The Fifty-One Society: A case study of BBC radio and the education of adults

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between sound broadcasting and adult education, looking at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) during the period of post-war reconstruction and austerity of the 1950s. It considers in particular one of the Corporation's most innovative educative programmes of the period, 'The Fifty-One Society'. This was produced in Manchester by the Talks Department of the BBC North Region and first broadcast on 1 November 1951. The format was a discussion, along the lines of the old literary and debating societies, and featured a small group of northern academics drawn from the Universities of Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool, many of whom had personal experience as adult education tutors. Each week a topic was introduced by a guest speaker and then discussed by the 'resident experts' in the studio. The discussion was then edited and broadcast. The Fifty-One Society aimed to bring to listening audiences ideas, informed views and argument on a wide range of topics relating to science, the arts, industry, education, literature, government, politics, religion, war and peace. The paper examines the programme's underlying philosophy: 'the belief of the liberal imagination' and attempts to evaluate its success and its educative impact.

Keywords

adult education tutors, educational history, liberal adult education, BBC, sound broadcasting, universities

Introduction

This article discusses the relationship between sound broadcasting and adult education. It focuses specifically on the radio output of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) during the period of post-war reconstruction and austerity during the 1950s.

This was a pivotal stage in the evolution of the BBC and the mass media more generally. Memories of a pre-war 'golden age of wireless' were fading. Television was beginning to erode listening audiences. Yet in the early years of the decade there were still five times as many families without television as with one, while the BBC's Light and Home Service programmes continued to attract millions of listeners.

The significance of this output for the education of adults should not be underestimated. According to one verdict 'the educational impact of the BBC was enormous', its most effective work being through its 'normal programmes' (Kelly, 1992, p. 319). In the context of 1950s radio this constituted the output of the Talks Department with its programmes dedicated to 'books, plays, films, music, travel and current affairs' (Kelly, 1992, p. 319). Despite the burgeoning challenge of television, radio was apparently realising some of the expectations of the pre-war Hadow Committee that it might fill many of the existing gaps in the adult education movement, widen the recruitment of students, as well as stimulating a larger public by putting 'listeners in touch with the leaders of thought and the chief experts in many subjects' (Hadow Committee, 1928, p. 87). According to Beveridge, whose enquiry into broadcasting reported in 1950, the time was ripe for a 'fresh attempt…to use broadcasting as a means of adult education' (Beveridge Committee, 1950). The outcome was a period in sound broadcasting rich in ideas and experiment dedicated to finding novel means of 'producing and deploying radio programmes for general and specific educational purposes' (Cain and Wright, 1994, p. 38).

Despite its significance for adult education, this period of experiment and innovation in BBC sound broadcasting remains somewhat neglected by historians of the adult education movement. Certainly compared to educational programmes for schools or for specific groups, such as the Armed Forces, the potential of the more general educative output of the BBC to engage with adult education has drawn little comment or question. Was there any broader educational philosophy underpinning the programmes? What sort of programmes were they? Where and by whom were they produced? Did they embody any formal educational aims? How important were they and were there any attempts to measure their impact or that of sound broadcasting more generally?

This article addresses some of these questions. It does so through a case study of one of the Corporation's most innovative educative programmes of the period. This was 'The Fifty-One Society', a discussion programme produced in Manchester by the Talks Department of the BBC North Region and usually broadcast on the Home Service. First broadcast on 1 November 1951 the Society aimed to bring to listening audiences ideas, informed views and argument on a wide range of sometimes complex and extremely contested topics relating to science, the arts, industry, education, literature, government, politics, religion, war and peace. The format was simple. Each week an invited speaker, of national or international prominence, would lead the studio audience, comprising the Society's 'members' and invited guests, into debate on a topical issue. This debate was recorded, subsequently edited and broadcast.

Methodological orientations

Reconstructing the story of the Fifty-One Society and understanding its place in the broader historiography of the BBC's radio programme output required an evidence base derived from traditional historical research methods. These included an extensive

search of secondary sources specifically on the BBC as well as on the history of adult education and the history of broadcasting more generally; informal conversations with individuals who had memories of the Fifty-One Society and discussions at conferences with experts from the field of media history; and, critically, in-depth research into the extensive primary source material held at the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham.

The Centre holds 250,000 correspondence files and 21,000 reels of microfilm, as well as BBC publications, plans, posters and other records, in fact – 'working papers gathered from all parts of the BBC from 1922 to the 1970s' (Kavanagh, 1992, p. 1; 2002). More recent papers are transferred regularly after about twenty years. A Civil Service style system of registries was set up in 1927 and continued until the 1970s, when a numerical classification scheme was introduced. New files were raised when required by users. This led to the registry's arrangement of the files being principally by source department and only secondarily by subject, since users tended to wish to consult their own papers rather than those of another department (Kavanagh, 1992, p. 3; 2002).

