



GABRIEL
BYRNE

'MY FAME STILL FEELS LIKE A HILARIOUS SURPRISE'

Gabriel Byrne has made a career playing unsettling characters. Now he has taken on his toughest role yet, as a prime minister tackling conspiracy in his own government. **Ariel Leve** finds out why he won't be basing it on Cameron or Blair. Photograph by **Paul Stuart**



A VERY BRITISH CONSPIRACY

Chris Mullin MP talks to us about the mood of the nation when he wrote the 1980s series *A Very British Coup*

Secret State isn't the first high-profile television series to focus on the murky world of political sedition. It's directly inspired by *A Very British Coup* — the Bafta-winning Channel 4 mini-series that gripped a nation still living in cold war paranoia, when it aired in 1988. Based on a novel by the author Chris Mullin — who later spent 23 years as a Labour MP for Sunderland South — it explored “the possibility that the threat to our liberties came not from the Soviet Union, or the left, but from the very Establishment”. In the series, an idealistic new Socialist prime minister called Harry Perkins (played by Ray McAnally) tries to uphold his controversial campaign policy for nuclear disarmament. He discovers, however, that the real power lies not within his cabinet but in an old boys' network of civil servants with strong links to both British media magnates and the US government, whose dirty tricks attempt to force Perkins from power.

“The book was written at a time when US cruise missiles were being introduced and it asked the question: what would happen if a government got elected and attempted to remove the nuclear bases? It was plausible that the government could expect to find itself in trouble. I was exploring possibilities,” says Mullin today.

In 1986, those possibilities increased with the publication of *Spycatcher*, by Peter Wright, a retired MI5 officer. In the book, he claimed the secret service had been spying on Harold Wilson's Labour government in the 1970s, believing him to be a Soviet agent. Initially banned in Britain by Margaret Thatcher, it was serialised in a cloak-and-dagger operation by *The Sunday Times* a year later.

“There was also evidence that, at least up to the late 1980s, the security service targeted legitimate political opposition, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and trade unions,” says Mullin.

“A few months ago, I met a retired telephone engineer who had been based at the telephone exchange close to many trade union head offices. He said there were hundreds of tapped lines.”

But does a far-reaching conspiracy thriller like *Secret State* still seem relevant in today's political climate? Mullin thinks so.

“Now the markets and media are much bigger players. It's multinational business that poses a threat to democracy,” he says.

On the night of Barack Obama's election, Gabriel Byrne was at home in Brooklyn, New York, with the windows wide open. Cheering could be heard from the streets. His daughter and her friends were running around; everyone was exuberant, buoyed by the tremendous sense of hope and optimism.

“The same thing happened in 1997, when Blair won,” says the Irish actor, his mellifluous voice neutralised of all emotion. “And then there was the same sense of disillusionment that followed. We still believe that one man can change the system. Now, four years later, there's a different feel in this country.”

We're sitting at a table over lunch in a restaurant in downtown Manhattan, and the “we” he is referring to is the collective mass of idealists who still cling to a dream. Did he not

have the same expectations as the people cheering in the streets? No, he says definitively. He did not. “Yeah, it's all great with that hope-and-change thing, but that's not how it works.”

How it works is the complex and nuanced subject matter of Byrne's latest project, *Secret State*. It is an updated version of the late-1980s television series *A Very British Coup*, a tale of insidious Downing Street conspiracy, which was adapted from Chris Mullin's novel of the same name. In *Secret State*, Byrne plays a man of principle who decides to run for high office. He is humane and considerate; someone with integrity who speaks the truth and becomes prime minister. A scenario he

evenly refers to as, “A fable. A political fantasy.”

As the lunchtime crowd piles in, it has become impossible to continue the discussion without shouting, so we relocate to a table outside. Byrne likes quiet places, no thumping music, and enjoys sitting alone at a restaurant, in a secluded spot where he can read. “I would never sit at a community table,” he says, horrified at the thought.

He has lived in New York since 1987. Do you like living in the city, I ask. “Uh,” there is a long pause. “Yeah.”

It's unconvincing. New York demands energy you might not be ready for, he says. “My challenge is to try to find places that are outside that energy. Quiet places. I dislike the

‘I’VE NEVER ASKED FOR A JOB IN MY LIFE. I WOULD NEVER SCHMOOZE UP TO A DIRECTOR’

POLITICAL INTRIGUE
Above: Gabriel Byrne plays a prime minister seeking the truth in Channel 4's *Secret State*. Above right: Ray McAnally in *A Very British Coup*, the inspiration for the series

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**STAR LINE-UP**

Byrne (second from right) in the cult film *The Usual Suspects*

His father's favourite television programme was an Irish soap opera called *The Riordans*. One day, Byrne, in his late twenties, was in a pub and was told that the man who wrote and directed the show was sitting at the bar. The next thing he knew, he had landed a role in the show. "I wanted to give my father that experience. It must have been beyond astonishing for him. Some of the best actors I ever worked with were on that soap opera."

