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# BBC History Archive

## Transcript of Interview with Michael Bunce

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# BBC History Archive

## Transcript of Interview with Michael Bunce

FG = Frank Gillard

MB = Michael Bunce

..... = Interview hesitation

*FG: It's the 24th May 1995 and for the oral history of the BBC this is **Frank Gillard** talking this morning with **Mr. Michael Bunce**, Executive Director now of the Royal Television Society, in his office in London.*

*You came into the BBC of course on the external broadcasting side way back in 1956 or thereabouts, you were an engineer to begin with.*

MB: I was - yes.

*FG: But you quickly moved into programmes, wise man, and particularly you were involved in overseas Talks and Features for a good part of your time there.*

MB: I was - I was very lucky. I joined the external services as you say, as an engineer, very rapidly became a Studio Manager and as a Studio Manager you get some overall impression of the services as a whole and I worked for the North American, African service, European service as well as overseas Talks and Features but that was a very exciting place to work at that time and although not technically the Head, **Gerry Mansell** led it. He subsequently rose and rose within the Corporation but it was quite clear to a young producer joining his staff that here was a man of very great professional skills, very good man manager, sound editorially across the board and a great guy to work for.

*FG: His boss of course, was **Arthur Barker** who you wouldn't say the same things about.*

MB: He was virtually invisible.

*FG: Yes, did you come across **J.B. Clark** at all while you were there?*

MB: Not at all.

FG: *No. Now you were producing current affairs programmes at this time, 'Commentary' and then 'People and Politics' - let's talk a bit about them. What sort of audience were you addressing - were they expatriates, English speaking people living abroad?*

MB: I think at that stage **Gerry Mansell** was aiming to re-position the producer's goal and in a way I was part of the instrument of change because prior to me I think producers were focusing almost exclusively on the expatriate audience, but **Gerry** recognised that it was important to communicate with nationals within the territories to which we broadcast and that, in a way, that was more important and so although 'People and Politics' was about UK domestic politics it was designed and I very much had in focus, interested and informed people across the world who wanted to know how the Palace of Westminster and Whitehall functioned, and what were the key subjects being discussed and debated in the week in question.

FG: *Could you get big British figures to contribute?*

MB: I think the really remarkable thing for an insignificant fee was that we attracted all the key players in British politics. We had Ministers like **Enoch Powell**, we had people like **Wilson, George Thompson** who were subsequently to be Prime Minister and Commissioner and a Labour Minister, there was never any reluctance on the part of people, to come to Bush House and take part in that weekly programme. In a way they liked it because often the political defences of individual parties were dropped and there was agreement across the political divide on the issues that mattered and in that sense, I think 'People in Politics' was a more revealing programme often than the domestic political equivalents.

FG: *Yes, the great years of war-time and the big achievements of BBC External Services, they were past now. Was External Services confident of its future in peace time?*

MB: Yes because although we were in peace time we were in a cold war and I think the war-time polarisation of the External Services had been replaced by a polarisation in the cold war, so whether you were talking to foreign nationals who were working in Bush House as part of the language services or whether you were talking to contributors or producers of the English language service, they believed they had a mission to explain.

FG: *And the great names, the **Bullocks**, the **Weidenfelds** all those people had gone of course, to the House of Lords and other places, were their successors people of calibre?*

MB: I think they were. I mean somehow it's quite difficult now to look back at they way in which one viewed and valued the contributions, I'm sure that young producers working for Radio and Television nowadays would consider ministerial people of weight to be making valuable contributions to programmes but what I think was then apparent was the considerable experience and expertise that politicians had, and the benefit to overseas broadcasting as I say, is that they dropped their 'political guard' and they debated and discussed key issues without the constant intervention of scoring party political points. 'People and Politics' lacked scoring of political points. It was essentially addressing issues and many of the key figures of the day were intellectual figures of very great weight in the way that **Enoch Powell** undoubtedly

was, **Crossman** was, **Crossland** was, **Wilson** was. They were very, very able people and of course while the Labour Party was in opposition it was very, very easy indeed to get all the top people who were very happy to appear in the programme and take part in the discussion and debate and in later years I was often introduced by people like **Dick Marsh** as the man who paid his mortgage while he was in opposition.

