



Debate stifled on Zircon

Duncan Campbell reports on the Zircon affair's troubled denouement

The once-banned Secret Society "Zircon" programme will be transmitted on BBC2 tonight (30 Sept.), almost two years after it was originally set to be shown. Accompanying the original Zircon programme will be a 45-minute special documentary and discussion, "The Zircon Affair", the making of which has caused almost as much internal controversy and anxiety for BBC management as did the original Zircon report. The difficulties that the BBC has faced in making a programme about itself has led to at least two threats of resignation from staff working on "The Zircon Affair" because of interference by senior BBC editorial managers.

The first time this happened, on Thursday, 1 September, the programme team were outraged by a suggestion from Samir Shah, BBC Deputy Editor of News and Current Affairs, that a "fake" studio discussion be filmed with me, from which my comments would subsequently be wholly expunged. The purpose of Shah's stratagem was to get me to take part in a pre-recorded, pre-edited film, while at the same time denying me any opportunity to respond to or correct the findings of the BBC's subsequent "analysis" of the

original Zircon programme or to deal with adverse comments by participants in the studio discussion—two of whom (including Lord Chalfont) would be ill-disposed to investigative journalism in general. Two members of the programme team told Andy Forrester, the programme's editor, that Shah's plan was unethical.

From the moment that the plan to show Zircon was announced, in July (and despite earlier undertakings to the contrary), the BBC has refused to allow any of the makers of the original Zircon programme to take part in the studio discussions which will follow it. They would be, the BBC explained, "too close" to the subject matter. The discussion was originally intended to comment on the programme and its findings, and also to discuss the "suitability" of such investigative reporting for the BBC now. A BBC spokesperson said "it was felt that the debate would be more fruitful if those involved in the making of Zircon did not take part."

One of the two team members who threatened to resign, researcher Cliff Smith, died on Friday, 2 September in a fall from the seventh storey roof of the BBC's Lime Grove studios. The circumstances of his death,

which appears to have been suicide, will be examined at an inquest next month. At the inquest, "Zircon Affair" producer Christine Chapman is expected to give evidence that she and Smith spent several hours the night before his death in a heated discussion with editor Andy Forrester.

One of Smith and Chapman's colleagues, researcher Elaine Thomas, informed *Observer* journalists that Shah had suggested that Forrester film a pretend studio discussion with me "in order to appease [me] and to get [me] to do the film interview." She told me that "[Christine and Cliff] told [Andy Forrester] very firmly that it was not to happen ... everybody else thinks that it was a disreputable suggestion." According to Elaine Thomas, the morning that Cliff Smith died, Christine Chapman warned a senior BBC executive, Tony Hall, about Shah's suggestion.

Forrester has since claimed that the plan was a "joke", but has refused to reply to a letter asking for his account of the events of that evening. Asked if he denied making the proposal, Samir Shah said this week that "the suggestion does not exist in this office... the idea is off the wall."

There is no evidence that these unsettling events at work led to Cliff Smith's death. Nor, however, have his colleagues or parents become aware of any possible private reason for his death. But this did not stop some senior BBC officials from spreading untruthful rumours about his private life, within 48 hours of his death. One BBC official told an *Independent* reporter on the day he died that Smith had had a "relationship problem", which was further characterised in terms damaging to his reputation. The *Independent* did not print any part of the smear, which was recognisably based on information the BBC was given by the police. The paper has naturally declined to identify their informant. What was said has since turned out to be wild and untruthful speculation. Despite this, a day later a senior BBC PR official told the *Observer* that Smith died because of "a girlfriend problem". This, too, was false.

The second occasion on which programme staff threatened to resign was last weekend, when the BBC's deputy director general, John Birt (who brought Shah with him to the corporation from London Weekend Television), took over editorial control of the programme and wanted sections of the script rewritten to his own taste. Large sections were ordered to be abandoned, including a

substantial report on investigative journalism at the *Observer*.

So at the beginning of this week, I informed the BBC that the continuing last-minute rewriting of the programme had undermined any confidence I had that they would be willing to deal fairly and even-handedly with the issues. I said that it would not be fair to use interviews previously recorded with me in a changed context.

The "Zircon Affair" programme will remain more notable for what it does not say than what it does. Another programme in the Secret Society series, "Cabinet", remains untransmitted (NSS, 24 August 1988) while not precisely "banned", despite urgings from, of all quarters, the *Daily Telegraph* that it would be better to transmit "Cabinet" than to leave the genie of another "banned programme" in the bottle.

In the *Radio Times* listing for "The Zircon Affair", a caption comments "Duncan Campbell claims parliament was kept in the dark about Zircon. Was he right?". Inconveniently, doubtless, given the BBC governors' strident condemnation of investigative journalism as destructive and subversive, the programme team found that the programme's conclusions were well-founded; even Conservative MP Michael Mates was willing to acknowledge that parliamentary accountability had improved as a result of the affair, while the Public Accounts Committee chair Robert Sheldon MP offered only contradictory excuses for why the Zircon project need not have been reported.

The programme team also invented a canard of its own, to the effect that the reason for the raid on BBC Scotland was to discover secret blueprints of the satellite which were allegedly in my possession. This suggestion, I told presenter Ludovic Kennedy, was "nonsense"; we had dispelled any suggestion of this kind even before the raids began. I then gave them the evidence that the search of BBC Scotland was actually mounted in order to seize the BBC's master transmission tapes for the entire Secret Society series, and pointed out that "the reason for the raids was to placate Downing Street... it wasn't a question of protecting security, it was political revenge."

As I write, the programme is set to portray me as a bicycle-riding CND supporter, while omitting any mention of the 1987 Investigative Journalist of the Year award I won for, inter alia, the Secret Society programmes. How balanced or fair the BBC can be as judge and jury in their own cause will emerge this Friday night.