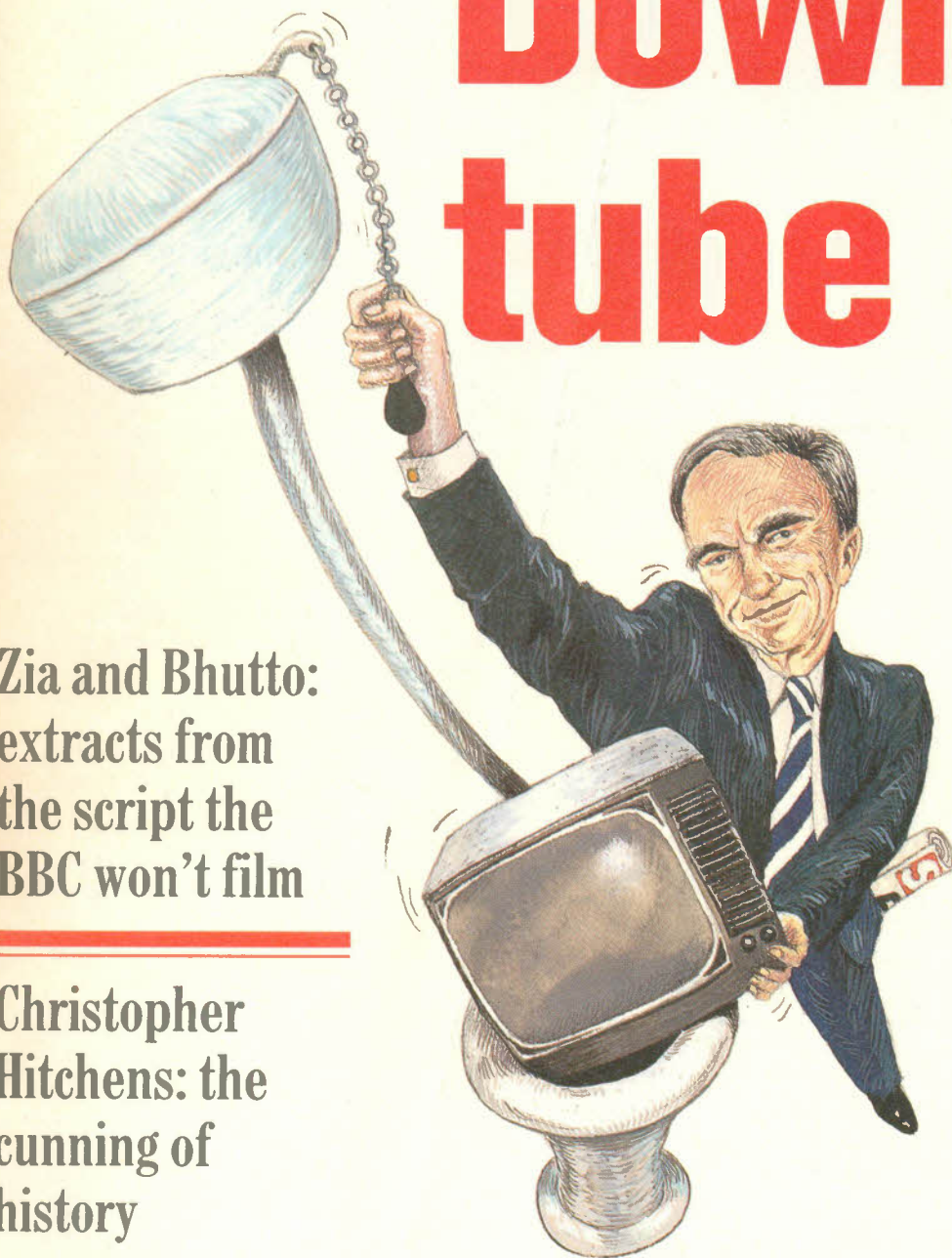


Down the tube



It's too late to adjust your set. The age of Mogg and Murdoch is upon us. The government may have

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Filing Cabinet

The banned Zircon programme in the series "Secret Society" will finally be shown by the BBC next month. Another in the series—about election dirty tricks—will not. Duncan Campbell reports

This weekend, television journalists gathering at the Edinburgh TV festival will debate the new constraints on TV journalism. They will also get to see, for the first time, at least part of the suppressed *Secret Society* programme on cabinet committees and alleged government manipulation of the electorate, which was first cleared for BBC transmission by former Director-General Alasdair Milne, but then (following his peremptory dismissal by the governors) withdrawn under a smokescreen of contradictory and often absurd excuses and explanations for its non-transmission. At different times, these have been stated to be "legal problems", "editorial difficulties", "unsuitable for a pre-election period", "out of date", and finally "new information".

