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Playing Devil's Advocate

Channel 4 . . . has been an integral part of my life . . . Just before its launch, Jeremy Isaacs, its chief executive, visited a Home Office minister to outline his plans. The minister congratulated Isaacs, then issued his parting shot, "As long as you do not have that Darcus Howe on the station."

Isaacs returned to his office, called me in Brixton and invited me to participate.

(NS, 18 November 2002)

When Dhondy was offered the job of commissioning editor for Multi-Cultural Programming at Channel 4, he sought advice from James. His first instinct was that commissioning would be a distraction from his vocation as a writer.¹ He put the dilemma to James. At first, James didn't say a word. He simply pointed at the bookcase and wagged his finger in the negative, then pointed at the television and nodded in the affirmative (Dhondy 2010). In his new role, Dhondy commissioned 'more popular and contentious programmes' than his predecessor did (Hobson 2007: 70). Some of the most famous were *The Bandung File* and *Devil's Advocate*, two programmes which allowed Howe to bring his own brand of radical journalism to a much wider public and become a household name in the process.

Before Channel 4

Howe had appeared on television and radio on numerous occasions prior to the advent of *The Bandung File*. These appearances tended to be brief, but in general terms, Howe's approach to television was a continuation of his approach to journalism in *Race Today*. Howe's appearance on *Skin*, directed by Trevor Phillips for the LWT Minorities Unit, in the wake of the New Cross massacre,

is a case in point. Rather than offering a political programme, Howe used the interview to reflect what was going on in the community. His brief interview set contemporary events the context of black struggle since the mid-1960s and stressed the scale and potency of the self-organization that had followed the fire (*Skin*, 7 June 1981). Howe took a similar tack during his appearance on an episode of the *London Programme* dealing with the Scarman Report in November 1981 (*London Programme*, 20 November 1981). A final example, an ITN News debate chaired by Peter Sissons, featuring Howe, Gerald Kaufman, Michael Mates and Leslie Curtis – the Chairman of the Police Federation – saw Howe setting out a forensic case against the police. Howe's critique of police racism was devoid of florid rhetoric and appealed to the most progressive aspects of British political culture. Indeed, Howe situated the fight against stop and search in a 'remarkable tradition of keeping the police in check . . . what keeps them in check is the alertness, the vigilance of the British democratic tradition' (*ITN News*, 17 November 1983).

In 1984, Howe did a screen test for LWT's *Black on Black*. Inspired by James, Howe viewed television as a progressive force. Radicals had long seen the potential of the media as a propaganda weapon, but for James, the media's progressive role was rooted in the sociological dynamics of modern society. *American Civilization* argued: '[t]he modern popular film, the modern newspaper . . . the comic strip, the evolution of jazz, a popular periodical like *Life*, these mirror from year to year the deep social responses and evolution of the American people . . .' (James 1993: 119). The bureaucratization of modern life, James contended, stripped people of their freedom and threatened their individuality. As life became increasingly restricted, people sought liberty in the field of entertainment, demanding 'aesthetic compensation in the contemplation of free individuals who go out into the world and settle their problems by free activity and individualistic methods' (Ibid., 127). In this sense, the modern media tended to reflect the desire for liberty and self-organization. With this in mind, although he had little time for *Black on Black*, Howe was willing to collaborate with programme makers. *Black on Black* was a false start, the screen test did not go well (Howe 2011j). Howe would soon get a break, with much more scope for creativity, in the form of *The Bandung File*.

The Bandung File

Dhondy was critical of much of the existing multicultural programming. For Dhondy, programmes like *Black on Black* and *Eastern Eye* were essentially

exercises in marketing, their sole purpose to present positive images of black people. Dhondy's approach was to try and reflect real life: 'lives have comedy, lives have tragedy, lives have fallacies. I was not going to be an advertising agency for positive images' (Dhondy 2011). As a result, he cancelled *Black on Black* and *Eastern Eye*, programmes which, in any case, were already losing audience share. Dhondy envisioned a flagship show that would take the politics of developing nations and the politics of black and Asian Britain to the centre of the schedule. Dhondy settled on a format revolving around two central journalists, one West Indian and one Asian. 'And who were the best anti-establishment journalists I could find? Darcus Howe and Tariq Ali. I called Tariq and told him "I want to pay you with Darcus." He said, "Oh God!"' (Ibid.).

