



**CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION**

# Channel 4: The Television Revolution

Panellists: Commissioners Caroline Thomson, Paul Bonner, Peter Ansorge, Karin Bamborough, John Ranelagh and Farrukh Dhondy

Members of the original Channel 4 Commissioning team come together to explain what was so different about this new broadcaster. What were their priorities? How did they achieve these extraordinarily original programmes? And what did the remit to 'innovate in the form and content of programmes' and 'to reach new audiences not catered for currently by British television' mean to them? Significant aspects of people's lives, political opinion, thought and creativity, style and culture were simply untouched by British television in the 1970s. This new channel was determined to give them space, with some of its bravest programming, during its first decade.

## **Channel 4: the First Ten Years**

The first years of Channel 4 were an exhilarating period for anyone involved. The excitement and optimism of changing television carried everyone along – 'the remit' was an explicit rationale to experiment in the form and content of programmes, push the boundaries and to challenge the mainstream by introducing a wider range of distinctive alternative programmes. In many areas Channel 4 introduced a radical diversity – new forms and genres of television, creating spaces where different ideas could meet their audiences.

This short season at the BFI Southbank is planned to celebrate the innovations and principles of early Channel 4, some of which may be relevant again at a time of change as television enters an entirely new digital terrain. A panel discussing Channel 4: The Television Revolution may be the relevant place to offer some elements of the overall intention and rationale for the season.

It was first conceived in 2019, but delayed as the extensive digitisation at the BFI archive and then the pandemic took place. Following the digitisation a large proportion of the Channel's output is now viewable at the BFI Mediatheque and supplements the season.

With Channel 4 transmitting 3000 hours each year the selection for the BFI season of about 20 hours from some 30,000 hours overall was an extremely difficult if not impossible task. Also the cinematic venue and audiences of the BFI Southbank naturally led to an emphasis on showing substantial pieces of ground breaking programme making that inevitably left out whole genres – sport and current affairs, animation and experiment for example – and important elements of the schedule like *Channel Four News* and *Brookside*. However, we hope that in stripping the content across some 9 themed screenings and events we have been able to do some justice to the channel's remarkable output both then and now.

It is clear that this is an epoch where linear television is being replaced, certainly for younger generations, by access to streamers and digital resources. Commercial contexts determine commissioning decisions and

algorithms curate our viewing choices. The notion that television with a market-led approach fulfils audience needs has always been a highly contested one. It is defended by its supporters as democratic, and by its detractors as a self-fulfilling prophecy which gradually closes down the space for public debate.

The various regional and national screenings and events celebrating the 40th anniversary of Channel 4 over the next few months indicate continued interest in the very different framework of that earlier epoch. However disinterring the early years of Channel 4 is not about nostalgia – the innovative principles of its past versions of public service television need to be re-invented and developed in a new epoch by all public service television including Channel 4 itself.

**Rod Stoneman**

### **About the panel**

**Caroline Thomson** joined Channel 4 in 1984 as a Commissioning Editor – commissioning in current affairs and science. She went on to become the first Director of Corporate Affairs working to Michael Grade. In 1996 she became deputy Director of the BBC World Service and in 2000 was appointed Director of Policy at the BBC. She remained a member of the BBC executive, finally as Chief Operating Officer, until 2012. Subsequently she became Executive Director of the English National Ballet and has had a number of non-executive roles including deputy Chair of the National Gallery and Chair of Oxfam and of Digital UK which runs and develops the Freeview television platform.

**Paul Bonner** rose through the ranks of the BBC from Sound FX on the *Goon Show* to Head of Science and Features. He played a leading role in the launch of Channel 4 as Channel Controller and was a key figure in the amalgamation of multiple ITV companies into a single entity. He is co-author of two volumes of *Independent Television in Britain*.

**Peter Ansorge** began his career in TV Drama at BBC Birmingham working as script editor and producer under David Rose. His productions there included *Gangsters*, David Hare's *Licking Hitler* and *Empire Road*. His later award-winning drama series commissions at Channel 4 include *A Very British Coup*, *Traffik*, *GBH*, *The Politician's Wife* and *Tales of the City*. He currently teaches the popular 'Writing The TV Pilot' course at the National Film & TV School which is sponsored by Sara Geater at All3 Media.

**Karin Bamborough** joined Channel 4 in 1981 as Commissioning Assistant for Fiction and Arts, became Commissioning Editor for Film on 4 and single drama, and finally co-deputy head of drama with Peter Ansorge. In 1991 she left Channel 4 to join the Norwegian State Broadcaster NRK as Controller of Drama. On returning to the UK she was an independent producer before becoming Head of Producing at the National Film & TV school, where she is still a senior tutor.

**John Ranelagh** began his television career as a Researcher on BBC TV's *Midweek* and was Associate Producer of *Ireland: A Television History*. He joined Channel 4 with Jeremy Isaacs and was Special Assistant to the Chief Executive, Secretary of the Board, and a Commissioning Editor. He developed the commissioning system, created the *Equinox* strand, and was responsible for *Jesus: The Evidence*. He was the first television professional appointed to the Independent Television Commission.

**Farrukh Dhondy** worked as Commissioning Editor, Multicultural Programming, for Channel 4 between 1984 to 1997. In this capacity, he was responsible for hundreds of hours of TV in all genres: entertainment, situation, comedy, TV drama, film, education and factual, and helped greenlight iconic shows like *Desmond's* and *The Bandung File*.

---

#### CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION

**Music & Youth: The Tube + Discussion & Q&A**

Fri 2 Sep 18:20

**Comedy: Discussion & Q&A**

**+ The Comic Strip Presents: Five Go Mad in Dorset**

Tue 6 Sep 18:15

**Channel 4's TV Drama Revolution: Discussion + Q&A**

Sun 11 Sep 14:15

**A Very British Coup + intro by author Chris Mullin**

Sun 11 Sep 16:30

**Diversity: Handsworth Songs + Q&A with**

**John Akomfrah + Panel Discussion & Q&A**

Mon 12 Sep 18:15

**Out and Proud: Veronica 4 Rose**

**+ Out on Tuesday + intro by original**

**Channel 4 Commissioner Caroline Spry**

Thu 15 Sep 18:15

**Access / Direct Speech: The Work They Say Is Mine**

**+ Women of the Rhondda + Face of Our Fear**

Tue 20 Sep 18:15

**Channel 4: The Television Revolution**

Fri 23 Sep 18:20

**Controversy: Jesus the Evidence + V + Mother Ireland**

Sat 24 Sep 18:00

**Who Needs Channel 4?**

Wed 28 Sep 18:20

**Channel 4 Then and Now conference**

Fri 23 Sep 10:00–17:00 and Sat 24 Sep 10:00–17:00

Regional screenings and events will be taking place at these venues across the UK (please go to [bfi.org.uk/whatson](http://bfi.org.uk/whatson) for links): Arncliffe, Bristol; Filmhouse Edinburgh; Queen's Film Theatre, Belfast; Y Drwm, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Explore thousands of titles from across Channel 4's history in our free Mediatheque

#### BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

#### BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

#### BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.