

TELEVISION
Timorous TV

In the wake of purges, threatened prosecutions and ratings' pressures Roger Bolton, editor of *This Week*, detects signs of a failure of nerve in tv's current affairs coverage. Will the cautious analysis which characterised 1987 continue to take precedence over investigative reporting?

It was year zero at the BBC and the year of civil defence at ITV, as the occupant of No 10 Downing St, newly granted a fresh five-year lease, stopped shelling the White City and turned her guns on the ITV companies. Since she had nearly all the guns and most of the ammunition this was a painful experience for a group of, on the whole, decent well-meaning if rather well-off people. I had seen their bewildered and pained expressions once before, at the BBC a year or so earlier when its bosses were under fire as opposed to on a short-leash.

Following the sacking of Alasdair Milne, the purge of much of his senior management and, most important, the rate-capping of the cor-

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poration through the indexation of the licence fee, the BBC was largely left alone by the government while its new head of journalism and deputy director-general, John Birt, did his own 'restructuring'. Yesterday almost ceased to exist; certainly it ceased to be defended.

Had the intimidation worked? Had the *Secret Society* raids by the Special Branch achieved their objective? In the end the DPP did not bring prosecutions against the BBC or Duncan Campbell but it is unlikely that another similar series will be commissioned in the near future. BBC radio's attempt to do a sober investigation into the

problems of the security and intelligence services incurred a gagging writ just a few hours before it was due to be broadcast. And, following an outstanding demonstration of Tebbit's law ('get your retaliation in first') by the man himself, the corporation exercised even greater caution than usual during the election. Reporting took second place to analysis, whereas both were vital.

This emphasis on analysis seems likely to be the hallmark of the Birt era and should not be undervalued. Perhaps it was time for a firm restatement of the need for careful, painstaking, objective analysis rather than more instant prescription. Organisationally the changes which have been ruthlessly implemented at the BBC will ensure that needless cock-ups are less likely, although 'rows' and 'cock-ups' are not necessarily the same thing, as the new regime has just learned over *My Country Right or Wrong*.

Certainly BBC news seems to have improved recently with much fuller backgrounds being given to news events. It is difficult to imagine that Mr Richard Branson will find it quite as easy to become the leading item on the main news bulletin and gather priceless free publicity for his company. John Birt has expensive and laudible plans to increase the amount and quality of foreign, industrial, social policy and political coverage with the creation of specialist units. I hope he gets the money he needs, though it is not a foregone conclusion.

I think there are, however, two potential causes for concern. The first is that the BBC's journalism may begin to speak with one voice. The corporation is not one news-



paper, it publishes a multitude of dailies, weeklies and monthlies. It is essential that a variety of voices and approaches be heard. John Birt's new structure, and perhaps his own personality, could lead to a narrowing of the agenda.

The second concern relates to reporting. It is first-hand reporting, particularly of controversial subject matter, that causes most problems for institutions. Good reporting is of course essential, for analysis based upon inaccurate information and false premises is worthless. Many within the BBC believe that a tactical withdrawal from the front line of investigative reporting is already in operation.

ITV has had a quieter year. The main fear is that the bosses, temporarily under ratings pressure, might shunt current affairs out of prime-time tv.

A debate at the Edinburgh International Television Festival revealed a failure of nerve among some current affairs' practitioners who were all for jumping into small-audience ghettos before they were pushed. I think they would find their budgets cut with the audience. Alternatively they have promoted the elevation of style over content, arguing that the tv audience's attention span had shortened dramatically. While this approach has led to a good and innovative tv magazine for young people, LWT's *Network 7*, there must be considerable doubts over how many of these techniques can be used on serious single-subject programmes.

On Channel 4 *Diverse Re-*

ports has disappeared, to be replaced by *Dispatches*, a regular weekly programme open to all-comers. The editor, David Lloyd, commissions one-off programmes from independents or ITV franchise-holders, depending on the ideas. The attraction of this idea is that a lot more people will get to make network current affairs programmes. The drawback, if the first few programmes are anything to go by, is that the diversity of opinion and approach, often evident in *Diverse Reports*, will be lost.

Overall, news and current affairs programming is not in bad shape, indeed we may look back on it as part of a golden era now drawing to a close. For it is possible to draw up a rather 'black' scenario for the future. The BBC contracts, loses its nerve, moves current affairs out of prime-time to maximise audiences, drops investigative reporting altogether and develops 'positive' news. ITV follows suit to fight for a declining share of the audience in a satellite and video world. The money is then simply no longer available to send units abroad or to pay for lengthy investigations. Broadcasting organisations find it cheaper to buy-in American international news and current affairs programmes are sponsored. Murdoch establishes the political line in the skies.

The 'white' scenario, on the other hand, is a triumph for Mr Birt's intellectual credibility and audience - and a six-part documentary series called *Secret Society II*.

I am, as befits a middle-aged TV executive, a 'grey' man myself ... •