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Spycatcher's Little Sister: The Thatcher government and the *Panorama* affair, 1980-81¹

Abstract: This article investigates the Thatcher government's attempts to suppress or censor BBC reporting on secret intelligence issues in the early 1980s. It examines official reactions to a BBC intrusion into the secret world, as the team behind the long-running *Panorama* documentary strand sought to examine the role and accountability of Britain's clandestine services. It also assesses the nature and extent of any collusion between the government and the BBC's senior management and contributes to the ongoing evaluation of how the Thatcher government's approaches to press freedom, national security, and secrecy evolved. It is also argued that the *Panorama* affair was an important waypoint on the journey towards the dramatic *Spycatcher* episode of the mid-1980s, when Margaret Thatcher's efforts to suppress embittered former MI5 officer Peter Wright's memoir resulted in huge public embarrassment. The key players on the government side – Thatcher and Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong – failed to learn the lessons of the 1980-81 affair, that it was often more dangerous to attempt suppression than to simply let events run their course.

¹ This article would not have been possible without generous postdoctoral research funding from the University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH). I would like to thank the staff of the BBC's Written Archives Centre – in particular Jessica Hogg and Louise North – for their considerable help in gaining the release of Corporation files on this matter. I am also appreciative of the assistance given by Mary Pring and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's Freedom of Information team. I also very much appreciate the time taken by Roger Bolton, Duncan Campbell, and Tom Mangold to answer the many questions I put to them. Finally, this article has been strengthened immeasurably by the assistance and contributions of many colleagues, family, and friends, in particular the anonymous reviewers for *Intelligence and National Security*, Richard Aldrich, Simon Cooke, John Craig, Roseanna Doughty, Penny Fielding, Frances Houghton, Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, Mark McLay, Christopher Moran, and Patrick Watt. My students – particularly those who were researching their final dissertations as I was working on this article – were also a constant source of inspiration and good humour.

At the end of May 1980, John Gau – the BBC’s head of current affairs programmes – wrote from Lime Grove studios to a veritable ‘who’s who’ of Britain’s post-war intelligence community. He enquired if they were interested in providing information or interviews for a *Panorama* programme investigating 'competence, public accountability, terms of reference, finance' and other issues relating to Britain’s clandestine agencies, agencies that officially did not even exist. Gau noted that recent events such as art historian Anthony Blunt’s exposure as a Soviet mole, investigative journalist Duncan Campbell’s reportage, and Labour MP Robin Cook’s security services bill had made this a matter of legitimate public interest.² These letters sparked a nine-month battle between Margaret Thatcher’s government and Britain’s public broadcaster, and between the BBC’s Director General (DG) and his subordinates, the trades unions, and the print media. Battle lines were rapidly drawn over official recognition of secret services activities and their accountability to parliament and the public. An integral part of this affair involved the BBC’s ability to report on national security issues, and the increasing tension between the state, the print media, and the televisual cornerstone of Britain’s cultural life.

This article investigates the under-analysed attempts by Thatcher and her government to suppress or censor BBC reporting on secret intelligence issues in the early 1980s. The official file maintained by the Prime Minister’s office on the affair was released into the UK’s National Archives in 2011, declassification provoking a brief

² Gau to Brooks Richards et al, Letters, 27 May 1980, BBC Written Archives Centre [hereafter WAC], T62/285/1 ‘Panorama – Security Services’ (hereafter T62/285/1). Letters were sent to Francis Brooks Richards (a former SOE officer and at the time of affair a senior Cabinet Office official), Arthur Franks (DG of Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service – SIS, better known as MI6 – until 1982); Martin Furnival-Jones (DG of the Security Service – better known as MI5– 1965-72), Leonard Hooper (former DG of GCHQ), Brian Tovey (DG of GCHQ), Howard Trayton Smith (DG of MI5 until 1981), and Dick White (DG of MI5 1953-56 and DG of MI6 1956-68).

flurry of media coverage, commentators focusing on the then DG Sir Ian Trethowan's role as a conduit between the government and the BBC.³ This study goes beyond the 2011 release, using newly available records from the BBC's Written Archives Centre and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), permitting a deeper analysis of events.⁴

Specifically, this article reveals the nature of official reactions to a BBC intrusion into the secret world, as the team behind the long-running *Panorama* strand sought to examine the role and accountability of Britain's clandestine services. It assesses the nature and extent of any collusion between the government and the BBC's senior management. It also contributes to the ongoing evaluation of how the Thatcher government's approaches to press freedom, national security, and secrecy evolved. Furthermore, this article argues that the *Panorama* affair was an important waypoint on the journey towards the dramatic *Spycatcher* episode of the mid-1980s, when Margaret Thatcher's efforts to suppress embittered former MI5 officer Peter Wright's memoir resulted in huge public embarrassment. The key players on the government side – Thatcher and Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong – had failed to learn the lessons of the 1980-81 affair, that it was often more dangerous to attempt suppression than to simply let events run their course.

³ 'Margaret Thatcher threatened to veto BBC programme about MI5 and MI6', *The Guardian* (hereafter *TG*) online, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/dec/30/thatcher-veto-bbc-programme-mi5-mi6> (accessed 25 November 2015); 'Secret service pressed BBC to censor *Panorama* – papers', 30 December 2011, BBC News online, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16358075> (accessed 25 November, 2015);

⁴ There is still much that we do not know. Many conversations were by telephone and there is no record of certain face to face discussions. Furthermore, many of the departments involved disavow the existence of relevant files. Only the FCO has released further information as a result of Freedom of Information requests. As with much of intelligence history, more peripheral documentary evidence must be used to fill this void.

The contemporary and historical aspects of the relationship between governments, intelligence agencies, and the media have received increased scholarly attention in recent years.⁵ In the BBC's case, historians demonstrate that the Cold War saw a complex and contested dynamic develop between broadcaster, government, and the intelligence services. From the end of World War Two onwards, the corporation had the difficult job of balancing objectivity and journalistic impartiality with the dictates of anti-communism and deference to the secret state.⁶ More often than not, the latter won out.

The BBC's DG was often a key figure in this dynamic. Officially the corporation's chief executive and editorial head, by its nature the position requires frequent contact with officialdom on controversial issues. The record of successive DGs in resisting or acquiescing to official pressure on sensitive matters is complex. Post-war holders of the post had frequently held sensitive positions or been privy to official secrets. General Sir Ian Jacob (DG, 1952-59) had been an assistant to Winston Churchill's war cabinet and a staunch supporter of the Foreign Office's clandestine anti-communist propaganda unit the Information Research Department (IRD).⁷ Jacob's

⁵ See Claudia Hillebrand, 'The Role of News Media in Intelligence Oversight', *Intelligence and National Security*, 27:5 (Oct. 2012), XXX-XXX; 'Intelligence Oversight and Accountability', in Richard Dover et al (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Intelligence Studies* (London, 2013); Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman (eds.), *Spinning Intelligence: Why Intelligence Needs the Media and Why the Media Needs Intelligence* (New York, 2009).

⁶ See John Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War* (Edinburgh, 2006), 47-52; Christopher Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2011) and 'Intelligence and the Media: The Press, Government Secrecy, and the "Buster" Crabb Affair', *Intelligence and National Security*, 26:5 (Oct. 2011), 767-700; Paul Lashmar, 'Urinal or Conduit?: Institutional information flow between the UK intelligence services and the news media', *Journalism*, 14:8 (Nov. 2013), 1024-1040.

⁷ Andrew Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-communist Propaganda, 1945-53: The Information Research Department* (Abingdon, 2004), 70-74.

successor, Hugh Carleton-Green (DG, 1960-69), had been behind the British psychological warfare effort against Malayan communist insurgents in 1950-51, and while DG, was party to the suppression of Peter Watkins's controversial pseudo-documentary *The War Game* in 1965.⁸ Ian Trethowan himself was a close friend of Edward Heath (Conservative Prime Minister from 1970 to 1974) and at times was believed by his subordinates to be a little too close to the secret services.⁹ In showing deference to official authority during the *Panorama* affair, Trethowan thus did little to break an established pattern.

