

12

THE REDGRAVES

When they were recruited, Corin and Vanessa Redgrave and Alex Mitchell were immediately put on to the Central and Political Committees. This put them into a position of leadership. I felt that not one of them could lead a pussycat across a country lane.

Maria, a young and enthusiastic comrade, came into the Centre one evening. She had been summoned to see WRP Assistant General Secretary Sheila Torrance. Maria stopped at my bench-cum-office at the bottom of the steps leading up to Sheila Torrance's office. Comrades often used to stop for a chat before going upstairs to face ST. The night before, Vanessa Redgrave had called a meeting of one of the West London branches to discuss the branch's paper and fund debts. The meeting was called for 21.00 hours and ST was waiting at the Centre for a phone message to say that the money had been collected, some hundreds of pounds. ST would be at the other end of the phone until midnight or so to hear from all the branches. Maria arrived for the meeting, parked her moped and went in. Vanessa was not there, but arrived shortly after. She stormed into the room, stage left, and told Maria that she was hopeless. 'You have parked your moped in a stupid place,' she said. Maria went outside to see what the problem was and was faced with the sight of her moped under the front of VR's car. The front of the car and the back of the bike were damaged. Maria immediately realised that this was a sit-on-the-bench-outside-Healy's-office job. So she went back into the meeting and took up the offensive, and told VR that she was not going to take the blame.

Vanessa reported to the branch that they had to pay off the debts that night, and should immediately make plans to achieve this. Then her leadership qualities shone through. 'We will go on a pub collection,' she said. Maria pointed out that as it was now 22.00 hours it was too late to raise the money in this way. I can well imagine Vanessa telling her that she was bending to bourgeois ideology. Vanessa led her reluctant troops out on to Kilburn High Street and into the biggest and liveliest pub in Kilburn, some fifteen minutes before last orders. Soon after, Vanessa had to be rescued from a building worker to whom she was explaining the building of the revolutionary leadership. The total collected was 20p.

When Maria came back down, she told me she had been severely dealt with. She was not to appear before the Political Committee the next morning, but in future she had to treat VR with more respect, as she was a very important member. Maria had to pay for her moped repairs while VR's car was paid for by the party. Lower echelons of the party had to pay while the 'important' members would charge it up to the office, under Healy's instructions.

On another occasion I was to take VR and Dot Gibson to Heathrow to catch a plane for the Middle East. I had prepared a car and loaded the luggage, and Dot and I waited for Vanessa to appear from Healy's office where she was receiving her last-minute instructions. They both came out into the yard and VR immediately shouted in a stern voice: 'Who told you to load up that car?' I replied: 'I did.' I was then instructed by Vanessa to take out the luggage and put it into her car (for some reason I was not to be trusted).

On the way to the airport her car started to shake, rattle and roll. 'What's wrong?' she asked. 'Don't know,' said I. 'It's going to break down,' she complained. She then started to slip into the transferring-blame mode. 'Who told you to use this car?' she demanded. 'You did,' was my reply. She had started to lay the basis for transferring blame in case we missed the flight. I was glad that Dot was in the car so she could hear what had been said. I coaxed the car to the airport and back. When they returned Dot told me that she was blamed for everything that went wrong. Vanessa even asked what Dot had done with her glasses when Vanessa could not find them.

Was Vanessa acting out the building of the revolutionary party and simply changing the script when she took on the role of transferring blame? Was this fight for revolutionary change simply the biggest production she had ever appeared in?

When we had candidates standing in a general election, Corin Redgrave was candidate for the Vauxhall constituency. One day he was leading a door-to-door canvassing team, marking his card with the ones who had shown an interest in voting for him. He was particularly interested in a young couple to whom he had talked for some time. On his return to the Centre he gave me their address, and told me to go and recruit them. His words were: 'They are keen and ready to join.' I rang the doorbell, introduced myself, and was asked into the house. Two minutes later I was on my way out. The kettle did not have time to boil. 'Come in, brother,' they said. 'I understand that you both want to take part in the struggle for socialism,' I said. The young woman said: 'The only place we will find peace and socialism is in the Kingdom of Heaven.' 'Hallelujah,' said the couple in unison. They were both Plymouth Brethren. 'Did you recruit them?' asked Corin. No, I replied. 'But they were keen! They called me brother. I spoke to them for about ten minutes.' I told Corin that they were Plymouth Brethren. I asked what he had talked to them about because I was in and out in two minutes.

But his sister was even worse. During a canvass on a big estate consisting mainly of tower blocks, a young woman came to the door, babe in arms, with two more youngsters clinging to her skirts, obviously a woman with a lot of pressure on her. She told us that she was having problems with the council regarding repairs and rent. I asked her if there was a tenants' organisation on the estate that she could approach for advice and help. At this point Vanessa pushed past me, and started to tell her about the need to change the system. 'The WRP candidate represents the fight against capitalism.' The only way to solve her problems, said Vanessa, was to demand a general strike, and so on. Then out came the membership application form. The young mother was left with 'Vote for the WRP!' ringing in her ears. On the way back from the canvass VR told me she severely disagreed with my initial approach and that she was going to raise it at the report-back meeting as an example

of how important it was to fight against social democracy in the WRP. That evening I received a great deal of verbal abuse from Healy, Mike Banda, Mitchell and Co.

