

Crime show pulled over Ashcroft donation

Channel Five drops *Crimestoppers Live* project after Ofcom warns that peer's £700,000 is 'self promotion'

ANDREW ALDERSON
Chief Reporter

BRITAIN'S LARGEST crime-fighting charity has been forced to abandon a new television series, which could have solved dozens of major cases, because of a row over programme sponsorship.

Filming for *Crimestoppers Live*, which was due to start this week with Fiona Phillips as the lead presenter, has been halted after Ofcom, the broadcast regulator, said it was unhappy that Lord Ashcroft, the Conservative peer, was providing £700,000 to help fund the show.

Fiona Phillips said: "I am terribly disappointed that this project is not going ahead.

Crimestoppers is such a well-loved service. I regard it as the people's conduit to the police: it is dear to people's hearts and very successful."

Lord Ashcroft said he was angry and disappointed at the outcome.

"We had been planning to appeal for information on about 150 serious crimes over the six-week pilot and would have expected, based on experience, to help the police solve about half of them," he said.

The project had the support of police forces up and down the country – and was also aiming to advise its audience on crime prevention.

"In view of the current economic situation – even the Home Secretary has now said

that crime will increase – this would have been very timely," said Lord Ashcroft.

He was speaking to *The Sunday Telegraph* from New Zealand, where he has been helping to set up a crime-fighting venture based on the British *Crimestoppers* model.

The 62-year-old life peer founded the national charity 21 years ago after the murder of Pc Keith Blakelock in the Broadwater Farm riots in north London. It is the only charity in Britain which seeks to solve crime, with the help of tip-offs, usually anonymous. He is the Chairman of Trustees for the charity.

It was decided to launch the new pilot show because of the popularity and success of



Crimestoppers. Since its inception, it has led to nearly 90,000 people being arrested and charged, including more than 800 people charged with murder. Drugs worth more than £165 million have been seized and stolen property worth more than £100 million has been recovered.

Mick Laurie, the chief executive of *Crimestoppers*, said: “We are really disappointed that this show is not going ahead. This was going to be public service broadcasting at its best, engaging people directly in helping the police to solve crime.

“And of course we and our police partners have already put a huge amount of work into this, now wasted.”

Ofcom had privately warned Channel Five that funding from Lord Ashcroft was likely to breach its sponsorship rules. The rules are designed to stop individuals or companies “plugging” products, but they appear to also apply to charities.

Ofcom’s code of conduct defines sponsored viewing as “a programme that has had some or all of its costs met by a sponsor with a view to promoting its own or another’s name, trademark, image, activities, services, products or any other direct or indirect interest.”

It warned that Lord Ashcroft wanted to promote a matter in which he had an interest: crime detection and *Crimestoppers*.

The pilot – a series of half-hour shows to be aired every weekday evening – would have involved reconstructions of crimes and Lord Ashcroft was going to appear to discuss *Crimestoppers*’ aims and origins. The long-term hope had been to get Home Office and business support for an ongoing series. It would have been Fiona Phillip’s first major role since leaving *GMTV*.

Lord Ashcroft, a deputy chair-

man of the Conservative Party, has donated well over £10 million to the party, while also masterminding its marginal seats campaign and polling.

Last weekend, it was disclosed that the Tory Party was being investigated by the Electoral Commission over claims, which are denied, that one of Lord Ashcroft’s companies channelled donations to the party from overseas in a breach of guidelines.

A spokesman for Channel Five said: “Five did discuss a potential series funded by Lord Ashcroft and involving *Crimestoppers*. Having sought guidance from Ofcom regarding possible sponsorship issues, and having considered Ofcom’s views, we have decided not to proceed further with the series.”

A spokeswoman for Ofcom said: Five did come to us and we gave private guidance, but it was up to Channel Five to make its own decision.”

NEIL MIDGLEY: PAGE 28



We are really disappointed it won’t go ahead, this would have been public broadcasting at its best





GEOFF PUGH/ANDREW CROWLEY

Crimestoppers Live, with Fiona Phillips, above, as the lead presenter has been scuttled by concerns over funding provided by Lord Ashcroft, above left