Using the archives can therefore initially seem daunting, until the logic behind the system becomes clear. Unfortunately, however, as with any major archive collection there is a degree of luck involved as to whether a particular file has survived. Decisions about the retention of certain papers were no doubt taken for a variety of reasons, both in the 1950s and during the decades since then. In the case of the Fifty-One Society, a rich collection of data was found; it had not previously been consulted and was in fact catalogued for our use.

In common with other large organisations, the hierarchy of the BBC is complex and somewhat intimidating until the vast array of initials is translated into job titles and individual identities. A critical awareness not only of the context of the BBC itself, but also of the wider political and social issues of the time being studied is of course essential. When using archives of this kind, each document must be assessed and evaluated, taking into consideration who wrote it and his or her purpose in so doing. In many cases, of course, the apparent purpose may not be the only one; the writer might well have had a different agenda, which may become clear only after immersion in the documents, but equally may never be identified by the researcher. Many of the documents used in the research were official reports and memoranda by various members of staff at the BBC. There were in addition a large number of correspondence files, containing letters not only from BBC personnel but also from members of the Fifty-One Society, from members of the public and from guest speakers and others who had been invited to take part in the programme. These data raise some important ethical issues, since in many cases copyright does not belong to the BBC and tracing the owners can be problematic.

Using those streams of primary source materials to which the BBC granted us access, the article describes the format, structure, content and significance of this programme series. Its central argument is that the Fifty-One Society was a potent example of the power of sound broadcasting to engage critically with the education of adults. The significance of the programme lay not in any formal attempt to educate vocationally or to engage with any specific sectional group of listeners, but in its avowedly 'progressive' nature. There were two separate though related elements to this. The first was the content of the programmes. This resided primarily in the articulation of ideas, comment and argument by the Society's participants. These constituted a small, cohesive

group of educationalists, academics, intellectuals, industrialists, trade unionists and journalists. Within this broader group, there was an inner core of members drawn mainly, but not exclusively, from academia – especially the Civic Universities of Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester – who were most closely integrated with the BBC programme producers. It was this inner group which gave to the programme its second crucial element: a shared philosophy and set of common ideas and ideologies.

Although they differed politically and intellectually, the participants in this group – members as well as producers – tended to coalesce around what one member would later describe as the 'belief of the liberal imagination' (James, 1972). This belief manifested itself as a shared faith in the power of liberal education to create a better, more tolerant and civilised world. Through the powers of rational argument, informed debate and, above all, education, the members believed there would come forth a better world of reason and democracy. The idea of taking such a vision to a broader audience through the medium of sound broadcasting constituted a novel post-war experiment, but one that on the whole, somewhat to the surprise of some BBC senior managers, proved remarkably successful. The article explores how this idea found expression within the BBC itself. It considers first the broader context of the BBC in the years of peace and reconstruction and its engagement with adult education issues. This is followed by the narrative of the Fifty-One Society itself, including the origins, objectives and ethos of the Society, the nature of the membership and an overview of the content of the broadcast programmes. The concluding section draws these elements together into an overall assessment of the programme series and its relationship to the history of adult education during the 1950s.

Context: broadcasting, the BBC and education in the post-war era

By the time of the Fifty-One Society's first broadcast, the BBC had been in existence for almost thirty years. Originally known as the British Broadcasting Company it had been formed in 1922 to sell radio sets. Broadcasting began from London on 14 November 1922 and from Manchester the following day. The influence of John Reith, the first Director General, cannot be over emphasised. His vision of 'an independent British broadcaster able to educate, inform and entertain the whole nation, free from political interference and commercial pressure' had an impact, not only in Britain, but arguably across the world (BBC website). Public funding through the licence fee was intended to keep standards high and maintain the Corporation's independence: what Richard Hoggart calls 'the free way' (Stanistreet, 2003, p. 12).

Brian Groombridge has illustrated how 'the roots of British broadcasting's strong commitment to adult education are to be found in the origins of the BBC itself 'in the post-war reforming aspirations of many leaders of opinion at the time, who helped shape emerging policies on broadcasting, most famously in the firmly held beliefs and strong personality of John Reith' (Groombridge, 1996, p. 356) and in the 'ability and vision' of some of those whom Reith appointed to senior posts.

The first Head of the Education Department at the BBC, J.C. Stobart, already dreamed of 'a broadcasting university, to be free to all and innovatory' when he was appointed to the post in 1924. Two years later he expressed his views on educational broadcasting: 'Wireless must flow into the vacant spaces of continuing education' (Groombridge, 1996, p. 357). There were early links too with the adult education community: with established tutors such as R.S. Lambert, and G.W. Gibson taking on

educational roles within the BBC. The Hadow committee, set up jointly by the BBC and the British Institute of Adult Education, included members of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and Board of Education. Shortly after the publication of its report *New Ventures in Broadcasting: A Study in Adult Education* the introduction of listening groups occurred. The broadcasts did not attract as many 'new recruits to learning' as hoped – many were already active in organisations such as the WEA – but by contrast the number of listeners to serious mid-evening talks regularly reached over five million (Groombridge, 1996, p. 360).

