



## The BBC – ‘Not One of Us’

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## **Abstract**

Working as a producer in BBC Television throughout the Thatcher regime, making documentaries about issues such as collapsing industries and the jury-less Diplock courts in Northern Ireland, as well as studio programmes and outside broadcasts about local and national politics, I had a unique engagement with Thatcherism. It is my contention that it was the robust radicalism of Thatcherism, challenging any medium that dared oppose her, that enabled the BBC to find its focus in the 1980s.

## **Contributor Note**

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Most look to the Falklands War as the defining event of the Thatcher period. It certainly transformed popular perception and won her the 1983 election. But I believe it was the much more seminal, and historic, conflict with the Irish that gave bite to the bellicose figure now seen as a latter-day Boudicca, and focus to her animosity to the BBC. Just five weeks before her 1979 victory, the man who masterminded her leadership campaign and the nearest she had to a friend, Airey Neave, was killed by a car bomb inside the Palace of Westminster. She said then:

He was staunch, brave, true, strong; but he was very gentle and kind and loyal.... I and so many other people, owe so much to him and now we must carry on for the things he fought for and not let the people who got him triumph.<sup>1</sup>

On July 5 1979, the very last BBC *Tonight* programme broadcast an interview with an Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) spokesman, back to camera and disguised with an ill-fitting wig, claiming responsibility for this act. Neave's widow, who had not been warned, saw the interview and complained, along with many other outraged citizens. Later that summer, Jeremy Paxman and a film crew from BBC's *Panorama* accepted the invitation to film a staged IRA road block in the small village of Carrickmore, Co, Tyrone. The footage was never shown, but the press had a field day with stories accusing the BBC of collaborating with terrorists. Thatcher allegedly went 'scatty' in Cabinet, and from these two incidents a set narrative of the BBC giving Irish terrorists 'the oxygen of publicity' was born. As Hugo Young wrote, at the time of Thatcher's fall in 1990, 'her own

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Thatcher speaking to the press on the day of Airey Neave's death 30 March 1979

experience with terrorism, always an underrated aspect of her psyche, made her an unyielding proponent of media curbs which touched upon it' (Young 1990).

Preceding Labour and Conservative governments had struggled with the BBC's determination to report impartially since the beginning of the so-called 'Troubles' – and they had not always done so. I had journalistically sound programmes censored at the BBC World Service because they did not accord with government views. In 1972, I was planning a *World Today* on Northern Ireland, and had booked the two journalists who were the best informed: the *Sunday Times*' Insight Team's John Whale, who had recently edited the Penguin special on *Ulster*, and the *Guardian* correspondent, Simon Winchester. I was told that, since they both had come to the conclusion there would be no peace without talking to republicans, one had to go, their view not supporting the government opinion of the day. Whale and Winchester were, of course, right and later, even though the Thatcher government maintained the fiction that Ulster was a security situation, not a political war, we now know for certain that unofficial talks were going on most of the time, despite being consistently denied. It is cold comfort that senior BBC executives have since admitted to me that the BBC did lose its objectivity over Northern Ireland for a time in the early 70s.

However, the need constantly to confront the incompatibility of political convenience and journalistic objectivity did give the BBC a more robust sense of mission throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Speaking to the Royal Institute of International Affairs in 1977, the then BBC Controller of Northern Ireland, Dick

Francis, said: 'We have a contribution to make to the maintenance of democracy, both by providing a forum where harsh differences of opinion can be aired and by reporting courageously and investigating the unpalatable truths which underlie the problems in our midst' (Francis 1977). Even the Conservative and cautious BBC Director-General in 1979, Ian Trethowan, wrote that the bludgeoning he and the BBC received after the INLA/Carrickmore incidents only lasted a fortnight and then stopped. He suspected that 'even newspapers hostile to the BBC began to worry about some of the more extreme demands which were being heard for censorship of material from Northern Ireland' (Trethowan 1984). Trethowan, like most BBC DGs was under constant pressure, as much from within the corporation as without. Thatcher's enmity had the unanticipated effect of creating something like common cause within this famously ungovernable institution.

