

Crossed Signals:

The British Labour Government and Cross-Border Commercial Radio after World War II

Abstract:

Traditional British hostility toward commercial radio increased sharply after the 1945 victory of the Labour Party, with its anti-advertising stance and emphasis on domestic austerity. The Labour government went to great lengths to silence or cripple the remaining continental commercial broadcaster – Radio Luxembourg -- that sought to resume its pre-war influence among British radio listeners. The abysmal state of the consumer market in post-war Britain made the job easier. Also, the government, along with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), tried to bolster the commercial-free public service model in most areas under British influence. There were exceptions both in small colonies and big regions. The most glaring example is South Asia, where the British government was the midwife to the most powerful and successful commercial broadcaster in Asia – Radio Ceylon. This paper examines how conflicting priorities and politicians tried but ultimately failed to inhibit the growth of commercial radio.

Introduction:

Commercial and public service have been the two main models of broadcasting throughout much of the 20th century, especially in Europe. In the 1930s the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was the epitome of public service, and English-language commercial programming reached British radio sets only from continental stations. After 1945, physical devastation, economic austerity and the victorious Labour government's shift toward socialist organization boosted the public service model in Britain. The government kept commercials off the BBC and diligently tried to squelch any possibility of advertising from Radio Luxembourg, the only remaining commercial continental station able to reach the British market.¹ Constitutional limits and practical reality put boundaries on the government's efforts, however. It could and did strong-arm advertisers, block foreign exchange payments and use diplomatic pressure, but despite some loose talk the government never considered the ultimate step of

¹ H.H. Wilson, *Pressure Group: The Campaign for Commercial Television in England* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 31; Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 4, *Sound and Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 53-4.

“jamming” continental signals the way the Soviets jammed BBC signals to the Communist world.

Although this official British antipathy seemed to be consistent with pre-war policies against commercial cross-border radio, much had changed since 1939. The thinking about the proper balance between national and transnational broadcasting that had marked European radio from the beginning had shifted toward the transnational by 1945, largely because of wartime British behavior.² Starting with borrowed time on Radio Luxembourg during the 1938 Munich Crisis and accelerating exponentially with the coming of war, the British government broadcast in multiple languages to occupied and neutral Europe regardless of frequency allocation.³ Programming ranged from calm and objective BBC bulletins to the scabrous “black propaganda” of *Soldatensender Calais*.⁴ After the war transnational BBC broadcasts continued – in 1946 alone the BBC was broadcasting worldwide in English and 19 other languages.⁵ As the Cold War intensified, the BBC increased its broadcasting to the Soviet bloc, whose leaders objected strongly and fought it by jamming BBC signals.⁶ Labour Party leaders apparently did not find any irony in the BBC broadcasting unwanted political propaganda to the Soviet bloc’s people while complaining about Radio Luxembourg broadcasting unwanted commercial propaganda to the British people

² Jennifer Spohrer, “Threat or Beacon? Recasting International Broadcasting in Europe after World War II,” and Alexander Badenoch, “Between Rock and Roll and a Hard Place: ‘Pirate’ Radio and the Problems of Territory in Cold War Europe,” in Alexander Badenoch, Andreas Fickers and Christian Henrich-Franke eds., *Airy Curtains in the European Ether: Broadcasting and the Cold War* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013); Stephanie Seul and Nelson Ribeiro, “Revisiting Transnational Broadcasting: The BBC’s Foreign-Language Services during the Second World War” *Media History*, 21 no. 4 (2015), 365–377. The Americans also played a major role.

³ Case Against Allowing Commercial Broadcasting to this Country from Abroad,” December 6, 1946, CAB 124/411, National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter cited as National Archives UK).

⁴ David Garnett, *The Secret History of PWE: The Political Warfare Executive, 1939-1945*, (London: St. Ermin’s Press, 2002), 380-385.

⁵ Briggs, *Sound and Vision*, 157-8.

⁶ Briggs, *Sound and Vision*, 137-61; Alban Webb, *London Calling: Britain, the BBC World Service and the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury Publisher, 2014).

Britain also had global interests above and beyond keeping advertisements away from domestic radio listeners. Britain's expanded global broadcasting created a demand for more and better facilities around the world, as it tried to reach listeners in occupied Germany, the rapidly coalescing Soviet bloc and the potentially vast audiences in Asia who were shaking off Japanese occupation and European colonialism. That meant often delicate negotiations with countries with much different priorities in the shadow of the larger international bargaining over spectrum allocations at the Atlantic City and Copenhagen conferences. At the same time, both the British government and industry were trying desperately to regain global market share lost during the war, and saw advertising abroad as a useful tool to achieve that goal – especially in the hard-currency “dollar zone.” Commercial broadcasting, though, would be tricky. Britain had been proselytizing for commercial-free public-service broadcasting for years in the colonies and Commonwealth, especially in countries with dual public-private systems such as Canada and Australia.⁷ (And the government had leverage over industry through currency controls.) An about-face would be difficult. A compromise on the use of commercial radio emerged in a policy statement often cited in official documents:

- No commercial broadcasting in or to Britain,
- No commercial broadcasting across national frontiers, anywhere in the world, and
- No commercial broadcasting in countries that also had public service, non-commercial radio systems, such as Australia and Canada.⁸

The traditional dedication to public-service broadcasting and Labour antipathy toward commercial advertising faced weak domestic challenges as rationing and rigid austerity policies

⁷ Simon Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ Flett to Morrison, August 9, 1947, CAB124/412; The Use of Commercial Radio for Advertising, CAB124/10, National Archives UK.

withered advertisers' main target – the British consumer market. Why advertise what you could not sell? The French turn toward commercial-free broadcasting removed other potential commercial broadcasters. The wider world, however, presented other challenges. While the government fought tooth and nail to block commercial broadcasting in Europe, its need for an Asian transmitter in 1949 led to a bargain that allowed the creation of the Radio Ceylon commercial service – the most important commercial radio station in South Asia.