Reith regarded education as 'a major task' in the Corporation's mission, defining it as 'a systematic and sustained endeavour to re-create, to build up knowledge, experience and character' and as a means, politically, of bringing forth 'a more intelligent and enlightened electorate'. Almost from its inception therefore, the BBC's output had included lectures or, as they soon became known, talks. Formal broadcasting to schools began in 1924 and according to Briggs, 'even schools which did not possess wireless sets were being influenced in their curricula and classroom practice by what the BBC was doing'. Programmes aimed explicitly at adult education soon followed, a *Radio Times* article in 1927 coining the term 'University of the Air' to refer to programmes aimed at the WEA (Briggs, 1985, pp. 54, 116).

The Second World War had done much to demonstrate the potential power of sound broadcasting as an agency of adult education. This had led to the creation of the Forces Education Unit in 1945 which had reflected a growing sense that broadcasting might enrich listeners' private lives as well as contributing more broadly to citizenship (Cain and Wright, 1994, p. 35). Kavanagh has described how 'Wartime programmes such as *The Brains Trust*, *Can I Help You?* and J.B. Priestley's *Postscript* were partly the result of the need to satisfy the desire of many ordinary citizens for more information as well as a need to boost morale at home'. (Kavanagh, 1992)

Given its history and public service ethos the BBC was inevitably deeply implicated in the educational revival of the post-war period. These were critical years for both education and broadcasting. The ravages of world war, the progress of reconstruction, the creation of a welfare state, the struggle for economic prosperity, the explosion of science and technology and the threat of cold war: each played their part in propelling issues of educational purpose and values into the public spotlight. In Britain the 1944 Education Act had established that every child should receive compulsory secondary education. Expansion of tertiary education, including the universities, was also a subject of intense debate, the first stirrings of an eventual shift from an elite towards a mass system of post-compulsory education.

Radio and, increasingly, television were themselves immensely powerful media with which to influence, manipulate and, in the wrong hands, suppress, the very liberation that the extension of educational opportunity was making possible. From 1950, when there were 12 million exclusively radio licences and only 350,000 combined radio and TV licences, the number rose to three million combined licences in 1954. The transformation was largely due to the broadcasting of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on 2 June 1953: the 'single event which changed the course of television history' (BBC website). It was estimated that 22 million watched the event. From then on, radio had a serious rival. Two years later, despite the recommendations of the Beveridge Committee, the BBC faced another kind of competition – from commercial television. It is against a background of these changes in both education and broadcasting that the contribution of The Fifty-One Society should be judged.

Origins, objectives and ethos

The idea for a discussion programme along the lines of the Fifty-One Society was first discussed at a meeting of members of the BBC North's Talks Department in the Yorkshire village of Grassington. The suggestion, put forward by Graham Miller, was for a radio adaptation of the old 'Literary and Debating Society' tradition (BBC WAC Miller, 1972). A number of such societies were founded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in northern England. The Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, for example, established in 1819 and described as 'a little torch of culture, burning in the midst of the darkness of provincial philistinism', was intended for 'the leisure-time cultivation of scientific interests by the professional and employing classes of Leeds' (Harrison, 1961, p. 4; Wemyss, 1883, p. 99). Miller, however, was using the analogy more to illustrate the idea of 'a permanent club which met regularly to hear, question and debate with a guest speaker' (BBC WAC Miller, 1972).

The general aims agreed at Grassington were: 'to illuminate everything that matters in life in general and Northern life in particular so clearly that as many listeners as possible are given a greater awareness, understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the world in which they live' (BBC WAC Miller, 1951). This objective took account of the belief that 'a big listening audience is not enough, and that what matters more in the long run is the positive impact of the programme on the minds and emotions of its audience'. It would be a unique programme for, as Miller later recalled:

> *We were going to ask people of some distinction and reputation to travel to Manchester regularly as members of the club and take part in a broadcast not for the normal fees which they could have commanded but for a drink, a sandwich and a very modest expenses allowance.* (BBC WAC Miller, 1972)

For what were later described as 'logistical reasons', the catchment area of the Society was limited to the Leeds-Manchester-Liverpool axis. The north regional ethos was to pervade the society throughout its existence. After prolonged discussions, the title 'Fifty-One Society' was chosen, commemorating the year it started. It was also agreed that the number of members should eventually total 51, though it is doubtful that it actually did so, usually hovering around 48 or 49. In line with the aims of reflecting the atmosphere of an autonomous society, a system was set up with agendas and minutes, conventions on the election of members, choice of speakers and the election of a committee. Similarly, to foster the impression of independence, attempts were made to broadcast from the Grand Hotel, Manchester. Technical problems over transmission proved insurmountable, however, so Broadcasting House became the permanent venue.

