

## SAYING GOODBYE TO HOLLYWOOD ON THE IRWELL

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I was a child of Watergate. When I left university in 1977 I wanted to be like Woodward and Bernstein - bring down governments, crack big stories, wear a flash raincoat with a belt and see bent cops tremble. Be glamorous. Count for something. Most of all I wanted to work on World In Action.

They always seemed to be in the papers - some big row with the government or exposing someone somewhere or winning awards. The metaphysical poets just couldn't compete. All I could think about was tough guys and guilty men and the eternal struggle between them in far away places. I loved the title too, although I was never crazy about that company name. World In Action from Granada. Whoever heard of Spanish sun in Manchester?

And then there was all that history. Every time I begged for a job from some TV bigshot it seemed he'd once worked on World In Action. The programme was obviously British Television's Clapham Junction. I remember John Birt, then programme controller of LWT who had brought Mick Jagger and William Rees Mogg together for one legendary World In Action, offering me a job. I said I had the chance of going to Granada. Go, he said, it's where everyone who's anyone started. So I went and eventually, after they knocked off my graduate cradle marks in local programmes, my dream came true.

I felt like I'd made the school first team.

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I spent the best part of ten years on World In Action - travelling the world, learning about journalism and how to make television programmes. I got the odd story that hit the headlines - I even got that ultimate accolade, a programme banned by the IBA.

I started on £80 a week and bought my first house - a terraced back to back in Stockport. I got a company American Express card and put on weight. Had a ridiculous haircut that made me look forty five. Got conspiracy mania and lost sight of the glorious fantasy that had driven me there in the first place. I became just another hungry young TV man on the make..

But eventually the endless quest for guilty men began to lose its appeal. Maybe investigative journalism wasn't my thing - all that machismo, that diet of righteous anger and need to settle scores. I began to feel like a weary detective in some trashy cop show - marriage on the rocks, knackered, uncertain of where to go next, what to do. Maybe the truth was I just needed time to grow up.

Anyway, I decided to leave.

The day I resigned I remember seeing the Editor, Ray Fitzwalter, for a chat. He was, I suppose, my mentor - the kind of man Robin Williams would play if they ever made "Dead Journalists Society" - a man of radical journalistic purpose, and conservative television practise who rose from the Bradford Telegraph and Argus by way of the Poulson scandal to become the longest serving Editor in British current affairs. He epitomised Granada's commitment to excellence, the moral thrust which made it the leading company in ITV. He had given me the job ten years before, and seen me try to grow up. He had given me my values, the tools of my trade, and the opportunity to learn and make mistakes. I owed him a lot.

He asked me if I was sure I was doing the right thing, even though we both knew I was. And then he said something which always stuck in my memory. He said Granada was going to be the place to be over the next ten years. They were busy, he said, creating Hollywood on the Irwell.

Hollywood on the Irwell?

I remember looking out of his office window at the sprawling Granada lot, the Salford skyline, the gun metal skies, the sheeting rain. I knew then I was at heart a namby pamby southerner. I needed to get back to London and find some new adolescent fantasy to sustain me.

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Five years later I came back to look up old friends. World In Action was thirty years old.

The Manchester skies were still the colour of the Kaiser's battleships. United still hadn't won the league. And Granada still dominated the view down Quay Street. But inside everything was in turmoil.

I arrived the day Granada appointed a new chief executive, a catering executive named Charles Allen. He was an outsider - the first in Granada's history. A top businessman, the papers said, with absolutely no experience of television. The kind of man who would get the profits others couldn't reach. The unattributable quotes from Granada's senior executives dripped with hostility. I could imagine.

I went up to the World In Action offices - a tardis like module on the third floor strewn with new faces and the ghosts of the past. They told me Charles Allen was touring the building. He was coming down any minute. Researchers and producers were lounging around talking about betrayal. An old colleague, much loved, said he he had survived the last job cuts but knew his redundancy letter would be coming now. They looked and sounded beaten.

It reminded me of the day Allan Klein moved into the Apple Offices on Saville Row

and spoilt the party. Big bad Allan Klein. Firing hippies. Cracking heads. Shattering dreams.

But this was World In Action. Since when did tough guys run scared?

