

# Let's blow Tom Driberg's trumpet

**Marc Glendenning** says that, in an age when the bland are led by the bland, the life of a larger-than-life maverick is worth celebrating

“I KNOW he was a bad 'un, but I still loved 'im.” The sad, typical lament from a loyal, grief-stricken woman from the lost age of capital punishment directed towards a recently-dispatched, possibly psychotic, loved one. It also captures my attitude to Tom Driberg, one of the most deliciously mischievous, disreputable and extraordinary Labour politicians of all time. The one-time leading Tribune is now largely forgotten, having died of a heart attack in the back of a taxi leaving London's Paddington station in 1976.

This is to be regretted, because he deserves to be brought to the attention of a younger generation. However, the current minister for children, Margaret Hodge, is unlikely to regard him as an appropriate “role model”, as she would no doubt put it, for the nation's youth. So, it falls to the Sohemian Society, a group devoted to reviving awareness of the characters and events associated with Soho's past, to make sure that Driberg gets the exposure he richly deserves.

We invited Francis When, his biographer, to give a sort of belated Tom Driberg memorial lecture. This took place yesterday (Thursday April 22 at our base, The Wheatsheaf pub in Rathbone

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Place, Fitzrovia (or North Soho, as we prefer to call it). Then, it was on to Tom's favourite culinary hangout, the Gay Hussar – it would be indecent to eat anywhere else – to further contemplate the meaning of Driberg's bizarre life.

The restaurant is a venue of great sentimental significance for his fans. It was here that Tom is said to have attempted an act of gross indecency with a prostrate and barely-conscious Aneurin Bevan, who was suffering from a great excess of Hungarian red wine. It was here too that Driberg attempted to seduce the object of his desires, Mick Jagger, and to convince him, even more improbably, to help set up a new Left-wing party. Another person, Tom, also rather directly expressed his feelings towards on one occasion was James Callaghan. Sadly, again, this offer of friendship was not reciprocated.

Why exactly does a warm glow come over me whenever the name of Tom Driberg is evoked? To read When's magnificent book, *Tom Driberg: The Soul of Indiscretion*, is to look down a historical kaleidoscope of fascinating, entertaining and sometimes nightmarish images, events, characters and movements: Edith Sitwell, Evelyn Waugh, the old Left, the Cold War, the heyday of Fleet Street, being anointed as a priest of the occult by Aleister Crowley, permissive Catholicism, cruising with Lord Boothby for rough trade around greyhound stadiums, consorting with the Kray brothers, the Spanish Civil War, reporting the liberation of Buchenwald and

accompanying commandos on daring raids in Korea. Tom's life conjures up a lost epoch that appears much more stylish and enriching than the political world of today, so dominated by creatures who come across as if they could have successfully auditioned for roles in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Driberg was first elected to Parliament for Maldon as an independent Leftist at a by-election in 1942. In 1959, he became the Labour representative for Barking, although, being a habitué of Soho and the high life, he predictably hated attending to his new constituents. As fellow Tribune Group member Ian Mikardo recalled: “The Barking Labour Party and Tom – it was like Zsa Zsa Gabor marrying Freddie Ayer.” Driberg was presumably grateful to leave the House of Commons in 1974 and be made Lord Bradwell.

The Driberg period was one in which “big beasts” – some intellectual heavyweights, others colourful and a few who combined both attributes – roamed Westminster. Being in the Commons with the likes of Bevan, Winston Churchill, Hugh Gaitskell, Enoch Powell, Barbara Castle, Peter Shore, George Brown, Bessie Braddock, Michael Foot and Tony Benn during Tom's 30-year stretch must have offered a very different quality of experience from having to listen to arid exchanges between the likes of Peter Hain and Ben Bradshaw now.

This was a time when there were debates of high calibre and the terrible brain-numbing clichés that fall so easily from the mouths of ministers, derived from that strange fusion of American management theory and social work-speak, such as “best practice”, “moving on”, “providing quality services”, “risk assessment” and “value added” were mercifully absent.

It was also an age when those seriously out of the mainstream could get a hearing. Nowadays, political parties seem to be far less willing to tolerate eccentricity in the round and the expression of views that are at variance with the prevailing consensus.

