

Conversation with Simon Cole (Managing Editor, Sky News), 13 August 2004

SC: Hello.

CS: Hi Simon, it's Charles Shoebridge here, thanks for coming back to me.

SC: That's ok mate.

CS: We spoke last a couple of years ago, you may remember?

SC: Yes.

CS: Partly as a result of what you told me, I'm pursuing a legal case against the Met Police, in the course of which you will be a witness. Were you aware of that?

SC: No.

CS: The purpose of my call today is to tell you that, and also as an act of courtesy really, because I obviously don't want a summons or take a witness in the middle of a holiday or something like that, I need to get your dates to avoid.

SC: So tell me the basis of what you're doing the Met for then.

CS: Sure. That problem is what happened with me at Sky is part of a pattern with the police. They've contacted other people.

SC: Well, what happened with you at Sky?

CS: Well, basically the police, as you know, approached and asked that I wasn't used, and as a result of that I wasn't used, which of course meant that, first of all, I've suffered financial losses..

SC: But, but you have been used by Sky.

CS: I've hardly been used by Sky except on the Littlejohn programme since then. There's probably one or two occasions. There's loads of occasions where quite clearly I was on the list to be used by Sky, where I've been phoned up, then when I agree to come in suddenly I'm cancelled and that happens again and again. Anyway, you can look at the amount I was being used before this call was made, and compare it with after – there's an absolutely clear difference. The fact is that I'm not used by Sky.

SC: But, but people come into vogue and go out of vogue. You were being used extensively by the ITV News Channel, and stations tend to want their own pundits rather than use someone who does the rounds..

CS: That may be the case now (working for ITV), but when I was working for Sky, I was working for Sky. I went to other channels mainly because I wasn't being used by Sky, and besides which, when I was working at Sky I was also working all the time for the BBC as well, it wasn't a problem and people told me it wasn't a problem. Indeed, the people you use now are frequently on other channels too. I don't really want to get into the whys and wherefores. This case is proceeding, and you are a witness in it. But what I want to say is that I don't want to get into some sort of personal issue here. I'm not - this is one of the reasons I'm glad you've called back as well because I want the opportunity to say that I have not got a problem with Sky over this. I said to you two years ago that, as far as I was concerned, I enjoyed working with at Sky, and I know people enjoyed having me there, but also I know that I think Sky has been put into a bit of a difficult position with this. But, I have to say that Sky is the only organisation to my knowledge that has responded in the way the police wanted them to. So, for example, the police have called other organisations and made similar requests and those requests were rebuffed. So, although in an ideal world this sort of situation wouldn't be going on, I have to do something to stop the police doing this, and the only way I can do that is to take them to court, and that is now proceeding.

SC: Right, and so what am I expected to say when I'm a witness then?

CS: Well, just the circumstances as to what happened with the police involvement. Last time you told me that the police had made approaches, and that as a result of that I was taken off.

SC: I never said that. I never said that you were taken off because the police had made approaches. I said that the police had made approaches. I didn't say that you had been taken off because of the police approaches.

CS: Well, that's certainly my recollection of the conversation.

SC: Charles, that is blatantly wrong. Certainly, the police made approaches to us about you.

CS: Right.

SC: But we did not say "Yes, yes, yes, then lay down and tickle my tummy, we're not going to use him anymore".

CS: So you're saying that it was a coincidence that that then happened?

SC: Yes, because we don't do what the Met says. Usually we do the opposite of what the Met says.

CS: Well, that's what I would have thought would be the case with an independent media organisation.

SC: Also, I would never, ever agree to what the police said about using someone, without, if you like, a huge amount of checking. So I have not said "Well, thank you the Met, Charles Shoebridge is no longer on our channel. People go in and out of favour. If you're expecting me to stand up and say that we took you off air because the Met called up one of our boys, that is blatantly rubbish.

CS: Well, at the time, I made notes shortly after our phone call of what was said, and I have those notes here,,,

SC: Well, tell me what I said.

CS: For example, you invited me to write in, if you thought the police had been unfair and that therefore you would consider putting me back on as a result of me rebutting what the police had said. That seems to imply, doesn't it, that the reason I was taken off is that the police asked. I don't want to go into all the detail of this, I mean what can come out in evidence can come out, but the point is you told me at the time, in fact it was on 2 August 2002, certain things which confirmed what I pretty much already knew anyway. Now I don't want to make this embarrassing, obviously I realise it's...

SC: Well, it's obviously going to be highly embarrassing for me.

