

‘PINKOES  
AND  
TRAITORS’

*The BBC and the nation, 1974–1987*

JEAN SEATON

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# CONTENTS

List of illustrations	ix
Timeline	xvi
Introduction	i
<b>1</b> Mrs Thatcher and the BBC: the Conservative Athene	14
<b>2</b> The licence fee and BBC independence: money, money, money	27
<b>3</b> Northern Ireland: 'The right amount of blood'	58
<b>4</b> Arts and music: culture vulture	85
<b>5</b> Attenborough: the public service animal	107
<b>6</b> The royal wedding: British Shintoism at work	139
<b>7</b> The Falklands: 'our boys' versus 'the British'	161
<b>8</b> Ethiopia: biblical famine, news and changing aid	186
<b>9</b> Women in the BBC: the triumph of the trouser suit	207
<b>10</b> Light entertainment: public service popular	232
<b>11</b> Drama: the domestic Homer	257
<b>12</b> Smiley's real people: public service tradecraft	281
<b>13</b> Endgame	304
Appendix: BBC directors-general and chairmen	328
Notes	329
Acknowledgements	359
Index	361

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Mrs Thatcher and Robin Day, 1980	16
Mrs Thatcher being shown how to use a computer to gather news, 1987	22
David Dimbleby with BBC 'Swingometer' David Butler, 1979	23
Mrs Thatcher and Sue MacGregor, 1985	25
Charles Curran, 1972	29
<i>Play School</i> , 1975	38
'And this is my reporter': cartoon by BBC journalist Michael Sullivan	40
Michael Checkland, 1989	43
Robin Walsh, 1970s	60
Loyalist women occupy Broadcasting House in Belfast, 1974	61
<i>The Question of Ulster</i> , 1972	63
The Belfast newsroom on a good day	66
Reporting in Bogside: BBC cameraman Cyril Cave and team, 1972	69
Dick Francis leaves the ruins of BBC Belfast after a bomb, 1974	71
Seamus Heaney, 1973	74
The <i>Multi-Coloured Swap Shop</i> in Belfast, with the young Keith Chegwin, 1979	76
Jeremy Paxman and Gillian Chambers in Belfast programme <i>Spotlight</i> , 1977	80
Pierre Boulez rehearsing the BBC Symphony Orchestra, 1972	90
Robert Hughes in <i>The Shock of the New</i> , 1980	91
Colin Davis conducting the Last Night of the Proms, 1971	94
Alan Yentob with Arthur Miller for <i>Arena</i> , 1987	95
Humphrey Burton with Emma Johnson, winner of <i>Young Musician of the Year</i> , 1984	98
David Attenborough in the cutting room, 1959	115
Attenborough filming for <i>Tribal Eye</i> at a wedding in Iran, 1975	116
Attenborough as the newly appointed controller of BBC2, outside Television Centre, 1967	117
Frank Gillard, sponsor of the Bristol Wildlife Unit, 1950	120
Filming <i>Life on Earth</i> in front of an anthill, 1979	130
Attenborough with young mountain gorillas, 1978	134
The Royal Family at supper, 1969	143
John Humphrys, Brian Redhead and Jenni Murray in the <i>Today</i> studio, 1986	149

