

A Summary of the LIZ FORGAN Interview. File 495.

Born in Calcutta in 1944 - a War baby. She attended boarding school before going to read modern languages at Oxford.

Her career started by accident. Her father worked for an oil company in Iran, so she visited him there and decided to get a job on one of the local papers in English in order to stay there. She decided that journalism was for her, and stayed there for a year before returning to England to take up her career.

She worked for various newspapers and was sent by The Guardian to interview Jeremy Isaacs, just before he started Channel 4. The interview was a success, Jeremy was impressed, and as his appointment to Channel 4 had just been confirmed, he invited Liz to join him in setting up the new Company. Liz was surprised at the offer, but said she hated television and didn't know anything about it. "Perfect! Just the very person", he said. She became head of Factual Programmes and later Director of Programmes.

The generous funding arrangements and legal innovative requirements laid down for Channel 4 by the government were reasons for its early success.

Jeremy was the right man for the job and not averse to taking risks.

She considers that the first ten years of Channel 4 were truly creative, enterprising and stimulating. She admits that they abused the tolerance of the audience and made some dreadful programmes, generating a left wing bias at times.

She comments on a programme she was responsible for called REPORT TO THE NATION which was pompous, pretentious, boring and went on for hours.

One of her main tasks was Channel 4 News which she wanted to be longer and more analytical in a serious fashion. Sarah Hogg was hired as an economics specialist, for instance. Rules were laid down such as no Royal Stories or Sport; No desks for the presenters or blue backgrounds. Those backgrounds, in practise, turned out to be a dingy brown colour which reminded everyone of the 'dirty' protest in the Irish detention establishments. All in all, not very successful and many compromises had to be made.

Channel 4 was in the happy situation where it was an ITN customer with a cheque in its hand and could dictate the kind of News programme it wanted. But as the viewing figures fell away she was having to assure the Board that they would improve.

The situation was saved dramatically by the Miners Strike which encapsulated the very essence of Liz's ideas of how a News programme should be presented.

In the beginning, there were two possible producers of the News programme under consideration, ITN or LWT. ITN won the contract and Liz gives the reasons.

Another programme that Liz was responsible for was RIGHT TO REPLY and she explains the concept. She felt that all such programmes seemed to be rigged so that the broadcaster always won the argument. In RIGHT TO REPLY, the situation was reversed however, and the Chairman's job was to help the audience when necessary instead of being entirely neutral. The viewer was always given the last word. The seating arrangement on the set was such that when people had a complaint they were sat opposite the person who had done whatever they were complaining about. Liz was proud of this concept but had difficulty, even with Jeremy, in bringing it to fruition. (This programme is still running - Ed)

Her rule was never to stay in one job more than ten years and she was beginning to feel uncomfortable about that so when John Birt, who was about to become Director General of the BBC, asked her to run Radio she made the same speech to him as she had to Jeremy Isaacs. She became Managing Director of Network Radio which meant Radio 1,2,3,4 and 5. There were numerous difficulties to begin with.

John was introducing his 'Producer's Choice' regime which was producing havoc within the Corporation; commercial radio was beginning to challenge the Beeb, and Radio 1 had sunk culturally to the banal level of a commercial 'pop' station!

Radio 5 also suffered from having dissimilar programmes parked on its frequency.

Radio 1, but with a loss of audience, was focused to become a young and distinctive channel. Radio 5's 24 hour News Network was dropped and became a programme for younger people hooked on Sport and good journalism. It was a success but resulted in the loss of some talented people.

She talks about John Birt and the regime he created, which, on the whole, was good for the BBC. However, it was an unhappy place and people tended to feel unvalued by their leader.

Eventually, the relationship between John Birt and Liz reached an impasse over the decision to move BBC Radio and TV journalists to the Television Centre 'sausage factory', whereas before they were two separate entities. Liz thought this was quite wrong from the Radio point of view. With five networked stations all receiving the same News, when their listener requirements were fundamentally different, it seemed inappropriate.

After the disagreement was put to the Governors who felt they should support the DG, Liz decided to leave.

She now enjoys herself going freelance, sometimes working for the Beeb, sometimes as a consultant etc.

Reverting to Channel 4, the problem was considered as to why current affairs programmes were all made by men. As an experiment it was therefore decided to commission two lots of women producers. The results turned out to be similar to the male producers except for the agendas and a few insignificant, but subtle differences.

Finally, she talks about a series of programmes Ken Loach made for Channel 4 called QUESTIONS OF LEADERSHIP about the British trade union movement. There were five episodes, brilliantly done.

Liz, at that time was head of Factual Programmes and was involved in trying to sort out a situation which was becoming heavily political.

A sixth programme was planned in order to deal with the bias, in an attempt to enable all the series to be transmitted. The programme was eventually given to Central TV but has never been transmitted. END.

COMMENT:- For someone who professed to know nothing about television or radio, Liz certainly made her mark in a remarkably innovative way and was not afraid to talk about her failures or misconceptions as well as her successes. She breathed some fresh air into our industry.

LIZ FORGAN was interviewed by TEDDY DARVAS.
DAVID MATHER ROBSON recorded it and wrote the Summary.

I make the usual disclaimer about the correct spelling of some names, which may need to be verified.

David Robson.

For the BECTU History Project.