The vital role of the producer had also been discussed at Grassington. It was agreed that this should be to 'select, carefully but boldly, the material that fulfils most completely his general aim and object . . . inevitably a most complicated and tricky business'. The producer had first to decide whether the particular subject under consideration was in fact 'one of the things that matter in life'. He could not allow his own opinion to cloud his judgement, nor be swayed by majority opinion. He then had to decide whether the subject was suitable for radio broadcasting, whether it was topical enough. Significantly he might also have to decide 'between getting a little of his subject over to a large audience, or getting more of it over to a small audience' (BBC WAC Miller, 1951). Graham Miller was to fulfil the producer's role with distinction. He had been appointed

North Region Talks Producer in 1947 at the age of 32 having previously been employed as the Assistant to the Secretary of the Labour Party Research Department.

While the producer's role was pivotal behind the scenes, in terms of the quality of the discussions for recording the chairman's role was vital. The programme was fortunate in obtaining the services of Norman Fisher, Manchester's Chief Education Officer. 'His control of the proceedings was absolute and his summing-up at the end of the recording quite superb'(BBC WAC Miller, 1972). In outlook and background he too was a typical liberal educationalist; his management of the broadcasts ensured that all views were heard and open-mindedness prevailed. His career ranged from army education to local government and the setting up and running of the Staff College of the Coal Board. Subsequently Fisher was also a member of the Board North Regional Advisory Council and the General Advisory Council of the BBC. After the Fifty-One Society his broadcasting career went on to include chairmanship of the television version of the Brains Trust. In many ways Fisher's career and ideals were characteristic of the Society. As his colleague in Manchester and fellow broadcaster, Eric James, High Master of Manchester Grammar, later wrote:

> *…underlying all he did were two firm guide-lines: one was a belief in education in one form or another…the second was a fundamental idealism… [T]o those who knew him there was never any doubt that he hoped for the creation of a better, more tolerant and more civilised world, and believed that the way to accomplish it was not to shout slogans, but to make people think more deeply and more rationally; in other words to educate them. It was this belief, the belief of the liberal imagination, that inspired his very varied contribution to our national life.* (James, 1972)

James also recalled that Fisher displayed a belief in the media's ability to 'play an essential part in the educational process' and that this in itself reflected his underlying faith that 'the way to truth lay through free, informed discussion' (James, 1972).

The membership

The conscious simulation of the philosophical and debating tradition demanded that both speakers and members possessed certain qualities. These included a considerable faith in the role of the broadcast media in the educational process. Miller later recalled that the members needed 'more than average gifts of thought and speech' and that this needed to be allied to 'personality, achievement, perhaps even distinction, in different fields'. Moreover each would need to display 'a genuine interest in (and some background knowledge of) controversial problems outside their own occupation or branch of study.' Broadcasting skills were clearly a prerequisite since, as Fisher later observed: 'Both for a member and an opening speaker the qualifications are the ability to put a case clearly and concisely, and tolerance of the view of others' (Fisher, 1955, p. 9).

From the early days the members were chosen with these qualities in mind. Existing members suggested names of potential members who, after discussion, might then be invited to join the Society. Few members had time to attend each weekly meeting, so, as Miller explained 'the number of members has been made large enough to ensure a quorum with a reasonable diversity of interests and experience at each discussion'(BBC WAC Miller, 1953). This also fitted quite neatly with the idea of having 51 members. About a dozen attended fairly regularly, with about an equal number of others 'changing from session to session who have completed the core of the Society' (Fisher, 1955, p. 9).

Throughout its existence the Society relied heavily on input from academics. Miller claimed that of the members 'approximately 40% come from the Universities, another 40% from the professions, broadly defined to include educationalists and 20% from industry'(BBC WAC Miller, 1953). Academic influence, however, was probably disproportionate to the numbers. In 1952, for example, 22 of the 49 members were academics, while another five had strong links with education – three as head teachers of public schools (James, Allan and Poskitt), one Chief Education Officer (Fisher) and the indefatigable educationalist Shena Simon. The arts were represented by David Baxendall of Manchester Art Gallery, Godlee of the Hallé Orchestra and the American sculptress Mitzi Cunliffe. There were five representatives of the press, seven from industry, two union leaders, two churchmen, one solicitor, one Medical Officer and one former Lord Mayor of Manchester. During the1958–9 season, 23 of the 49 members were academics. Eric James, Allan, Poskitt and Shena Simon were still members. Of those who had joined within the previous six years, Phyllis Bentley also had strong links with education. There were in addition to Mitzi Cunliffe three lawyers, three politicians, four ministers of religion, two from the world of journalism, one local government officer, one surgeon, one Justice of the Peace, two union leaders, two industrial leaders and a farmer.