FG: *Well you were obviously happy here in External Services and you found it a satisfying job but you very soon moved into television. Was it difficult to get in?*

MB: Strangely enough, I ran across my opposite number in Television who was walking along the beach at a Party Conference in October '73..... I was walking along the beach with **Norman Crowther Hunt** who was my anchor man and we encountered coming in the opposite direction my opposite number from television, and **Mr Wilson**, then recently elected Leader of the Labour Party and **John Grist** the producer of 'Gallery' asked me why I hadn't come to television and I said I hadn't come to television partly because I was enjoying the job I was doing in Radio enormously but partly because no-one had mentioned that they would be interested in me coming to television. Well it emerged that he was interested in me joining the programme and in January the following year, after the briefest of training courses which failed to tell me that in making a film you needed to shoot a cut-away, I joined 'Gallery' where I worked for two years.

FG: *And you were at Lime Grove.*

MB: I was at Lime Grove.

FG: *Lime Grove is fascinating of course, <sup>Green</sup> **Hugh Green**, the Director General at the time you are speaking about was happy with Lime Grove, he loved the Lime Grove people and the atmosphere, but his successors used to talk about 'those shits at Lime Grove' why was this?*

MB: Well one successor in particular used that phrase, **Ian Trethowan**. Ian was Conservative by nature and had many Conservative friends with a capital 'C' and of course that was a period of radical change. What we had seen was a campaign by the Labour Party to end what they described as '13 years of Tory misrule' and there were a number of radical film makers of which I was one, **Phillip Whitehead** was another, who looked at a number of issues, such as capital punishment, the difference between state education and private education, and had challenged the status quo, that everything was fine. Conservatives in the Conservative Party and Conservatives in the BBC saw that as dangerous radicalism and that is why we were not necessarily comfortable people to live with and to work with because we were constantly challenging the status quo.

FG: *I understand that.*

## Film Roll 2

## Film Roll 2

Michael  
^  
FG: Who were the leaders of the Current Affairs group when you went to Lime Grove. Was it still **Leonard Mite** or was it **Grace** - who was in charge?

MB: Leonard was in charge, Grace was involved and there were 3 warring bands. There was 'Panorama', there was 'Tonight', and there was 'Gallery', and they were literally warring bands. The programme ideas were put up on blackboards in code because it was known that in the dead of night, programme people from other areas would come in and look at your outlined plans and so the aim was to keep private, particularly if you were on a weekly programme like 'Panorama' or 'Gallery', to make sure that 'Tonight' didn't swoop in and wipe your eye, the day or two days before your considered piece on which you'd been working for a couple of weeks, was transmitted.

FG: Did this keep you on your toes?

MB: Very much so.

FG: You've mentioned 'Gallery' already, let's now deal with 'Gallery'. What was the purpose of 'Gallery' what was its function?

MB: 'Gallery' was to report on matters of political moment in a particular week. It concentrated very much on domestic politics. It was rare that it looked outside the UK and so it looked at the UK political scene but not just in Whitehall and Westminster it was equally concerned to report on film from around the country.

FG: Really. What was the BBC's attitude then to controversy - the higher ups, did they encourage it or discourage it?

MB: Well by the time I joined 'Gallery' it had a new Editor, **Tony Whitby** who undoubtedly was one of the most able people I've ever worked with. He was brave, he was enormously encouraging because people like myself who joined the team were very poorly trained. We had sound, I think, editorial experience having worked in radio, but frankly, technically we were dependent on the skill that we learned on the job because training was at a pretty low level and I remember when I joined the television service I think, the course was either three or four weeks - it had been halved in order to increase the staff to match the needs of BBC 2 which were almost upon us.

FG: Who were the key people involved in 'Gallery'?

MB: **Tony Whitby** was the key person, **Margaret Douglas** was the studio director, **Phillip Whitehead** later to become the MP was a film director and myself and there were then occasional people who floated in and floated out. In terms of the presenters, the main presenter was **Ian Trethowan** we also had **Alun Gwynne Jones** as he was, late of the Times, later to be **Lord Chalfont** as a co-anchor person and we had a chap called **Nigel Lawson** join us from the Financial Times, who worked on the programme for a year or so particularly dealing with the business aspects of politics.

FG: And who were your prime contributors?

MB: Well it's very difficult to say who the prime contributors were because I think the approach of the film directors was always to ensure that you didn't draw

exclusively from London and so most of the films were made from outside London but in terms of studio guests, the studio guests were the principal players of the day, **Lord Hailsham, Tony Wedgwood Benn** as he then was, key ministers and key civil servants.

FG: *Was it a popular programme with the audience?*

MB: It was very well respected and received, it was a quality programme that didn't go for mass audiences. Indeed, on a Thursday night at 10.30 'ish and it had a variable starting time, one would not be expected to go for key audiences but there were a great many people around the country who were engaged in politics at a local level, or who were very interested in the social issues that we were looking at, who were regular viewers to the show and we picked up an audience of somewhere in the region of 3 million 3 1/2 million which was a good and consistent figure.

