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# 'Who is Sir Curtis Seretse?': A Re-evaluation of Black Representation in Sixties British Television

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## ABSTRACT

This paper re-evaluates the significance of Sir Curtis Seretse, a black character from the 1960s television series *Department S* (ITV 1969-70) which has largely been ignored. While earlier critical and academic discourse of *Department S* has primarily centred on the flamboyant Jason King, the importance of Seretse's character has been overlooked. Seretse, as the head of Department S, is in a position of authority and power over the other (white) characters of the show. Furthermore, he represents a highly educated character that converses on equal terms with Prime Ministers and Presidents, a unique representation of a black character on British television at that time. Seretse's appearance on prime time television, at a period when black performers in the media were invariably confined to little more than token characters, is therefore worthy of further attention. This paper examines how Seretse represents a different type of black character not previously seen on British television, when compared to the representations of racial problems on other television crime dramas.

## KEYWORDS

Black Representation; British Drama; Cult; Race; *Department S*; Sir Curtis Seretse

## Introduction: ITC and Popular British Television Drama

ITC (Incorporated Television Programme Co.) was founded in 1954 by the theatrical businessmen Lew Grade, Leslie Grade, Prince Littler and Val Parnell. The company was setup to bid for the new Independent Television franchises following the publication of the newly elected Conservative government's Television Bill. The Bill was intended, as Scannell (1990) has noted, 'to establish commercial television, funded by advertising' (17) that would also become an alternative broadcaster to the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), which had, up until this time, held the monopoly of British television. The group at ITC failed in their bid to obtain one of the new broadcasting franchises, and turned the company into an independent production company. Within a year, it became a subsidiary of another successful franchise holder, ATV (Associated Television), which gave ITC programmes access to British broadcasting facilities. In addition, ITC productions were primarily directed towards popular entertainment, as reflected in their extensive creative output, from historical dramas like *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* (ITC 1956-57) and *The Buccaneers* (ITC 1956-57), to children's adventure shows like *Thunderbirds* (ITC 1965-66) and *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (ITC 1967-68), as well as light entertainment programmes like *The Muppet Show* (ITC/Henson 1976-81).

Following the success, both nationally and internationally, of the historical adventure series *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (ITC 1955-59), ITC began to specialise in action series

throughout the 1960s and 1970s, until the company was sold in 1982. The output of ITC during this period is too numerous to mention here but, in order to place *Department S* (ITC 1969-70) – the main focus of this paper – within the context of similar ITC products, I will, for the rest of this section, discuss a number of significant series made by the company during this period (see Sellers 2006 for a non-scholarly overview of ITC's popular action series). In doing so, I hope to clarify why *Department S* has been selected for this particular case study, and to explain the significance of black representation within this programme.

Some examples of series that featured solo protagonists in adventure and crime series include *Danger Man* (ATV 1960-68), with John Drake, a trouble-shooter for NATO, *The Saint* (ITC 1962-69), which introduced Simon Templar, a gentleman adventurer based on the books by Leslie Charteris, and *Man in a Suitcase* (ITC 1968-68), which gave audiences the tough, bad-tempered McGill, an ex-CIA agent turned private detective. ITC then began to produce programmes which featured teams of crime fighters. I would like to point out here that the depiction of black people in ITC's earlier output did not reflect the reality of the experiences of black migrants living in Britain during this period. Any major roles for black people would frequently be constructed within stories featuring adventures in Africa or the Caribbean. For example, *Danger Man*'s John Drake protected a new African government from election fraud in 'The Galloping Major' (UK airdate: 3 November 1964), interrupted a military group planning to depose an African leader in 'The Mercenaries' (UK airdate: 4 November 1965), and investigated murder and a voodoo cult in the Caribbean in 'A Man to be Trusted' (UK airdate: 15 December 1964). In *Man in a Suitcase*, McGill was asked to investigate an African-based Jesuit Priest in 'The Whisper' (UK airdate: 10 January 1968), and to help a North African political exile in 'The Revolutionaries' (UK airdate: 20 March 1968). Furthermore, episodes set in London in these series, rarely featured black characters in prominent roles, and appearances by black people were usually confined to bartenders, bus drivers, train guards and petty criminals. Cultural historians looking for evidence of black settlers within these programmes would find very little material to analyse. An analysis of other similar ITC programmes reveals a similar lack of black representation.