CS: I feel I've been put into a position where I've absolutely no choice but to pursue this, because of a) the interference with what I'm trying to do, and b) because of financial losses. So what I'm saying is that I'm very upset and sorry because of the relationship I had with Sky before, which was a very good one, and because when we chatted before you seemed to be a reasonable person, and I know from what people tell me you're a reasonable person. I'm very sorry about any embarrassment this case may cause, and it isn't just yourself. I'm embarrassed by it, the police will be very embarrassed about it, as will possibly other organisations involved. But I can't be in a position where, because people may be embarrassed, I therefore can't protect my interests, which have been quite badly damaged, and are continuing to be damaged. I have no choice but to do this. I have been put in this position by the police, in the same way as I feel you and Sky have been. My argument is not with Sky, and I'm very sorry about the embarrassment it may cause both yourself and Sky. I appreciate that, and I'm sorry, but I want you to understand that it is nothing personal. So, that's the first thing. The second thing is that there is another issue here. You told me two

years ago that it wasn't yourself that had written that memo that went around. Now I understand why you told me that, but I'm in a position here where I can show that the memo was sent by yourself, basically saying that I wasn't to be used anymore. Now, once again, I don't have a problem that you told me, and I want you to understand that – well, I know you probably don't care what I think or feel - but I want you to know I do feel that. I can understand completely how you were put in a very difficult position two years ago when this was sprung upon you, and, obviously, I might have been tempted to say the same, to say 'it wasn't me, but this is what happened'. I don't want your embarrassment to be compounded further, because at the moment there isn't any question about integrity, honesty, or anything like that, but that is the position we may come to, and I would rather avoid that, because all I've got is a straightforward dispute with the Metropolitan Police that unfortunately for everybody involved, including myself, is involving others collaterally. I would much rather of course that this case wasn't necessary, and I understand of course if it goes ahead then we may be in this position where of course you will be in the witness box and being cross examined.

SC: Hmmm.

CS: You see it's difficult for me as well, even to explain what's happening, because it's embarrassing even talking about it.

SC: So, so you're claiming Charles, that you've got a copy of a memo I've sent?

CS: I've got three members of Sky's staff – they don't even know they are witnesses, and have no idea of what you have said, or what you would say – who have told me about the memo. I'm saying that if you want to stick to that story, then that's fine. But I don't understand what the problem would be in saying that you did send that memo round, simply because, that was the decision that was made, for whatever reason.

SC: Well, the God's honest truth is that I don't remember. It's two years ago, and a lot's happened since then. But if you say I did, and you have proof, then I did.

CS: Well, I know you did, and I think when you think about it, you'll know you did as well. But what I'm saying to you, if you don't mind my suggestion, is that I don't see it's a big deal that you did that, because you have the right to do what you want to do. You run that place, and..

SC: Without doubt.

CS: The three people I have called or will call as witnesses, because they will be summonsed too, the only reason they're being called is to make the point that you were either mistaken, or that you lied, when you said you hadn't sent it round. I have no beef against you at all on this, I think you do understand that. It's the police who have done this to me and of course to you, and to other people involved, because they've involved people like yourself in their campaign, if you like, that they've had. When I say 'they', I mean we're talking about very, very few people at the top of the tree at Scotland Yard. What I'm pleased about is to hear what you said at the beginning of this conversation because it was my impression certainly that you would do the police's bidding..

SC: No, there's loads of times, this morning I was in trouble with the Foreign Office for not doing their bidding. We don't do peoples bidding.

CS: No of course because that's your job - enough other people will, I know that. This case at the moment is proceeding, the police have mentioned something about settling but I don't think that that will take place to be honest, I don't think the chances of that are high because they're talking about just saving a couple of thousands of pounds in their costs and that's obviously not what we're talking about

here. The other point is that we're still in this position where you are using people for security and for crime expertise who, you know, you are losing out with this issue as well, you're losing, everybody's losing by this arrangement, because Sky News used to use me, and used to benefit from what I used to provide, and that's what I now provide elsewhere. And that is, very cutting analysis. You are well known for breaking the news first, everybody knows that and everybody's very impressed with Sky, and you go to any newsroom and they're watching Sky. Sky is the one they watch, and around the world they watch that

SC: They are..

CS: But what you don't get, on security and intelligence issues, is proper analysis – in other words, people who are right again and again, people who actually did the work, and people who actually command respect elsewhere. It's clear, from talking to your people, that they would like to use me, but they're not allowed to, and I feel that's bad for me, and for you, and the only reason is because of what somebody at the Yard has said years ago. Now, you've used me on Littlejohn before, as I say, and I wonder whether that's provoked any problems with the police. Have they ever come back to you on that?

SC: No, no-one's... your name has never cropped up for ages.

CS: Yes, that's what I thought, because otherwise you'd have said to Littlejohn not to use me as well – although I know that Littlejohn's gone now. Well, that's brought you up to date really. Now, I need to get a statement off you at some point. You're not obliged to provide that, but it would be obviously better once it gets to a hearing.

SC: Well I'm going to get in touch with a Sky lawyer about this because not only my reputation but also the reputation of the channel is at stake here.