FG: *Was this on BBC 1 or BBC2?*

MB: This was on BBC 1.

FG: *Over your period in television Current Affairs were there different policies for BBC1 and BBC 2 political programmes?*

MB: No, I believe the approach was largely the same. In the early, formative years with Encounter enquiry and so on, there was a deliberate attempt to spawn new programmes that were not replicas of what had been broadcast on BBC1, But I worked on both BBC 1 and BBC 2 and in the period that I worked across the Channels, given that it was the News and Current affairs were managed by the same people, whichever channel they were on, the attitude was very much the same and in fact the governance of the programmes was largely in the hands of Current Affairs bosses and not in the Network Controllers. I mean the impact the Controller of BBC 1 had on the content of 'Gallery' was, I would suggest, minimal at that stage. The content was determined by the Editor and the Editor was answerable although with a dotted line to the Controller, primarily to the Head of Department to whom he was working.

FG: *Lets move on from 'Gallery' for the moment because you spent 2 or 3 years producing, what were 'quasi-educational programmes'. Were you caught up in that great struggle on educational television, between the television service and the education people in the BBC?*

MB: No, there was a great divide. **Don Grattan** was the boss of that area at the time and he took on his own shoulders the responsibility for fighting the political battles. Those working in 'the trenches', of which I was one, were given a programme assignment and allowed to get on with it and given total defence and a very positive response from Don who I look upon as a very inspiring and able and astute figure.

FG: *So you worked to him rather than to C.P. Tel?*

MB: Absolutely. I mean I got reactions. There was one particular series of programmes of which I'm even at this remove, quite proud, called 'Minorities in Britain' and this was extremely well regarded by the then Controller of BBC 1, **Paul Fox** and the combination of Paul's own reaction and possibly even more significantly, the reaction of his mother-in-law and the supermarket people to whom he was talking, led him to believe that it was worth repeating so he did.

FG. (Comment or question omitted)

MB: Not at my level.

FG: *No. Anyway in 1968 you became editor of the 'Money Programme' now this is something. Was this the television equivalent of the Financial Times?*

MB: It's very difficult isn't it, in television to think of a direct comparator. It was a programme that had been started about 2 1/2 years earlier and it had a lot of difficulty in establishing its credibility within the square mile. I think that is a problem even today because what happens is the journalists on papers like the Financial Times stay in their jobs for a very long period and therefore suspicious captains of industry can build up relationships of trust over time. Television people are nomadic and while they may be working on a particular strand of programmes for one year, they'll be somewhere quite different and the captains of industry will have to deal with people who are unknown to them, and so there was a considerable difficulty, I think, in establishing its credibility.

The key point, just a few months before I joined the programme, was that Lord Cromer ~~Bromer~~, Governor of the Bank of England, agreed to go on the programme and so in a way, when I was appointed I reaped the benefit of acceptability, because if the Governor will go on the programme it must be a decent programme to go on. It had extremely good staff, it had very good presenters and I think by the time I joined, it was on the road to success.

FG: *And as Editor did you have a free hand?*

MB: Totally free hand.

### Film Roll 3

FG: *We were talking about the Money Programme. I can't imagine a more sensitive or tricky job in the whole of the BBC's output, than running the 'Money Programme'. Didn't you find it so?*

MB: Well to start with, although I was a television professional and put in to run it, I think, because I was a television professional, I had to learn about money and the first thing I did - I was fortunate having had contacts from my previous jobs both in Radio and in Further Education. I set up some tutorials for myself, both at New College Oxford and at the University of Surrey where a Professor and a Reader in Economics dealt with different aspects and were very generous with their time. It's a reflection, I think, of the high regard that people outside broadcasting had for the BBC that people in key academic posts were prepared to take on a poor student like me to make sure that they had a better grasp of the field in which they were asked to work.

FG: *But did you have to deal with speculation for example, about profitability of various enterprises?*

MB: Towards the end of my 2 year period on the 'Money Programme' I was piloting through the political hierarchy of the BBC a proposal that we should do a service on

tipping shares and you can imagine that there are certain parallels in the past. I mean tipping horses was a very well fought campaign. There was huge sensitivity that we might somehow affect the market and we might be vulnerable to political damages and also to financial damages if we got things wrong. My argument was that you're paid to get things right and that if you have sound editorial judgement and if you have good advisors who are technically proficient and not in anyone's pocket, there is no reason why you shouldn't do a good job, and of course now it happens and it happened sometime after that. But it was a very tricky business trying to deal with Governors and Members of Board of Management who felt that it was a dangerous area to get into.

