

Lobster 59

I helped carry William Burroughs to the medical tent

Further thoughts on the 'pirate' radio stations of the 1960s

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Lobster 58 published a piece that I had written about the odd career of Simon Dee. Inevitably there were many subsidiary areas of research, interesting facts and late arriving information that could not easily be included in it. These have now been assembled and are presented here. Broadly they cover three further areas of enquiry:

To what extent were those in the UK who supported commercial radio in the 1950s and '60s actively seeking to change the economic and political environment in Britain? Did they oppose the post-1945 consensus around the welfare state and central government planning, and if they did by whom were they influenced?

Was there an explicitly political agenda behind the various US-style offshore commercial radio stations that appeared in Europe from 1961 onwards; and, if so, was this in any way promoted by the US government?

Did the various 'counter culture' activities of Ronan O'Rahilly in the 1960s and '70s have a deliberate political purpose?

Beginnings

A discussion of the origins and role of Radio Luxembourg – in its heyday the epitome of slick broadcasting – was omitted

from the article in *Lobster* 58 but is worth setting out now in some detail as an example of the earliest exposure of the UK to commercial radio and an indication of how far back an interest in this subject can be traced amongst selected figures in the British establishment.

The station came into being as a result of the enthusiasm of Leonard Plugge. Plugge was dismayed by the decision of the Baldwin government in 1927 to favour a very limited state run and regulated radio service, rather than licence a substantial network of privately funded and commercially sponsored stations, of the type that had quickly emerged during the same period in the USA. In 1931 Plugge established the International Broadcasting Company Limited to promote his proposals about broadcasting across Europe. He persuaded the government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg that, via an expanded network of companies under his control, he should be granted a licence to broadcast across France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. Radio Luxembourg took to the air in June 1933. It was entirely privately funded, much of its income coming from sponsorship and advertising. Equipped with a powerful transmitter, Luxembourg could be heard in the UK and transmitted 3 hours of English language broadcasts each evening. Even this limited output was immensely popular, with up to 4 million listeners tuning in every night to Radio Luxembourg rather than to the immensely staid and Reithian BBC Home Service. To satisfy UK demand for more broadcasting of this type Plugge also ran a smaller operation, Radio Normandy, a small station licensed by the French government with a transmitter capable of reaching London and the South East from a base on the French Channel coast. Like Luxembourg this also began in 1933 and proved to be highly popular.

As well as his immensely lucrative commercial interests Plugge also had a political career: in 1935 he was elected

Conservative MP for Chatham. He also moved in the highest of high society circles with all the usual trappings of the *uber*-rich, including a London residence on Park Lane that he purchased from Baron Leopold de Rothschild.

The considerable success of Radio Luxembourg, and Plugge's expansion of his network via the International Broadcasting Company to Spain, Yugoslavia and Eire in the years that followed, drew many other wealthy political and business figures to consider similar ventures. One of these was Sir Oswald Mosley who from 1936 invested substantial sums in attempting to establish a European-based English language radio station that would provide the type of mass exposure and publicity for the British Union of Fascists that it would never get from the BBC.¹

In the summer of 1938 the potential of Radio Luxembourg, with its broadcasting capabilities in France and Germany, came to the attention of the Chamberlain government during the fraught international circumstances that developed between Germany and Czechoslovakia about the status of the Sudetenland. In September 1938 Plugge was persuaded by government figures to pass a temporary controlling interest in his various companies to Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. Wellesley was a member of the Anglo-German Fellowship and hence, at this point, a supporter of the Chamberlain policy of placating Hitler so as to retain him as an effective bulwark against Soviet Russia by detaching the

¹ For Mosley and radio see Stephen Dorril, *Black Shirt* (2006) pp. 387-437. Mosley's negotiator on the project was Peter Eckersley, a former BBC engineer. Eckersley also worked by MI6, hence perhaps, the failure of the project. Mosley does not appear to have had direct dealings with Plugge, but the two had a common friend, Colin Beaumont, whose mother was Seigneur of Sark, the proposed location of Mosley's station.

Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia and ceding it to Germany.²

Following the involvement of Wellesley in its affairs, Radio Luxembourg broadcast strongly pro-appeasement material throughout the Munich crisis. The existence of Luxembourg as an 'offshore' station for the Chamberlain government was thus extremely convenient for the pro-appeasement Tories who could use it for this purpose when the BBC – which was supposedly impartial and above politics – could not. Another benefit that flowed from using Radio Luxembourg as an organ of British propaganda on the status of the Sudetenland was that its broadcasts were clearly 'deniable' as representing the views of the Chamberlain government.

In 1940 the powerful and intact Radio Luxembourg transmitter fell under German control and was later used as one of the broadcasting bases for its English language services. Many of these programmes featured William Joyce ('Lord Haw Haw'), formerly a significant supporter of Sir Oswald Mosley. Joyce's talks, like Luxembourg's broadcasts in the 1930s, were extremely popular with audiences across the UK, much to the annoyance of the Churchill government.³

Plugge lost his seat in Parliament in the 1945 Labour landslide but retained his commercial interests. For some years in the 1940s the Attlee government and the Foreign Office made serious attempts, without success, to acquire broadcasting rights on Radio Luxembourg. This would have involved ending Luxembourg's transmissions to the UK (thus preserving the BBC monopoly) and switching its coverage

² For details of the range of right wing groups that stretched from Chamberlain to Mosley (and beyond) see Richard Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted* (1998). Wellesley was Chairman of the Right Club, a significant and well connected far right faction, and a strong Nazi sympathiser.