## ILLUSTRATIONS

The Royal wedding: Charles and Diana, 1981	153
Huw Wheldon introducing <i>Royal Heritage</i> , 1977	158
Alasdair Milne, 1982	166
News manager Jenny Abramsky, 1986	169
Brian Hanrahan aboard HMS <i>Hermes</i> sailing to the Falklands, 1982	171
Robert Fox reporting from the <i>Canberra</i> , 1982	172
<i>Newsnight</i> presenters Fran Morrison, Peter Snow, David Davies and Charles Wheeler, 1980	174
Michael Buerk reporting on the famine in Ethiopia, 1984	188
Live Aid is announced at Wembley, 1985	198
Wembley during Live Aid, 13 July 1985	200
<i>Blue Peter's</i> 15th anniversary party, 1979	203
The 1979 intake to the BBC's General Trainee Programme	212
Joan Bakewell interviews Henry Moore, 1980	217
Monica Sims, the first female head of Radio, 1979	219
The all-women production team of <i>Question Time</i> , 1982	228
Bill Cotton Jr, head of Light Entertainment, 1984	233
<i>Yes Minister</i> : Paul Eddington, Nigel Hawthorne and Derek Fowlds, 1986	235
<i>Morecambe and Wise</i> , 1973	242
<i>Fawlty Towers</i> , 1975	245
Esther Rantzen and the <i>That's Life</i> team, 1983	250
Dennis Potter on set, 1979	258
<i>Boys from the Blackstuff</i> : Bernard Hill and Graeme Souness, 1982	264
<i>Edge of Darkness</i> : Bob Peck and Joe Don Baker, 1983	266
Colin Firth in <i>Tumbledown</i> , 1988	268
Michael Kitchen and Michelle Newey in <i>Brimstone and Treacle</i> , 1976	274
Michael Gambon in <i>The Singing Detective</i> , 1986	276
<i>EastEnders</i> , 1985	280
The corridors of Broadcasting House, 1932	282
The World Service canteen, 1960	284
John Tusa, director of the World Service, outside Bush House, 1989	287
John le Carré, 1966	300
Alec Guinness as George Smiley in <i>Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy</i> , 1982	302
Home secretary Douglas Hurd and Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity, 1989	306
Michael Cockerell, 1978	310
Patricia Hodgson, the first female BBC Secretary, 1995	320
Marmaduke Hussey, 1986	321
A view of Milne's departure: cartoon by Trog, 1987	325
<i>Prospero and Ariel</i> by Eric Gill, 1933, on the façade of Broadcasting House	327



## MRS THATCHER AND THE BBC: THE CONSERVATIVE ATHENE

THERE IS A DISPUTE among historians about when Margaret Thatcher became her true 'Thatcherite' self. She bustled into power after the 1979 election with the largest swing since 1945 as the first woman prime minister in any industrialised country. However, her relationship with the BBC shows her as the Athene of British politics. Like the Greek goddess of wisdom, born fully formed from the brow of Zeus, the Mrs Thatcher seen in the BBC's archives sprang forth in 1959 as a newly elected MP, armed with values, a social analysis, a keen appetite for argument, reproof, and a strong sense of the BBC's prejudices and failures. From the start it is a peculiarly focused intelligence. Her views of the Corporation were confirmed by experience. Colin Shaw, a wise and emotionally astute BBC Secretary, wrote after a bruising encounter with her: 'She is a proud and difficult lady and needs a particular kind of wooing.'<sup>1</sup> Despite taking her seriously from the first encounter, despite libating her with the gift of public exposure, despite a strong-minded independence from her that she might have respected, the BBC haplessly confirmed her worst suspicions about public service broadcasting. It was like a rabbit caught in the eye of a ferret.

Most British prime ministers have been sensitive to criticism from the BBC, an organisation which they are held in part responsible for. Brian Griffiths, who worked with Mrs Thatcher closely on broadcasting in No. 10, said she 'was utterly devoted to public service'.<sup>2</sup> This did not stop her querying the very building blocks of the BBC: the licence fee, the obligation to broadcast to the nation, and the nature of 'impartiality' versus 'the national good'. She passionately believed two contradictory things: that the BBC ought to be more elitist, exercising ever higher 'standards' as it shaped public behaviour and attitudes; and that it needed exposure to the brisk winds of market competition, preferably by replacing the licence fee with advertising revenue. She wanted a BBC changed beyond recognition.