Literature Review

Literature on the post-war Labour government's communication policies mainly concentrates on its build-up of official advertising and public relations to push government goals; there is no mention of commercial broadcasting.⁹ There has been a good deal of scholarship and some popular accounts of Radio Luxembourg and the other, pre-war continental broadcasters. Suzanne Lommers' *Europe on-Air*, and Jennifer Spohrer's doctoral dissertation "Ruling the Airwaves" concentrated on the interwar years; Spohrer's "Threat or Beacon" took the story into the post-war years. Denis Marachel focused on Luxembourg's continental markets, and television, throughout the 20th century.¹⁰ Richard Nicholls' *Radio Luxembourg* provides loving detail on the radio programming and personalities, and gives a competent account of some of the business and political issues.¹¹ Sean Street cast a wider net in *Crossing the Ether*, and analyzed all cross-border commercial radio broadcasting to Britain, but he spent little time on the early

⁹ William Crofts, *Coercion or Persuasion? Propaganda in Britain after 1945* (London: Routledge, 1989); Martin Moore, *The Origins of Modern Spin: Democratic Government and the Media in Britain, 1945-1951* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁰ Suzanne Lommers, *Europe On-Air: Interwar Projects for Radio Broadcasting* (Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam Press, 2012); Jennifer Spohrer, "Ruling the Airwaves: Radio Luxembourg and the Origins of European National Broadcasting, 1929-1950" PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012; Denis Marechal, *The History of a Popular European Radio Station: from Radio Luxembourg to RTL.fr*, trans. Christopher Todd (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013) ebook; Spohrer, "Threat or Beacon?"

¹¹ Richard Nichols, *Radio Luxembourg: The Station of the Stars: An Affectionate History of 50 Years of Broadcasting* (London: Comet, 1983).

post-war years. Asa Briggs lightly covers some of the controversy in his magisterial *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*.¹² Scholarship on Radio Ceylon is thin, and mainly concentrates on its effects on Indian culture, which were extensive.¹³ There is little on the business or political issues, though the administrative and technical aspects of its predecessor, Radio SEAC, are covered in Eric Hitchcock's *Making Waves*.¹⁴

The Pre-War Legacy:

The British Broadcasting Corporation was monopolistic and commercial-free from the earliest day, funding itself through license fees and devoting itself to information, education and uplifting entertainment. Britain's political and cultural elites disdained commercial radio, and much of popular culture, as a degrading race to the lowest-common denominator of taste. That left an opening for commercial advertising and popular culture that cross-border radio would provide.¹⁵

Continental stations had been broadcasting commercially and regularly into Britain since the 1931 establishment of English-language programming on Radio Normandy.¹⁶ Other stations quickly followed, with the soon-to-be dominant Radio Luxembourg coming on the air in 1933

¹² Street, Sean, *Crossing the Ether: Pre-War Public Service Radio and Commercial Competition in the UK* (London: John Libbey, 2006); Briggs, *Sound and Vision*.

¹³ David Lelyveld, "Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All-India Radio," in C.A. Breckenridge ed., *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 49-65; Aswin Punathambekar, "From Indiafm.com to Radio Ceylon: New media and the making of the Bombay film industry," *Media, Culture and Society* 32 no. 5(2010), 841-57; Aswin Punathambekar, "Ameen Sayani and Radio Ceylon: Notes toward a history of broadcasting and Bombay cinema," *BioScope* 1 no.2(2013), 189-97; Aswin Punathambekar, *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Eric Hitchcock, *Making Waves: Admiral Mountbatten's Radio SEAC, 1945-49* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2014).

¹⁵ Adrian Johns, *Death of a Pirate: British Radio and the Making of the Information Age* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 30-34; Street, *Crossing the Ether*, 56-76.

¹⁶ Keith Wallis, *And the World Listened: The Biography of Captain Leonard F. Plugge, a Pioneer of Commercial Radio* (Tiverton, Devon: Kelly, 2008), 70-82.

with 200,000 watts on a long-wave frequency not allocated to it by international agreement.¹⁷ Luxembourg and Normandy soon became fixtures for British listeners, especially on Sundays when the BBC broadcast sermons and religious music, and sometimes even dead air.¹⁸ By 1938 British advertisers were spending £1.7 million on continental radio.¹⁹ Luxembourg and Normandy went off at the start of World War II, and the BBC set up the Forces Programme to broadcast light, Luxembourg-style entertainment for the troops. The success of that programming, and the fear of resumed continental broadcasting, led the BBC to set up the Light Programme; it was “largely designed to cut out Luxembourg and other commercial stations.”²⁰ That strategy largely succeeded, but Luxembourg would not go away quietly.

Post-War:

The Germans had Radio Luxembourg for propaganda during the war; after liberation the British and American forces used the station for their own propaganda.²¹ In July 1945 the American Office of War Information leased the station to broadcast to the occupation troops in Germany but budget cuts scuttled any expansion plans.²² The station’s owners were planning to power up for commercial broadcasting and American advertisers were salivating over the possibilities, especially because France was following Britain’s lead and going non-commercial with a nationalized monopoly.

The most romanced fem in all of Europe today is the Duchess of Luxembourg – at least as far as broadcasting is concerned. Radio biggies from all over the world know that Radio Luxembourg will be handed back to the Duchess, and since most of Europe is

¹⁷ Nichols, *Radio Luxembourg*, 20.

¹⁸ Street, *Crossing the Ether*, 138-46

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁰ Flett to Morrison, May 28, 1946, CAB124/407, National Archives UK; Street, *Crossing the Ether*, 192-195.

²¹ Street, *Crossing the Ether*, 196-9.