³ For Joyce see Francis Selwyn *Hitler's Englishman* (1987) and for the use made by the Third Reich of Radio Luxembourg see David O'Donoghue *Hitler's Irish Voices* (1998).

instead to eastern Europe. Plugge and his directors rejected these proposals because they would have involved a substantial loss of advertising revenue. The airwaves controlled by Luxembourg, however, were available at the right price. In 1953 the station struck a deal with Herbert W. Armstrong and the Radio Church of God, prominent religious broadcasters in the US. The Radio Church of God, which claimed to purvey 'the plain truth about today's world news', were particularly concerned about the future political direction of Europe. Stripped of the bombastic religious and biblical language and imagery their broadcasts used, the Radio Church of God message could be summarised as:

- * warnings that a strongly united and federal Europe (under either French or German leadership) posed a graver threat to ordinary citizens than the existing Cold War stand-off between the USA and the Soviet Union;
- * a united Europe was a good idea provided it was part of a broader alliance with NATO and the USA.

The similarity of this message to the long term strategic interests of the USA is obvious and not coincidental. The Radio Church of God would later expand their Luxembourg operation and would participate in many of the 'pirate' radio ventures of the 1960s trying (and failing) to be involved on Radio Caroline before being widely heard on both Radio London and Swinging Radio England.⁴

Plugge's post-war career as a jet-setting wealthy playboy brought him into contact with a wide range of political and business figures. These included Jean Millstein, a controversial figure, to whom he sold his Park Lane property in 1950. Millstein reopened it as a private gambling club, Les Ambassadeurs, the prototype for, and attracting the same

⁴ Herbert W Armstrong's connections with the US State Department stretched back to 25 April 1945 when he attended the inaugural meeting of the United Nations in San Francisco as a State Department accredited representative.

clientele as the later and similar Clermont Club.⁵

Throughout the rather austere years of the 1950s and 1960s Plugge ostentatiously drove a large US Buick around London and moved in the same circles as Princess Margaret, and, like her, kept some extremely louche company. He turned his new home, a town house in Lownes Square SW1, into a private gambling club modelled on the Clermont and Les Ambassadeurs. (The property was used in 1968 as the set for the film *Performance*.) His daughter, Gale, would later achieve notoriety when she became involved with the tiny group of UK black power advocates who followed Michael de Freitas (aka Michael X).⁶

The lengthy career of Leonard Plugge from the 1920s through to the 1970s thus encapsulates a number of disparate elements in UK politics and society. He represented a type of right wing, free market entrepreneur who fell completely out of fashion in the UK after 1945 but would later

⁵ Jean Millstein (anglicised as John Mills – not the actor) served as an intelligence officer for the Polish government in WW2, and possibly for the Polish government in exile after 1945. He described Les Ambassadeurs, which he started as early as 1944, as ‘a place where people can relax and be seen talking to whom they wish’. In the 1950s the club was frequented by Ian Fleming, Princess Margaret and John Aspinall. Scenes from *Dr No* and *A Hard Days Night* were filmed on its premises.

⁶ Gale Benson (née Plugge) was murdered in Trinidad in 1972 by accomplices of Michael de Freitas. De Freitas had a long history of criminal activity and violence and was convicted and hung for the murder of his cousin in a separate but related case. There is some speculation, not substantiated, that he was eliminated as part of the FBI COINTELPRO programme that throughout the 1960s and ‘70s terminated the careers (and lives) of many black American, civil rights and left activists in the US, Central America and Caribbean. Another theory is that de Freitas had Benson murdered because she was searching, at the request of Leonard Plugge, for a set of photographs in the possession of de Freitas that showed Princess Margaret engaged in group sex with a number of young black men. This argument forms part of the plot of the recent film *The Bank Job* (2006).

re-emerge with the ascent of Margaret Thatcher. His success in establishing commercial radio in the 1930s and his high society connections – which lasted throughout his life – would clearly have been a lasting example and inspiration to those in the UK who wished to escape what they considered an undue amount of government control and regulation.

The US interest

The success of Radio Luxembourg in the 1930s, and the use made of it by Nazi Germany in the 1940s meant that there were many well connected figures at all levels of the US government after 1945 who took the view that operating a radio station of the Luxembourg type could well form a useful part of the armoury against the (supposed) Soviet threat to western Europe. As the Cold War escalated, a number of European-based radio stations were set up by the US. Some of these were openly and directly funded; others had funding passed to them via a 'front' for the US government. The rationale for this policy was entirely political. By 1947 the US considered itself (rather than Britain or France) the leader of the free world and had formed the view that western Europe faced a direct threat, if not of territorial conquest, then certainly of emasculation or enforced neutrality, from Communism.

The first signs of this policy came in 1946 with the decision to use The Voice of America (which had originally been launched in 1942 as part of the US war effort and was directly funded by the US government) to report on selected European events that were deemed to be of critical importance to US foreign policy objectives. The Voice of America duly covered the 1948 Italian elections in great depth, the outcome of these being regarded as important to the future political balance of Europe. The role played by the US in swinging these elections away from the Italian Communist Party and toward the

Vatican-aligned Christian Democrats was seen as a substantial early success for this initiative. Following this, however, the Truman administration took a considered view that continuing with directly funded radio broadcasting that was obviously linked to the US government was likely to be counterproductive in propaganda terms. It concluded that a range of 'private' initiatives should be established through which future funding could be channelled and deniability ensured. A specific step in enabling this course of action to be adopted came in 1949 with National Security Council Directive 10/2. This empowered the CIA to spend money on whatever or whomever it felt would be beneficial to US interests without having to explain its decisions, leave any trace of them, or produce financial accounts of how much money it had disbursed. This strategy resulted almost immediately in the setting up of Radio Free Europe, based in Munich.

