian Michele Hilmes has called, the 'roots of forgetfulness' and quite another thing to seek to restore an overlooked medium to its historical significance.⁴⁰ And although this study has shown that both parties (and the wider political establishment in Britain and the Netherlands) managed to go a long way in curbing the role of radio in politics, it will be argued here that these efforts have mainly helped to conceal, but failed to undo the impact of radio on interwar political culture.

38 Letter M. Jones to J. Reith 29-11-1934 and letter M. Jones to J. Reith 10-12-1934, WAC, inv. nr. R34/561. Chapter seven, page 274-275.

39 'Broadcasting policy. 5. The broadcasting of controversial matter', WAC, inv. nr. R34/534/4, f. 19. Also *Hansard*, House of Commons, debate 6-7-1936, 978, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard>.

40 Hilmes, 'Rethinking Radio', 8.

For this reason it is useful to return to the theoretical point of view and firstly to John B. Thompson's *The Media and Modernity* which offers a very instructive interpretation of how the historical emergence of new media have helped to transform the practices and meaning of communication and politics. Thompson's work was also referred to above in relation to the significance of radio as a means of 'despatialized simultaneity' and its impact on the 'uncoupling of space and time', and having charted both parties' dealings with radio throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, we have seen ample evidence of how crucially significant these spatiotemporal aspects were to the integration of broadcasting in political culture. Without going into detail, it was these aspects that would see, for example, the living room acquiring a whole new significance as a space of political persuasion, or that would give a political speech a far greater scope and immediacy (that is, in terms of space and time) than before; moreover, it is elements like these, which Thompson depicts as the distinctive features of the new forms of 'mediated publicness' which have emerged throughout history, and he sees this, in turn, as part of a larger shift that has gathered pace with the advent of modernity in the nature of political power.⁴¹ Having said that we have also seen that it was the SDAP's and the Labour Party's ambivalence and resistance to these developments that stood out most clearly within the more strictly delineated period of this study. While this would eventually lead to the parallel attempts to ban radio from the heart of political life, drawing on Thompson this turn of events could be seen to epitomize both parties' attachment to, what he calls, a traditional form of publicness, which was marked above all by the face-to-face setting, the sharing of the same locale and the idea of co-presence.⁴² In relation to this it might be noted also that Thompson links the 'traditional publicness of co-presence' to a particular conception of power as spatialized and routinely displayed in public, and this suggests that both parties' opposition to broadcasting might also be understood as an attempt to preserve or consolidate the particular idea of power that lay encapsulated in these parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of assembly.⁴³

Of course, this is but one way to reflect on the significance of this parallel turn of events, and we might also, for example, take up the notion of the public sphere to elaborate on the analogy with the conception of politics as an embodied form of conversation or dialogue, which can be seen to underlie Habermas' writings on this concept.⁴⁴ Beyond that we might also recall James Carey's distinction between a 'transmission' view and a 'ritual' view of communication, and in light of what was noted above, we could ask for instance what both parties' attempts to preserve the ritual shape of politics within a particular spatiotemporal order, disclosed about their idea of power as governing over space and time. But if both lines seem worth exploring, to do so would also distract from another, more important question of what the significance of these developments was in light of the role of radio as a medium of political change, and to answer this question really ought to return to the notion of co-presence, which conceals a more profound meaning than its standard connotation of nearness or proximity would seem to suggest. What is referred to here is the fact that the notion of presence (as the core part of the notion of co-presence) has a central place as well in the concept of representation. In fact, among those to elaborate on this notion is Michael Saward, whose work on the 'representative claim' was referred to above.

41 Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*, 119-148.

42 Ibidem, 126.

43 Ibidem, 132-134.

44 Peters, 'Distrust of representation: Habermas on the public sphere', 564.

Quoting Hanna Pitkin (as one of the foremost theorists on the subject of political representation) Saward defines representation as the act of making something present that is literally absent.⁴⁵ Of course, this is a most concise description of a most elusive concept, but it may be noted that it holds an immediate significance as well to much of what this study has explored, which, indeed, did not just revolve around the capacity of radio to expand, undermine and transform the 'presence' of politics at a given location in time, but which would also, eventually, lead to the (near) absence of radio itself, not just politically, but also historiographically. It is worth pursuing these observations a bit further, as it may help to see that the marginalization of radio throughout the interwar decades really failed to stem the tide of change that was the result of its arrival.

Indeed, one way to do so would be to take up Michael Saward's writings on the 'representative claim', which, as was explained, stresses the need to recognize the dynamic, creative and claim-based character of political representation. It is a central argument of Saward's work that the meaning of representation does not so much reside in the mere fact of a presence, but rather in the multiple ways in which this presence is constructed, defended and contested as standing for an absence.⁴⁶ It is not difficult to see how these words apply to what this study has found, and we may refer for example to the struggle for 'control' which was explored in the second part of this, and which may well be understood as a struggle to impose the primacy and authority of a particular idea of 'presence' over the steadily emerging field of broadcasting. Of course, the same argument can be seen to apply to both parties' involvement in what was earlier called the 'politics of programmatic form', and which focussed largely on the question of what the form and content of the mediated 'presence' of politics in programmes ought to be, and, which fuelled such a protracted conflict over where the authority to decide on these matters was essentially located. Obviously, there is no need to go through these issues here again, but while these observations help to recognize that this struggle between politics and broadcasting was very much a struggle over the form and nature of political representation, ultimately it also highlights the need to acknowledge the significance of what is absent as a way to understand the nature and meaning of what is present. In terms of this study, this implies acknowledging that the significance of radio to interwar political culture was not merely defined by its impact on the presence of politics, but also (and perhaps even more so) by its influence as a relative absence from politics.

To be clear, these considerations are also informed by the writings of other authors, among whom the cultural theorist Clive Barnett. Drawing on a similar deconstructivist and claim-based understanding of representation as Michael Saward, Barnett's work has a closer affinity to the subject of this study, as it explores the intricate connections between the media, communications and democracy from a theoretical and philosophical point of view.⁴⁷ Barnett's approach is non-historical, but what is interesting is that it touches on some of the same dichotomies and ambiguities which this study has found. This is most notably so in his questioning of, what he calls, conventional conceptualizations of representation as being tied to 'a strong sense of presentation in a here and now, a delimited place and moment', which he argues has had a profound impact on the public and scholarly debates about the meaning of democracy.⁴⁸ Elsewhere he makes a similar point when he addresses the tendency to understand democracy in terms of the immediate

45 Saward, *The Representative Claim*, 39-43.

46 Ibidem, 39.

47 Barnett, *Culture and Democracy*, 9-32.

48 Ibidem, 22-23.

presence (or 'self-presence of the people to itself through the medium of public debate') of the public in a forum of debate or decision-making, which he sees in connection to a similar, long-standing tendency to 'develop excessively concrete images of the spaces of public action and political representation'.⁴⁹ If this bears an immediate resemblance with the developments which this study has explored, what is most significant here are Barnett's comments about, what he describes as, 'the paradoxical play of presence and absence that distinguishes democracy as a regime of power'.⁵⁰ These comments are crucially informed by the notion of the empty place of power by the French political philosopher Claude Lefort, who, Barnett notes, has installed a 'metaphysics of absence' at the heart of democratic theory.⁵¹ What's more, in drawing on Lefort (and others) Barnett argues that the meaning of democracy is inherently unstable, that the public can never be fully present and that the nature of the public sphere should really be understood as 'structurally elsewhere, neither lost nor in need of recovery or rebuilding but defined by its resistance to being made present'.⁵² Against this background it might be argued also that we should avoid understanding politics as fully present or as being consubstantial with itself. And although this was very much what fuelled both parties' attempts to preserve (or recover and rebuild) a particular form or presence of politics against the influence of radio, with Barnett we might say that these efforts were destined to fall short and merely helped to conceal that the transformative impact of radio on politics would continue elsewhere.