²² Cabinet Overseas Information Services (Official) Committee, Note by Joint Secretaries, January 16, 1947 L/I/1/438, IOR, British Library.

within the range of this transmitter, everyone is trying to get the Duchess' ear and a lease on the operation – or part of the time -- or some kind of deal.”²³

Other potential commercial threats to BBC hegemony quickly disappeared. The French nationalization meant the BBC faced no commercial competition from Radio Normandy, or other, smaller French stations.²⁴ Ireland seemed a promising site to American businesses, some of whom dangled “lucrative” offers to build and operate commercial transmitters there, but the Catholic church-dominated government of Eammon de Valera had problems with American-style advertising and feared potential BBC retaliation.²⁵ Nevertheless, the British government monitored commercial radio murmurings no matter how obscure, from a proposal to put up a station in Spanish Fernando Po (now Equatorial Guinea) to an account of a British businessman who wrote a string of bad checks while trying to get a concession for a radio station in the Faroe Islands.²⁶ Other commercial stations were distant with weak signals that were unable to reach Britain clearly and consistently.²⁷

In its deliberations the wartime coalition cabinet favored continued public service broadcasting, and worried that continental commercial stations might fall under the control of American business “to the detriment of British trade and industry.”²⁸ The decisive victory of the Labour Party in 1945 only intensified the official hostility and the vehemence with which the government fought commercialism. The Labour movement was “completely unsympathetic” to

²³ “How Do, Duchess,” *The Billboard*, September 1, 1945. The writers were being creative; Duchess Charlotte had no known role in the radio world.

²⁴ Street, *Crossing the Ether*, 200.

²⁵ “Erin Go Brath, But Keep off BBC Toes,” *Broadcasting*, February 18, 1946, 46. Commercials on Irish airwaves were limited to Irish companies selling Irish products to Irish consumers. H.T. to Flett, April 26, 1946, FO371/54951, National Archives UK.

²⁶ Baker to Kirk, October 6, 1947; Boorman to Birse (FO), October 30, 1947, CAB 124/412, National Archives UK.

²⁷ “Plans for Commercial Broadcasting,” December 12, 1945, FO371/54949, National Archives UK. The British did try to block any advertisers or equipment going to commercial stations aimed at the French market, such as Radio Andorra and Radio Tangier, to strengthen the case against commercial radio within France. McNeil to Morrison, October 8, 1946, CAB 124/411, National Archives UK.

²⁸ Briggs, *Sound and Vision*, 34-42; Cabinet Minutes, January 27, 1944, WM (44)12th Conclusion, CAB65/41, National Archives UK.

commercial advertising, a trend that began long before their July 1945 victory and continued long after their fall from power in October 1951.²⁹ For example, in 1953 the Advertising Association invited Labour firebrand Aneurin Bevan to speak at their conference where he clearly spelled out his hostility toward consumer advertising. ““You use your arts to push a product down our throats which we would not think of taking if you left us alone. You are harnessed to an evil machine which is doing great harm to modern society. I hope you will be kept in check.””³⁰ The content was also a concern. Commercial competition could bid up the price of radio talent to the point that the BBC could not afford it, or would have to raise license fees to pay for it. And finally, there was the old issue of taste: commercial broadcasting’s emphasis on winning the largest and “most gullible” audience would “debase” programming standards, and a 1947 case against commercial broadcasting pointed to recent reports from the United States as evidence – not only of bad programming but also of the effect of tasteless commercials: “Repugnance caused by continual reference to physiological disorders, e.g. – ‘one long parade of headaches, coughs, aching muscles, stained teeth, unpleasant full feelings, and gastric hyperacidity.’”³¹

Radio Luxembourg and other potential competitors to the BBC were on a hit list, with the cabinet deciding in November 1945 that “an attempt should be made to eliminate commercial broadcasting from overseas.”³² The cabinet’s information point man, Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison, spoke out in parliament in April 1946 against commercial broadcasting, which

²⁹ Wilson, *Pressure Group*, 137; Dominic Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 23. However, in the 1930s an organizer frustrated with the BBC had suggested buying time for political propaganda on Radio Luxembourg..

³⁰ Nixon, Sean, *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c1951-69* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 164.

³¹ “The Case Against Allowing Commercial Broadcasting to this Country from Abroad,” December 6, 1946, L/1/438, IOR, British Library.

³² Broadcasting Policy Report by the Lord President of the Council, the Minister of Information, the Postmaster-General and the Minister of State, November 20, 1945, Cabinet Paper (45) 293, CAB 129/4, National Archives UK.

“disconcerted” American advertisers who were planning on returning to continental broadcasting.³³ It came up again in June when Morrison told parliament “the Government intend to do everything they can to prevent commercial broadcasting to this country from abroad.”³⁴ Some inside the government privately balked; his parliamentary private secretary Patrick Gordon-Walker – also the Labour Party’s broadcasting officer – not only called for advertising on the BBC, but also characterized Morrison’s position against Luxembourg as futile. “I believe that the policy of just trying to shut out commercial broadcasts is a Canute policy. It won’t work.” Morrison was not impressed with Gordon-Walker’s argument.³⁵ Over the next weeks and months the topic kept surfacing in parliament, with Conservative Party leader Winston Churchill comparing Morrison’s vague threats to do “everything they can” to “peacetime jamming.”³⁶ The American trade press clearly intimated that jamming was a possibility, though it was never seriously discussed internally.³⁷

The 1946 White Paper on broadcasting, which called for continued BBC monopoly and an extension of the charter for five years, explicitly singled out Radio Luxembourg and any other potential interlopers.³⁸ Morrison made his position clear publicly and repeatedly. In the parliamentary debate over the White Paper, he said:

Quite frankly, we do not like this effort of a concern to set up a business in Luxembourg for the purpose of directing broadcasting at this country, when the policy of our country is otherwise. This does not mean that we are going to jam it, or that anyone is going to be penalised who listens to it. They can listen to what they like, but the Government are entitled to a view as to what is desirable in this matter. Quite frankly, this particular type

³³ J.F.A.D. Note, May 3, 1946, W5327/104/801, FO371/54951, National Archives UK.