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World In Action's thirtieth birthday has not been happy. Nor has Granada.

Down in London I heard terrible stories on the grapevine. One old colleague told me of the day Ray Fitzwalter attended a Granada Programme Review Board and wondered out loud what was happening to the station's output - gameshows, sponsored documentaries, the dive down market. What had happened to the quality, he asked, the old Granada values? It seemed to him there were only two or three people left who knew what they were.

Granada's then chairman David Plowright, himself a former World In Action editor, said he was one, Ray was another - so who was the third, he asked? No-one in the meeting said a word. He and Plowright were isolated.

A few months later Plowright got the chop - axed by Gerry Robinson, the new Granada Group strongman brought in to rescue the corporation from the jeopardy that debt and unwise acquisitions had placed it. Robinson needed profit - and quick. Plowright wanted independence and programmes. It was no competition.

Since then it's been open season on World In Action. Every Monday, it seems, the Guardian runs an article by some big name ITV executive with even bigger share options telling us the programme's finished. Must be moved out of prime time. Just doesn't fit the new junkier schedule they're dreaming up somewhere between the market research and the advertising revenue. "It's not the business of television to get people out of jail," said Paul Jackson from Carlton.

WHAAT! That was the whole point so far as my generation were concerned.

"Don't write an epitaph," said one senior executive at Granada when I told him I was writing the article, "Steve Morrison will get Plowright's job. He's an old World In Action man, but he's modern too. We're going to get through this. Changed, but intact."

That was the day before Charles Allen was appointed. I spoke to him the next morning. He sounded crushed.

"By the way," he said, "it is an epitaph you're writing."

Up in the World In Action offices I looked out over the smudgy blackness of the Salford canal beyond the studio lot they say Granada will soon sell to move to a slimmer, more cost effective base on the Trafford Park industrial estate. It was hard not to feel angry.

This wasn't Hollywood on the Irwell. This was Gloria Swanson and Robert Mitchum in Quay Street's version of 'Sunset Boulevard'.

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Ray was in his office, hard at work. Unlike some television executives Ray always worked phenomenally hard. Along the walls were the mementoes of thirty years of proud programme history - the awards, the campaigns, the triumphs. Ray is the keeper of the flame; the vicar in the ITV warehouse. It's easy to mock him with his Bury accent and his Buddy Holly fashions and his ability to justify absolutely every single second of World In Action's history - even the very many lamentable ones. I did it as much as anyone.

A lot of people say he's out of touch. But then again you could say he's got the guts to stick to his guns when others are busy counting their share options.

We talked gossip, and future plans. He was gearing up for the new series - audiences were up, better than many of the trashy sit coms and game shows and third rate movies ITV dish out these days. It would be tough, he said, but there was a chance they could still stay in prime time. Ray has always been a fighter. He takes punches that would floor many a TV executive. And he keeps standing. Still that old religion - the single subject twenty six minute film in prime time, bringing difficult, often contentious subjects to a mass audience.

I asked about Charles Allen. Ray was diplomatic.

"It'll be interesting to see what he has to say....."

"Charles is on his way down," said his secretary.

I went out to the coffee machine. A few minutes later I caught sight of a diminutive figure amidst a phalanx of suits making his way towards Ray's office. The door closed.

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World In Action was built in the image of Granada's founder - the legendary Sidney Bernstein. Sidney was a man of high ideals; a socialist. He was Jewish - an outsider - with no truck for the establishment. He was also a showman, with a shrewd eye for a business opportunity. Legend has it that in the mid 1950's he studied maps of population centres and rainfall levels and concluded that if commercial television was going to succeed anywhere it would be in the industrial North West. He decided to apply for a franchise.

The truth is Sidney ran a chain of declining cinemas, and knew he had to join ITV or be destroyed. It was a close run thing. MI5 opposed his application. Words were

had with the Independent Television Authority. Top secret words. Sidney was a communist, or at the least a fellow traveller, they said. The Authority wavered, not for the last time, and only the art historian Kenneth Clark's threat to resign from the ITA if they caved in to the politics of smear and innuendo saved him.