Radio Free Europe, on paper, was supposedly the offspring of the National Committee for a Free Europe. It was joined in 1953 by Radio Liberty which also broadcast from West Germany. Radio Liberty was essentially a joint CIA-Intermarium project (with its funding channelled through the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia) and by 1955 had a second transmitting station in Taiwan from which it was able to reach areas of the Soviet Union denied to it by the location of its German transmitter.⁷

In 1951 this strategy was expanded further with a decision to commission six mobile broadcasting ships. These were to be fully equipped radio stations that could roam the sea perimeters of the eastern bloc at will and would not be susceptible to jamming, or in the event of war, sudden immobilisation by an air strike. The first of these was

⁷ For an account of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty see Christopher Simpson *Blowback* (1988) pp. 125-136. See also *Voices of Hope: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* published by The Hoover Institute (2001). On the Intermarium see Stephen Dorril, *MI6: fifty years of special operations* (2000) chapter 11.

commissioned by President Truman at a major public ceremony in March 1952. The ship in question was the US Coast Guard cutter *Courier*, which was the most powerful and lavishly equipped floating radio station in the world. It anchored off Rhodes in the Mediterranean and broadcast to the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Ukraine and much of Central Asia. The *Courier* had a helicopter deck which it used to launch barrage balloons. These raised its transmitting aerial to an altitude sufficient for ultra long range broadcasting. In addition the *Courier* also had facilities that enabled it to monitor radio transmissions of all types from deep within the Soviet bloc and could also, if required, jam signals.

Intriguingly, given the later financial issues that dogged many of the 1960s 'pirate' radio stations, the US government quickly discovered from its use of the *Courier*, that the costs of running a radio station at sea were far greater than on land. The fleet of broadcasting ships never materialised – at least not as a specifically government funded initiative – and the *Courier* remained the only vessel of this type under direct government control.⁸ Even so it would still be plausible to assume, given the US policy decisions listed above, that there were similar schemes which enjoyed some US government funding and which at the time were presented as being entirely private sector initiatives.

In other words the expense of the USCGC *Courier* meant that rather than an obviously government led and funded scheme the US would opt instead for a private sector intelligence operation, promoted by any one of the extremely

⁸ Although the US lost interest in running floating radio stations, between 1961 and 1964 the US Navy commissioned 5 large and 6 small signals intelligence ships that were used to monitor radio broadcasts of all types in selected locations around the world. These included the USS *Liberty*, which was attacked by Israel in the eastern Mediterranean in June 1967, and the USS *Pueblo*, captured off North Korea in 1968. The remainder continued in service until replaced by satellite technology in the 1970s.

wealthy and deeply patriotic American business figures (such as Gordon McLendon, a major figure in US radio) underpinned by some clandestine government funding to ensure deniability. In this context the close connection between Gordon McLendon and David Atlee Phillips, which came into the open in the 1970s, makes a great deal of sense.⁹ It was not only a personal friendship, but also a long standing business and professional relationship that dated back to the earliest days of US clandestine broadcasting in the 1950s. A significant part of the work Phillips undertook for the CIA involved running radio stations. He was a key figure in setting up The Voice of Liberation, which broadcast into Guatemala in 1954, and Radio Swan, which transmitted into Cuba from 1961. Both these stations were modelled on the format that McLendon had pioneered at KLIF Texas: popular music punctuated by breezy news bulletins from a heavily pro-US/pro-western standpoint and significant amounts of religious broadcasting from the Radio Church of God. With hindsight both the Voice of Liberation and Radio Swan look very much like templates for Radio Nord, the station that McLendon sponsored in the Baltic

⁹ Gordon Maclendon's Wiki entry includes this: 'Jack Ruby was both a listener and admirer of McLendon and known to the staff of the station, including Gordon McLendon. Conspiracy theorists Warren Hinckle and William Turner (in their book *Deadly Secrets*) and Peter Dale Scott have alleged that McLendon played a peripheral role in the John F. Kennedy assassination. Gordon McLendon was the first person Jack Ruby asked to speak with after his arrest. They also cite McLendon's close relationships to legendary Central Intelligence Agency operative David Atlee Phillips, politically connected oil magnate Clint Murchison, Sr., and political advisor to LBJ, Bobby Baker, as circumstantial evidence. McLendon is also alleged to have funded Interpen, the Intercontinental Penetration Force, which aimed to privately overthrow Cuba in the 1960s. Gordon McLendon and David Atlee Phillips co-founded the Association for Intelligence Officers.'

from 1961 and which later became Radio Caroline.¹⁰

Unravelling Mr Pearson (sic)

The official version of the Radio London story states that an admirer of KLIF Dallas, Don Pierson (also spelt Don Pearson on occasion), was apparently so enthused when reading about the success of Radio Caroline that in late 1964 he decided to start his own station, Radio London, with funding from the Radio Church of God.¹¹ A little later, in 1965, Pierson claimed that he had become 'disillusioned' with the material broadcast by Radio London and formed a new consortium with William Vick and Tom Danaher. They acquired and fitted out another ship and brought it into service as the base for two different radio stations: Swinging Radio England, which broadcast pop music, and Britain Radio, which provided easy listening for an older audience. This venture was launched at an extremely lavish social event at the Hilton Hotel in May 1966 and the two stations broadcast until August 1967 when the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act took them off the air.