Although Northern Ireland would return as the *casus belli*, a skirmish in the South Atlantic distracted Maggie and the media in 1982. The American media had happily colluded in the simplistic assumption that their coverage was what lost the US the Vietnam War, so the military planners in the Falklands decided to impose full military censorship on coverage of their action there. Predating satellite phones and the internet, they had complete control of communications, and tried to influence reporting. What they could not control was the language used, and it was this that upset Thatcher and her government. Where she, in Churchillian mode, expected reports on 'our boys' and 'the enemy', she heard from the BBC the less loaded 'British' and 'Argentinian forces'. One MP accused *Newsnight's* Peter Snow of being 'almost treasonable' for daring

to question the accuracy of British reports. Thatcher said she felt offence and emotion was caused by the 'times when it seems that we and the Argentines are being treated almost as equals and on a neutral basis' (Hansard 1982).

She had more to say when, the following week, a *Panorama* controversially covered dissident views about the conduct of the war. She said 'the case for our country is not being put with sufficient vigour'. Another MP called the programme 'an odious and subversive travesty'. The next day, the then Chairman of the BBC, George Howard, and Director-General Alasdair Milne suffered a severe roasting before the Conservative Backbench Media Committee. The timing of this row is so critical it may have been confected. A few days before, on May 2, the Argentina's only battle cruiser, the *Belgrano*, had been sunk, costing 368 lives and the scuppering of peace proposals. As is now known, not least due to the whistle-blowing civil servant Clive Ponting, the ship was sailing away some 250 miles from the British fleet and well outside the Total Exclusion Zone Britain had declared. This dubious action ensured the all-out war that followed, and a long tail of anxiety about too many questions being asked. Thatcher was enraged when a caller on an 1983 election programme questioned her about the sinking of the *Belgrano*: 'Only the BBC', she said, 'could ask a British Prime Minister why she took action to protect our ships against an enemy ship that was a danger to our boys'. Later that year, I took a Royal Court production of *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinas* – based on the poetry of Lieutenant David Tinker, who, before he died in the Falklands on HMS Sheffield, had dared to question the

validity of the war – to Plymouth to film before and discuss with an invited audience of navy officers, widows and naval dockyard workers. The Plymouth Corporation banned us from using their theatre and the Admiral of the Fleet sent a bulletin to all serving naval personnel to have nothing to do with me. The show was shot and shown, but, whatever else it was fought for, the Falklands was not about free speech.

The BBC did not help its case with the broadcast in January 1984 of a *Panorama* entitled 'Maggie's Militant Tendency', an exposé of some Tory MPs' links to far-right organizations. It appeared to be a deliberate riposte to the right wing press' vilification of Derek Hatton and the role of Labour's 'Militant' wing on Liverpool City Council. In naming names, the programme, which is generally agreed not to have been the best piece of television journalism, led the BBC to the libel courts, and to settling £20,000 damages on Neil Hamilton, M.P. Any organisation broadcasting the number of hours the BBC does will have its off moments, but the intense public scrutiny it is under, not least from press and politicians, means that its faults will always be amplified, undermining its ability to keep its eye on the ball, as has happened in the last year. In March 1984, Thatcher's assault on the unions she had dubbed 'the enemy within' reached its apogee in the calling of a miners' strike. This rapidly escalated until the so-called 'Battle of Orgreave' on 18 June, when mounted police charged a miners' blockade of a coking plant near Rotherham, causing severe injuries. Even before this, we had noticed that nearly all news coverage of the strike had been shot from behind police lines, unwittingly helping perpetuate the image of the confronted miners as 'the enemy'. We sent a

production team to film an *Open Space* documentary from the pickets' side with Sheffield Police Watch, which had a corrective effect on the hitherto partial coverage, even admitted to in the late Alasdair Milne's autobiography (Milne 1988). It is ironic that the impartiality the BBC tried to maintain under the more lethal conditions of the Falklands was less well observed in the north of England.