The question remains how all this can be understood to have marked the birth of a new political reality. Most of the issues that are discussed here are closely linked to what Barnett has called the 'irreducibility of the medium in processes of representation' and in drawing up a more comprehensive picture of the new political reality of broadcasting, the following (final) pages of this study will turn to what is broadly recognized as the most quintessential medium of politics, theatre.⁵³ Of course, this is not the first time that the notion of politics as theatre is referred to, and chapter seven and chapter eight indicated that the theatrical understanding of politics stood very much at the heart of the tensions between radio and interwar politics. This was most clearly exemplified by the SDAP's theatrical turn, with its inherent antagonism to radio. In a different way it resonated also in Ramsay MacDonald's early warning to the BBC's John Reith about the theatrical shortcomings of radio – 'you will never broadcast a great stage scene' –, and his own 1924 encounter with the microphone in Glasgow's City Hall certainly seemed to prove this point. Throughout these chapters we have also encountered the names of the political historians Jon Lawrence, Henk te Velde and Bernard Rulof, who have all applied the theatrical perspective to chart the changing culture of politics in 19th and 20th century Britain and the Netherlands and, moreover, who have all (to a more and lesser extent) been relatively unimpressed about the significance of radio to interwar political culture. This last point is notably important here, and in drawing a rather different conclusion, the following pages will argue that the rise of radio can really be understood to have changed the theatre of politics at large, and that the contours of this shift were largely obscured by the perceived continuity of politics on the political stage.

49 Ibidem, 10 and 24.

50 Ibidem, 19–20.

51 Ibidem, 19. Barnett borrows the term 'metaphysics of absence' from S. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford 1992).

52 Ibidem, 30. The quoted passage comes originally from T. Keenan, 'Windows of vulnerability' in: B. Robbins ed., *The Phantom Public* (Minneapolis 1993).

53 Barnett, *Culture and Democracy*, 16.

On and beyond the political stage

In juxtaposing the rise of radio with the theatre of politics, we are dealing here with a metaphor which has been widely used throughout history to reflect on the spectacle and meaning of politics, among whom, for instance, by Hannah Arendt, Clifford Geertz, Richard Sennett or Claude Lefort.⁵⁴ However, in taking up the theatrical perspective here, the following pages turn more specifically to an essay by the Dutch political historian Ido de Haan which discusses the merits and limits of the notion of political style and which sets out a case in support of the theatrical perspective through an analysis of the choice of metaphors in the political aesthetics of Frank Ankersmit.⁵⁵

Of course, Ankersmit's name was also referred to above, where a parallel was observed between the first experience of broadcasting by Arthur Greenwood and Asser Benjamin Kleerekoper and the ordeal of Jim Carrey's character in the film *The Truman Show* and it was Ankersmit's interpretation of the latter example which was seen to cast an interesting perspective on the former example as well. What's more, Ankersmit's reflections on this film do not figure in De Haan's assessment of Ankersmit's political aesthetics, which concentrate mainly on Ankersmit's use of metaphors from the visual arts, most notably painting. Reflecting on Ankersmit's work with obvious appreciation, De Haan suggests that this choice of metaphor is not unproblematic, since it ties the intricacies of politics at a given moment to a single mechanism (or medium) of representation, that is the painting.⁵⁶ According to De Haan, the use of this metaphor narrows the ability to grasp the conflictual nature of democracy, and it is for this reason that he welcomes Ankersmit's more recent turn to musical theory (more specifically, his exploration of Robert Schumann's technique of the *innere Stimme*) as more promising, as it allows for the incorporation of multiple perspectives (or voices) in a larger whole.⁵⁷ While he sees this as more closely consistent with the pluralist nature of democracy, he also argues that the same can be seen to apply to the idea of politics as theatre, which much like the performance of a musical piece, relies on the convergence or clash of different perspectives or actors on a stage. What's more, it is a central argument of De Haan that democracy is a regime of fundamental indeterminacy, and that politics should not so much be seen as having a fixed form, but that it should rather be understood as constantly evolving with the passing of time. Indeed, this is much similar to the theatrical practice, and after elaborating on some of the further, closer affinities between the world of politics and the realm of theatre (such as the shared dependence on rhetoric and persuasion) De Haan asserts that the theatrical metaphor makes a most helpful perspective to capture the ongoing transformation of politics throughout history.⁵⁸

The question here is where this leaves radio as a medium which had an enormous potential to expand and change the display of politics on the political stage, but which, as we have seen, was also partly at odds with the theatre of interwar politics. To answer this question the most obvious place to start is probably the political stage itself as the central locus of political life where the theatre of politics was played out before the public eye. Of course, in the case of this

54 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago 1958), Dana R. Villa, 'Theatricality in the Public Realm of Hannah Arendt' in: Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong eds., *Public Space and Democracy* (London and Minneapolis 2001), Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton 1980) or Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York 1977), Lefort, 'Het vraagstuk van de democratie', 97-98, Lefort, 'Democratie & vertegenwoordiging', 103-105 and Lefort, 'Bestaat het theologisch-politieke nog?' in: Idem, *Wat is politiek?*, 121-191, there 144.

55 De Haan, 'Stijl, vorm, ontwerp. Nadeel en nut van het stijlbegrip voor de politiek'.

56 Ibidem, 243-245. A similar point is made by Näsström, 'Representative Democracy as Tautology', 330-332.

57 De Haan, 'Stijl, vorm, ontwerp. Nadeel en nut van het stijlbegrip voor de politiek', 244-245.

58 Ibidem, 245-248.

study we have dealt with two rather different, but equally distinctive forms of political theatre, and while the British House of Commons is widely recognized and admired as home to the most splendid form of political drama which democracy has to offer, no less iconic are the scenes of the marching crowds, participating in a choreography of a unified will. Having said that, this study has asked what the rise of radio has meant to interwar politics in both configurations, and, as such, it has found ample evidence of the radical change which broadcasting brought to the rituals and practices which had long shaped the display of politics on the political stage. Indeed, this was most clearly exemplified by the shift in the rhetorical and performative requirements of political speech-making, and, leaving the details aside, it was the presence of a microphone or the proximity of a radio reporter which instantly altered the dynamics and scope of what was happening on the political stage. In a more general sense it might be argued as well that the use of radio caused a sense of doubling in the public nature of the play that was being performed or enacted on the political stage. Clearly, this does not deny that the actual presence of radio on or near the stage remained rather limited throughout the larger part of these years, notably in the British case, but on the whole the significance of these developments lay less in the scale and more in the very profoundness of the break which radio caused with the former state of affairs, which defined the relationship between the political stage and the outside world.

It appears this was also recognized by the SDAP's and the Labour Party's leadership, which, as we have seen, would both grow increasingly concerned about the disruptive impact of radio on political culture, in spite of the limited presence of radio on or near the political stage. We know where this would lead to and when looking at these developments from a theatrical perspective, it may be noted that these attempts to restore the unity of political life were somehow reminiscent of an Aristotelean conception of theatre, as based on the unity of time, space and action.⁵⁹ Still, the question is what these turn events have meant for the significance of radio as a medium of political change, as it might seem that this near absence of radio from the political stage was the ultimate proof of its limited importance to political culture. This, of course, is not how this study sees it, as it draws an opposite conclusion, which partly builds on De Haan's critique of Ankersmit's choice of metaphors, but which applies the same line of reasoning to the theatrical metaphor to suggest that the real significance of radio lay hidden beyond the political stage. To clarify this point it is helpful to briefly return to De Haan's essay on the notion of political style. As was explained elsewhere, it is a particular argument of this essay that politics is always 'a struggle over substance within a given form, and, at the same time, a struggle over the form of politics itself.'⁶⁰ Perhaps to remind, these words were also used in the introduction to this study to highlight the significance of the institutional framework of politics and, more particularly, to address the need to keep an eye on the institutional processes and dynamics which helped to define the particular form of politics in a given time. Having charted both parties' involvement in this struggle, the various parts of this study have offered a detailed look of these dynamics as well, but what is important here is that these chapters have taken us well beyond the political stage. In fact, having gone through a vast accumulation of letters, memoranda, minutes of meetings and others forms of documentation, it needs no explanation here that many of the issues that would help to define the place and shape of politics in broadcasting (and vice versa) were literally discussed behind closed doors. And although this does not in any way rule out the use of the notion of politics as theatre, it does indicate that the theatrical metaphor is not free from shortcomings either,

59 Kari Palonen, 'Taking Distance as a Condition of the Study of Politics' in: Tuula Vaarakallio & Taru Haapala eds., *The Distant Present* (Jyväskylä 2013), available online <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/41748>, 12-27, there 15.