*FG: It's a world of secrecy isn't it? Were people willing as contributors to come on to the programme and reveal what they were planning and what they were hoping to do?*

*MB: Well whether you're dealing with politics or whether you're dealing with business there is always a degree of partial disclosure. When they disclose, they decide to disclose because it is in their interest to disclose and what it's important to have is a person or people in the team who are sufficiently well connected and well informed to properly probe and question and that's quite difficult.*

*FG: Who were you working to in the BBC when you were doing this was - it still within Current Affairs?*

*MB: Yes.*

*FG: So who was Head of Current Affairs at this time can you remember?*

*MB: John Grist.*

*FG: He was willing to let this proceed... that's fine. You got some awards I believe for the 'Money Programme' while you were on it.*

*MB: I think the 'Money Programme' had established itself as a programme which key people in the financial and business world would both appear on and would regularly watch. I think my task, as a professional, was to make it more understandable and appealing to a general audience without, in any way, de-valuing it and I think we won awards ... we won a BAFTA nomination, we won the Shell International Award for it, because we were very successful in making the programme accessible to a quality audience, but quite a sizeable audience.*

### Film Roll 3 Take 2

*FG: Were there any programmes that made you lose your sleep at night and keep your fingers crossed, I mean were there any really critical ones?*

*MB: Sometimes you can tell when you're straying into difficult territory, sometimes you can't and there were two occasions in which there were furores. One with a speaker walking out of the studio just before the item took place - one an MP who complained to everyone it seemed, senior to me at the BBC and who spoke freely to the newspapers that evening so that there were people from Fleet Street behind the privet hedge outside the house ready to 'doorstep' me when I got back from the programme. At the end of the day when the 'powers that be' wanted an explanation of what we had done, the team were exonerated from causing any offence and certainly hadn't got things wrong. It was a reflection that good journalists sometimes ask*

questions that people of power do not wish to have asked. We asked the right questions, the people concerned didn't like the questions being asked and complained about it - perfectly legitimate, but we were right in asking those questions.

FG: *But did you find life very fraught in these high risk, very exposed posts like 'Gallery' and 'Money Programme' and did you get adequate backing all the time from the BBC?*

MB: Yes, I never failed to get the backing. In the case of 'Gallery' there were a couple of programmes that I did that might be worth mentioning. For 'Gallery' I made a film about prisoners serving life sentences for murder and this was at a time when there was still capital punishment in the UK. It was a very strong programme, we interviewed 17 murderers in prison, we interviewed jurors, we interviewed counsel for the prosecution and the defence and it made huge impact. It was unusual for an up-market political programme to be talked about across the Nation, but undoubtedly that was talked about. Paul Fox was the Controller of BBC 1 at the time and he rang me about a week later and said: "Do you think you could convert that 20 minute item to a documentary?" And I said: "We could certainly do that across the summer" and so that was the birth of a 50 minute documentary for BBC 1 'The Murderer, a Man Apart' which in its way had significant influence on the British public who at that time were being asked to examine whether capital punishment should continue.

Another film that was quite an interesting film and quite a challenging film was the Roxburgh Selkirk and <sup>Peoples</sup> People's By Election which David Steel won, and there were a lot of Constituency reports which we did in 'Gallery'. This was quite a difficult one to do because it was very fiercely fought and of course David came through as the surprise winner to many people, but it was an exciting film to make, it was a challenging film to make and it was a film that had considerable impact, I would suggest, on the public recognition of the qualities that David Steel had.

FG: *Was it controversial in any other way?*

MB: Only in the way that if you're making films in that part of the country it is quite difficult to penetrate a rural establishment and to get everyone, regardless of their social standing and their political views, on board, but we managed to persuade the local hunt to allow us to film in baronial halls, to film an SNP candidate who had a particular problem. He had an enormous motorbike which I wanted to film him on, that wasn't licensed and insured for him to ride and he had a two stroke which was insured but certainly wasn't what a film director would have wanted to film, but nevertheless we overcame the difficulties and made the film and it had considerable impact.

FG: *What was the standing of BBC Current Affairs and BBC Television generally at this stage, was it highly respected and influential?*

MB: I think it was. Probably there were two prongs to that. 'Panorama' was, partly because of Richard Dimbleby, a national institution, the nation tended to watch that programme and expect from it their gift of sight across the world. And then there was the 'Tonight' programme, a maverick programme run by a maverick team that were very skilled in exploiting popular stories.

#### Film Roll 4

*FG: Well in 1970 you took over as editor of 'Nationwide'. Now that was the successor to 'Tonight', am I right?*

MB: Yes.