Mrs Thatcher crashed through taboos and provoked a savage, bemused humour which captured something of her power. Dennis Potter, the great television dramatist, described her at a Conservative party conference,

demonstrating something of the misogynist hostility she encountered: 'She kept her glossy head tilted at a rather too carefully alert angle, and occasionally made small pawing gestures with her hands in a manner which reminded me of everyone's favourite celluloid bitch Lassie. "Oh look – she wants us to follow her."<sup>3</sup> The BBC, however, had a hidden asset that would, in the fullness of time, prove valuable. Patricia Hodgson, a junior Open University producer, first met Mrs Thatcher in 1976 when the new Conservative leader arrived at a Crossbow dinner organised by Hodgson. A grand affair, it brought together every living leader of the Conservatives – Alec Douglas-Home, Harold Macmillan, and an Edward Heath early in his bruised 'Easter Island-faced' sulk. Hodgson dispatched a chap to chivvy Heath out of the Gents, as she had been warned that he would try to be the last to enter the room in order to upstage his successor. Mrs Thatcher, in cream silk, greeted the young Hodgson, in a cream silk cocktail dress, through gritted teeth, 'But you said you'd be wearing blue!' The dinner was fortuitously timed, coming on the evening that Harold Wilson announced his unexpected retirement. Attention focused on Mrs Thatcher, the new Conservative leader. Heath, from one side of the table, bellowed ever louder at Macmillan, who was deaf, that he must be part of the plan to get rid of Mrs Thatcher, and that he, Heath, would see him about it the next day. The new leader ignored Hodgson, whom she was sitting next to, ate nothing and spent the meal anxiously rewriting a speech. After giving a lacklustre performance, Mrs Thatcher prostrated herself, kneeling, at Douglas-Home's side, nervously seeking reassurance.

Although she had ignored Hodgson she had not failed to notice her. The next day, Hodgson received a handwritten note from Mrs Thatcher, apologising for being so distracted and asking her to dinner. It was an entirely typical personal kindness. From then on, Hodgson and Mrs Thatcher would meet for an annual lunch or dinner in London or Chequers. Milne shut this channel of communication down when Hodgson became BBC Secretary. However, wearing the wrong dress had given a young Open University producer a personal link to the prime minister-in-waiting.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the BBC's turbulent conflict with Mrs Thatcher's No. 10, one person at least within the BBC, as Hodgson moved up the Corporation, was known by the prime minister to be 'one of us', a connection that was to help save the BBC.

Mrs Thatcher saw the arts and broadcasting as industries that ought to be managed like any business, regarding any protection from the 'market' as inimical to freedom of expression. Talent, she argued, 'let alone artistic genius – is unplanned, unpredictable, eccentrically individual. Regimented, subsidised, owned and determined by the state, it withers.'<sup>5</sup> This philosophy was formed by her perception of the state-censored culture of communism. She told Woodrow Wyatt, 'There has never been a justification for the existence of the BBC. It was formed during an authoritarian mood following World

## 'PINKOES AND TRAITORS'



*Holding power to account:  
Mrs Thatcher, the prime minister, and Robin Day in 1980*

War I. Justifications for state broadcasting ... are identical to those used in Communist and other dictatorships for state monopoly of the press.<sup>6</sup>

### FINCHLEY AND THE UNWRITTEN CONSTITUTION

Her Finchley constituency was Mrs Thatcher's bedrock, and a fertile source of engagement with the BBC. Early in her parliamentary career she called the Corporation to account over a constituent's protest about anti-Semitism on *Any Questions*. The director-general, Hugh Greene, answered immediately and personally that there had been a slip on the programme. He said that the *Any Questions* team was 'firm and unanimous' in its distress at the incident and opposition to such a view: 'Anti-Semitism is not a question on which the BBC is or should be impartial.'<sup>7</sup> Over the next five years there was gathering traffic between Mrs Thatcher and the BBC around family values (BBC lack of support for), anti-commercialism (BBC bias in favour of), vulgar programmes (BBC broadcasting of), the advantages of advertising funding (BBC hostility to), and political bias (BBC's airing of any opinion not shared in Finchley).