Having been approached by Dhondy, Ali came up with the title of the show. At the time Dhondy approached him, Ali was working on the manuscript of *The Nehrus and the Gandhis: An Indian Dynasty*, published in 1985.

I had just reached the point where Nehru arrives at Bandung for the Conference when Greg Lanning, an experienced Producer setting up the company rang and asked for a name for the company and the show. I said: "Bandung" and explained why. Darcus and Greg thought it was a good idea. The show reflected the Bandung experience in the sense of treating the post-colonial world as an entity and not via specific identities.

(Ali 2011)

Ali recalls that the Channel 4 bosses backed the project. 'Jeremy Isaacs, the legendary boss of Channel Four approved strongly. He and Dhondy wanted a hard-hitting show. His only advice: "Let us know first if you're planning something naughty so our lawyers can help in advance."' The show was produced by Bandung Productions, a company jointly owned by Howe, Ali and Lanning (Ibid.).

The Bandung File realized Dhondy's ambition of bringing multicultural programming to primetime. According to Ali, Michael Grade was so impressed by the preview tapes that he granted the show an early evening slot (Ibid.). In its first incarnation, the *Bandung File* had a significant studio-based element. The 45-minute show was split in half by an advert break. The first half was essentially a round-up of national and international news. Sitting at news desks, Howe, Gita Sahgal, Jan Bain and John Buckley introduced short films dealing with specific items.

The show's second section was devoted to longer documentary films made by Howe, Ali and, sometimes, Sahgal. Howe's documentaries included 'The Comediennes', a piece about black comics on London's alternative circuit; 'Black

Police – Behind the Image’, which considered why so many black officers left the force; ‘Grunwick – Ten Years After’, looking back at the significance of the landmark dispute; and ‘From Bandung to Harare’, an interview with President Robert Mugabe filmed at the 1986 Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Zimbabwe.

By all accounts, Howe and Ali worked together well. Joint editorial meetings at the beginning of the week determined the main focus of each programme as well as assigning researchers and directors to each segment of the programme. For Ali, ‘it was a very creative process. I trusted Darcus’ judgements on the Caribbean and he mine on other parts of the world so we got on fine’ (Ali 2011). Howe agreed: ‘Tariq and I never had a row. We were mature enough to know that this wasn’t the International Marxist Group, or Race Today’ (Howe 2011j). For the most part, Howe and Ali worked quite separately. However, they collaborated on their interview of Julius Nyerere, and when Howe was ill, Ali stepped in to present a programme dedicated to James (Ali 2011).

Howe’s television journalism reflected his long-standing concerns. Phillips argues that Howe essentially used his journalism to popularize the work and thought of James (Phillips 2011). There was a continuing focus on the problems of postcolonial government, on police harassment, on James’ ideas and on James himself, on the black art scene, black self-activity in Britain, not to mention cricket. During the second series Howe took a steer from James which resulted in the documentary ‘Unfinished Revolution’. Dhondy recalls James consistently held that ‘if you want to know what the islands in the Caribbean will end up as, go and look at Haiti. That is the degradation into which these ex-slave cultures will descend, without a complete federation of the Caribbean including Cuba’ (Dhondy 2011). Talking to James about the programme was natural for Howe. ‘Anything big I’m doing I’m going to talk to James about it. I said “Nello, I think part of this has to be the countries we come from.” He said “Go to Haiti first, that’s where all those little Islands are headed”’ (Howe 2011j).

The Jamesian origins were reflected in the finished film which considered the causes and consequences of the revolution that overthrew Jean-Claude Duvalier in February 1986. Broadcast in May 1986, Howe’s film read Baby Doc’s downfall as part of the Caribbean tradition of revolt stretching back to the Saint Domingo slave revolt. Jamesian too was the emphasis on interviews with the Haitian poor. The documentary presented an extended interview with Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who would later become Haiti’s first elected President (*BF*, 9 May 1986).

Making the film was a harrowing experience. Howe saw evidence of torture on the bodies of his interviewees. In the slums of Port-au-Prince, he came across a child dying of hunger. Unaware of what he was witnessing until it was too late, the child's final moments were caught on camera. Appalled by what he had witnessed, Howe refused to let the footage be used in the final film (Howe 2011j). In Cite Soleil, a slum that Howe described as 'the dark dungeon of the Caribbean' (*BF*, 9 May 1986), he saw a woman, the very image of his aunt, living in abject squalor. This, more than anything else, brought home the horror of the situation. That evening he cried himself to sleep. Howe brought home a fragment of bullet-proof glass several inches thick, part of Baby Doc's holiday home that had been destroyed in the revolution. For Howe, it symbolized the fragility of dictatorship, however impregnable it may seem (Howe 2011j).