*FG: What was the difference between 'Nationwide' and 'Tonight'?*

MB: I think it was an entirely different sort of programme. The strengths of 'Tonight' were very grown-up reporters who'd been put out of work by the collapse of 'Picture Post' working with very young ambitious and quite brittle directors and producers to reveal on film what was happening up and down the country. The idea of 'Nationwide' was to link all the BBC studios around the country so that wherever a contributor was, you went to that contributor live and therefore 'Nationwide' was predominantly a studio programme - 'Tonight', although I'm sure Alasdair Milne would disagree with me, was primarily, in my memory, noticeable for its film impact.

*FG: Who were the personalities involved on Nationwide then?*

MB: Personalities in front of the camera were, prior to me taking over, Michael Barratt, Bob Wellings. There were film reporters like Philip Tibbenham, David Lomax. There were a range of people - in terms of the team that emerged, I believed very strongly in a live programme of dual linking, so I discovered a number of, I thought, very promising performers regionally - Sue Lawley in Plymouth, recently a South Wales Echo Thompson trainee, very inexperienced, but subsequently to make a huge name for herself. There were people from Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland who I brought into the team - it was enormously important that wherever you sat in Britain at 6 o'clock at night, you felt that you were watching your programme and so I was determined that the voices and the faces that appeared on the screen should be recognisable to people wherever they lived and worked, and secondly there was a new approach and that it should appeal to the entire family because although those in the BBC hierarchy who lived and worked in London rarely got home in time to watch 'Nationwide', 9/10 of the audience working outside London would be home and to quote a colleague of mine, 'in a viewing mode' at 6 o'clock. So we appealed to the entire family and the entire nation and that meant nothing was too light for us, nothing was too serious and I think in the history books 'Nationwide' is remembered for some of the lighter and more frivolous items, but the skill was to blend, in a very unpredictable fashion, the light and the serious, and that meant that when I took over the programme, the audience was about 3 million at peak. When I handed it on five years later it had peaked regularly at 14 1/2 million. It was, when I took it over, three nights a week in black and white. It was when I handed it over, in colour, five nights a week, so it had grown enormously in strength.

*FG: Well I'm sure the Regions were pleased about the opportunity of national exposure - were you pleased with the Regions?*

MB: I think you may be making a false assumption. I think the Regions were very suspicious about the impact that 'Nationwide' would have on their audiences vis-a-vis the regional magazine. It was my task to build up a positive working relationship and to

try and persuade people to be generous in giving stories, giving time, giving expertise, building the network part of the programme and for a long time, for the first year of its life, there was extreme suspicion. But at the end of the day money counts, and we came up with idea of providing a regional researcher to work on 'Nationwide' based in each region and that clinched the partnership.

FG: *Yes I understand that, speaking as a regional person. After 'Nationwide' you became Chief Assistant in the Current Affairs group. Did you have specific duties as Chief Assistant or were you just picking up everything that the Head of the group didn't want to do?*

MB: It was a bit of both. I certainly did a lot of attending meetings at home and abroad. We were running up to the first European elections in which Britain had taken part and there needed to be representation about how they were covered on television. I drew that straw, but I also, since I built up a certain expertise in nightly programmes, was made responsible for the development of nightly programmes - that led to the development of the new 'Tonight' programme. It also meant that 'That's Life' transferred from Desmond Wilcox's department to Current Affairs and I became editorially responsible for that.

FG: *Tell us about the new 'Tonight' first. I mean how new, how different, different placing, different timing?*

MB: The feeling was that 'Twenty Four Hours' and 'Mid-week' had failed to establish a popular appeal with the audience. I was advised not to take it on and foolishly didn't listen to Derek Aymore who gave me that advice. He described the late evening as the 'graveyard' for many good careers, but in a sense because I'd been successful in popularising without de-valuing the 'Money Programme' because I'd built 'Nationwide' into the strongest current affairs programme in audience terms, ever, the hope was that I'd be able to do something for the late evening. In the event neither I nor my four successors running it, were able really to establish a successful vehicle on BBC 1. The only successful vehicle that has emerged for that slot, has emerged as 'Newsnight' on BBC2.

#### Film Roll 4 Take 2

FG: *What was wrong, why couldn't you establish it?*

MB: I think there were two problems. One is that the audience were by then getting too much news and current affairs and there was no appetite on BBC1 for yet another dose of news and current affairs in the late evening. It had been described by a colleague of mine as a 'graveyard' for good careers. I should have listened to him. I didn't. I thought following the success I'd had with the 'Money Programme' and 'Nationwide' in popularising those programmes that perhaps it was worth having a go at the late evening. In the event, neither I nor the Controller, nor the Managing Director saw any way through to improving it and it had to wait until BBC2 came along with 'Newsnight' before we had a late and successful show.