The 1980-81 *Panorama* affair has received little to no coverage in the literature. Historian Jean Seaton's controversial analysis of the BBC from 1974 to 1987 does not mention it, while journalists Richard Lyndley and Michael Leapman offer only a few brief paragraphs within their books on – respectively – *Panorama* and the BBC.¹⁰ Ian Trethowan reflected on the affair in his 1984 memoir and in his reminiscences, former *Panorama* editor Roger Bolton comments on the imbroglio.¹¹ Little has therefore been said about the affair, bracketed as it was by other more prominent conflicts between the BBC and the Thatcher government, such as *Tonight's* interview with the Irish National Liberation Army on the assassination of Thatcher confidante Airey Neave, the

⁸ Tony Shaw, 'The BBC, the State and Cold War Culture: The Case of Television's *The War Game* (1965)', *The English Historical Review*, 121:494 (Dec., 2006), 1355.

⁹ Tom Mangold, 'From Thorpe to paedophile MPs to torture, the ruling elite ALWAYS try to cover up their sins', 13 December 2014, *Daily Mail*
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2872344/From-Thorpe-paedophile-MPs-torture-ruling-elite-try-cover-sins-bids-constrain-media-insidious.html> (accessed 1 February 2016)

¹⁰ Jean Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors: The BBC and the nation, 1974-1987* (London, 2015); Richard Lyndley, *Panorama: 50 years of pride and paranoia* (London, 2002); Michael Leapman, *The Last Days of the Beeb* (London, 1986).

¹¹ Ian Trethowan, *Split Screen* (London, 1984), 189-91; Roger Bolton, *Death on the Rock and Other Stories* (London, 1990), 110-12.

‘Carrickmore affair’, and accusations of ‘unpatriotic’ coverage during the Falklands conflict.

The affair emerged into a heightened atmosphere surrounding Britain’s relationship with its secret intelligence and security services. Periodic ‘intelligence flaps’ had been part of the scene for decades and the post-war era saw concerns about intelligence capabilities, spies, subversion, and the relationship between the media and national security regularly rear their heads. The affair also emerged into a renewed Cold War, with the decline of détente and the resurgence of East-West hostility, where intelligence remained the Cold War’s front line.¹²

During the 1950s and 60s, *Daily Express* journalist Chapman Pincher was a persistent thorn in the secret world’s side, as well as a useful conduit for official leaking. Prime Minister Harold MacMillan asked, ‘Can nothing be done to suppress or get rid of Mr Chapman Pincher?’ while the historian E. P. Thompson pungently described the journalist as ‘a kind of official urinal’.¹³ By 1967, ministers were mired in the ‘D Notice Affair’, the furore centring around Pincher’s revelation that the intelligence services were intercepting private telegrams, and Harold Wilson’s clumsy, counter-productive attempts to reinforce the secret state’s crumbling walls.¹⁴ The D-notice system – which persists today – was a voluntary system of regulation that

¹² See Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbours: A new history of Soviet intelligence* (Oxford, 2015); and Len Scott, ‘Intelligence and the Risk of Nuclear War: Able Archer-83 Revisited,’ *Intelligence and National Security*, 26:6 (2011), 759-777.

¹³ Moran, *Classified*, 129, see 95-135 for an examination of Pincher’s career. ‘Chapman Pincher - obituary’, *The Telegraph*, 6 August 2014
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11016167/Chapman-Pincher-obituary.html> (accessed October 23, 2016)

¹⁴ See Moran, *Classified*, 136-176 for a dissection of the affair.

brought together the press and the government. Reporting on matters related to nuclear weapons and the activities of intelligence agencies were two areas where journalists were limited in what they could report. As the decades progressed, the system came under increasing pressure and began to fray around the edges.¹⁵ Wilson's government also intervened to ensure the suppression of Peter Watkins' landmark 1965 nuclear conflict drama *The War Game*, for fear of it weakening public support for nuclear deterrence. This was a moment when – as with *Panorama* fifteen years later – the BBC approached the limits of what the government felt was appropriate for Cold War public consumption.¹⁶

Parallel to Britain's economic woes in the 1970s, the edifice of the secret state suffered similar troubles. The activities of intelligence community apostate Phillip Agee and journalist Mark Hosenball (both Americans residing in the UK) in publicising details of US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) personnel raised the secret world's profile and resulted in their deportation.¹⁷ In 1976, the young journalist Duncan Campbell exposed the existence, purpose, and location of the most secret of secret services: Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).¹⁸ By 1978, Campbell and his co-defendants Crispin Aubrey and John Berry found themselves in court for probing British signals intelligence. As Richard Aldrich argues, the 'ABC Trial' was a

¹⁵ See Nicholas J. Wilkinson, *Secrecy and the Media: The Official History of the United Kingdom's D-Notice System* (London, 2009).

¹⁶ *The War Game* case has been the subject of extensive debate. See James Chapman, 'The BBC and the Censorship of *The War Game* (1965)', *Journal of Contemporary History* (hereafter *JCH*), 41:1 (Jan., 2006), 75-94; Mike Wayne, 'Failing the Public: The BBC, *The War Game* and Revisionist History', *JCH*, 42:4 (Oct., 2007), 627-637; James Chapman, '*The War Game* Controversy—Again', *JCH*, 43:1 (Jan., 2008), 105-112.

¹⁷ Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *In Spies We Trust: The Story of Western Intelligence* (Oxford, 2013), 163-68.

¹⁸ Duncan Campbell, 'The Eavesdroppers', May 1976, *Time Out*, <http://www.duncancampbell.org/content/gchq> (accessed 29 November 2015).

‘landmark event’ that simply focused more attention on GCHQ’s activities. The three were cleared of all but the most minor charges, as much to the Callaghan government’s embarrassment it was revealed that the vast majority of their information came from publicly available sources.¹⁹ This was only the beginning for Campbell, who by the 1980s had become the secret state’s pre-eminent journalistic opponent.

Campbell loomed large in government thinking on the *Panorama* affair, his work influencing and complicating matters. Writing for the left-leaning *New Statesman*, in the first half of 1980 Campbell penned articles that delved into every aspect of modern Britain’s relationship with its security and intelligence services, examining telephone tapping and communications interception, the service’s accountability, and press freedom to report on ‘national security’ issues.²⁰ Unlike the staunchly Conservative Pincher – who cultivated relationships with the rich, powerful, and well-connected through fine dining and weekend grouse-shoots – Campbell’s genius lay in his ability to scour public sources, listen to the disaffected, and make connections where others saw none.²¹

Changing attitudes towards secrecy were not only the province of journalists and intelligence apostates. In December 1979, Labour MP Robin Cook drew attention to the

¹⁹ Richard Aldrich, *GCHQ: The uncensored story of Britain’s most secret intelligence agency* (London, 2011), 161.

²⁰ On tapping/interception, see ‘Big Buzby is watching you’, *The New Statesman* [hereafter *TNS*], 1 February 1980, 158-60; ‘Facts and figures on phone tapping’, 9 February 1980, *TNS*, 183; ‘British Teletap, Inc.’, 3 April 1980, *TNS*; ‘Tapping: facts behind the official line’, 11 April 1980, *TNS*, 537-38; on accountability, see ‘Big Brother’s many mansions’, 8 February 1980, *TNS*, 194-97; ‘Destabilising the “decent people”’, 15 February 1980, *TNS*, 234-36; ‘Salesmen of the secret world’, 22 February 1980, *TNS*, 269-270; ‘The spies who spend what they like’, 16 May 1980, *TNS*, 738-42; on press freedom, see ‘Destabilising the “decent people”’ 15 February 1980; ‘The D Notice quangette’, 4 April 1980, *TNS*, 502-3.