60 De Haan, 'Stijl, vorm, ontwerp. Nadeel en nut van het stijlbegrip voor de politiek', 248.

in the sense that its emphasis on what happens on the political stage can easily distract from the fact that a crucial part of the political process takes place beyond the political stage.⁶¹

There is a more fundamental point to be made here, because this inquiry has shown that the struggle between politics and broadcasting should not so much be seen as a struggle which came to unfold within the theatre of politics, but that it should also be seen as a conflict over the very nature and future of the theatre of politics. Of course, at the heart of this was the perceived incompatibility of radio with the established forms and conventions of politics, and if this helps to understand the troubled and deeply fraught integration of radio in political culture, again, it was this that would also, eventually lead to its near absence from the heart of political life and, in turn, its status as a 'phantom medium'. Still, there is a difference between banning a medium from the political stage and reversing its influence on the theatre of politics altogether, and this implies it is equally important to look beyond the political stage in this respect as well, since it was there where the new political reality of broadcasting continued to take shape, so in spite of the attempts to curb its influence on political life. At this point there is no need to do so in detail, since the pages above and the previous chapters have already offered us multiple views of the shift in the makeup of interwar political culture that was the result of the rise of radio. As such, we have seen for instance that the new reality of radio was very much epitomized by the novelty of the broadcasting studio, which was anything unlike the conventional surroundings of politics. What's more, if speaking from the studio proved daunting at first, it also offered, as one contemporary phrased it, a chance to have 'a personal and highly intimate conversation' with each of 'all those ten-thousands listeners separately', and it was this that paved the way to a new, more personalized form of political leadership.⁶² Of course, the larger context here was the introduction of universal suffrage and against this background it was noted also that the rise of radio seemed perfectly suited to reach out to the new vast electorate, in its fragmented and aggregated form, and, indeed, among which the many newly enfranchised, female voters. And yet, when reflecting on these developments, we may also highlight the shift which radio sparked on the receiving end of politics, that is in those living rooms across the country and with the individual listeners as the elementary particles of this new collective entity, which, suddenly, with the turn of a switch could find themselves connected to places or locations, which had long remained inaccessible to the average citizen. We know that many of those barriers remained in place, or were reinforced after a moment of openness. However, it was the sheer promise of access which radio offered that signalled the arrival of a new political era and a new political culture, which centred more strongly on the domestic sphere and the family and which was shaped by a whole new idea and expectation of the immediacy, subjectivity and accessibility of political life.

In fact, we should take this argument one, final step further and it is suggested here that we can only grasp the full significance of radio to interwar political culture by acknowledging that the new reality of broadcasting that was taking shape beyond the political stage had an immediate impact as well on the nature of politics on the political stage, that is regardless of the actual presence or absence of radio on or near the political stage. This may sound overly philosophical, and to explain what is meant here it is helpful to turn to the work of the social theorist Anthony Giddens

61 It should be noted that this is something which De Haan has forcefully argued for as well, albeit from a somewhat different (non-theatrical) point of view and the introduction to this study referred to his writings on this issue (most notably De Haan, *Politieke reconstructie. Een nieuw begin in de politieke geschiedenis*) to explain the partly institutional approach to the emergence of broadcasting. More extensive on this chapter two, page 27-30.

62 Kleerekoper, 'Anders.... maar niet minder'.

who has reflected on the same principle, albeit from a somewhat different perspective. Key to this is the term ‘phantasmagoric’, which figures in Giddens’ analysis of the advent of modernity and which he uses to reflect on the consequences of, what he describes as, the ‘dislocation of place from space’ and the ‘separation of time from space’. More particularly, Giddens argues that in conditions of modernity ‘place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the “visible form” of the locale conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature.’⁶³ To be clear, Giddens uses this term in a non-political sense, but it may be noted there are various aspects to these words which resonate closely with the issues that were explored above, most notably the focus on the notions of ‘space’ and ‘time’ or the distinction between the idea of what is present and absent. As such, it may be noted also that Giddens’ description of the term ‘phantasmagoric’ has an immediate affinity with Clive Barnett’s and Michael Seward’s observations about the meaning of the notions of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ to the concept of representation. As was explained earlier, both Seward and Barnett insist that the meaning of representation does not so much reside in the mere fact of a ‘presence’, but rather in the intricate connections between this ‘presence’ and the multiple forms of ‘absence’ it was thought to represent. It was Barnett who refers in this respect to the philosophy of Claude Lefort as a ‘metaphysics of absence’, and who argues that the public sphere should be understood as ‘structurally elsewhere’.

However, there is a different aspect that requires our attention here, that is the theatrical connotation of the term ‘phantasmagoria’. This is something Giddens does not reflect on, but in light of our observations here it is certainly interesting that this term refers to a late 18th and 19th century form of horror theatre which relied on the use of magic lanterns to project images of demons, ghostly figures and other fantastic creatures.⁶⁴ In contrast to the more conventional forms of theatre it might be noted that this form of entertainment relied less on the actual, embodied presence of actors on a stage, and more on the projected and imagined forms of absence that lay hidden beyond the visible, material world. While Giddens uses this perspective to highlight the entangled nature and growing complexities of a globalizing world, in the context of the argument here the term ‘phantasmagoria’ offers a helpful perspective as well to grasp the reciprocal significance of the absent aspects of political life to the nature of what was present on the political stage. In fact, picking up on Ido de Haan’s comments about the political aesthetics and choice of metaphor of Frank Ankersmit, it may be argued that this term has a wider merit as it has the potential to mitigate or reconcile the shortcomings of the theatrical metaphor, as it may help to remind those authors deploying the notion of politics as theatre to always consider the myriad forms of absence which, to a more or lesser extent, were also important to understand the nature of the spectacle of politics on the political stage. Of course, in the case of this study, this concerns the absence of radio and the new political reality of broadcasting that was taking shape beyond the political stage. Having charted the interwar emergence of radio, this study has found that this development sparked a fair bit of concern and anxiety in political circles. At the heart of this stood the ghostly figure of the broadcasting audience, and it was these developments that would give radio its phantom status. However, unlike the projected figures of a magic lantern, the broadcasting audience was very real,

63 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge and Malden 2008) 19.

64 Fred Botting and Catherine Spooner, ‘Introduction: monstrous media/spectral subjects’ in: Idem and Idem eds., *Monstrous media/spectral subjects: Imaging gothic from the nineteenth century to the present* (Manchester 2015) 1-12 and Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford and New York 2006).

and so was the influence of radio on interwar political culture. As such, it is argued here that the rise of radio should really be understood to have opened up the theatre of politics to a new political era, so, indeed, despite the fact that its significance was very much concealed by the perceived continuity in the form of politics on the political stage.

Having arrived at this point, this leaves us with one final question, that is what all this means for the far more prominent status of television as the younger sister of the broadcasting family. Perhaps to remind, the introduction to this study explained that the 1950s emergence of television is widely acknowledged as a defining moment in the evolution of 20th century political culture and, moreover, that statements in this direction nearly always ignore the interwar emergence of radio.⁶⁵ Of course, in seeking to counter this neglect, this study has focussed on two cases only and if this means that its contribution to the restoration of radio can only be modest, at the same time the findings of this study offer ample evidence to claim that this television-centric understanding of political change is seriously flawed. On the whole, we have seen that the 1920s and the 1930s emergence of radio forced politicians to face up to the new political reality of broadcasting, and while this was a very contentious process which was paved with conflicts of all sorts of kinds, it also saw the steady emancipation of the broadcasting organizations as a political force to be reckoned with. Parallel to this we have also seen that the mutual dealings between politics and broadcasting would start to improve towards the end of the 1930s – cautiously in the British case and more notably so in the Dutch case – and that the leadership of both parties would grow more accustomed to the medium-specific qualities of radio and the mere presence of the broadcasting audience. Again, this was a highly contentious process, but against this background it was also highly symbolic that these years would see the first attempts to develop a journalistic approach to party politics. Although this journalistic impulse was observed on both sides of this comparison, it was slightly ironic that the first steps in this direction were taken by the VARA and not the BBC. Clearly, these experiments were still very rudimentary, but it was this development that seemed to mark an end to the fundamental conflict over radio, or rather the birth of a new understanding about the need to recast and resume this conflict in a different form. While this development would gain further momentum in the post-war years, it suggests there is every reason to restore and re-explore the historical continuities between radio and television. Beyond that, it also suggests it is high time to stop praising the post-war triumph of television without acknowledging the critical importance of the rise of radio as the process which had already changed the nature and meaning of politics in a most profound way.