The excuses mask a quite different story. Had Milne not been sacked by the BBC governors, the entire *Secret Society* (save *Zircon*) series, including the Cabinet programme, would have been transmitted more than a year ago. Since the publication of Milne's memoirs, it has also become clear that even the banning of *Zircon* had little to do with national security considerations and a great deal more to do with the politically-motivated pressure which was brought to bear on Milne to ban the entire series—before Milne or anyone else at BBC headquarters even knew what the *Zircon* programme was about.

The pressure on Milne to ban the entire series began exactly two years ago, in the week that BBC2 announced its autumn schedule for 1986. The series' presenter (this writer) was, Milne was quickly told, "a destroyer". It was clear by November 1986 (when the series should have been being transmitted) that a number of right-wing governors were intent on getting the series as a whole banned. Indeed, among the governors the Cabinet programme caused controversy earlier than did *Zircon*. A number of Conservative figures, such as Winston Churchill MP, had been invited to take part in the programme. When he and his colleagues declined to appear, they began a long smear campaign against the series and myself through such fronts as the far-right Freedom Association and the Tory-aligned "Media Monitoring Unit". Although these campaigns and smears had little if any effect on Milne, they probably informed and enlarged the fury of the Thatcher-appointed BBC governors who were quite as keen to bury Milne himself as to get *Secret Society* off the air.

In a statement at the start of July this year, the BBC announced its plans to show the *Zircon*

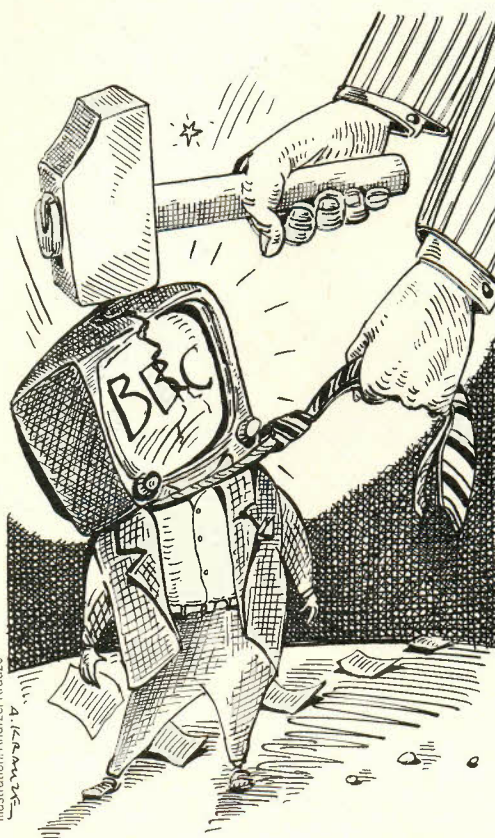


Illustration: A. Krause

programme this September, but finally announced that *Cabinet* "will not be shown". The statement claimed that the script of *Cabinet* "had been published in the *New Statesman*"—which was untrue, although an article based on the script had been published. "As a result", it was claimed, "new information was advanced about events...with which the programme dealt". This is completely untrue—no new information came to light and was passed on about any of the events described in the programme, as a result of the articles about the programme, or in any other way. The programme itself had been intensively researched and checked, cleared and re-cleared, by BBC lawyers and senior editorial staff. But the so-called "new information" is now allegedly the only problem with the programme. "Because of this", the BBC statement went on, "it would need a great deal of work to update and complete [*Cabinet*]... this extensive update cannot be justified".

The BBC's conclusion does not bear close scrutiny, and in any case bears no relation to the many excuses for non-transmission advanced during 1987. The BBC's budget for next month's new programme about *Zircon* (to accompany the old) is almost double what the

entire *Secret Society* series cost. The production staff is at least twice as large; cost does not seem to have been a problem. Moreover, during 1987, *Cabinet* itself was repeatedly re-edited and re-scripted (amounting to some four remakes of the programme, and 23 different scripts) to meet successive and ever-expanding anxieties about the programme's contents. All but one of these occurred after the programme had been cleared, legally and editorially, by Director-General Milne and the BBC's own solicitor. To alter the few parts of *Cabinet* which are now out of date would cost the same as any of the three earlier remakes.

The final misrepresentation of events in the BBC's statement was a claim that the decision not to re-adapt *Cabinet* for transmission after the June 1987 general election was made by the programme's Executive Producer at BBC Scotland. In fact, the decision was made by the new Director-General, Michael Checkland, and his staff in London. They then canvassed for any one of the programme makers, including the management of BBC Scotland, the producer, and myself, to endorse this conclusion. All refused, and said that the programme should be transmitted. After some time, however, Executive Producer David Martin of BBC Scotland agreed.

As the final episode of the *Secret Society* series, *Cabinet* explored how governments manipulate information to reinforce and retain power. It produced damaging new evidence about the behaviour of leading politicians in both parties in the periods before the 1979 and 1983 general elections—particularly including detail of the Conservative government's campaign against the peace movement in 1982–83. Those who saw the programme inside the BBC, including former BBC2 controller Graeme MacDonald who had originally commissioned the series, considered it the second strongest programme of the series, after *Zircon*.

