

PRESS FREEDOM

BBC to show *Secret Society*

DUNCAN CAMPBELL's *Secret Society* BBC-2 series will finally go on the air in two weeks' time, according to a BBC announcement last weekend. However, only four of the six programmes made have so far been included in the BBC's schedules.

One of the missing programmes deals with the concealment from Parliament of Zircon, the new British spy satellite — as revealed in the *New Statesman* in January. The programme is not scheduled because Strathclyde police, who seized the master and backup transmission tapes from BBC Scotland in Glasgow in January, continue to refuse BBC requests to hand them back.

The police claim that the tapes are needed for their investigation. The BBC have pointed out that the police have no need for two identical copies of the tape, neither of which they can even look at without renting special equipment. Indeed, the only tape held by police which has been authenticated for evidential purposes by the BBC is a third, VHS video recorder tape.

But Strathclyde police have remained intransigent, despite a relaxed attitude adopted by the Home Secretary. At the beginning of March, Douglas Hurd said that 'whether the programme (Zircon) is shown is a matter for the BBC'. Hurd also said that so far as the Special Branch investigation in London was concerned, only the 'minimum necessary' material would be retained by police for their reports.

The second unscheduled programme, called 'Power Play', describes how governments manoeuvre to influence public opinion and stay in power. It focuses on unorthodox activities by the last two outgoing governments at the time of general elections: Labour in 1979, and the Conservatives in 1983. It also looks at how the centre of government decision-taking — cabinet committees — is concealed from public, press, or parliamentary attention.

The BBC says that the 'Power Play' programme still requires further legal checking, which is under way. However, the entire series was reviewed by the BBC's Assistant Director-General, Alan Protheroe, and former Director-General Alasdair Milne in December last year. After the review, Milne informed the NUJ that he had 'now cleared five of the programmes for transmission', and that they would be 'transmitted shortly'. The series was then scheduled to start transmission on 25 March.

But that schedule and Milne's clearances were disregarded last month, when senior BBC officials were told to put the entire series through editorial and legal checks for a third time.

The entire *Secret Society* series was originally to have been broadcast on 17 November 1986. Since then it has been pulled out of the BBC's schedules three times. All the programmes have been remade an average of three times each. Some scripts have gone through 15 versions: the 'Power Play' programme is still being rewritten.

The first of four remaining programmes going on the air, 'We're All Data Now', concerns private and public computer databanks. It will be screened on BBC-2 at 10.20pm on Wednesday 22 April. That week's *New Statesman* (24 April) will carry the first of a series of accompanying features. ●