

ENTRENCHED WARFARE

Jane Redfern on Living with the Enemy

***Living with the Enemy* recently returned to BBC2 for a second series. The basic premise of the programme is that two groups of people with diametrically opposed points of view on a specific issue live together for a week. The filming is done both by a camera crew, but also by video diary, where the combatants are given the opportunity to reflect on the events so far, and what, if any, progress is being made. The results are condensed into an all-too-short 30 minute show. The programme is made by the Community Programmes Unit, which has a remit to provide a forum to views which are underrepresented, correcting perceived imbalances in coverage of issues.**

Series one aired in 1998, and the first programme followed Dee-Dee, who had campaigned for years against New Age travellers, as she lived on a site for a week. The next week saw Derek Draper, (now infamous) New Labour man and ex-lobbyist sharing his home with Paul Dainton, traditional Old Labour supporter. After that we met John, an animal rights activist, who lived for a week on a traditional livestock farm. Possibly the most disturbing episode of this series, if not both series, was the week when Mick and Wayne, rampant homophobes, go to live with Paul and Mark, a gay couple in the heart of Soho. Feeling on slightly safer ground, the next programme followed Damian, a sceptic, as he spent a week with the controversial London Church of Christ. Finally, concerned mothers, Janet and Lynn (themselves mother and daughter), went on tour with black metal band Cradle of Filth, to find out why they promote witchcraft, Satanism, necrophilia and blasphemous T-shirts.

The new series continues in much the same vein, although as the run progresses there is the sense that we are running out of enemies willing to confront each other in this way. Series two started well with James, an aspiring Young Conservative spending the week living in Exodus, a commune who have an open agenda to campaign for the legalisation of cannabis. Programme two continued the positive trend as Patricia, a sceptic, met healers Isis and Argon, when she checked into their spiritual retreat. The next programme was particularly entertaining as two modern artists, Tim and Sue, opened their doors to two traditional artists, Sheila and Charles. All of these shows had a positive feel, as people with passionate beliefs argued and debated with each other. Programme four on the other hand felt somewhat contrived, as Lorna and Gemma, writers for a feminist magazine, went to work for a week on a building site, and share lodgings with builders Mark and Shaun. OK, they had their disagreements, but in reality it was clear that nobody really had an axe to grind. This was inevitably highlighted by the fact that they both revealed on camera that they had been approached to do the show, and weren't really bothered one way or the other.

It is clear from the start that these programmes take a specific stance. Narrated by Caroline Quentin (series one) and Neil Pearson (series two), the commentary often adopts a mocking tone in regard to one of the protagonists. But this is actually one of the elements that make *Living with the Enemy* extremely watchable. Not only do you have the protagonists slagging each other off, but the narrator joins in as well. You are invited to take sides, and the good news is (for this viewer anyway) that everybody else is with you too. Sometimes this can be very subtle, such as stating the costs for all the alternative therapies in the programme featuring healers. But occasionally the editorial attitude feels a bit more explicit. From the same programme came the comment "Now, Argon, in trance, his body apparently taken over by Akada, a reincarnated Japanese surgeon, only available between six and seven in the evening, will operate on Patricia to remove her anger". With the homophobes we were invited to consider the question "Were they beginning to understand and appreciate the subtle intricacies of sexuality?" During the programme with the artists, the commentary went thus, "Exhausted, Charles and Sheila now have to face the ordeal of a journey into the dark heart of Modern Art". Tongue-in-cheek?

But there is not much force for reconciliation. Despite the proposed aim of showing the "other side" your point of view the programme simply comes across as adversarial. If anything, at the end, both sides appear to be even more entrenched in their viewpoints. It is interesting to note that only one programme had anything like reconciliation in it - Cradle of Filth. But, rather than being a conversion to the cause, the mothers were simply reassured that the band didn't actually practise some of the practises they seemed to endorse - "... they're just a bunch of young men that love their mothers like anybody else ... just big sappy lads at heart." This is the exception however, and overall both sides stick to their guns. At times this entrenchment feels quite chilling - "I'm just sick of spending time with poofs ... I don't like 'em. If owt, at the end of this ... I think even less of them now. They're just poofs ... they're just filth."

Are these really subjects where tolerance can be learned? Living on a farm was never going to convert a vegan, and I'm sure the farmer had heard all the animal rights arguments before. The programme tries to suggest there is an element of discovery, and that this week is an opportunity for both sides to learn about each other, and perhaps

develop some tolerance in their views. But, on consideration, it all feels slightly misleading. The people involved in these shows are generally intelligent and articulate. Both sides know exactly what the other is about. Often as the programme progresses you find out that they are very well versed - even if only in their spare time - in their field. For example in series two, Patricia, who lived at the spiritual retreat, was originally presented to us as a woman whose husband had died from cancer. Before his death, they as a couple had spent a lot of money and invested a lot of hope in faith healers who claimed they could cure cancer. However, as the show progresses, it is revealed that she is also (to all intents) a professional sceptic, who since her husband's death has become a member of the Association of Sceptical Enquiry and is thus very well-informed about alternative therapies and ideologies. Personally, I think the programme was all the better for it, as she was certainly well able to debate with the community in a way that, perhaps, a less well-informed person would have been unable to do. But it feels slightly disingenuous to suggest that it is a learning experience for the participants.

Somehow, for the audience it's not particularly revealing either. As the programmes carry on, you sense that this format does not seem to be a particularly good forum to explain or educate. Perhaps the fact that viewers are invited to take sides in the debate blocks the opportunity to hear what the other person is saying, or perhaps this isn't actually the best forum for participants to get their point across. Whatever it is, in the end you realise you have had very little added to your understanding of the arguments on either side. I would think it unlikely that any viewer's opinions are changed significantly by what they see.

The programme's stance is heightened by the fact that in every episode only one of the sides goes to the enemy camp. There is no reciprocal arrangement. Admittedly this would often be impractical, if not pointless. The programme's format is generally of ordinary people going into a slightly more unusual environment (travellers, band on tour, religious community, spiritual community and so on). However, this is not always the case, and particularly in series two there have been opportunities to show both sides of the equation which I think would increase the appeal and scope of some of the shows. Sometimes the issues are confused by other factors, and I think it is not insignificant that there is often a generation gap, or major lifestyle differences that split the parties. At times we are seeing more than one cause for the effect. Would younger traditional artists have been quite so offended at the housekeeping arrangements that Tim and Sue laid on? How much of that programme's antipathy was actually based on the tension of "aunty and uncle's" disapproval of the youngsters' lifestyle?

It's not educational, or informative, but it is an excellent spectacle; fascinating to observe the two sides at war, and to see the pleasantries degenerate into rudeness, and bad moods, although never (quite) violence. Classic debates include "You are a fuckwit." or "I think you're very stupid/Well you would wouldn't you?" It is fun to hear what people really think on their video diaries, and to witness that being completely contradicted by the other side. It can also at times make for most uncomfortable viewing. Watching Patricia, at the spiritual retreat, eating her breakfast while others get up, leaving the table with comments about how they do not want to sit with her, calling her a liar but refusing to discuss what they think she has lied about is edgy and unsettling. Visitors have occasionally decamped before the week is up, and hosts have sometimes expressed a strong desire for their visitors to leave. And it does make me wonder what motivates people to take part in this experiment. But overall our enemies have been able to find some common ground with each other, even if they cannot tolerate their beliefs. At the end of most of the programmes you are left with some sense of admiration for one side (usually yours, but not always) and how they coped in the face of the enemy.

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