There are a number of problems with accepting this version of events at face value.

Firstly, although Don Pearson/Pierson stated that he

¹⁰ For a fictional treatment of this topic see Len Deighton's *Billion Dollar Brain* (1966) p. 31 where the main villain (an oil magnate from Texas) is described thus; '...the guy's a multi-millionaire, multi-billionaire maybe. This is his toy. He made his money from canned food and insurance; that's a dull way to make a billion, so he needs a little fun. The CIA siphon a little money to him....some of the stunts we pull are pretty good. He has two radio stations on ships that beam into the Baltic states. You know the sort of thing: "Stand by for freedom and coke"....'

¹¹ Pierson stated that he saw an article in *The Dallas Morning News* quoting Ronan O'Rahilly as saying that Radio Caroline was making a profit of £18,000 per month. If so, this was false. O'Rahilly had no controlling interest in the station at this point and it never made any money. At the time he claims to have seen the article, one of the Radio Caroline ships was still owned by Gordon McLendon (a friend of Pierson's) and was only leased to its UK operators.

was 'disillusioned' with Radio London, both Swinging Radio England and Britain Radio continued to use the same format, including religious broadcasting and commercials from the Radio Church of God, that had been used by Radio London.¹²

Secondly, the personnel involved at a senior level in the management of Swinging Radio England and Radio Britain were far more high powered and significant individuals than one might reasonably expect to find running a radio station, even one with the ample funding that these enjoyed. Day to day control of the two stations was exercised by William Vick, who otherwise acted as president of 16 oil company subsidiaries of the Monsanto Corporation.¹³ Tom Danaher, who like Pierson was also a friend of Gordon McLendon, served as a (prominent and well known) US Navy pilot in the Pacific and Korea. In 1990 he would be credited with giving Mel Gibson special assistance on the film *Air America*, a drama about the CIA covert operations in Laos and Cambodia in the

¹² In October 1966 Swinging Radio England covered the Conservative Party Conference at Blackpool in some depth, including coverage of a Young Conservatives rally.

¹³ SRE/BR had a UK board of directors one of whom was John Cordle, Conservative MP for Bournemouth East 1959-1977. Cordle was a friend of Princess Margaret (connecting him with others – Plugge, Stevens, Robin Douglas-Home etc – in this narrative), a right wing evangelical Christian and early follower of Billy Graham (and thus possibly sympathetic to the Radio Church of God). He resigned his seat in Parliament in 1977 after being found to have received payments from John Poulson.

Also involved in the SRE/RB management structure at various stages were:

Basil Van Rensburg, a former producer with the South African Broadcasting Corporation who had also worked in Rhodesia TV. (Neither of these are mentioned in his *Guardian* obituary). In later life van Rensburg was a significant figure in the Catholic anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

John Withers, who managed the advertising account at SRE/RB and worked alongside Ted Allbeury. Seems to have been the same John Withers (1930-2009) who had a *Guardian* obit on 13 June 2009 and who was a major figure in UK advertising in the 1960s,'70s and '80s.

1960s and '70s. The managing director of Britain Radio in 1966-1967 was Ted Allbeury. Allbeury had been an intelligence officer during the early part of the Cold War, running agents into East Germany. He would later pursue a career as a thriller writer and admitted that he was given 'top secret information' by the CIA in the 1970s and '80s to place in, and spice up, his espionage novels.¹⁴ Mention should also be made of Philip Birch, the UK Head of Radio London. Birch, who was recommended for the position by Pierson, was also a senior figure at the London office of J. Walter Thompson. The impression gained from a perusal of the CVs of these individuals is that both Radio London and Swinging Radio England were very expensive US ventures designed to promote US culture to UK listeners.

Thirdly, the ship used to accommodate Swinging Radio England/Britain Radio, the SS Olga Patricia, was a converted US Navy vessel, formerly the USS Deal. Like the USCGC Courier it had a helicopter deck aft and carried very expensive radio equipment, supplied by Continental Electronics. It was a sister ship of the USS Pueblo. Its home port was Miami and it sailed to its UK destination in 1966 under the command of Captain Julio Alonzo, a Cuban exile.

Fourthly, the funding for both Radio London and Swinging Radio England/Britain Radio did not come from the Radio Church of God, as was claimed at the time, although it is possible that the Radio Church of God may have contributed some money toward them. The money trail behind Swinging Radio England leads instead to Pierce Langford III. Langford headed 'the Wichita Falls, Texas group of investors' for whom

¹⁴ Allbeury was also active (like Oliver Smedley) in the Liberal Party. He stood as the Liberal candidate in a Parliamentary by-election in Petersfield in 1960. See his *Guardian* obituary, 3 January 2006.