Although there had been changes, therefore, the balance of academics to the rest of the members remained similar. It is interesting too, though not surprising, that more than half the members were drawn from the Manchester area: 29 in both 1952 and 1958. Consistently the Leeds area supplied around ten to 12 members, with only about half a dozen from Liverpool. A much higher proportion of academics made up the representation from Leeds and Liverpool than from Manchester, however. In 1952, for example, only eight of the 29 strong Manchester contingent were from the universities, compared to ten of the 'Leeds fourteen' and four of the 'Liverpool six'.

While the general educational disposition of the Society's membership is clear, less apparent was the specific orientation of several key members towards adult education. This was exemplified in Sidney G. Raybould, one of the Society's most staunch supporters. Raybould was a northerner, born and bred. Richard Hoggart described him as 'stocky, pugnacious, a bluff Northerner to the core and a little stagey with it…he engendered his own north-south divide'(Hoggart, 1990, p. 190). A former school teacher from Middlesbrough, he had begun working as an adult education tutor for the Leeds Joint Tutorial Classes Committee in the 1930s. In 1946 he was made Director of Extra Mural Studies at the University of Leeds and in 1952 appointed to the new Chair of Adult Education. He has, with reason, been credited with creating the department of extra mural studies at Leeds (Harrison, 1961, p. 342). He also served as Vice-President of the WEA from 1949–57 and was a member of the BBC general advisory council from 1952–9. Raybould played an important role in the Society, attending meetings regularly and for a time serving as deputy chairman. He made numerous suggestions about speakers, topics and guests, bringing to the society the same dogged conscientiousness that marked his professional life. Many colleagues believed that adult education was Raybould's sole *raison d'être*: it can be assumed that he viewed his participation in the Fifty-One Society as an expression of this.

Many of Raybould's colleagues from the University of Leeds were among the members of the Fifty-One Society. These included academic staff from a range of disciplines; of greater significance, however, is that all had been involved in adult education. These members included J.M. Cameron, Senior Lecturer, later Professor of Philosophy

at the University of Leeds, who had worked in adult education in the Portsmouth and Leicester areas as well as Leeds in the inter-war years; Guy Chapman, Professor of Modern History, University of Leeds, 1945–53 who previously worked as an adult education tutor in the North Riding of Yorkshire and for Oxford; A.H. ('Harry') Hanson, later Professor of Politics, University of Leeds, also a contributor to the extra-mural department; Arnold Shimmin, lecturer in economics at University of Leeds, then head of the department of social studies and a tutorial class tutor; and H. Victor Wiseman, later Professor of Government, University of Exeter, who taught adult education classes in the Leeds area. In addition the Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University, Charles Morris, and his wife Mary, were members of the Fifty-One Society. They too were staunch advocates of adult education. Mary Morris gave occasional lectures for the Leeds Extra Mural Department on the voluntary service with which she was involved. Charles Morris was described by Raybould as 'a vice-chancellor who is perhaps unique in the degree of his interest in and understanding of adult education'(Raybould, 1952, p. 11). Morris had worked as a tutor for the Oxford Board of Extra Mural Studies, teaching at day and weekend schools and was an individual member of two WEA districts.

The contribution of these and other adult educators to the character of Fifty-One as both society and as a programme should not be underestimated. In particular it imbued the style and content with something of the early university tutorial class movement. Fieldhouse claims that this movement, in its origins at least, 'represented a libertarian socialism which nevertheless, most of the time, displayed comfortable affinities with the mainstream British liberal tradition and the emerging Labour movement'. He argues that the movement's ideological agenda 'encompassed notions of individual self-fulfilment, social purpose, public service, social justice and class emancipation "provided they were pursued through a dialectical process rather than by propagandising"' (Fieldhouse, 1996, pp. 202–3). It was these principles which set the WEA apart from its rival the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC): the WEA aimed to teach people *how* to think, not *what* to think. By drawing on the intellectual and pedagogical character of so many from within this tradition almost unconsciously the Fifty-One Society's aims mirrored this approach.

Content: programmes as curriculum?

The Fifty-One Society broadcasts were certainly not planned as a formal curriculum; nor were they progressive in the sense of providing related blocks of learning. Since they relied heavily on spontaneous contributions, content and quality were never entirely predictable. Nor were they even aimed explicitly at formal learners in schools, colleges or universities. On the contrary they were aimed at general listeners to radio. Far from any pretension of serving a cultural elite or promoting high culture, the programme went out on the Home Service North: hardly 'lowbrow' but certainly less troubled than the 'highbrow' Third Programme by any fears that it might inadvertently pander to 'mass culture'.