These days, who could imagine Labour's National Executive Committee cheerfully waving through the selection for a winnable seat of a candidate as off-message and decadent as Tom? Politics is more bland and less flexible than it was 40 years ago. Why are parties so much more fearful of having in their ranks politicians who are

at odds with the zeitgeist than they once were?

Between 1945 and the late 1970s, the parameters of ideological difference within the political and opinion-forming elite were also narrow. Yet advocates of fundamental change – whether from the Left or Right – were given hush-hush within mainstream parties and their views were not dismissed as “irrelevant”, to employ the worst insult that *Today* programme producers can deliver. Dissident ideas were treated with a respect they are not now.

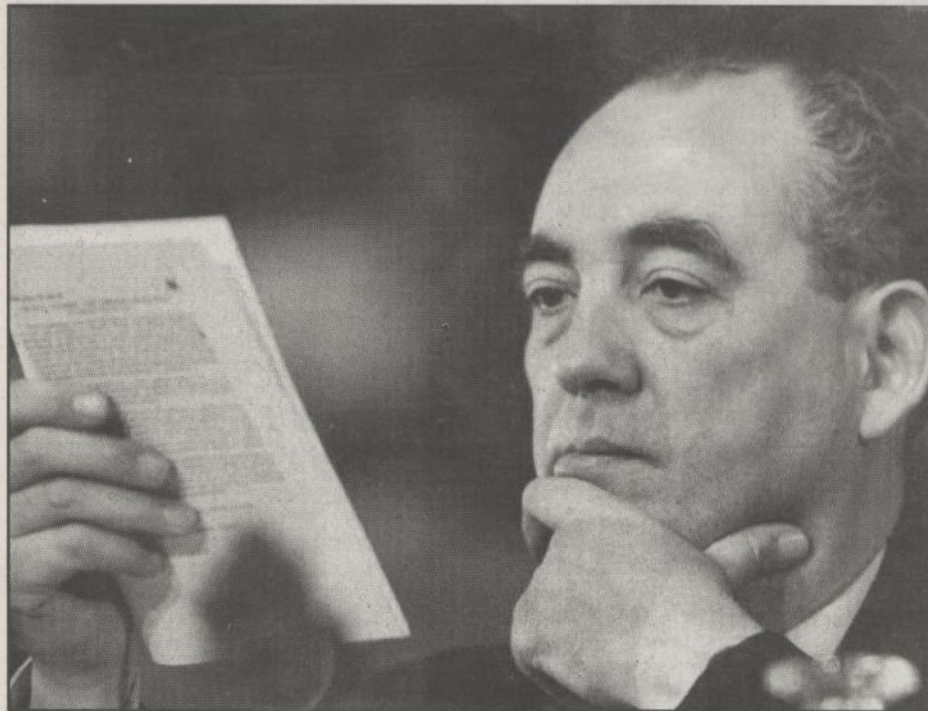
Tom Driberg may have been amoral in his private life, yet he had sincerely-held political beliefs. In the late 1930s, he used his column in the *Daily Express* – he was the original “William Hickey” – to try to warn his readers of the dangers of fascism. He was an outspoken Left-winger after the Second World War. He was the reverse image of most “New” Labour politicians whose idea of being risqué is having a second glass of

rosé before bedtime, but who are completely without conscience when it comes to abandoning the principles they once held because of the exigencies of gaining or keeping office.

The Honourable Member for Barking also epitomised the spirit of his age in another respect. Tom was a highly clubbable character who happily socialised with those who held very different beliefs from his own. Obviously, with regard to Bob Boothby – in many ways Driberg's Tory equivalent – this was in part due to their shared enthusiasm for pursuing young, working-class males and their not unrelated association with the Krays. Driberg was not only a gossip columnist, he was also a great gossip. As Fenner Brockway put it: Tom “was utterly indiscreet and could never keep a secret”.

I never thought I would live to use this phrase voluntarily but, on reflection, I believe that Tom Driberg was, indeed, a “positive role model”. My hope, contrary to expectation, is that there are some backbenchers quietly biding their time who will eventually emerge from the closet of dull conformity and reveal their full Dribergian tendencies to help usher in a new age of political colour and intrigue.

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THE notorious Tom Driberg. Is that a copy of Lord Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* he's reading?