

realised the MP would not leave his wife. 'I'm not old enough to vote,' Anna Cox declared, 'but I'm old enough to know when I've been used.'

The timing was fortunate for Labour. That week the Tories had inflicted real wounds over the Opposition's plans for extending Trade Union rights. Then in the space of 24 hours Tim Smith had been forced to resign over cash in brown paper envelopes, pressure had intensified on Neil Hamilton (see pp. 353-65) - and now Piers Merchant had been caught on candid camera. The focus was back on Tory Sleaze.

Merchant says he first met Anna Cox (at a Young Conservative meeting) for 'ten seconds' several months before but did not see her again until about three weeks before the *Sun's* story. She came from a 'nice quiet family' and was a real young Conservative known to the other local Tory MPs. When the election came she fitted well into his campaign team. 'She was not at all as the papers described her', he says. Miss Cox told the MP she worked as a secretary in the City. He thought she was in her twenties. As for her job - which the *Sun* made much of - as a £100 per night hostess who drank with male punters in a seedy Soho Club, she had explained that this was a job advertised in the *Evening Standard*. It had lasted four nights and she had left when she found out what type of place it was.

The *Sun* takes a different view. They claim Anna Cox was a confident young woman who rang the newsdesk at least a week before the story appeared, alleging she was already having an affair with a married Tory MP. Feeling 'used', she wanted revenge and knew she would be rewarded for her story. Following several hours of interviews, she took *Sun* reporters to Merchant's London flat and described in detail the interior.

But the paper needed to see them together. After several days, the *Sun* claimed she rang on the Tuesday morning to say she was meeting Merchant at a railway station in his Beckenham constituency. A reporter and a photographer raced down there, saw them greet one another, then trailed them as they went delivering leaflets. Eventually, awaiting her return train, she led the MP into a nearby park. Undetected, the men from the *Sun* photographed them kissing. The *Sun* alleged more, but pictures, if they exist, have neither been published nor privately produced. Later that night she was photographed arriving and leaving his Pimlico flat.

The next day, Wednesday 27 March, the 17-year-old was whisked to a hideaway for a photo shoot as the *Sun* polished its scoop. By now Anna Cox was hot property. A fee of £25,000 was allegedly agreed. Sky Television was called in to shoot a video. That evening, the MP was doorstepped outside his home. Piers Merchant stared at the fuzzy black and white prints the *Sun* reporter offered him, and admits he said too much: 'That may well be me kissing her in the pictures, but I see nothing wrong in that. I am sure my wife will not be the slightest bit concerned . . . You must have a very weird sense of values if you see anything wrong with kissing a girl in the park. Anna is a very dear friend of mine and has been helping with my campaign. But there is no question of us having an affair. I have never made love to her.' As for the night in his flat, she slept on the sofa, he said.

As if to demonstrate how unconcerned his wife was, she appeared alongside him on the doorstep later that evening. Egged on by the photographers, husband and wife kissed in a manner more adventurous than anything pictured in the park the previous day.

The following morning, as the *Sun* landed on doormats across the nation, and parts of Britain giggled at its contents, Michael Heseltine publicly called the whole affair an 'embarrassment'. Piers Merchant should 'consider his position'. John Major stared at the paper and reportedly remarked 'How can people do this sort of thing?'. The party Chairman, Brian Mawhinney, who before the campaign began had told every back-bencher to act 'as if there were a tabloid reporter under every bush' was furious that his advice had been so soon ignored. Tabloid headlines heralded the 'End Of The Piers Show'. Conservative Central Office began briefing against their own MP.

Despite this pressure Piers Merchant held on. The following week 116 constituency members in Beckenham voted to re-select him (he was by all accounts a good constituency member) with only 4 dissenters. In the General Election, Piers Merchant was returned to Parliament. The 15% swing against him was lower than some of his neighbours.

I took the view advanced by Auberon Waugh. In backing its MP, we saw 'old England reassert itself: a tolerant, easy-going country with a highly developed sense of humour and little taste for being cowed by puritanical fanatics'.

– under the homosexual age of consent of 21. (The reduction in the age of consent to 18, which Mr Hayes had supported, did not take place until 1994.) The paper added that the letters written by the 43-year-old MP created a security risk. Jerry Hayes was PPS to Robert Atkins, the Northern Ireland minister and ‘on an IRA hit-list’.