Pierson acted as a banker.¹⁵ Langford was also closely connected to, and a key supporter of, Senator John Tower (Texas-Republican). Tower served in the US Navy between 1943 and 1946 and remained an active member of the US Navy Reserve until 1990. During this period he took a BA in Political Science (1948) and in 1952-1953 travelled to the UK where he studied and researched the organisation of the Conservative Party. A close colleague of Lyndon B Johnson (despite their apparently different political affiliations) Tower was Chair of the Senate Armed Forces Committee and in the 1960s and '70s had a key role in the oversight of intelligence affairs.¹⁶

After Swinging Radio England/Britain Radio stopped broadcasting in 1967, the vessel used to host the stations, the Olga Patricia, appears to have been sold to the Zapata Corporation (details at Lloyds List are not certain on this) and renamed SS Laissez Faire. There are reports (unconfirmed and difficult to substantiate) that it remained a mobile broadcasting station into the 1970s off Vietnam and later Cuba. The most significant of the founding figures in the Zapata Corporation was George Bush Snr, then of the CIA, and it is commonly assumed that the Zapata Corporation acted as a direct conduit for CIA funding.

Ronan O'Rahilly – counter culture auteur?

In my essay in *Lobster* 58 Ronan O'Rahilly loomed large as a

¹⁵ Pierson was both the founder and Chairman of the Abilene National Bank. The Wichita Falls, Texas group of investors all appear to have been oil men or the owners of extensive and profitable car dealerships. See <www.northernstar.no>, <www.johnlilburne.com> and Frances Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Art and Letters* (1999).

¹⁶ Tower worked in radio in Texas in the late 1940s. He conducted his research in the UK by interviewing selected Conservative Party activists and officials across the country. In 1966 he privately visited the UK offices of Radio London – it is not clear why.

major figure behind Radio Caroline. His other activities were also touched on in the article but the full extent of these, and how heavily he campaigned against the Wilson government in 1970, only became apparent after the deadline for the publication of the original article had passed.

In 1968-1969 O’Rahilly was riding high on the credibility that he had gained from keeping Radio Caroline on the air for 8 months after the Marine Offences Act had come into force and from the relative success of the first film he had produced, the Marianne Faithful biker movie *Girl on a Motorcycle*. He had also become manager of George Lazenby, the Australian actor chosen to succeed Sean Connery in the role of James Bond.

O’Rahilly also drank deeply from the well of the US counterculture. In late 1969 he was approached by various members and associates of The Committee, a comedy troupe based in San Francisco that had a reputation at the time for improvised political satire.¹⁷ The Committee operated out of the same building as *Ramparts* magazine. One of its members, Del Close, was also in Ken Kesey’s *Merry Pranksters*, as well as being the creative force behind the light shows used by the Grateful Dead. The Committee had devised a film, *Gold* – a western type farce about some hippies who discover a gold mine and their subsequent tribulations with authority – but had run out of money to complete the venture. They thought O’Rahilly might be able to assist them. O’Rahilly saw some potential in the project and agreed to help get the film into a state sufficient to enable it to be released. He added music from various artists on the Major Minor record label to the soundtrack and provided an image of Radio Caroline that was used at the start of the film.¹⁸ Overtaken by the need to put together a follow-up film for Lazenby after he had persuaded

¹⁷ Private correspondence with Bob Levis, director of *Gold*.

¹⁸ Major Minor funded Radio Caroline in 1967-1968 when it was solely managed by Ronan O’Rahilly. The soundtrack of *Gold* also features a contribution from Warner Jephson, a contemporary US avant garde composer.

Lazenby to drop out of the Bond franchise, O'Rahilly put work on Gold to one side shortly after he had acquired the 35 mm negative from its director Bob Levis. He also threw himself into the 1970 UK general election when he was responsible for a major campaign that aimed to ensure that a Labour government under Harold Wilson was not re-elected.¹⁹

Wilson called the election on 18 May 1970, with polling day set for 18 June. It quickly became clear that, as well as the usual Parliamentary opposition, Labour would also face hostility during the election campaign from a range of UK 'counter culture' groups. An indication of this came on 5 June 1970 when the *International Times* carried advertisements for 'Phun City' a major anti-establishment music and poetry festival.²⁰ *International Times*, which had a not insignificant circulation of 40,000, was run by a 'workers group' who had taken over its publication in late 1969 after the paper faced prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act for publishing contact advertisements for gay men. The most prominent of this group was Mick Farren, a musician who had recently toured North America with his rock group the Deviants. Farren had returned to the UK as the British representative of the White Panthers, a US libertarian/anarchist group that had been founded by John Sinclair. Sinclair was also manager of the MC5 the premier US political rock band, who had enjoyed a substantial success with their LP Kick out the Jams.²¹

¹⁹ In September 1967 O'Rahilly gave a press conference in Amsterdam saying that he had been given a secret tape recording by 'two journalists' which would destroy the Wilson government if played on the air. He referred to it as 'The Secret Life of Harold Wilson' and implied that it would shortly be heard on Radio Caroline. It was never broadcast.

²⁰ The *International Times* carried a considerable volume of material on UK, US and Dutch politics during its life, as well as in-depth coverage of various radical causes.

²¹ The MC5 had performed at the events surrounding the Democratic Party National Convention in Chicago in August 1968 prior to the assault on the crowd by the Chicago police.

It is important to remember that when Farren and his colleagues devised Phun City the assumption would have been that Wilson and Labour were about to be re-elected for a further 5 years. The event thus had two aims: to raise money toward the legal costs of the *International Times* obscenity trial and to protest in the biggest and noisiest manner possible against what was regarded by the counter culture as a conformist, pedestrian Labour government that failed to let people (especially young people) express themselves. The venue selected for the event, Ecclesden Common, was on the outskirts of Worthing, an extremely staid seaside town where Farren had been educated. Every major UK recording artist of the time was invited to perform and Farren, via his connection with John Sinclair, also secured the appearance of the MC5 as the headline act.