ITC's first adventure series to shift away from solitary heroes towards crime-fighting teams was *The Champions* (ITC 1968-69). Unlike the programmes referred to above, *The Champions* was a fantasy-oriented series, featuring the adventures of three agents working for Nemesis, a Geneva-based international crime-fighting organisation. The agents consisted of an American, Craig Stirling (Stuart Damon), and two British characters, Richard Barrett (William Gaunt) and Sharon Macready (Alexandra Bastedo). In the first episode, the trio's aeroplane crash-lands in the Himalayas, where they are rescued by a mysterious Tibetan monk, who heals their wounds. The three agents then discover that they have been given special powers, such as super strength and hearing, improved stamina, and they can communicate with one another telepathically over small distances. They decide to keep their new-found powers secret from the world, including their boss and the head of Nemesis, Lawrence Tremayne (Anthony Nicholls). Similar to ITC's previous programmes, the depiction of black people is confined to Africa or the Caribbean. Furthermore, Nemesis appears not to have any black agents working for them, despite being an international agency, and all the main characters are played by white actors.

The same year, *Strange Report* (Arena/ITC 1968-9) featured another ITC crime-fighting team. Although the programme is not as well-known as other ITC shows, it is worth mentioning because of the similarity in format to other action and adventure series made by the production company. For example, the team was also a crime-fighting trio, which

consisted of Adam Strange (Anthony Quayle), an ex-Home Office criminologist, Ham Gynt (Kaz Garas), an American museum researcher, and Evelyn McLean (Anneke Wills), a young 'swinging-sixties' artist and model. Although the series included one episode featuring a racist organisation (further discussed in the following section), and despite being set in London, the representation of black people is, again, confined to minor roles. For example, the resolution of the episode 'Report 8319: Grenade' (UK airdate: 19 October 1969) relies on the ability of a black bus conductor to convey a telephone message from Gynt to the rest of the team in time to prevent a radical student organisation from carrying out a terrorist attack. The only other episode to feature a larger than normal cast of non-white characters was in 'Report 3424: Epidemic' (UK airdate: 2 November 1969). Nevertheless, its storyline, which depicted cholera-infected, illegal immigrants from Pakistan being smuggled into the UK, hardly demonstrates a progressive attitude towards ethnic representations.

After ITC decided not to continue with the production of *Department S* (they decided, instead, to opt for a new series of solo adventures about Jason King, the most popular character of the show), ITC later returned to the team format with *The Protectors* (ITC/Group Three 1972-74), which featured an international crime-fighting agency. The team consisted of the American Harry Rule (played by the American actor Robert Vaughan), a recently-widowed Englishwoman, the Contessa di Contini (New Zealand-born Nyree Dawn Porter) and, providing a mainland European connection, the Frenchman Paul Bouchet (played by British actor Tony Anholt). The programme also featured Suki, Rule's au-pair and martial-arts expert, and the karate-chopping chauffeur, Chino. Despite the presence of non-white characters, the representation of black people is notably absent and, when they do appear, they are limited to being inhabitants in either Africa or the Caribbean.

Of ITC's prolific production output, only two science fiction series made in the 1970s included black characters in minor roles. The first series, *U F O* (ITC/Group Three 1970-73) featured a black astronaut, Lieutenant Mark Bradley (Harry Baird). In the second episode, 'Computer Affair' (UK airdate: 15 May 1971), it is made clear that Bradley is maintaining an inter-racial relationship with Lieutenant Gaye Ellis (Gabrielle Drake). However, this relationship was not developed in subsequent episodes, and following Drake's departure halfway through the series, the storyline was quietly dropped and, as a result, Bradley's appearance became less frequent.

The second science fiction series to feature black characters in the 1970s was *Space: 1999* (ITC/RAI/Group Three 1975-77), which was set on the futuristic Moonbase Alpha. The show's large cast in the first season included two black characters, Dr Bob Mathias, a medical assistant, and David Kano, who was in charge of the base's computers. The roles were played by the Jamaican actors Anton Philips and David Kano, respectively. Mathias' role in the programme is minimal, and is confined primarily to helping one of the main characters of the show, Dr Helena Russell (Barbara Bain). However, Kano's role in the show is comparable to the other secondary characters, and is worth referring to briefly. For example, Kano's role is explicitly depicted as important to the smooth operational running of the Moonbase, and his input is treated on equal terms with the other members of the team during top-level meetings with the different sections of the base, which include Alpha's commander, the head of the medical team, as well as other essential command personnel. In spite of the prominence given to Kano, the character was dropped, along with other cast members, when the programme was renewed for a second season. The only black cast member to remain following the reshuffle was Dr Mathias, whose role was reduced even further.

Therefore, as mentioned above, the majority of ITC's popular drama series rarely featured black characters in any significant roles. Moreover, the absence of black people in ITC shows was mirrored in other popular British television programmes. Therefore, the appearance of the black character Sir Curtis Seretse in *Department S*, albeit in a secondary role, represents a small shift in the representation of black people on British television.

