

COCK-UP OR CONSPIRACY

PRESENTER: GUNNAR PETTERSSON

PRODUCER: JULIAN HALE

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PARTICIPANTS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

Bernard Porter, historian, Hull University

Dr. Yacub Zaki, The Moslem Institute

Michael Billig, sociologist, Loughborough University

Christopher Andrew, historian, Cambridge University

Joe Haines, journalist

Brian Crozier, writer and campaigner

Robin Ramsay, editor, Lobster magazine

(Porter:) *"I think when politicians go around trying to tell people, publicly and also privately, that what they think is a conspiracy was a cock-up, I think then you really start suspecting that there may have been a conspiracy somewhere there in the background.*

(Zaki:) *The invisible government is composed of faceless people, whose names or whose faces we never hear or see. But occasionally one can glimpse them.*

Conspiracy theories have one unique selling point. At a single explanatory stroke coincidences form a pattern, chaos is given meaning and the chapter of accidents reveals an author. A kind of dot-to-dot approach to history, the conspiracy theory joins up the jumble of numbers finally to reveal the shape of monstrous intent: it all connects.

(Billig:) *It's the most wonderful theory because it explains everything - but because it explains everything it explains nothing...*

(Andrew:) *I think that throughout the ages it's the single commonest misunderstanding about the way that the world works.*

But where the conspiracy theorist sees evil design, the cock-up theorist sees no more than bumbling, accident-prone human beings trying more or less successfully to cope with a brutally capricious world. The only thing that connects is the one cock-up following on another.

(Haines:) *"Cock-up... isn't it Murphy's law, that if you drop a piece of bread and jam, the jam falls face downwards. I mean, that's what the cock-up theory basically is..."*

At this point, though, the conspiracy theorist reaches up on his library shelves for facts and examples, all the sinister minutiae he has accumulated.

(Zaki:) *For instance, France - France has been a colony of the Freemasons ever since the Dreyfus affair. Although Dreyfus was probably innocent, the Dreyfusards capitalised on their victory to de-Catholicize France and convert it into a Masonic type state. Now, if we look at the present incumbent of high office in France, Mitterand: his brother is the top Mason in France, the head of the Grand Lodge of the Orient.*

And so, the cock-up or conspiracy debate continues, long into the night. It's one of those arguments we all seem to have taken part in at some time. especially in times of great international tension. Everyone has an opinion about it and we seem prepared to label ourselves as one or the other. Fragments of the debate have entered the ever-growing dictionary of clichés: "The great, British cock-up...", "I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but..."

Although it often grows surprisingly heated, sooner or later the argument descends into a quarrel over the interpretation of details, and it usually ends in a rather unsatisfactory draw. One is then left with the feeling that it wasn't really so much about all the details, as a conflict between two fundamentally different philosophies, or at least two psychological types who view the world in diametrically opposed ways. The Cambridge historian Christopher Andrew:

(Andrew:) *It's really an infantile way of looking at the world, but on the other hand deep within us all there are plenty of infantile instincts, and conspiracy theory is one of them.*

(Haines:) *The sophisticated people, who thrive on intellectual exercise, and the company of journalists in particular, believe that there has to be an ulterior motive behind every act of government, that there has to be a sinister reason behind every apparent act of compassion, that there has to be a predictable reason behind every surprising decision.*

Joe Haines, journalist and former press secretary to Harold Wilson. So, whether they deserve it or not, let's for a moment promote the two viewpoints to the rank of, at least, philosophising. At its most extreme, conspiracy theory proposes that behind the history of human society, on a large as well as a small scale, there is a concealed, primary force, or power. Call it God, historical determinism, Freemasons, or extraterrestrial visitors. Nothing, but nothing, happens by pure accident, least of all in the political sphere. Deep beneath social reality there is a hidden agenda.

Indeed, from an historical point of view, it is no accident - to coin a phrase - that conspiracy theories of an elaborate, global kind seem to have emerged at the end of the 18th century,

particularly in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The explanation for this could be twofold. On the one hand that, from 1789, history seemed to "accelerate" and in doing so tore apart the previous comforting categories. Reality became modernity, limitless and fragmentary, and demanded explanation and simplification. Consequently, the revolutionary turmoil was blamed on Jews and secret societies like the Freemasons and the Illuminati.