FG: *Well your career wasn't seriously damaged but 'That's Life'. It seems incongruous that you should be handling 'That's Life'. In any case I understand that Esther Rantzen is the supreme boss of the whole outfit.*

MB: She wasn't then. What one has to remember and this I suppose is a controversial statement, that you either have producer power or you have presenter power and those were the days of producer power and therefore in previous jobs - for example, Michael Barratt wished to be the sole presenter of 'Nationwide' - I didn't wish to have a sole presenter. I wanted to have a team of presenters - that enables the editor to edit. If you ever put your life in the hands of a single presenter, then he or she calls the tune, but from my dealing with 'That's Life' it wasn't run by Esther - she was the star of it, it was run by the editor of the day.

FG: *Well it was an immensely successful series anyway. Yes, indeed. Did you enjoy that sort of 'show-bizzy' side of television?*

MB: I did. It was quite different for me because 'Nationwide' wasn't 'show-bizzy' in that sense. 'That's Life' was quite glossy, had songs in it and so on - I'd not been much used to that.

### Film Roll 5

FG: *Were you sorry in 1978 to leave programme production for information services - quite a different job and quite a different world?*

MB: I was both sorry to leave programmes because I think if you are a programme maker that is the most exhilarating thing you can ever do, but I also liked the challenge of working with both management and programme makers in the new information role that Alasdair Milne had created for me. It was an exhilarating thing to do and it's quite nice to be a pioneer.

FG: *To begin with you were confined to the television service weren't you?*

MB: For the first four years I co-ordinated and ran the Press and Publicity operation for the Television Directorate. I mean that was not only promoting programmes, which I think we did better and better, but it actually meant the introduction of MP workshops so that for the first time we would bring groups of the House of Commons in and other specialist groups - we brought lawyers in, we brought educationalists in, we brought people from the Church in. They spent a day with the television service. It began with the Managing Director and the two Controllers talking to them about their budgets, their aims and aspirations for the annual plan and so on, then they went round and they looked at studios and they went to make-up and they watched the 1 o'clock news go out. Then they came and had lunch and they were able to ask any questions that were in their mind of the Director General of the day, the Managing Director and his Management team and that was, curiously enough, it was the first real PR, BBC Television had ever set up.

FG: *I'm glad that you've emphasised those points because it was much more than mere publicity wasn't it?*

MB: Oh absolutely.

FG: *In Huw Wheldon's day and George Campsey's day it was publicity wasn't it?*

MB: Publicity is promoting programmes. The PR role was promoting what the television service does and did and it's a fine organisation, it should be very proud of its

achievements and it shouldn't hide its light under a bushel. Alasdair and I believed that we should open the door of the Television Centre very freely to any special interest group that had a right to know what was going on - after all we are spending the licence payer's money, how do we account for that? Well we account for that by bringing groups of people in, showing them around, telling them how we do things and letting them ask any questions that are relevant.

*FG: How did the Managing Directors and the Network Controllers react to this?*

*MB: Very positively, Alasdair was 100% behind it. We did it as a television service initiative and Ian Trethowan was at the time Director General and I think he blew a fuse when he discovered that BBC Television was doing it rather than the BBC corporately. The compromise we came up with was to involve the DG in the final 12 o'clock or 1 o'clock discussion session with the MP's or the specialist group. He played a very important part in that, he was very good at it. I think he was a bit miffed that it wasn't his idea.*

*FG: But of course you were dealing with the Press as well weren't you?*

*MB: Yes.*

*FG: As high up as editors or just the critics or what?*

*MB: No, no, occasionally as the editors. Journalists writing about television then, were more experienced and more grown up and therefore there were a number of people who ran their own media areas in the newspapers who it was very important, to have a good working relationship with. We had always aimed to have that, I think we improved on it, we gave them better access. For example, one day we ran a day for journalists and the day explaining, rather like the MP's seminars, how the budget was spent - they were given an opportunity to push cameras in a studio under Jonathon Miller's direction from the "Gallery". Jonathon talked about making 'Midsummer Night's Dream' - it was a way of attempting to achieve a better educated press, so that they could actually write in a more informed fashion about the BBC and programme making and I think it worked.*

*FG: I don't suppose you could ever educate them out of the desire for 'scoops' and that sort of thing?*