²¹ For Pincher’s own account of his life and times, see Chapman Pincher, *Dangerous to Know: A Life* (London, 2014).

secret services through a bill in the House of Commons that – in the wake of Blunt’s exposure by Margaret Thatcher – rather sarcastically suggested giving ‘legal authority for the creation of a security service, and to provide for the appointment of its Director General and for his accountability to Parliament’. Of greatest concern to the young MP were the legal status and parliamentary accountability of any such service.²² The government’s approach was to give as little credence to the bill as possible, and Thatcher reluctantly assented to a ‘do nothing’ approach, letting the bill – which had little chance of progressing – fade away with minimal fuss.²³

Thatcher herself had a confrontational and complex relationship with broadcasters in general, and the BBC in particular. She viewed the Corporation as anti-commercial and self-righteous, poisoning the national debate with its brand of woolly liberalism and moral permissiveness. Thatcher judged domestic reporting – especially on national security issues – within a Cold War paradigm, as a ‘weapon in the global battle of ideas’.²⁴ She had little time for the notion that BBC journalists could be skeptics. For her, they were simply subversives at a time when Britain was fighting the Cold War and terrorism.²⁵ Thus, a culture of ‘reflexive secrecy’ surrounded those clandestine services that were playing such a critical role in the wars against the Soviet Union and Irish republicanism.²⁶

²² Robin Cook MP, House of Commons Debate, ‘Security Service’, 11 December 1979, *Hansard Online*, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1979/dec/11/security-service> (accessed 29 November 2015).

²³ ‘Note for the Record’, 10 December 1979, The National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA), Records of the Prime Minister’s Office (hereafter PREM) 19/119.

²⁴ John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher, Volume 2: The Iron Lady* (London, 2003), 401-02.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 403.

²⁶ Jeffreys-Jones, *In Spies We Trust*, 171.

Thatcher's beliefs strongly influenced the *Panorama* affair. The Prime Minister loved intelligence and sympathized with the challenges faced by secret service personnel.²⁷ Her suspicion that any programme about the intelligence services would be partisan and damaging to the effectiveness and morale of the community came up against journalists with a belief in the right, and need, to know. Thatcher also believed in 'patriotic censorship'. Harking back to the World War 2 practices, the idea's influence in opposition to the media's increasing tendency to push the limits of dissent is plain to see.²⁸ For the Conservative leadership, 1939-45 was the touchstone for great British struggles, defiance, and victory.²⁹ Likewise, the secret services importance in combating the imminent threat to Britain's national security and national integrity represented by the Northern Ireland situation was another complicating factor that militated against official openness on the workings and accountability of the security and intelligence agencies.³⁰

Popular culture also tapped into the *zeitgeist*. Alongside relatively lightweight fare such as ITV's *The Professionals*, *The Sandbaggers*, and the James Bond movie *Moonraker*, the BBC's landmark adaptation of John Le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* aired from September to October 1979. The muted, realistic world of George Smiley – at odds with Bond's jet-set glamour – dramatised for the British viewers the

²⁷ Richard J. Aldrich and Rory Cormac, *The Black Door: Spies, Secret Intelligence, and British Prime Ministers* (London, 2016), 353-354.

²⁸ Ralph M. Negrine, *Television and the Press Since 1945* (Manchester, 1998), 124; John Jenks, 'The Enemy Within: Journalism, the State, and the Limits of Dissent in Cold war Britain, 1950-51', *American Journalism*, 18:1 (2001), 45.

²⁹ Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the 1980s* (London, 2010), 104.

³⁰ Mark Phythian, 'The British Experience with Intelligence Accountability', in Loch K. Johnson (ed.), *Strategic Intelligence, Volume 5, Intelligence and Accountability: Safeguards Against the Abuse of Secret Power* (Westport, 2007), 68.

crumbling world of the secret state and almost instantly achieved the status of modern television classic.³¹

In this atmosphere, the *Panorama* team set out to explore the workings, actions, and accountability of Britain's intelligence services. The 'shock troops of truth' at Lime Grove were late to the party, but sought to deploy the BBC's weight and reputation to produce an authoritative, impartial programme drawing together the threads spun by Agee, Campbell, Cook, Hosenball, and Pincher. This was viewed with deep suspicion by a government that sought to bolster the secret state against its attackers, real and imagined.

In mid-June 1980, *Panorama*'s editor Roger Bolton outlined to his superiors the reasons why his team were making a programme on the secret services.³² Bolton said that journalist Tom Mangold and producer John Penycate would examine 'how the services can serve the country effectively while maintaining democratic accountability' by 'bringing together already published material and making it comprehensible'.³³ He argued that Blunt, Cook's bill, reviews of the D Notice system, Lord Diplock's ongoing inquiry into telephone tapping, and disclosures made by *The New Statesman* and *Panorama*'s great rival ITV's *World in Action*, made the matter one of legitimate public

³¹ Joseph Oldham, "'Disappointed romantics': Troubled Heritage in the BBC's John le Carré Adaptations', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 10:4 (2013), 727-745

³² Bolton had enraged Thatcher as editor on programmes about Northern Ireland. See Gary Edgerton, 'Quelling the "Oxygen of Publicity": British Broadcasting and "The Troubles" During the Thatcher Years', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30:1 (Summer 1996), 116-120.

³³ Bolton to Gau, 'Panorama on the Secret Services', 13 June 1980, WAC, T62/285/1, 2. Mangold was not a newcomer to the world of spies and secrecy. He joined the BBC in 1964, after working as a newsman covering the Profumo Affair. In the 1990s, he wrote *Cold Warrior*, a well-received biography of legendary CIA counter-intelligence chief James Jesus Angleton.

interest.³⁴ Bolton had also witnessed the Church Committee's impact in the United States, which raised serious questions of intelligence agency accountability.³⁵ The programme, Bolton stated, was not 'motivated by any great scandal' and Mangold later recalled that 'politics did not enter my reasoning'.³⁶

By this early stage, however, the government was moving against the project. Rather than replying, the recipients of Gau's May missives had passed the letters to Whitehall. Thatcher was alerted to the issue during an early June meeting on the official histories of Britain's secret services (a project that Thatcher tried to quash).³⁷ In the interim, there had already been informal, 'high level' contact with the BBC about the production. At this point, Armstrong refrained from overt criticism, and suggested that in all likelihood, the programme would never be transmitted.³⁸

These 'informal contacts' were between Ian Trethowan and Bernard Sheldon, who for nearly two decades was legal adviser to MI5.³⁹ Thus began the rather conservative Trethowan's clandestine role as a conduit for government and intelligence community wishes. It was the first of a series of breaches of the BBC's supposed editorial independence. The DG was – initially – guardedly positive, remarking that

³⁴ A May 1980 ITV *World in Action* programme – jointly researched with *The New Statesman* – was banned by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) for being 'prejudicial to national security'. The IBA only held jurisdiction over commercial television. See Duncan Campbell, 'GCHQ: The cover-up continues', 23 May 1980, *TNS*, 774.

³⁵ Roger Bolton, interview, 1 May, 2016.

³⁶ Bolton to Gau, 13 June; Tom Mangold, written interview, 18 August 2015.

³⁷ Jeffreys-Jones, *In Spies We Trust*, 170.

³⁸ Armstrong to Whitmore, Memo, 18 June 1980, TNA PREM19/587. Thatcher took note of Armstrong's memo, but did not issue further instructions. See Whitmore to Armstrong, Memo, 20 June 1980, TNA PREM 19/587.

³⁹ Armstrong to Thatcher, 'BBC Panorama: Proposed Programme on Intelligence Services', 21 July 1980, TNA PREM19/587, 1; Obituary, Bernard Sheldon, 28 February 2008, *Daily Telegraph* (hereafter *DT*), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1580057/Bernard-Sheldon.html> (accessed 4 February 2016)

accountability was a matter of legitimate public interest. Regardless, Trethowan raised issues that would prove to be a constant in the *Panorama* affair: that the secret services' work should remain secret; that the ongoing public comment about those services stemmed from 'the far left'; and that behind everything lurked the Machiavellian figure of Duncan Campbell. Trethowan confessed to disliking Campbell, the journalist having recently written an 'absurd piece' about the BBC Monitoring Service's activities.⁴⁰

Notwithstanding these opinions, the *Panorama* team assumed that the programme *would* be transmitted. Mangold contacted Nicholas Fenn, the FCO News Department's chief. Mangold described his letter as 'one for the Department of Long Shots' but reminded Fenn that he had usefully assisted a September 1979 *Panorama* episode on the Soviet Union's Committee for State Security (KGB). The journalist then asked if he could obtain an interview with Soviet defector Captain Vladimir Rezun, and if the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, more commonly known as MI6) could give a non-attributable briefing?⁴¹ When Fenn called Mangold, the BBC man accepted that meeting with Rezun would be impossible, but expressed incredulity that SIS would not wish to offer a briefing. According to Fenn, Mangold stated that he would not be dissuaded by an absence of official cooperation, a decision that might lead to serious distortions and give 'disproportionate space to partisan lobbies'. Fenn noted Mangold's intention to invite Foreign Secretary Lord Peter Carrington for interview, with Fenn

⁴⁰ Trethowan to Gau, Memo, 18 July 1980, WAC, T62/285/1; Trethowan, *Split Screen*, 189-190. BBC Monitoring monitored radio stations around the world for news and open source intelligence purposes.