The other part of the explanation might simply be that, with the Enlightenment and the secularisation of life and society, the vacuum left by God had to be filled. Conspiracy theories are a result of having abandoned one set of beliefs and replacing it with a new form of explanatory myth.

(Billig:) *But there is a difference. The sort of religious mythologies identify the conspirators as being non human, either being gods - very good gods, you can have a conspiracy of a good god, or several gods who control what happens, or some evil forces and so on. But political conspiracy theory brings these mythological beings down to earth and says there's actual human beings who exist as conspirators and who are controlling events in the universe."*

The sociologist Michael Billig of Loughborough University. Now, cock-up theory, at its extreme, is the doctrine of coincidence, randomness and universal incompetence. History - and particularly politics - is a mess: a number of more or less controllable, more or less survivable accidents, which simply don't leave the time or the space for intricate webs of deceit to be spun. Those conspiracies that have existed have first of all never truly succeeded, and secondly, they've essentially been bad apples for which you can't really blame the barrel.

In fact, cock-up theory often becomes a kind of post-modernism. Like art and culture, politics in these post-industrial times are neither more nor less than what they seem. There are no hidden depths. Everything is foreground. Or, to use an apt computer acronym, we have reached the WYSIWYG society: What You See Is What You Get.

Some even argue that whereas conspiracy theory is ancient in all its superstition and longing for coherence, cock-up theory is not only a distinctly modern phenomenon but it is also an improvement, a progression to a more mature view of the world, a coming to terms with life without God.

(Andrew:) *There are two ways of explaining things when they go wrong. One is by some malign conspiracy: now, at virtually all times and all places and in all cultures, that is the way that people have been tempted to explain their misfortunes. Then there's the other way: cock-up theory. In other words, when something goes wrong it's more likely to be the product of human incompetence or accident than it is of conspiracy. Now, it's wrong to suppose that that's a piece of elementary common sense, that it goes back to the origins of human society. Actually, it's really rather a historical novelty and I believe it's one of the greatest*

contributions to modern mental health that society has ever made. The instinct that there has to be some malign conspiracy is, I think, a way that leads us away from rationality, away from exploring our own responsibilities."

But Christopher Andrew's "hard line" cock-up theory obviously won't find agreement with everyone. Robin Ramsay is editor of the investigative, "parapolitical" magazine *Lobster*:

(Ramsay:) People always say there's some kind of great conflict between cock-up theory and conspiracy theory and most areas, as you would expect, yes, cock-up theory prevails, it's absolutely universal, human beings are incompetent on the whole. So most things are cock-ups plus conspiracy. I mean Watergate is a classic example: a series of extraordinary cock-ups and muddles, starting with the break-in itself, and then you have a whole series of little conspiracies interlinked, which were involved with covering this up or covering that up, or keep the CIA out, or keep the FBI out, this great complicated fuzz. So, there is no contradiction between cock-up theory and conspiracy theory. And people who use this antithesis... it's a low-level academic trick. It passes for sophistication. If you're sophisticated in this society you talk about the cock-up theory, the cock-up theory is sophisticated and the conspiracy theory is for morons. The truth is, almost always both are involved. And the idea that cock-up theory is some kind of theoretical step upwards is just silly.

Moronic or not, conspiracy theory does seem to be on the one hand a deeply rooted human instinct and, on the other, one that has become deeply disreputable. And for very good reasons. One need not look too closely at our own century to see that a frightening amount of blood has been spilt as a result of conspiracy theories, and the counter-conspiracies they always seem give rise to.

Stalin's and Hitler's paranoias about Trotskyists and Jews have sometimes been explained - often in what used to be called 'vulgar Marxist' terms - as cleverly constructed excuses for something else, a demonic ruse to divert attention from the reality of oppression. But the crucial and frightening thing is, of course, that Stalin and Hitler did completely believe in the reality of a Trotskyist plot and a Jewish conspiracy against the Aryan race. Conspiracy theories take a remarkably strong grip on the mind.