*MB: No.*

*FG: Did you encourage them to have 'scoops' perhaps?*

*MB: I think you realise, particularly on foreign visits. There is an annual festival in Montreaux for entertainment programmes, and the pack of journalists who go there, go there ravenous for a story, and if you don't give them a story they will make up a story. So it was just good and prudent editorial management, to ensure that they were given a positive story to write about because the consequences if you didn't do that, were quite serious.*

*FG: Did you allow journalists to wander round BBC studios and premises at large, at will?*

*MB: We tried not to but I have to say, the security of the Television Centre was not something that any of us were particularly proud of at the time and most people who, and journalists are pretty insistent, most people who were insistent arriving at the front*

gate could talk their way past the BBC Commissionaires and get in and walk around. We didn't have a great deal of problem arising from that but it was something that made one a little uncomfortable because one never knew quite what they were up to.

*FG: What about the attitude of producers, I mean the programme makers themselves. Were they interested in what you were trying to do on the information side and what was their attitude to publicity, obviously they wanted all they could get I suppose?*

**MB:** Yes I mean, perfectly understandably, a producer wants the maximum publicity he or she can get for his show and if he thinks he can achieve that by the back door he'll do it through the back door. It was my policy to try and better resource the publicity side of both television and later, the entire BBC, so that individual producers didn't have to do back door publicity and that we could therefore know what was going on because inadvertently sometimes, sometimes deliberately, producers would leak aspects of a production which they knew to be provocative and knew would raise questions in Parliament or elsewhere and cause embarrassment to the BBC. It was my aim, as far as we could achieve that, to avoid that sort of embarrassment.

*FG: Yes, well what about artists and contributors. I mean many of them are crazy for publicity aren't they?*

**MB:** They are but they were in those days fairly strongly controlled by Executive Producers and Editors and we had very little difficulty with artists. By and large they wanted good promotion for their programme and they knew they could achieve that in partnership with their editor, director, producer and I do not recall a single episode where we had difficulties that were not containable - the only difficulties that weren't containable were if a Blue Peter presenter had been accused of taking drugs or some such and clearly that sort of story creates a terrible problem for the editor of the programme and for the network on which its being transmitted.

*FG: And of course the messenger always to always take the blame. Did you find yourself at times 'holding the can' for other peoples blunders, I suppose you did?*

**MB:** I think you need to do that because it is right for management to defend the people who are doing their best and occasionally will let slip something that they didn't intend to let slip, but one knows that they were not deliberately trying to rock the boat.

*FG: Did you feel that the Press and Publicity and indeed all your efforts with MP's and others - did they react back on the BBC, did they influence the BBC - you were trying to influence people and building a good image but did their views come back and influence the BBC?*

**MB:** I think they did. I mean I think that we had a very good relationship, during my period of running Television Information, with the press. I gave access to the Managers of the Television Service the Managing Director, Director of Programmes, the Network Controllers and the Heads of Department. I opened up the place - there were more journalists coming in, they were better informed, they could lift a telephone and they

could find out information and importantly I would know that information was being asked for.

*FG: So that was valuable. Thank you.*

### Film Roll 6

*FG: Now in 1983 you became Controller of Information Services. This, as a Controllorship, was a revival I believe, of something that had happened before, there'd been an interval, but what was involved in the Controllorship?*

**MB:** It was quite a big Department. There were about 180 people all up and it was really the external relations of the BBC in its entirety, the External Services, Radio, Television, Enterprises and so on. So I had a team of people who looked after the press operations, ran the press office, ran the duty offices and I also had a public relations responsibility. This was the period, if you remember where, for the first time in the BBC's history I had the agreement from the then Director General, **Alasdair Milne**, to invite six advertising agencies to pitch for the BBC's account. At the end of the day **Lowe Howard Spink** won it and we started advertising BBC programmes. Off the back of that when there was a conflict of interest at **Lowe Howard Spink**, we involved **Tim Bell** and I invited **Tim** to come in as advisor and he has been invaluable, in my view, in putting forward, sometimes, uncomfortable external views of the BBC and helping the BBC redress that. He was also, I have to say, a two way conduit because he not only brought the external view to the BBC, he was, at the time he was appointed, extremely close to the then Prime Minister, **Mrs Thatcher** and he was able sometimes to explain and defend the BBC which was very much the whipping boy of both **Mrs Thatcher** and the then Conservative Government.

*FG: Who was your Director then in this time?*

**MB:** Well I had three over time. Initially it was **Alan Protheroe**. It was he who appointed me as Assistant Director General. After he left, they brought from Wales **Geraint Stanley Jones** as Director of Public Affairs and I worked to **Geraint** and then for the last period I worked to **Howell James** who came in himself from a Government position into the role of Director of Corporate Affairs.