The Department S team is usually called in to investigate criminal or other unusual activities that other crime fighting organisations have found too difficult to solve. The shot of the Eiffel Tower through the window indicates that the team is based in Paris. It consists of two men and one woman: Stewart Sullivan, played by the American actor Joel Fabiani, who is the main field investigator; Annabelle Hurst, played by Rosemary Nicols, an English computer expert; and Jason King, played by Peter Wyngarde, the 'dandy crime-writer cum reluctant crime-fighter' (Bould 2005, 95). King is not an official member of the Department, but Sullivan often calls on his aid because of his expertise in solving unusual situations, which contrasts with the more rational, science-focused Annabelle. The head of Department S, and the person the other characters report to, is Sir Curtis Seretse, played by the Gambian actor Dennis Alaba Peters.

Critical and academic analyses of *Department S* invariably concentrate on the flamboyant character of Jason King, and examination of the other characters is only marginal. James Chapman, who has written extensively on popular fantasy drama of the 1960s and 1970s, devoted a complete chapter to the programme in his discussion of British television action heroes. It is worth quoting his description of the other characters as typical of the way in which the relevance of Sullivan and Hurst's characters was perceived:

American Joel Fabiani was cast as Stewart Sullivan, a square-jawed action man, while English Rosemary Nicols played computer analyst Annabelle Hurst. Neither role is especially memorable: Sullivan has so little personality that he is indistinguishable from the mill of sixties adventure heroes, while Annabelle is virtually a clone of Linda Thorson's Tara King in *The Avengers* (Chapman 2002, 191).

Moreover, in Chapman's analysis of Sir Curtis Seretse, he dismisses the character, arguing that 'Peters's role in each episode is minimal, and the presence of one black actor playing a secondary character is hardly indicative of the sort of multiculturalist agenda that was a feature of contemporary American police series' (Chapman 2002, 192). This lack of critical examination regarding Seretse's character is also found in non-academic sources. For example, in Robert Sellar's *Cult TV: the Golden Age of ITC* (2006), a book that covers many aspects of the most popular ITC television programmes, there is no reference to Sir Curtis Seretse in the chapter on *Department S*. Moreover, the review published by *Sight and Sound* (2008) of the DVD edition of the series refers to the 'three heroes': King, Sullivan and Hurst (90). Once again, the reference to Seretse is absent.

I do not wish to play down the importance of Peter Wyngarde's flamboyant performance as Jason King. The undoubted popularity of the character with British audiences (particularly among female viewers), as well as King's complex and multi-layered relationship with traditional representations of masculinity and heterosexuality (specifically the close relationship King appears to have with Stewart Sullivan, and the cold, almost disdainful disrespect he possesses towards Annabelle Hurst) reveals much about contemporary attitudes towards sexuality and performance in popular media. The reaction of the public towards

Jason King was so positive that ITC decided to produce the eponymously titled *Jason King* (ITC 1971-72), while ceasing the production of *Department S*. This decision was not made because the series was unpopular, but due to the pressure of finding new and fresh mysteries each week, a task that had become too difficult for the small pool of writers employed by ITC. Nonetheless, the critical and academic emphasis on King has led to an absence of any discussion of the other characters in the show. Although Chapman has argued that Seretse's presence is minimal, I contend that the importance of this character has so far been underestimated. The significance of Sir Curtis Seretse is explained by the contrast of his character in relation to other conventional representations of black roles played on British television programmes during this period, as discussed above.

The British and American press releases issued by ITC at the time demonstrate the importance of Seretse's character to the marketing of the show. All four characters are featured in the publicity issued by the production company, and they all receive a similar amount of space. As well as highlighting the unique elements of the show, the biographies of the four main actors also feature as part of the publicity campaign. Furthermore, Dennis Alaba Peters receives equal billing with his co-stars and, as part of the programme's title sequence, Seretse is featured as one of the four main characters.

Seretse's character makes an appearance in all of the twenty-eight episodes of *Department S*. In the majority of the episodes, he appears more than once, usually to introduce information on a new mystery to the rest of the team, and to offer advice and guidance. Seretse also plays a more central role in the narrative of three episodes, when his help is required to resolve the convoluted plotlines. Although Seretse's overall screen time is undoubtedly less than the other three members of the Department, his input to the progression of the plot is often shown to be vitally important. Furthermore, on many occasions, the other three members of the team are not able to function or find it extremely difficult to carry out their assigned duties without Seretse's help.