65 Chapter one, page 11-15.

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Samenvatting

Menig historicus heeft betoogd dat de opkomst van televisie in de jaren vijftig en zestig van de 20e eeuw een grote invloed heeft gehad op het aanzien en het functioneren van de politiek. Opvallend genoeg gaan beweringen over de betekenis van televisie doorgaans voorbij aan de rol van radio, als een medium dat nauw verwant is aan televisie, maar zijn doorbraak naar een massapubliek beleefde in de jaren twintig en dertig van deze eeuw. Deze gebrekkige erkenning van radio is wijdverbreid en de sporen ervan kunnen niet alleen getraceerd worden in de geschiedschrijving van politiek, maar ook in aanverwante vakgebieden als de politicologie, politieke filosofie en politieke communicatiewetenschappen. En hoewel de opkomst van vakgebieden als media studies en mediageschiedenis sterk heeft bijgedragen aan een opleving van radio als onderwerp van wetenschappelijk onderzoek, heeft dit slechts beperkt geleid tot een herwaardering van het medium vanuit politiek historisch oogpunt. Tegen deze achtergrond onderzoekt dit proefschrift de politiek culturele betekenis van radio in het interbellum en het hoopt daarmee een aanzet te geven tot een correctie van de televisie-centrische opvatting van politieke verandering die zo dominant is in het denken over de relatie tussen politiek en media in de 20e eeuw.

Daartoe hanteert dit proefschrift een vergelijkend perspectief, en het richt zich meer nadrukkelijk op de omgang met en opvattingen over radio van twee verwante politieke partijen, de SDAP in Nederland en de Labour Party in Groot-Brittannië. De keuze voor deze twee partijen impliceert een verkenning van twee verschillende omroepsystemen: aan de ene kant het Nederlandse ‘verzuilde’ bestel dat gebaseerd was op een verscheidenheid van private omroepverenigingen en aan andere kant het Britse publieke bestel dat geheel en al samenviel met de BBC. Tegelijkertijd beschouwt dit proefschrift radio als een medium dat wezenlijk gelijk was in beide landen, en de veronderstelling is dat het contrast tussen beide omroepconstellaties het mogelijk maakt een scherper beeld te vormen van de medium-specifieke dynamiek die de komst van radio op gang heeft gebracht in de politieke cultuur van beide landen. Op basis van deze vergelijking poogt dit proefschrift ook het idee van nationale bijzonderheid te relativeren dat zo sterk verweven is met het denken over de geschiedenis van omroep en politiek (ook in Nederland en Groot-Brittannië) en wat in beide gevallen mede heeft bijgedragen aan de status van radio als een ‘fantoom-medium’ in de politieke geschiedschrijving. De vraag die in dit onderzoek centraal staat is welke rol de SDAP en de Labour Party gespeeld hebben in de politieke vormgeving van de omroep in de jaren twintig en dertig, en welk aandeel radio heeft gehad in de verandering van het partijpolitieke optreden en de partijpolitieke aanwezigheid in de openbaarheid. Deze vraag valt uiteen in drie sub-thema’s en elk van deze thema’s komt aan bod in een afzonderlijk deel van dit proefschrift. Het eerste deel concentreert zich op de opkomst van radio in de vroege jaren twintig en het bestudeert de bijdrage van de SDAP en de Labour Party aan de vorming van een nationaal omroepbestel. Het tweede deel richt zich op de daaropvolgende periode en het onderzoekt de positie van beide partijen in de politiek-bestuurlijke dynamiek die de verhouding tussen omroep en politiek verder vorm zou geven. Het derde deel, tenslotte, analyseert hoe de SDAP en de Labour Party gebruik gemaakt hebben van radio als een medium van politieke communicatie, onder meer tijdens verkiezingscampagnes, en het beschrijft daarnaast welke rol beide partijen gespeeld hebben in de ontwikkeling van politieke programmavormen. Uiteindelijk worden de bevindingen van deze drie delen samengebracht in

de slotconclusie, waar eerst een aantal theoretische noties ('constitutief moment', 'openbaarheid', 'representatie', 'integratie' en 'tijd en ruimte') ingepast worden om de samenhang tussen de delen te duiden, en vervolgens de metafoor van politiek als theater gebruikt wordt om te betogen dat de opkomst van radio een meer fundamentele breuk in de politieke cultuur van het interbellum heeft gemarkeerd dan tot nog toe herkend is.

Deel I: Rode blauwdrukken voor een omroepbestel

De wortels van radio voeren terug tot ver in de 19e eeuw, maar het waren de jaren na de Eerste Wereldoorlog waarin de ideeën over radio als een 'omroep'-medium vaste vorm aannamen. Politiek gezien waren dit roerige tijden. Zowel in Nederland als in Groot-Brittannië resulteerde de invoering van het algemeen kiesrecht in een verdrievoudiging van het electoraat. Ook in cultureel opzicht was dit een turbulente periode, en de opkomst van radio bood een treffende illustratie van de nieuwe massacultuur die zich steeds sterker zou manifesteren. De groeiende belangstelling voor radio werd vanuit twee richtingen gevoed: enerzijds vanuit de hoek van grotere en kleinere radiofabrikanten en anderzijds vanuit de hoek van individuele toestelbezitters. Het was deze ontwikkeling die de roep om een permanente omroepvoorziening deed toenemen en die de Britse en Nederlandse overheid ertoe aanzette hun terughoudende reguleringsbeleid te verruilen voor een constructievere aanpak. Daarmee werd het omroepvraagstuk ook nadrukkelijk een onderwerp van politiek debat.

Van de twee partijen die in dit onderzoek centraal staan, was het de Labour Party die als eerste gevraagd werd haar ideeën over de organisatie van de omroep te formuleren. Mede ingegeven door het schrikbeeld van de omroep-'chaos' in Amerika, kwam de Britse overheid in 1922 al tot de conclusie dat Groot-Brittannië het meest gebaat zou zijn bij de oprichting van één nationale omroeporganisatie en het besloot daartoe de radiofabrikanten, die voor een zendvergunning in aanmerking wensten te komen tot samenwerking te bewegen. Daarmee was de geboorte van de British Broadcasting Company een feit, al moest de politieke discussie over de invulling van de taak en opdracht van de BBC, en haar relatie tot de overheid, nog op gang komen. Een cruciale rol in dit proces werd vervuld door twee adviescommissies, de Sykes Committee (1923) en de Crawford Committee (1925-1926). De Labour Party was in beide commissies vertegenwoordigd en haar voornaamste standpunt was dat de omroep een publieke voorziening diende te zijn, waarin geen plaats was voor private of commerciële belangen en waarin de overheid, en met name het parlement, een controlerende functie behoorde te hebben. In grote lijnen was dat ook de strekking van het advies dat de Crawford Committee in 1926 aan de Conservatieve regering aanbood. Het daaropvolgende besluit van diezelfde regering om de BBC om te vormen tot een publieke corporatie (de British Broadcasting Corporation) werd door de Labour Party verwelkomd als een overwinning voor het socialisme. Opvallend was dat de partij weinig belangstelling toonde voor de programmatisch-inhoudelijke kant van het omroepvraagstuk, en daarmee ook geen oog had voor de vraag welke betekenis radio zou kunnen hebben in politieke of democratische zin. Even opmerkelijk was de gebrekkige interesse van de Labour Party voor de implicaties van de toekomstige status van de BBC als een publieke corporatie, en het was een veeg teken dat de term 'controle' meer centraal stond in Labours bijdrage aan het omroepdebat dan het begrip onafhankelijkheid.