In 1969, Mrs Thatcher asked the new director-general, Charles Curran, to give a talk to the Finchley Council for Christians and Jews on 'The role of the BBC'. It was a bracing encounter. 'When we met', he wrote, 'we had an interesting exchange about the obligations of the BBC in matters of programme policy, particularly as they concerned the standard of national life.'<sup>8</sup> Finchley



believed that the BBC needed tighter legal regulation. Curran took the responsibility of educating Mrs Thatcher seriously, sending her a careful reply including an extract from a 1964 letter by the chair of the governors, Lord Normanbrook, to the Postmaster General, reminding him that it was the BBC Board of Governors (not him and certainly not the government) who were responsible for maintaining due impartiality over controversial subjects, and that 'so far as possible the programmes for which they are responsible should not offend against good taste or decency, or be offensive to public feeling'.<sup>9</sup> It was also a reminder of the BBC's special status, regulating itself, unlike ITV, whose standards were laid down in law.

Curran included an extract from the Canadian parliament's 1967 discussion of broadcasting, which argued that 'sporadic interference' by politicians would only damage the capacity of broadcasters to 'fairly and squarely' take responsibility in the national interest.<sup>10</sup> He concluded with a quote from Adlai Stevenson (perhaps, on reflection, the über-liberal of American presidential politics was not best placed to win Mrs Thatcher over). 'Freedom', Stevenson had asserted, 'demands infinitely more care and attention than any other system. It puts consent and personal initiative in the place of command and obedience ... How are we to defend freedom if, for the tyranny of external control, we substitute the clattering, cluttering tyranny of internal aimlessness, confusion of ends and fuss?'

Curran added his own interpretation of the BBC's purposes in an unusually explicit defence of the Corporation's, and indeed the nation's, unwritten constitution.

Good broadcasting is a practice not a prescription. In my view, traditions are more important in this respect than written documents, and I think that in this the BBC reflects the general character of British constitutional life. We depend more on the atmosphere in which we live than on the rules which come into existence as a result of the codification of that atmosphere.

He went on to defend the Board of Governors because, if the members are chosen well, 'it is a more flexible instrument for interpreting the public mood than any written document could possibly be'. The governors moulded the human capital of the BBC by appointing the director-general and nearly sixty other positions in the Corporation: 'these people set the tone at the BBC'. Writing down an obligation to preserve standards in national life or the integrity of British institutions would in fact be damaging. The Glorious Revolution, 'on which so many of our civil liberties are founded', would not, he argued, have taken place if such prescriptions were codified. Curran was articulating the BBC's capacity not merely to reflect and change with the

temperament of the times, but also the BBC's primacy in challenging and holding other British institutions up for public inspection.

Mrs Thatcher sent a handwritten reply to Curran: 'I have digested your letter thoroughly,' she wrote, and proceeded to rebut Curran's arguments thoughtfully like the lawyer she was. The Thatcher radical was already forming – not yet a monetarist but not a conventional Conservative either. Curran had argued that the BBC was successful if it reflected the variety of public opinion. She replied, 'I do not think it is sufficient to say that your objective is to present a full and wide range of opinions in the country today. This seems to me to sidestep the responsibility you have by taking refuge in what on the face of it is an attractive concept.' Mrs Thatcher wanted the BBC to shape and mould attitudes – to lead the nation, not represent it. At the same time she suspected them of doing this subversively, leading 'in the wrong direction for the nation'. She finished with candour (or pride): 'You may have gathered that tact is not my strong point when I start discussing things with busy people. May I say finally (and it is a liberty) that I should be happier if you weren't quite so sure all is well.'<sup>11</sup> Curran sent her another educative lecture by Lord Normanbrook, asked her to come and see for herself how 'senior colleagues are preoccupied with the practical aspects of the problems we have been discussing', and warned her of the danger of the imposition of formal regulation.