Sidney got his franchise and set about establishing a television service which would beat the BBC at their own game. On the first night Granada broadcast a tribute to the BBC and before the ads lectured the viewers on the perils of unnecessary spending. Sidney believed in making money, but above all in quality - he wanted to educate, to inform and to entertain. He wouldn't stand a chance today in ITV.

Sidney built Granada on the twin pillars of campaigning journalism and high quality drama. First came a drama series about working class life in Salford called Coronation Street. A little while later came a new kind of current affairs show called World In Action. Sidney called them 'the family silver' and they have underpinned ITV ever since.

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World In Action was first transmitted in January 1963.

It was the brainchild of Sidney's major domo - Denis Forman, a war hero and former director of the British Film Institute who came to Granada to give shape to Sidney's vision, and add some of his own. Forman, a radical Scottish non-conformist masquerading as the television industry's permanent secretary, wanted a programme that was different from anything which had gone before. He decided, in an age of studio bound programming, to create the first all-film current affairs show.

"Up until then current affairs programmes meant Panorama - deferential encounters in a studio between BBC presenters and politicians. You never saw the real world at all."

For inspiration he turned to the legendary documentary maker John Grierson, whom he knew from his days at the BFI. Grierson had pioneered the British realist documentary form, first with the GPO unit, and then during the war with his enormously successful Canadian series "The World In Action". Forman offered to buy the title for £400.

"I cheerfully hand over to your highly responsible keeping such rights in the title as I might have as its only begetter," wrote Grierson, "Just tell your children at Granada one day that it once got a Hollywood Oscar and that it was good enough in the American rat race to run MARCH OF TIME ragged..."

Forman's choice to run the programme was a "knock 'em down, drag 'em out" Aussie named Tim Hewat, then the Northern Editor of the Daily Express. Hewat was a tabloid man with a mission. "He made Derek Jameson look like William Rees Mogg", said his successor David Plowright, and he succeeded in creating a

programme which broke the mould of factual television.

Even viewed today the power of those early programmes remains undiminished. From opening titles to end credits they shriek at you. There is no Dimbleby or Day to mediate. Just a faceless voice intimidating you to "Consider these facts", a driving sound track and an extraordinary array of ersatz devices - model missiles traded by stone faced actors across a map of the world, hundreds of coffins emerging one by one into the streets of Salford to dramatise deaths from cancer, a ticking clock whizzing round to emphasise defence expenditure. The programme leapt with a whoop of exhilaration from the studio into the world outside.

It was an overnight sensation and even when I joined they still talked in awe of the reviewer who wrote at the time "No-one sleeps in the back row when World In Action is on the air."

But if audiences loved it, politicians and the Independent Television Authority hated it. It was biased, they said, crude, trouble making. Sidney and Forman basked in the controversy. This was, after all, the early sixties - thirteen years of Tory misrule was coming to an end and the white heat of the technological revolution was about to begin. The satire revolution was underway. Deference was breaking down at last.

"Pretty early on they banned one on wasteful defence expenditure. Ludicrous. So I phoned up Paul Fox, who was then running Panorama," remembers Forman, "I said "Those bastards won't let us show our programme!:" So Paul showed it instead. They weren't very happy. I remember RAB Butler coming up to me at a party conference soon after . "Just watch it, old boy," he said. "You're going too far..."

Sidney and Forman defended the programme vigorously but diplomatically. The programme makers were a little more direct. Around this time a drunken World In Action reporter, Bill Grundy, lurched up to a Tory politician at a reception. "Can you feel something hot and wet running down your leg?" He asked the bemused grandee. "You should do. I've just pissed in your pocket."

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Granada, like British broadcasting as a whole, has always wrestled with a north/south divide.

The company headquarters was a flash block in London's Golden Square but the television studios were in Manchester and they needed northerners to man them. The best they hired was a young journalist from the Yorkshire Evening Post. His name was David Plowright.

Plowright made his name running the local programme "Scene at Six Thirty", which he turned into Granada's principal window on its region. When, after a year or two, the first flush of excitement faded from World In Action Denis Forman asked David Plowright to take on the job of beefing it up.

Plowright was the perfect foil for Forman - professional northerner meeting urbane

southerner. Plowright was the journalist; Forman the film man. Plowright a doer, Forman a superb administrator. Together they dominated the company for the next twenty five years and shaped the face of ITV.