Despite the significance of Seretse's character, the question remains as to why his part has not been analysed in further depth, and whether *Department S* offers any significant shift or cultural value to the representation of black characters on British television. As Chapman points out, the character's role was minimal when compared to the other three. Furthermore, as Chapman also writes, *Department S* did not place any emphasis on the character's colour. I would argue that this is precisely the primary reason why Seretse and *Department S* are significantly different to other popular action and adventure series of the time.

As mentioned earlier, the representation of black characters in other ITC series was invariably framed within the context of national racial problems, or as exotic, foreign troubles. However, while Seretse's blackness is visible, it is significant that Seretse's race is not referred to. In this respect, *Department S* is similar to American crime series like *Mission: Impossible* or *I-Spy*, where the black characters in the series, Barney Collier (Greg Morris) and Alexander Scott (Bill Cosby), respectively, are not framed by the colour of their skin but by the equality of their characters in relation to the rest. Unlike other similar ITC action and adventure series or, indeed, other British television dramas, *Department S* did not treat Seretse differently to the other characters in the series because of the colour of his skin. Instead, Seretse is different from Sullivan, Hurst and King because he is erudite, educated and intelligent, which, together with the fact that he is in a position of responsibility, offers a positive representation that diverges from those observed in other series.

As part of this paper's re-evaluation of Sir Curtis Seretse, I will first locate the character within its social and cultural context in Britain during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when *Department S* was first broadcast. I then analyse how Seretse is framed within the programme and discuss why he should be viewed as different to other representations of black characters on British television.

### **'Rivers of Blood', 'Paki Paddy', Immigration and the 'Black Problem': Black Representation on Post-war British Television**

Daniels (1994) points out that, from 1946 until the mid-1950s, 'there was little representation of black settlers on British television' (65), a viewpoint also supported by Hall (1990), who argues that black performers in the media were invariably confined to the three 'base-images of the "grammar of race"' (15). For Hall, these base-images were the 'familiar slave-figure', the 'native' and the 'clown or entertainer' (15-16). Finding examples of black performers appearing in prominent or, indeed, positive roles in popular post-war British television programmes is not an easy task. One of the most notable and earliest instances is found in the long-running medical drama *Emergency-Ward 10* (ATV 1957-67) which featured a black character played by the Jamaican actress Joan Hooley. Hooley's character was so popular that she made appearances in more than fifty episodes from 1964 onwards. Hooley played the part of Dr Louise Mahler, who had come from Africa to train in England as a house-surgeon. Dr Mahler had an extended love affair with one of the hospital doctors, Giles Farmer, which resulted in the characters' eventual engagement to each other. However, Farmer ends the relationship after his family objects to a black fiancée, much to Hooley's 'disgust' (Pines 1992, 100). Hooley had wanted the 'character to develop further and [to get] married to Giles' (100), but this proved too difficult for the producers to fully develop.

Although the series was progressive in terms of portraying a mixed-race relationship, controversy was created when the British press discovered that the producers wanted to feature a scene where the two characters kiss in a bedroom. According to Hooley, the newspapers 'suggested that the kiss would be unfit for viewing at 7.30 in the evening because there might be young people watching!' (cited in Pines 1992, 100). The script was subsequently rewritten so that the bedroom would be replaced by the garden. The relationship, although of significant importance to the development of the representation of black people on British television, gradually disappeared, and Dr Louise Mahler was eventually written out of the series. The character's death took place off-screen, and viewers were informed that she died after being bitten by a snake.

British audiences had to wait until 1970 before another black person appeared in a prominent role on a popular television show. A black character called Melanie Harper, played by Cleo Sylvestre, walked into the reception area at the climax of an episode of another long-running daily soap opera, *Crossroads* (ATV/Central 1964-88). Harper announced that she was the daughter of Meg Richardson, the white owner of the Crossroads motel. The initial shock of matriarch Meg Richardson's implied mixed-race relationship was dispelled in the following episode, after it is revealed that Melanie was in fact adopted. Unlike Hooley's Dr Mahler, Melanie Harper was allowed to develop and, after some initial speculation, she stayed on at the motel. Moreover, as Sylvestre points out, Melanie Harper's colour never became an issue in the series, and her 'storylines were just the normal sort of problems which people of that age would have had at that particular time, about boyfriends and so on' (Pines 1992, 106).