³⁴ Wilson, *Pressure Group*, 31.

³⁵ Patrick Gordon-Walker to Morrison, June 5, 1946; Morrison to Gordon-Walker, June 25, 1946, CAB 124/411, National Archives UK; Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, 23.

³⁶ United Kingdom. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 425 (1946), July 10, 1946, cols., 387-7.

³⁷ “British Debate Radio Jamming Threat,” *Broadcasting*, July 15, 1946.

³⁸ *White Paper on Broadcasting Policy*, Cmd. 6852, (HMSO: London, 1946), para 74.

of sheer naked exploitation, not of the highest order, is one which we do not like. We feel that if we can discourage it, we should discourage it.³⁹

Those and other public statements over the years had a “beneficial effect in discouraging some large advertisers in this country from entering into contracts with Radio Luxembourg.”⁴⁰ Tobacco and patent medicine firms, which had once been mainstays, avoided it.⁴¹ After Radio Luxembourg resumed regular English service it attracted two advertisers by late 1946 – bookmaker William Hill and headache cure Protex.⁴² The dismal British economy with its rationing, regulation and austerity, and the damper that placed on consumerism, probably did more than Morrison’s threats to discourage advertising. Production was geared to export to the dollar zone, to earn desperately needed foreign exchange, and goods were kept scarce to keep inflation down during a period of full employment. Even bread was rationed. The domestic consumerism that had fueled Radio Luxembourg before the war was but a memory as production was steered to the export market.⁴³

The austerity and currency exchange controls not only in Britain but also elsewhere in Europe discouraged American advertisers throughout the 1940s. By 1949 Coca-Cola had pulled out of Radio Luxembourg, and the only remaining American product advertised on the station was an over-the-counter laxative, Carter’s Little Liver Pills.⁴⁴ Ads also ran for the American Economic Cooperation Administration, which supervised the Marshall Plan and the American-sponsored Lutheran Layman’s Hour.⁴⁵ Commercial radio had re-emerged in Luxembourg and

³⁹ United Kingdom. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 425, July 16, 1946, col. 1092.

⁴⁰ Parsons (GPO) to Pimlott, June 13, 1949, CAB 124/10, National Archives UK.

⁴¹ Haley (BBC) to Flett, June 20, 1946 CAB 124/407, National Archives UK.

⁴² Summary of B.B.C. Listening Report, 1st December 1946; Luxembourg Legation to Foreign Office, November 30, 1946, CAB 124/407, National Archives UK.

⁴³ Morgan, *Britain since 1945: The People’s Peace*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 32-3, 77; For a detailed account of post-war rationing, see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ “Commercial Radio in Europe,” *Sponsor*, September 26, 1949, 30-1, 65-8.

⁴⁵ Pimlott to Morrison, April 26, 1949, CAB 124/10, National Archives UK.

other mini-states, but they were useless for American advertisers as the American trade magazine *Sponsor* noted: “These stations have audiences, but the audiences for the most part haven’t American dollars, or their equivalent, to spend.”⁴⁶

Although most of the Labour opposition to Luxembourg focused on its commercialism, there were always fears that it could be used politically. This surfaced in small, but telling ways. When the small, splinter Socialist Party of Great Britain asked for permission to broadcast political messages on Radio Luxembourg, Morrison slapped them down hard and pointed out that if it was government policy to discourage commercial broadcasting, “how much less desirable was it for a socialist party to use it for political purpose.”⁴⁷ Just to be sure, the 1949 Representation of the People bill contained a clause banning any parliamentary candidate from using cross-border radio in an election campaign.⁴⁸ The government also noted when the European Cooperation Administration bought time on Radio Luxembourg for the show “America Reporting to Europe” on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings “to give their support to Europe on various aspects of the U.S. Role in the recovery programme.”⁴⁹ A more worrying report came from New York, where a consortium known as the Association of Export Advertising Agencies was apparently planning commercial and anti-socialist messages on Radio Luxembourg.⁵⁰ They did not follow through.

Competition??

Anti-Luxembourg Tactics:

⁴⁶ “Commercial Radio in Europe,” *Sponsor*, September 26, 1949, 31.

⁴⁷ Radio Luxembourg: Request from the Socialist Party of Great Britain,” July 31, 1948, CAB 124/10, National Archives UK.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Pressure Group*, 26.

⁴⁹ Parsons to Stephens, December 17, 1948, CAB 124/10, National Archives UK.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

In the early post-war years, the government's desire to keep unwanted programming off Radio Luxembourg dovetailed nicely with the need for a new transmitter for the BBC European service and the desire to prevent any uncontrolled broadcasting to Germany. In October 1945 the British proposed a joint lease with the French government that would take almost all the station's time. The French government was divided over the policy and backed off eventually because of the costs, but the British went ahead as complications with other transmitters made it pressing to have an available transmitter for the BBC to broadcast to Germany and Austria. The Treasury was willing to "consider sympathetically any reasonable proposal for expenditure" – and figures ran anywhere from £100,000 to £250,000 for an annual lease.⁵¹ Purchase costs were even higher; reports reached the Foreign Office that the Americans had offered £1 million for the station, "which was considered insufficient" and a British organization had offered £3 million in January.⁵² The Luxembourg government delayed, presumably assuming there was more money to be made through commercials than an official lease to the BBC. Eventually, the BBC worked out its problems with the other transmitters, which deflated the government's plan to lease the station.⁵³ As one of Morrison's officials noted: "A decision to spend large sums of public money would have to be justified on grounds of overseas information policy, and it would not be right to embark on large expenditure to prevent a foreign station from being used for broadcasting to this country."⁵⁴

⁵¹ CM (46) 78th Conclusion, August 14, 1946, CAB 128/6; Radio Luxembourg, meeting minutes, August 15, 1946, CAB124/407, National Archives UK. A figure of £500,000 annually was also mentioned. See, Pimlott to Nicholson, January 21, 1947, CAB124/407, National Archives UK.

