

A Very English Scandal

from his creditors and was no longer available for Thorpe at a moment's notice and he realised that Thorpe was prepared to throw him to the media wolves. It happened similarly later on in the case when David Holmes, Thorpe's previously close friend, realised that he was being made to take the whole blame for what Thorpe saw as the incompetence of the execution of the whole plot to silence Scott. It even extended to the wholly innocent friend, Nadir Dinshaw, who finally demurred at being the conduit for diverting cash from Jack Hayward, and was then threatened by Thorpe who said that 'he would be asked to move on', i.e. suggesting that, having an immigrant past, his residence in the UK might not be secure!

The film takes the simplistic media view that because Peter Bessell's affairs were in disarray, he let the party and his family down by abandoning his parliamentary seat and by fleeing Britain, and therefore his whole political career must have been a sham. In my view this is unfair. For much of his time in parliament he was a loyal and able spokesman for the party, with whom I worked on speeches and articles. He certainly became unreliable as his personal and business affairs collapsed and he was never going to be a compelling prosecution witness. His book *Cover Up* has some errors, but it is a far more reliable record of the whole period than is often admitted.

The party's problem with Thorpe came to a head at the 1978 Liberal Party Assembly at Southport. Knowing how disruptive his presence would be, having just been charged with conspiracy to murder, the new party leader, David Steel, had extracted a promise from Thorpe that he would not attend – a commitment he proceeded to break and duly hijacked the conference. The complete party confidentiality on the behaviour of Thorpe had meant that even its candidates had been kept in the dark. One candidate, Dr James Walsh from Hove, tabled a motion censuring the party's officers for their treatment of its leader! The then three key officers, Gruff (later Lord) Evans, party president, Geoff (later Lord) Tordoff, chair of the party executive, and myself as chair of the Assembly Committee, and thus in the hot seat, met

and decided to take the motion head-on and that, if carried, we would all resign on the spot. The motion was taken at a private session of the Assembly and Gruff Evans was ruthless in his detailing of the difficulties we had faced over many years, which were a revelation to delegates. Dr Walsh's motion was duly withdrawn.

Two questions remain. First, was not Thorpe as leader responsible for the huge rise in Liberal support at the February 1974 election? Not really. With his 1970 majority having dropped to just 369 votes, he was instructed firmly that he was not to set foot outside his constituency and he undertook no leader's tour at the election. In fact the general election vote was on the back of a series of five by-election victories in Rochdale, the Isle of Ely, Ripon, Berwick-upon-Tweed and, most remarkable of all, Sutton and Cheam, won thanks to Trevor Jones's campaigning skills. If anyone was responsible for the general election vote, it was he. Before this run of by-elections our poll rating barely climbed out of single figures, whereas from August 1973 to polling day it hovered around 20 per cent.

Second, was it really possible that an intelligent and highly regarded public figure could conspire to murder a

person, however miserable and threatening the man in question had made his life over many years? The answer is that it *was* possible. No one, however apparently stable and sensible, is immune from becoming mentally unbalanced by the pressure of domestic circumstances, and there is no doubt that it is conceivable that eventually Jeremy Thorpe could arrive at a point where he demanded, 'Who will rid me of this turbulent Scott?' As for evidence, after the trial, and after the death of David Holmes, Andrew Newton publicised recordings he had made of telephone conversations he had conducted with Holmes which essentially admitted the conspiracy.

The BBC's drama was compelling. The acting was remarkably good. In particular Hugh Grant's absorbing of Thorpe's mannerisms and his style of speaking was astonishing. It was a well worthwhile effort to popularise a political era that many of us had endured!

Michael Meadowcroft was a Leeds city councillor for fifteen years and a West Yorkshire metropolitan county councillor for six. He was the Liberal MP for West Leeds from 1983 to 1987. He is a regular lecturer on political and local history.

Interview with David Steel

IN JULY THE *Journal* interviewed David Steel, Liberal Chief Whip 1970–76 and Leader of the Liberal Party 1976–88, about his views of the BBC series and his recollections of Jeremy Thorpe.

JLH: You helped Hugh Grant prepare for the filming, I believe?

DS: Yes, he asked me to have lunch with him some months before the event, and we had lunch downstairs in the cafeteria, introduced by Evan Harris. I'd only met him once before, but we had quite a long chat. He wanted to know about Jeremy Thorpe. Subsequently he sent me a photograph of him in a shot from the film, and I was absolutely taken aback by how good the similarity was. In fact I showed the

photograph on my mobile phone to various people, saying, 'Who's that?' and they all said 'Jeremy Thorpe'. And it was Grant.

JLH: What kind of thing did you talk about? What was he interested in?

DS: He wanted to know what Thorpe was like as a person. So I gave him the best I could of my recollections of Jeremy, who was a very charismatic figure.

JLH: What did you think of his portrayal of Thorpe?

DS: I thought it was very, very accurate – astonishingly good, in fact. And, in fact, when I've seen Hugh Grant in other films, he's always played Hugh Grant. Even in the Paddington Bear ones, it was still Hugh Grant. But this

time, I think it's established him as a serious actor, it was such an accurate portrayal. He got his mannerisms and his way of speaking all correct. There were things that were not right about the script, but that's another matter.

JLH: What was wrong with the script?