The paper published letters from Hayes. One said: ‘I love you. I miss the magic of your hugs and watching you when you are asleep’. The letters suggested Paul Stone had ended the friendship.

Hayes had told Rebekah Wade that the relationship, although close, had always remained platonic. The young man had even been a babysitter for the children. ‘There was always a limit to our relationship’, he said, but reportedly admitted some turmoil. ‘I didn’t understand the feelings I was having . . . I knew these affections for this boy were becoming unhealthy.’

To avoid the press, Jerry Hayes, his wife and children went into hiding in a ‘distant part of the UK’. The week, he said later, was ‘the worst nightmare you could imagine . . . like having a car accident – everything was in slow motion. For the first two nights I couldn’t sleep . . . I’m not going to pretend I didn’t have gloomy, suicidal thoughts, but that would have been a spectacularly selfish thing to do.’

Why did the scandal suddenly erupt in January 1997? Some papers suggested it was linked to John Major’s New Year launch of a family values campaign in the *Daily Telegraph*. In truth, it was the earliest the story could run. Paul Stone had made up his mind shortly before Christmas that he wanted to go public with his allegations. He went to his local library in Peterborough to look up the telephone number of the publicist Max Clifford – then rang him. Clifford invited him to London and they met in the PR man’s Mayfair office on Christmas Eve. Stone says if Max Clifford had refused to take him on he would not have dared approach a newspaper independently.

Paul Stone was paid £30,000 for the story – some recompense for shouldering the indignity of lines like: ‘His power, fame and good looks intoxicated me.’ For almost a week he was guarded in a Wimbledon hotel. He enjoyed the attention and gave further interviews – including one for the *Guardian* under the headline ‘Oh Paul, How Could You?’ – a comment his mother had made.

The following week, Hayes’s wife, Alison, gave an interview to the *People* saying that her husband was not gay. Paul Stone’s claims were sick fantasies, she said. The letters were to give the boy, who had been suicidal, a sense of self-worth.

In a way, few cared whether the allegations were true. In this most modern of sex scandals, the accuser faced greater vilification than the accused. Stone’s father – a life-long Tory, whom he had not seen for two years and who did not know he was gay – told the *Daily Mail* ‘it’s going to take an awful long time before I forgive him for this.’ The firm of chartered accountants Stone worked for sacked him, as he half-expected, for ‘gross misconduct’. The young man was (temporarily) banned from his local gay pub. Pictures of him in drag in a church hall pantomime appeared in the press. After a week, interest rapidly waned. When I met him recently I discovered a remarkably self-assured young man without regrets, but with time on his hands. I had the strongest impression that money was not what had motivated him. He had felt spurned by Hayes.

The MP survived. There was no question of his constituency failing to reselect him, although he immediately offered to stand down. The Commons too, he found, is a forgiving place. When he went back, he says, he was hugged by half the Labour Shadow Cabinet. Clare Short gave him a big kiss. ‘All my chums in the Press gallery were terrific’, he added. Although he lost his seat at the General Election, he believes the allegations played no part: the swing of 12.5 per cent against him was about 1 per cent less than that suffered by neighbouring Tories.

Jerry Hayes now hopes to build a media career for himself. Paul Stone is opening a gift shop in Peterborough.

But there was more to come from John Major’s dying government.

With only five weeks to go before polling day, Conservative election plans were blown off course by another *Sun* exclusive: ‘SCANDAL OF TORY MP’S MISTRESS, 17 – HE TAKES SOHO CLUB HOSTESS CANVASSING’. Piers Merchant, a 46-year-old non-drinking, non-smoking, vegetarian, happily married father of two had been caught on camera kissing a mini-skirted girl in a South London park. The paper alleged they had been conducting an affair (Piers Merchant denies this), but, with the election campaign underway, 17-year-old Anna Cox had



are not financially reliant on their own local officers have an important independence – and the remainder an important dependence – which is of potential interest to press and public. But nobody has ever suggested that this is a declarable interest.

