

And foul contagion spread

Alasdair Milne, veteran programme maker and Director General of the BBC, explains how he was sacked for acting in the public interest. This marked the end of what, in the 1990's, was called ['The Golden Age of Television'](#). Out went the programme makers and in came the accountants. This is an extract from his fascinating autobiography 'DG: Memoirs of a British Broadcaster'.

The most important and controversial matter of the autumn of 1986 was the series of documentaries called Secret Society. I do not think there remains much dispute about their genesis. They were offered to the Controller of BBC-2 by BBC Scotland as a result of conversations between a producer in Glasgow and the journalist Duncan Campbell, after another programme in which Campbell had taken part. Campbell, well-known as a thorough investigative journalist much of whose work was published in the New Statesman, wanted to try his hand at television. The offer, six thirty-minute investigative films by Duncan Campbell (i.e. researched and presented by him, but produced within normal BBC practice) 'each illuminating a hidden truth of major public concern', was accepted by Graeme McDonald, the Controller of BBC-2 on 12 on th June, 1985. Later, those who detected the cloven hoof in Campbell demanded to know why McDonald had not alerted others He said, simply, he never recognised there might be a problem. And, anyway, the plan for the programmes' production was known to senior Television Service management.

Work began on the series. In April 1986 Alan Protheroe, acting on my behalf, was asked by BBC Scotland for permission to embark on programme one which involved the need to 'bug' a private detective who said he could access a Criminal Records Office computer. Permission for such covert filming or recording had to be obtained from the Director General or his nominee. After much legal discussion, permission

was granted and filming took place. Later, the police were informed that a potentially criminal act had taken place and the man was subsequently charged under Section 2 of the Official Secrets Act. This work was embodied in the programme later called Data. In June, the Head of Television BBC Scotland wrote to the Controller of BBC-2 filling in the details of the programmes as planned at that date.

1. The Secret Constitution. We're taught that Britain is a parliamentary democracy.

But who really rules? Answer: small, secret Cabinet committees.

2. In Time of Crisis. Since 1982, governments in every other NATO country have been preparing for the eventuality of war. In Britain, these preparations are kept secret. So what will happen when the balloon goes up?

3. A Gap In Our Defences. Bungling defence manufacturers and incompetent military planners have botched every new radar system that Britain has installed since World War Two. Why? And can we stop it happening again?

4. We're All Data Now. the Data Protection Act is supposed to protect us from abuse, but it's already out of date and full of loopholes. So what kind of abuses should we worry about?

The fifth programme being discussed at the moment is about the Association of Chief Police Officers and how Government policy and actions are determined in the fields of law and order.

A sixth programme is at the early stages of discussion and is likely to be about communications with particular reference to satellites.

Alan had mentioned to me that work was proceeding on the Campbell series and that everyone in Scotland, from the Controller downwards, seemed to be on top of it. The programmes were still, of course, being made. But their shape was emerging, and at a press conference on 20th August to reveal the BBC-2 autumn plans, attended by Duncan Campbell, there was talk of the series 'which will disclose restricted information on Government emergency plans in case there is another war'. Reports of this press conference alerted the Secretary of the D-Notice Committee (Defence Press and Broadcasting committee: a means for the Ministry of Defence to communicate to the media matters whose publication might affect national security) who made remonstrations. It also alerted some Governors since the reports of the press conference were included in their regular press packs. They began to ask about the series. I promised to keep them informed as progress occurred.

Early in September, the Head of Television in Scotland, Jim Hunter, wrote to Alan to tell him that Joel Barnett had agreed to take part in one of the programmes (the one on satellites, named Zircon) in his former capacity as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. (Later Joel withdrew and his successor as Chairman of the PAC, Robert Sheldon, took his place.) On 10th October, Alan wrote to Pat Chalmers, the controller of BBC Scotland, saying that we must have an urgent and full brief on the whole series as it then stood. A couple of days earlier, the interview with Bob Sheldon had been done and he complained to the BBC and Joel Barnett that he had been 'set up' by Duncan Campbell and the production team. Things seemed to be getting very messy.