⁵² Luxembourg Legation to Chancery (FO), July 22, 1946, CAB 124/407, National Archives UK. The information came from a conversation with Stephen Williams, a British announcer on Luxembourg. The British organization's money had suspicious origins, apparently.

⁵³ Memorandum on Radio Luxembourg, Cabinet Overseas Information Services (Official) Committee, January 16, 1947, CAB124/407, National Archives UK.

⁵⁴ Pimlott to Nicholson, January 21, 1947, CAB124/407, National Archives UK.

But other measures to harass and contain Radio Luxembourg were already in play. In April 1946 two British companies had asked for foreign exchange to buy ads on Radio Luxembourg, and on Radio Andorra. The Foreign Exchange Control Committee turned down both of them, mainly because of the government's policy against cross-border commercial radio.⁵⁵ By 1946 Luxembourg had replaced its pre-war agent, Wireless Publicity, with a new British subsidiary, Radio Luxembourg Advertising Ltd. (RLA). The government again used exchange controls to prohibit RLA from using British sterling to pay for advertising time. To get around that, RLA took its 25-percent commission from Radio Luxembourg in the form of airtime, which it then sold to British advertisers within the country.⁵⁶ Any dollars from American advertisers presumably went straight to Luxembourg. It was legal, but Morrison told the Treasury that it was "really very wrong" and that he did "not like it at all." He hoped to get legislation against it. He didn't.⁵⁷ Another way around the ban was a disguised payment system consisting of inflated dividends, which were not covered by exchange controls, for the RLA shareholders. Because 73.5 percent of the shares in the subsidiary were held by Radio Luxembourg, and dividends could add up to £9 for a £1 share, a sizeable amount of money could potentially make its way to Luxembourg. Dividends went from £400 for the 1948-49 fiscal year to £17,820 for the 1950-51 year, with officials anticipating that they could increase up to £100,000 a year. The Treasury and Bank of England did not think it was worth plugging that particular loophole.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Commercial Broadcasting Overseas: Minutes, April 5, 1946, W5098/104/801, FO 371/54951, National Archives UK. In addition, the government knew the French government was not unanimous about its new commercial-free policy, and wanted to strengthen its allies in Paris.

⁵⁶ Memorandum on Radio Luxembourg, Cabinet Overseas Information Services (Official) Committee, January 16, 1947, CAB124/407, National Archives UK.

⁵⁷ Mitchell to Lidderdale, November 28, 1947; Morrison to Hugh Dalton (Chancellor of the Exchequer), January 8, 1947, CAB 124/412, National Archives UK.

⁵⁸ Herbecq to Woodruff, October 18, 1951; Herbecq to Gill, February 28, 1952, T231/1264, National Archives UK.

Some pre-war harassment tools against Radio Luxembourg were revived, and new ones considered. The government clearly had allies in the BBC and the British newspaper industry, which feared Luxembourg's competition for advertising.

- The Post Office continued its pre-war policy of refusing telephone relays from Luxembourg to Britain for live remote broadcasts. Instead, technicians had to record the events and fly the transcription discs to Luxembourg for broadcast.⁵⁹ This would continue into the mid-1970s, long after Britain adopted commercial television and domestic commercial radio.⁶⁰
- British newspapers kept up their pre-war boycott of any advertising by or news of Radio Luxembourg programming. The *Daily Mail's* Lord Rothermere had written directly to Prime Minister Clement Attlee on behalf of the Newspaper Proprietors Association in January 1945 to reiterate the policy.⁶¹ By 1955 the more direct threat of domestic commercial television made newspapers less worried about Luxembourg, and they began to take advertising from the station.⁶²
- The Director of Public Prosecutions was asked to weigh in as well on Luxembourg advertising, but noted that it would be practically difficult to prosecute under existing law those who advertised on Radio Luxembourg, and the difficulties of creating new law to do so.⁶³
- The government looked into the idea of slapping export controls on recordings, including those of shows specifically for Radio Luxembourg, with the idea of choking off recorded

⁵⁹ To Postmaster General, March 26, 1952, HO256/668, National Archives UK.

⁶⁰ Roscoe to Goose, October 19, 1973, HO256/668, National Archives UK.

⁶¹ Rothermere to Attlee, January 24, 1945, CAB 124/411, National Archives UK.

⁶² "Press Ends Broadcast Boycott," *World's Press News*, June 24, 1955, 1.

⁶³ Case Against Allowing Commercial Broadcasting to this Country from Abroad, December 6, 1946, CAB124/41, National Archives UK.

music and other programming heading toward Luxembourg. But it would have involved creating an entirely new control category, which would not logistically be able to single out records going to the station. Besides, officials noted, a ban could easily be evaded.

The idea was rejected.⁶⁴

Doubts and Murmurs:

Throughout all these anti-Luxembourg maneuvers, British officials always had doubts. In the June 1946 cabinet paper calling for opposition to commercial broadcasting, there was this odd acknowledgement:

We must, however, face the prospect that these efforts may fail, and that Radio Luxembourg will once more become a commercial station. We feel, therefore, that while we must persevere in our efforts to prevent commercial broadcasting directed to this country from stations overseas, there may come a time when we have to recognize that these efforts have failed; that commercial broadcasting has successfully re-established itself, and that something must be done to allow British companies to use stations like Radio Luxembourg on an equal footing with their foreign competitors.⁶⁵

The Board of Trade also continued to push a pragmatic, business-friendly policy. If Luxembourg couldn't be stopped, officials argued, Britain should not sit back and let Americans dominate the airwaves. British businesses should not only advertise on the radio, they also should run the stations. The board's top official wrote to Morrison in 1946, arguing that "if it is not in fact practical to operate this ban then there are strong hard-boiled arguments for allowing British undertakings to take part in the management of stations abroad, which are in fact directing commercial broadcasting to this country and elsewhere."⁶⁶ The board also wanted

⁶⁴ Woods to Flett, July 11, 1948, CAB 124/10; Board of Trade to Flett, September 30, 1946, CAB124/407, National Archives UK.