However, by appealing to 'listeners whose tastes and interests lay somewhere between the average Home Service and average third Programme levels' the programmers were given a unique opportunity to impact on listeners' 'minds and emotions'. The intention was to 'bring out the larger fundamental and enduring trends and conflicts of our own age'. To do this they deliberately eschewed any idea that the broadcasts should impart 'purely matters of fact requiring expert knowledge'; instead, they should

convey 'matters of principle and opinion, demanding the application of intelligence and a general experience of life. At every meeting of the Society some "expert witnesses" should be present; but the group as a whole really plays the part of a jury' (BBC WAC Miller, 1953). To achieve this required:

- some degree of formality (our ordinary conversation is often quite unintelligible to the sound radio listener).
- an element of drama and entertainment to stimulate the listener – the light and shade of differing personalities, different attitudes and experience of life.
- a measure of corporate unity, because true spontaneity, genuine humour, and speed of reaction in conversation are rarely possible unless the speakers are at least acquaintances. (BBC WAC Miller, 1953)

To bring these elements together The Fifty-One Society relied on what was described as 'radio conversation but of a rather unusual kind' (BBC WAC Miller, 1953). This marked the programme out from the Third where, as its Controller admitted, there was much more reliance on broadcasts modelled on Foundation lectures and the 'assimilation of ideas in didactic form'.[5] Of course, listeners to The Fifty-One Society, like those to the Third, benefited from the emerging links between university academics and the BBC and from the idea that programme content might even be described as 'research led'.[6] Although not a formal curriculum the involvement of leading academics in the Fifty-One Society ensured that content was not just remarkably diverse, but frequently cutting-edge and controversial. Discussion themes were invariably not just 'topical and "newsy"' but often previously un-rehearsed on the airwaves (BBC WAC Miller, 1953).

Topics such as government and private enterprise, socialism and Britain's economic future, key issues in the new welfare state of the post-war era, brought to the studio discussion several leading politicians as guest speakers, including future leaders of the Labour Party Harold Wilson and Hugh Gaitskell (twice). Other politicians from the 'left' included Richard Crossman, Denis Healey, Roy Jenkins and Herbert Morrison. Also on political themes Lord Beveridge accepted a second invitation in 1954 to investigate whether it was a crisis year for social security, Lord Hailsham opened on the future of the House of Lords, and Communist James Klugman spoke on 'Has Marxism failed?' Ethics and science, notably the threat posed by the H-bomb, 'weapons of mass destruction' and the relationship between science and society were introduced by such luminaries as Patrick Blackett, J. Bronowski and Julian Huxley. Richard Hoggart, author of *The Uses of Literacy*, spoke on the rise of mass advertising and Raymond Williams on 'Democracy and culture'. 'Women in contemporary society' was opened by Mary Stocks, and 'The reform of the divorce laws' by R.S.W. Pollard.

Although the vast majority of the programmes covered topical themes history was not neglected. Hugh Trevor-Roper introduced 'History – mind or matter', A.J.P. Taylor 'Is there a pattern in history?, Asa Briggs 'Equality and social opportunity in the twentieth century', and Sir Isaiah Berlin 'National superiority and inferiority'. Higher education, a subject of intense debate in the post-war world, brought two university vice-chancellors: J.F. Wolfenden, who introduced both 'Problems in the universities' and 'The future of the public schools', and Eric Ashby who asked 'Compulsory education – a menace to civilization?' Finally, the arts and journalism provided the sports journalist John Arlott, who asked 'Are we a sporting nation?'; the poet John Betjeman on 'What is good taste?'; the actor Eric Barker on 'What is a sense of humour?' and Gilbert Harding on 'Manners

makyth man'. Other topics covered during the Society's nine broadcast sessions included foreign relations, the future of the press, the future of the novel, the end of film, the future for youth, the question of capital punishment, and the future of the monarchy.

From the start it was recognised that there could be tensions between the BBC, who would retain editorial control of the programme, and the Society, which, it was predicted, would become, a 'corporate body with a life and will of its own' (BBC WAC Miller, 1972). During the programme's life, there were indeed occasions when the Corporation felt the need to wield its authority, but these were remarkably few. Some topics, however, threatened to open to public scrutiny issues over which the Corporation had a vested interest. For example, in 1953 government proposals to break the BBC's monopoly, a subject of intense debate in the press, led the Society to suggest a discussion of commercial television. Initially London refused but after intense pressure on behalf of the Society by its BBC North patrons, permission was granted for a special programme on 2 February 1954. Broadcast as 'Television: Commercial Competition', the case for commercial competition was put by Malcolm Muggeridge, editor of *Punch* magazine, writer and vice-president of the Popular Television Association. It was opposed by Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Chairman of the National Television Council, Vice-President of the Liberal Party and a Liberal peer. Members and their guests were carefully lined up as speakers in support of both sides of the argument. Such was the importance of the topic the BBC decided to broadcast nationally, the only time the Corporation permitted a full length discussion of the subject to go out on its airwaves.