"The first thing I did was move the programme to Manchester," remembers Plowright. "And that became the source of its strength. It was non-metropolitan."

The old guard was ruthlessly ousted, including Tim Hewat who having failed in his bid for the Yorkshire franchise, and after a brief stint back at the Express, went back to Australia. In came ambitious young turks from "Scene at Six Thirty". For a while the programme floundered under new names - "The World Tomorrow", "The World Tonight" - uncertain of its direction. And then Plowright saw the light.

"I decided to do for television what Sunday Times Insight was doing for newspapers. Campaigning journalism using film as evidence. So I hired Jeremy Wallington from Insight and set up the World In Action Bureau. That was when the reputation for investigative journalism began....."

The 1967 series returned under the old World In Action name. The first programme was a report from the Investigations Bureau on sanctions busting in Rhodesia, made by Jeremy Wallington, and a young Granada director fast making a name for himself, Leslie Woodhead. To prove how lax sanctions were they smuggled in a lorry axle and filmed the journey as evidence.

"I suppose that was where film and journalism began to really come together on television," remembers Woodhead. "Wallington yelling at me to keep the camera down in case we got seen, and me yelling at him that unless there was some film the story was pointless."

The lorry axle went to the bottom of a Rhodesian lake but the programme inaugurated World In Action's most enduring and creative period. For nearly a decade the programme reigned supreme - its London offices looking out onto Carnaby Street, its north west base flourishing in a region blessed with the Beatles and the United of Law, Best and Charlton.

A whole generation of young men gravitated to Granada who were to dominate the television industry - a young trainee with a Beatle haircut named John Birt, Gus McDonald, now the Groucho club frequenting millionaire Managing Director of Scottish TV but then a fully paid up member of IS who had to ask permission from the comrades to join the capitalist television system. They agreed on condition he worked to further the revolution. There was Charles Denton who went on to run Central, David Boulton who became Granada's Head of Current Affairs. Later came Steve Morrison from the National Film School, today Granada's Programme Controller, and of course Ray Fitzwalter.

Then there were the film makers - Michael Apted who went to Hollywood, Leslie Woodhead, later to win a BAFTA lifetime achievement award, Mike Newell who made Sour Sweet, Mike Grigsby, Brian Moser and Charles Sturridge en route to Brideshead Revisited.

And there was John Shephard - World In Action's very own Tim Page, a lugubrious chain smoker who would disappear to South East Asia for months at a time, and announce his return by cryptic telex: "Have emerged from jungle. Movie groovy". One editor recalled a colossal Shephard expenses claim neatly itemised as "Entertaining Laotian Generals in Opium den".

Not much room for the likes of John Shepherd in today's ITV.

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World In Action was hip; unashamedly part of the counter-culture. Many of the films were shot using freelance crews from AKA, with their silk scarves and their "This machine kills fascists" stickers on their cameras. Programmes were put together in a haze of marijuana. There were no suits in the office. They were for straights or worse. And of course combat fatigues were de rigeur for Vietnam.

Even the danger seemed comical, or surreal, or glamorous or all three. George Jesse Turner, still World In Action cameraman today after twenty five years, wrote himself a special page in World In Action mythology crossing the Jordan River with a group of Palestinian Commandoes. The programme opens with a pitch black screen punctuated with tracer and the sound of automatic fire. Suddeny the camera starts to go haywire. A voice - Turner's - can be heard in the background. "Christ - I've been hit!". "Where?" comes the reply from his producer. "Up the fucking arse!

The World In Action films of the 60's and early 70's are an extraordinary chronicle of extraordinary times. Many, of course, were instantly forgettable. But some - "The Demonstration", for instance, which captured all the optimism and righteous anger of the Grosvenor Square March, John Shepherd and Mike Beckham's Vietnam films, Brian Moser's photographic record of the display of Che Guavara's body, David Boulton's coverage of the early days of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and the unforgettable scenes at Martin Luther King's funeral - have enduring documentary power. These remain the closest we have come to the traditions of John Grierson and the GPO unit.

And there were always the investigations - the dangers of Asbestosis, corruption in Hong Kong, torture around the world - to give the programme its special reputation for journalism.