Even though the festival simply could not be organised in conjunction with Wilson's electoral timetable, Farren pressed ahead and obtained advance publicity for the event on Radio Caroline International, which broadcast for the duration of the 1970 general election campaign from the Radio North Sea International ship, off the coast of Essex.

Even after the surprise Heath victory on 18 June and the election of a Conservative government, Farren continued with his plans. Captain Henry Kerby MP, within whose constituency the festival site was actually located, raised his concerns in Parliament on 10 July 1970 asking for a ban on all pop festivals.²² Four days later the local authority obtained an injunction against Phun City. This caused the various backers to withdraw and, in some disarray, Farren and the *International Times* turned to Ronan O'Rahilly for help. O'Rahilly

²² Kerby was an interesting figure. A serving officer in MI6 in the 1930s and '40s, he was active in the Liberal Party before sitting as Conservative MP for Arundel and Shoreham 1954-1971. He held views about the undue influence of the US that allowed him to speak freely to the 1964-1970 Labour government about the (many) plots that it faced.

confirmed that he could assist and arrived on site in his double decker election 'battle bus' on 22 July with sufficient finance to pay for some site security and a PA system, but an insistence that the bands and poets due to appear would have to perform for free. He also announced that his company Mid Atlantic Films (producers of *Universal Soldier*, the George Lazenby-Germaine Greer follow-up to *On Her Majesties Secret Service*) would film the entire event, thus producing something to equal Monterey Pop or Woodstock in its scope and portrayal of the cultural proclivities of contemporary UK youth.²³ Following O'Rahilly's guarantees the injunction was lifted and the festival opened on 24 July 1970 with a performance from the Pretty Things. The following day there were sets from the Pink Fairies (who appeared nude) and the Edgar Broughton Band who showcased their successful LP *Sing Brothers Sing*, as well as their fiercely political polemic single about the 1970 general election, *Up Yours*. The day concluded with an appearance by the MC5. Events continued on 26 July with performances from Michael Chapman, Sonja Christina (from the cast of *Hair*) and Mungo Jerry. Farren and his colleagues at the *International Times* had originally intended an event lasting a week. The severe shortage of funds precluded this and also meant that Phun City was highly disorganised: sanitation was poor and there was nowhere to shelter from the constant rain. The poetry festival (fronted by Pete Brown and William Burroughs) was due to be held in an inflatable dome but the dome failed to inflate and the event was held instead in a tent used for collective acts of worship by a Christian group, from which the poets were quickly evicted (by Hells Angels!) due to their continual swearing.²⁴ Once the musical events were over most people left the site

²³ Another account says that Phun City was filmed by Lion Films. Presumably not O'Rahilly's company – or did he subcontract the work?

²⁴ Burroughs collapsed with a heroin overdose shortly afterwards and was assisted by various spectators to the medical tent....hence the title of this piece.

and the police arrived in force the following day to disperse those who remained.

Despite its grand objectives Phun City as originally intended was neither a large scale event nor a commercial success. It passed by without causing major disorder and the masses did not take to the streets. It lost £6,000 (the equivalent of £150,000 today) and provided no funds for the International Times.²⁵ O'Rahilly never produced a film of the event for public release, and it is not clear what became of the extensive amounts of supposedly excellent footage that was shot and seen by some of the participants.

Following the release and failure of *Universal Soldier* and the abrupt ending of his relationship with George Lazenby as a result of this, O'Rahilly returned to work on *Gold*. In late 1971 he announced that he was bringing the MC5 back to the UK (they were now without a manager or a record deal in the US) where they would provide material for the soundtrack of *Gold*, record a live LP, tentatively called 'Live from Saturn', and tour extensively. Between January and March 1972 the MC5 appeared at various venues across the UK and recorded their contribution to the soundtrack of *Gold*. The film was finally released in late 1972 after difficulties with the British Board of Film Censors, who removed an unsimulated oral sex scene and also cut a section where instructions are given to the audience about how to make a petrol bomb. It was shown until mid 1973 at two cinemas in London, one of which was The Windmill, formerly the premier UK venue for nude reviews. The film was not a success and it remains the last celluloid venture from O'Rahilly, who concentrated thereafter on keeping *Radio Caroline* on the air whilst pushing and promoting – very heavily – the message of the Los Angeles

²⁵ Nor did Mick Farren's White Panthers amount to much. They were credited with organising the catering at the Windsor Free Festival in 1972, though selling vegetarian burgers must come some way down the list of revolutionary political activities.

counter culture with his 'Loving Awareness' strategy.²⁶

Conclusions – the UK

The opulent life style enjoyed by Leonard Plugge and the colossal advertising revenue generated by Radio Luxembourg would clearly have been a sufficient motivation for many entrepreneurs in the UK to try and establish a commercial radio station from the 1930s onwards, even if their possible political motivations were not taken into account. The sponsors of Radio Caroline – Geoffrey Crowther, Jocelyn Stevens, Max Rayne and Oliver Smedley – shared a number of common denominators: a disliking of government regulation; a belief that broadcasting should be much more a branch of the entertainment industry than a public service; a desire to make – and keep – money; and a general belief that most people in the UK would be better off if the country were more like the USA. These opinions even received a sort of semi-official endorsement in 1962 in an article 'The Mass Media' written by Anthony Crosland MP and published in *Encounter*, which appeared while negotiations were underway between Gordon McLendon, the Radio Church of God and the quartet above to transfer Radio Nord from the Baltic to the North Sea so that it could broadcast to Britain.²⁷

The UK supporters of commercial radio also tended to be at best ambivalent toward and often completely anti-Common

²⁶ O'Rahilly is making a documentary about John F Kennedy, Robert F Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Details of 'King Kennedy' can be found at <www.kingkennedy.com> which invites the public to make a donation toward its (eventual) release in exchange for a share in its profits. The film is endorsed by Lord Smith of Finsbury, Joanna Lumley and a number of others and is due to be released at some point in 2010.