Throughout her parliamentary career there were perpetual skirmishes with the BBC. She was incensed by a BBC series for schools, designed to get 'less academically able' teenagers talking about the problems they faced, in which John Peel, the presenter, had criticised marriage as 'an artificial device which tends to destroy relationships'.<sup>12</sup> She complained about the effect of television on children, bad language, violence among the young, and bias in favour of trade unions. Her Finchley constituents worried that Arab spokesmen had too much airtime.<sup>13</sup> Later she complained about a drama series, *When the Boat Comes In*, starring James Bolam, set in the North-East of England, about the impact of the 1930s industrial collapse in the region, and said that although she had not seen it, 'Conservatives did not like it'. When George Howard, chair of the governors, protested that he was a Conservative from the North who enjoyed it, she retorted 'not a typical one!' A programme about the Angolan government's employment of mercenaries distracted from what really mattered, that it was facing a Marxist rebel force. When the director-general accepted that the BBC had 'missed the point', she retorted that the BBC was not in business to miss points. Mrs Thatcher dismissed the BBC's claim that over time they had cumulatively told the right story, saying getting 'a' story wrong was not excused by getting 'the' story right. She had argued that freedom of information, and consequently the independence of the BBC, was threatened by union pressure; the free flow of information 'was perhaps of much greater importance than the right to a closed shop'. She worried that

individuals who stood out against unions were not given proper recognition by the BBC.<sup>14</sup>

Mrs Thatcher saw broadcasting in Cold War propaganda terms, as a force shaping behaviour in a Manichaean struggle between good and evil. The BBC agreed, and believed it participated by stretching the variety of views and serving the whole British public. A Reithian commitment to providing imaginative excellence and fostering virtue also remained important in the morality of news and programming in general. Mrs Thatcher thought that BBC programmes led to copycat riots (after Brixton in 1981), gave terrorists publicity, and were politically motivated. She asked, 'if television in the western world uses its freedom continually to show all that is worst in society, while the centrally controlled television of the Communist world and dictatorships show only what is judged as advantageous to them – how are the uncommitted to judge between us?'<sup>15</sup> She thought, as many did, that broadcasting had an immediate and direct impact on behaviour.

Heat was also rising over how the BBC spent its money, the fact that the licence fee 'was not a choice but something that everyone was obliged to pay':<sup>16</sup> she also thought that the BBC had too many people working for it and was complacent. By 1971, when she had become the secretary of state for education, she was determined to appoint Bryan Forbes to the BBC's Schools Broadcasting Council. He was a considerable film-maker, who was producing the Conservative Party political broadcasts, but with no experience of or interest in schools. By now the BBC was more familiar with her style. Curran wrote in a slightly weary memo, 'we shall have to decide in what terms to tell her that this is none of her business'.<sup>17</sup> Forbes 'seemed to us wholly unacceptable in an impartial body'. She also claimed that BBC interviewers let politicians off the hook. Perhaps, Curran concluded, she meant they let the wrong politicians off the hook.

One consistent theme was that she 'regretted that the BBC's independence should rest only on convention'.<sup>18</sup> The BBC's unwritten constitution needed 'entrenching' in law. The BBC was anxious about attempts to regulate it, seeking always to retain a fluid independence. Mrs Thatcher believed the independence was being exercised irresponsibly. She viewed the market as the discipline that brought institutions into line. She believed that the BBC, unlike everything else, needed *more* regulation. She also concluded from BBC meetings, with governors and management and programme makers, that they were united in its defence against her. What was the use of such boards? she asked. They had become creatures of the broadcasters, not their rulers. The sense that the BBC needed root-and-branch reform was in her mind from the fifties and reinforced by the eighties.

Where did Mrs Thatcher get her ideas about broadcasting from? She was not the kind of mother to rush home for *Play School* with the twins. She listened