When Barnett came to Edinburgh to speak to the CBA dinner, he was not only tetchy about the Hamilton/Howarth case, he was very cross about the way he claimed

Sheldon had been treated. Alan had briefed me over the phone and I had the transcript of the interview to hand in Edinburgh. I took Joel through it and satisfied myself (and I think at the time him) that Sheldon had come out of the experience perfectly well, even though for good reasons a question was sprung on him. but alarm bells were ringing all over the place. Daphne Park and other Governors were demanding to know why Campbell had ever been employed. He was 'a destroyer', he was not the sort of person the BBC should consort with. On 13th November, she and Curtis Keeble waxed very hot about the matter. Joel Barnett and Alwyn Roberts were the only voices counselling caution. Hussey, chairing his first Board meeting, made no bones about how deeply most Governors were getting to feel about this series.

Over the next few weeks, there was much bustle with Alan attending several viewings in Glasgow. In particular, the Zircon programme about an alleged British spy satellite, the cost of which the programme claimed had been concealed from the Public Accounts Committee in direct contravention of an agreement made when Joel Barnett was PAC Chairman, was causing anxiety. Campbell claimed, and has continued to claim, that his information was accurate. Alan's briefings, from a number of sources, changed his original view that the programme was fit for transmission. In a private letter sent to my house on 5th December, he made the positive recommendation to me that the BBC should not transmit the Zircon programme for reasons of national security. His memo was carefully, but strongly, worded.

Meantime, I had personally viewed all the programme rough cuts, as I assured the Board I would, and I invited other members of the Board of Management to see them with me. If we were working up to another confrontation, I wanted to be sure that the

management, anyway, was of one mind. We concluded that Zircon apart (and some were doubtful of Alan's judgment on it) the other five programmes were transmittable. But all had flaws. Consequently, at a meeting in my office on 17th December, and again on 7th January, I told the Controller of BBC Scotland that I wished to clear an evening on BBC-2, cut the films down, and use them as evidence in a thorough programme discussion on 'freedom of information'. He was not happy, but I told him to go away and think about it. Over the Christmas holiday, I concluded that BBC Scotland would not easily encompass the new format and told Pat Chalmers to prepare the agreed five films for transmission. Secret Society was ready for the air, probably in March. I then informed the Board that five films would be transmitted but that one, Zircon, would not. We were giving further thought to possible different programme format.

By now, Hussey and I had had a few working weeks together. A big, genial man, he seemed mainly concerned that I was being kept fully informed about who he was lunching with, but also wet, ferret-like, back over all the papers on the Hamilton/Howarth case, writing me long memos full of fairly peremptory questions. He even sent for our counsel in the case and interviewed them at length. Later, there was a sticky meeting where he and Barnett sat in solemn judgment on the affair and Alan, Margaret and I were left in no doubt that they thought we had made a proper hash of the whole thing. Shortly after Hussey arrived, I gave him lunch at a restaurant we both enjoyed. there I learnt a lot about him, his terrible war wound at Anzio, his early life in newspapers, his troubled time at The Times. He was amiable and obviously a man of great courage. I touched then on my future, saying I would like to continue as DG (which was an option in my letter of appointment from George Howard) after my term of six years expired in July 1988. He said, I thought quite

reasonably, that 'It's not the right time to talk about that.' I presume he already knew by then how he was going to act a few weeks later.