⁶⁵ Broadcasting Policy: Joint Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council and the Postmaster-General, June 21, 1946, CP (46) 241, CAB129/10, National Archives UK.

⁶⁶ Woods to Morrison, June 26, 1946, CAB 124/411, National Archives UK.

British exporters to be able to use cross-border broadcasting whenever possible, especially if their American competitors were using it.⁶⁷ The board did not prevail.⁶⁸

In 1947 Chancellor of the Exchequer Stafford Cripps asked the Federation of British Industries to look into commercial advertising overseas.⁶⁹ The Board of Trade's position came up again during the 1948 export drive. The French government had wrapped up a £43,000 a year lease of up to 13.5 hours of airtime a week for propaganda, and Luxembourg wasn't getting as many sponsors as expected in the commercial service, especially the English service. One of Radio Luxembourg's British directors, Sir Herbert Dunnico pitched two successive ideas – first the Federation for British Industry sponsoring a “Cavalcade of British Industry” on Luxembourg, second, the British government leasing the station for up to £200,000 a year to promote exports in continental Europe, and presumably, engage in political propaganda.⁷⁰ The Board of Trade was unenthusiastic about this particular scheme because exports needed to go to dollar-earning areas, not continental Europe.⁷¹

In the largely anti-commercial Beveridge Report on Broadcasting, the BBC seemed resigned to a contained, minor-league Radio Luxembourg, acknowledging, “This form of broadcasting has almost certainly come to stay.”⁷² Although Luxembourg had stuck to light entertainment and paid American religious rebroadcasts, and had steered clear of political references and humor, there was a fear of what could happen in the future with politics or a “full-

⁶⁷ Commercial Broadcasting Overseas: Minutes, April 5, 1946, W5098/104/801, FO 371/54951, National Archives UK.

⁶⁸ Commercial Broadcasting Overseas: Minutes, April 5, 1946, W5098/104/801, FO 371/54951, National Archives UK.

⁶⁹ Cripps to Sir Norman Kipping (FBI), October 14, 1947, CAB 124/412, National Archives UK.

⁷⁰ Cavalcade of British Industry, June 5, 1948; Suggestions Concerning Radio Luxembourg, June 1948, CAB 124/10, National Archives UK.

⁷¹ Board of Trade to Morrison, July 2, 1948, CAB 124/10, National Archives UK.

⁷² *Report of the Broadcasting Committee, 1949, Appendix H: Memoranda Submitted to the Committee* (Cmd. 8117) (London: HMSO, 1951), 106.

scale attack” by American commercial broadcasters from other stations.⁷³ Jamming again came up as an option, but in an odd way:

In the last resort, if we do not want either political propaganda or commercial broadcasts from abroad, we may be driven to jamming, as Soviet Russia has jammed much or most of the information about the world outside which the British and American broadcasting authorities have endeavoured to supply to the Russian people. Those who think commercial broadcasts are as objectionable as gambling forecasts or political propaganda, however dishonest, must contemplate jamming. Those who feel that advertisement by radio, even if we do not want it to dominate radio and even if we do not want it from the BBC, is not in itself as bad as other things that can happen in the world today, may be prepared to make a bargain.”⁷⁴

That suggested bargain would allow Radio Luxembourg commercial freedom in exchange for British controls and an avoidance of politics “and other even less desirable things.”⁷⁵ Beveridge’s report came out in January. By October the Conservatives were back in power and, despite misgivings by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a strong pressure group within the party started pushing for commercial television within Britain. Cracking down on Radio Luxembourg was no longer a priority.⁷⁶

British and commercial Independent Television began in 1955 and attracted many of Luxembourg’s performers and writers. But fate was kind to Radio Luxembourg that year. International economic agreements meant the government had to allow direct payments to Radio Luxembourg.⁷⁷ At the beginning of 1955 a new kind of music entered its Top Twenty music show – Bill Haley and the Comet’s “Rock Around the Clock.”⁷⁸ The BBC disliked rock and roll; Radio Luxembourg played it to millions of British fans and gained a new mission.⁷⁹

⁷³ *Report of the Broadcasting Committee*, Cmd. 8116 (London: HMSO, 1951), 108-9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Wilson, *Pressure Group*.

⁷⁷ Rudd to Symons, December 2, 1955, T231/1264, National Archives UK.

⁷⁸ Briggs, *Sound and Vision*, 759.

⁷⁹ Johns, *Death of a Pirate*, 149.

From Radio SEAC to Radio Ceylon:

At the same time that the Labour government was doing almost everything possible to cripple commercial radio targeting Britain, it served as a midwife to one of the biggest commercial operations in Asia that would bedevil their fellow socialists in India for decades. It is a story of increasing British desperation to maintain a voice in Asia, and the firm determination of Ceylon's leaders to make some money with the post-colonial windfall of a brand-new, British-built and installed 100,000 watt shortwave transmitter.

During the colonial era radio in South Asia had been firmly planted on a state-run variation of the BBC model – All India Radio (AIR) – and in post-independence India the emphasis was on education, information, development and national uplift.⁸⁰ Commercials were not in the picture, and neither was much popular culture. Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) had inherited the same sort of radio system but had one significant difference. The British South East Asia Command (SEAC) had built a station with a powerful shortwave transmitter in Ceylon in 1945 to give news and entertainment to its 1.3 million soldiers, sailors and airmen throughout Asia.