## 'PINKOES AND TRAITORS'

religiously to *Farming Today* and kept a wary ear on the *Today* programme – presented by the admitted Labour sympathiser Brian Redhead, who she assumed ran it for 'socialist propaganda'. On Saturdays at about ten at night, she told the Board of Management, she tried to find something to watch – but there was never anything worth seeing. She did enjoy, however, Stakhanovite that she was, late-night schools programmes, which 'were really excellent'.<sup>19</sup> Ingham said he only saw her gripped by television twice: on the occasions of Nelson Mandela's release and the siege of the Iranian embassy.<sup>20</sup> Denis Thatcher, however, was a keen rugby, football, golf and cricket watcher, and Chequers, said Nigel Lawson, 'had a chintzy television room that was Denis's snug'.<sup>21</sup> Carol Thatcher said, 'I grew up listening to "But he's a socialist!" whenever Denis disagreed with anyone on television, as if describing some common criminal.' Denis assured John Cole, the BBC's political editor, that the entire management of the Corporation were Trotskyists. He was tickled by the 'Dear Bill' satirical letters in *Private Eye*, written by Richard Ingrams, ostensibly from Denis to Bill Deedes. They were uncannily accurate: one 'letter' about the BBC went: 'Dear Bill, I keep telling the Boss, if ever there was a state-owned industry ripe for privatisation, it is that nest of Pinkoes and Traitors at Shepherd's Bush.'<sup>22</sup>

As Mrs Thatcher rose through the political system the BBC tried, and failed, to get to grips with her. On one programme, when she was education secretary, she was exposed to articulate and angry teachers, during a teacher's strike that damaged schools for a generation and degraded the standing of teachers for decades. It confirmed her hostility to the teaching profession. Although she was 'friendly' afterwards, said John Tisdall, a BBC political adviser, it was an optimistic spin on a bruising event.<sup>23</sup> At a lunch with the governors she said that the aggrieved teachers had not represented 'the Country' as she did, and had been a typical example of the Corporation's secret political agenda. A cautiously firm letter was dispatched: 'I am not including our own assessment of whether they were satisfactory or not since I don't want to prejudge the issue,' said Michael Swann, then the BBC chairman. 'But perhaps when you are less busy you could consider which programmes you felt went wrong and why? I want to pin down things that went wrong and see if anything can be done to make sure that they don't go wrong again.'<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile her office wanted the right-coloured flowers to be part of any set she appeared on. (Blue hyacinths would be 'suitable', went one request, as Mrs Thatcher would be wearing strong blue.) The Board of Management discussed whether this was bias and concluded that as long as Jim Callaghan was offered whatever he wanted – 'a harvest festival arrangement perhaps, a kind of Constance Spry right of reply' – it would be permissible.<sup>25</sup>

She was hawk-eyed for breaches of balance. A programme in the *Open Door* series, made by the Free Palestine Group, seemed to be partial. Her constituents complained that the programme gave no right of reply. Indeed,

the idea of the series was to open broadcasting space up to non-mainstream groups and opinions, and for them 'to say what they want to say in their own way'. Although the BBC selected organisations with a careful eye to balance across the series, it was an innovative attempt to permit partisan, minority expression. Skilled assistance in putting the programmes together was given by the BBC's Community Programme Unit, and the series was edited by Giles Oakley, a punctilious broadcaster who anguished over getting it properly balanced. The problem, or indeed the glory, of *Open Door* was that editorial control was handed over to the groups being broadcast. Viewers accustomed to the BBC's editorial responsibility for content were at first affronted. Mrs Thatcher was incensed at one made by the Anarchists, who had fun describing the defence of Heathrow as a way of softening up the population with 'tanks on the streets', and the army in Northern Ireland as imperialist oppressors. In contradiction of the founding principles of anarchism it ended by giving the address of Anarchist headquarters for viewers to apply for membership forms. Mrs Thatcher's constituent said, 'This was the final straw ... when anyone has declared they are going to set fire to your house, is it usual to hand him the box of matches? This is what the BBC has done!'<sup>26</sup> The director-general pointed out that both the Scouts and the anti-union organisation 'Freedom under the Law' had also had programmes in the series. 'We take care', he assured her, 'not to allow the programmes to promote a political party or to pursue an industrial dispute. *Open Door* allows for dissent and a generous interpretation of free speech.'<sup>27</sup> Mrs Thatcher saw this as a classic example of a weighty principle being used to disguise insidious betrayal.

