

146, Chamberlayne Road,
London, N.W.10.
March 24th 1970.

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR INDEPENDENT BROADCASTING.

Dear Committee members,

I was, to say the least, very pleased and flattered by the remarks made in Mr. Bunzl's letter to me following upon your last Committee meeting, and I feel that I owe Mr. Bunzl something of an apology for my previous remarks to him. Those of you who know me will perhaps understand that I have had rather more than my fill of peremptory communications from free radio organisations, although I now realise that from his own point of view Mr. Bunzl had every reason to be peremptory.

I am addressing this letter to all of you, not in the vainglorious assumption that it will be read with solemn ceremony at one of your meetings, but so that any and all of you may feel free to read it should it prove of interest.

Working as I do, within the BBC, it is occasionally possible for me to see both sides of questions involving the decisions of that organisation. I think it is fair to say that the government controls the BBC: its set-up is such that the really important decisions lie in the hands of a man or men who have been directly appointed by the government. These are the men who say that local radio will be set up despite the obvious inability of the BBC to afford it (the rush to get this scheme under way before the next General Election is, I think, significant) and who have the power to change the entire face of British radio despite adverse criticism from every possible quarter. They, as a group, are not broadcasters but minor politicians, more interested in their own future than in that of their medium. It is therefore rather unfair to blame the BBC as a whole for faults which really lie with the government of the day.

The government is evidently very afraid indeed of uncontrolled commercial radio. Hence their complete abandonment of the basic rules of humanity (not to mention English Law) when drafting the Marine Offences Act, and hence also their panicky rush to blow up the only Thames Estuary fort to still be a possible base for such operations after the passage of the Act. The cause of this fear is, I think, obvious. It stems from the one big mistake of the original pirates: that of supporting the Conservatives in the GLC elections. At the time, this seemed like a good idea, but had they reserved their efforts for a General Election, the whole course of commercial radio in this country might have been very different. At the same time, one must agree that it is not reasonable to allow commercial operators, who may well have very wierd political ideas of their own, to carry such power. It would open wide the door to neo-nazis and similar undesirables to achieve some real say in our national life. (Admittedly, this is carrying the argument to its limit, but I really suspect that this is the sort of thing which worries the government, not all of whose members are aged kill-joys). There must therefore be some sort of political control over radio. What easier method than to perpetuate the monopoly of the BBC? So it is inertia, rather than direct antipathy, on the part of the government which we have to overcome, with concrete and sensible alternatives.

Economic viability is also not, in my opinion, a good basis for permitting the existence of a commercial station. It might work at first, but as soon as there were more stations wishing to transmit than could be supported by the available audience, it would be a case of who could attract the most listeners. Which equates with who can provide the most easily assimilable programmes, and not with who can provide the most local (i.e. minority) interest. If a broadcaster wishes to attract advertising from Coca-Cola, and has a choice between a top-forty show, with a potential audience of several million, and an outside broadcast from the local poetry marathon, with a probable listener figure of only a few thousand, which is he bound to choose? There must then be a limit to the number of stations, with their service areas strictly defined, and each must have an audience of sufficient size to permit the transmission of loss-making prestige programmes. I would further suggest that a central authority should network the best programmes, either on the same or a different channel, in order to keep the individual stations competing with each other in this respect. This of course makes the commercial stations regional rather than local. But this is precisely what the old pirates were, and may well have been a contributing factor to their success.

Technical feasibility is a good point, but somewhat meaningless under the circumstances. It is technically feasible to select several hundred radio channels, unused now or to be vacant soon, throughout the entire gamut of wavelengths comprising long wave, medium wave, short wave, VHF and UHF. More than enough, in fact, for everybody. What is more difficult is to unglue the red tape surrounding these wavelengths. It seems to me that there are two possible approaches: either to persuade the government to move the BBC right out of the medium waveband, as most continental countries have done with their national networks (giving scope for radio 1 in stereo!), or to plump for a VHF or UHF unused television channel and to hope to persuade the set manufacturers to follow. After all, the radio industry was built up by supplying the sets that the public demanded, i.e. the programmes came before there was any means of listening to them. I'm sure that sufficient public demand would overcome their present objections to the higher frequencies. There are also the techniques of single-sideband and multiplexing (as in stereo) to consider as means of reducing the congestion in the medium waveband, again dependent on the attitude of the set manufacturers.

I would have thought, incidentally, that competition with radios 1, 2, 3 and 4 was just what we were aiming for. It is surely their pathetic inability to fill the gap left by the pirates which has led to the existence of organisations such as the CIB? I think that the complete destruction of, at least, radio 1 would be a far better declared aim of the Campaign than an unspecified, and to me unspecifiable, service which would not compete with any of them!

To return, finally, to myself, I shall do my best to attend the meeting on April 3rd to which you so generously invited me. But I beg you to forgive me and to rest assured of my good intentions should I fail! I am indeed interested in helping your cause in any way I can. But I must make it clear that I am even more interested in not helping the cause of the Free Radio Association, which to me means the personal comfort and aggrandisement of one Geoffrey Pearl. I have had hanging over my head for over a year a writ for slander issued by this man as a result of my telling the truth about his operations to the Sunday Telegraph and the Sunday Times. Writs which he refuses to drop and his solicitors refuse to take any further. Possibly Caroline is still in the same boat. The cause of free radio is welcome

to any help I can give it, but I will not be again associated with any form of swindle, nor any attempt to gain unwilling or disinterested members for obscure political parties, nor any attempt on the part of one individual to force his fellows to acknowledge him as their superior. Geoffrey Pearl has done, and for all I know is still doing, all these things; I consider them to be the very negation of freedom in any sense. (To say the least!) Therefore, if the CIB has any thoughts of amalgamation, or even of collaboration, with the FRA whilst Geoffrey Pearl remains its proprietor, it would be better if I were not involved. I would be more of a hindrance to you than a help!

Yours sincerely,

Tommy Peters

Anthony Peters.