

# **MY FAME STILL FEELS IKE 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



n 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; evervone 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

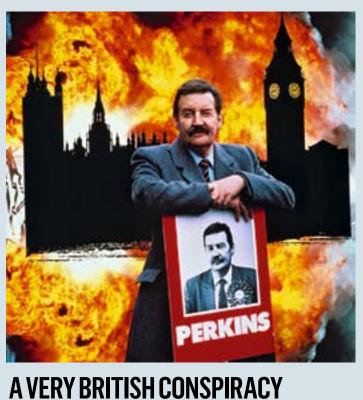
evenly refers to as, "A fable. A political fantasy." As the lunchtime crowd piles in, it has

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'



Secret State isn't the first high-profile television series to focus on "The book was written at a time when US cruise missiles were In 1986, those possibilities increased with the publication of "There was also evidence that, at least up to the late 1980s, the "A few months ago, I met a retired telephone engineer who had But does a far-reaching conspiracy thriller like Secret State still "Now the markets and media are much bigger players. It's

POLITICAL INTRIGUE

Above: Gabriel Byrne

plays a prime minister

State. Above right: Ray

inspiration for the series

seeking the truth in

**Channel 4's Secret** 

McAnally in A Very

British Coup, the

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 being introduced and it asked the question: what would happen if a bases? It was plausible that the government could expect to find 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. cloak-and-dagger operation by The Sunday Times a year later. security service targeted legitimate political opposition, such as the been based at the telephone exchange close to many trade union head offices. He said there were hundreds of tapped lines." seem relevant in today's political climate? Mullin thinks so. multinational business that poses a threat to democracy," he says.

government, whose dirty tricks attempt to force Perkins from power. government got elected and attempted to remove the nuclear itself in trouble. I was exploring possibilities," says Mullin today. Initially banned in Britain by Margaret Thatcher, it was serialised in a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and trade unions," says Mullin.

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

relentless energy." As he says this, a refuse lorry backs up and starts unloading mountains of rubbish from the huge bin nearby.

GABRIEL BYRNE

Friends have advised him that if he had been more social it would have benefited his career, but the idea of doing anything calculated like that makes him cringe. "I've never asked for a job in my life. I'd never schmooze up to a director - I would never, ever ask. I'm not that kind of person. I'd rather talk about football. Maybe it's a working-class thing — you never ask for stuff, you earn it."

He's earned quite a lot on his own, having acted for over 30 years. Byrne is best known for his roles in the cult noir films The Usual Suspects, and Miller's Crossing, the Coen Brothers' gangster tale, which anointed him as a gloomy, unsettling heart-throb. In 2000, he was on Broadway as James Tyrone Jr in A Moon for the Misbegotten, a role that earned him a Tony Award nomination for best actor. And yet he is uncomfortable with the idea of performing in front of people.

"I hate the bowing at the end. I've always had a problem with it. The bowing. The clapping. I suppose I have this idea from childhood that any form of public exhibition is equated with showing off." Whenever he has found himself in the company of actors who are shamelessly bold about their own abilities, he smiles. "I sit back sometimes and I just have to laugh – where do they shop to get balls that big? To be that confident? One time, an actress sitting with my ex-wife after watching the credits come up in a film, slapped her on the leg and said, 'Can I f\*\*\*ing act or what?'"

In 1988, Byrne married the sultry, savvy, outspoken New York actress Ellen Barkin, the star of The Big Easy and Ocean's Thirteen. Byrne and Barkin had two children before they divorced in 1999: a son, Jack, who is now 23, and a daughter, Romy, who is 19.

After their marriage ended, Barkin wed Ron Perelman, the Revlon chairman and billionaire, a man in stark contrast to the pensive, thoughtful and handsome Byrne. Her tumultuous second marriage was chronicled in gossip columns, culminating in an acrimonious divorce and reports of Barkin auctioning off at Christie's all the jewellery Perelman had given her and throwing a glass of water in his face at a swanky restaurant.

Byrne and Barkin have, by all accounts, remained close friends throughout the upheavals. He attended the opening night of her Broadway performance in Larry Kramer's Normal Heart last year, and even moved into the same street in Los Angeles as her for a brief period following their separation.  $\Longrightarrow$ 

"Ellen had moved out there with the kids and I moved out, too — literally lived on the same road," he says. "It was an enjoyably surreal experience, but then I got tired of it. It became predictable after a while."

He arrived in LA the night of the huge earthquake in 1994, when the freeways buckled and roads opened up. "I was on the floor with a television set — a frightening way to be introduced to Hollywood."

Byrne never dreamt of being an actor and says now that fame still feels like "a hilarious surprise". Before acting he was teaching Latin and Spanish at a secondary school in Dublin. He'd bring films and music to class and take his students to plays. "I knew that the day that I left teaching was a significant day for me and I believed at the time I had made a huge mistake. I was 28 or 29 and I'd been teaching for about seven years."

omething compelled him to alter his destiny. He had been working as a film critic for a magazine, although he adds: "Film critic is too grandiose two free tickets — and it was exciting to be sitting in the dark writing," but he had no idea it was the underpinnings of a future career.