Howe returned to the Caribbean in his February 1987 documentary 'The Gathering Storm' (*BF*, 14 February 1987). The film was made shortly after the National Alliance for Reconstruction won power in Trinidad. 'The Gathering Storm' examined the impact that the fall in oil prices and poor economic stewardship by the previous government had had on Trinidad's economy and society. Howe argued that the mass unemployment, the spiralling inflation and the failure of the government were fuelling nationwide revolt. According to David Abdullah, now general secretary of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU), Howe's film 'became infamous in elite circles in Trinidad and Tabago'. Abdullah maintains that 'it was a very important programme which accurately

Figure 8 Howe on Observatory Street Port-of-Spain, the home of the Renegades, in the late 1980s. From *Left to Right*, Howe, Victor McQueen, 'Slugger', Tony 'Castro' McQueen and Dr Rat.

foretold the general strike of 1989. . . . Darcus was spot on in his assessment of a seething undercurrent of social conflict and opposition' (Abdullah 2011).

Closer to home, Howe's documentaries dealt with the gentrification of Brixton, conflict between London's pirate radio stations and the authorities and Brixton's art scene. Howe also made several documentaries on cricket. On one occasion, he recalls: 'we were in Barbados filming the West Indies playing New Zealand. I called Viv [Richards] and said "Could you make a hundred?" He just said "Yeah man." I knew he could do it. He did it in ones and twos, he didn't take any chances at all. I thought to myself this is a man who knows what he's doing!' (Howe 2011j).

The show won plaudits from all quarters. 'In general', Ali comments, 'the responses were very positive, although the professional race-relationwallahs hated us because *The Bandung File* did not provide them with a platform' (Ali 2011). *The Listener* credited it with 'some remarkable firsts in both political and cultural coverage'. The *New Statesman* opined that the show guaranteed the Channel 4 boss a spot on the short list for the next Director General of the BBC (Bandung 1988: 2). After 6 years and 91 episodes, the show came to an end. Ali saw the cancellation as indicative of the dumbing-down that was going on in the British media. Dhondy argues that the end of the show was due to changes in the media. The advent of cable television meant that programming from the sub-continent and the Caribbean was available independent of the terrestrial networks; therefore, there was less need for *Bandung* (Dhondy 2011).

The dissolution of the Race Today Collective

In the first few years, Race Today worked closely with Bandung Productions, printing transcripts of segments of the show and publishing pamphlets based on the show's content. Howe's attention was increasingly focused on his television work. In 1985, Howe stepped down as editor and Hassan took over the running of the magazine. Hassan remembers this as a difficult time. 'When Darcus left *Race Today* we were very upset. We used to joke "are you selling out and becoming a TV personality?"' (Hassan 2011). The final issue was published in 1988. The Collective formally dissolved itself on 7 April 1991. The Collective had been extensively reorganized in late 1988, with the establishment of Race Today Enterprises. The move had, in part, been an attempt to solve the magazine's financial problems. Following the closure of the magazines, there were ongoing discussions on the future of the Collective. Howe was keen, at

least between 1988 and 1990, to keep an organization going. In a letter to the members of the Collective written in 1989, he argues that the organization should continue as a basis for future interventions in British national life (UC DHP Box VIII/4). The eventual agreement was to dissolve the Collective and found a new organization. Therefore, the formal dissolution, proposed by Patricia Dick and seconded by Michael Cadette, passed all the Collective's assets to a new association, The C. L. R. James Institute (Preparatory) (Ibid.). From Johnson's point of view, Howe had lost interest in *Race Today*:

Darcus decided that he wanted to be in the media, and I got the impression that he figured that we had more-or-less won the battle that we had been fighting. I wasn't around for any decision making, I just stopped attending meetings, I didn't think the leadership's heart was in the organisation any more.

Also the death of CLR James created a pall over everything. Some members were affected by it. I certainly was.

(Johnson 2011)

For Howe, *Race Today* had done its job. 'We had exhausted the moment' (Howe 2011d).

