

Conversation with Simon Cole (Deputy Head, Sky News), 2 August 2002

SC: Simon Cole.

CS: Mr Cole, hello, my name is Charles Shoebridge. Hello. I used to work a lot for Sky, for Sky News. My understanding is that, as a result of something that you put out, that I wasn't to be used by Sky anymore. My understanding is that the Police asked you not to use me. What I was going to say is, are there any grounds for me to write to you, to appeal, or to counter what has been told to you or anything like this? Is it worth me writing to you in that respect?

SC: Yes it is. No problem at all with that Charles.

CS: Ok.

SC: I see the BBC still use you, don't they?

CS: Yes, they do. To be honest with you I used to work a lot for Sky, as you know, and I think I was quite appreciated there, and also it's a very enjoyable atmosphere working there.

SC: Yes, it's a nicer place than the Beeb, that's for sure.

CS: Well, you run a very informal shop and I think it works very well, it's a very exciting place to work. But what I need to know is what were the specific grounds, what was actually said? Don't get me wrong, I can understand that Sky is in a difficult position in this respect, with these sort of aspects, and really, what I can write to you to say 'well that may be true, however this' or whatever, just so that I can have some sort of input?

SC: Yes. I don't think any memo was put out, I mean, that I don't know that that's true that a memo was put out saying don't use you.

CS: Ok.

SC: Um, if we were going to do that, we would never put it on the record anyway, because it's not right.

CS: No, right.

SC: But I think it would be fair to say that certain elements within Scotland Yard, suggested that that there was perhaps a slight question mark against you, and that you did not represent, if you like, the semi-official view of the Yard. Because I think with certain retired, ex or whatever they are Army, RAF, Police, sometimes people have left in circumstances that we don't know about, and sometimes they put themselves up as experts – I'm not saying this has happened in your case – I was caught out at ITN by someone who claimed he was an expert on something

CS: This wasn't the ex-SAS chap was it, by any chance?

SC: No, I've been caught out by an ex-SAS chap here. No, it was a weapons expert at ITN.

CS: Right.

SC: Obviously if there is a major doubt, then people are banned. You're not by any means banned from Sky. It's just that I think what's happened is that, once a bit of a word got out, people tend to go for someone who is, if you like, doesn't have the question mark against them.

CS: They're safer?

SC: That's right. We've got to be careful that we don't, for want of a better phrase, have a rogue elephant on air, who is not putting out what might be regarded as sort of mainstream opinion.

CS: Having said that, everything I ever said for Sky of course was absolutely accurate, and everything I predicted, for example, came unerringly true. Certainly the

only comment I ever had - because you know I also do a lot of written work as well, for the Guardian and Police Review for example..

SC: Right.

CS: ..and the only comment ever that has come from the Police is from Mike Fuller, who's the head of the Drugs Directorate. I did a piece criticising drugs policy and he wrote a piece the following week singing my praises.

SC: Yes

CS: I mean, you know the circumstances under which I left the Police, having taken them to an Employment Tribunal, and that to me is the only reason why the Police would not want me to be used, because certainly I think I've been very balanced, and certainly for the BBC and for yourselves, very balanced sometimes in criticising, sometimes in supporting, what the police are doing. And, generally, supporting the policeman on the ground, because that of course is the job that I did. In my case I have never claimed to be something that I wasn't.

SC: Right.

CS: And the advantage that I had over for example, you use John O'Connor who I've met and is a very nice chap, but you know he left the Police many many years ago.

SC: Well I would accept that John, much though he's a lovely guy and a good performer, I would put him in the category that he's probably out of touch with mainstream Police opinion.

CS: He is, whereas I'm not. You should see the e-mails I get and for example the postbag I got from work on Sky and in the Guardian has been very supportive. When I first went to Sky, I explained the circumstances under which I left, and that was passed on to for example Phil Wardman.

SC: Right.

CS: So there was never any question of...

SC: Of you trying to keep it quiet?

