

## NEWS ON CHANNEL FOUR

### Brian McNair

The Broadcasting Act of 1981 required the Independent Broadcasting Association, with regards to Channel 4, 'to ensure that the programmes contain a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV'. It had, in addition, 'to encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes'. Notwithstanding the IBA's obligation to maintain 'due impartiality' in all matters of 'political and industrial controversy', the widespread anticipation that Channel 4 would exert a radicalising influence on British broadcasting was clearly justified under the terms of the 1981 Act.

To what extent, then, has that anticipation been met? Let us first establish the limitations on what can legitimately be expected from Channel 4. It is not in any respect fundamentally different from the established broadcasting institutions, for the following reasons: it is a commercial public channel, subject to the ultimate control of a public authority while also being dependent on advertisers and thus on advertising; the dubious criteria of impartiality in broadcasting must be followed, as John Pilger has discovered to his cost with *The Truth Game*, postponed because of the need for 'balance'; and many of the programmes shown on Channel 4 are made by personnel applying the same journalistic and professional standards as have been frustratingly evident on the other three channels. There are, in short, structural and institutional similarities between the four channels which tend to minimise Channel 4's 'radical' content.

Furthermore, one cannot highlight the innovatory developments of Channel 4 without stating that such things *can* happen on channels 1, 2 or 3. The *Open Door* programmes put out by BBC2 contained often excellent, highly politicised critiques of government policy, of media institutions and even, dare we admit it, of capitalist society itself. ITV allowed Jonathon Dimpleby to express in *The Cold War Game* the almost heretical (for the established media) view that the GDR could provide full employment, adequate housing, and rising living standards for its people.

Now, it can be argued that the appearance of alternative viewpoints such as these on television is largely a consequence of opening doors to alternative voices — voices, in other words, different to those which routinely monopolise the airwaves. It is a question of access. The concept of access is not new as Lord Annan reported in 1977: 'For many years, it has been exercised by the leading political parties in the form of short party political broadcasts for which the broadcasters provide transmission time and if required the production facilities, but are seen to have no responsibility for the content of the programme'.

Until the advent of Channel 4, it has been the extension of this 'access' to community groups, campaigning organisations, and esteemed individuals with prestige such as Dimpleby, which has provided the most interesting television on the old channels. Channel 4 is a progression however, in that it represents a partial institutionalisation of the concept; to a limited degree certainly, but it is there, and sanctioned in the law. Channel 4 must provide facilities and transmission time, as part of its brief, for groups previously excluded from television to produce programmes related to their own spheres of interest. It can in addition commission programmes from commercial companies like Central or Granada which are expressly designed to serve 'minority' groups. Unsurprisingly, this has led to some refreshing changes:

'Welcome to *Union World* coming to you from Liverpool, the first network television series to report exclusively on trade union affairs'. (Gus Macdonald).

What follows is indeed a radical shift away from the dominant media representation of



Gus Macdonald

trade unionism and its function in modern Britain. Where news and current affairs programmes most frequently present the British trade union movement as undemocratic, having excessive power, bearing responsibility for inflation, bad industrial relations and Britain's poor competitiveness, *Union World* begins from an entirely different set of premises. High-lighting a strike at Heathfield's of London, the dispute is put into its historical context: 'Unions have had a hard time organising in this Slough estate, but the workers in the plywood shop at Heathfield's, almost all black, joined the General and Municipal two years ago, and eventually won recognition from the company'. (*Union World*, November 6).

Attempting to contextualise an industrial dispute is not the stock-in-trade in conventional media reporting of trade unionism: 'Today that victory has a hollow ring. After they took action to improve their pay four months ago, twenty-one black trade unionists in the plywood shop were locked out, their jobs were immediately taken by non-union workers from an agency, initially all-white. A strike followed which quickly collapsed when some members were sacked'.

Thereafter the programme does not attempt to discuss the validity of the dispute, since this is taken for granted, but to raise questions concerning the trade union movement itself: 'There is another union at Heathfield's, the strong, left-leaning print union, SOGAT 82. Their 30-odd members are concentrated in the print shop. But despite the picket line and the non-union labour, the SOGAT men are refusing to back their black brothers and sisters in the G&M'.

Trade unionists are asked to explain their racism, a painful display of which we are confronted with in the shape of a SOGAT shop steward who simply refuses to condemn white scab workers in his factory, stating on camera that he doesn't 'owe' the black workers anything. Lest this be interpreted as an alternative form of union-bashing, however, we see also the efforts of other trade unionists to discipline their racist colleagues, and we are left in no doubt that the trade unions regard the problem as a serious one, threatening to undermine united action against an employer. The radical difference in this approach to trade unionism is that the debate has shifted away from the rantings of Scargill and Buckton-bashers towards a perception of what the trade union is for: to protect the interests of the worker, black and white, male and female, in a capitalist society.

Subsequent editions of *Union World* have continued in this vein, emphasising the role



Arthur Scargill

played by trade unions in the nitty-gritty of defending workers' rights; in dealing with the 'matter-of-fact' issues; in constituting an essential critical voice against government policies. A programme on pension-funds for example emphasised the TUC's demand for a new investment programme, controlled by the government and funded from the vast resources of pension funds, this being placed in direct contrast to the 'non-investment' policy of the Tories and financial capital.

When one thinks of the 'bully-boy-saboteur-militant-wrecker' image of effective trade unionism so common in the British media, we are entitled to claim this kind of approach as an advance, although *The Times* TV correspondent thought otherwise: 'Trade union affairs spend a long time being stupefyingly boring before they get interesting, and it is an inflexible fact of life that only a handful of unionists have the patience to stay through the boring bits'. And to emphasise what he regarded as the more relevant aspect of trade unionism: 'There was one compensation however: Arthur Scargill had refused to be on the programme because of some supposed disagreement with Granada'. It is of course precisely the attempt to move away from personalities and sensationalising which makes *Union World* the advance that it is.

*Union World* exemplifies what can be expected when access to television is made just that little bit easier, and when production companies are given just that little bit more flexibility in their choice of subject-matter. There are others on Channel 4 of which similar points could be made (*Opinions*, *The Friday Alternative*), and a greater extension of access still will lead inevitably to a new kind of broadcasting — one which will, incidentally, reflect the strength of socialist and Marxist ideas in our society.

For the Left in Britain, it is clear that our fundamental demand in the area of the media has been vindicated: be it the press or

television, the only way to develop a media which can express the needs and interests of a people — in all its complexity — is to campaign for — the extension of rights of access. The democratisation of the media is not a new demand, but in programmes like *Union World*, we can begin to see what it will look like when it comes.

Channel 4 proves, if proof were needed, that Britain's broadcasting institutions are not the tools of a monolithic ruling class, and that they are subject to change. To test the limits of this capacity for change, the movement must demand more strongly rights of access and make of them a reality. The Communist Party above all, knowing as it does the value of an alternative media, must be in the forefront of such a campaign, creating in the wider movement an awareness that the media institutions as they develop will create new possibilities for 'putting the case'. These opportunities must not be missed.