The death of James

James' death in May 1989 was a major blow to Howe. Howe was prepared for the end when it came. 'I asked him what do you want, where do you want to be buried? And he says "Please keep me out of a church!"' (BBC 2002). When the time came, Howe took James' body back to Trinidad. James had a long-standing arrangement with George Weekes, and latterly Errol McLeod, that the OWTU should be responsible for his funeral. Together with OWTU officers McLeod, Abdullah, Pat Bishop and the OWTU's representative in Britain John la Rose, Howe played a major role in organizing James' last rites (Abdullah 2011). Howe dealt with all of the legalities of taking James to Trinidad and ensuring that the OWTU had the legal right to oversee the burial. He arranged to have James' remains embalmed. In the meantime, Abdullah and McLeod fended off attempts to turn James' burial into a State Funeral (Ibid.). The rejection of officialdom was evident as James' body arrived in Trinidad. John La Rose read an excerpt from Aime Cesaire's 'Return to My Native Land' in homage to James. In a sense this was an allusion to the Black Power Revolution, as an excerpt from the poem had been published in the *Vanguard* during 1970. Speaking at the airport as James' coffin touched down,

Howe paid tribute to his great-uncle and friend: 'I have brought my friend home, on the last leg of his final journey, into the night' (*BF*, 27 June 1989).

Abdullah recalls that 'Darcus worked closely with myself, Errol, John and Pat on the final programme' (Abdullah 2011). Howe ensured that 'he was buried with his Rite of Spring, his Stravinsky, I was very smart in organising, I knew what I was doing. He was buried as he should have been with all the paraphernalia of advanced European music' (BBC 2002). Music was a major part of the day. The Rite of Spring was played by a steelband and Mighty Sparrow sang his classic calypso 'Memories'. 'Sparrow had written an additional verse about CLR,' and David Rudder sang 'Haiti', a song inspired by *The Black Jacobins*. Howe was one of many who paid tribute to James. Abdulla recalls: 'He spoke on behalf of the family. There is one other relative, Cyril Austin who lives in Belmont, but Darcus was the closest to him personally and politically.' Speaking of James' relationship with the generation that had emerged following the 1981 uprisings, he said, 'they needed him and he needed them. . . . I know no one over forty in the United Kingdom who had such an intimate window upon a completely new generation of people . . . that was James in the last ten years of his life' (*BF*, 27 June 1989).

Devil's Advocate

'In Brixton, my name changed from "Darcus" to "the Dev"!'. In 1992, Howe embarked on a new project. The origins of the show are disputed. Howe claims that the idea emerged from a morning at a West-Indian barbers. 'I left a barber's shop in Balham, and they were all arguing about this-and-that, politics and everything, and I just took it over. I said, if you want to get somewhere with this discussion, talk here, I in charge' (Howe 2011j). Howe approached Dhondy, wanting to recreate the vigour of the barber's shop discussion on screen. Howe was also inspired by *Desmond's*, a Channel 4 sitcom broadcast between 1989 and 1994. Set in a Peckham barbers shop, the comedy emerged from the discussions between a cast of black characters with different aspirations. Howe's vision was simultaneously grandiose and democratic. 'I said, I'll only do it if we can book the largest studio in the country!' (Howe 2010). The studio audience were the democratic element. Not only were they representing the wider viewing public, but also they joined in the debate heightening the scrutiny to which Howe's guests were subjected.

Phillips, the show's Producer, tells a different story. He argues that the show emerged from contemporary media dynamics. *The Walden Interview*, he recalls,

ended in the mid-1980s. Its demise, he argues, marked the end of the in-depth 45-minute interview. The dominant model from the late 1980s was the short adversarial confrontation, a style that Jeremy Paxman made his own. Phillip's vision was to revive the 45-minute format. He believed that the longer format was more conducive to forcing public figures to engage with the interviewer. He planned to bring back the 45-minute format but with an added adversarial element (Phillips 2011). Dhondy, too, claims credit for devising the format, as well as coming up with the show's title. In any case, Dhondy, Phillips and Howe all agree that the *Devil's Advocate* format was the perfect vehicle for Howe. LWT picked up the show with Phillips acting as executive producer.