### THE WRONG SORT OF CHAP?

Perhaps the problem was BBC chaps? They did not seem able to charm her. Everywhere she turned in the British establishment she met a tolerant, faintly dismissive club. The relaxed, jokey, allusive style, the affectation of doing things well without trying, the view of politics as a game, all expressions of male culture, 'were alien to her'.<sup>28</sup> Mrs Thatcher relished situations when she could feel the edges of her 'outsider' status, and the BBC had allowed itself to become – in her eyes – a classic example of establishment pomposity. She worked furiously hard, was happiest with her red boxes, and cultivated an image of superhuman energy. Percy Cradock, who had remained impressively cool in charge of the British embassy in Peking when it was attacked during the Cultural Revolution (no doubt useful training for life in No. 10), wrote, 'One of my most abiding memories is of her coming down the steps from her flat to the study in Downing street, exactly on time, beautifully turned out, with every sign of positive anticipation of a good discussion on some particularly ugly international situation.'<sup>29</sup>

'PINKOES AND TRAITORS'



*BBC chaps: Mrs Thatcher being shown how to use a computer to gather news, 1987.  
Ron Neil seated at bottom right, with Martin Lewis behind him*

As she became a minister, then leader of the opposition and then prime minister, she increasingly made her views of the BBC public, in Parliament, in speeches, in interviews and in occasional off-the-cuff responses to questions. She set up a special Cabinet Committee (Misc 128) which she chaired to consider broadcasting policy. As well as Bernard Ingham, her pugnacious and effective press secretary, she appointed a series of No. 10 advisers on media policy. The BBC was not as hostile to her as she seemed to need it to be. Ian Trethowan, the director-general who succeeded Curran, was a conservative, and there was a group of passionate, independent-minded more right-wing bureaucrats like George Fischer and Ian McIntyre who certainly understood that the mood of the nation had shifted. Michael Checkland and his resources team completely shared her view that the unions were out of control. Sir David Nicholas, who ran ITN, had a wife 'who worshipped Mrs T'. But Percy Cradock summed her up: 'She was intensely feminine, making rapid, instinctive judgements on people, reacting well to certain kinds of men, losing few opportunities of commenting on male weaknesses and inadequacies.'<sup>30</sup> She was impetuous, combative, would jump to conclusions. Ingham said, 'She positively liked to take people on – "not our friends" – she would say after a meeting. But above all she was absolutely serious about policy.'<sup>31</sup>

As a not very secure leader of the opposition she refused numerous invitations to appear on BBC programmes, turning down *Today* (27 times), *Analysis*, *World at One*, programmes on religious belief, *Woman's Hour*, *Question Time*,



1979 'Swingometer': David Butler, Angela Rippon,  
David Dimbleby and Robert McKenzie

interviews with Robin Day, and a proposed *Panorama* special on her.<sup>32</sup> For the BBC it made maintaining political balance difficult, and they thought that as a potential prime minister she needed to be tested for the British public. 'She kept herself for the big stuff,' her office told the BBC, her 'shadow home secretary could for example speak on hanging'. Small-scale guerrilla conflict flared all over the country. Sometimes local BBC reporters may have been too pushy, but she was abrasive, especially when she was trailing Callaghan in the polls. In Carlisle, she treated reporters to a lecture on media failings and then refused to give BBC Radio Carlisle a prearranged interview; in Aberdeen she turned her back on a hapless BBC reporter who had been waiting all day; in Medway the BBC local radio producer, Langley Brown, described her as the 'Ice Matron', and claimed on air that she had yet again refused to do a BBC interview which had been cleared locally and with her campaign manager. It was, he said, another incident for the BBC file. The story bloomed in both the local and national press: 'Riddle of Beeb's "File on No-No Maggie"', said the *Sun's* front page.<sup>33</sup> The BBC went into overdrive apology mode: 'This was not only thoroughly unjustified, but it was impertinent.'<sup>34</sup> Brown was suspended,<sup>35</sup> which in a delicious twist led to the local Medway Conservative Party petitioning the BBC on his behalf, while Mrs Thatcher told the BBC that she had not been at all offended.

Was there a file? Yes and no. The BBC kept a scrupulous record of political appearances to ensure 'a proper audit of balance is kept'. There may have been no file of 'refusals', but her performance and refusal to perform were