CS: No absolutely, because I have nothing to be afraid of at all. For example, I took the Police to Tribunal on two occasions, and on both occasions the entirely separate Tribunals ruled that the Police had acted appallingly, and, you know, I was awarded compensation in line with that. And certainly I can see that me being on Sky might upset a few people at the very top of Scotland Yard, who perhaps would think "This is the chap that took us to an employment tribunal", but there certainly shouldn't be grounds for complaint from them as to what I'm actually saying.

SC: Yes. I think that what perhaps has happened in this case Charles, is that, without anybody being specific, somebody's said "You want to be a bit careful about him".

CS: A whispering campaign?

SC: And it's said maybe someone who thinks you're a tosser, for want of a better phrase, and is trying to put out a rumble.

CS: It was nothing through you?

SC: (Pause) Sorry?

CS: It was nothing through you?

SC: Not to me personally, no.

CS: Right. Well, I'm very appreciative of your comments.

SC: Well, I think the best thing you can do is to write a letter to me, because ultimately I'm the number two.

CS: Of course.

SC: Explain that you think that perhaps we've been a little unfair to you.

CS: And to yourselves, to be honest, because the producers have said, I've obviously spoken to the producers since as well as of course I've obviously got contact still

within the police at very different levels, and of course within the police people say 'well what happened?', and some of course know what happened whereas of course the producers say 'yeah, it's a shame we can't use you anymore.'

SC: Yes.

CS: Because I'm up to date, I was a front line officer as opposed to a very senior officer, and, according to your producers and viewers generally it seems that on air I was reasonably articulate...

SC: Yes, that's right.

CS: ..and reasonably challenging as well. So for example I was doing a lot of things where the Government would bring out a new initiative and I would say 'but actually if we go back to June 2001 for example, we will find that this was said in exactly the same way, albeit in a slightly different policy and nothing has happened since' and things like that, and so I was pointing out things of that nature. And of course, if you wanted, I might put this in my letter to you then, to go to the Guardian website, put my name in and you'd see the kind of articles I'm writing, very balanced, very challenging and very up to date if you like, and also what I tend to write comes true.

SC: Good.

CS: And it's a shame that Sky is missing out on that because I think Sky's a very worthy channel.

SC: Well, I'm a pretty fair guy Charles and if you think that you've been the victim of a smear campaign with a small s and c, that people have just been saying watch this geezer and you think you have the right to appeal, appeal to me and I'll have a look at the letter, I'll talk with the Head of News about it, and if we're happy I'll give you a call and we'll get you back on.

CS: Yes, because as I say it's great working there and I think I was achieving things for yourselves and for myself as well, and it was a good relationship and certainly the relationship I had with people like Phil Wardman and Mike Wilson and your producers was a very good one and certainly I think since I've gone a lot of the, if you like, cutting edge commentary, without blowing trumpets too much, has disappeared. But I appreciate your call. Who is the Head of News then?

SC: The head of news is a guy called Nick Pollard.

CS: Right of course yes. I'll write to you.

SC: If you write to me because if you write to him he will only ask me to sort it out anyway (laughs).

CS: Yes, he'll say 'what's this about?', exactly.

SC: That's what being a Deputy is all about.

CS: Sure yes.

SC: I'll talk to Wardman as well, he's back next week. But please write, I'm here until a week today.

CS: Oh, are you going?

SC: No, I'm only going on leave. I'm just saying I hope we get it sorted by the end of next week.

CS: Ok, well I appreciate your time and I appreciate your attitude as well.

SC: Ok well Sky's a pretty fair place and if somebody thinks they've had a raw deal then we are prepared to listen.

CS: What happened was I simply stopped being used just like that, and I was being used probably twice a week for many, many weeks, and that was probably a reflection upon what I was able to offer. But thanks very much again.

SC: Ok mate, give us a letter and I'll attend to it straightaway.

CS: I'm grateful.

SC: Ok Charles, bye.
CS: Bye.

Call ends at 1348 on 2 August 2002.