⁴¹ Mangold to Fenn, Letter, 4 July 1980, Foreign & Commonwealth Office unreleased files (hereafter FCO UF), ZCZ11/11, 1. The FCO provided these documents through a Freedom of Information request. They have not yet been assessed for submission to The National Archives, hence the lack of the usual notation system. When submitted to Kew, they will be held in the FO1093 series.

suggesting (reading between the lines of Mangold's comments) that any refusal would lead to Britain's most senior diplomat being publicly pilloried.⁴²

The decision not to permit the Rezun interview or an SIS briefing came from a much higher level than Fenn. Indeed, the FCO press officer argued that the choice was a mistake, and hoped it would be reviewed.⁴³ The higher level was represented by Sir Anthony Acland, Deputy Under-secretary at the FCO, and the chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC).⁴⁴ Matters did not stop with Acland. Pressure was already being exerted on the BBC and the issue would shortly be debated at the highest levels of government.

Accountability sat at the heart of Bolton, Mangold and Penycate's desire to make the programme, and the official resistance to it. This resistance was going against the flow of events. In the United States, the Senate had just passed the brief but forceful Intelligence Oversight Act (IOA), which mandated that America's secret services make their covert activities accountable to Congress.⁴⁵ The CIA – in an attempt to repair their post-Church image – orchestrated a campaign of media openness during the Carter years.⁴⁶ The revelations in the United States had worried Britain's intelligence community, provoking concern that they too would be subject to similar analysis. Despite the changes taking place in the US, there was no British equivalent to the IOA,

⁴² Fenn to Moss, 'Panorama and the Intelligence Services', 9 July 1980, FCO UF, ZCZ11/11.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Moss to Acland, 'Proposed Panorama Programmes on the British Intelligence Services', 10 June 1980, FCO UF, ZCZ11/11.

⁴⁵ Loch K. Johnson, *Strategic Intelligence, Volume 5*, 237; Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy*, 2nd edition (New Haven, 1998), 226-7.

⁴⁶ Christopher Moran, *Company Confessions: Revealing CIA Secrets* (London, 2015), 160-178.

Church Committee, or 1976 Government in the Sunshine Act.⁴⁷ Even on a less glamorous issue such as data protection, Thatcher's government resisted statutory oversight.⁴⁸

After the initial skirmish, *Panorama* became a subject of concern for the Conservative administration's upper echelons. The main figures on the government side were Thatcher and Armstrong, the latter a key link with the BBC and the architect of government policy on the matter. A more shadowy presence was Bernard Sheldon, the secret world's legal brain. Sheldon was undoubtedly the main instrument of censorship, but the nature of his 'recommendations' must be deduced from Trethowan's subsequent changes to the programme.

On 21 July, Armstrong noted that he and Sheldon had once more met with Trethowan, whose gloomy view was that he did not think he could prevent a programme on accountability, even though he understood 'the dangers of lending respectability' to a campaign by Campbell, Cook, Robert Cryer, and others, all of whom were on the political left.⁴⁹ Thatcher emphatically objected to a programme on accountability, against Armstrong's suggestion that this was an issue of legitimate interest. Campbell and his writings were a thread running through government concerns about the programme. The journalist was seen as provoking the BBC's interest, although Armstrong was uncertain if Campbell bore any direct responsibility. Anxiety was expressed about the effects on the 'morale and effectiveness of the intelligence

⁴⁷ On the ramifications of these changes in the USA, see Jason Ross Arnold, *Secrecy in the Sunshine Era: The promise and failures of U.S. open government laws* (Lawrence, 2014)

⁴⁸ Adam Warren and James Dearnley, 'Data protection legislation in the United Kingdom: from development to statute, 1969-84', *Information, Communication, and Society*, 8:2 (Jun. 2005), 250-251.

⁴⁹ Armstrong to Thatcher, 21 July 1980, 1. Cryer – Labour MP for Keighley – was an outspoken opponent of secrecy and nuclear weapons.

services' should media coverage go beyond minority interest publications like *The New Statesman*.⁵⁰ Here were two of the affair's critical features: the BBC's reformulation and publicisation of existing issues for a far wider audience than *The New Statesman*'s readership and the perceived effect publicity would have the secret services ability to do their Cold War job.

An official veto was Armstrong's most dramatic proposed response. Through the BBC charter, the Home Secretary possessed the authority to restrict broadcasting on certain issues. A more innocent use of this was to limit political broadcasting during an election, but it had never been used to suppress a particular programme. Armstrong contended the veto's use would 'produce a tremendous hoo-ha, inside the BBC, in the Press and in Parliament, about censorship.' For the Government and the BBC alike, the veto had 'many of the qualities of a nuclear deterrent.'⁵¹ Informed by her belief in the Cold War as an actual war, and reinforced by the conflict in Northern Ireland, Thatcher noted 'I would be prepared to use the veto.'⁵² Thus, if the BBC were unwilling to self-censor for the good of the nation in a time of supposed national crisis, Thatcher would do it for them.

A basic plan was hammered out by Thatcher, Armstrong, Willie Whitelaw, and Peter Carrington. Secret service chiefs had presciently informed Armstrong that using the veto would probably be a bad idea, the resulting row likely to do more damage than the programme. Reason, the intelligence community suggested, must be used to persuade the BBC to drop the issue and desist from examining the service's workings.⁵³

⁵⁰ Armstrong to Thatcher, 21 July 1980, 2, 5-6.

⁵¹ Ibid, 4-5.

⁵² Marginal note on Armstrong to Thatcher, 21 July 1980, 1.

⁵³ Armstrong to Thatcher, 'BBC Panorama: Proposed Programme on the Intelligence Services', 24 July 1980, TNA PREM19/587, 1.

A tripartite approach was agreed. Firstly, Armstrong would attempt to persuade Trethowan to drop the programme. Sir Brian Cubbon – Permanent Under Secretary at the Home Office – would raise the issue informally with George Howard, the new Chairman of the BBC's Board of Governors. And it was decided that if both approaches failed, Thatcher, Armstrong, Carrington, and Whitelaw would meet again to take a decision on the nuclear option.⁵⁴

A few days later, Armstrong met Trethowan again, once more connecting the BBC with the activities of secrecy's left-wing opponents, arguing that 'the activities of Duncan Campbell and those associated with him were doing the effectiveness of the intelligence services no good', indirectly contending that the BBC's activities were unpatriotic within the context of a renewed Cold War. Yet, aware of *The New Statesman's* small circulation, he contended that *Panorama's* exploration of the accountability *and* workings of Britain's secret services would be far more dangerous.⁵⁵ Trethowan responded that the BBC would not make anything that was not 'authoritative and balanced' and that because of the services' unwillingness to cooperate, such a production would be near impossible. Armstrong noted that the *Panorama* team had been casting their net internationally, activities that the government found 'not merely disagreeable but in some cases positively discreditable'. Referring to an ongoing dispute over BBC funding, Armstrong found Trethowan's statement that cost would not prevent the production being dropped rather cavalier.⁵⁶ Concluding, Armstrong queried if the BBC wished to be associated with Cook, Campbell, and their campaign to 'discredit'

⁵⁴ Whitmore to Armstrong, 'BBC Panorama: Proposed Programme on the Intelligence Services', 25 July 1980, TNA PREM19/587.