In conflicts like these, the choice between objectivity and partiality should be clear. But the divisiveness caused by a prime minister whose first question was always 'Is s/he one of us?' inevitably cast anyone unwilling to defer, especially independent messengers, as enemies. Lord Stockton, the former Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, was a One-Nation Tory, who favoured consensus politics. He said in the Lords:

It breaks my heart to see – and I cannot interfere – what is happening in our country today. This terrible strike, by the best men in the world, who beat the Kaiser's and Hitler's armies and never gave in.... Now there is a new kind of wicked hatred that has been brought in by different types of people. (Macmillan 1984)

Policing the miners' strike brutalized many constables who had never previously left their own county. Confronting a convoy of hippies, who lived in old buses and were apparently bound for Stonehenge for the 1985 summer solstice, Wiltshire police saw fit to corral this convoy in the infamous 'Battle of the Beanfield' on 1 June, smashing the vehicles' windows, terrorizing and clubbing women and children. Over 300 were arrested and charged but, as at Orgreave, none of the charges were proved and damages were

eventually awarded against the police. The convoy were on the day offered sanctuary in his Savernake Forest by Lord Cardigan, sickened by seeing a heavily pregnant woman bludgeoned by a policeman. I spent the week filming another *Open Space* there as the travelers licked their wounds and tried to comprehend how they could be attacked for being a dangerous threat in their own country.

It echoed a complaint I had heard earlier in the year in Belfast, from a Protestant woman whose husband was being tried for terrorist activities on the word of a supergrass. 'It's bad even for the republicans. But how could the British do it to us, their own people'. Even when breaking the law in the same way, the members of the Ulster Volunteer Force, thanks not least to friends in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, did not see themselves as enemies of the state in the same way that the republicans were characterized. Thatcher's earlier cold-hearted contempt for the death of Bobby Sands from his hunger strike in the Maze in 1981 – 'he was a convicted criminal' – was not something they expected for their own, or felt was justified. In the early 1980s, over 600 republican and unionist paramilitaries were arrested and charged on the uncorroborated word of supergrasses, who in turn went free to a new life under witness protection. Four of these mass show trials went ahead, including one that sent 22 IRA suspects to jail for 4,000 years in 1983, before the system collapsed and eventually all were released because of its flagrant injustice.

Unfortunately for me, the film I had made with the late Irish novelist Nuala O'Faolin, *On the Word of a Supergrass*, was also due for transmission on BBC2 the same summer (1985) as a Real Lives film, *Edge*

*of the Union*, which featured Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Gregory Campbell, both of whom were democratically elected representatives, but who still supported violence. Its producer, Paul Hammann was a skilled publicist, and it was no great surprise to me when *Sunday Times* reporter Mark Hosenball ambushed Thatcher at a Washington press conference with a 'hypothetical' question about British broadcasters giving a platform to 'the IRA chief of staff'. Thatcher said that she would 'condemn them utterly' and, a great political row was started with Home Secretary Leon Brittan eventually calling on the BBC to ban the film. As is well recorded elsewhere, the BBC governors broke with tradition by viewing the film and deciding to accede to the ban. Unfortunately, the then Director-General, Alasdair Milne, was away on a fishing holiday in Scandinavia at the time, fatally undermining the BBC management's defence. Although the film was eventually shown, the row did permanent damage to the BBC's governance, its political independence and Milne's career.

I was part of the collateral damage. My equally timely and challenging film about the supergrass system was quietly pulled from the schedule by then Managing Director of Television, Brian Wenham, despite its having been legally and editorially cleared. It was his mendacious excuse in a press release that it was 'unready for transmission' that insulted my professionalism, and led me to write letters of clarification to my contributors in the families of IRA, INLA and UVF members. Perhaps predictably, it was the UVF contingent who chose to share my confidences with the national press, and my reasonably intemperate words were quoted in leading articles in, among others, the *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror*. I

assumed my career had ended that day but, in all fairness to Wenham, he stood by me and *On the Word of a Supergrass* was, like *Edge of the Union*, eventually transmitted. The experience speaks to the two contrary impulses of the day: a fatal inability to withstand the political will of an ideological government which controlled the purse strings and the appointment to the BBC board of governors, and a countervailing determination to get the important work out despite these crippling constraints. It is notable that it was not this battle over editorial freedoms that was finally to emasculate the BBC, but a Labour government eighteen years later, desperate to bury the truths about its faulty prospectus for war in 2003.