But what sort of mind? Can one draw a kind of psychological portrait of the conspiracy theorist? Michael Billig has studied these questions in some depth, particularly as they apply to the extreme right-wing:

(Billig:) The sort of person who looks likely to be attracted to these theories at the moment is likely to be someone who has less education for the job they might hold than you would expect someone to have for that sort of job. And it would also be someone who would wish for education and would wish to have had education. Many of the conspiracy theories have all the outward appearances

of being academic theories. Detailed footnotes, cite other conspiracy theories and so on. And this will appeal to the sort of person who's missed out on education, maybe even has a grievance against people who they feel look down upon because they themselves are uneducated. And the conspiracy theory provides them with the truth, provides them with an education - and therefore, for a conspiracy theory to do this it has to look the business.

And a curious business it looks, too. One of the things that has perhaps made conspiracy theory so disreputable is that it doesn't allow for even a shred of doubt. The conspiracy theorist finds confirmation for his theory in absolutely everything, including a lack of evidence or even a whole range of counter-evidence. The phenomenon is well known in counterintelligence circles, for instance, that the absence of proof for a Communist or a Capitalist plot simply goes to prove how devilishly cunning the plotters are. In a similar way, many believers in a UFO cover-up on the part of the governments of the world argue that the ridicule their theory is constantly met with, is part of the plan. In other words it's part of the extreme subtlety and therefore world-shattering importance of the cover-up.

(Andrew:) Conspiracy theory in one important and tragic sense is like AIDS. It's incurable. Once you've caught it there is no cure. The only answer to conspiracy theory is preventive medicine, because once someone has become a conspiracy theorist all evidence proves the conspiracy. Either the evidence is suspicious, which of course proves the conspiracy, or the evidence doesn't support the suspicions, which only proves that the conspiracy is on an even bigger scale and that one of its purposes has been to suppress the evidence.

Where this capacity to absorb counter-evidence becomes particularly pernicious is of course in those post-war theories that claim, despite all physical proof to the contrary, that the Holocaust is the hoax of the century. The fact that so many people believe the extermination camps existed proves nothing but the enormous power of Jewish interests, particularly in world media.

If anything shows the tenacity of conspiracy theories, it is the survival and recent resurgence of those theories of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy. *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, that notorious czarist fake from the turn-of-the-century, is still in print and being circulated, not least in the Soviet Union. The Polish presidential elections last year saw rumours and speculations of a Jewish plot to seize the reins of power. And in certain strands of Islam, too, the Jewish world conspiracy is seen as a powerful weapon against Moslem interests. Dr Yaqub Zaki of the Moslem Institute described to me some sinister threads he sees running through politics and society:

(Zaki:) Well, if I can quote from a will that was proved last week, of the Earl of Cholmondeley, who died leaving the largest will ever proved in British history... Now, he was the man who walked backward before the Queen, at the ceremonial opening of

Parliament and he was a great landowner, with lands in Cheshire. Now, it was commented at the time that a landowner of this scale would have been expected to leave a will in the region of 20 to 30 millions. In fact, it was 118 millions. And if we look into his background we find that his father was married to one of the Sassoons, who are Indian Jews but the Sassoons were originally Iraqi, that is to say Arab Jews, and she was the granddaughter of Rothschild. Now, we have to ask the question: when you have money at that scale is not that money translated into political power? Now, for instance, we find that at one point, in the career of Mrs Thatcher one third of her Cabinet was Jewish.

But it's not just in Britain now.