De hervorming van de BBC kreeg haar beslag in 1927, op een moment dat de toekomstige inrichting van het Nederlandse omroepbestel nog ongewis was. Even goed, hadden zich in de voorgaande jaren een tweetal ontwikkelingen voorgedaan die van grote invloed zouden zijn op de uiteindelijke uitkomst van dit proces: ten eerste het vroegtijdige stranden van de pogingen om

(naar het voorbeeld van de BBC) een nationale omroep op te richten en ten tweede de opmars van particuliere omroepverenigingen die een eigen deel van de zendtijd opeisten. Eén van die omroepverenigingen was de in 1925 opgerichte VARA, die nauw gelieerd was aan de SDAP, maar tegelijkertijd slechts beperkt steun vond bij de partij in haar poging een socialistisch geluid via de ether te verkondigen. Dit was in belangrijke mate het gevolg van het feit dat de SDAP zich voor de geboorte van de VARA al gecommitteerd had aan de oprichting van een nationale omroep. De overheidscommissies die in 1925 en 1926 met dat doel aan het werk togen, zouden niet het beoogde resultaat hebben, maar de inbreng van de SDAP (met name het minderheidsrapport van partijsecretaris Cornelis Werkhoven) bracht wel een fundamentele parallel aan het licht met de omroepopvattingen van de Labour Party. Net als de Labour Party was de SDAP van mening dat de omroep een publieke voorziening behoorde te zijn, al steunden haar voorstellen in die richting sterker op de inbreng van het publiek in de organisatie en het bestuur van de omroep, ook via de omroepverenigingen. Dit contrast was illustratief voor het verschil in de democratieopvatting die ten grondslag lag aan de voorstellen van beide partijen, waarbij de Labour Party vooral de noodzaak van democratische controle onderstreepte en de SDAP het belang van participatie. En hoewel de SDAP meer oog had dan de Labour Party voor de betekenis van radio als een medium van debat en meningsvorming, was ze net als de Labour Party maar beperkt geïnteresseerd in de partijpolitieke mogelijkheden van het medium. Ook om deze reden was het ironisch dat het uiteindelijke zendtijdenbesluit van mei 1930 zo positief zou uitpakken voor de partij, en de aan haar gelieerde VARA. Met een halve week zendtijd zag de VARA haar strijd voor gelijkberechtiging beloond worden, een strijd waar de SDAP zich schoorvoetend achter geschaard had na het vroege echec van de nationale omroep. Al bleef de partijleiding principieel voorstander van een publieke, niet-‘verzuilde’ inrichting van het omroepbestel, het viel niet te ontkennen dat de alternatieve uitkomst stevige voordelen bood, niet alleen aan de VARA en de arbeidersbeweging in het algemeen, maar ook aan de SDAP in het bijzonder.

Deel II: Tussen onafhankelijkheid en controle

Met de opdeling van de zendtijd langs confessionele en ideologische scheidslijnen had het Nederlandse omroepbestel op het eerste oog weinig gemeen met het Britse voorbeeld. Tegelijkertijd combineerden beide omroepstelsels een niet-commerciële grondslag met een zekere mate van onafhankelijkheid ten opzichte van het politieke gezag, althans formeel gezien. De vraag die het tweede deel van dit proefschrift behandelt, is wat dat tweede aspect betekend heeft voor de politiek-bestuurlijke omgang van de SDAP en de Labour Party met het omroepvraagstuk in de jaren na de vorming van beide omroepstelsels. Wat de SDAP betreft zou deze vraag grotendeels (maar niet volledig) samenvallen met de relatie van de partij tot de VARA. Ook in het geval van de Labour Party zou deze vraag zich toespitsen op de relatie van de partij tot de BBC, die vanzelfsprekend een geheel andere invulling zou krijgen dan de relatie tussen de SDAP en de VARA. En hoewel dit tweede deel van het proefschrift grote verschillen heeft blootgelegd in de aard en dynamiek van de kwesties en conflicten die zich zouden voordoen binnen beide casussen, bracht het ook een overeenkomstige roep om ‘controle’ aan het licht, die vanuit beide partijen zou opklinken en die in toenemende mate het debat over de relatie tussen politiek en omroep zou overstemmen.

Dit werd het meest pregnant geïllustreerd door het voorbeeld van de Labour Party. Zoals vermeld, had de Labour Party de aangekondigde hervorming van de BBC in 1926 met vrolijke triomf verwelkomd, maar hoofdstuk 5 toont dat Labours optimisme over de omroep binnen het bestek van een decennium radicaal zou omslaan. Een sleutelmoment in dit proces was de

val van Labours tweede minderheidsregering in 1931 en de daaropvolgende marginalisering van de partij in het parlement bleek een vruchtbare voedingsbodem voor haar toenemende onvrede over de BBC. In de jaren voor 1931 had de Labour Party zich beperkt geïnteresseerd voor de omroep, al was het geleidelijk duidelijk geworden dat de autoritaire bestuursstijl van haar algemeen directeur, John Reith, niet strookte met de ideeën van de Labour Party over hoe het publieke toezicht op de BBC georganiseerd zou moeten worden. In de jaren na 1931 zou de Labour Party zich in toenemende mate beklagen over het voordeel dat de nationale regering in omroepaangelegenheden zou genieten, en haar onvrede hierover werd nog eens versterkt door de weigering van diezelfde regering en de BBC om hier op gepaste wijze op te reageren. De Labour Party was van mening dat deze situatie niet alleen strijdig was met de democratische grondslag van het omroepbestel, maar ook ondermijnend was aan de positie van het parlement als 'supreme authority'. De aanzwellende roep om parlementaire controle die hier het gevolg van was, zou in het midden van de jaren dertig uitmonden in een reeks uitingen die de BBC en haar algemeen directeur antidemocratische en nazistische trekken toedichtten. De gekozen terminologie was niet alleen illustratief voor de frustratie binnen de Labour Party over het vermeende democratische tekort van het omroepbestel, maar ook voor de gebrekkige waardering binnen de partij voor de onafhankelijkheid van de BBC als een democratisch beginsel.

Ook in Nederland zou het begrip 'controle' een prominente plaats opeisen in het debat over de relatie tussen politiek en omroep, al ging het hier om twee andere vormen van controle. De eerste vorm betrof de meest voor de hand liggende vorm van controle, te weten de directe greep van de SDAP op de organisatorische en bestuurlijke gang van zaken binnen de VARA. Als schoolvoorbeeld van de 'verzuilde' relatie tussen partij en omroep, was het niet verrassend dat de SDAP een nadrukkelijke rol had binnen de VARA, al toont hoofdstuk 5 ook dat de zeggenschap van de partij over de omroep nooit onomstreden was. Sterker nog, anders dan wat doorgaans verondersteld wordt, bleek de omgang van de VARA met de SDAP sterk gekleurd door de hang naar een zekere mate van onafhankelijkheid en wat zou resulteren in een lange reeks van conflicten en confrontaties tussen de omroep en de partij. Eén van de twistpunten was de houding van de SDAP en de VARA ten aanzien van de tweede vorm van controle: het preventieve en repressieve toezicht op de inhoud van radioprogramma's door de in 1930 ingestelde Radio Omroep Controle Commissie. Zowel de VARA als de SDAP werd getroffen door deze vorm van censuur, maar waar de partij geneigd was zich onder protest te voegen naar het bewind van de Controle Commissie, toonde de VARA een meer strijdbare houding. Dit contrast werd mede ingegeven door een verschil van inzicht over de politieke strategie van de arbeidersbeweging, en het leidde er onder meer toe dat het parlementaire protest van de SDAP tegen de Controle Commissie geleidelijk zou verstommen. Een ander gevolg was het gedwongen vertrek in 1934 van de VARA-omroepsecretaris Gerrit Jan Zwertbroek, wiens radicalisering niet alleen de verhouding tussen de VARA en de Controle Commissie op scherp zou zetten, maar ook een bron van constante frictie vormde tussen de VARA en het partijbestuur. De opvolger van Zwertbroek was Arie Pleysier en hij werd benoemd op voorspraak van Koos Vorrink, die zelf recentelijk tot partijvoorzitter was gekozen. Hoewel Vorrinks bemoeienis exemplarisch was voor de invloed van de SDAP op de VARA, was het even treffend dat Pleysier en Vorrink een paar jaar later ernstig in onmin raakten, wat mede het gevolg was van Vorrinks poging om de greep van de partij op de omroep te verstevigen en Pleysiers verzet daartegen uit naam van de relatieve onafhankelijkheid van de VARA.