John Birt remembers it as "an extraordinarily inventive place to work, full of optimism. You pointed the camera and solved the problem, it just seemed to capture the mood of the times so well."

"I'm sure it's not rose tinted spectacles," says Woodhead, "Things just seemed to come together. It was the era of student rebellion. The anti-Vientnam protests. Pop music. The 747 - which gave you inter-continental travel. The advent of the Eclair camera so you could wander round and shoot anything wobbly scope. You knew you were in on something special. And you knew it wouldn't last."

These were heady days too for Granada. Under the cosy duopoly owning an ITV station was a licence to print money - and ITV viewers were soon watching Granada programmes on sets rented from Granada Rentals. They went to bingo in converted Granada cinemas, and they ate at Granada service stations that sprouted up along the new motorway networks. Later came video rentals, book publishing and the rest.

But World In Action - revelling in its reputation and its top twenty ratings - still lay at the heart of the company, as the company lay at the heart of ITV, and the managerial chain ran like a spine from Sidney down through Forman to Plowright and hence into the programme itself.

"There was just this sense of incredible power" remembers Gus McDonald. "You would come down on the train from Manchester on a Monday night as the programme was going out and know that most of the lights in the houses you could see were watching what you had to say.

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The sixties seem a long time ago, especially if like me you just missed them. They say the fashions are similar now. And some of the music. But that's as far as it goes. As for ITV - it's unrecognisable. Sidney has long since gone and all that idealism with him. The new men of ITV are from light entertainment. They talk a lot about "new realities" and the "advertising friendly" network they're busy creating. Most of them wouldn't know how to educate or inform if they tried.

And the company Sidney founded has changed too. It's no longer a thriving family business, for one thing. It's a broken backed, debt ridden giant barely supported by its television revenues. The programmes are different too. Out have gone the high class dramas and the factual programmes. Granada is now an entertainment company. You can't buck the market, as someone once said. But the truth is Granada is in danger of becoming just another TV station.

The change has left World In Action isolated. It is no longer the creative heart of the company - standing at the centre of a stable of factual programmes. It stands isolated, with only the occasional commercialised drama documentary for company. And its executives are no longer on the fast track to promotion. No-one is tipping Ray Fitzwalter for a Programme controllership.

This season World In Action has a new editor, Diane Nelms - a bright executive who started on the programme and made her reputation with "Richard and Judy" and daytime programmes. She says she has the toughest job on the network, and that the programme is safe for a year at most. She knows the wolves are circling.

Where did it all go wrong?

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"Some time in the early 1970's there was a sense...I don't think I was alone...that

World In Action ceased to have all the answers," remembers Birt, "It ceased to speak for its times. Just documenting a problem was not enough. There was the oil crisis of 1973, the Middle East War, the British economy sunk into the malaise of the three day week, and the miners strikes, terrorism in Ireland and on the mainland. It suddenly seemed a much more complex world than we had thought."

At first Granada responded to the challenges of complexity with a range of new factual programmes branching from World In Action's central trunk - a new drama-documentary form established by Leslie Woodhead as a means of covering closed societies like the Soviet Union and China. Then Brian Moser and Mike Grigsby's "Disappearing World" which charted the impact of modernity on tribal society. There were verite series from Roger Graef, Brian Lapping's "The Nation", "State of the Nation" and "Hypotheticals", Mike Scott's "Nuts and Bolts of the Economy".

Simultaneously World In Action began to fertilise itself across British Television. John Birt left for LWT soon to set up a tough investigative team in the London Programme, and a more considered analytical programme called Weekend World. Charles Denton took John Pilger and Richard Creasey to ATV/Central to make more personal documentaries.

But these changes steadily depleted World In Action's reservoir of talent and never again was the programme able to assemble a team of comparable strength. But underneath this other developments, even more ominous than personnel changes, were conspiring to threaten the programme's future. The loose broadcasting ecology which had sustained the creativity of the 1960's was beginning to stiffen up.

Granada's rows with the IBA became increasingly virulent. Forman recalls one session where he and the company were accused of being communist. The programme was harbouring dangerous subversives and needed reigning in, said the Authority. Forman refused and even consulted lawyers about the possibility of suing for defamation.

