



**CHANNEL 4: 40 YEARS OF REVOLUTION**

# A Very British Coup

Introduced by author Chris Mullin

Although set in the near future, Channel 4's series *A Very British Coup* carries echoes of the Wilson/Callaghan era. It is based on the novel by Labour MP Chris Mullin, which was written in the late 1970s and put flesh, in fictional form, on some of the rumours and allegations about plots to destabilise the Labour government, which were then generally dismissed as mere paranoia on the part of Harold Wilson and his associates. The prime minister hero of *A Very British Coup*, however, is no latter-day Wilson, but a committed left-winger, a former steel worker from Sheffield heading a Labour government elected with a large majority on a radical ticket and pledged to repair the ravages of Thatcherism. Those who didn't vote for him, however, are determined to bring his government and indeed his whole life tumbling about his ears.

This project has had a long gestation period and, as the series' co-producer Sally Hibbin points out, the *Spycatcher* furore made life more difficult. 'When *Spycatcher* came out, we really had to rethink the whole thing. Our original script was in a way quite gentle, and as the Wright allegations emerged we realised that the reality was much harder and tougher than in our story. We then had to make it all sharper.' At this point, it was still hoped to make *A Very British Coup* as a feature film, and indeed the original script money had been raised from the National Film Development Fund. However, this was not to be. At first all concerned were disappointed, but then realised that they could turn the situation to the story's advantage. As director Mick Jackson put it: 'We realised that our story would be much better for the change to television. A movie has to have international appeal, so you can't assume a great deal about the audience's basic level of political awareness. You can't have glancing references to Joe Gormley or work-to-rules, you can't play on the niceties of British politics, so you tend to lapse into crude simplifications.' The series' scriptwriter, Alan Plater, agrees: 'Once we had agonised for a while, we did feel as though a load of chains had been cut in the ways in which we could think about the story. We no longer had to aim everything at farmers in Wisconsin.'

Mick Jackson also feels that *Spycatcher* has been something of a mixed blessing. 'What once might have seemed far-fetched and speculative to some people is now in danger of becoming old hat. At one stage we felt we were reading the latest draft of our script in the Sunday papers. Part of the film is about what happens when a British government tries to get rid of American nuclear bases, and the making of it coincided with the Reagan-Gorbachev arms talks. There is also a sterling crisis, and the filming coincided with the October stock market crash. So all the time we have had to second-guess events in the real world. For instance, if we show a cruise missile being disarmed at Greenham, will we have been trumped by the real thing happening on television news a few days before? And would there still be any nuclear missiles for Labour to get rid of? As Harold Wilson said, a week is a long time in politics. These are the dangers of topicality, but then again *A Very British Coup* is meant to be a dangerous series.'

Sally Hibbin thinks that the current vogue for films and series about conspiracy has something to do with the public's changing perceptions of the state. 'Until Thatcherism, there wasn't in most people's minds this thing called 'the state' which was separate from the country as a whole. It was something that was just a part of the country, like the health service. What Thatcher has done, and nowhere more clearly than in the Ponting and Tisdall cases, is to turn the state into something which is identifiable as an organism, something more obviously there.'

'In America you have bodies like the CIA which operate quite openly, so that it is much easier to identify the manipulations of the state-hence the early appearance of the political thriller there. In Britain the idea of the state is only just becoming part of people's thinking, which is why Peter Wright's revelations of dirty deeds by the security services still shock so many of them. The appearance of the state as a force to be reckoned with in these movies also has to do with the breakdown of consensus politics. While consensus existed, the workings of the state were part of the consensus, even if there were nasty things going on secretly behind the scenes. But at least there were areas where Left and Right agreed, and this made the operations of the state seem 'natural' and taken for granted. Once you break that consensus, the battle lines are fundamentally redrawn, and then the workings of the state become at once more obvious and more controversial.'

The co-producer of *A Very British Coup* is Ann Skinner. 'Most people simply haven't yet taken in the enormity of what Peter Wright is talking about, namely the security services trying to undermine a democratically elected British government. And if they haven't taken this in, that is at least partly the fault of the press, since most papers have actually taken precious little interest in this aspect of the whole affair. So we think it's important to dramatise these things in an interesting and entertaining way on television. Not that *A Very British Coup* is in any sense a dramatisation of *Spycatcher*, though it does cover some of the same ground, albeit from a very different point of view, in fictionalised terms and projected into the future.'

'The Tories have put themselves into the frame by their insistence on secrecy,' says Alan Plater. 'This attitude implies that there are lots of vital secrets lying around and that if they were released the sky would suddenly turn black with Russian paratroopers. Not unnaturally, people wonder what these secrets are and start to look for them. In my opinion, the government's determination to keep things from people is an example of an over-developed 'them and us' attitude. Politicians live in a self-enclosed world. Perhaps it would help if the seat of government were moved halfway between Leeds and Manchester.'