A second controversial issue concerned the future of sound broadcasting. As with commercial television London had given qualified refusal on several previous occasions, provoking a confidential memo from the Controller, North Region (CNR) to the Assistant Director Sound Broadcasting (ADSB), in August 1957, questioning the logic and wisdom of the decision:

> *We surely should not deny a public discussion of our own policies in our own medium… The future of Sound Broadcasting as a whole is a matter of general public interest and concern and, as such should find a place in the BBC's serious discussion programmes. It is every bit as valid a subject as e.g. Defence, or the Wolfenden Report… [O]ne cannot but be concerned at the continued pressure of public criticism of all aspects of the BBC's work – pressure that is mounting like steam in a boiler. Let us release some of that pressure ourselves, and allow a debate on the air, through the Fifty-One Society.* (BBC WAC CNR, 1957)

London eventually yielded the following year. After some disagreement on who should lead the debate, the Society settled on Tom Driberg of the *New Statesman*, much to the consternation of the Director of Sound Broadcasting who thought the choice 'strange' and 'unpromising'. 'Normally', he continued, 'your central speaker is an authority on his subject who can speak with authority in answer to probing questions on his facts and opinions, Driberg has no such knowledge of broadcasting, so far as I know – no more than a *New Statesman* critic can have acquired' (BBC WAC DSB, 1958).

In the event the broadcast seemed to divide opinion inside the Corporation, symbolising perhaps a growing sense that 'The Fifty-One' might be nearing the end of its useful life. The Controller of West Region wrote to the Controller North Region to congratulate him on the quality of the discussion. But this view was not shared in London. In a critical memo from Head of Talks, London, the programme was dismissed as a failure. Worse still, the Society's members were criticised for being 'wholly unaware of the realities of working class life' and ignoring the fact that 'radio is essentially a medium for

mass communication'. It was acknowledged that the Society had often produced good discussions, but this discussion was 'deplorable'. It concluded:

> *Two main lessons might be thought to emerge. In relation to output, that care should be taken to ensure that at least some of the speakers have made a proper study of the subject; and in relation to the Corporation that steps should be taken to eradicate a dangerous degree of ignorance about the Corporation and its work among the relatively better educated and opinion forming minority.* (BBC WAC HT, 1958)

The critique arrived at a critical point in the Society's existence. Radio audiences in general were dropping, members were drifting away and were in any case becoming too familiar to the audience. Experiments with a televised version of the programme failed, while the policy of integration into the national Home Service, alongside retention of some regional 'opt-outs' imposed new rigidities and effectively spelt the end of the programme. Although it struggled on for a last 'session' during 1959–60, the end came with a delayed final broadcast on the occasion of the BBC's 40th anniversary celebrations in November 1962.[8]

Conclusions

In seeking to 'illuminate all that matters in life in general and Northern life in particular', the Fifty-One Society broadcasts sought not just to entertain but to inform as well. But in what sense did they contribute to the BBC's commitment to educative ideals? As originally conceived they were explicitly designed to lead listeners towards 'a greater awareness, understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the world in which they live' (BBC WAC Miller, 1951). To achieve this the programmers decided to shift the emphasis from 'ordinary citizens' as speakers, to highly educated experts and to substitute editing for 'live' outside broadcasts. In the process incidentally they hoped the quality of discussions would also be much improved (BBC WAC Miller, 1972).

Initially this approach appeared hopelessly miscalculated. The new programme took to the air at a time when formal links between university academics and other 'experts' were still in their infancy. Much to the programmer's despair the first broadcast, led by Lord Beveridge, proved 'chaotic' – 'trained minds' were 'little better at sticking to a point and developing a coherent discussion than [the] . . . man in the street' (BBC WAC Miller, 1972). A confidential report by the BBC's Audience Research Department later revealed that the first programme had scored an Appreciation Index (AI) of only 56, disappointingly lower than the then current average of 63 for talks and discussions in the Northern Home Service (BBC WAC Listener Research Report, 1951). Audience appreciation figures did subsequently match or exceed regional averages. Inside the BBC the broadcasts were seen in absolute terms as a 'modest success'. In relative terms, taking into account all the difficulties it faced, the Society was portrayed as scoring a 'major triumph' (BBC WAC AGM, 1952). The number of listeners rose rapidly from an average of 100,000 to 200,000, thereafter remaining 'remarkably constant'.

Quite why the broadcasts were so successful was not really clear at the time either to the Society or the BBC. For example, at the end of the 1954–5 session it was reported:

> *Another remarkable session, with 14 broadcasts gaining an average A.I. of 70. It is interesting to reflect why an entirely serious spoken word programme of this kind (placed*

> *opposite LIFE WITH THE LYONS and TAKE IT FROM HERE on the Light Programme), should sustain a regular audience of from 200,000 to 300,000 in a generally working-class region which is strongly addicted to Light Programme as compared with Home Service.* (BBC WAC CNR, 1955)

The answer was partly due to the BBC's preparedness to give to the programmers and the Society comparative freedom in the choice of subjects and speakers. This approach demanded a high level of thought from listeners. To the extent that it appealed to the more serious listening public the Society was free to an almost unparalleled degree at this period to indulge its 'belief of the liberal imagination'. It did not expect, or seek, vast audiences, though when extended to the national network large audiences of half to three-quarters of a million did tune in. In setting out consciously to challenge what the BBC rather despairingly expressed as the 'increasing tendency on the part of the public to listen to discussions which were becoming so informal and light-hearted as to be almost variety turns in themselves', the Society was uniquely successful (BBC WAC Inaugural meeting minutes, 1951). In providing a meeting place on the air 'for representatives and authoritative intellects in a great many field of human enterprise' where 'matters of public importance could be subjected to enquiry and discussion', the Society achieved something that had not been done before in broadcasting.