⁵⁵ Armstrong to Whitmore, 'BBC Panorama: Proposed Programme on the Intelligence Services', 29 July 1980, 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 1-2.

the services and damage their effectiveness, something they may be exploiting the Corporation to do? Trethowan promised to consider this.⁵⁷ Reading the record of the conversation, Thatcher noted ‘the matter has been put to the BBC in no uncertain terms.’⁵⁸

Trethowan’s reflections did not endear him to Thatcher and illustrated the problematic nature of his position regarding attempts to influence the work done by a supposedly impartial, apolitical public broadcaster. On Trethowan’s inability to stop the production, Thatcher stated he was ‘being as weak as I expected. I hope George Howard will insist on seeing the programme’.⁵⁹ Thatcher’s faith in Howard was misplaced. Despite being a staunch Tory and Whitelaw’s close friend, he was a louche, anti-establishment figure, a ‘resolute defender of the BBC’ at odds with Thatcher’s opinion that the Chairman and his Board were there to keep the BBC in line.⁶⁰ What was it that raised Thatcher’s ire? Yet again, the secret world’s left-wing *bete noir* had been invoked, this time by Trethowan who was ‘acutely conscious’ of the need to avoid being exploited by Duncan Campbell. Yet, Trethowan typified the tension between national security and the right to know when he remarked that public interest demanded the BBC address these topical issues. Consequently, the DG had allowed his subordinates to continue to pursue their investigations regarding foreign agencies and intelligence service accountability. Bolton, Mangold, and Penycate were not, however, to attempt to get material from present or former members of the British services, a

⁵⁷ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁸ Whitmore to Armstrong, Memo, 4 August 1980, TNA PREM19/587.

⁵⁹ Marginal note on Armstrong to Thatcher, ‘BBC Panorama: Proposed Programme on the Intelligence Services’, 8 August 1980, 1.

⁶⁰ Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 308.

diktat they largely ignored. This attempted balancing of journalistic integrity with the secret state's needs was doubtless where Thatcher perceived 'weakness'.

Armstrong contended that the government had now gone as far as it could, the only further resort being the veto, an option that could cause an unholy political and public row about censorship.⁶¹ The FCO's Permanent Under Secretary's Department (responsible for the JIC) agreed, noting that 'the fuss about censorship which [using the veto] would almost certainly outweigh any damage to the intelligence services which would arise from allowing a programme...to be screened.'⁶²

Given that Campbell lurked in the government's psyche like a recurring nightmare, it is worth considering his role in the affair. The *Panorama* team had met with the journalist, on 2 June. As Penycate noted, this was because the BBC were moving into areas of interest that overlapped with Campbell's. Penycate hoped Campbell might be able to steer *Panorama* towards useful topics or individuals, whilst retaining his right to source anonymity and that he would be appropriately recompensed and credited.⁶³ However, the relationship became sour and acrimonious. There had been two meetings between Campbell, *The New Statesman*'s editor Bruce Page, Penycate, and Mangold, but by 1981 Penycate alleged that the print journalist had made 'threatening and hectoring' telephone calls to him. The producer had reneged on his commitment to give Campbell on-screen credit and a squabble developed over payment.⁶⁴ By the February's end, Mangold wrote to Page, complaining about supposedly falsely attributed remarks and anecdotes that appeared in a Campbell article

⁶¹ Armstrong to Thatcher, 8 August 1981, 1-2.

⁶² Moss to Acland, 'Proposed Panorama Programmes on the British Intelligence Services', 2 September 1980, FCO UR ZFF306.

⁶³ Penycate to Campbell, Letter, 6 June 1980, WAC T62/285/1.

⁶⁴ Penycate to Campbell, Letter, 5 February 1981, WAC T62/285/1.

about the *Panorama* debacle. The BBC man contended that the relationship collapsed because of Campbell's 'splenetic petulance' and noted to his boss Alan Protheroe (Assistant Director of News and Current Affairs) that the Corporation should disengage from any kind of relationship with Campbell.⁶⁵

By autumn 1980, attitudes within the Thatcher government hardened, putting Trethowan under even greater pressure. Not only did the DG find himself in off-the-record meetings with senior secret service officers, he also had to deal with Margaret Thatcher's displeasure. The Prime Minister grew increasingly angry about the BBC's alleged prejudice, supposed efforts to discredit the security services, and perceived unwillingness to censor themselves in the national interest.

Official demands on Trethowan were relentless. He found himself privately briefed by MI6's DG Arthur Franks, MI5's chief Sir Howard Smith, and Bernard Sheldon. Trethowan also assured George Howard that the programme would remain within the D Notice system.⁶⁶ Armstrong felt that the BBC was displaying 'prejudice against the services' when it was discovered that *Panorama* was investigating whistleblower John 'Jock' Kane's allegations of fraud and lax security at GCHQ's Hong Kong outpost (allegations that first surfaced in *The New Statesman* and had then been the subject of the May 1980 *World in Action* documentary that had been censored

⁶⁵ Duncan Campbell, 'Secrets that won't be told', 20 February 1981, *TNS*, 12-13; Mangold to Page, Letter, 23 February 1981, WAC T62/285/1; Mangold to Protheroe, Memo, 24 February 1981, WAC T62/285/1. Recalling the affair, Campbell makes no mention these contacts. See Campbell, 'Banning Panorama', undated, <http://www.duncancampbell.org/content/banning-panorama> (accessed 18 January 2016).

⁶⁶ Trethowan to Howard, Letter, 18 September 1980, WAC, R78/3 180/1 'Panorama on Security Services and Privacy' (hereafter R78/3 180/1). The meeting between Trethowan, MI6, and MI5 is alluded to in Armstrong to Cubbon, Memo, 22 September 1980, TNA PREM19/587, 2.

by the IBA). Armstrong commented that just because material had appeared in print, it did not mean the BBC should feel free to air whatever it liked. 'This', he noted 'was D Notice country'. Regardless, the Cabinet Secretary quashed Trethowan's suggestion that the D Notice Committee's Secretary view a rough cut of the film, believing that leaks and outrage would be the likely consequence.⁶⁷ It is clear that where the BBC was concerned, press freedom was not absolute. While print journalists such as Campbell could publish material about the secret state (albeit, with considerable official annoyance), the publicly funded BBC occupied a different space. For officialdom, the corporation's cachet, their global reach, and their central position in post-war Britain's cultural life meant that greater rigour and responsibility was expected of them. The veto resurfaced as the government reassessed its approach. Armstrong was anxious about the programme's potential to 'diminish the morale' of the intelligence services and reduce their 'capacity to do their job effectively'. If threatening a D Notice breach was not enough, the veto might be required.⁶⁸ Such was the situation's seriousness that Thatcher called another meeting of senior ministers.⁶⁹

Into October, Thatcher made it clear that she 'feared that the purpose of those who were making the programme was to discredit' the intelligence services, services that she cherished. Given that the programme was contrary to her perception of the national interest and what the 'British' part of 'BBC' actually meant, the Prime Minister reiterated her willingness to deploy the ultimate deterrent of the veto. Supporting Thatcher, Carrington agreed the veto could potentially be used, but suspected that the

⁶⁷ Armstrong to Cubbon, 22 September 1980, 2; John Kane, 'Jock Kane's Story', May 16, 1980, *TNS*, 740-742; John Kane, 'Jock Kane's Story', 23 May 1980, *TNS*, 776.

⁶⁸ Armstrong to Thatcher, 'Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services', 24 September 1980, TNA PREM19/587, 2-3.

⁶⁹ Whitmore to Armstrong, Memo, 29 September 1980, TNA PREM19/587.