Despite these positive roles, the position of black actors in popular British television shows was usually confined to thinly-veiled racist stereotypes. In popular music and comedy television programmes, it was common to see white actors with make-up to act as black or Asian characters. For example, the British comedian Spike Milligan played a character called Paki Paddy, an Irish-Pakistani, in the controversial situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC TV 1966-68, 1972-75). Following the character's appearance in this show, he was given his own situation comedy in 1969 (the same year *Department S* began transmission), called *Curry and Chips* (LWT 1969). Five years later, Michael Bates wore blackface for his role as the Indian servant Ranji Ram in another popular and long-running situation comedy, *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* (BBC 1974-81). The racist imagery in these comedies did not only consist of white actors wearing black make-up, but it also included overtly racist characters. For example, the main character in *Till Death Us Do Part* was the unapologetically racist Alf Garnett, played by Warren Mitchell. As Dominic Sandbrook (2006) points out, Alf Garnett was a 'staunch supporter of the monarchy and the Conservative party', and his weekly rants against 'left-wingers, do-gooders, "darkies" and "wogs"' made frequent appearances on the show (624). Despite this, Garnett was a huge success with the British public and *Till Death Us Do Part* regularly attracted up to eight million viewers.

Positive black representation on television decreased throughout the 1970s, in spite of initiatives within British society to eradicate racial discrimination, as well as the increasing appearance of a black political consciousness. Highly-rated comedy programmes did not reflect these changes in society, and frequently featured black characters framed within plotlines that emphasised their racial differences and their attempts at integration into British white society as problematic. Situation comedies frequently proved to be regressive in attitude towards their black characters. For example, *Love Thy Neighbour* (Thames 1972-76) featured an ongoing duel of racist epithets between Bill Reynolds (West Indian actor Rudolph Walker) and his neighbour, the white racist Eddy Booth. In *Rising Damp* (Yorkshire 1974-78), the virility of African student Philip (Trinidad-born Don Warrington) emphasised the mythical sexual potency of black men. Nevertheless, the real star of the show was the landlord, Rigsby (Leonard Rossiter). Rigsby's racism is only thinly disguised by his petty bourgeois attitudes towards class, lazy left-wing students and his bathetic, but unrequited love for Miss Jones, one of the other lodgers at Rigsby's run-down boarding house. Towards the end of the 1970s, *Mind Your Language* (LWT 1977-79), a comedy set in an English language school, took the opportunity to feature coarse stereotypes of various racial groups. These included Indian, Pakistani, Sikh, German, Spanish, Italian and French characters. The programme depicted, in the broadest and crudest terms, the peculiarities of foreigners. For example, the German character, Anna Schmidt, is hardworking, humourless and sticks to details; the French character, Danielle Favre, is young, pretty and sexily precocious; and the heavily-moustached Italian, Giovanni Cappello, is well-meaning but stupid.

Situation comedies were not the only type of programme to feature negative representations of black people. The racism of some comedians in Northern Working Men's Clubs was the background to a studio-based recreation in *The Comedians* (Granada 1971-74), which became a regular showcase for racist jokes from club comics like Bernard Manning and Mike Read. Finally, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (BBC TV 1958-78) featured white singers and dancers in black greasepaint, exaggerated white lips and eyes. In one episode, to demonstrate the way the show had permeated British culture, Hughie Green, a popular game show host, guest-starred in the programme in full blackface.

The background of these programmes needs to be placed within the context of immigration in Britain during the late 1960s. The immigration from mainly Black populated Commonwealth nations into Britain was increasingly viewed as a problem by many in British society. *Department S* was broadcast one year after the Conservative MP Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968, when he recalled a conversation with one of his constituents. Powell said that the man had told him: 'if I had the money to go, I wouldn't stay in this country [...] In this country in fifteen or twenty years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man' (cited in Sandbrook 2006, 639). During the speech, Powell added:

As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood!' That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect (cited in Donnelly 2005, 168).

Powell argued that 'black immigrants [...] diluted the British "national character" and were therefore a threat to the country's stability and social cohesion' (Donnelly 2005, 170). However, his speech did not reflect official Conservative policy and, as a result, the leader of the party, Edward Heath, subsequently sacked the politician from the front bench. Nevertheless, Powell had managed to instil a certain mood amongst some members of the British public. Two weeks after Powell's speech, a Gallup poll found that 74 percent of participants agreed with what he had said, with only 15 percent disagreeing, while seven out of ten thought that Heath had been wrong to sack him, and more than eight out of ten wanted stricter immigration controls (Sandbrook 2006, 643). In popular culture, Powell's incendiary rhetoric was echoed by Alf Garnett, who stated that 'the "bloody coons" [...] are undermining the nation's moral fibre and social fabric, and should be sent back to "their own countries"' (Sandbrook 2006, 625).

