

Broadcast news

Britain is about to destabilize a good broadcasting structure to satisfy Tory ideology and Treasury greed.

THE trouble with the lessons of history is that it is easy to get them wrong. Because the fears aroused in Britain in the early 1950s about the arrival of commercial television turned out to be exaggerated, the Conservative government is now laughing away all the warnings about arguments about the imminent destruction of public-service broadcasting.

Let it be said right away that this is no parochial British matter. The high quality of Britain's four-channelled television service, well subsidised either by the BBC's licence fee or commercial television's near-monopoly on television advertising revenue, for many years brightened and sustained the woefully under-financed American Public Broadcasting Service. More recently, with the advent of satellite distribution and cable television in Europe, the four British channels are widely available in Europe. And with Eastern Europe opening up too, this is a poor time, indeed, for the Thatcher government to undermine the national broadcasting excellence.

The main proposal in the Broadcasting Bill unveiled last week is to award commercial television licences to the highest bidder. During the past year since this proposal was announced, critics from all sides, including Mr Rupert Murdoch of News International and the pillars of the British advertising industry, have been begging the government to think again. Some concessions have been wrung from the free-market diehards, led by the Prime Minister, behind the bill. Before being entitled to offer a cash bid, would-be broadcasters must say what kinds of programmes they would offer in "extraordinary circumstances," moreover, even after this passing this "quality threshold", the highest bidder may be turned down. But that's all. Other than that, the licence to broadcast must go to the highest bidder. The temptation to over-bid is therefore built into the plan. The only way this money can be recovered is by reducing spending on programmes — or by letting the company be taken over. As the new licences, which will take effect in 1993, will be accompanied by a lighter regulatory regime — a new agency, the Independent Television Commission, is to replace the present Independent Broadcasting Authority — there will be no obligation to produce programmes for children, for education, for minorities.

Critics of the bill argue that these changes will not only take away excellence from the commercial system (which, contrary to much opinion abroad, is a source of many fine current affairs programmes documentaries) but also weaken the BBC by lowering the quality of its competition. In response, the government scornfully resurrects the fears of the 1950s then that the coming of what is known as ITV would ruin British cultural life. Lord Reith, founder of the BBC, compared it to the Black Death. Instead, as it turned out, competition was good for the

BBC, forcing it to acquire the popular touch, which led to the satiric and comic renaissance of the 1960s.

The 1950s parallel does not hold, however. ITV started out as a "a licence to print money" because it had a monopoly on advertising revenue and stole two-thirds of the audience by giving it game shows. It only turned from offering the cheap diet to viewers in favour of the more expensive one which included serious current affairs, education, music and community affairs, when it was compelled by parliamentary wrath and tough IBA regulation. However unwillingly, it could obey the regulatory strictures because it had the money to do so. The 1990s are not going to be like that. With the many new channels of satellite and cable competing for advertisements, commercial television is going to be short of money. And it will be more loosely regulated: a recipe for lower standards. The government conveniently chooses to ignore parallels closer in time. In Australia, deregulation of commercial television two years ago led first to sales of licences at vastly inflated prices, followed by takeovers at fractions of their original value. Serious programmes of science, business and arts have disappeared. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal tries to vainly to impose standards of programme quality but enforcement is pointless when the receivers are at the door.

There is also a parallel in America with another of the Broadcasting Bill's proposals — to remove certain national sporting events from the protected list and throw them to the open market. Mr David Mellor, the new broadcasting minister at the Home Office, says it is unlikely that owners of the rights to television the Wimbledon tennis championships would with their event to be seen other than by the largest possible home audience. He should look at what has happened in the United States where baseball — the national game — has virtually disappeared from free television and been placed in the hands of the cable barons.

The Broadcasting Bill's proposals are draconian to no purpose. What the Prime Minister dislikes as "the cosy duopoly" of the BBC and ITV has ended anyway with the advance of cable systems and the installations of satellite dishes by the thousand every week. The challenge for public policy now is to protect the excellence of the national services that now exist so that these continue to be available as part of the choice that Mrs Thatcher (hardly a typical consumer of television) wants for viewers.

A good way to get the Prime Minister and the Treasury off the auction hook on which they stuck themselves has been suggested by the Campaign for Quality Television. It is to hold an auction but to specify that the bid represent a promise of money to be spent on programmes, not on sum of money that would be given to the Treasury. Will the voices of reason be heard? As the Broadcasting Bill heads for passage, probably next July, those Tories who fear its potential, should remind the government of another lesson from history — that monuments, once destroyed, cannot be built again. □