Ogenscheinlijk hadden deze kwesties weinig gemeen met de conflicten die zich in dezelfde jaren hadden voorgedaan tussen de Labour Party en de BBC, maar het derde deel van dit proefschrift

toont dat er meer schuil ging achter deze parallelle strijd om ‘controle’ dan het vermeende gebrek of tekort aan invloed op de omroep, en dat het ook in belangrijke mate symptomatisch was voor het onvermogen van beide partijen om zich aan te passen aan de nieuwe politieke werkelijkheid die met de komst van radio gestalte kreeg.

Deel III: ‘Jazz politiek’

Lag de nadruk in het eerste en tweede deel van dit onderzoek op de rol van de SDAP en de Labour Party in de institutionele omgang tussen politiek en omroep, het derde deel van dit proefschrift behandelt de vraag hoe beide partijen gebruik hebben gemaakt van radio, welke bijdrage beide partijen geleverd hebben aan de ontwikkeling van politieke programma’s en hoe de leidende partijfiguren zich gevoegd hebben naar de medium-specifieke eisen van radio. Het zal niet verbazen dat ook dit deel grote verschillen aan het licht heeft gebracht tussen beide casussen, vooral in de aard, variatie en veelheid van de mogelijkheden die de SDAP en de Labour Party ter beschikking stonden om zich tot het radiopubliek te richten. Maar ondanks die verschillen werd ook duidelijk dat beide partijen vergelijkbare bedenkingen hadden over de politiek culturele werking van radio, wat in het midden van de jaren dertig zou resulteren in een parallelle poging om radio te weren uit het epicentrum van hun politieke wereldbeeld. Deze ontwikkeling is in beide gevallen niet eerder gesignaleerd, en het biedt een cruciaal perspectief, ten eerste om te begrijpen waarom radio lang over het hoofd is gezien, en ten tweede om te betogen dat deze onzichtbaarheid exemplarisch is voor de betekenis die aan het medium toegekend kan worden.

In het geval van de Labour Party waren de bedenkingen met name gericht op de betekenis van radio voor de positie van het parlement als de primaire plaats van het nationaal politieke debat, en hoofdstuk 7 toont dat de Labour Party zich in toenemende mate zou verzetten tegen de toelating van de BBC tot het parlement. Dit proces verliep grotendeels parallel aan de strijd om parlementaire controle die in het tweede deel van dit proefschrift zichtbaar werd. Ook gezien die ontwikkeling, was het opmerkelijk dat de Labour Party wel degelijk grote invloed had op de pogingen van de BBC om de politieke partijen voor de microfoon te brengen. Aanvankelijk werd de BBC op dit vlak vooral gehinderd door de ‘ban op controversé’, die van regeringswege was opgelegd om te voorkomen dat de omroep zich in ‘controversiële’ kwesties zou mengen, waaronder partijpolitiek. In 1928 werd dit verbod opgeheven, maar al spoedig bleek dat de geëiste inspraak door de partijen, de Labour Party inclusief, minstens zo belemmerend was voor de ontwikkeling van de politieke programmering van de BBC. De inzet van dit conflict was de vraag waar de zeggenschap over de politieke programma’s lag: bij de BBC of bij de partijen? Een uitzondering binnen dit kader waren de reeksen verkiezingsredevoeringen (van 1924, 1929, 1931 en 1935), die de partijen in staat stelden zich direct tot de kiezers te richten. Door de jaren heen slaagde de Labour Party er slechts beperkt in deze mogelijkheden te benutten, en de retoriek van Labours redevoeringen gaf weinig blijk van inzicht in de medium-specifieke eigenschappen van radio. Desondanks werd een positieve kentering gesignaleerd in 1935, met name in de redevoeringen van Herbert Morrison en Clement Attlee, die meer nadrukkelijk afgestemd waren op de specifieke samenstelling van het radiopubliek en de huiselijke aard van het medium. Maar deze ontwikkeling had ook een keerzijde in de vorm van de toenemende zorg binnen de Labour Party (en met name bij de nieuwe partijleider Attlee) over wat werd gezien als de ondermijnende invloed van radio op het parlement als het brandpunt (of ‘focal point’) van de politiek. Waar de BBC in deze jaren trachtte te ontkomen aan de greep van de partijen door zich sterker te richten op de parlementaire politiek, was het deze zorg die Attlee en de Labour Party ertoe bewoog een veto uit te spreken tegen de permanente aanwezigheid van de BBC in het hart van

de politiek. Daarmee leek de continuïteit van de parlementaire politieke cultuur gewaarborgd, maar de vergelijking met het voorbeeld van de SDAP suggereert dat deze ontwikkeling ook beschouwd kan worden als een uiting van de breuk in de politieke cultuur die de opkomst van radio gemarkeerd heeft.

In tegenstelling tot de Labour Party had de SDAP alle mogelijkheden om zich tot het radiopubliek te richten, al toonde de partij maar weinig belangstelling voor het medium. In de tweede helft van de jaren twintig bleef het optreden van de SDAP voor de VARA-microfoon beperkt tot een select aantal momenten, en het initiatief daartoe kwam doorgaans van de VARA. Een treffend voorbeeld in dit verband was de avondvullende bijdrage van de VARA aan de verkiezingscampagne van 1929, met als hoogtepunt het politieke hoorspel dat was opgedragen aan de SDAP. Des te opmerkelijker was de oproep van de SDAP aan haar achterban om vooral niet naar deze verkiezingsavond te luisteren, maar voorrang te geven aan de laatste propagandawerkzaamheden. Een ander voorbeeld was de geschiedenis van het 'partijkwartiertje', het wekelijkse radiopraatje dat een typisch product leek van de 'verzuilde' eensgezindheid tussen partij en omroep, maar dat in werkelijkheid inzet bleek van constante strijd en frictie. Tegelijkertijd zouden deze kwesties overschaduwd worden door de toenemende verscherping in het toezicht op de uitzendingen door de Radio Omroep Controle Commissie, waardoor het steeds lastiger werd voor de SDAP en de VARA om hun idee van politiek voor de microfoon uit te dragen. Daarnaast toont dit onderzoek ook dat er een fundamentele twijfel binnen de SDAP over radio bestond. De kern van die twijfel was de vrees dat de opkomst van radio een bedreiging vormde voor de cultuur van samenkomst die de arbeidersbeweging kenmerkte. En hoewel de partij op verschillende manieren gebruik bleef maken van radio, bleek die vrees voeding te geven aan een tegenbeweging die zou culmineren in de campagne voor het Plan van de Arbeid tussen 1935 en 1937. In het middelpunt van deze ontwikkeling stonden de zogeheten Plan-spelen, de theatrale massa-opvoeringen die een synthese beoogden te realiseren tussen het publiek en de deelnemers en die er deels op gericht waren om de eenheid te herstellen die, zo werd gedacht, verloren was gegaan mede door de komst van radio. Overigens betekende dit niet dat radio niet gebruikt werd om de Plan-boodschap te verspreiden, maar hoofdstuk 8 laat zien dat de positieve bijdrage aan de Plan-campagne zeer bescheiden was (ook door toedoen van de Controle Commissie) en in het niet viel bij de negatieve betekenis van het medium. Niet alleen werpt dit een ander licht op het zo wijdverbreide beeld van de Plan-campagne als een uiterst moderne aangelegenheid, het toont ook dat de vermeende incompatibiliteit van radio met de gevestigde vormen van partijpolitiek belangrijker is geweest voor de omgang van de SDAP met radio dan tot nog toe is aangenomen. Even goed viel niet te ontkennen dat het medium zich in de voorbije jaren ontwikkeld had tot een onlosmakelijk onderdeel van de arbeidersbeweging, en de tegenvallende resultaten van de Plan-campagne noopte de partij om ook op radiovlak een andere koers te kiezen. Het was deze ontwikkeling die eind jaren dertig de deur opende voor de politieke reporter, die vanuit een journalistieke rol de SDAP en het VARA-publiek nader tot elkaar zou pogen te brengen, en daarmee de partij zou helpen de kloof te dichten die de opkomst van radio gemarkeerd had.