The impact of Powell's speech was not limited to situation comedies, but it was also referred to in other crime series of the time. In an episode of the spy series *Callan* (ABC/Thames Television 1967-72), 'Amos Green Must Live', broadcast in June 1970, Callan is ordered to protect politician Amos Green, whose views echoed Powell's rhetoric, from a rogue member of a radical civil rights group known as Black Glove. Green's stance is that the British people do not want 'facts dressed up. They want action. They want themselves, no visitors, no immigrants'. As a result, Callan's loyalties are tested by the inflammatory racist position of the person he is asked to defend.

A year earlier in an episode of *Strange Report*, 'Report 1553: Racist - A Most Dangerous Proposal' (UK airdate: 7 December 1969), Strange is asked to investigate the attempted murder of an English MP, Richard Crowley. Crowley is a politician who has links with the far-right organisation Pure British League. At the beginning of the episode, Crowley is at a rally advocating the forced repatriation of all black immigrants from Britain. Given the racially charged political atmosphere of the time, it is possible that the fictional Pure British League may have been inspired by the real-life National Front.

Founded in 1966, the National Front brought together members of other far-right groups, including 'the Racial Preservation Party, the British National Party [and] the League of Empire Loyalists' (Beckett 2009, 445). Having gained 3.5 percent of the vote in the 1970 elections, the National Front was not able to secure any seats in Parliament. However, as an

indication of the ongoing support for the National Front, the party's continued popularity allowed them to contest over ninety constituencies four years later, and to present their views nationally through a party political broadcast. In spite of the lack of large-scale political success, the significance of the National Front as a political party which opposed black and Asian immigration, as well as those migrants already settled in Britain, were substantial. In *Strange Report*, Strange's anxieties about the state of race relations in Britain are demonstrated in a speech he makes to his American student, Ham Gynt: 'Headlines: Race Riots. Headlines: Bloodshed. We've had some of that in England, Ham, we don't want any more'. Strange was referring to the race riots of 1958 in Notting Hill when 'crowds of up to four hundred men laid siege to Caribbean homes with milk bottles, iron bars and knives' (Sandbrook 2005, 316).

In popular literature, Powell's speech found expression in the 1972 novel *Who Killed Enoch Powell?* by Arthur Wise. The novel offers an imaginary account of what might happen following the assassination of Powell by a bomb while giving a speech at a village hall. After his death, the country erupts into mass riots and violent demonstrations, until an old war hero, Colonel Monkton, is called out of retirement by the Prime Minister to take control of the situation. The novel ends with Monkton staging a military coup and taking over the country. The perceived threat to national stability represented in the novel was reflective of the general unrest within British society at the time and, while the 'rivers of blood' predicted by Powell did not actually happen, there was a steady increase in racial violence in the late 1960s and in the 1970s. For example, following Powell's speech in April 1968, a Wolverhampton christening party held by a West Indian family 'was broken up by white youths wielding knives and shouting. "Powell, Powell"' (Sandbrook 2006, 644). White, working-class disaffection led to the formation of skinhead gangs, inspired by the racist discourse of the National Front, and the movement took out their anger on the immigrant population. This increasing tension was brought into stark reality in 1970, when Tosir Ali, a porter from Pakistan, was stabbed to death by a rampaging gang of skinheads in the London East End, and sporadic acts of violence towards immigrants continued during the rest of the decade (Sandbrook 2006, 646).

Despite the sacking of Powell and the disassociation of the Conservative party from his inflammatory language, the effect on the political establishment led to the introduction of the 1971 Immigration Act. Moreover, as Mark Donnelly has argued, in order to appease hardening attitudes towards immigration, the Act 'virtually halted black primary immigration into Britain' (Donnelly 2005, 171). Furthermore, the Act 'restricted automatic rights of British residency to those who were born in the country, or whose parents or grandparents were British-born (by definition, mainly white citizens of the "Old" Commonwealth)' (170-171). The Act, in effect, discriminated against non-white Commonwealth citizens.

These examples give an indication of the cultural and social environment that existed in Britain during this period, as well as the difficulties and problems experienced by black actors. The broadcast of a television series like *Department S*, that has a black character in a major role, represents a shift, albeit a small one, in the traditional depiction of black people in popular action and adventure drama series. I argue that the creation of Seretse's character in an environment that was 'not conducive to creative expression, nor to the emergence of imaginative roles for black actors and actresses' (Pines 1992, 12) should not be underestimated. Although the series occupies a niche place in British popular television, any role that could offer a significant deviation from the norm is surely worth reviewing.

## Sir Curtis Seretse: The Head of *Department S*

Although Seretse does not share the same amount of screen time as the other three characters, his role in the series is unique to this type of action and adventure series. While the other characters fulfil various heroic archetypes, Seretse remains a combination of powerful politician and cultured Renaissance man. For example, Seretse is a true polymath, knowledgeable about wine, antiques, fine art, architecture and history. He also demonstrates his prowess at sport when Seretse easily outplays Jason King during a game of croquet, declaring that he is ‘in the Ambassador’s team against Asia’. Similarly, Seretse’s sporting athleticism also extends to the running track when he outpaces the series action hero, Stewart Sullivan.