As to the Treasury money, Lamont explains: 'the decision . . . was made by the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, the Head of the Civil Service and the Prime Minister. It was not made at my request . . . They came to the conclusion that those costs arose out of my public position. For the same reason the Prime Minister decided . . . that it was reasonable for the Conservative Party to help me with the total legal costs I had in evicting my tenant. These costs were way above those that would normally arise in a situation like this . . . [because of the Chancellor's public position] it was necessary to accelerate legal procedures in order to end the ridiculous publicity. I would point out that I also incurred large legal costs because of allegations made over 'Threshergate'. These were completely without foundation. But I had to pay a large bill.'

Given that there was never the hint of a suspicion that Lamont himself was involved in or had even known about Miss Whiplash's business, he was unlucky to attract the publicity he did. But it was hardly damaging, and caused only giggles. A parliamentary aide well placed to know told me at the time that all Norman's friends were urging him to relax and treat the matter lightly. 'But he was in a great state about it,' and determined to act. When I put this to the former Chancellor, he remarked that there may have been no 'printed hint' linking him to Miss Whiplash, but 'there were plenty of threats to make such allegations, which is why I had to engage libel lawyers'.

I still believe the Chancellor over-reacted. The scent of potential writs excites as well as frightens editors. But it would not be surprising, in light of his experiences so far, if the Chancellor were becoming increasingly defensive. He adds: 'All the photos of this woman in my family's house were immensely distressing to my wife and to my children. As a matter of politics as well, the view in Government was that it was essential to end the publicity as soon as possible.'

And what was the *private* view among media folk? The reader may find this immoral, even shocking, but I have to report that journalists' reaction was one of hilarity that a non-story which

some of our tabloid cousins were doing their tongue-in-cheek best to present as an issue of national importance (but which we all knew readers would take with a large pinch of salt) should be causing such a flutter in the Chancellor's dovecote. The media often remind me of a boisterous and undisciplined infant, gazing with amused bafflement at what it has broken in its romps. Most of the press does not believe that its readers really believe what it writes. Most politicians believe they do. This can cause a mismatch between the two groups' attitudes to media behaviour.

After the *débâcle* of the ERM withdrawal in October 1992, Lamont found himself in a scrape with the press which was really not his doing. The *Sun* reported that the Chancellor had walked out of the Grand Hotel after the Conservative Party Conference in Brighton without paying his bill.

The story was a travesty. It is, after all, hardly credible that a man as easy to find as the Chancellor of the Exchequer would try to do a runner from a Brighton hotel. In fact Lamont had arranged with the hotel that his bill should be sent to him at Conservative Central Office. The same arrangement was made for many of the guests at the time. The *Sun* (says Lamont) obtained the information that Lamont's bill had not been paid by telephoning the hotel and pretending to be Conservative Central Office, asking for a list of all those whose bills were to be forwarded. 'The list included several ministers but the paper chose to write the story only about myself. At the time the *Sun* ran the story I had not even received the bill. The management of the hotel said the story was completely untrue.'

The *Sun* seemed to have it in for Lamont. The following month the paper announced that he had exceeded his credit card limit twenty-two times in the last eight years. He was £470 over his £2,000 limit. He had received five warning letters from Access. 'This,' Lamont told me, 'is about the only allegation in the newspapers that was broadly true. For some years I simply paid my credit card bills every two or three months in order to save myself the bother of writing endless small cheques. Some people may or may not approve of this. But it seems to me an entirely private matter . . . A much more important question was why newspapers felt it right to obtain access to my own financial records and to publish them.'

Of course by now a familiar dynamic was in play. Once a public

telephone in the Finborough Road flat in West London where she lived and where he frequently visited her, had been bugged. Her landlord had co-operated in this with journalists, who had been tipped off about the story after Mellor had been recognized. Within weeks, the press were publishing photographs of the room, with a mattress on the floor.

Mellor immediately rang the Prime Minister to offer his resignation. The offer was refused. John Major reassured his old friend that he had his full support. He stood by Mellor the next day and publicly made clear that there was no question of any conflict of interest: Mellor would handle the Calcutt Report.

It is worth making clear that Miss de Sancha was not accused of having tipped off the press, or assisted in any way in the first 'scoop'. She too was – at least at first – a victim. And now she was under siege. The press uncovered her single most memorable film role: her portrayal of a one-legged prostitute who has sex with the pizza delivery man in the soft porn film, *The Pieman*. Photographs of bottoms, and of Miss de Sancha, taken from the film, graced many tabloid front pages.

