

Off The Record

A drama in one act

by Mark Edwards

Spotlight Publications

Off The Record

CAST (in order of appearance)

Louise Fisher, interviewer & presenter

Steven Ashford, Labour MP for North Ealing and Social Security Minister

David Relton, Conservative MP for Westfield & Fordingbrook, Hampshire

Bill Davis, radio producer

Time - the near future

Place - a BBC Radio studio, Broadcasting House, London

NB Throughout, Bill Davis is not seen, only heard from offstage, via a speaker. There is an unseen window on stage right, through which the characters can see the producer's control room.

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Scene 1

A radio studio – a table, with three microphones on it and three chairs around it

There is a scattering of paper on the table. There is a door up stage right

Louise Fisher sits in the middle, flanked by the two men

Louise ... turning to the issue of general, long-term welfare, what safeguards, Mr Ashford, will the Government put in place, if these measures are passed, to protect those who will inevitably fall through the net?

Ashford I've made this quite clear, before, but I'll reiterate it now, that the White Paper published last year has at its core a wide-ranging, detailed framework with regard to those who may require support in addition to that contained in the main section of the proposals.

Louise Isn't it true, Mr Relton, that the Government's plans will ensure that no one will be without adequate pension provision?

Relton I only wish that were the case. Unfortunately, what the Government proposes will leave millions, both young and old, in perilous straits. We have to make clear that what the Government puts forward as to the future of this country's finances will fall from idealist's fantasy into the stark reality of a New Labour nightmare ...

Ashford I see David's been infected by the more rabid elements of the media ...

Relton (*forcefully*) The Government plans to abolish the state pension system without anything approaching the sufficient means to replace it. Now, it's all very well for Steven Ashford to sit there and blithely trot out that the Government has made suitable provision for all when he knows as well as well as I do that every independent report into this matter completely contradicts this complacency displayed by the Labour party.

Louise Mr Ashford?

Ashford The new Pensions Bill sets out a structure that will be both comprehensive and inclusive. The capital sums applicable to each person will provide the basis for secure, sound futures for everyone. The McKenzie Report confirmed that the Government's proposals would provide the necessary capital under the umbrella of the new regulatory organisation ...

Relton The McKenzie Report stated that these plans were likely to lead to widespread financial hardship for very many people, particularly the most elderly and vulnerable ...

Ashford I don't think the Conservative party is in any position to offer a lecture on social welfare and responsibility ...

Relton Can the Labour party still claim that state pensions are safe in their hands?

Louise We're running out of time, gentlemen. In a few seconds, Mr Ashford, do you think that the Government will not only win the support in the Commons tonight, but also in the country as a whole?

Ashford I believe that people in this country fully appreciate and understand the need for reform; that the state pension system, in its present form, is untenable and that what the Government proposes is the best, the most far-reaching and inclusive way forward towards a secure, long term future for all.

Louise Isn't it true, Mr Relton, that the Tory party has been unable to produce any alternative plans that have been met with any credence or enthusiasm by either the general public or financial institutions?

Relton What we in the Conservative party have advocated is a system that will combine the old with the new; the secure permanency of the old, with the rationally modern progressive, yet fairly and finely balanced of the new ...

Ashford David Relton's answer is as vague as the Tory alternative. They have come with nothing concrete ...

Relton And the Labour party would wish the country to be led into a narrow, blind alley, facing only the spectre of catastrophe ...

Louise Gentlemen, I'm afraid ...

Relton I hope the minister's conscience will contemplate the fate of millions of pensioners.

Ashford Typically ill-considered and foolish ...

Louise I'm afraid we really must leave it there. Steven Ashford, David Relton, thank you both very much. Before we go, tonight's main headline: the debate continues in the House of Commons tonight on the

final reading of the Pensions Bill into the future of state pensions. The vote that will follow the debate is expected to be extremely close, with some Labour sources admitting the Government could be defeated, such is the number of Labour rebels, following what one MP has called the fiercest, most acrimonious parliamentary debate for years. (*A slight pause*) From me, Louise Fisher, and all the 'News Tonight' team, a very good night.

The broadcast over, the three participants visibly relax. They collect papers from the desk

Relton (*standing up*) Thank you, Louise, always a pleasure.

Davis That was fine, Louise. Thank you, gentlemen; I'm sure you'll both be anxious to make a quick departure.

Louise (*ironically*) The arena awaits you; two more gladiators to join the fray.

Relton (*glancing at his watch*) I hope that cab's waiting. Of all the innumerable pleasures and past times one misses after leaving office, none is more sadly mourned than the loss of the ministerial car. What have you got at the moment, Steven? Still the Rover?

Ashford A Rover 75.

Relton (*with a bland smile*) I'm sure you'll be in a Jaguar in a couple of year's time.

Ashford stands up as Relton moves towards the door

Relton (*turning to Louise*) Do I need a code to get out?

Louise No, just pull the handle.

He does so, but the door does not open

Relton It appears to be stuck.

Louise (*puzzled*) Oh?!

She stands up and walks to the door and tries it herself

I'll get them to open it from outside with the security code.

She moves back to the desk and speaks into the microphone

Bill, the door seems to be jammed; could someone open it from outside?

Davis Okay, just a moment.

A pause; all three look expectantly at the door

Relton (*half-seriously*) This smells like another Machiavellian BBC conspiracy, thwarting the political process.

Davis I'm terribly sorry about this, everyone, but there seems to be an electrical fault with the door. I'll get an engineer down here and we'll have you out in a jiffy.

Relton (*exasperated*) This is ridiculous! We could be stuck in here all night before a BBC engineer deigns to put down The Sun and pick up his tool-bag! Demarcation and restrictive practice! As much part of the BBC as Terry Wogan or 'Blue Peter'! The BBC – one of the last bastions we haven't defeated, eh, Steven?

Ashford (*mildly*) There's always someone who cracks hysterically during tense, claustrophobic situations.

Louise Well, I'll be adding to the hysteria if I can't reach the loo soon.

Relton It'll be a question of what gets us first: thirst, lack of oxygen or insanity.

Louise If you start tunnelling now you should be out by the next election.

Relton (*with growing frustration*) This is ridiculous!

Louise Never mind, even if you're too late, surely it's only a formality; your two votes would cancel each other out.

Relton Oh, I wouldn't always take things at face value, Louise. Beneath Steven's New Labour rationale beats the seething heart of Old Labour.

Ashford remains impassive

Still waters run deep, eh, Steven?

Ashford (*evenly*) And deep waters still run to catch the unsuspecting.

Off The Record

A compelling political drama by Mark Edwards for two men and one woman

Plot Summary

Two politicians, one Labour and one Conservative, are accidentally locked inside a radio studio. In the relaxed atmosphere they reveal more about each other than perhaps they intended. And was it really an accident? ...

Approx. 30 minutes