(Zaki:) *The Russian revolution was financed by Kuhn Loeb & Co, the Jewish bankers of New York, you know Jacob Schiff. Similarly with the revolution that overthrew Sultan Abdul Hamid. It was financed by the Mayor of Rome who was the top banker in Italy, and he was a Jew and a Freemason. I'd like to put on record, this is not a blanket condemnation of Jews. As Sir Oswald Mosley said: I am not opposed to the Jews, what I am opposed to is the policy of some Jews. The powerful weapon is global control.*

There is some debate among academics about the origins and nature of the Jewish conspiracy theory, whether for instance it is an integral part of anti-semitism generally or a subsequent conceptualisation of it. The anti-Jewish myths and superstitions of the Middle Ages, for instance - how they poisoned wells, caused the plagues, slaughtered Christian children for their blood, and so on - are markedly different from the elaborate and seemingly sophisticated conspiracy theories that began to emerge in the 19th century. These were specifically about Jewish world domination and reached their apex, or nadir rather, with The Protocols of Zion.

As Yaqub Zaki showed, political and economic power is at the centre of modern Jewish conspiracy theories. And in the time-dishonoured tradition they weave isolated facts into a grand design.

(Billig:) *"Where it becomes conspiracy is what is implied by listing the details. In late 19th century anti-semitic propaganda, also in the Nazi propaganda, and also as it exists today, would be the sort of argument saying, look how powerful they Jews are, look at Communism - Karl Marx was a Jew - look at capitalism: the Rothschilds are Jews. And it's the style of arguing saying: look, Jews in Communism, Jews in capitalism, therefore communism and capitalism are both the same, they're both Jewish, the Jews are getting control over the whole world, from the left and the right. It's at that stage, where pointing out a fact has gone from pointing out isolated facts into trying to weave a story which suggests that the facts are not coincidental."*

Theories of a Jewish plot to dominate the world is the one area

where conspiracy theories take on the distinct shape of political myth. One of the most curious aspects of these anti-semitic theories is of course that they have appeared in societies where there are relatively few, if any, Jews. Poland is a case in point. Another is that of Japan where there are virtually no Jews at all: a recent book published there, about a Jewish world conspiracy, sold half a million copies. Michael Billig describes the strength of this mythology with an example from closer to home:

(Billig:) *In political terms there is virtually no reason for groups like the National Front, or other contemporary British fascist parties, to be anti-semitic. They gain nothing from it politically. In fact, their anti-semitism is often a political disadvantage, they have to hide it when they seek mass support. People say, well why do they have these beliefs? Why haven't they dropped a belief in a Jewish world conspiracy for a belief in a world West Indian conspiracy, or something else which may resonate to their other anti-immigration stances. And I think the reason is that culture of anti-semitism exists on the extreme right, you have believers in the anti-semitic mythology who take part in that politics, have positions of power in these small little groups, and who educate new recruits. And so because of the existence of a culture, it has its own momentum."*

Now, it seems an obvious historical fact is staring us in the face: conspiracy theories emerge at times of crisis. Militant Islam and Eastern Europe both provide telling contemporary illustrations of a very old fact. Most analyses of conspiracy theory include the idea that we have a profound need to apportion blame.

(Andrew:) *My own conviction is that conspiracy theory arises not from some particular philosophy, but from a deep human instinct. Inside all of us is the desire to blame somebody else when something goes wrong. And all that conspiracy theory consists of is an elaborate form of scapegoating. In other words, instead of blaming simply one other person you blame a collectivity of other people: Jews, Jesuits, Freemasons, the CIA, the KGB, another political party.*

(Billig:) *There may be occasions where people might prefer a conspiratorial explanation for a particularly dramatic event, because an explanation in terms of some sort of chance occurrence, or even something rather shabby, as the cause, just demeans the event. People may feel that the murder of a particular person was so significant, so horrific that it deserves a significant explanation."*

Nonetheless, it seems equally obvious that blame-placing is by no means the only explanation for conspiracy theories. After all, they also occur where the subjects of the conspiracy simply aren't

there and no particular blame presumably need be placed: again, Japan comes to mind. And they crop up even though no particular disaster has occurred, such as the UFO cover-up theory. Another instance of that, incidentally, is the relatively harmless, but nonetheless extraordinary, theory elaborated in the best-selling book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. This seems to show that a large part of European history has been influenced by a secret society known as the Priuré de Sion. This was established about 900 years ago to protect none other than the direct descendants of Jesus Christ, who are today, somewhat surprisingly, involved in promoting a federal Europe.