From 1992 to 1996, the *Devil's Advocate* was a regular feature of Channel 4's output. The show ran for six seasons, a total of 36 episodes. Much more than his previous media appearances, *Devil's Advocate* conferred a degree of celebrity on Howe, making him as much a part of 1990s' TV culture as Jeremy Paxman, Richard and Judy, Denise van Outen, Alan Partridge, Chris Evans or Mr Blobby. The first episode of Howe's new series aired at 11:30 on 10 August 1992. According to the *TV Times*, the show would 'challenge conventional wisdom about a major talking point of the day' (7 September 1993). The format of the show changed over the course of production, but in essence, Howe used each episode to subject a person, or a small group – the occupants of the 'Hot Seat' – to intense scrutiny. Usually, Howe would lead the questioning in the first 20-minute segment and then moderate an audience discussion following an advert break. The opening titles added an edge of melodrama, beginning in the first four seasons with a flash of lightning and in the final two with a blaze of hell fire. The theatricality was heightened with two catch phrases. Howe introduced himself with the phrase 'I am the Devil's Advocate' and invited comments from the audience or his guests with the words 'What say you?'. The second phrase had a Shakespearian edge, as well as juridical overtones, recalling the inquiry of the Clerk of Court to the Forman of a jury at the end of a trial in some American States.

‘They say “Get Back” we say “Fight Back!”’

The high point of the third season was Howe's confrontation with Bernie Grant. The show created a stir in the press and serious repercussions for Grant. Howe's relationship with Grant went back many years. Broadly, Howe had supported Grant, believing him to be 'the authentic voice of black

people' (DA, 13 October 1993). *Devil's Advocate* examined Grant's speech at a fringe meeting of the 1993 Labour Party Conference. Speaking on the 25th anniversary of Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech, Grant discussed calls for state-funded 'voluntary repatriation'. Prior to the broadcast, Grant's comments had made the front page of *The Voice*. On 5 October, under the headline 'Take the money and run', Ainsley Okoro reported Grant's statement thus: 'I can tell you that people are coming to me saying that we want voluntary repatriation, that we have had enough of this lousy country. . . . We won't have to wait until the British National Party gets elected and sends us back, we will go back voluntarily. The government should pay for those who want to go.' Smelling blood, the mainstream press jumped on the story. Grant, who was abandoned by his black parliamentary colleagues, responded with a 'clarification' stating that he was not talking about voluntary repatriation (*Guardian*, 6 October 1993).

Howe opened by offering Grant the chance to back down. Grant, however, asserted that he had nothing to apologize for, *The Voice* has misquoted him. At this point, Howe played his trump card, a recording of Grant's fringe speech in which he clearly advocated 'voluntary repatriation'. Faced with the recording Grant apologized, clarifying his position again: he was opposed to 'repatriation', in the sense that he was not advocating a 'return'. That said, he did want a debate; he wanted to ensure that people who wanted to leave Britain were helped to do so; and he wanted Britain to pay reparations to her former colonies. As the show progressed, Grant justified his position in two ways. First, he argued that he was reflecting the concerns of his constituents. Secondly, he argued that black people had no future in Europe:

Grant: Our future is not in Europe, I think that our future is in Africa in the Caribbean in countries . . .

Howe: But you're MP for Tottenham!

[Laughter and applause.]

Grant: Hang on a minute, I know I'm MP for Tottenham! . . . They have no future because what is happening in Europe is a movement towards ethnically cleansing Europe similarly as has happened in Bosnia, in Europe, that's what I'm saying. And I'm saying that there are two ways you fight against it, you can fight it here in Europe . . . and I'm saying that you also have to join up, because black people in Britain aren't going to be able to sort their own problems out. We have to link up with people in Africa and other countries in order to make sure that that future exists.

(DA, 13 October 1993)

Needless to say, Howe argued that this was a retrograde position. For Howe, it amounted to 'surrender'. Moreover, it shifted the debate away from the fight against racism to repatriation. In so doing, it undermined the gains made by the black community since the late 1960s by questioning the place of black people in British society. Howe argued: '[j]ust when we thought we had established our rights here as British citizens, Bernie has offered us the defeatist position of abandoning ship with our pockets filled with silver'. For Howe, voluntary repatriation was the beginning of a slippery slope that would inevitably lead to forced repatriation. Howe offered an alternative slogan, borrowed from an Asian anti-racist demonstration of the time, "They say 'Get Back' we say 'Fight Back!'" (Ibid.).