CS: That's right, and I don't want to burn my bridges with you here, but I feel I have no choice with this, because of what the police are doing. This is my career and it's because of what I'm saying because I'm accurate in what I say, I'm impartial, I'm very balanced and I'm very, very knowledgeable about these issues on which I talk. In fact you know in three years I've been doing this work now, including a lot for Sky in the early days, I think I'm probably in a lone position, for example with things like March 11th with Madrid and so on, the only person in this whole field who so far, touch wood, hasn't been wrong, and this is something that is sought after by others and by your people at Sky and that's why sometimes even now they still phone just for advice although they explain they can't use me, which seems ludicrous and that is part of the issue we're talking about here where, for example, I have to be honest with you as well, with regards to you a settlement with the police if that were to come about, we're talking about huge future losses as well because of course I'm still not being used by Sky, even though I actually enjoyed working for you, I think you're a very important channel vis a vis the others, and of course I work for the others because they haven't turned over. I know you'll probably object to that phrase, but they haven't rolled over in the same way.

SC: Well I don't really want to say anything else because I think from the implications of what you're saying I'm going to immediately put this up to Sky lawyers, and take their advice because, you know, you say you respect Sky and you want to work for Sky, but this is hardly the way to go about it is it? To basically put us in the frame with the Met and sue us for loss of earnings.

CS: No I'm not suing you for anything. I'm not suing you for anything, you've absolutely the right to take what decisions you want. I've got no action against Sky.

SC: We do have the right to use who we like, we also have the right to not use people.

CS: No that's absolutely right, as I've said to you two years ago, I want you to understand that I've got no beef with Sky whatsoever. I think it's a shame that you did what you did, but there's certainly no legal redress. I wasn't employed by you, I was freelance, working for you as a consultant and commentator, and you can use exactly who you like regardless of exactly who they are and what they are and that's your prerogative, and so I've got no case whatsoever against Sky, nor would I want to have because it would be untenable. My case is against the police interfering in an area in which it is my career after leaving the police, and they are interfering to make that career unpursuable, and of course there is nothing to suggest to me that no matter what career I go in they will carry out that same action and they need to be stopped. Perhaps, you know, you can think of something, but I cannot think of any other way to stop them from doing what they're doing. And of course..

SC: Apart from us using you. Which we do.

CS: There would still be a case against the Met.

SC: I saw you being used in a news package the other day in an interview, talking about terrorism.

CS: Well, you must have taken that from another station, because it certainly wasn't for Sky. You know, I don't work for Sky, and that is well known amongst your employees, that I'm not to be used. Although you do keep me on the database, just to be asked advice. So people are happy to call to get an angle, but of course I don't give that anymore because you're not going to use me. It's a great shame, because it was a mutually beneficial arrangement, that came to an end. But that is by the by. I'm pursuing a case against the Met, and quite obviously you, as the decision maker in this case, are an obvious witness, a central witness, and there's nothing I can do about that. I really wish it wasn't so, and of course if I wasn't at least deferring to your sensitivities in some way, I wouldn't even have called you. I'd have just plonked a summons on your desk.

SC: Mmm.

CS: I called you because I respect you and when we chatted before you were straightforward, well, almost straight forward, two years ago, and when I worked there you were in a respected position and so it's not the case that I'm just going to do something like that, other people would simply get a summons, but I wanted to chat to you first, because courtesy demanded it.

SC: Well ok, I appreciate that, but which court will it appear in?

CS: It's an Employment Tribunal, so it's not completely clear which one it will be, it will probably be the Inner London, Central London, at Woburn Place.

SC: Okay well I'm obviously going to get a Sky lawyer and take his advice.

CS: And feel free to let them call me if they want to.

SC: Sure, I've got your number here. Have you got a lawyer, or..

CS: No, I'm doing it myself.

SC: Ok.

CS: I can't do, it's obviously hugely expensive to hire lawyers, so I'm taking it on board myself, I've had enough losses as a result of this. With regards to needing a statement, because the tribunal has ordered statements from people, and of course it would be great if I could have dates to avoid so that it doesn't inconvenience you any more than it's going to have to.

SC: Dates to avoid, let's have a look.

CS: Just for the next six months. It turns out I don't need those today, but I will them within next week.

SC: Well I can give you dates to avoid.

CS: Ok let's do that.

SC: Next week dates to avoid.

CS: No, no it won't be next week.

SC: When do you think it will be.

CS: No it's within the next six months, that's what I mean, I need them by next week to give to the tribunal.

SC: Oh.

CS: Come back to me on that.

SC: Well I don't know, things crop up, I would say I'm available most of the time.

CS: Ok then.

SC: Ok.

CS: Alright, thanks for that, I'm sorry to break the news as I did but as I say, I just don't see any alternative, and in fact just put yourself in my shoes, what else can you do, except just say alright I'll go and be a shelf stacker for Tesco's or something. What am I supposed to do?

SC: Well, I'll reserve comment for later.

CS: Ok.

SC: Ok Charles.

CS: Thanks again Simon, goodbye.

SC: Goodbye

Call ends at 1440 on 13 August 2004