BBC would go ahead and leak the programme anyway. Whitelaw – having conversed with his friend George Howard – felt that the veto would be counterproductive.⁷⁰ Thatcher viewed a potential informal briefing of the *Panorama* team by senior intelligence figures with suspicion. While she was happy for Sheldon to brief Mangold, she balked at the involvement of senior worthies such as former MI5 and MI6 DG Dick White.⁷¹ Anthony Acland responded in even stronger terms, contending that any briefing for Mangold – even by Sheldon – should be avoided.⁷² Former Home Secretary Lord Robert Carr’s involvement in the programme was also quashed. Carr was unhappy about being asked, but felt he could balance the views of former Labour Home Secretary and Northern Ireland Secretary Merlyn Rees, who was known to be appearing in the film (a point that Acland agreed with).⁷³ However, Thatcher’s objections to Carr’s participation ended the matter, much to the Conservative peer’s relief.⁷⁴

After this flurry of discussion, there followed a quiet period, save for a controversial meeting between Trethowan and Mangold. There is no documentary record of this consultation, other than Mangold’s recollections in a 2011 BBC radio interview and a 2014 *Daily Mail* article, and a brief internal memo from the DG. According to Mangold, Trethowan was effusively flattering, but then produced the

⁷⁰ Whitmore to Halliday, ‘Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services’, 2 October 1980, TNA PREM19/587, 2.

⁷¹ Whitmore to Armstrong, ‘Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services’, 7 October 1980, TNA PREM19/587, 2.

⁷² Permanent Under Secretary’s Department to Dinwiddy, ‘Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services’, 8 October 1980, FCO UF ZFF306. Sheldon’s name is not mentioned in this memo, but a name is redacted prior to Dick White’s. It is reasonable to assume that the redaction refers to Sheldon.

⁷³ Whitmore to Armstrong, 7 October 1980, 1; Permanent Under Secretary’s Department to Dinwiddy, 8 October 1980.

⁷⁴ Whitmore to Armstrong, 7 October 1980, 2; Armstrong to Whitmore, ‘Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services’, 8 October 1980, TNA PREM19/587; Whitmore to Armstrong, ‘Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services’, 13 October 1980, TNA PREM19/587.

programme's script and announced that he would be passing it to the people 'at Curzon Street' (then MI5 HQ). Aghast at the potential for the Security Service interfering in a film about their accountability, Mangold told the DG that he would discuss this with Bolton and the team at Lime Grove, as this was the first he had heard of official interest in the production. This led to an outburst from Trethowan, who allegedly described Bolton as a 'Marxist little shit' and forbade Mangold from discussing the meeting with his colleagues.⁷⁵ Mangold later noted that he was made to 'stand to attention' in the DG's presence.⁷⁶ This exchange escapes mention in Trethowan's follow-up memo to Mangold, commiserating about his inability to 'open one or two doors' for the team. He also attempted to mollify his subordinate, noting that 'I don't normally get involved in such programme details, but when we are dealing with such very sensitive issues, involving an inevitable Whitehall concern, it's obviously helpful.'⁷⁷ Trethowan's alleged admission about passing the script to MI5 is all the more remarkable in light of the media focus that would be placed on *Panorama* in early 1981.

1981 brought new challenges for the government and its bid to reinforce the secret state. The *Panorama* affair rumbled on and further revelations were on the horizon. Crispin Aubrey – of ABC Trial fame – was due to publish *Who's Watching You?*, examining the intelligence services and his treatment at their hands.⁷⁸ Even more sensationally (although the government did not have an inkling about it until February), Chapman Pincher was preparing his book *Their Trade Is Treachery*, an alarming, Le Carré-esque,

⁷⁵ Tom Mangold, interview, BBC Radio 4 *PM*, 30 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16369440> (accessed 25 January 2016). See also Lyndley, *Panorama*.

⁷⁶ Mangold, 'From Thorpe to paedophile MPs', 13 December 2014, *Daily Mail*

⁷⁷ Trethowan to Mangold, Memo, 22 October 1980, WAC T62/285/1.

⁷⁸ Crispin Aubrey, *Who's Watching You?* (London, 1981)

sensationalized account of Soviet moles at the top of Britain's secret services.⁷⁹ The *Panorama* production was therefore emerging into a world of revelations.

On 13 January, Trethowan viewed a rough cut of the 100-minute film at a screening in Soho. Also present at the screening were Bolton, Mangold, Penycate, and certain individuals unknown to the *Panorama* team.⁸⁰ While, Trethowan claimed, there was a perfectly decent programme on accountability, when it turned to operational matters the team had 'predictably done so in a manner which is naïve and wholly lacking in authority. Some of the witnesses are highly dubious and the programme as it stands would undermine the prestige of "Panorama" and the BBC.' Trethowan suggested cuts to trim the episode down to the usual 50 minute *Panorama* slot.⁸¹ These cuts involved *Panorama*'s displaying of the intelligence service's structure, which Trethowan claimed was inaccurate, but refused to say how or why.⁸² The DG communicated this to the Managing Director of Television Alasdair Milne, the Director of News and Current Affairs Richard Francis, and then downwards to the team. Francis – having spent several years running BBC operations in Northern Ireland and being the Corporations's man on the D-Notice Committee – was only too aware of official secrecy's strictures. In an effort to retain as much material as possible, he suggested splitting the programme into two episodes: one on the services and one on issues of surveillance and privacy.⁸³

The critical feature of these events was that the cuts were not Trethowan's. The mysterious figures at the 13 January screening included none other than Bernard

⁷⁹ Chapman Pincher, *Their Trade is Treachery* (London, 1981)

⁸⁰ Bolton, interview, 1 May 2016.

⁸¹ Trethowan to Milne, "'Panorama" on the Security Services', 26 January 1981, WAC T62/285/1.

⁸² Bolton, interview, 1 May 2016.

⁸³ Francis to Milne, 'Panorama on the Security Services', 30 January 1981, WAC, T62/285/1.

Sheldon. While a careful veil of secrecy was maintained around this, it was Sheldon – on the secret services’ behalf – who outlined the cuts that Trethowan should recommend, with Armstrong commenting to Thatcher on 30 January that Sheldon had done a ‘very good job’. Concurrently, the Cabinet Secretary was anxious that Sheldon’s role in affairs not filter down to the *Panorama* team for fear of leaks.⁸⁴

Despite Sheldon’s ‘very good job’ of censorship, the situation was exacerbated by leaks to the print media, creating exactly the ‘hoo ha’ that Armstrong had wanted to avoid. Furthermore, it provided what might have been (but for Thatcher and Armstrong was not) an instructive lesson for the government about the dangers of interfering with public debate on intelligence issues. Unknown individuals within the BBC leaked the story to the *Guardian*’s David Leigh – himself a prominent critic of official secrecy – sparking a minor witch hunt at Lime Grove.⁸⁵ Led by the *Guardian*, the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Star*, *Sunday Times*, and *The Times* all carried stories about government and secret services censorship, ‘tendentious’ and ‘carping’ accounts that Trethowan was forced to rebut.⁸⁶ In all cases, the DG categorically denied there had been any government interference in the programme and that he was merely carrying an editor-in-chief’s duties.⁸⁷ Claims of official intrusion influenced calls for an

⁸⁴ Armstrong to Thatcher, ‘Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services’, 30 January 1981, TNA PREM19/587, 1, 9.

⁸⁵ ‘Film dropped after Trethowan intervenes’, *TG*, 30 January 1981, 1; ‘When the heavy hand of Auntie comes down too hard’, *TG*, 30 January 1981, 17. Bolton was tasked with finding the leaker, but reported that – although the culprit could not be found – he was certain it was neither Mangold or Penycate. See Bolton to Holmes, ‘Leaks to the press’, 2 February 1981, WAC R78/3 180/1.

⁸⁶ Trethowan, *Split Screen*, 190-91.

