

# TROUBLED AIR

TELEREVIEW/Philip Gillon

PEOPLE WITH long memories will recall what happened in the U.S. in the '50s, when Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin launched his witch-hunt against so-called Communists. Many competent people were driven out of employment in the film and television studios: even more sinister than the fate of the victims was the fact that the survivors were completely cowed. It took many years before American television news coverage regained its self-assurance.

Some people may argue that it cannot happen here, because while in America advertisers and popularity polls decide which stars appear on the air, here there are no such criteria. Television is run by a public authority, presumably immune from considerations other than the public weal.

It is no secret that, in the first decade of the state, Israel's broadcasting services were subject to considerable pressure from the Prime Minister's Office, under whose control they then were. As far as I can remember, David Ben-Gurion never sacked any radio commentator — at that time we only had radio, not television — because of his political opinions. On the other hand, I cannot remember that any Herutnik was ever appointed to a key post.

The very able director-general of the service at the time, the late Hanoach Givton, was certainly not a Mapainik, but he was also no right-winger; he was a middle-of-the-road, liberal kind of man. He had many arguments with his bosses. He tried to keep broadcasting as apolitical as possible, and, on the whole, he succeeded.

WHEN LEVI ESHKOL became premier, he abolished the government's power to dictate what went on the air by creating the independent Broadcasting Authority. This was modelled on the BBC. Its basic purpose was — and still is — "to reflect, with fairness and authenticity, the life of the State...expressing all views and opinions..."

Admittedly, the then government tempered generosity with discretion: the independence it gave with one hand was taken back with the other. While the Authority was so non-political in its objectives, the membership of the executive and the council running it reflected, by a curious coincidence, the set-up in the Knesset.

Shortly after the Likud government was elected, the term of office of the Authority members expired.

By another curious coincidence, the views held by the new members reflect the changes in the Knesset, with the chairman an open supporter of Herut attitudes.

All this was elementary and fair practice in a democracy. Furthermore, the Authority was within its rights when it appointed Yosef (Tommy) Lapid as the director-general of broadcasting. He is a very competent journalist, with many years of experience with "Ma'ariv."

It is true that no previous director-general has been so patently a political animal. Lapid once turned down an offer by the Liberals to stand on the Likud list for the Knesset. In his writings and appearances on radio, he has taken a clear stand on the great issues of the day, such as the settling of Judea and Samaria. It would be as improper to suggest that these opinions should have disqualified him from getting the post of director-general as it was improper on his part to get rid of people because they are leftists or doves.

WHEN A director-general, who has announced his intention of improving the quality of the broadcasting service, gets rid of one man whose views are anathema to him, that may be a coincidence; when this happens to a second victim, it smacks of a purge.

This is what has happened since Lapid took office on April 1. Ya'acov Agmon and Mordechai Kirschenbaum, both doves, have been slaughtered to provide pigeon pie for a right-wing banquet.

It was impossible to argue that Kirschenbaum, creator of Israel's best known and most imaginative programme, "Nikul Rosh," was incompetent, so Lapid justified the dismissal to my colleague, Judy Siegel, by asserting: "One can't force me to work for the next three years with someone with whom I have no common language."

Why ever not? Why can't he be forced to do so, just like so many directors-general? Civil servants, by law, are protected against dismissal for political reasons. Aha, Lapid may point out, the employees of the



Tommy Lapid (Zoom)

Broadcasting Authority insist that they are not civil servants, so they cannot avail themselves of this provision.

On the other hand, I have scoured the Broadcasting Law, and can find no clause that stipulates that employees must be politically or personally acceptable to the director-general. On the contrary, the whole spirit of the law, the reason why it was passed, was to free the air from political considerations.

Speaking in the Knesset, Education Minister Zevulun Hammer pointed out that the law does not impose any restriction on the Authority's right to get rid of people when their contracts expire.

This is true, but it is also specious. The allegation with which Hammer has to deal is that Lapid got rid of Agmon and Kirschenbaum because of their opinions — and this is a clear breach of the spirit of the law.

IT IS GREATLY to the credit of the people employed by the Authority that they have reacted so bravely and strongly, unlike the Americans in the '50s, McCarthy's threat, "It will be your turn next if you dare to open your mouth," proved astonishingly effective in the U.S., as

we saw in a recent television programme devoted to the revolting senator. So far, there has been no indication that the Israelis will prove to be as pusillanimous.

It is still too early to say whether the editorial policy of people responsible for the news and documentaries will be affected by Lapid, but the possibility of this happening is a daunting one. I already find myself worrying whether certain events, which Lapid would consider unpalatable, are given wider coverage on Jordan TV than on ours. For instance, it seemed to me that Jordan gave the Peace Now plant-in in Hebron much more exposure than it was given by Israel. Another coincidence?

I hope that the public will be as alert as the employees of the Authority to the threat to the freedom of our air.

THE NEW programme about current controversies, "An Hour Before," on Monday night, got off to a curious start. On the one hand I thought that the principle of cutting down this type of programme to one hour, instead of carrying it on endlessly, as used to happen on "The Third Hour," was a good one. No issue, however important, and however well treated, can sustain our interest for an interminable three-hour debate.

On the other hand, the first programme in the new series, devoted to "Autonomy," seemed to be curiously unbalanced and mismatched. Contrasting Jews who talked about the virtues of autonomy, however well, with a film of Arabs living in the areas, was rather like putting me in a boxing contest against Mohammed Ali.

The believers in autonomy emerged as people making a genuine intellectual effort to concoct a scheme that would make peace possible, a laudable enough objective; the Arabs we saw talked from their hearts about their passion for self-determination in a land they could call their own, living on their own soil.

Dr. Eliahu Ben-Elissar, director-general of the Prime Minister's Of-

fice, insisted that autonomy was no trick, as critics tried to make out that it was. He claimed that there was no question of hocus-pocus, of offering apparent independence on a plate to the Palestinians, only to sneak it back again afterwards. They would get genuine liberty in their personal lives, although, he insisted, sovereignty over the areas would always remain Jewish; the green line would never be restored. He sounded like a good lawyer pleading a case very skilfully.

The Arabs in the film, although they conceded that they have gained great economic benefits since June 1967, were adamant that for them, autonomy meant being masters of their own house on their own soil. They sounded like fervent lovers of freedom.

Our great problem, of course, is that the word "autonomy" means something different to everyone who hears the word used. Humpty-Dumpty told Alice that the thing with words is to make it clear from the beginning who is master, then they will mean whatever you want them to mean. So far, this poor word "autonomy" has so many masters that it must be completely bewildered about what it should decide to mean.

THE AMERICAN generation of the '60s was made of sterner stuff than the McCarthy generation. As heroine Kate pointed out in the final episode of "Loose Change" last Friday night, they fought a valiant battle for the causes in which they believed so fervently. But at 29, she realized that her generation was already effete.

It was rather a pity that in the film, all their fierce fighting ended in saccharine and corn with the kiddies on Christmas Eve. Sandwiched in between this end and a goopy beginning, the serial was taut and astringent, although I must admit I kept wondering why young Americans take their souls so very seriously. They are entitled under their Constitution to the pursuit of happiness, but all that introspection interfered with the action, and shouldn't have been indulged in on our time. And any Israeli woman could have told Kate that it is feasible to have a baby without abandoning all hope of doing any work.

Still, it was an absorbing serial, and we are going to miss those soul-searching girls. But we will get a kick out of the incomparable Howard Hughes, spending money as if he thought he were God or Samuel Flatto-Sharon.