Precisely because of its constitutional obligations as a public service broadcaster, the BBC is seen as the enemy by every government keen to spin the message their way. As former *Panorama* reporter Richard Lindley writes, in his biography of that programme: 'There will always be those who see left-wing subversion in any questioning of the status quo, any challenge to authority: apparently Winston Churchill believed the BBC to be a nest of Communists' (Lindley 2002). Following Churchill, Thatcher was not keen to subject herself to BBC interrogation, preferring the soft soap of the *Jimmie Young Show* on Radio 2 to hardball on *Newsnight*. She did, however, listen to the agenda-setting *Today* programme on Radio 4, later to hire one Andrew Gilligan. Like the astute politician she was, she picked the battles she could win. The BBC is, by definition, an Aunt Sally for all and she was happy hurling battens at it when it gave her the opportunity. But, apart from shamelessly stacking the board of governors with Conservative appointees, she chose not

to attempt to break up or privatize the BBC. When the Peacock Committee unexpectedly backed retention of the licence fee in 1986, she knew this was one battle she may not win. This was one portion of the 'family silver' which Macmillan had commented on her 'selling off' which was to remain in the state sideboard, leaving it open to intervention.

One of the more egregious examples of such intervention was the 'Zircon affair', concerning *Secret Society*, a series of programmes made in 1986 by investigative reporter Duncan Campbell. His revelation of a half-billion pound spy satellite programme that had not been approved by the Commons Public Accounts Committee led to government pressure being applied through the BBC Governors on DG Alasdair Milne to drop the story. This and another programme on secret Cabinet committees were shelved. The *Observer* ran the headline on 18 January 1987 'BBC Gag on £500m Defence Secret' and, as Milne recalls: 'It wasn't long before the Special Branch were running all over the BBC in Glasgow like mice, removing boxes of paper and every inch of film they could find'. The then BBC Chairman, Marmaduke Hussey, had been appointed by Thatcher to 'sort the BBC out'. His Deputy, Joel Barnett, had formerly been Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, and responsible for the £200 million ceiling on government expenditure before it needed PAC ratification, which Zircon flagrantly ignored.

Another governor was Daphne Park, principal of Somerville College, Oxford, and a former MI6 officer. She reportedly said that the BBC should never work with people like Campbell, whom she labeled 'a destroyer'. This establishment inquisition unanimously agreed that the

investigation of Britain's *Secret Society* should not have occurred, and Alasdair Milne was summarily sacked. Chief Accountant Mike Checkland was appointed in his place.

The point had been made that no one was irreplaceable, and that there were subjects the BBC should avoid, although it did not lead directly to a cowed corporation. When, on 19 October 1988 Tory Home Secretary Douglas Hurd announced that all organisations in Northern Ireland believed to support terrorism would be banned from directly broadcasting on the airwaves, broadcasters continued to film such interviews and merely replaced the sync sound with actors speaking the same words. It signified that the battle for free reporting against a censorious government continued. Just as Thatcher gave us

programme makers, from documentaries to *Spitting Image*, meaty material to work with, the BBC made a perfect whipping-boy for an ideologue wanting evidence of apostasy. Michael Grade reports an outraged Bill Cotton, then Deputy Managing Director of BBC Television, of responding to Thatcher's criticism of the Falklands coverage: 'Prime Minister, are you accusing the BBC of treachery?' As Grade comments: 'He still got the CBE!' (Grade 1999). I wonder how she would have responded to the news that the BBC had caved in to Conservative pressure to censor Radio 1's chart show running of *Ding-Dong! The Witch is Dead* reaching number 2 to mark her death. I sense she would have been triumphant, but contemptuous. Her biographers record how she loved an argument – and a worthy opponent.

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