Throughout the series, Seretse is frequently seen at numerous diplomatic functions and mixes with heads of state and foreign ambassadors, offering a very different representation from the victimised black migrant population usually depicted in other contemporary drama series. Furthermore, Seretse’s position at these functions is shown to be as important as the other foreign dignitaries and Heads of State. For example, in ‘The Man in the Elegant Room’ (UK airdate: 13 April 1969), Seretse meets the Department S team at what appears to be a diplomat function. This is signified by the black bow-ties and dinner jackets that most dignitaries wear, including Seretse. Seretse’s privileged status is emphasised by the arrival of Howard, who advises Seretse that he needs to leave or he will be late for his next appointment. However, Howard’s subservient position is highlighted by Seretse’s dismissal of the request, which also serves to accentuate Seretse’s independence from the rigours of established protocol. Howard’s role as a white man acting with deference towards a black man was an uncommon sight within popular British television drama at this time.

More importantly, Seretse also stands apart from the political establishment. Although Seretse’s well-spoken Oxbridge accent sets him apart from conventional West Indian patois, his voice unmistakably contains an African inflection. In other words, Seretse’s education and status may have come from the educational elite of British institutions, but his African background remains part of the character. Furthermore, Seretse’s independent position as someone outside the political establishment, but nevertheless holding some power within those same institutions, is demonstrated by Seretse’s ability to exert influence over different Heads of State. For example, when a particular case is faced by official obfuscation, Seretse asks the British Prime Minister to disclose the contents of his recent conversation with the American President. Moreover, Seretse’s official title is Sir Curtis Seretse, an honourable designation rarely afforded to black characters in popular television (Philip in *Rising Damp* is assumed to have a royal background, but this is only a pretence which he uses to fool his landlord).

Finally, Seretse’s role within Department S is to assign tasks to its members, and to offer guidance, information and access to foreign governments or other establishments. For example, in ‘The Double Death of Charlie Crippin’ (UK airdate: 24 September 1969), Seretse’s official credentials allow the team access to the private villa of the exiled King Frederick. In ‘The Bones of Byrom Blain’ (UK airdate: 28 January 1970), Seretse is the chairperson of a joint American and British committee to discuss a new strategy to protect the secret service agents of both countries. At first, Seretse’s involvement in the committee is not revealed to the Department S team, until a shadowy organisation starts to replace the committee members with skeletons. At that point, King, Sullivan and Hurst are given access to the highly secret meeting by Seretse.

Furthermore, Seretse's role is significantly expanded on several occasions beyond the character's normal function of offering an introductory exposition to the Department S team. In a significant shift in the character's normal role, the case in 'Death on Reflection' (UK airdate: 17 December 1969) is unusually brought to the attention of Department S by Seretse, rather than by another outside crime agency. The title card during the pre-title sequence states that the location is Bond Street, and the exclusivity of the area is emphasised by shots of several black and white Rolls Royce cars. There is a cut to the interior location of an auction room, and another cut to a close-up of a mirror in a gold frame, which shows the reflection of Seretse and a woman. The woman, Cynthia, is well-spoken and white. The conversation between Seretse and Cynthia indicates they are friends, demonstrating a relationship between races which is closer than usually depicted on British television. Although there is no indication of a sexual or romantic relationship between Seretse and Cynthia, they appear to be extremely comfortable and at ease in each other's company, indicating a different attitude towards inter-racial relationships.

Moreover, inter-racial relationships were also considered unacceptable within British political society, as the case of the African statesman Seretse Khama demonstrates. Khama was the heir to the chieftaincy of the Bamangwato tribe of Bechuanaland, a British Protectorate. In 1948, while studying in the UK, Khama met and married an English woman, Ruth Williams, the daughter of a former Indian Army Captain. In spite of Khama's tribe's acceptance of him 'as their Chief' (Hennessy 1992, 443), 'the issue was sensitive in the [British] Government's eyes because Bechuanaland was surrounded by South Africa, a Commonwealth member which had switched to a policy of official apartheid' (443). Khama and Williams were forced to marry in a registry office because the Bishop of London, under pressure from the British government, refused to give his permission for the marriage. The British government, in collusion with the South African apartheid regime and the resident commissioner of Bechuanaland, banished him from his homeland for five years. In 1958, Khama eventually returned home with Ruth and founded the Bechuanaland Democratic Party, later securing the country's independence in 1966, three years before *Department S* was broadcast (Arnold 2002, 20).