As he went around the BBC, we discussed amongst ourselves at Board of Management how the new team of Hussey and Barnett were getting on. Hussey seemed to go down very well with the staff, relaxed and friendly, as did Barnett also. It was inevitable that they would be dubbed 'Little and Large'. There were some who were anxious that Arnett had an office in the building and seemed a very active Vice-Chairman, and I passed this anxiety on to Hussey on one occasion. The increasing presence and activity of Chairman in recent years was one thing; if you had an interventionist Vice-Chairman as well (and Joel was very involved in, for example, the White City development) there was distinct danger of collision. Although Hussey was genial with the staff, one or two members of the senior management had received the rough edge of his tongue. To me, he could not have been nicer. The Board, on the other hand, showed all the signs of ragged nerves. At the last two meetings before Christmas, they grumbled about various appointments suggestions we put to them, hounded me unpleasantly over Secret Society, seemed thoroughly dyspeptic. Mike Checkland and I swapped notes after one meeting. 'They're throwing down the gauntlet,' was his comment. I was quite glad to see the back of them at Christmas.

There was one other incident towards the end of the year which perhaps had a hidden significance. We had all worked hard to arrange a celebration of Stuart Young's life in Guildhall, with many different interests to be accommodated. It turned out to be a splendid and moving occasion where a number of people, including the Prime Minister, gave readings and Bill Cotton, David Young and I spoke, David most

touchingly. Afterwards, there was a reception, and I moved with Sheila to have a word with the PM who was talking to the Chief Rabbi. To my surprise, she effectively cut me dead. The very same evening, after a Board discussion on television, Alwyn Roberts dropped in to the office for a drink. Some Board members, he warned, wanted my 'head to roll' because of Secret Society. I had no need to ask who.

Chapter 16 Bleak Midwinter

The New Year dawned mild and very wet. Ten days later, the entire country was feet deep in snow and transport paralysed. The worst winter, they said, since 1962-3. The first Board meeting of the year was due to take place on 15th January; the General Advisory Council meeting the day before. It seemed only humane to cancel the GAC meeting since there were around sixty-five members coming from every corner of the country. And though we rang round the Governors and all were valiantly prepared to try and come to London for their Thursday meeting, when I met Duke Hussey in the lift on the Wednesday morning, we quickly agreed we should cancel the Board as well. Joel Barnett was still on holiday in Brazil and rumours in Broadcasting House had it that the wires between the Chairman's office and Rio de Janeiro were hot with usage. Had that meeting occurred, I suppose my execution would have taken place a fortnight earlier than it did.

We already had confirmation from the Home Office that in future the licence fee would be index-linked to the RPI. Over the next fortnight, too, the Secret Society affair gathered momentum. On the 18th, the Observer broke the story of my decision not to transmit the Zircon programme: 'BBC GAG on £500M DEFENCE SECRET'.

The next day the press had heard that Duncan Campbell would be showing the film to MPs in the House of Commons on the Thursday. We thought it prudent to tell Pat Chalmers to remind our staff of their contractual limitations and to demand the return of the film. By the Wednesday, Treasury solicitors were busy taking injunctions out against Campbell. The Select Committee on Defence were insisting on seeing the film but the permanent Secretary at the MoD, Sir Clive Whitmore, appeared to have refused them. On a couple of occasions, Hussey grumbled to me about why we ever came to make the film. It wasn't long before the Special Branch were running all over the BBC in Glasgow like mice, removing boxes of papers and impounding every foot of film they could find. It was a bizarre development to a long-running story.

On Wednesday, 28th January, the day before the first Board meeting, there was a farewell dinner for Alwyn Roberts, the retiring Welsh National Governor. Alwyn had been around the BBC, first as a member of the Broadcasting Council for Wales and then seven years as National Governor, for a long time. He had been due to go the previous summer but this term had been extended for six months, just as he was about to have his first farewell dinner! These are big occasions, held in the Council Chamber, with seventy or so people present, including former Governors and former members of the Members of the Board of Management.

The tradition is that the Chairman speaks first, and the Director General follows, speaking for the executive. There is a presentation, and the guest of honour replies.

