Success has a thousand fathers, failure is an orphan.

[Attributed to Count Galeazzo Ciano (1903–44)
Mussolini’s son-in-law and briefly Prime Minister of Italy]

Four’s first fathers

Parts of the pre-history of the fourth channel have been related at some length in earlier volumes of *Independent Television in Britain*. In Volume 3 (Chapter 17) in particular, ITV’s proposals for the use of the empty channel as an ITV-2 are well detailed. The intent of this chapter is to carry the channel’s history forward from a summary of the public debate about what form the channel should take, which had gone on for 20 years, to the start of the setting up of the channel.

The timescale was significant. The debate had started with submissions to the 1960 Committee on Broadcasting, chaired by Lord Pilkington. When the Committee reported in 1962 it recommended that a new third channel be awarded to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The Report also dealt with the possibility of a fourth channel. It was highly critical of the independent television system but it did say that if the Committee’s proposals for reform – in essence that the Independent Television Authority (ITA), rather than the ITV companies should plan the programmes and sell the advertising – were carried out

it would, in our view, be advantageous if independent television were, in due course, authorised to provide a second programme. [*Report of the Committee on Broadcasting, 1960* (Cmnd. 1753), HMSO, 1962]

‘In due course’ was to stretch through a further committee – the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, chaired by Lord Annan. This reported in 1977 (after
a false start in 1970, when the proposed inquiry into broadcasting’s future was postponed by the incoming Conservative government, it finally got down to work in the autumn of 1974). In the meantime there had been several debates in both Houses of Parliament and many proposals and counter-proposals by broadcasters, producers and journalists. There was also increasing public discussion of the matter. Few new steps in public policy have received such prolonged scrutiny as television’s fourth channel. Annan was deluged with over a thousand written or oral submissions.

Subject to so much debate, the fourth channel may indeed be said to have owed its existence to many parents. It is important to attempt to identify those who genuinely sowed the seeds of the extraordinary opportunity to create a form of television that was different in several important dimensions to the three channels that had come before. Some continued to be involved in the setting up and launch of the channel and feature amongst the *dramatis personae* of this section of the book, others made their contribution from outside the channel. Both should be recorded.

The first is Anthony Smith. Later to become President of Magdalen College, Oxford, Smith started in broadcasting at the BBC as a General Trainee, going on to produce television Current Affairs programmes from 1960 to 1971. He then spent five years as a Fellow at St Antony’s College, Oxford. In 1979, Smith took on the notoriously difficult role of Director of the British Film Institute and was successful in raising its income from patronage and sponsorship to provide more and better services.

During Smith’s period at St Antony’s he joined in discussions on the fourth channel organised by the Association of Broadcasting Staffs (ABS), a union that represented primarily BBC staff. The union's producer members in BBC Television’s Features and Music and Arts departments based at Kensington House provided at this time some of the more radical ideas to design new structures for television production in Britain. Some of them went on to join what was becoming a plethora of other anti-ITV-2 pro-independent production lobby groups – Free Communications, the Association of Independent Producers, and, later, the Channel Four Group. But it was initiative by the ABS to respond to a request by the new Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Sir John Eden, for the submission of ideas for the channel that encouraged Smith into the thinking that provided key elements in progress towards a form the future fourth channel might take.

The *Guardian* of 21 April 1972 published an article in which he outlined his ideas for an entirely new form of organisation to run the channel:

> The National Television Foundation we propose would be run by a body of trustees, appointed with the approval of the Minister of Posts and