Here, instead, we seem to have an equally profound but perhaps less harmful human need: that of deluding ourselves into seeing past, present and future as a coherent narrative, or indeed a plot. It's the consoling aspect of myth and fiction, the need to snuggle up indoors with the good book of human history while, outside, the rain of accident and coincidence lashes against the window.

So it's obvious that conspiracy theories aren't created out of nothing. But what sort of soil do they need in order to grow, and in particular what political context? It's a pertinent fact that conspiracy theories in Eastern Europe have emerged along with the process of democratisation, but the question remains unanswered whether they have been reinvented or merely reawakened. Perhaps the cock-up or conspiracy debate itself is a peculiar feature of democratic societies. A dictatorship, one might think, is a conspiracy in practice. Certainly, the difference between the two major political systems is seen by some as essential.

(Andrew:) *In a closed society, in which you divide the world into the sheep and the goats, the goats must always be plotting against the sheep. Within a plural society, even if you tend to prefer people who vote for the same party as you do, there is not quite the same compulsion to believe that you are dealing with monsters...*

(Crozier:) *All Communist governments, starting with the one established in the Soviet Union, are dedicated to conspiracies as a permanent means of carrying out their policies. In the West you can get the occasional conspiracy, and democracies are vulnerable.*

The writer and political campaigner Brian Crozier, agreeing there with Christopher Andrew. Now, those conspiracies may not be endemic to the West, but conspiracy theories of one kind or another have attracted enormous interest in the last 30 years or so. It seems to have begun with the assassination John F Kennedy in 1963, an event which became something of a watershed. The Credibility Gap opened up; the Official Version of Events, particularly in the form of the Warren Commission report, became almost by definition a very suspicious-looking parcel indeed; and the Cover-up, a phenomenon inextricably linked with the information society, entered our political mythologies.

But the debate has always come back to one question: what

exactly is a conspiracy? Joe Haines, who is, incidentally, a firm believer in cock-up theory, gave me a recent example.

(Haines:) *When Michael Heseltine challenged Mrs Thatcher for the leadership of the Conservative Party he did so in concert with some of his colleagues who felt similarly. That was a perfectly proper challenge to her: open and within the rules. But then after Mrs Thatcher won after the first ballot, and really quite decisively, a group of Cabinet ministers are alleged to have met over dinner and decided that they would withdraw their support from the then leading candidate, thus compelling her to stand down in the next round of the ballot. Now that seems to me to be a classic conspiracy.*

(GP:) So how would you then define conspiracy?

(Haines:) *I think there are three criteria. One is loyalty, another is legality, the third is the target: is it a proper target? For example, it would be perfectly proper for a group of army officers and security service personnel to plan together to destabilize or destroy the IRA. But were those same officers, of all the services and both the security services, to band together in order to destabilize the properly elected government, that would be disloyal, illegal, the wrong target - a clear conspiracy.*

At the heart of the cock-up or conspiracy debate there seems to be some confusion about what constitutes not only a conspiracy, but a conspiracy theory. A case could be made for saying that there are in fact two kinds, and that the one has been tarred with the brush of the other. So far we've mainly come across huge, elaborate delusions about world domination, about hidden powers behind all of history. You might call them "global" conspiracy theories. Disreputable, ridiculous, infantile, uneducated - few would have any argument against those descriptions, at least in polite society.

On the other hand we have what might be called "local" conspiracy theories. They're about specific historical - and usually post 2nd world war - events, such as, indeed, political murders from Kennedy to Olof Palme, or government coups from Iran in 1953 to Romania in 1989. Or political scandals from the Wilson plot to the Stalker affair. Robin Ramsay of Lobster magazine makes a similar distinction between conspiracy theory and conspiracy research.