DS: I can't tell whether it was the book [John Preston's *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (Viking 2016)] that was wrong or the film script. But, in particular, they seem to make a bit of a villain out of Emlyn Hooson, which is not right. And the very first moment when I appear in the film, Emlyn Hooson is introducing me to Norman Scott. That's complete rubbish, because I remember very clearly that what happened was that Scott's landlady in Wales was a constituent of Emlyn's – I think possibly knew Emlyn, I'm not sure – and she arranged to bring him down to meet Emlyn. And of course, typical Emlyn, he was in court the day they came and asked me if I would meet them instead. He was also under the impression – because the woman had written to him about allegations against a colleague – that she was coming to talk about Peter Bessell. So I was ready to hear things about Peter Bessell – which wouldn't surprise me! – and then out came this story about Thorpe. But the film got it completely wrong. The film was entertainment, so I don't think it matters all that much. But it was a bit hard on Emlyn. The fact that he'd stood for the leadership against Thorpe was neither here nor there. The other thing that was odd was they showed a scene of me announcing that Thorpe was elected leader and he then wielded a sword and cut a cake. Well, that was all complete rubbish. No such thing ever happened.

JLH: What did you think of the portrayal of Peter Bessell?

DS: I thought it was again remarkably good. Bessell was always regarded by his colleagues as a bit of a charlatan, and I thought that came across well.

JLH: So it wasn't a surprise that Bessell turned up as a witness against Thorpe in the court case?

DS: Nothing about Bessell would surprise anybody. He wrote that

extraordinary book and then he signed this fatal contract with the *Sunday Telegraph* – which, of course, the lawyers blew out of the water, and helped get Jeremy off.

JLH: I think there was also a problem with the cars that Thorpe was shown driving?

DS: When I received the photograph of Grant, it was supposed to be Jeremy Thorpe coming out of his car, and I looked at it and I said immediately, 'The car is wrong.' They had him driving a three-litre Rover and he didn't – he drove a Humber Super Snipe. The reason I remember it so well is because he drove me around on polling day in my by-election in the car – and I know about cars! They also had him down at his cottage driving a white Triumph Stag; in fact it should have been a white Rover 2000. It didn't affect the story,

but it was just irritating and unnecessarily wrong.

JLH: One comment that people made was why on earth didn't they manage to get Norman Scott a National Insurance card?

DS: It's a very good question – and I don't know the answer. It has always struck me as peculiar that the whole thing hinged, according to Scott, on the fact that he didn't have a National Insurance card. I mean surely, if Thorpe was going to all this trouble – talking to Reginald Maudling and all the rest of it – surely he could have got him a new National Insurance card?

JLH: As portrayed in the television series, Thorpe says: 'Can't we kill him?' Do you think he actually said that at any point, or was it more like: 'Can't we just do something to get rid of him?'



David Steel and Jeremy Thorpe at the unveiling of Thorpe's portrait in the National Liberal Club

Europe: The Liberal commitment

The historical origins of the Liberal commitment to Europe, and the Liberal Party's, SDP's and Liberal Democrats' support for the European project and the EU, stretch back to the nineteenth century.

This fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrats' autumn conference will feature a discussion on the origins of the Liberal commitment to Europe with **Anthony Howe** (Professor of Modern History, University of East Anglia; author of *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846-1946* and editor of the collected letters of Richard Cobden) and **Eugenio Biagini** (Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, University of Cambridge; author of works on Gladstonian liberalism, the Italian Risorgimento, and Ireland).

Chair: **Baroness Julie Smith** (Director of the European Centre and Senior Lecturer in International Relations, University of Cambridge).

6.15pm, Sunday 16 September

Sandringham Suite, Hilton Brighton Metropole (no conference pass necessary)

DS: I have no idea. It is possible. Jeremy's downside was that he *was* a bit of a fantasist, and it could be that he might have said that. But certainly I was totally unaware of any such conversations. Again, one of the things that was wrong in the film was that they showed him and Peter Bessell sitting at a table for two in the Members' Dining Room. Well that's nonsense: they always sat at the oval table which the Liberal MPs occupied in the middle of the dining room, and that was where a lot of the conversations took place. Certainly not a table for two.

JLH: What did you think of Thorpe as leader?

DS: I was a great supporter and follower of Jeremy Thorpe and I thought he was a very good leader in that he enthused people, he was a great campaigner. I suppose the main criticism that can be levelled at him was that he wasn't really interested in developing the party's policy in the way that Jo Grimond had. I remember John Pardoe telling me after Thorpe's hovercraft

tour in southern England that, 'You know, we had all the details about what colour wellingtons we had and umbrellas and all the rest of it ...'. And at the last minute he said to Jeremy, 'But what are we going to say?' Jeremy hadn't actually decided what the message was going to be.

JLH: He comes over in the series, at least in the first episode, as being genuinely motivated by anti-colonialism.

DS: Oh, yes. Despite his background, which was very conservative, he was a genuine radical. It wasn't put on; it was quite genuine. He was ferocious on Ian Smith's rebellion in Rhodesia. Anything to do with the underdogs, he was on the side of the less well-off.

JLH: Was European unity a particular cause of his?

DS: Yes. He led the party into the Division Lobby at a time when it was very important and our votes made all the difference. My recollection is that somebody tried to hit him in the chamber!

JLH: On the negative side, there were the allegations about secret funds.

DS: Yes, he was very casual with money, to put it mildly. And of course that was how we fell out in the end – I said he had to resign when I discovered that £10,000 had gone from the Hayward donation to pay for buying off the Scott letters. After he had been acquitted, the party executive wanted to pursue him for the return of the money. I had a meeting with Geoff Tordoff, who was chairman of the executive at the time, and I said, 'Look, please don't do this. We've had months and months of the Thorpe thing and this will go on and on. If you can persuade the executive not to pursue him for the money, I will give you the undertaking that he won't play any part in the public life of the party again.' In other words, no peerage. That was the deal, and Geoff persuaded the executive. Subsequently Thorpe wrote to every one of my successors, right up to Nick Clegg, asking for a peerage, and I had to brief every one of my successors about the deal.