"Things started to change in the early 1970's. The politicians started to fight back," recalls Woodhead, "and when terrorism really got going in Ireland and on the mainland the pendulum started to swing back from support of the broadcaster to support for the politician and the high octane energy that had driven the programme started to slip away. Nothing did more to take the fun, the energy, out of current affairs and documentaries than the growth of supervision which began around this time."

In 1973 World In Action prepared a programme about an obscure Yorkshire architect named John Poulson who had recently gone bankrupt. The programme was meticulously researched by a new recruit to the programme from the Bradford Telegraph and Argus - Ray Fitzwalter. Granada had risen on the effervescent tide of the 1960's. Now it exposed the detritus thrown up in its wake - the bent councillors, the shabby deals for hospitals and tower blocks, the casual corruption that reached right up to Westminster and into the Cabinet room, most notably with Reggie Mauding, the then Home Secretary.

It was too much for the IBA. They banned it.

Forman is still bitter twenty years later. "They said it was likely to bring public institutions into disrepute. Nothing they ever did made us crosser. There was absolutely no justification"

But a line had been drawn, and never again were the broadcasting authorities going to retreat.

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1974 was the annus mirabilis for investigative journalism. Watergate suddenly put into perspective everything that had gone before.

"It didn't seem like it at first - but it demoralised us really," says David Boulton, the former Tribune editor who ran the programme at the time, "We suddenly looked small. What did it matter what we said? And what was the future of investigative journalism once you had brought down a President? Where could we possibly go?"

The truth was that like the television industry as a whole World In Action was no longer young; no longer of the moment. It had become a programme with a past and a mythology to live up to. The non-metropolitan perspective which had fuelled its vision now began to seem narrowly provincial, the investigative slant more and more myopic. As confidence sagged and direction faltered the free and easy style which had carried it through the sixties began to disintegrate.

The 1970's were ITV's dog days. Industrial relations were soured by craven management and intransigent trade unions. Inside World In Action the atmosphere slowly turned sour. Lack of purpose and frustrated ambition led to rows, feuds and internal dissent. When I joined they were called simply "The troubles". No one knew precisely how or why they started, but they brought the programme to its knees.

Some say the programme bosses fell prey to the ambitions of office. Others say the team fell prey to the syndicalism of the times. This was after all the era of shop steward's power, the shipworker's sit ins and the great Miner's strikes. Maybe the truth was people just got tired of working hard for little money. The rewards of a company Amex can soon pale in the face of a family fortune and a soaring share price, and Granada was always the meanest of the ITV companies. Whatever the reason bright young men became older and bitter and conspiracy mania ruled the roost.

Brian Lapping, editor during the 1970's, remembers the programme becoming "infantile", obsessed with ludicrous fantasies of cultural revolution. "But basically I didn't believe in that sort of journalism any more - it had become a very inadequate means of talking about the world."

There were still fine programmes of course - Lapping is especially proud of those that dealt with the National Front - but the cult of the investigator, and the shadow of

Watergate slowly squeezed the light out of its films and its journalism. Nothing symbolised the change more than the contrast between the bright and airy rooftop offices over Carnaby Street where World In Action had once worked and the dingy basement offices they now occupied.

The team called them, appropriately, "The Bunker". It developed a mentality to match - dark, conspiratorial, unhealthy.

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Ironically it was Mrs Thatcher who rescued World In Action.

She gave it a focus. Something to campaign against. A way of being rude again.

There were other reasons too, of course. The ITV strike cleared the air for a few years. Everyone got paid more. It was franchise time. More money came into the programme. And a young newly appointed editor, Ray Fitzwalter, after a hesitant start, secured his position as the dominant figure shaping programme policy - introducing a purer stream of journalism and working in tandem with Granada's head of Current Affairs, David Boulton. Fitzwalter finally eased some of the old hands out and brought new people onto the programme - men like John Ware, Laurie Flynn and Ian McBride for whom "the troubles" were distant history. Gradually the wounds of the past began to heal.

The first half of the 1980's was a kind of Indian summer. The programme regained its self confidence with a string of fine stories. It began what became a long and honourable campaign to reverse the Birmingham Six miscarriage of justice and exposed the Rossminster tax scandal. There were a string of courageous programmes in Northern Ireland. It became a haven for whistleblowers - Jock Kane, Peter Wright, Sarah Tisdall, and the American "mole" Ernest Fitzgerald.

