

# A Very English Scandal

## Hidden Liberal Traumas Exposed

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Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**

THE BBC HAS received almost universal plaudits for its three-part drama based on Jeremy Thorpe's showmanship, high-risk behaviour, and multi-faceted political and personal life, inexorably leading to his trial for conspiracy to murder along with his former friend, David Holmes, and the two henchmen, John Le Mesurier and George Deakin. Having been at headquarters at the beginning of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership and having been Assembly Committee chair at the end of it, I was inevitably glued to the television screen. The political atmosphere of fifty years ago was vividly evoked by the drama and I certainly recognised many of the scenes depicted on the screen, including, suddenly, Mike Steele, the very effective party press officer at the time. From that point of view it was a worthwhile project and a surprisingly successful effort to bring modern history to the screen.

I have never hidden my view that Jeremy Thorpe was a poor political leader and a deeply flawed politician. In comparison with Jo Grimond, his immediate predecessor as Liberal leader, his legacy was extremely thin. During nine years of leadership Thorpe left no legacy of writing – neither books nor pamphlets. He was a showman and a charismatic campaigner with a capacity for making effective set speeches. To his credit he had a lifelong devotion to anti-colonialism – which was rightly shown in the film – and this, plus a commitment to electoral reform, was a key motivation for his attachment to the Liberal Party despite his solidly Conservative family history.

Even though the election of party leader at the time was in the sole hands of the handful of MPs, widespread consultations with party officials across the country were made – with candidates, association chairs and leaders of

council groups all being 'phoned. The small 'cabal' of staff and officers at HQ opposed to Thorpe becoming leader, quite unofficially and quixotically, tried to prevent it by, for instance, trying to persuade Richard Wainwright into being considered as an extra candidate. It was futile with Thorpe the only MP dating from 1959 and with his history having been hidden.

For the party managers the difficulties with Thorpe were the eternal problem – that it is electoral suicide for a party to criticise its leader whilst in office. Consequently his autocratic, and sometimes domineering attitude towards staff, his unwillingness to apply himself to difficult political issues, his preference for gimmicks rather than the necessary slog of day-in-day-out election campaigning, his love of pretentious occasions which were at odds with the party's image, his decision to confront the Young Liberals rather than seeking to promote conciliation, and his lack of transparency over funds he solicited personally, were all almost entirely kept under wraps out of party loyalty. For instance, the party treasurer, Sir Frank Medlicott, resigned ostensibly on health grounds even though he said to me that he was not prepared to be treasurer of a party in which the leader had secret funds.

The remarkable internal party secrecy – until the Norman Scott affair broke in the media as a consequence of Scott's outbursts – even extended to the parliamentary party keeping its knowledge of Scott's allegations and the cover up within its ranks to itself and not even communicating it to party headquarters just along Victoria Street.

One error that the BBC drama makes is to suggest that the occasional party mutterings against his leadership were because of his presumed

homosexuality. This is categorically untrue and it was a subject that was never mentioned. Similarly the depiction of Emlyn Hooson is extremely flawed. Emlyn was a man of much greater intellect and standing than the film's image of him. His portrayal as a sly politician always seeking an opportunity to topple Thorpe in order to take over the leadership has no basis in fact. He had certainly wanted to be leader – he stood in the January 1967 election against Thorpe – but I have gone back over my files and all the publications and I know of no evidence that he took any action with a view to causing Thorpe's resignation for selfish purposes. In fact, Emlyn's leading role in discrediting Scott at the now infamous 'star chamber' meeting with Scott had the effect of entrenching Thorpe's leadership.

The BBC drama was also in error in suggesting that George Carman had confessed to having had some homosexual tendencies. Quite apart from the irrelevance of such an inclusion, even if true, legal friends who knew Carman tell me that it was completely untrue and that, in fact, Carman was quite a predatory womaniser.

Apart from these significant errors, the nature of producing a drama inevitably led to the compression of certain events and to 'sexing up' an already lively story by quoting a number of rumours and allegations as if they were facts. Questions inevitably arise as to how and why Peter Bessell changed from being Thorpe's totally loyal right-hand man, who took great risks in covering for him, to the chief prosecution witness at the trial. The clue lies in a particular failing of Thorpe: that he demanded total loyalty, and the moment that there was any whiff of dissent then that supporter was simply cut off. It happened after Peter Bessell had fled to California to escape

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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!

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## Interview with David Steel

**I**N 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