EVEN in the brief period between the 1966 election and its predecessor, broadcasting had had time to change and develop. For the first time the proportion of the population in homes equipped with television had risen to over 90%, leaving television only fractionally short of the universal coverage of radio. Current affairs broadcasting continued its steady increase in output and importance. With the introduction of a largely revised structure of programmes, the BBC was now devoting about 10% of its evening output to politics. The new situation was well exemplified when Sir Alec Douglas-Home was replaced by Mr. Edward Heath. Both the outgoing and incoming Conservative leaders spent entire evenings journeying from studio to studio to explain their positions for the different networks, and during the contest itself Mr. Heath staged a picnic in a seaside carpark, while Mr. Maudling produced a family game of football for the benefit of the cameras. Clearly television was having its impact on political ritual.

In contrast to the heated controversy over its activities in 1964, broadcasting’s place in the 1966 campaign was more generally accepted and understood. Nevertheless, the campaign was preceded by a clash between broadcasters and politicians when the committee on party election broadcasts met to discuss election arrangements. Confronted with BBC–ITA proposals to cut party television broadcasts from thirteen (shared 5:5:3) to ten (shared 4:4:2), all three parties closed ranks to defend the status quo — conveniently for the Liberals, since the smokescreen behind which they had been concealing a drop in their candidacies might have been inadequate to protect their allocation from attack by their rivals. Eventually a compromise was reached, maintaining thirteen programmes but cutting the time allotted to them by forty minutes — giving a mixture of ten- and fifteen-minute broadcasts. The Welsh and Scottish Nationalists were for the first time allotted five minutes on regional radio and TV if they contested a fifth of their
region's seats (as they subsequently did). Later, under the standing rules, the Communists qualified for five minutes on national radio and television by nominating over fifty candidates.

Communists and Nationalists alike complained bitterly at these arrangements, decided as usual in their absence; as in previous elections both broadcasters and politicians declined to accept responsibility and the broadcasting committee itself went into recess for the duration of the campaign. Yet while the criteria for allocating time to minor parties is inevitably a matter of dispute, on procedure and timing at least their complaints seemed cogent. The insistence on transmitting their programmes at 6.30 p.m. rather than 9.10 p.m. cut their audiences sharply (p. 143) and weighted them unduly with people too young to vote. The BBC contended that schedules which had been revised for thirteen programmes could not be touched again, and that 6.30 p.m. was a ‘recognised time’ for political programming. Clearly a less negative approach to minor party time might appropriately be evolved for future elections; since so few parties could possibly qualify it would be simple enough to ascertain their intentions in advance and make provisional bookings for them during the general revision of schedules, which would also allow them the publicity in programme weeklies they were denied in 1966.¹

Surprisingly, the broadcasting committee never discussed whether the party leaders should meet in televised ‘confrontation’. Apparently it was felt that the issue was closed by what had happened in 1964. In 1966 it was only raised when ITV interviewers extracted agreement in principle from the three party leaders on the evening the election was announced. Although a Gallup poll during the campaign showed 69% favouring a televised confrontation between leaders, with so much at stake neither major party showed real enthusiasm. Both, however, deemed it politic to appear willing and indeed Mr. Heath issued repeated challenges. Negotiations bogged down: Mr. Wilson insisted that Mr. Grimond must be included, Mr. Heath rejected any triangular ‘tea-party’ with Mr. Grimond an equal, and Mr. Grimond

¹ Minor party broadcasts were not listed in the programme weeklies on the ground that they could not be officially settled before nomination day. The Communists in fact announced their intention to qualify for air time at their national congress in November 1965. Though their TV broadcast was listed in daily paper programme guides, not a single morning paper except the Daily Worker listed their radio broadcast.