After various jobs in his twenties, he decided to move to London, and joined the Royal Court Theatre. He married Barkin a year after they had starred as the romantic leads in the 1987 surreal thriller Siesta. He then relocated to New York to be with her.

One night, after the success of The Usual Suspects, he says he found himself sitting in a convertible looking out over Los Angeles and laughing and thinking: "Who could have predicted this?" "When you're a success in Hollywood, they let you know. In all the ways you would expect. Compliments, money — adulation."

Did it matter? He shrugs. "At that time I was old enough to know. I never seriously believed it."

In 2010 he took two years out from acting to be the Irish cultural ambassador in America. One might imagine that this required riding

≥ on a float in the St Patrick's Day ≝ parade, but like most Byrne-related

ROMANTIC INTERLUDE Byrne married Ellen Barkin in 1988. Although they later divorced, they remain close friends

## YOU CAN'T IMITATE CAMERON OR CLEGG: THERE IS NOTHING TO MIMIC. THEY'RE JUST MASKS'

matters, it was a serious endeavour, promoting Irish identity in the arts. It brought him into the world of diplomacy and government, which he found fascinating. Politics have always interested him, but the job was a huge commitment and after his two years were up, he decided not to continue, and returned to acting.

When he read the script for Secret State he was intrigued. It speaks of a breakdown in the system, and it resonated.

"When Blair came to power, people hated Thatcher; in the same way Obama was greeted after Bush. But afterwards there was huge disillusionment; Blair's legacy will be the immoral invasion of Iraq."

Was there anyone in mind to base his prime minister on? "No. You can't imitate Cameron or Clegg — there's nothing to mimic. They're just meaningless. Blair had something that was imitable, as Michael Sheen proved [in The Queen]. These other two are just masks and you can't get behind their masks. There's nothing to parody — they're interchangeable figure sticks."

Byrne's character, Tom Dawkins, is a

thoughtful and measured man. "It was a wish-fulfilment figure," says Robert Jones, who wrote the series. "The idea that a politician puts honesty and transparency above political considerations."

When Jones was first approached, it was going to be a straight adaptation of A Very British Coup, but that didn't sit right with him. The 1980s series told the story of an idealistic left-wing prime minister, intent on nuclear disarmament, but prevented by conspiring forces within his own government.

"The more I thought about it," explains Jones, "it seemed a new scenario was necessary. The cold war is no longer as divisive and topical, and after discussions with the director and producer, we updated the topic."

Rather than nuclear conflict, the rivalries now centre on the power of banks and big business. Jones feels these new tensions are just as relevant as those that existed in the 1980s, pointing to the anti-corporate Occupy protests and people's growing cynicism about multinational corporations.

"What I tried to do," he says, "is reflect the steps that would lead to a conspiracy, and I'd hope you would say yes, I believe it's realistic that other forces would move against any one politician, although of course some elements are more sinister than others."

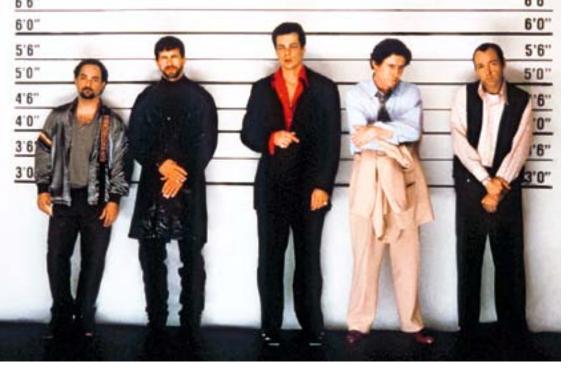
In the first episode, a catastrophic industrial accident raises questions about the safety procedures of the petrochemical company involved. The prime minister mysteriously dies and the deputy prime

minister (Byrne) reluctantly agrees to step forward into the limelight and become leader, in order for justice to be served. As Byrne's character tries to get to the truth, he is convinced that his own government is implicated.

Jones says he was not inspired by one event in particular, but that the scenario is more of an amalgamation of industrial disasters such as the Bhopal gas leak in India. As soon as Byrne's name came up for the role of Dawkins, Jones knew it was the right fit.

"He has the depth and gravitas to carry it off. You get the sense there is a lot going on without him saying a lot."

There is a remoteness to Byrne that feels like it might be a part of who he is and not just a barrier that he puts up  $\implies \rightarrow$ 



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."

yrne 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.

REX FEATURES

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'**

**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."

GROWING

PAINS

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's he's going, he replies: "The dentist." ■ Secret State is on Channel 4 in November