The station wound up in Ceylon rather than India where AIR already had a large and sophisticated broadcast infrastructure largely because of the clout of SEAC Commander Lord Louis Mountbatten, who wanted any station under his control and near his Ceylon headquarters.⁸¹ It was a very expensive investment. The original cost estimate was £100,000, but actual costs ballooned to £300,000 – an estimated £10 million in 2014 money – as a state of

⁸⁰ Kachan Kumar, "Mixed Signals: Radio Broadcasting Policy in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 31, 2003, 2173-82.

⁸¹ Hitchcock, *Making Waves*, 39, 65.

the art broadcast complex emerged with equipment shipped thousands of miles through war zones.⁸²

The first step was a 7,500 watt shortwave transmitter that started broadcasting in 1944, but the monster 100,000 watt transmitter did not start broadcasting until May 8, 1946.⁸³ By that time the war was over and SEAC had moved its headquarters to Singapore, but the station would attract many loyal listeners among the British troops awaiting demobilization, or still in the area as occupation and counter-insurgency forces.⁸⁴ By June 1947 Radio SEAC was broadcasting 16.5 hours a day – a mix of BBC news and transcription programs, recorded music and American programs.⁸⁵ It was a strong signal that could be heard throughout the world. In fact, on select Sunday nights Radio SEAC broadcast to Britain for troops to make dedications and send messages for friends and family who had the rare shortwave receiver.⁸⁶

But even before full broadcasting began, Mountbatten had developed some radical ideas for the station and was lobbying Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin for a future of high quality entertainment programming – on “commercial or semi-commercial lines” – to face anticipated American competition in the area. He dismissed BBC programming as lower quality and sent an emissary with experience in American commercial radio to London for talks. Mountbatten had big ambitions for the station, writing, “I see no reason why it should not capture the whole English-speaking audience in the Far East.”⁸⁷ It is unclear exactly how Bevin responded, but

⁸² Ibid., 87.

⁸³ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁸⁵ *SEAC Forces: Radio Times*, June 1947, L/I/1/440, India Office Records and Papers, British Library, London. (hereafter IOR, British Library); Hitchcock, *Making Waves*, 148

⁸⁶ Hitchcock, *Making Waves*, 145.

⁸⁷ Mountbatten to Bevin, January 28, 1946. Quoted in Hitchcock, *Making Waves*, 108-9.

Radio SEAC remained firmly anti-commercial in the short time it remained under British control.

As Britain's South Asian colonies moved toward independence after the war, the future of the Radio SEAC became a point of contention. The Ceylonese could not abide a British-owned station on their soil, but the British needed the station to relay BBC broadcasts to Asia and did not think they could realistically dismantle and move the broadcasting complex.⁸⁸ Drawn-out negotiations about the turnover of the station continued even after Ceylon declared independence in February 1948. At one point the British were insisting that Ceylon pay the full value of the assets – what officials estimated as £250,000, but by late 1948 were content to give it to them. The reason for the change was straightforward British desperation. With the defeat of Japan, ensuing civil wars and insurgencies, and the recent or impending independence of former European colonies, Britain considered it vital that its news, views and propaganda could reach Asian listeners without delay. The BBC was building a transmitter near Singapore, but until that was ready in 1951 the British wanted Radio Ceylon's transmitter for 8.5 hours of BBC broadcasts a day.⁸⁹ They eventually got the time, at an estimated £65,000 annually for two and a half years for the privilege.⁹⁰

Ceylonese leaders were clear early on that they wanted to use other hours on the transmitter for commercial broadcasts. A BBC representative at Radio SEAC, Edward Bonong, encouraged their ambitions. Commercial radio offered the promise of revenue, even on a short-wave transmitter. He wrote, "The potential market which can be reached by Radio SEAC's

⁸⁸ Gordon-Walker Memo, July 28, 1948, L/I/1/440, IOR, British Library.

⁸⁹ Gordon-Walker to High Commissioner (Colombo), 17 Dec. 1948, L/I/1/440, IOR, British Library.

⁹⁰ Treasury minute, n.d., HO256/285, National Archives UK.

service is enormous.”⁹¹ The British had tried but failed to talk the Ceylonese out of advertising.⁹² The only alternative would be for Britain to buy the additional time, which was dismissed as being “very costly.”⁹³

An important figure in the negotiations was Morrison’s former parliamentary private secretary Patrick Gordon-Walker, who had become parliamentary undersecretary at the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), and would soon become CRO secretary. Gordon-Walker had been dismissive of Morrison’s anti-commercial worries about Radio Luxembourg in 1946; he was equally as unconcerned about commercialism on Radio Ceylon in 1948. In fact, he was enthusiastic about it if it could be done with British interests in mind. Gordon-Walker pointed out there was a strong possibility that individual British firms or the British government could buy advertisements on Radio Ceylon for its cross-border broadcasts. Better than the Americans. The only condition should be that Radio Ceylon could not allow commercial programs to be aimed at Britain, something that would be technically possible on shortwave. Other than that, it would be Ceylon’s station, and Ceylon’s problem if neighbors with non-commercial systems, like India, complained.⁹⁴ He concluded:

Provided the adjacent countries do not raise objection to the content of particular U.K. sponsored commercial broadcasts across their frontiers (objection to commercial broadcasts in principle would be for the Ceylon Government to deal with) it is submitted that no objection should be raised to any of these courses and that their possibilities should be looked into forthwith. Unless this is agreed, there would be the danger of United States competition.⁹⁵

At the end of February 1949 the Ceylonese announced that they were going to aim commercial broadcasts at Southeast Asia, Africa, India, Pakistan and Burma, and vowed to make

⁹¹ Bonong to Bond, September 29, 1948, HO256/274, National Archives UK.