Conclusie: tussen af- en aanwezigheid. Het theater van de politiek

De vraag die hier onvermijdelijk uit volgt, is wat de vergelijkende betekenis van deze ontwikkelingen is geweest, ook in samenhang met de bevindingen van de eerdere delen van dit proefschrift. Wanneer we het geheel van dit onderzoek overzien dan verschijnt een tweeledig beeld, waarbij enerzijds geconcludeerd kan worden dat de opkomst van radio aan de wieg heeft gestaan van een geheel nieuwe verschijningsvorm van politiek, maar waarbij anderzijds duidelijk is geworden dat de

weerstand tegen radio minstens zo belangrijk was en in zekere zin zelfs de overhand heeft gekregen. Vanuit een vergelijkend perspectief was het de tweede ontwikkeling die het meest opmerkelijk was, met name omdat het een fundamentele overeenkomst aan het licht heeft gebracht tussen de SDAP en de Labour Party en de perceptie van radio als een bedreiging voor de vorm van politieke samenkomst, die centraal stond in het denken en handelen van beide partijen. Zoals hierboven uiteengezet, zou deze diagnose in beide casussen bijdragen aan de relatieve afwezigheid van radio, niet alleen in politiek historisch opzicht, maar daarmee ook in politiek historiografisch opzicht. En hoewel het voor de hand lijkt te liggen om die afwezigheid te beschouwen als een blijk van de beperkte betekenis van radio voor de politieke cultuur van het interbellum, concludeert dit onderzoek dat het tegendeel waar is en dat de fundamentele betekenis van het medium alleen begrepen kan worden door die af- en aanwezigheid in samenhang te duiden.

Dit is een van de redenen waarom het slotdeel van dit proefschrift teruggrijpt op de reeks noties en concepten die uiteengezet zijn in het theoretisch hoofdstuk van de inleiding. Eén van die noties is het Habermasiaanse concept van de ‘openbaarheid’ en het is dit concept dat ons in staat stelt een scherper begrip te vormen van de opvattingen over de plaats van politiek in de openbaarheid die ten grondslag hebben gelegen aan de omgang van de SDAP en de Labour Party met radio. Even belangrijk in dit verband is het feit dat radio een geheel nieuwe invulling gaf aan diezelfde openbaarheid. Tegen deze achtergrond grijpt de conclusie ook terug op de noties ‘tijd’ en ‘ruimte’ om daarmee inzichtelijk te maken dat de vernieuwing van radio in belangrijke mate samenhangt met een herdefiniëring van de ‘spatiotemporele’ inrichting van die openbaarheid. Een voorbeeld hiervan was de nieuwe nadruk op de huiselijke sfeer die de komst van radio met zich meebracht, wat onder meer weerspiegeld werd in de cultivering van een nieuwe informaliteit in de presentatie van politiek leiderschap. Uiteraard werkte de komst van radio ook de andere kant op, en de ongekende directheid tussen verzending en ontvangst maakte het mogelijk voor luisteraars om ‘aanwezig’ te zijn bij politieke evenementen of gebeurtenissen die zich elders voordeden. Maar zoals hierboven uiteengezet, was het de weerstand tegen deze ontwikkelingen die resulteerde in de pogingen van de SDAP en de Labour Party om een bepaalde vorm van politieke samenkomst te waarborgen. De conclusie van dit proefschrift geeft een nadere duiding aan dit proces door het te verbinden aan de notie ‘presence’, en dan met name aan de betekenis van deze notie als een kernconcept binnen het denken over representatie (als het present maken van iets wat in werkelijkheid absent is). Het is dit begrip dat een cruciale onderbouwing biedt van de stelling dat de betekenis van radio ook gezocht moet worden in de relatieve afwezigheid van het medium in de politieke cultuur van de jaren twintig en dertig.

De vraag die resteert is hoe de samenhang tussen de af- en aanwezigheid van radio dan begrepen moet worden, en het slotdeel van de conclusie richt zich vanuit dit oogpunt meer nadrukkelijk op de notie van politiek als theater. In de voorbije decennia hebben tal van historici deze metafoor gebruikt om de veranderende vorm en stijl van politiek te duiden, ook bijvoorbeeld in relatie tot de opkomst van nieuwe media. Maar anders dan de gangbare interpretatie, veronderstelt dit proefschrift dat het niet volstaat om alleen het spel of de verwickelingen op de Bühne te analyseren, maar dat het evenzeer noodzakelijk is om te begrijpen hoe het politieke toneel werd afgebakend in een bepaalde tijd. Wat radio betreft heeft dit onderzoek laten zien dat het medium slechts in beperkte mate werd toegelaten tot het politieke toneel, en uiteindelijk zelfs werd geweerd om de eenheid en continuïteit van de politiek te waarborgen. Tegelijkertijd heeft dit de invloed van radio niet ongedaan kunnen maken, om de simpele reden dat het politieke veranderingsproces dat het gevolg was van de opkomst van radio voorbij het toneel verder gestalte zou krijgen. Het is tegen deze achtergrond dat dit proefschrift concludeert dat

de politiek culturele omwenteling die zich met de komst van radio heeft voltrokken, gezien moet worden als het product van de ontwikkelingen die zich op en voorbij het toneel hebben afgetekend. Hieruit volgt ook dat het hoog tijd wordt om de politieke betekenis van dat andere omroepmedium – televisie – te relativeren, en wel door meer nadrukkelijk te erkennen dat de kentering die doorgaans wordt toegeschreven aan de opmars van televisie in de jaren vijftig en zestig reeds in gang werd gezet met de komst van radio in de vroege jaren twintig.

Dankwoord

De roman *Het meten van de wereld* van de Duitse auteur Daniel Kehlmann schetst een vrolijk beeld van de ontberingen die de twee grote Duitse geleerden Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) en Carl Friedrich Gauß (1777-1855) hebben moeten doorstaan in hun pogingen om de wereld in kaart te brengen. Van de twee was het de ontdekkingsreiziger Von Humboldt die de oevers van de Orinoco afvoer en daar te stellen kreeg met kannibalen, muskieten, krokodillen en allerlei andere vormen van ongemak die zich ophielden in de Zuid-Amerikaanse jungle. Van een geheel andere orde waren de ontberingen waar de wiskundige en astronoom Gauß zich mee geconfronteerd zag. Niet gehinderd door enige reislust, werd hij geteisterd door een snurkende hospita, kolieken, kiespijn en een ongerieflijk matras. En hoewel zijn ongemak er niet minder om was – althans volgens Kehlmann – stond dit in geen verhouding tot de grote verdienste die Gauß, net als Von Humboldt, heeft gehad voor de wetenschap.

Ook dit proefschrift is het resultaat van een lange reis, niet zozeer in afstand, maar vooral in tijd. De afronding ervan heeft vaak gevoeld als een uit de hand gelopen expeditie binnen de vier muren van deze werkkamer, maar des te groter is de opluchting dat de jaren van onderzoek en schrijven eindelijk een definitieve en tastbare vorm hebben gevonden. Uiteraard is de wetenschap geen eenmanszaak en nu de beproeving daadwerkelijk achter de rug is, ben ik me des te meer bewust van de steun en betrokkenheid die ik door de jaren heen van verschillende kanten heb mogen ontvangen. Van alle mensen die ik in dit verband wil bedanken, wil ik eerst en vooral mijn grote waardering uitspreken voor Huub Wijfjes, zonder wie dit proefschrift nooit het licht zou hebben gezien. Mijn samenwerking met Huub kreeg eerst gestalte binnen zijn onderzoeksproject naar de geschiedenis van de VARA, waaraan ik als archiefonderzoeker een bijdrage mocht leveren en wat al spoedig een vervolg zou krijgen in de opzet van dit promotieonderzoek. Als begeleider en later als promotor heeft Huub een cruciale rol gespeeld in de verschillende fasen van het onderzoek. Steeds was Huub bereid om mee te denken over de keuzes en dilemma's, die bij een onderzoek als dit komen kijken, en al was er in een later stadium minder noodzaak tot regelmatig overleg, ook op afstand bleef Huub positief en constructief betrokken. Tussentijds heeft Huub me ook gevraagd mee te werken aan andere projecten, onder meer de uitgave van de bundel *De Hoofdreducteur*. In al die tijd was mijn grote doel het voltooiën van dit proefschrift en ik wil Huub zeer bedanken voor het geduld en vertrouwen dat hij steeds getoond heeft, ook op die momenten dat de afronding van dit proefschrift het minst nabij leek. Daarnaast wil ik Doeko Bosscher, Ido de Haan en Henk te Velde bedanken dat ze bereid zijn geweest om in de beoordelingscommissie plaats te nemen.