When Hussey and I had done our bit Alwyn, speaking as he always did without a note and with the rhetorical skill of a trained preacher, spoke strongly and with candour. He warned the Governors and the management of the continuing dangers of confrontation. He was dismissive of those Governors who insisted on proclaiming that they and they alone were the BBC. What about the producers, the cameramen, the sound recordists, the film editors, the engineers, he asked; were they too not part of the BBC and the most important part?

Looking about me, I could see that this homily did not please some of the Governors present. There were frowning faces. A colleague of mine who was sitting next to Sir John Boyd told me later that John was muttering angrily: 'This is all nonsense. You wait until tomorrow.' As the party broke up for a farewell whisky, it seemed we had said a proper goodbye to Alwyn, which he fully deserved. He had also sounded a clear warning note.

At the Board the following morning, much of the business was routine. I fancied Hussey was in more of a muddle with his papers than usual, but thought nothing of it. Some Governors - Daphne Park, Watson Peat - were extremely sour about Secret Society again, but Alan Protheroe fought his corner well. As we walked down the stairs at Television Centre, I said to Mike Checkland, 'What did you make of that?' 'Awful,' he said. In breaks during the morning, we had been talking to our lawyers about the ghastly case of Michael Lush who had been killed rehearsing a stunt for the

Noel Edmonds' Show. The case was being heard in the Coroner's Court that day, and I went in to Bill Cotton's office, which adjoined mine, to speak to them again.

Then, as I walked down the corridor in the direction of lunch, Patricia Hodgson, the Secretary, asked me if I would go and see the Chairman. I thought it odd that she addressed me by my Christian name; everybody else did, but for some reason she had never done so before. When I walked into Hussey's office, Barnett and he were both there. I remember the blinds were drawn against the sun which was brilliant that morning. Hussey's lip trembled as he said: 'I am afraid this is going to be a very unpleasant interview. We want you to leave immediately. It's a unanimous decision of the Board.'

I was stunned. What was he talking about? Perhaps I should have seen the plot thickening, but I hadn't. 'We want to make changes,' said Barnett. 'We can't under the present circumstances.' I didn't speak. Hussey said again: 'It's a unanimous decision of the Board. You might prefer to resign - for personal reasons.' Barnett said, 'We are men of honour. If you resign, it won't affect your arrangements. You are going next year anyway.'

I had, in fact, eighteen months to go as DG. The Board which appointed me had also spoken of a mutual option of another two years. Hussey said: 'I've already spoken to Arnold Goodman.' What terrible people, I thought. I asked for a sheet of paper,

couldn't remember the date: one of them said it was 29th January. I wrote out my resignation and handed it to Hussey. I walked back to my office and said to Ros, my personal assistant, 'I've been fired.' She said: 'Oh my God', and then I walked through to Bill Cotton's office, where Mike Checkland was too, and told them. Bill swore roundly; Mike looked totally disbelieving. I went downstairs and said to Eddie, my driver: 'Home Eddie.' 'When shall I pick you up?' he asked. (We were due that evening at a party to launch Superchannel, where the Prime Minister was going to be present.) 'I'll be in touch,' I said when he dropped me at home.

At home, I was on my own. Sheila was out. As I prowled up and down the living room, the first impact was the humiliation of being discarded by such people without a word of explanation or discussion; one of them had been all of ten working weeks in the BBC, the other barely six months. I had imagined I still had eighteen months to serve as DG. Anguish was followed by despair.

Half an hour later, a letter from Hussey was delivered by a driver. The Board had, he said, accepted my resignation. They had asked him to 'express their gratitude for your many years of service with the Corporation'. Would I now put my lawyers in touch with theirs?

Within minutes of the BBC's announcement of my departure, the Fleet Street contingent was camping round my front door to chronicle the end of my BBC career.

The horror of what had happened was softened in later days by the scores of letters from friends and colleagues all over the world. One of them, from a famous and distinguished British broadcaster, precisely echoed my own feelings. 'What has happened to you,' he said, 'is something that will stand high in the annals of broadcasting infamy.'