⁸⁷ ‘MP demands answers over MI5 film’, 31 January 1981, *Daily Express*; ‘BBC “not leaned on by No.10”’, *DT*, 31 January 1981; ‘Dropped spy programme – the whole thing smells’, *Morning Star*, 31 January 1981; ‘“Panorama” was censored, journalists say’, *The Times* (hereafter *TT*), 31 January 1981, 2; ‘Blunt’s Oxford spy foray revealed in vetoed film’, *Sunday Times*, 1 February 1981; ‘BBC’s security film

official inquiry into phone tapping. Conservative MP John Gorst switched to the opposition side and supported tapping controls after the *Guardian*'s reporting on alleged *Panorama* revelations about NSA bugging of Labour party phones.⁸⁸

Thus began a period when Trethowan became a scapegoat for the *Panorama* affair. Indeed, Armstrong was relieved that the spotlight was firmly on the Director General.⁸⁹ Thatcher's pugnacious press secretary Bernard Ingham took the standard government line that the PM would not comment on intelligence and security issues.⁹⁰ Armstrong recommended that, should Thatcher be quizzed in an upcoming TV interview, she should say that 'The BBC were told that, in view of the risks to national security inherent in such a programme, people in Government service would be instructed not to give interviews or cooperate with those making the programme. But the BBC has, under its charter, complete editorial freedom, and it was and is, entirely within the responsibility of the BBC to decide whether to show such a programme.' The Cabinet Secretary emphasised that 'we should not, for instance, wish to be drawn on the channels by which or the levels at which the Government communicated with the BBC on these matters.'⁹¹

Government silence contrasted with demands on Trethowan to justify his actions. The DG stated to the Board of Management and the News and Current Affairs

cuts anger staff', *TG*, 3 February 1981, 26; 'TV film on press changed by BBC chiefs', *TG*, 4 February 1981, 24.

⁸⁸ 'US agency "bugged Labour MPs"', *TG*, 7 February 1981, 26; 'Tory defector backs phone tap controls', *TG*, 11 February 1981, 3; 'MP is determined to back telephone tap amendment', 12 February 1981, *TT*, 3.

⁸⁹ Armstrong to Thatcher, 30 January 1981, 4.

⁹⁰ Armstrong to Thatcher, 'Panorama Programme on Intelligence and Security', 31 January 1981, TNA PREM19/587, 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Department that after Gau's 'naïve' letters he had let the team continue, feeling that accountability was a matter of public interest. Although admitting that the government had indicated that the programme 'was not a good idea', his objections and cuts were based on maintaining editorial standards.⁹² Supporting the programme – and indicating that there had been talk of a potential prosecution – Glenn del Medico (the Corporation's forceful lawyer) argued that the risks of showing the film were 'absolutely minimal' and that a prosecution under the official secrets act was highly unlikely.⁹³ Trethowan hoped that no one had read too much into the reports of censorship coming out the *Guardian*.⁹⁴

Unfortunately for the Director General, many people *were* reading a considerable amount into the reports of censorship. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Federation of Broadcasting Unions (FBU) expressed their anger and concern at the allegations of government and secret service censorship.⁹⁵ A meeting with union officials was hastily convened in order to head off a further confrontation with the unions, which had been plaguing the BBC for some time. Trethowan argued that the furore about censorship was merely a 'storm in a largish teacup'.⁹⁶ In a subsequent press release intended to calm the situation, Trethowan again claimed that nobody had challenged the BBC's independence and that accountability, at least, was a

⁹² 'Extracts from minutes of a meeting (Board of Management)', 2 February 1981, WAC R78/3 180/1.

⁹³ Del Medico, Handwritten Note, 2 February 1981, WAC, T62/285/1.

⁹⁴ 'Extracts from minutes of a meeting (News and Current Affairs)', 3 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

⁹⁵ Ashton to Trethowan, Letter, 2 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1; Hearn to Trethowan, Letter, 6 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1; 'Strike threat over BBC deletions in film', *TT*, 7 February 1981, 2.

⁹⁶ 'Extract from Minutes of a Meeting (Board of Management)', 8 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

matter of legitimate public interest.⁹⁷ Threats of potential legal action arrived from the hard-right former deputy director of MI6 George Young, who had taken part in the programme. Young was worried not about censorship, but about ‘grave distortions’ of his views by the *Panorama* team.⁹⁸ The Director General agreed that, from what he had seen, some of the production was not very well balanced, but he was personally involved in making sure it took a fair approach.⁹⁹ Finally, a group of agitated MPs (all NUJ members) also took the DG to task, with their leader Philip Whitehead (a former BBC producer) growing even more frustrated when the response arrived from a mere subordinate.¹⁰⁰ Yet again, Trethowan had to mollify the aggrieved party.¹⁰¹

Censorship furore notwithstanding, the programme trundled towards transmission. Francis’ suggestion of splitting the production had been taken up, the film divided into a programme on the services (for transmission on 23 February) and a programme on privacy and surveillance (for transmission on 2 March).¹⁰² According to Francis, the programmes went to great lengths not to reveal critical intelligence sites or the names of serving officers.¹⁰³ His deputy Alan Protheroe contended that the films raised ‘important principles which should very properly be the subject of a *Panorama*

⁹⁷ Press release, 10 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 1801/1; ‘Security services “would not help” in Panorama film’, *DT*, 11 February 1981; ‘Film cuts all my own, Sir Ian insists’, *TG*, 11 February 1981, 22; ‘BBC journalists get assurances on security reporting’, *TT*, 11 February 1981, 4.

⁹⁸ Young to Trethowan, Letter, 4 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

⁹⁹ Trethowan to Young, Letter, 13 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

¹⁰⁰ Whitehead et al to Trethowan, Letter, 6 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1; Holmes to Whitehead, Letter, 11 February 1981, WAC, R78/3, 180/1; Whitehead to Holmes, Letter, 16 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

¹⁰¹ Trethowan to Whitehead, Letter, 23 February, 1981, BBC WAC, R78/3 180/1.

¹⁰² ‘Extract from the minutes of a meeting (Board of Management)’, 16 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1; ‘Extract from the minutes of a meeting (News and Current Affairs)’, 17 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

¹⁰³ Francis to Bolton, ‘Panorama/Security (film 1)’, 16 February 1981, WAC, T62/285/1.

programme.’¹⁰⁴ Despite this, senior management were still on edge. Gau had to reassure Milne that two programmes in seven days would not be too hard for the public to take. Delaying screening would ‘provide a field day for the conspiracy theorists that abound in this area’ and that ‘cries of censorship would once again echo down the corridors of Fleet Street.’ Moreover, the phone tapping issue was highly topical, with Lord Diplock’s report on the matter due for release.¹⁰⁵ Trethowan suspected that once the films were screened, those who cried ‘censorship!’ would wonder what all the fuss had been about.¹⁰⁶

Yet, there were still doubts about the two films. Trethowan asked Protheroe if there was the opportunity to tack a studio discussion onto the privacy programme? When the combative Protheroe said no, Trethowan expressed unhappiness about the way things had turned out, feeling that Lime Grove had ‘conned’ him. His unhappiness stemmed from a perceived lack of attention to Sheldon’s suggested cuts and the privacy production’s in-depth nature.¹⁰⁷ Protheroe had good reason to resist Trethowan’s entreaties. Three days before, the D Notice Committee had instructed him to make further (albeit relatively minor) cuts to the programmes. Committee Secretary William Ash had received the scripts a few days earlier and felt that certain elements contravened D Notices and, despite the cuts, it was made clear that none of his

¹⁰⁴ Protheroe to Bolton, ‘Panorama Privacy Film’, 19 February 1981, WAC, T62/285/1.

¹⁰⁵ Gau to Milne, Letter, 19 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1. The Diplock report was released a few weeks later, and was mostly notable for its brevity. See ‘The interception of communications in Great Britain. Report by the Rt. Hon. Lord Diplock’, Cmnd. 8191, March 1981, Twentieth Century House of Commons Sessional papers, <http://parlipapers.proquest.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1980-072670?accountid=10673> (accessed May 31, 2016)

¹⁰⁶ ‘Extract from minutes of a meeting (Board of Governors)’, 19 February 1981, WAC, T62/285/1.