Antonia de Sancha's story of the media circus in which she became involved makes extraordinary reading. Cast into the wilderness by the man she claimed had declared his love for her, she chose to enlist the services of the near-legendary freelance publicist, Max Clifford, who presumably stood to gain a cut of her earnings from the affair. She made a shrewd appointment. She later told Julia Langdon in a *Guardian* profile that the Chelsea strip story had been made up during a conversation with Clifford (she says he suggested it; he says she did; he 'laughs uproariously' at the suggestion that he knew the story was untrue, and denies it). Clifford told me the coincidence of Derek Hatton's claim some years ago that he made love in an Everton strip is no more than that: a coincidence.

In Antigua, taking a respite from the affair, de Sancha says she rang Clifford to try to break off the deal whereby he was to represent her. He said, 'Calm down, It's all right. I've just had a call from Los Angeles and Jack Nicholson wants you to play Catwoman.' He had suggested to her, she says, ('to keep the story hot') that she pretend to be pregnant and resting in Antigua while deciding whether or not to keep the child. Julia Langdon adds, 'Max Clifford laughed when this was put to him. "Really," he

said, "I don't remember saying that!"

On her return from Antigua, de Sancha says, she found her 'Chelsea strip' story had been sold to the *Sun*. 'I thought, I just don't think I can do this. It was like it wasn't me doing it.' . . . 'Max stormed into the room and said: "Antonia, tell her [a woman reporter from the *Sun*] about the Chelsea strip" . . . It was just awful, awful, awful. I'd have to look them in the eye and say "Yes, it's true."'

The toe-sucking story, de Sancha told Langdon, 'was complete and utter garbage'. Although she admitted her mistake in going along with these stories, 'she did manage to stop some others. She did not, for example, allow her PR adviser to promote the story that she was pregnant with Mellor's child – to be followed later by a miscarriage. And she refused to make a video on how to suck toes. "I hate feet." Clifford has not recognized any such account of events.

At this point the minister was forced to admit the difficulties this was causing his marriage of almost twenty years to his



*Sun*, 25 September 1992



## DAVID MELLOR – 1992

‘If you can dish it out, you’ve got to be able to take it’

Few modern ministers have dished it out more brutally than David Mellor. Few have taken it with morechutzpah.

In political ethics, this affair presents a dilemma of gripping intensity. David Mellor’s behaviour was at the same time wholly reproachable, yet irrelevant to the ministerial post he held. Such was his talent and expertise that when he left office a whole area of national life lost a formidable ally. Such were his antics that even his friends despaired of recommending any other course.

Not least among this Cabinet minister’s contributions to cultural life, during his brief but colourful stint as Heritage Secretary, was to acquaint the English with a new word: shrimping. Not least among the disappointments which have arisen since is the discovery that Mr Mellor and his friend may never have shrimped. She now says the story, along with the story that he made love in a Chelsea strip (the apparel of the football team Mellor follows), was invented.

‘To shrimp’ is a term imported from the United States. It describes the Putney MP’s alleged penchant for having his toes sucked by his partner: a passion also indulged, it was alleged, upon the Duchess of York, though not by Mr Mellor. Thanks probably to both, it was included for the first time in the latest edition of *Chambers’s Encyclopaedic English Dictionary* after becoming probably the best remembered allegation concerning Mellor’s unlucky affair with actress Antonia de Sancha. When Mellor was finally forced out of office and on to the backbenches the *Sun* summed up his fall from grace with one of its punchier headlines: ‘From Toe Job to No Job.’ The nation remains in some confusion as to whether Mr Mellor was alleged to have sucked his friend’s toes, or *vice-versa*.

David Mellor, elected (as I was) in 1979, was a colleague I often drove home to South London (where we both lived) after

late-night sittings at the Commons. In career terms he quickly outstripped me, and was soon a minister. Some indication of his skills is provided by the way he persuaded me, for two years, that his Putney home was on the way from Westminster to Clapham where I lived.

We often agreed, and often crossed swords: once or twice quite unpleasantly. Arrogant, rude, capable, ambitious, entertaining, quick-minded, sharp-tongued, liberal in his thinking and brutal in debate, Mellor was a man of steady and humane judgement in public affairs, yet often unbelievable insensitivity and self-defeating impatience in personal and political relationships. He both impressed and infuriated, often at the same time.