*FG: And you deputised for them did you?*

**MB:** I did at Board Management and at the Governors' meetings.

*FG: And what about the involvement with the Regions - they came under your scope as well I suppose?*

**MB:** They did, we had a dotted line relationship but I chaired meetings that all the Heads of Information and the Publicity staff came to, two or three times a year and of course I introduced the new technology. I felt it was very important that the Controller of Scotland, if he was going to lunch with the High Sheriff should have the same information at his disposal as the Director General would have or the Chairman would have in London and so we introduced a computer network that would deliver to everyone regionally, the same information that top management got in London and that was enormously important - it was a two way process because it meant that all the

Regions could feed to us centrally, any information that they felt was relevant for the DG or others to have.

*FG: It impresses me because my years were the publicity years and here I get a sense of Information Services being a creative body, image-building and taking initiatives in all sorts of directions - not just a body which was unavoidably necessary to get us out of difficulties when problems arose with the press.*

**MB:** I think there was an unkind description of the Information Services as the 'thought police'. I didn't take very kindly to that and having been a creative person all my life I wanted to actually build positive bridges and I thought that the BBC needed to present itself more effectively in the market place both to those who govern us as politicians and civil servants inevitably do because they control the purse strings, or equally important at the licence payers because without their support there is no licence fee, there is no BBC.

*FG: You're giving us a picture of a BBC that's intensifying largely through your agency, its accountability to the public. Nowadays accountability seems to be more important almost than programme making in the BBC - but it is important and it was an advancing cause, was it not, within the BBC in your time?*

**MB:** I think it's mistaken for people to assume that the new BBC of **John Birt** has created accountability. For the entire period that I worked for the BBC, accountability was very near the top of all the managerial and editorial priority lists and I believe that we did our best to achieve maximum understanding for what we were doing. We were however, functioning at a very difficult time. The Conservative Government was extremely hostile and I believe **Margaret Thatcher** was hostile to all broadcasters because of the assassination of **Airey Neave**. **Airey Neave** was her Campaign Manager as you'll remember, was very important to her as well as a close friend. When he was killed she was shattered. The fact that the BBC could put on an <sup>INLA</sup> ~~inlier~~(?) representative in a programme, the fact that **Thames Television** would put on a programme 'Death on the Rock', led inevitably to her view that the broadcasters were hostile to her Government and her friends. I think it became extremely difficult if not impossible, ever to overcome that prejudice. \*

*FG: You were dealing with issues which touched the Board of Governors, personally. They read the newspapers, they meet Members of Parliament and such people. Did they often call you in?*

**MB:** The Chairman I was closest to was **Stuart Young** and **Stuart** I saw on a basis of at least once a week. He came to the BBC as an outsider to the sort of public role that he had as Chairman of the Corporation and he of course formed alliances and friendships within - **Bill Cotton** was a close friend of **Stuart**. I became quite close as both a friend and a colleague and I think he respected the professional views that were given to him from people who were not pulling their punches and often agreed with him about the diagnosis of the troubles the BBC was facing and the troubles were principally that a Tory press and a Tory Government were eager to undermine, if not destroy, the Corporation.

*FG: And what about **Duke Hussey**?*

**MB:** I think the jury is out on **Duke**.

FG: *You're not going to say any more. Now you were a witness of course, to the decline and fall of Alasdair Milne.*

MB: I was.

FG: *And you had to deal with that with the press and that must have caused you some problems?*

MB: It was extraordinary because I was at a meeting in Television Centre on the day that Alasdair was disposed of and I had just gone back from Television Centre to a meeting I was chairing in Broadcasting House, when my secretary got hold of me and said the Chairman needed to see me immediately. I did point out that I had a large number of people waiting for me but this had no effect at all and I went back immediately to Television Centre where Dukey told me that Alasdair had resigned and produced from his pocket a folded sheet of paper which he handed to me and said: "This is a statement that I want you to issue right away". So I was extremely surprised as indeed members of the Board of Management were when they heard about that a few minutes later and we issued the statement shortly afterwards. I then went round to see Alasdair who lived literally a few hundred yards away and identified for him a person who could look after his PR because I clearly couldn't handle the interests of the BBC and the interests of the Director General - former Director General.

FG: *Some note to end this interview on. Thank you very, very much indeed.*

MB: Pleasure.

FG: *And your career has been a fascinating one. I was going to ask you about what you're doing now but there's no time.*

MB: No, don't worry.

FG: *Thank you.*

**Interview Ends**

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