Grant enjoyed some support from the studio audience. Lady Jane Birdwood, who had stood as a BNP candidate in the 1992 General Election, and had been convicted of distributing anti-Semitic material, stated that she agreed with Grant.

Linda Bellos, former leader of Lambeth Council, offered qualified support:

I do support the fact that Bernie is reflecting a point of view, which I must say in my several years in working in Social Services, I have had put to me. I have to say, I don't advocate a political strategy of voluntary return home. But I do, on an individual level – on a personal level, feel very sympathetic to people, like my father who's 77, who came here, yes, 50 years ago, he came during the war, expecting not to stay for very long. He is now old, because he was badly paid, as a manual worker, he doesn't have the resources that he thought he would have had, and should have had. So someone like him does frequently say he wants to go home. I don't think he will, I think he's going to die here, like most of us will. But in reflecting that and in saying that, I think Bernie is right.²

(Ibid.)

Howe and Bellos were known to each other before the show. During the 1980s, Bellos had lived in Brixton, near the Collective's base; she had been interviewed by *Race Today*; and clashed with Howe over the issue of Black Sections in the Labour Party. Bellos' interest in reparations had led her to work with Grant as part of the African Reparations Movement (United Kingdom) (Sudbury 1998: 186). 'To say that I was less than impressed with Darcus is an understatement,' comments Bellos: 'I just found him so damn negative, sneering and elitist. I could see what he was against, I couldn't see what he was for.' For Bellos, the programme glossed over the subtleties of the reparations issue.

Ours was a much more sophisticated argument than "take the money and go" . . . We had demanded that Britain recognise its role in the enslavement of African

people, I mean the African Diaspora, and pay for some of the repair. What we argued was that the historical legacy of enslavement and colonisation, the relationships that were built before independence, and treatment of people of African descent in Britain; we saw them all connected.

(Bellos 2012)

As treasurer of ARM (United Kingdom), Bellos helped shape the group's demands. Ultimately, Bellos felt that the show had trivialized the issues, missing the opportunity to put a case about the history of Britain to the viewing public.

After the show, Howe claims, Grant left in tears convinced his political career was over (Howe 2011j). Bellos and Grant left together: she recalls that the drive back to London consolidated their mutual 'loathing of Darcus' (Bellos 2012). Having been involved in several of Howe's shows, Bellos decided that would be her last.

On 11 October, the day after the recording, Grant complained to Michael Grade. He argued that he had been invited on the show 'on false pretences', stating that Howe had focused on his 'credentials as a black leader', not on the issue of 'return/repatriations'. He also objected to the use of the tape. In sum, he argued that 'the makers of this programme behaved in a thoroughly unprofessional manner, and that I was treated shabbily in an attempt to humiliate me'. The complaint was passed to Dhondy, who defended the integrity of the programme and offered no apology. Grant, clearly dissatisfied, wrote to John Willis, Channel 4's Director of Programmes, objecting to the

ghettoisation of my complaint. I am a Member of Parliament, and when I write to Michael Grade, I expect him to reply to me, and not to refer the matter to the Commissioning Editor for Multi-cultural programming. This amounts to nothing less than institutionalised racism. Because I am black, then you seem to feel that the matter had to be sorted out by black people, and that I can be fobbed off by Mr Dhondy.

(BGI BG ARM 7/2/16)

Grant's complaints did not delay the show's transmission. After the programme aired, Grant received a series of letters rejecting his position. On 17 October, the African Caribbean Leadership Council formally distanced itself from Grant's comments. On 19 October, the UNISON Black Member's Committee did the same, and SCORE UK, the Standing Committee on Racial Equality, professed itself 'extremely disturbed' by Grant's comments. The General Committees of the

Archway, Alexandra and Hornsey Vale Labour Parties disassociated themselves from Grant's comments. The Tottenham Labour Party was more supportive, but did acknowledge that 'incautious and confused language' was used in the debate and therefore that 'steps much be taken to minimise the damage that has been done' (BGI BG ARM 7/12/15).

Fortunately for Grant, the show did not, as he had feared, end his career. Grant continued to advocate a version of the policy that he outlined on *Devil's Advocate*. Indeed, speaking in the House of Commons on 19 December 1995, he argued that 'a £100,000 option should be given to those wishing to return to Africa and the Caribbean' (Grant 2006: 123). Howe recalls that the programme marked the end of their friendship, and that, from that time on, Grant invariably referred to him as 'that well known idiot Darcus Howe' (Howe 2011j).