He also became a friend and ally of the man who was to become Prime Minister: John Major, a fellow Chelsea Football Club supporter. There was no surprise when Major created a tailor-made job for him after the April 1992 election: the first Secretary of State at a new Department of National Heritage. Responsibilities included the press, broadcasting, heritage and the arts. There were high hopes for Mellor: probably the Cabinet’s only genuine aesthete, one of whose boasts was the possession of the largest classical music collection on CD in South London. But Mellor was also Parliament’s most articulate authority on football. In his new job he was quickly dubbed Minister for Fun.

And Mr Mellor was having much more fun than many of us realized.

A key part of the Heritage portfolio was the media. In July Mellor, educated at Swanage Grammar School and Christ’s College, Cambridge, commissioned Sir David Calcutt, the eminent lawyer, to produce a report into press freedom. Mellor, whose own doubts about state interference with the press had never been a secret, and never changed, was under political pressure to reduce unwarranted intrusion by the press into individual privacy. He warned the press barons they were ‘drinking in the last chance saloon’. Unbeknown to all of us, least of all himself, he was about to provide trebles all round.

David Mellor was forty-three and married with two children. On Saturday, 18 July 1992, he received a tip-off that the *People* newspaper was to splash a story the next day about his affair with the thirty-one-year-old actress, Antonia de Sancha. Her

*People* proved harder for the bachelor MP to shake off. The newspaper and Proctor had been snarling at one another over the MP's successful libel action against them after they had (wrongly) alleged Mrs Thatcher was refusing to call Proctor 'my hon. friend'.

That summer the *People* printed a huge story, over three pages, about Proctor's proclivities. A male prostitute said that Proctor would play the headmaster. 'I would have to pretend to be a pupil who had done something wrong. He said I must call him Sir at all times and must not answer back. He took me into the bedroom and told me to put on a pair of white shorts.' Then the spanking sessions took place. The MP was gentler in bed, according to the newspaper. The young man in question had moved in with Proctor for a while, the paper alleged. Proctor denied this but said the man had stayed in his flat for a few days, at his mother's request, to study for his exams.

The MP, who had moved to the safer Tory seat of Billericay after boundary changes, was accused by the *People*, the following Sunday, of using a rent-boy network. A gay massage parlour boss was procuring youths for the MP at £35 a time, according to the newspaper, which alleged that youths would take part in sex games at Proctor's flat and that the politician would spank them 'while he watched by-election results on television'. Given the direction of subsequent Tory fortunes at by-elections, it is surprising the practice did not become more generalized.

At this time, Proctor refused to comment on sexual allegations, saying that his private life was his own business and did not interfere with his parliamentary or constituency work. He later told friends that what was published was usually a mixture of truth, half-truth, and falsehood. He lacked the funds to gamble on libel actions, which he feared would degenerate into confused disputation over half-truths, damaging him regardless of whether he won the individual arguments.

But of course failure to sue only whetted the newspapers' appetite for new stories. Friends would telephone Proctor after encountering men in gay bars or clubs showing photographs of the MP and asking whether anyone knew him. The *People's* next scoop was sensational. They ran it as a 'splash' story for six weeks running.

One of the *People's* informants was a young man whom Proctor

says journalists had been hunting for some time. He was an eighteen-year-old rent boy, who had told Proctor he was twenty-one. He was allegedly called Max, though nobody was ever sure of this, and he cannot now be traced. Armed with the *People's* hidden tape recorder, he had visited Proctor and, under the pretence of chatting about the MP's life and desires, gathered the evidence the paper wanted. 'Max' was paid by the *People*.

Wired for sound, 'Max' assured the MP that he was over twenty-one (this could be heard on tape.)

These stories were proving a serious embarrassment to some Billericay Tories, who were facing a General Election within eighteen months. Their chairman, Frank Tomlin, was no fan of the MP. Proctor has claimed that, unlike most of the Billericay Conservative Association, Tomlin was embarrassed by his MP's views on immigration, which he did not share. He now demanded an explanation. His wife, Proctor's agent, agreed.