He has made it a point to be close to his own children. "They know the essence of me.

I didn't know the essence of my father until many years later. It's a strange irony that the longer my father is dead, the more he's alive."

The dishes have been cleared away and the black coffee sits untouched.

"I was more idealistic when I was younger. I was passionate in an idealistic way. There's a sense of history in my bones — a sense of politics. Back in Ireland it didn't feel like a self-conscious thing to talk about."

America, he feels, is a very moralistic country. "Church and politics are so mixed up that if you decided to run for president tomorrow and said, I'm gay and I'm an atheist, you couldn't even get on the card. You have to be straight and you have to be married and you have to believe in God. And you probably have to have a family as well, to show that you're not just married — you have to have the kids on the platform smiling and looking to you.

"It's ridiculous," he continues. "There was a guy on television the other night saying that God had decreed that the only marriage is between a man and a woman. And Piers Morgan, who is not a guy I should like but who I think is a very good interviewer, asked this man, 'What happens if two people love each other? Are you saying they should be denied the right to be together?'"

Being politically outspoken is not something Byrne shies away from. "The economic balance of the world is changing and that will change everything. Economics is what history is about. And that's what politics is about. Today's history is yesterday's politics."

Just as our time is winding down, the lunchtime crowds have dispersed and the noise level has finally dimmed. Byrne has to depart, and as he gets up to leave, he looks a little bit relieved and eager to be off to his next appointment. When I ask where he's going, he replies: "The dentist." ■

Secret State is on Channel 4 in November

during an interview to guard his privacy. He is engaging in conversation, self-deprecating, and willing to talk about ideas and issues. However, when the subject turns personal, he moves to generalities.

Recently, Byrne starred in HBO's critically acclaimed drama *In Treatment*, playing a therapist, Dr Paul Weston. He won the Golden Globe award for best actor and though he is not in therapy now, he has been. However, after the programme aired, he found it difficult to find a therapist who hadn't watched the series. "One guy wanted to know how he could write for the show," he laughs.

He admits he has struggled with depression and suffered periods of it throughout his adult life. "I know where the dangers are for me. Some periods are more debilitating than others. I'm not of the opinion it should be hidden. Or that it's something to be ashamed of," he says. "I'd love to be a happy-go-lucky person; I'm not. Part of it is genetic, part is cultural, and part is chemical."

Byrne was born in 1950, the son of a cooper and a hospital worker, and raised in a Catholic home. He grew up in the countryside and recalls a childhood spent playing football, going on hikes, riding horses bareback — and going to the movies. Unsurprisingly, he grew up in a household where feelings were not discussed.

"I can talk about feelings now," he says, sounding still somewhat surprised. "A friend of mine in LA said, 'You know, you're my best girlfriend.'" He took it as a compliment.

He has a lot of female friends; his closest friends are women.

"My mother was a big influence on my life, for sure. My father was made unemployed at 50 and my mother went out to work. I understand now that he was depressed. I didn't understand what an awful place that must have been. For a working-class man to have no work... they were unceremoniously dumped — given clocks and told goodbye."

This loss was more than a wage; it was a loss of identity. "Work was the definition of who they were. Wage-earners. As well as the camaraderie that existed in the work place. The routine — up at 6am, walked to work, went to mass, went to the job, worked all day, 50 weeks a year — and then, suddenly, that was over." He pauses. "When my father died, he was an older man than he was."

Byrne was living in London at the time. He had moved there for his acting career and speaks about how he got the news.

"I walked around a corner and bumped into a friend who said he'd just come from my house. He said, 'Your father passed away last night.' I was literally walking around the corner and I didn't expect that." He inhales sharply. "My father was dead at 67."

Now at the age of 62 himself, he is reflective about who his father was.

"I wish he'd had a chance to live his life. He was trapped by his class. By the job that he had. By his sense that this is all you're entitled to. I think about men like him. That life. That unfulfilled life where they sacrificed everything for the family. They didn't feel they deserved more. He was a shy, funny man."

'I WAS IDEALISTIC WHEN YOUNGER. THERE'S A SENSE OF HISTORY IN MY BONES, OF POLITICS'