On a different note, Seretse's knowledge of architecture and fine furnishings is demonstrated when he informs Cynthia (without looking at his auction catalogue) that the mirror they are admiring comes from the Baroque period, and was decorated at either Versailles or the Palace of Fontainebleau. Seretse also displays his knowledge of *objet d'art* by estimating that the value of the mirror should only fetch between £2,000 and £2,500 at auction. It is only when the piece is eventually sold for £9,000 that Seretse believes something strange is occurring, and he asks the members of Department S to investigate.

Seretse's position as a highly educated man is stressed throughout the episode. For example, following the events at the auction, which results in the murder of the buyer, Seretse discusses the case with Sullivan during a wine-tasting function. Not only does Seretse identify the vintage he and Sullivan are sharing, but his societal protocols are established when, admonishing Sullivan for drinking the wine too quickly, he utters that 'this is only a tasting, not a bacchanal'. Seretse's interests also extend to other leisure pursuits. For example, after the discovery of a piece of paper containing an unusual set of numbers, Seretse recognises the pattern as a system used for playing roulette. During the same episode, Seretse eventually joins the team on a stake-out and is frequently on hand to offer guidance, advice or, at one point, a warning. Sullivan later comments that Seretse 'should have been a field

operative'. The case is eventually solved by Seretse's involvement in the purchase of another mirror, as these are being used to smuggle stolen art work. It becomes clear that Seretse's knowledge of fine art and his familiarity with auction rooms are essential in the resolution of the case.

Seretse's role as the head of Department S is, therefore, an essential component of the series. As a black man in a position of authority and power, he represents a rare example of a black character in British popular drama. The equal billing that Dennis Alba Peters received during the title sequence is emphasised by the production company's acknowledgment that the character was important to the series, as indicated by ITC's US press release for *Department S*, in which the actor is described as 'Handsome, Assured, Attractive, African born' (ITC Press Pack 2008). It is therefore unfortunate that the character and the actor have been ignored by previous critical and academic overviews of the series.

## Conclusions

*Department S* was shown on the British commercial channel ITV and was marketed as an action and adventure series. The programme's intention, like many of ITC's shows, was to appeal to a broad audience demographic. There is no evidence to suggest that the producers intended to appeal to black audiences by including a black character. However, it is likely that Seretse was introduced to allow the programme to appear more exotic than it actually was in order to make the show more appealing to American television networks.

Nevertheless, in terms of traditional representations of black characters on British television at the time, the character is significantly different. Ross (1996) has argued that producers of British television drama were primarily occupied with 'discussing the "problematic" aspects of the black presence in Britain' (88). In addition, Tulloch (1990) points out blacks are typically represented as 'problems' (144). By way of contrast, *Department S* created a character that did not conform to mainstream representations of black people routinely depicted on British television. Seretse offers an unconventional, more positive representation. His race is never represented as an issue, and his role within the series acknowledges that a black man can play an important, intelligent, widely respected person. Seretse is not presented as a problem but as a part of the British political establishment. Although this was not a true reflection of the majority of black people living in Britain at that time, it indicates a shift away from the type of representation discussed by Ross and others.

Finally, in addition to the absence of academic discussion on Seretse, his role has also been marginalised in previous histories of the development of black characters on British popular television. Indeed, both the character and the actor are excluded in historical and cultural black discourse. This paper has attempted to re-evaluate and re-position the character, and it has introduced an additional perspective to the discussions about black actors in British popular culture. Seretse's character challenged, as far as this show is concerned, the widespread view of the black migrant population as a problem. Furthermore, his appearance in a niche programme that is now largely forgotten by mainstream commentators of popular culture is unfortunate, because it offers an alternative, positive representation of a black man that challenges, to a certain extent, the widely mediated stereotypes of black people.

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### **Biography**

Michael Ahmed completed his PhD at the University of East Anglia in 2013. His thesis examined the development of 1960s low budget, independent filmmaking in Britain, with an emphasis on the career of film director Robert Hartford-Davis. He has given papers on numerous subjects including the films of exploitation filmmaker Doris Wishman, zombie superheroes, Freudian Psychology in Hammer's Frankenstein films, black representation in British Tele-Fantasy, Sixties LSD movies, and Real-life Superheroes. He has published in *Screenonline*, *Scope*, *Postscript: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, and *Networking Knowledge*. He has taught film and media studies courses at Birkbeck College, the Foundation for International Education, BFI Southbank, and the University of East Anglia. Michael is currently developing his thesis into a book. He can be contacted at [mike\\_ahmed@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mike_ahmed@yahoo.co.uk).