Plater also agrees with Lynda Myles that the English are peculiarly obsessed with stories to do with intrigue and spying. 'It all stems from the public school system. Many people who have been through it never really escape from it, and never really mature emotionally. The network of MI5/MI6/Whitehall is a projection of the system into public life, and all the rivalries and battles in this enclosed, exclusive little world are really like house matches.'

Mick Jackson takes a slightly different view of the conspiracy cycle. 'There is a vague anxiety, a feeling deep down that things are spiralling out of control, that the rules of the game have changed. It is an inarticulate, unexpressed feeling, but it is definitely there. Films like *A Very British Coup*, *Defence of the Realm* and *Edge of Darkness* help to legitimise such feelings. They help

people to realise that they are not alone in their worries, that they are not crazy or paranoid, and that there really is a hidden, unanswerable face of authority beneath the acceptable public mask.’ In other words, the message from *A Very British Coup* and its predecessors is that in a country that has spawned Peter Wright and his cronies no one can justly be called paranoid: it’s all true.

**Julian Petley, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1988**

**Chris Mullin** is an author, journalist and former MP. His books include four novels and three widely acclaimed volumes of diaries charting the rise and fall of New Labour.

---

#### **A VERY BRITISH COUP**

*Director:* Mick Jackson  
©: Channel Four  
*A Skreba Films production*  
*For:* Channel Four  
*Producers:* Ann Skinner, Sally Hibbin  
*Production Manager:* Donna Grey  
*Production Accountant:* Carl Griffin  
*Location Manager:* Howard Gibbins  
*Assistant Director:* Gary White  
*Script Supervisor:* Joan Marine  
*Casting Director:* Anne Henderson  
*Screenplay by:* Alan Plater  
*Based on the novel by:* Chris Mullin  
*Director of Photography:* Ernie Vincze  
*Camera Operator:* John Maskall  
*Gaffer Electrician:* John May  
*Editor:* Don Fairservice  
*Production Designer:* Grant Hicks  
*Art Director:* Mark Raggett  
*Production Buyer:* Jill Quertier  
*Construction Manager:* Brian Higgins  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Philippe Pickford  
*Make-up:* Lindy Shaw  
*Hair:* Wendy Rawson  
*Music Composed and Conducted by:* John Keane  
*Music Mixers:* Dick Lewzey, Sean Cotter  
*Sound Recordist:* Christian Wangler  
*Dubbing Mixer:* David Old  
*Dubbing Editor:* Peter Elliott  
*Advisers:* Alistair Campbell, Duncan Campbell, Trevor Hyett, Chris Nawrat, Keith Smith  
*Archive Material courtesy of:* BBC, CNN, Index Stock Shots, Thames Television, Weintraub Screen Entertainment  
*Thanks to:* Jim Coleman, Sheffield City Council

#### **Cast**

Ray McAnally (*Harry Perkins*)  
Alan MacNaughtan (*Browne*)  
Keith Allen (*Thompson*)  
Christine Kavanagh (*Liz*)  
Geoffrey Beevers (*Wainwright*)  
Jim Carter (*Newsome*)  
Philip Madoc (*Fison*)  
Tim McInnerny (*Fiennes*)  
Marjorie Yates (*Cook*)  
Oliver Ford Davies (*Tweed*)  
Oscar Quitak (*Kowalsky*)  
David McKall (*Robertson*)  
Shane Rimmer (*Secretary of State*)  
Erin Donovan (*Chambers*)  
Clive Merrison (*TV interviewer*)  
Roger Brierley (*Andrews*)  
Bernard Kay (*Inspector Page*)  
Julian Fox (*Porter*)  
Bert Gaunt (*returning officer*)  
Philip O’Brien (*President*)  
Jeremy Young (*Alford*)  
Clive Panto (*producer*)  
Zulema Dene (*vision mixer*)  
Harmage Singh Kalirai (*Patel*)  
Caroline John (*Annette*)  
Hugh Martin (*Sampson*)  
David McKail (*Robertson*)  
Stephanie Fayerman (*editor*)  
Terry John, George Rossi (*photographers*)  
Jessica Carney (*Maureen*)  
Berwick Kaler (*Smith*)  
Preston Lockwood (*Lord Fain*)  
Michael Godley (*Gibbon*)  
Dennis Creaghan (*head of CIA*)  
Gabrielle Daye (*mum*)  
Kika Markham (*Helen*)

C4 tx 1.6.88 – 3.7.88

UK 1988

3 x 50 mins episodes plus two short intervals

Total running time 180 mins

---

Regional screenings and events will be taking place at these venues across the UK (please go to [bfi.org.uk/whatson](http://bfi.org.uk/whatson) for links): Arnolfini, Bristol; Filmhouse Edinburgh; Queen’s Film Theatre, Belfast; Y Drwm, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Explore thousands of titles from across Channel 4’s history in our free Mediatheque

#### **BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

#### **BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780