(Ramsay:) *Roughly speaking, it seems to me that a conspiracy theorist tends to take the extreme complexity of political and social events and boil them down to a very small number of elements and thus come up with a very simple-minded view of the universe. So conspiracy theorists tend to simplify things. Whereas conspiracy researchers, or what I would prefer to call the parapolitics people, tend to take what looks like a fairly straightforward kind of political event and by digging into it they always end up making it more complex than it was to start with. So, in a sense, the processes go in different directions.*

Now, as opposed to the delusions of conspiracy theory, parapolitics is for Robin Ramsay simply a method of enquiry, intellectual curiosity about politics and how the world works, and he places it somewhere between journalism and professional history.

(Ramsay:) *"There's a famous quotation about journalism being the first rough draft of history. In that sense, much parapolitics is the second draft, in which you accumulate, collect lots and lots of little fragments, much of it journalism, and reassemble it to make a second draft. And if you like, historians are 3rd, 4th and 5th draft, or ad infinitum. It seems to me that the major event of the last 20 years, say since the Kennedy assassination and subsequent revelations about the CIA, has been the world-wide, almost universal discovery of secret institutions, parallel states, or parastatal organisations. There is indeed a kind of parallel universe to what is regarded as politics. My personal quibble is essentially that what is taught as politics, what is thought of as politics, what is presented on the media as politics, seems to focus almost entirely on the Houses of Parliament in this country. And almost nothing of importance goes on there. All the important stuff goes on elsewhere... The parapolitics perspective is: there's always another dimension."*

For the professional historian these areas of research present particular problems. The history of conspiracies is by definition the history of secrets, of the unknowable. The constantly raging debates about the secret services and KGB infiltration show clearly enough that when evidence is in short supply speculation and guesswork come cheap. Bernard Porter of Hull University has come up against the problem when writing the histories of the Special Branch and, most recently, political espionage in Britain. At times, he says, it seemed like something of a game.

(Porter:) *I think that's why a lot of people who work in this field do it, because it's a sort of game. And it was fun at first. Towards the end it got less fun, partly because some of the things you seemed to be finding when you were digging underneath, and partly because of this relativity about everything. Any book that you read on this, any piece of evidence, derived ultimately from people who were, to put no finer point on it, professional liars. And consequently they could be stringing you along on all kinds of things. And this sense of, sort of, absolutely wandering around, absolutely nothing you can touch, nothing you can grip. After a bit, it starts making you feel a little bit sick."*

Now, historians broadly agree that conspiracies have had a limited impact on history: the effects have been either temporary or trivial. But there is a distinct difference in emphasis as to the significance of what we do not, or cannot or may not know. I asked both Bernard Porter and, first, Christopher Andrew what difference it would make to the historians if all the archives, particularly on the secret services, were suddenly opened up.

(Andrew:) I am sure history would be re-written to some extent. What we would understand, however, is more about why things happened, rather than discovering things had happened that we did not know about. The importance of having access to the intelligence archives seems to me to be the following: people can only act on the basis of one of two things: on the basis of guesswork, guessing what things may be like, or on the basis of actual information, right or wrong, as to what things are like. Now, I think in the majority of cases the most important information that is available could be found in the newspapers. But there are a minority of cases in which the most important information we call secret intelligence and can only come from covert sources. So, undoubtedly, once we have access to the secret files, we will have a far better understanding in some cases of why things happened, why governments acted as they did. But even then, it's only going to be one element.

(Porter:) Oh, yes... Releasing all the papers there possibly are would be superb for a historian. There's an enormous amount that's still not released. There is this fiction in Britain that we have a 30-year rule. Of course, the things which are released after 30 years are entirely harmless. An enormous proportion is kept behind. I, for example, have not been given access to papers that are more than a hundred years old, not many but some, and there are whole areas, the whole area of the Special Branch archive, for example, you can't see and MI5 and M16 and so on. If you could just look at everything it would be superb, but it would also have another effect, because as soon as these agencies and people got to know that even in 50 or 100 years' time historians would be able to see all this stuff, they'd stop producing all this stuff. They would shred it at the time. That actually is the main - I'm not saying it's an argument against it - but it's the main flaw in the idea of some sort of open government act, or access to knowledge act, Freedom of Information Act, that people would immediately start telephoning messages, for example, instead of sending memos.

