

# Reviews

## Secret State

Directed by Ed Fraiman



There is one word that sums up Channel 4's new political drama *Secret State* – unbelievable.

From the sight of former MP Chris Mullin dressed as a vicar, to Charles Dance's clichéd all-powerful chief whip and Gina McKee as the wise, principled journalist who comes across more as an Amnesty activist than a lobby hack, none of it adds up.

The way in which politicians and the press are so embarrassingly misplayed in this sub-*Homeland* thriller make it hard to take it seriously, which is a shame because it is obvious that the writers have some very important, if naïve, points that they want to make.

The Prime Minister (a poor pastiche of David Cameron) is killed when the plane he is travelling back to the UK in goes down in the Atlantic in dodgy circumstances. The plane is owned by an evil American petrochemical company, the same company whose Teesside plant suffered a massive explosion, devastating the nearby town.

Deputy Prime Minister Tom Dawkins (a wooden Gabriel Byrne) steps into the power vacuum, over the heads of the Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary,

encouraged by the Chief Whip.

Were the explosion and the plane crash the work of, wait for it, Muslim terrorists? But hold on – what are we to make of the revelation that the company was developing a top secret fuel for military drone aircraft at the factory?

The sad thing about *Secret State* is that it is billed as an updated version of Chris Mullin's classic book *A Very British*

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*Coup*, the TV adaptation of which is still regarded as one of the best political dramas ever made.

It is hard to countenance how they got it so wrong with *Secret State*, but for anyone with even a cursory understanding of Westminster it just does not work. For example, journalists do not hang around unaccompanied in Downing St corridors and have cryptic conversations with the Prime Minister. Inaccuracies and flights of fancy such as this make *Secret State* a poor successor to *A Very British Coup*. ❸

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## The Gentlemen's Clubs of London

By Anthony Lejeune (Stacey International £40)



This is a new edition of a delightful book, full of diverting anecdotes, which was published in 1979. Short, sharp text describing all the West End clubs then in existence (plus the MCC) accompanied a rich array of black and white pictures. In this revised version, glorious colour illustrations abound, depicting all the central elements of traditional club life: sharp-eyed staff, rubicund members, walls festooned with paintings, well-stocked (if not always well-read) libraries, grand staircases, ample cellars and strange relics (such as the nose cap of a shell which came through the roof of the Cavalry Club in 1917).

Only one respectable characteristic pastime is unrepresented: sleep. All the men who appear here sunk in deep comfortable armchairs seem to be wide awake. Nor is there a woman to be seen even though, as the introduction explains by way of apology for the book's rather outdated title, “most of the clubs described in these pages now give access to women by one device or another, including full membership”. In an age of equality it would have been better to have celebrated the full part that women can now play in clubs like the Reform and the Carlton.

The history of clubland goes back to 1693 when the Italian adventurer Francesco Bianco opened White's Chocolate House in St James's Street. Sixty years later the next two immortals appeared: Edward Boodle was put in charge of one and William Brooks the other. The Victorians expanded clubland with the same enthusiasm which they brought to the Empire. A century ago there were some 200 gentlemen's clubs of varying size and importance with Pall Mall, St James's Street and Piccadilly as their heartlands.

For most of them decline and fall lay ahead. Plummeting membership lists and

rising costs, exacerbated by high inflation in the 1970s, meant that by the time this book first appeared in 1979, only 49 remained and several of them were moving towards amalgamation or extinction. Thirty have survived to adorn the pages of the new edition.

London's political clubs were conspicuous among the casualties that followed the era of growth. In the nineteenth century Tories and Liberals from all parts of the country descended in their thousands on the clubs which their party managers provided for them. Demand seemed insatiable. When the last Tory club, the Junior Conservative, opened in Piccadilly in 1889, it announced that provision would be made for the "large number of gentlemen who are practically excluded from participating in the advantages of a West-End Club, through the crowded state of the existing Conservative Clubs". The destructive, post-war wind of change swept it away, along with ten other Tory clubs. Their histories will never be written, for their records vanished with them.

There were just two survivors, the Carlton and the St Stephen's clubs. The latter only managed to limp on; next month it will finally close its doors, mourned in a fine valedictory article published in the current edition of the *Conservative History*



David Cameron arrives at the St Stephen's Club following the 2010 General Election

*Journal*. The Carlton, the first and greatest of Tory clubs, will then reign in solitary splendour with a healthy membership and a vigorous programme of political activities conducted in premises that look more impressive today than ever before, as the sumptuous pictures of it in this book show. The first of them includes one of last year's fleeting political celebrities, Adam Werritty, whisky glass in hand, and a companion through whom he may perhaps be seeking to advance the interests of Dr Liam Fox. Clubland would be incomplete without at least a hint of intrigue.

The Liberal Party, with seven clubs in its heyday, had less to lose than the Tories. As the Party declined, its clubs which were to have a future looked outside politics for members. The Reform Club, founded in 1836 as the Liberal Party's first

headquarters, remains in its Italianate palace in Pall Mall. Members are now required to do no more than express support for the principles of the 1832 Reform Act. The more venerable and august Brooks's reveres the memory of Charles James Fox, but takes no stance on current affairs. Only at the National Liberal Club, where Mr Gladstone

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was worshipped by 6,000 members in 1887, are the old party political traditions to some extent observed. "The revival of the fortunes of the Liberal Democrats out of the SDP brought to the club a new vitality," Anthony Lejeune tells us.

The anecdotes of club life which appear here include my own personal favourite. Two grand guards officers found themselves at the Oxford and Cambridge Club which was distinctly unfashionable in its early years. As they "sank into comfortable leather armchairs opposite an elderly member whose face was concealed by the newspaper he was reading, one said to the other: 'These middle-class fellows know how to do themselves well'. Slowly the newspaper was lowered to reveal the Duke of Wellington, Chancellor of Oxford University". 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and the official historian of the Carlton Club



The Carlton Club was one of a number of London clubs to suffer bomb damage during World War II