

LOCAL RADIO

Thomas O'Malley

The Left was caught hopping by the advent of commercial radio, and still doesn't quite know what to do about it. In 1972 the Heath government, supported by a well organised lobby of commercial interests, introduced commercial local radio. The *post-facto* reaction on the left was to accept that the main battle was lost and to make interventions by favouring marginalised community radio stations at best, and at worst, as is apparent in London today, by giving credence to the impoverished arguments of the pirate radio enthusiasts.

Commercial local radio came about because of the activities of commercial interests who were determined to bring broadcasting in Britain out of the public and into

the private domain. This 'lobby' succeeded in foisting commercial TV on an unsuspecting nation, and it was the same spirit within and around the Tory Party which succeeded in bringing radio into the domain of commerce in 1972.¹

Nonetheless the system as established is regulated by *Law*, in this case the 1981 Broadcasting Act. The law requires a number of things of the stations and in particular of the regulatory authority, the IBA. The stations should broadcast material of an appropriately 'local' nature and it is up to the IBA to ensure that they do. This was in part a concession to the widespread political view, bolstered by the practice of the BBC, that broadcasting should not be wholly subject to the dictates of commerce but should have a public service content.

But the IBA has failed to carry out its obligations under the legislation, as the work of Wright, Local Radio Workshop and others proves.² 'Local' radio isn't local in any meaningful sense of the word when used to describe the commercial system; this is because the IBA has consistently refused to interpret its duties under the law in anything other than a partial manner.

The IBA is, to all intents and purposes, in the pockets of the companies that run the

commercial radio stations when it comes to the non TV side of its activity. This explains why the NUJ's legitimate concern about the threat to the financial viability of the commercial radio system posed by the present reckless expansion being pursued by the Authority has been virtually ignored.³ The IBA marches to the tune of those interests who want to establish the infra-structure, and the case for, commercial regional stations which will help boost advertising revenue. A 'financial crisis' in independent local radio would provide the ideal pretext for the establishment of such a regions system, a system which would enhance the power of the big companies and put the unions in a weaker bargaining position.

The IBA is accountable *in fact* if not in law to nobody but the companies who run the stations. There are bodies called Local Advisory Committees which are meant to advise the Authority on the public's views on their local commercial stations. These have no power, meet in secret and are appointed without any process of proper consultation let alone election. The IBA also holds occasional public meetings to glean the views of the public. It makes much of the fact that it doesn't have to act of any of the views expressed at these travesties of public con-

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