There's one particular period in recent British history that's given rise to a great amount of conspiracy theory - and indeed conspiracy research. This is the period of the last Wilson Government, marked at one end by the 1974 miners' strike and rumours of an intervention by elements within the army and secret services, and at the other end by the various conspiracies said to be behind the Wilson resignation in March 1976. For Brian Crozier, a veteran opponent of Communism and subject of several conspiracy theories himself, the Communist threat and the possibility of army intervention were very real indeed, particularly around Wilson's resignation.

(Crozier:) The conspiracy to take over this country and turn it into a People's Democracy in my view was a reality. Now, there was an interest in certain circles of the Army in countering this. And I know a great deal of consideration was given to it. I mean supposing that at one time HM the Queen had called on Mr Foot to

form a Government, there would have been considerable anxiety and some people may have been tempted then to say that we can't put up with this and we might seize power. Callaghan took over, so that was regarded as relatively safe. If Mr Foot had taken over at that time the perception would have been that this country was heading for a People's Democracy.

(GP:) It's somehow difficult to imagine Mr Foot as the head of a People's Democracy, though...

(Crozier:) I don't think this would necessarily have been his personal view, but he would have taken over a Labour party which was very deeply penetrated. And the mini-coup-d'état we had which brought Mr Livingstone to power, in a way, in the LCC, was an example of the kind of thing that can be done. You have a weak leader in office, and the weak leader can be overthrown and somebody stronger can take over. This could happen in the British parliament, I think the Thatcher years have put paid to that, thank God, but there was a very real danger at that time.

(Haines:) What plot?

Joe Haines was as close to the Wilson Government as anyone, but he doesn't even acknowledge the existence of a plot.

(Haines:) I'll always accept that a few members of MI5 or MI6 or a few army officers in the febrile atmosphere of 1974, when it was thought that the miners were going to march their divisions into Whitehall and take over, rather like the Romanians did: I can imagine these people sitting around and gossiping and saying we ought to get rid of that bugger and have we got anything on him? That is not a plot, nor is it indeed a conspiracy. A conspiracy or plot by the security services to have any relevance whatsoever would involve people of substance in the services. Now, there were sort of lots of, or at least some, right-wing ex-Malayan plantation owners who had come back here after decolonization, who would have believed anything about the Communists. And these people may over a few whiskies have sat round and chatted, but I don't think it ever amounted to any more than that. Indeed, I'd be very worried if there had been a plot and it so dismally failed to succeed. I mean, I would hate to think our security is in the hands of such incompetent people that they were never able over two years to invent anything that would carry a moment's credibility.

It seems that one of the strongest arguments in favour of cock-up theory is that, as with Joe Haines and the Wilson plot, those in the know know - or say they know - there is no conspiracy. When the possibility is suggested to them, most politicians and senior civil servants get a dreamy look on their faces and say they only wish they had the time to conspire. And it is perhaps a measure of the mistrust and disaffection, the general cynicism about politics, that so many of us tend to think there is something all the more fishy going on when all the politicians have to offer by

way of explanation is the great, British cock-up.

(Porter:) *It's quite good, I think, that people don't trust official explanations of things and so on as much as they used to. But another thing which seems to follow on from that is they don't seem to care whether these things are true or not as much as they used to. I mean, there's no doubt at all, e.g, that if, whether they're true or not, and I think generally they are, some of the charges that are being made against certain conspirators at the time of Wilson's last Government - if those had come out 20, 50, certainly 100 years before in Britain, they would have caused the most almighty scandal and certainly the defeat of the Government and demands for inquiries and so on. Because people's perception of the honesty of governments was much higher. The reason for that, I believe, is that governments were much more honest. And there was a kind of tradition at that time in Britain of resistance to, certainly secret polices and secret services and so forth, which we don't have now. It seems to me that we are becoming immune to this and that's a sad thing."*

But, of course, that's a 'sad thing' which the conspiracy theorist is determined to do something about, cheerfully digging away in the mounds of facts and factoids and coming up with intriguing-looking shards of evil intent. There is something about his very determination, the burning eyes, the sense of impending danger that catches our attention, if only momentarily, and sometimes strikes a chord, no matter how obviously deluded we may know him to be. Why do we, cock-up theorists included, listen so attentively to conspiracy theories?

