



Roger Huchings/Camera Press

Campbell's coup

In the last decade scourge of the Establishment Duncan Campbell has opened an impressive number of Whitehall's closed doors. He tells John Shirley the public has a right to know

DUNCAN Campbell, whose controversial series *Secret Society* finally began last week on BBC2, acknowledges an ironic debt of gratitude to the Special Branch. Without their intervention, he says, he might today have been a businessman instead of an investigative reporter.

Back in 1977, Campbell was still pondering his life. He had two degrees – a first in physics from Oxford and a master's from Sussex – and had decided he did not want to work in an Aldermaston laboratory. He had flirted with technical magazines and a community newspaper but journalism occupied less than half his time and he did not want to take it up professionally. 'I thought that it was parasitical,' he says. 'It lived off other people's lives. It wasn't about wealth creation.'

His real enthusiasm then was masterminding an electronics co-operative to exploit the potential of a miniature camera that could survey sewers. He had financial backers and was on the verge of delivering a blueprint.

Then the Branch arrived. Campbell was arrested and charged under the Official Secrets Act after interviewing a former military intelligence analyst for the magazine *Time Out*. He missed a

Secret Society
Wednesday 10.20 BBC2

crucial business meeting, lost the camera contract and shot to national prominence. 'It was the most significant event of my life,' he says. 'They were trying to put me in jail. Instead, they put me on a pedestal. They talent-spotted me.'

Campbell has been embarrassing the authorities ever since. Using a rare combination of journalistic tenacity and scientific method – the two are linked, he says, by simple human curiosity – he has wheedled out an impressive list of Whitehall secrets about intelligence gathering, telephone tapping, wartime planning and the Falklands conflict, first for *Time Out* and, since 1978, for *New Statesman*.

He presents a disarmingly gentle persona for someone engaged in what some politicians see as virtually a subversive role. Aged 34, his background is impeccably middle-class: his parents were both academics – his father had a university chair in economics, his mother was a mathematics lecturer – and today his two sisters respectively practise economics in the City and

law in Glasgow. He lives quietly in north London surrounded by pot plants and Scottish folk music.

He sees himself as a libertarian, in the tradition of American investigative reporters. 'So much of the British press is the servant of special interest groups,' he says. 'They rewrite handouts and accept lobby briefings. In America, the press operates as one of the checks and balances in society. It is a watchdog of the constitution championing the relatively weak against the relatively strong.'

Campbell's four-part *Secret Society* series is certainly in this vein. He argues that, within the limits of national security, the public has a right to information and that, without it, secret material is open to abuse.

'Governments in Britain are obsessed with secrecy,' he says. 'For no good reason, information that we've a right to know about, and a need to know about, is locked away.'

'In Whitehall's upside-down rule-book, it often seems to be a greater sin for a civil servant to leak information to Parliament than to the Russians. The entire world may know a secret but Whitehall has never found it difficult to argue that the British must stay in the dark.' ●