²⁷ Although keen on US broadcasting, the UK figures behind Radio Caroline were still too socially reserved for the full-on bombast of the Radio Church of God, which did not feature on the station. Kenny Everett, a prankster DJ, was sacked from Radio London in 1966 for making inappropriate jokes about the Radio Church of God.

Market in their outlook. They were certainly not interested in European type levels of planning, regulation or social provision and implicitly rejected the politics of the Churchill/Eden era – a period of consensus and Gaullist Toryism that they deemed to have failed at Suez. In an ideal world they would have been happy with a return to the free market economics of the 1920s and '30s and a political system that accommodated this. In the 1970s and '80s most could be found as solid supporters of Margaret Thatcher.

With hindsight it could be said that they were prominent among those who prepared the way for her. As early as January 1950 – i.e. during the run up to the February 1950 General Election, at which the Attlee government faced its first electoral test – Geoffrey Crowther gave a series of talks on the BBC Home Service entitled *What Is Wrong With the British Economy?* In 1950, with full employment, UK exports 50% higher than 1937 and a share of world trade that had increased to 25%, the answer was actually 'not very much'. This being so, what the object was of a series of lectures of this type from an eminent figure is difficult to determine. While making them Crowther (who had an American wife and was editor at this time of both *The Economist* and *Transatlantic* magazines) was careful to decry any suggestion that he was seeking to Americanise Britain, but they were very much the starting point of the steady drip of demoralising literature, journalism, political comment and general verbiage on the topic of 'we can't go on like this' that continued until May 1979, and still rears its head today.²⁸ Crowther also played a significant role in 1961 as Chair of the 'Traffic in Towns' Royal

²⁸ Typical titles include Michael Shanks, *The Stagnant Society* (1961), Eric Wigham, *What's Wrong with the Unions* (1961) and Rex Malik, *What's Wrong with British Industry* (1964). In Arthur Koestler's anthology *Suicide of a Nation* (1963) Malcolm Muggeridge is quoted as saying, 'Harold Macmillan blowing through his moustache to the extent that "Britain has been great, is great and will continue to be great". A more ludicrous performance could scarcely be imagined....'

Commission that looked at a range of transport systems – the majority of the examples in its report being US rather than European – and was used by the MacMillan government to justify an expansion of the motorways alongside a drastic reduction in public transport. Mention should also be made here of the Institute of Economic Affairs, the prominent free market think tank co-launched by Oliver Smedley, the Adam Smith Institute founded by Smedley's business partner Anthony Fisher (the driving force behind the privatisation strategy that began in 1979) and the role played by Jocelyn Stevens at Express Newspapers in promoting the rise of Margaret Thatcher.

Conclusions – the US

But if the potential to make serious money and promote economic liberalism was probably a sufficient motive for the UK backers of private radio broadcasting, were the US government also involved? The first significant 'pirate' radio ship in Europe, Radio Nord, was apparently funded by Gordon McLendon, who, then as later, took great care to conceal his involvement. Positioned off the coast of Sweden, Radio Nord was also perfectly placed to reach much of the eastern bloc. Why was Sweden chosen as a location? McLendon must have known from his own experience with KLIF Dallas and the knowledge within the radio community about the level of expense required to keep the USCGC Courier broadcasting, that a radio ship is much more expensive than a land based station. He would also have known that the supposed target audience (Sweden) was small and advertising revenue, therefore, limited. All this suggests that Radio Nord cannot have been a purely commercial venture and its circumstances fit those outlined in NSC 10/2 as described above. As to why the US government might have been minded to organise – through an intermediary – something like Radio Nord, it is

worth remembering that by 1961 Sweden had been governed by the Social Democrats, a political party in Sweden who were much further to the left than the Labour Party in the UK, for 30 years. Sweden thus represented the opposite of what most people in US politics would have wanted from a European nation. Sweden was also scrupulously neutral and non-nuclear in the Cold War – hardly a position to commend it to successive US Presidents. In these circumstances why not enlighten and influence Swedish youth with a glimpse of US culture?