The Hot Seat

Occupants of the Hot Seat included big names such as Arthur Scargil, Winnie Mandela, Nigel Benn, John Fashnu and Chris Eubank. More often than not, Howe's cross-examinations led to heated exchanges. On an early show dealing with allegations of racism and nepotism at Stratford School, Muhammad Haque, chair of the London Collective of Black Governors, made no bones about his view that 'this programme is a dirty tricks programme, and you are doing the dirty for the racists'. Latoya Jackson took to calling Howe 'The Devil' during her appearance on the show. On two occasions, the show led Howe to fear for his life. Following his clash with Rastafarian actor and writer Shango Baku over the divinity of Haile Selassie, Howe recalls: 'the head of the Rastafarians in Brixton sent two men to my house to take me to their headquarters for a trial. They left without me' (NS, 18 November 2002). More serious was his encounter with Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Howe's meeting with the Zulu leader was the climax of the show's fourth season. Howe flew to Durban for the confrontation. Howe had evidence which corroborated ANC claims that sections of Inkatha had taken money from the South African security services during the years of Apartheid. The information came from Phillips' contacts in the ANC, contacts that he had developed while being the president of the National Union of Students. Buthelezi 'arrived in the studio with a massive retinue'. More intimidating was news from Phillips

'that some people in the audience were bearing arms'. The worst of it, from what Howe recalls, was that as the show began, 'the braces clipped on to my trousers popped' (*Independent*, 25 October 1998). In front of a packed hall, Howe reeled off details of the funds paid by intelligence officers to the Inkatha Freedom Party from the security budget of the Apartheid regime. Buthelezi treated the claims with contempt. The programme ended with Buthelezi issuing a Zulu war cry. Following the show, Howe took no chances. He left immediately for Cape Town, then to Soweto and then home. Two days after the show was aired, the Durban studio was attacked by armed supporters of Buthelezi (*NS*, 6 September 2001).

The audience played a crucial role in holding the powerful and the famous to account. This was certainly the case in a 1995 edition of the show featuring Chief Constable Richard Wells, then leader of the South Yorkshire Police. The show, which was shot in the context of the controversial anti-mugging initiative Operation Eagle Eye, focused on the extent to which the police took racial violence seriously. Wells acknowledged that the force had had to rethink its attitude to black people. However, in the contemporary world, he argued, the biggest problem was communication, as a few *cause célèbres*, created by small pockets of racist officers, had persuaded minorities that the police could not be trusted. Other than introducing the show, Howe took a back seat, allowing the audience to put their case to Wells. The final word went to Frank Crichlow, who, drawing on his own experience, pointed out that small numbers of racist officers could 'ruin people's lives, hundreds of West Indian and black people's lives, continuously. . . . What I would like to see is an Eagle Eye to stop the deaths in police custody, an Eagle Eye in order to flush out some of the racism in the police force – we cannot walk the streets!' (*DA*, 27 September 1995).

'X-PRESS', screened on 10 August 1994, saw Dotun Adebayo and Steven Pope in the Hot Seat. The show focused on the publication of *Cop Killer* (1994) and the controversial marketing tactics used to promote it. *Cop Killer* was the fifth novel published by X-PRESS, an independent publishing house set up by Adebayo and Pope. Howe argued that the book was badly written, glamorized violence and the campaign to promote it, which consisted of sending out flyers to national newspapers with what appeared to be a bullet, was irresponsible.

Describing the atmosphere in the green room prior to the show, Adebayo recalls: 'I'll give Darcus this, and Trevor Phillips who was working on the show, they really knew how to put the fear of God into interviewees, they really knew

it!' (Adebayo 2011). Adebayo's brother, a researcher on the show, refused to divulge anything of Howe's plans. 'We got to the green room, they'd sent a taxi, my heart was beating! Steve was nervous too, but not as nervous as me. They prepared the taxi to arrive with only a few minutes to go before they needed us on set.' Adebayo and Pope were rushed through make-up and then straight on to the set. Adebayo was convinced that the speed with which they were hurried through LWT was intended to put them on edge.