¹⁰⁷ Protheroe, ‘Privacy film: Panorama: TXN 2 March 1981: Aide memoire (3)’, 23 February 1981, WAC, T62/285/1.

comments should be construed as giving permission for transmission.¹⁰⁸ The cuts would have been more extensive, but as Armstrong pointed out to Thatcher, much of the material was already in the public domain. ‘In short,’ he noted ‘Sir Ian Trethowan has not managed to clean the programme up to the extent we might have hoped.’¹⁰⁹ Thatcher did not regard the programme’s transmission as a happy prospect but – short of deploying the veto – there was nothing more that could be done.¹¹⁰

On 23 February the film on the secret services was transmitted, followed one week later by the privacy segment. The former was broad in scope, covering the KGB’s activities in the UK, the role of British mole in the Kremlin Oleg Penkovsky, lurid accusations by Conservative MP Jonathan Aitken about 1950s SIS plans to assassinate Egypt’s Gamel Abdel Nasser, the US-UK intelligence relationship, and the US IOA.¹¹¹ Accountability – the original issue behind the entire affair – was relegated to being one theme amongst many. Former Labour Foreign Secretary David Owen suggested on camera that parliamentary oversight of intelligence functions would be advantageous.¹¹² The privacy programme addressed issues of data protection, surveillance, and phone tapping. The film also highlighted the case of Jan Martin, a wholly innocent industrial film-maker who – because of an improbable series of events involving the Red Army Faction, Dutch police, MI5, Special Branch, the Taylor Woodrow building company,

¹⁰⁸ Armstrong to Thatcher, ‘Panorama Programme on Security and Intelligence Services’, 17 February 1981, TNA PREM19/587; Ash to Cooper, Letter, 20 February 1981, TNA PREM19/587.

¹⁰⁹ Armstrong to Thatcher, 17 February 1981.

¹¹⁰ Whitmore to Armstrong, ‘Panorama Programme on Security and Intelligence Services’, 19 February 1981, TNA PREM19/587.

¹¹¹ On the 1950s origins of the alleged Nasser assassination plans, see Aldrich and Cormac, *The Black Door*, 199-201.

¹¹² ‘Dr Owen suggests intelligence vetting’, *TT*, 24 February 1981, 2.

and a database of security risks linked to British National Insurance numbers – had almost lost her livelihood.¹¹³

After all the governmental anxiety, talk of censorship, Trethowan's hand-wringing, and imposed cuts, the programmes received little comment. Other stories – Prince Charles and Diana Spencer's engagement on 24 February, an attempted coup in Spain, Thatcher's visit to the United States to meet Reagan – dominated the headlines, with only a limited number of stories covering the programmes.¹¹⁴ Within the BBC, the reaction was muted. Gau thought the first programme 'nice' and 'discrete', while BBC1's controller thought it 'unsurprising'.¹¹⁵ More widely, some news and current affairs staff wondered what all the fuss had been about.¹¹⁶ Noting that the programme on privacy was easily the better of the two, Trethowan and Milne were relieved at the quiet passage of programmes that had 'excited much controversy in advance.'¹¹⁷ Mangold unintentionally agreed with Duncan Campbell when he noted that the brouhaha stemmed from the broadcaster moving into areas previously the print media's province.¹¹⁸

Within government, the reaction was also muted. Anthony Acland was visited by a furious Lord Robert Hankey, formerly a senior British diplomat. Hankey felt that the first programme was very damaging and 'symptomatic of the campaign to destroy

¹¹³ Duncan Campbell and Steve Connor, *On the Record: Surveillance, Computers, and Privacy* (London, 1986), 286-288.

¹¹⁴ 'MP claims that MI6 plotted assassination of Nasser', *TG*, 23 February 1981, 3; 'Woman's career was imperilled by false information at Yard', *TT*, 3 March 1981, 3.

¹¹⁵ 'Extract from a meeting (Television weekly programme review)', 23 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

¹¹⁶ 'Extract from the minutes of a meeting (News and Current Affairs)', 24 February 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

¹¹⁷ 'Extract from a meeting (Board of Management)', 2 March 1981, WAC, R78/3 180/1.

¹¹⁸ Tom Mangold, "'Panorama" on the secret services', 5 March 1981, *The Listener*.

the effectiveness of our intelligence services'. He regarded the government as feeble on these matters and planned to take the matter up with Trethowan.¹¹⁹ Questions were also raised in the House, although Thatcher was given the usual advice to simply say nothing about the secret services.¹²⁰ After all that had happened since Gau's 27 May letters, the anger within government, the demonization of Trethowan, the media and union fury, and the exasperation generated at Lime Grove, the programmes sank with little trace. Three weeks later, Parliament would enter into vigorous debate, not about the accountability of Britain's contemporary secret services, but regarding the accusations of decades-old betrayal that emerged from Chapman Pincher's *Their Trade is Treachery*.¹²¹

Conclusion

Despite the programme's relatively minor media impact and the overblown nature of government concerns, the furore is informative on several levels, and helps us to understand the development of tactics and beliefs that would come to be part of the Thatcher government's approach to the media and secret intelligence issues in a resurgent Cold War. These tactics and beliefs would reach their apotheosis in the *Spycatcher* affairs four years later. The belief that public discussion about – and increased accountability of – secret service activities would automatically damage the morale and effectiveness of clandestine agencies was central to official objections. Again, this was founded in the idea of the Cold War as actual war. The affair illustrates

¹¹⁹ Acland to Moss, 'Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services', 24 February 1981, FCO UF ZFF306.

¹²⁰ Armstrong to Sanders, 'Panorama Programme on Privacy', 3 March 1981, TNA PREM19/587.

¹²¹ House of Commons Debate, 'Security: Prime Minister's Statement', 26 March 1981, Hansard Online, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1981/mar/26/security#S6CV0001P0_19810326_HOC_164 (accessed 19 April 2016)

the power of ideas and dogmatic approaches. Thatcher never wavered from her conviction that the BBC was part of a left-wing, anti-British plot to discredit the security and intelligence services and damage Britain's national security. That 'national security' was all the more important during a time when the Cold War resurged and 'The Troubles' were an imminent threat. The BBC's unwillingness to self-censor in the name of the national interest only served to reinforce the belief that the broadcaster was subversive, dangerous, and anti-British.

On the other side, the *Panorama* team never wavered from their belief in what they were doing. The Thatcher government came up against a press seeking greater openness and accountability in public life. The Profumo affair, Watergate, revelations about the CIA, the availability of open source information, all of these influenced the climate into which the programme appeared. The very thing that Thatcher took issue with – the BBC's reach and cachet, and the corporation's mandate to inform – was the very reason why Mangold and his colleagues pursued the matter so doggedly.

In their unwillingness to deploy the nuclear option of the veto, the government realised that their power to influence the media had limits. As the furore over censorship illustrates, openly suppressing inquiry – or attempting to do so – could have more dramatic consequences than the inquiries themselves. Regardless, such was their desire to prevent discussion on secret intelligence issues that they took great risks in their attempts to have the *Panorama* programmes suppressed. And, although despising Ian Trethowan's 'weakness', it was actually his strength that prevented the affair from exposing official interference in the editorial affairs of Britain's public broadcaster. Despite this, the tension between impartiality, responsibility, and national security during a period of resurgent Cold War was there for all to see. It also illustrated the problems that arose when the BBC stepped into sensitive areas that had previously been

the domain of print journalists. This was one area where Campbell and Mangold could agree: the rules for television were stricter than those for print.

The *Panorama* affair was an early challenge to the Thatcher government's views on secrecy. It demonstrated to them that suppressing information was possible, but the programmes' muted passing left the most important official lesson unlearned, despite the realization that the veto was untenable. This lesson was that overzealous attempts at censorship were potentially far more damaging and dangerous than almost any information that was made public. *Spycatcher* brought together the same volatile mixture of officialdom, the secret services and the media. Yet when Peter Wright's memoir became an issue for Thatcher and Armstrong, there was no Ian Trethowan to act as a firewall between the government and a voracious press.

MI5 came into official existence in 1989, followed in 1994 by MI6 and GCHQ. There is a good argument that in order to function effectively, secret services must have an appropriate level of secrecy. An equally valid argument demands that in democratic societies, clandestine agencies must be subject to appropriate oversight by Parliament, a free press and the public. The debate continues today over Edward Snowden's status, communications surveillance, and the workings of intelligence services. It is a debate that we must have, and one that should be informed by an understanding of the ways in which the state, the intelligence services, and media have collided in our distant and recent past.