(Billig:) *The conspiracy theory offers an easy explanation. Everything is explained, an evil figure or group of figures is pointed out - and of course, in that sense, conspiracy theory is optimistic. It's pessimistic in it's obvious sense of betraying, that the world is slipping into the hands of... the evil clutches of a group of enemy figures. But it's optimistic because it suggests if only you can get hold of that small group of people, who are numerically very small, if only you can expose them, you will have put right practically everything that is wrong with the world. Think also of one of the most common metaphors of the conspiracy theorists: the conspirators are 'pulling the strings' of everyone else. And the conspirators aren't therefore being depicted as physically powerful, they're just pulling little strings, so if you cut the strings you've destroyed the power of the conspirators. So it's this odd conjunction of the world on the edge of the precipice, or the awful things just about to come to pass, but it's very easy to stop it.*

The real delusion of conspiracy theory, in other words, could be the delusion that we still have the power to influence events. But Michael Billig's observation there of course also implies that there is a kind of pessimism at the heart of cock-up theory. In fact, is it any more than that? Is it a theory at all? Where the conspiracy theorist sets up more or less verifiable, more or less

ridiculous propositions - the cock-up theorist doesn't really have an awful lot to say for himself. Once you've established that accident and incompetence rule, not much remains to be elaborated on. Perhaps it isn't so much a theory as a slightly pessimistic attitude - which *sounds* like a profound insight into the futility of our best-laid plans, but never does so without at least a hint of complacency.

If the cock-up argument has a weakness it is precisely that somewhere in the background there is that really rather outrageous generalisation. Certainly we're all bumbling fools, yes there are probably a million cock-ups every day. But if we're allowed to generalise in that way, it's equally true to say that human beings also manage to produce intricate patterns and designs - not least in politics - that we also like to plan together, to act in accord - and to conspire. And it shouldn't come as complete news that we often get away with it.

(Porter:) *I think this view that's sometimes put out that every conspiracy is in fact a cock-up is really a simple-minded and as unsustainable as the idea that there is a conspiracy behind everything. It seems to confuse a belief that there are conspiracies with a belief that conspiracies rule the world.*

For Christopher Andrew the problem is more clear-cut.

(Andrew:) *Conspiracy theorists are producing one version of history for which there is no serious evidence in the serious study of history. On the one hand, one has these theories about what a conspiracy might have achieved, or what it is alleged to have achieved; and on the other hand there is the serious critical study of past conspiracies, which shows that they are nowhere near as efficient, and nowhere near as important in their impact as conspiracy theorists speculate. So in my perhaps slightly harsh judgement, nobody should be allowed to produce a conspiracy theory until they have spent some time studying the actual history of conspiracies. And I think that very few people who spend any time studying the actual historical record of conspiracies would be tempted to produce conspiracy theory.*

The terms cock-up and conspiracy have now jelled into clichés and settled comfortably into easy political rhetoric. The usual precautions should therefore be taken when coming across them. But beneath the surface one can still discover parts of many other and much larger questions: to do with our ability to control events, our sense of alienation faced with impersonal political and historical processes. Above all, perhaps, they have to do with the ultimate political privilege: the writing and rewriting and *unwriting* of history: when various Trotskys are scissored out from various political line-ups, how do we explain the gap between the remaining dignitaries?

(Ramsay:) *The truth is the basic building blocks of our*

knowledge are still missing. We're all groping around in the dark trying to construct the first skim across the surface. This is of course a tribute to how this parallel universe has been kept almost entirely secret.

(Porter:) Conspiracy is a little like terrorism, in that in most historical circumstances at any rate, it very rarely has the effect it's supposed to have.

(Haines:) Perhaps we're just talking about a part of human nature that people enjoy the sinister, the scabrous, the scandalous, rather than the simple and virginal and obvious.