In 1962 McLendon withdrew Radio Nord from the Baltic and opened negotiations with the UK investors. Any theory about a possible US government involvement in the launch of Radio Caroline (as Radio Nord became) must consider as a motive the extent to which the US, particularly after Suez, wanted the UK run by pro-US centre or centre-right governments. The emergence of figures who were compliant with these requirements (MacMillan and Gaitskell) could be said to represent a success for long-term US strategic goals. By 1961, though, MacMillan seemed in serious disarray, badly behind in the polls and widely mocked by many of the UK intelligentsia. There is also evidence that the spy scandals of 1962-1963 caused many in the US to finally lose patience with their British allies.²⁹ Coupled with the emergence of Wilson as the next potential prime minister, this may have produced an alarming scenario in the US – the possibility of losing

²⁹ The critical dates in this theory would be the Vassall spy trial (October 1962), the disappearance of Philby in Beirut (January 1963) and the Profumo case (May-June 1963). The US Ambassador attended the Parliamentary debate on the latter in person and cabled back to Washington that MacMillan had become 'an electoral liability....his replacement cannot be too long delayed....' MacMillan eventually gave way to the Earl of Home (whom he favoured over R.A. Butler) in October 1963. Home was the uncle of Robin Douglas-Home, a friend of President Kennedy and the business colleague at *Queen* magazine of Jocelyn Stevens. It was *Queen* magazine who first broke the Profumo story in its gossip column in 1962.

significant influence over a future UK government. In this context it seems possible that the appearance of both Radio Caroline vessels (neither of which were profitable) was part of a US desire to give the UK a crash course in the benefits of an economically liberal, pro-US society in the run up to the 1964 general election.

None of this *proves* any involvement by US government or any of its various agencies in Radio Caroline. But with Radio London and Swinging Radio England/Britain Radio, the advanced technology carried by the broadcasting ships, the identities of the backers and day-to-day managers, the implausible explanations offered as to how the stations came into being and their broadcasting format – identical to that used by the stations run by David Atlee Phillips in the Caribbean and Central America – strongly suggest a direct US state involvement.³⁰

Conclusions – the counter culture

Most people were surprised by the result of the 1970 general election. While natural caution and common sense urges us to the view that the pollsters do sometimes get it wrong (and in 1970 opinion polls were certainly less sophisticated than today) the possibility should also be examined that the activities of Ronan O’Rahilly, Mick Farren, Simon Dee and Radio Caroline International may have had a serious impact on the result. Consider the numbers: in 1970 there were 7.5 million UK electors aged 18 to 26, i.e. people who would have been part of the target audience for the ‘pirate’ radio stations between 1964 and 1967. Although no records exist breaking

³⁰ After the demise of Swinging Radio England, Don Pierson spent a great deal of time setting up various ‘free ports’ (i.e. tax free areas) in locations such as Haiti and the Dominican Republic where US investors could earn lucrative returns on hotels, casinos, holiday resorts etc. Some commentators have seen these initiatives as evidence of a US political programme carried out by private sector proxies.

down the participation in the election by age range on the turnout of 72% recorded on 18 June 1970, it seems likely that between 5.5 million to 6 million young people voted. The difference in votes between Labour and Conservative in this election was only 900,000 (Conservative 13.1 million – Labour 12.2 million). If only 10% of the electors in the 18 to 26 age group switched their votes because of a disenchantment with Labour policy toward the ‘pirate stations’ and youth culture generally, this would imply 550,000-600,000 votes against Labour that might otherwise have been in favour – enough to change the result. In fact even a much smaller number than this would have swung it from Wilson to Heath.

O’Rahilly, who was not shy about making claims on this and other matters, would later say, when interviewed in the 1980s, that in June 1970 he targeted 100 marginal constituencies and distributed 5 million anti-Wilson leaflets. Selecting marginal constituencies is usually a careful and somewhat academic activity and not one – normally – expected from pop music hustlers. Did he have help in doing this? Who paid for the 5 million leaflets? The defeated Labour Party leadership clearly thought there was a case to be answered here. They lodged a complaint about the campaigning activities of Ronan O’Rahilly with the police on the grounds that he was in breach of electoral law (he was) by distributing specifically partisan and targeted material without indicating a printer or agent and without submitting proper expenses. This resulted in a major Special Branch enquiry throughout the remainder of 1970 during which Simon Dee (whose whereabouts were known) was arrested and questioned. But no action was taken against Ronan O’Rahilly (who could not be traced to any UK address). In the end nothing was done about Dee. The extent of his involvement – turning up in a double decker bus, signing some autographs for teenagers and doing some DJ-ing were hardly criminal offences, even if carried out in 100 consecutive marginal

constituencies.

The role played by the Voice of America and the US Embassy in Rome in influencing the outcome of the 1948 Italian election is a matter of record. Can a similar process be seen at work in the UK in 1970?

End piece

How much of all of this did Simon Dee know? He spent 1964-1965 on board Radio Caroline, confined to a ship for 4 weeks at a stretch, in a small cabin, the vessel heaving in poor weather and a great deal of time to think and talk to the US broadcasting engineers, the Dutch crew and fellow DJs. A clip of his being interviewed exists in which he says that Radio Caroline is employing 100 people. Did he wonder who was paying for this? The briefing prepared for Ministers in 1964 when Caroline took to the air states that much of the money behind the venture could not be accounted for and that there was other information that the civil servants preparing the report would prefer to only provide verbally. Dee and O'Rahilly were friends – they had hung around Soho together in the early 1960s. Did O'Rahilly talk freely to Dee about the US background to Radio Caroline?

Dee exited the mass media on 28 February 1970 after an episode of his TV chat show that featured John Lennon and Yoko Ono (promoting their newly released single Instant Karma), Michael X, and George Lazenby (naming the individuals who he considered had killed John F Kennedy). This would be quite something, even today, and is perhaps a measure of how conventional and undemanding celebrity culture and contemporary politics in 2010 have become. In its own way this is perhaps the best obituary Simon Dee could have.

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