Best of all the programme found the mother of all confrontations - with the British Steel Corporation who went to court to obtain the name of the "mole" who had given the programme a stash of highly embarrassing internal company documents. Only one man knew the name - the World In Action journalist who had obtained them, Laurie Flynn.

The case became a cause celebre, as the company resisted British Steel through every court in the land. Facing sequestration of assets neither they nor Flynn would bow, and finally the Corporation blinked first. They withdrew their case at the death. Granada emerged triumphant and had the pleasure of seeing the law of contempt changed to provide journalists some measure of protection for their sources.

It was a high spot. At a time when BBC current affairs was awash with doubt and low morale World In Action had proved it could tough it out. It may have been a programme with a longer past than future. But it was still the best place to tell a difficult story. No matter what our private gripes, and they were legion, we all knew that.

There was even a story to match Bill Grundy's. One day a World In Action team was preparing to interview Douglas Hurd, then a junior Minister in Mrs Thatcher's government. The researcher bet the producer £25 he wouldn't call Mr Hurd "Mr Turd". The producer accepted on the grounds that no politician could possibly bring himself to say "I'm sorry. Did you call me Turd?"

It was infantile. But then World In Action was always less than mature.

In 1984 Granada threw the programme a 21st birthday party in a stylish indoor marquee. All the luminaries came back - Birt, Apted, Moser, Denton, Sturridge - and we were each given a silver medal to celebrate the event. I remember thinking it felt like a great big raucous extended family. David Plowright, Denis Forman and Sidney, who had long since retired, stood in a line to say hello when we came in. It was a nice touch. I'd never met the old man before. I shook his hand and said it was a privilege to work there. And meant it.

We all got riotously drunk. There were speeches and fantastic amounts of mutual back slapping. It was hardly surprising really. The company was basking in the glory of Brideshead Revisited and Jewel in the Crown. MP's were asking why the BBC didn't make programmes like that. World In Action was on the up. They'd given Mrs Thatcher one in the eye and got their franchise back for ten more years. All around Manchester Granada were buying land and building studios and planning to conquer the world.

I suppose that was when Hollywood on the Irwell began to take shape.

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But underneath the hubris the ground was shifting.

Mrs Thatcher believed in the market. And the market made Granada vulnerable. For all its profits Granada was essentially a cash rich sleepy little company that reaped the dividends of monopoly broadcasting. As the corporate pace of the 1980's quickened so Granada became a target for takeover - first from Ladbrokes and then more seriously from Rank's.

"The Rank bid really frightened us," says Forman, "Luckily the IBA stepped in and said that they wouldn't permit the TV franchise to be transferred - otherwise we would have been in real difficulty."

Granada had to adapt. It was no good being just a family company - it was devour or be devoured. So they brought in an outsider to run the Group - a businessman called Derek Lewis. It was the first time they looked beyond their own. It was a disaster.

"We went for growth," explained a Granada executive involved at the time, "We realised in the eighties that the old working class thing was dead. People could own their own videos and TV's. They didn't need Granada Rentals to make it safe - not with cheap Japanese electronics. It was a declining market. So we decided to get

the best out of it by getting a bigger stake, and in the meantime expand into other areas.”

Granada Group turned corporate raider and investor - computers, high street electronics, satellite television, property, insurance. Huge quantities of money were borrowed in the drive for growth, whittling away the family control and driving the company into the hands of the city. And as the debts mushroomed and the recession bit the Group began to eye its Television subsidiary more and more resentfully. If they would just spend a bit less on programmes - and deliver a lot more profit.....

Around this time Derek Lewis arranged a series of “hypotheticals” where senior Group executives would role play business scenarios for the future. Time and again discussion would get round to the role of Granada Television in the Group. Always the conclusion was the same - get more profits from TV. Plowright would refuse. He needed the money to fund quality programmes. Ensure Granada got the franchise in an increasingly hostile broadcasting environment. Continue to develop Hollywood on the Irwell. What would you do next, the moderator would ask executives from other parts of the Group? Fire Plowright, they answered. And they'd all laugh.