⁹² Gordon-Walker Memo, July 28, 1948, L/I/1/440, IOR, British Library.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

enough money within two and a half years to run the national broadcasting system.⁹⁶ The following year Ceylonese government ministers outlined an ambitious plan to the *Ceylon Observer*, explaining how Ceylonese diplomats would drum up business overseas. They were already negotiating a sale of airtime to Voice of America, and would consider selling time to other governments as well. They anticipated earning about 2 million rupees annually from the station.⁹⁷ American business was excited about the potential in the early 1950s, with *Sponsor* magazine describing the station's signal as "strong enough to sell Wheaties to the Japanese emperor."⁹⁸ The main target, though, was India, where AIR shunned commercials and most popular culture.⁹⁹

By late 1950 advertisers began to gravitate toward Radio Ceylon, including British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC), which was looking into airtime.¹⁰⁰ Shell Oil had been approached, with the veiled threat that their American competitors could be advertising as well. Shell didn't want to get into a radio ad war with their American competitors, but would if they had to.¹⁰¹ Within a few years British, American, Indian and European advertisers flocked to Radio Ceylon, with the British senior trade commissioner in India estimating 100 advertisers by

⁹⁶ High Commissioner (Colombo) to CRO, February 27, 1949, HO256/275, National Archives UK.

⁹⁷ "Ceylon to Relay Voice of America," *Ceylon Observer*, August 20, 1950. (attached to Costley White (Colombo to Sedgwick (CRO), August 23, 1950, P1062/31, FO953/749, National Archives UK.

⁹⁸ "International Basics," *Sponsor*, July 14, 1952, 258

⁹⁹ John Jenks, "Commercial Temptation: Cross-border Radio and the Comparative Transformation of Public Service Broadcast Policy in Britain, South Africa and India, 1930-67" *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 15 (2017), no. 1, 133-4. Commercial broadcasting to India had already begun from the Portuguese colonial enclave of Goa, but the signal could only reach western India as far as Mumbai.

¹⁰⁰ Curson to Swinnerton, November 17, 1950, P1062/52, FO953/749, National Archives UK.

¹⁰¹ Commercial Broadcasting – Radio Ceylon, prepared by A.A. Star, September 28, 1950, P1062/35, FO 953/749, National Archives UK.

1952.¹⁰² High-profile sponsors included Lipton, Goodyear, Pan American Airways and Air France.¹⁰³

While Radio Ceylon broadcast popular music in English, Hindi and Tamil, AIR stuck with cultural uplift. AIR soon further undermined itself when Information Minister B.V. Keskar banned the wildly popular Hindi film music from AIR broadcasts, because he thought it was “vulgar,” in favor of Indian classical music, which he believed was more uplifting. Tens of millions of radio listeners in India did not share his opinion. Radio Ceylon’s Hindi service began broadcasting film music and found its listenership, and revenue, taking off as AIR’s listenership fell.¹⁰⁴ Revenue followed. Official sales of airtime went from 600,000 rupees in the first year of operation to 3.2 million rupees by 1954-55.¹⁰⁵ More money may have been flowing in unrecorded channels as India tried to block Indian advertisers’ payments to Ceylon.¹⁰⁶

Eventually the Indians capitulated and started a service for popular music – Vividh Bharati – and explicitly and without irony compared it to the situation with the BBC and Radio Luxembourg.

This service (Radio Ceylon) became extremely popular and listening to it was increasing rapidly at the expense of programmes of AIR. The situation was no different from that in the U.K., at one time when Radio Luxemburg had made heavy inroads on the listening to BBC programmes. This induced the BBC to adjust its programme pattern. Similarly, AIR conceived Vividh Bharati and put it on the air in October 1957 to counteract the growing popularity of Radio Ceylon. Its attraction was immediate and it succeeded largely in its purpose.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Rowland Owen, *India: Economic and Commercial Conditions in India, September 1952* (London: HMSO, 1953), 92.

¹⁰³ “Radio Ceylon adds to sponsor list,” *Sponsor*, October 20, 1952, 95

¹⁰⁴ Jenks, “Commercial Temptation,” 134-5.

¹⁰⁵ Accounts of the Government of Ceylon Running Expenses of the Commercial Service: Annual Report and Audited Accounts for 1954-55, DO109/41, National Archives UK.

¹⁰⁶ Jenks, “Commercial Temptation,” 136.

¹⁰⁷ *Radio & Television: Report of the Committee on Broadcasting & Information Media* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1966), 73.

Conclusion:

Whether in Britain or India, commercial broadcasting proved to be a powerful force; it could be temporarily limited, or pre-empted, but never blocked. There was no way, short of jamming, that radio waves could be stopped from reaching listeners. Prohibition on actual listening was beyond the will or capacity of most democratic states. However, commercial radio from across borders could be crippled if the flow of money could be crimped and advertisers intimidated – something both the British and the Indian governments tried in the cases, respectively, of Radio Luxembourg and Radio Ceylon. But Britain's success at limiting Radio Luxembourg depended ultimately on austerity, rationing and the constriction of the consumer market; people could not buy much of what was advertised. India's failure against Radio Ceylon came about because AIR's horrible programming decisions left no domestic outlets for popular Hindi film music that Radio Ceylon was eager to provide. Advertising to the much-poorer Indian market could still make sense because of the absolute size of the buying public.

This paper also shows that divisions within the seeming solid Labour phalanx could lead to differing results in different parts of the British-dominated world. When Labour was building on a history of public service broadcasting, and concentrated on the vital home listening public, it was united. Morrison could and did slap down the impertinent Patrick Gordon-Walker. Even the pro-business Board of Trade was mainly interested in broadcasting commercials to foreigners. But East of Suez, things could be different. Radio SEAC had grown up outside BBC control and both Lord Mountbatten and the Ceylonese recognized the commercial potential early on. When push came to shove on continued access to the transmitter, the government was willing

to acquiesce. The dominant position of Gordon-Walker in the final negotiations with Ceylon may have made it easier. It definitely made it ironic.