The timing too was significant:

> *… it was at last recognised that radio must be treated "as a means of education in its own right" and not as a medium, subservient to other purposes. This was the principle followed by the B.B.C. in relation to sound radio from 1952 onwards and subsequently in relation to television.* (Rowntree, 1959, p. 159)

The programme was a perfect vindication of the Reithian vision for public service broadcasting that would not just entertain and inform but educate as well. Through its educative function it would make its own contribution to the BBC's broader mission to help develop an educated democracy. On the other hand, as patron to a group of independent and largely liberal, left-of-centre members drawn overwhelmingly from the upper tiers of education, many of them with direct experience of working in adult education, the Corporation had given birth to a society over which it could exert only delicate, arms-length control. Although the relationship was not without its tensions the principal tenets of liberal adult education had been transposed from the tutorial classroom to the living room or kitchen via sound broadcasting. In this the programme sought, in the phrase used by Richard Hoggart on adult education, to 'get across without selling out' (Stanistreet, 2003, p. 12). Although open to and, ultimately, victim of the accusation of elitism, both the Society and its patrons in BBC North felt their 'intention and execution was quite otherwise' (BBC WAC Miller, 1972). Although located at the outer fringes of the educational system, by harnessing the power of broadcasting as a mass medium to the belief of the liberal imagination the Society was able to translate a fundamental, almost idealistic, belief in education into a unique form of practice. In this sense the Fifty-One Society represented a powerful experiment in developing the critical, socially engaged intelligence which its members and their patrons in the BBC believed to be the basis of progressive education in a democratic society.

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Notes

1. We use the term 'progressive' to refer to interactions, synergies and contradictions in relation to innovative approaches to education outside the formalised systems of schools, further or higher education, rather than in the sense of specific concepts, theories or practices of pedagogy or shifting perceptions of experimental or alternative education movements.
2. The origins of the idea for a broadcast Society are unclear. Although Graham Miller is generally thought to have been the originator, Donald Stephenson, Controller North Region, later claimed the credit.
3. Miller's background had much in common with members of the Fifty-One Society. He was the son of a former high master of Manchester Grammar School where he received part of his education. He attended Brasenose College Oxford. In 1956 he was promoted to Assistant Head of North Region Programmes. By the time of his retirement in 1974 he had been Network Editor, Radio for three years. Kenneth Brown, his colleague and successor as producer of the Fifty-One Society, described Miller as 'a very private person who always remained something of an enigma to his colleagues' but was known for helping and encouraging young producers (*Ariel*, 27 November 1974).
4. The President of the Society was Professor Lyon Blease of the University of Liverpool. The three vice-presidents of the Society were the three vice-chancellors of the universities of Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester respectively, which could be seen as giving added weight to the academic body.
5. Such as the Gifford series in Scotland. In 1951 the Controller of Third, Harman Grisewood, emphasised that 'the Third Programme cannot satisfactorily be used as a supplementary course of instruction. Its aim is not directly an educational one, its programmes are not planned as a curriculum, they are not progressive and, regarded as single items, they are not elementary enough to be used in the way suggested by the title of a set of publications overseas vividly called "smatter" books. But the listener to the programme may gain according to his taste and capacity an insight and understanding of the broad world of culture' (Harman Grisewood, 'The Universities and the Third Programme', *Universities Quarterly*, 5(4), August 1951, p. 369).
6. Grisewood hoped that programmes would be 'shaped more and more in accordance with the pattern of research that prevails in each branch of learning; so that the audience for the programme can feel assured that it is in touch with the best minds in each field of knowledge and with the vital and sensitive points in the development of each specialised branch of study' (*Universities Quarterly*, 5(4), August 1951, p. 372).
7. These included for the motion Alan Green, a businessman and prospective Conservative Candidate, Professor Ely Devons, an economist from Manchester University, Jane Newton, an advertising company executive and Clifford Paine, Chairman of ICI Dyestuffs Division. Those speaking against included W.L Andrews, editor of the *Yorkshire Post*, Sidney Raybould, Dr Phyllis Bentley, a writer and member of the North Regional Advisory Council, Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, former Chairman of the BBC Board of Governors, Dennis Chapman, a social scientist and Dr Green, Bishop of Manchester.
8. The discussion was led by Richard Hoggart and Henry Fairlie on the problems of the mass media.

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