The *People* sent six reporters to Billericay in the run-up to the Executive Committee meeting which had been called, in October 1986. The journalists repeatedly contacted members of the Executive Committee, and managed to secrete a tape recorder into the meeting, with one of Proctor's opponents who sat at the front. After a stormy meeting Proctor won the day by thirty votes to ten. The Tomlins resigned, as did the deputy chairman and the treasurer.

Proctor announced he would not be suing the *People* because of the prohibitive costs involved. The newspaper, regarding this as an admission of guilt, turned over their dossier to the vice squad. Reading the early edition of the paper late on a Saturday night, the MP immediately telephoned Scotland Yard to offer to give evidence. For the time being, however, the police made no effort to talk to him. But Proctor discovered they were making inquiries of a number of other people.

The next story – which appeared in the *Daily Mirror* – concerned Proctor's recent jaunt to Morocco. The headline read: 'Naked Arab under MP's bed'. At the Ali Baba hotel in Agadir it was alleged that a naked young Moroccan man had been forced, with Proctor's help, to escape discovery by hiding under the bed in Proctor's room. A journalist seems to have extracted this story from a friend of Proctor's. Proctor protests that the 'youth' was in fact twenty-five, and not naked at the time.



information on to the Serious Crime Squad which was investigating a high-class London vice ring. They in turn passed the information on to MI5, who told the Home Secretary. Edward Heath was informed. The Prime Minister, aware of Macmillan's failings only ten years earlier, ordered MI5 and the police to co-operate in securing any evidence.

Meanwhile, Colin Levy was planning to cash in on his wife's connections. Levy and an accomplice hid cine-equipment and a microphone (the latter up a teddy bear's nose) in his wife's bedroom to capture the minister *in flagrante delicto*. On 5 May they offered the film show to the *News of the World* for £30,000. The pictures were not good enough so the newspaper installed its own equipment in the flat. On 9 May Levy used a tape recorder to capture a conversation about drugs between Lambton and Norma.

The following day, a *News of the World* photographer hid in the wardrobe behind a two-way mirror and took pictures of the minister cavorting on the bed with Norma and a black prostitute. Inexplicably, the newspaper shelved the story and returned the evidence to Levy. He tried and failed to sell it to the German magazine *Stern*. The *Sunday People* was next on his list. Levy demanded £45,000. The *Sunday People* offered £750, with a further £5,250 if they published the story. Reluctantly, Levy agreed. The newspaper gave the material straight to the police.

Norma Levy then embarked on the course which was to prove fatal to Lambton. She told her story to the well-connected wife of the man who ran the upmarket London nightclub 'Eve', where Norma plied her trade. The woman contacted James Prior, the Leader of the House of Commons, through a mutual friend who happened to be an old business acquaintance of the minister's. They met Robert Armstrong, a senior civil servant (later to become Cabinet Secretary), in the incongruously dignified surroundings of the Privy Council Office.

Prior doubted 'if the room had ever witnessed a more bizarre yet intriguing story'. His discoveries were conveyed to the Prime Minister. On 22 May, hours after Prior had emerged from the Privy Council room, Lambton resigned from the government and Parliament. His statement was frank and devoid of self-pity. 'This is the sordid story,' he wrote:

There has been no security risk and no blackmail and never



*Daily Mirror*, 24 May 1973

at any time have I spoken of any aspect of my late job. All that has happened is that some sneak pimp has seen an opportunity of making money by the sale of the story and secret photographs to the papers at home and abroad. My own feelings may be imagined but I have no excuses whatsoever to make. I behaved with incredible stupidity.

Lambton was later to comment that he couldn't think 'what all the fuss is about; surely all men patronize whores?'

The following day, 'a day of sensation' (*Daily Mirror*), it was revealed that Scotland Yard was investigating a 'top people's vice ring'. Within hours of Lambton's resignation statement, the Attorney-General announced that the former minister was to be investigated for drugs offences.

Senior Scotland Yard officers carried out summonses for the possession of cannabis and amphetamines. Lambton, in a second statement that night, said: 'The police appeared to believe I was a heroin addict and asked to inspect the veins on my arms and legs. I consented. They were unmarked.' The press latched on to the fact that the minister stripped to his distinctive red flannel underwear. They searched his house. 'I willingly complied and showed them at once a small parcel of soft drugs that I had confiscated from a friend many months ago. They also found barbiturate pills which I