Called *Cabinet* because of its partial focus on the role of secret cabinet committees, the programme included serious criticism of the Prime Minister's press secretary, Bernard Ingham, for taking an active political role in planning the Conservatives' 1983 election campaign. As a civil servant, such behaviour would normally be seen as a gross and unacceptable breach of propriety. In the programme, former Defence Permanent Secretary Sir Frank Cooper said that Ingham's active attendance at Conservative Party meetings "would be fundamentally wrong." This was one of a number of aspects of the programme (which devoted equal time and

weight to attacking duplicity by former Labour Premier James Callaghan) which were clearly embarrassing to the Prime Minister and her colleagues.

Between October 1986 and April 1987, the *Secret Society* programmes were pulled from transmission schedules three times, usually without notice and within 24 hours of a deadline for *Radio Times* listings. *Cabinet* was cleared for transmission in December 1986 by BBC Solicitor Tony Bostock and assistant Director General Alan Protheroe. It was then passed by Milne, who stated publicly shortly before he was sacked that he had cleared all five remaining *Secret Society* programmes, including *Cabinet*, for transmission. Following the Zircon row in January 1987, Protheroe wrote in the *Listener* that the programme concerned matters of "legitimate public interest and concern" whose "peremptory seizure" by police was a "shabby, shameful, disgraceful incursion into a journalistic establishment".

But soon after Milne's departure, all the programmes were "uncleared", and had to be checked again, and again. Between February and May 1987, a succession of general or specific "editorial" or "legal" problems, often inter-related, were "discovered". The result (only the very charitable could now argue, the *unintended* result) was that the programme was eventually legally approved so late in May that the BBC felt it had to be withheld from transmission during a "pre-election period".

During December 1986, the programme had been cut and recut twice. Following the appoint-

ment of Michael Checkland as Milne's successor, Alan Protheroe ordered a new version of *Cabinet*, the third, to be cut to deal with new "editorial considerations". But this made matters worse, and resulted in further delay. In March 1987, the fact that new changes had been made to the programme since Milne left was used as grounds for postponing the *Secret Society* series as a whole. There were soon then said to be new "legal problems" to be "double-checked" with *Cabinet*—none of which, however, could be specified in writing.

Legal and editorial checks continued to be carried out on each of the programmes until the middle of April, by which time it seemed likely that a general election would be called for June. Finally, the *Cabinet* programme was once again said to have been legally (if not "editorially") approved, following a final close examination of the evidence by BBC legal adviser Tony Jennings. But the corporation then announced that they "would not wish" on "editorial" grounds to show the programme in a "pre-election period".

They were asked if it would, therefore, be transmitted after the general election. The reply appeared in the affirmative. "The fact that we wish to go on with the legal checks and with editorial consideration of those legal checks means that we wish to transmit this programme if and when it is possible", Checkland's chief political adviser, Margaret Douglas, wrote in April 1987. "If this is after [the] election, we do not believe that this in itself will make the programme out of time."

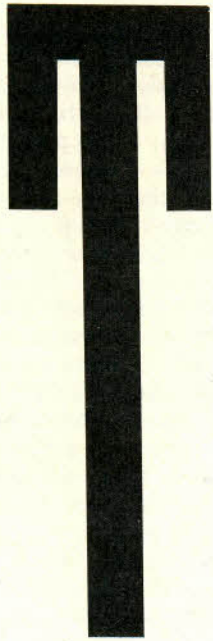
But after the June 1987 election was over, perhaps unsurprisingly, no steps were taken to adapt or transmit the programme. Senior BBC staff were told not to re-edit or re-schedule *Cabinet* for transmission. Asked what should now be done to advance the programme into the TV schedules, from Broadcasting House in London there came only a deafening silence. It was at times suggested that a suitably updated *Cabinet* programme might form part of a second *Secret Society* series, which had been commissioned by BBC2 in November 1986. This proposal remained in abeyance while (part of) the first series was, eventually, screened. But six days before the general election, we were informed that there would, most definitely, be no second series of *Secret Society*. The BBC has also consistently refused offers by independent or foreign TV companies to purchase *Cabinet* (or *Zircon*) to broadcast independently.

It is now obvious that a programme which deals with government manipulation of the electorate or media at a time of a general election should now, ideally, be updated to deal with the 1987 election. To change the version of *Cabinet* approved for transmission by Alasdair Milne would actually cost relatively little. But the major difficulty is obvious: ironically but unsurprisingly, the fate of *Secret Society* and the *Cabinet* programme itself would have to be part of the subject matter of the new version. Under the new regime at the BBC, the prospect of such critical examination of the role of government in the Corporation's affairs must seem more remote than ever. ●

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