De laatste fase van dit onderzoek heb ik grotendeels doorgebracht als wat Mark Rutte genoemd heeft een 'fröbelende zolderkamergeleerde'. Dit was niet mogelijk geweest als ik niet in een eerder stadium uitgebreid onderzoek had gedaan in verschillende archiefinstellingen, zowel in Nederland als in Engeland. Erg inspirerend in dit verband was mijn verblijf aan University College London, wat ondersteund werd door een Marie Curie Fellowship en wat mij in staat stelde het Engelse deel van het onderzoek uit te voeren. Van de mensen die ik in Londen getroffen heb, wil ik met name Axel Körner en Mary Hilson bedanken, die beiden vanuit een andere hoedanigheid bij het Building on the Past-programma betrokken waren dat het kader vormde van mijn onderzoeksverblijf aan UCL. Mijn dank gaat in dit verband ook uit naar Dirk Jan Wolfram, die als de Groningse coördinator van dit programma optrad. Daarnaast wil ik graag Els Boonen noemen, die als medewerkster van het onvolprezen BBC Written Archives Centre in

Reading zo vriendelijk was mij te gidsen door het labyrint van inventarissen en indexnummers, waar een archiefonderzoek maar al te makkelijk in vast kan lopen. Even goede herinneringen bewaar ik aan mijn vele bezoeken aan het VARA-archief in Hilversum, waar Ad van den Berg even behulpzaam was in het verstrekken van advies en dozen vol archiefstukken.

Net zo positief, maar van een geheel andere orde, was de betrokkenheid die ik ervaren heb van mensen uit mijn directe omgeving. Gezien de longitudinale aard van dit onderzoek, zal het niet verbazen dat er meer mensen zijn dan ik hier kan noemen, die op een of andere manier van betekenis zijn geweest voor de totstandkoming van dit proefschrift. Door de jaren heen is het onderzoek een terugkerend onderwerp van gesprek geweest met de mensen die ik trof op het schoolplein, op de racefiets, op de stoep en al die andere plaatsen waar ik me ophield als ik niet achter mijn bureau zat. Ik hoop dat de mensen die hun belangstelling of interesse getoond hebben, weten dat ik dat altijd zeer op prijs heb gesteld. Tegelijkertijd is er ook een viertal personen die ik hier met naam wil noemen, ten eerste Stefan Couperus, wiens inbreng even gevarieerd als essentieel is geweest. Of het nou over de aanschaf van een nieuwe racefiets ging, de theorievorming over politieke representatie of over de wederwaardigheden van het academische bestaan, op tal van momenten was Stefan bereid mee te denken of te luisteren, en ik kan niet genoeg benadrukken hoezeer ik dit gewaardeerd heb. Niet toevallig gaat de vriendschap met het resterende drietal – Rik Visschedijk, Stef van den Hof en Janko van de Kempe – ook terug tot de Groningse collegebanken. Als voormalig medestudenten van de opleiding Geschiedenis zijn Rik, Stef en Janko niet alleen getuige geweest van het gestage wordingsproces van dit proefschrift, maar ook en vooral van de grote en kleine omwentelingen in het leven waar deze jaren mee gepaard zijn gegaan. Hun bereidheid om steeds weer mijn overpeinzingen over het onderzoek aan te horen is erg belangrijk voor me geweest, net als hun aanwezigheid op al die andere momenten die juist niets met het proefschrift van doen hadden.

Met het afronden van dit proefschrift wil ik ook mijn grote dankbaarheid en liefde uitspreken naar mijn ouders, die me altijd aangespoord hebben om voorbij mijn eigen horizon te kijken en te geloven in het vermogen om jezelf te ontwikkelen. Ik ben me er van bewust dat ik met dit proefschrift een stap heb gezet in een richting die binnen de familie relatief onontgonnen is, en ik ben er trots op dat ik dit ook heb kunnen doen uit naam van mijn vader, moeder, opa's en oma's. Het is een blijvend verdriet dat het mijn vader niet gegund is om dit moment mee te maken, maar ik ben blij dat ik de liefdevolle herinnering aan hem en dit moment mag delen met mijn moeder, broer en zus. Op eenzelfde manier prijs ik mezelf gelukkig met de familie waar ik sinds mijn engagement met Froukje deel van uit heb mogen maken. In Bakkeveen staat de deur altijd open en het is een rijk besef om te weten dat Emy en Fred altijd bereid zijn om bij te springen, zoals ze ook gedaan hebben op de vele dinsdagen dat ze mijn zorgtaken hebben overgenomen om mij daarmee extra werktijd te bieden. Hoewel menig Sinterklaasgedicht werd aangegrepen om de voortgang van het proefschrift (of het ogenschijnlijke gebrek daaraan) te bevragen, heb ik me altijd gesteund gevoeld door het optimisme en het vertrouwen waarmee de Hoogenboomen de wereld bezien.

En toch is er één persoon die er voor mij in alles boven uitsteekt en voor wiens eindeloze geduld ik een onmetelijke bewondering heb. Terugkijkend op de jaren die Froukje en ik inmiddels samen zijn, is het proefschrift een haast constante aanwezigheid geweest en ik ben Froukje voor altijd dankbaar dat ze mij heeft bijgestaan met haar vrolijkheid en niet-aflatende geloof in de goede afloop. Tegelijkertijd weet ik ook dat dit niet altijd gemakkelijk is geweest, en dat ik door de jaren heen regelmatig de nukken en het humeur van een Carl Friedrich Gauß heb vertoond. Sterker nog, ik vrees dat ik niet overdrijf wanneer ik stel dat er ook momenten zijn geweest

dat Froukje mij maar wat graag als een Von Humboldt de Orinoco had opgestuurd, met de boodschap dat ik pas terug zou mogen keren uit de jungle met een afgerond proefschrift. Dat zij dit niet heeft gedaan, beschouw ik als een klein wonder en het onderstreept wat mij betreft dat dit proefschrift bovenal het resultaat is van onze gezamenlijke inspanning. Dat zij dit niet heeft gedaan, heeft er bovendien toe geleid dat we samen getuige zijn geweest van het grote wonder dat zich in de voorbije jaren in ons leven heeft voltrokken: de geboorte van onze prachtige, lieve kinderen Else, Filip en Jonna. Allerliefste Froukje, allerliefste kinderen, ons samenzijn betekent alles voor mij en aan jullie draag ik dit proefschrift op.

Curriculum vitae

Bas de Jong was born on 22 November 1978, in The Hague, the Netherlands. He attended secondary school at the Dalton The Hague, where he graduated in 1997 (pre-university education). After spending a year working and travelling in Australia and New Zealand, he moved to Groningen to study History and Journalism. During his studies at the University of Groningen he served as an editor of the historical magazine *Groniek*. In 2004 Bas graduated (with honours) on a master's thesis about the cultural criticism and art conception of the Dutch composer Alphons Diepenbrock (1862-1921). After conducting an interview project on behalf of the Democracy and Media Foundation, Bas became involved in 2006 as a researcher in a project of the University of Groningen into the history of the broadcasting association VARA. In 2008 he was offered a chance to set up his own PhD-research under the guidance of prof. dr. H.B.M. Wijffes, and the subject of this research focussed on the SDAP's and the Labour Party's dealings with radio in the interwar decades. Between October 2008 and March 2009 Bas served as a Marie Curie Fellow at University College London in the European Doctorate Programme 'Building on the Past'. His stay at UCL helped him to do extensive research in the BBC's archives. Besides his PhD-research he also served as co-editor of *De Hoofredacteur*, a volume published in 2011 about the challenges to leaders of news organizations in the present-day media landscape. After that he took on a new job as the chief managing director overseeing the expansion of the De Jong household, which he combined with writing his dissertation – *A phantom medium?* – about the politics of radio broadcasting in the Netherlands and Great Britain in the 1920s and 1930s.

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