Eventually, when Plowright had got the franchise back and the company was so broke with debt and bad acquisitions, they brought someone in who would.

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Wherever you walk in the Granada building the loss of Plowright is still keenly felt.

Up in his sixth floor office Programme Controller Steve Morrison, himself an ex-World In Action man, admits it was a shattering blow - most of all to World In Action. He knows the pressure is on from other ITV companies to move it out of prime time. But he intends to fight all the way and thinks he can win. He points to last season's dramatically improved ratings, its new editor Diane Nelms, the first woman editor in the programme's thirty deeply chauvinist years. He thinks that together with Ray Fitzwalter she can preserve the best of the old traditions and carve out a secure new niche in the schedules.

Morrison is a skilful and persuasive advocate. He talks of the ITV family of programmes, the need for fixed points in the schedule, the way World In Action gives grit and variety to the output, the strength of its brand name. This programme still has a big future, he says. They would be foolish to throw it away.

No, of course it won't be like the past, but then neither will ITV.

Not worse. Just different.

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I went back downstairs to Ray's office.

He said his talk with Charles Allen had been productive. He had asked good, tough questions about the programme. Said he admired it and wanted it to survive in prime time, although, of course, it had to earn its keep.

"The next couple of months will tell," said Ray, "but people have to realise this is a litmus test. If World In Action is moved out of prime time it will be a mortal blow. Once out of prime time you can't justify your resources. And then you start to lose your budgets and your staff....."

He didn't want to look too far down that road.

The truth is the late 80's have been thin years for World In Action. It was easy to get noticed when there were only two channels, and news was five minutes long. Much harder to keep up there in a time of global news, extended news, and a dozen current affairs and documentary programmes scattered across 4 channels.

There have been highs, most notably the culmination of the Birmingham Six campaign, but fewer of them. There have been fewer lows and slicker presentation too. But the overall impression is of a blander product struggling in overpoweringly hostile conditions. Despite its recent revival in the ratings outside the company it's hard to find people taking bets on its survival.

"It's all over," says Woodhead, "I hate to say it but I just don't think the powers that be in ITV are interested. But it seems incredible to me that a programme that was once the apotheosis of brash popularity should now be seen as pointy headed elitist. Nothing tells you more about these depressing times."

John Birt is equally pessimistic. "I have enormous respect for the programme, but I have to say I'm gloomy. I've been inside the ITV system, and I know the pressures at play."

David Plowright hopes he's wrong, but doubts that he is.

"Are we really saying that we want an ITV with no current affairs. A schedule with no place for a programme like World In Action with all those achievements to its name? It seems we are."

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Apparently when the newly appointed Granada Group Chief Executive Gerry Robinson first visited the Granada studios David Plowright gathered together his senior executives to meet him. He told his new boss he would like to start by telling him something of the company's history. Robinson interrupted him brusquely.

"I'm not interested in your history," he said.

It's a shame because World In Action, like the company that makes it, has a proud

one. It has been one of the great forcing grounds of British Television. Its journalistic and film making record, and its consistent commitment to disclosure are second to none.

Of course, like Granada, it's insular, brash, conceited, arrogant and infantile. And, as one critic sagely observed, "one hesitates to pay them compliments since they have already paid themselves any that are worth having." Of course it has made heavy weather of adapting to the challenges of new times. And it was unfortunate the company set out on the great task of building Hollywood on the Irwell just when the network studio system started to break down.

But it is still alive, and still standing for values. Not, as it often likes to pretend, the only ones in town, but values none the less. The kind of values that I experienced many times - in a court room in Australia during the Spycatcher trial when Ray phoned me after some twirp of a Tory MP had jumped up in the House and said I should be sacked. He just wanted me to know they were right behind me. Or the time I sat with Ray and David Plowright looking depressed at a dodgy legal opinion on a programme.

"Is the programme true?" asked Plowright.

I said it was.

"Then we transmit." he replied.

I hope they don't vandalise World In Action. I hope Charles Allen backs them 100%. and tells the rest of ITV they won't get Coronation Street unless they take World In Action in prime time. I hope so because those values are the hardest to find and the easiest to lose. They're the kind you only get in the movies.

In Hollywood on the Irwell, in fact.

Paul Greengrass  
September 1992