The first person I saw on set was the brother of PC Patrick Dunne, a PC who had been shot in Clapham – when I saw that, I will tell you, my heart almost jumped out of my mouth – I've been a journalist all my life, you know what that symbolises, I couldn't control my emotions at that point, I was totally hyped! I wasn't a fool, I'd seen *Devil's Advocate*, I knew what the form was. I was a journalist, I knew I was there to get duffed up! We were sitting on these chairs, like electric chairs, waiting for the lever to be pulled!

(Ibid.)

Adebayo's nerves were not helped by Howe who was there in the background, 'clearly in his element, dressed for the occasion, his very presence dominating the arena!'. By the time the filming started, Adebayo was keyed up for a fight. Howe ramped up the dramatic tension during the show by producing a replica revolver. The audience was split, Adebayo had invited the team who put out the magazine *Skank* along for moral support. Adebayo's strategy was to come across as 'street', to imply that Howe was out of touch with contemporary youth culture, and this certainly came across in their exchanges over music. Adebayo and Pope countered Howe's claims about the quality of the prose by arguing that it was not so much about good or bad prose as it was catering to a specific market, and on this criteria, sales figures showed that they were succeeding.

Looking back, Adebayo comments: 'the great thing about Darcus at that time, when he was clearly at the top of his game, I defy you to find any journalist or presenter at the time, who could do that job as well as Darcus? . . . Darcus is a legend. Darcus has always been a positive militant person to look up to for me. Ever since Linton Kwesi Johnson did that tune, I remember thinking "I'm supporting him". Darcus, even before I met him, was something of an icon' (Ibid.).

Naturally, *Devil's Advocate* examined cricket. The very first show concerned the game. For Howe, this was a deliberate attempt 'to avoid the pre-set tracks

of what it is deemed right and proper for a black public figure to follow' (UC Box VIII/7). Season 4 opened with Imran Khan in the Hot Seat. Howe tackled allegations regarding ball tampering. Khan responded that whatever he had done, it was nothing more than any other cricketer. Howe's response reflected his faith in the universality of the moral code he had imbibed in his youth. He argued, very simply, that this defence would not have satisfied his mother. The show led to new opportunities for Howe. Impressed by what he saw, Stewart Steven invited Howe to write for the *Evening Standard*. As a result, Howe became a columnist, finding himself in the unlikely company of Nigella Lawson and Brian Sewell. His first column appeared on 9 September 1994. On that occasion, the column gave an insight into events around the making of *Devil's Advocate*. On another occasion, Howe used the column to interview Clare Short, who had previously been a guest on the show. The interview took place in 1995. Short was in the Shadow Cabinet and with the Major government divided and unpopular, she was preparing for Government. 'Over the years I've had plenty of interviews. What I remember of Darcus was that he started off by asking me to recall a line of poetry. It was very distinctive and I still have a little affectionate memory of that.' Short quoted Yeats, "'The best lack all conviction, The worst are full of passionate intensity.'" I liked him and I liked his style.' The verse lead into a discussion of her father, who used to quote the verse, and Short's own approach to politics (*Evening Standard*, 4 April 1995). Of Howe's impact on British politics, she comments: 'He was rigorous and critical and then he became a national treasure without compromising. That's pretty admirable' (Short 2012).

The sixth season of *Devil's Advocate*, which aired in 1996, was the last. Phillips recalls that LWT were willing to commission a seventh series, but they were offering less money so Howe pulled out (Phillips 2011). Over its 4-year run, the show attracted praise and censure. Bellos looks back on it simply as 'that stupid ludicrous programme . . . not to disparage the positive things that he did do early on, frankly *Devil's Advocate* and a few other commentary things that he has done have made him look a fool' (Bellos 2012). For Phillips, the show was ground-breaking. 'It showed the black community not as a monolith, but a community like any other where people had disagreements and took different positions' (Phillips 2011). In terms of the journalism, he comments: 'people celebrate the Paxman interview where he asks Michael Howard the same question fourteen times. Darcus was doing that every week!' (Ibid.).

Notes

- 1 Dhondy was enjoying considerable success as a writer. In the 1970s, he had published *East End at Your Feet*, a collection of short stories, and *The Siege of Babylon*, a novel inspired by the 1975 Spaghetti House Siege. In the early 1980s, he had started writing for television with *Good at Art*, *The Bride* and *Come to Mecca*, airing on the BBC in 1983 and the first series of the sitcom *No Problem!* showing on Channel 4 in the same year.
- 2 Bellos returned to this theme in 'Bravo Bernie' *The Guardian*, 12 October 1993.