

A candid friend of Viscount Tonypandy

Of all plagues, good Heaven, thy wrath can send
Save, save, oh save me from the candid friend!

George Thomas MP, Speaker of the House of Commons and later Viscount Tonypandy, was at one time my friend. So I was interested to see the Sunday Times piece about him on March 18 headlined "The Speaker's Secret". When reading on I found, as I had feared, that it was a disreputable secret.

The purveyor of this secret to the public, Leo Abse, claims also to have been a friend of the late viscount. He is a solicitor. Indeed this proud man claims to be the first solicitor in history to be granted audience in the High Court.

Mr Abse must know that as a solicitor he is bound by the duties of professional confidentiality. The late viscount confided his disreputable secret to Mr Abse, so he was bound to keep it hidden even unto death – and beyond.

As a conscientious solicitor Mr Abse is sure to have studied my 1969 book *Professional Ethics: the Consultant Professions and their Code*, where at page 74 it says: "The duty to maintain confidences does not of course end with the practitioner-client relationship. As Sir Thomas Lund put it, 'The duration of the privilege is for ever'" Yet the venerable Mr Abse (he is now aged 86) does not seem to see it that way. Perhaps he would claim that George was not a client, but just a friend.

I first met George in the House of Commons in the 1950s. He was a chairman of committees, and I was a draftsman of Bills. In standing committee it was then the custom for the draftsman to sit next to the chairman and give him expert advice on the legal meaning of the Bill and points of parliamentary procedure.

I found George exceptionally warm and friendly, though always humble. We struck up a rapport, which in time extended beyond the confines of the House of Commons. George came to tea at my Georgian mansion on the North Downs in Surrey. He appeared fascinated when we explained that the old house was formerly the rectory for the manor of Farleigh, given in 1262 to endow Merton College Oxford on its foundation. George was absorbed when we explained that as the college were still lords of the manor they had to be joined in the conveyance, and that the other parties were Her Majesty the Queen (by Order in Council) and Bertram, by divine providence Lord Bishop of Southwark.

George maintained his interest in our family, and we kept in touch. I recall that on one occasion in the lobby of the House of Commons George introduced me to a young man he described as a promising Labour MP, Mr Anthony Wedgwood-Benn. The promising young man shook my hand with an absent air.

Mr Abse, formerly a backbench Labour MP, published his autobiography in 1973. It was called *Private Member*, a clever punning title. In the House of Commons a backbencher is called a private member. But Mr Abse was also identified with another sort of private member. He pioneered the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which released British homosexuals from their long bondage. Mr Abse now dramatically reveals that Viscount Tonypandy was numbered among those thus freed.

In *Private Member* (page 142) Mr Abse records that when in 1972 George's 90-year old mother died almost all the Welsh MPs defied a 3-line whip to travel to Wales for her funeral. That says something about how George was regarded by his colleagues. Yet now Mr Abse pours scorn on him as a mother-fixated closet queer continually needing help from Mr Abse to fend off blackmailing youths.

In the Sunday Times article Mr Abse asks: "Am I now, belatedly, betraying my friend in telling of the shadows in which, away from the pomp and glory of the Palace of Westminster, and, indeed, of Buckingham Palace, he was humiliatingly forced to walk?" I think the short answer is yes. The matter is made worse by the fact that Mr Abse pats himself on the back for having protected the viscount from discovery. "I take pride that I had been able to shield him a little, so that he was unbesmirched when his time came." The time referred to was George's funeral in Westminster Abbey, following his death from throat cancer. It was attended by the Prince of Wales, representing the Queen, and passed off as a great occasion unbesmirched as Mr Abse says.

Well, I don't know. By the way the verse at the head of this piece was composed by George Canning MP. Famous for fighting a duel with Castlereagh in 1809, he too was the victim of disloyal friends - but that's another story.

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