The reason why I think it is important to describe the relationship between the WRP's members and the Redgraves is because it goes a long way in exposing the corrupt and reactionary relationship between the party and this layer of the 'leadership', on a day-to-day basis.

I once drove Vanessa Redgrave to the BBC Social Club where she was to meet her mother, who was doing a radio play. While we were walking to the car she asked me if I had seen *Playing for Time* which had been shown on TV the evening before. As it happened, Charlie, Rudolph and I had been banished from the premises as punishment for taking a decision (a correct one) without first checking it with Healy. We had to write the necessary confession and report with it the following morning. But it meant that we had been able to watch the film! It was about a Nazi concentration camp. There was an orchestra on camp, and one of its jobs was to play as the victims were herded to the gas chambers. The music was supposed to calm them. The conductor was Mahler's granddaughter. VR's character was one of the musicians. In the scene where the condemned were heading for the death chambers the orchestra was playing and VR was singing an extract from *Madame Butterfly*. I said yes, I had seen it and that in the scene where the men, women and children were being herded to their deaths I thought that the orchestra had played and her character had sung in a way appropriate to such harrowing circumstances. That is, no one would have been able to perform at their best. She looked at me angrily and said that she was doing her best to sing correctly. I responded by saying that I thought that it came over as though she was emotionally upset, as one would expect. As we pulled away in the car she told me to stop trying to be a film critic and get her to the Social Club as quickly as possible.

We parked outside where I was unsocially left outside in the car. About 40 minutes later the doorman came out and told me that I was requested to go in and join them. I found VR and Rachel Kempson (her mother) with a group from the cast of the radio play.

I felt uneasy and must have looked uneasy. They were all talking among themselves and kept breaking out into what I supposed were their characters. I had been bought a drink so at least I was able to hide behind the glass. One young woman from the cast broke away from the rest, pulled her chair closer and started to explain what the play was about. We entered into general chatting. She told me that she thought it bad that I had been left outside so long. Rachel had asked V how she was getting home and the reply was that she had a car and driver waiting for her outside. She let me know that it was Rachel and not V who had suggested I be told to come in.

I said many things in the party which ended up with me being criticised. Once I was at Vanessa's house along with a number of other people when I voiced the opinion that Jane Fonda had shown some courage in her stand against the Vietnam war. Vanessa came straight back. 'She is an opportunist. She never understood the reason for joining the Fourth International.' The gist was that she was frivolous and not serious enough about what she was doing.

No doubt everyone who has come into contact with VR is aware of her sharp wit and acute sense of humour. Once I was in the car with Healy and Vanessa, with Aileen driving, travelling along Goldhawk Road, near Shepherd's Bush. The traffic was very heavy so we were going very slowly. Passing a row of shops, I pointed out one with a notice outside saying, 'Insurance from birth to death.' I said: 'From womb to tomb!' Next door was an undertaker's with a notice: 'Easy payments can be arranged.' In the same breath, I said: 'Die now, pay later.' Even Healy saw the funny side of this, but Vanessa's face never slipped.

ST decided in her wisdom that I should work with VR for the following six weeks or so. One duty was to be her driver. This was about the time comrades had begun secretly to prepare a challenge to Gerry Healy, which culminated in his expulsion.

I had to pick VR up at 07.00 hours every morning and take her wherever she had to go. This was mostly to Clapham to be at the Political Committee meeting for 08.00, but then to continue with whatever plans she may have had. She had the attitude that somehow I should automatically know where she wanted to go. One morning she was not ready to leave for the Political Committee as she had

slept in. Her reaction was that I should anticipate situations like this, and arrive earlier. The Political Committee agreed with her, so no matter how long I had worked the night before – usually well after midnight – I had to be banging on her door at 06.45, after coming from Clapham to Hammersmith. One morning she was excused attendance at the PC because she had an appointment for an insurance medical in connection with a film she was making. She did not have to leave the house until 11 am. She did not let me know, so instead of me having a lie-in, I was up at my usual 04.45 hours. I was banging on her door at 06.45. I did point out to her that if I had been told, we both could have had a sleep-in. There were no apologies, although she did say a little later that the reason she had not told me was that she did not want to ‘interrupt the continuity of the arrangement’.

Around this time her father, who was a very sick man, was staying at Vanessa’s. I used to pass the time of day with him or sit down in his room for a chat. The Redgrave family had its own film archives, added to from time to time. On one occasion a venue was booked and all the family took part: Michael, Rachel, Vanessa, Corin, and Lynn, acting out scenes from King Lear. In one scene, Vanessa was sat at the feet of her father (playing King Lear).

On another occasion film footage was to be taken at Haddon Hall, near Bakewell in Derbyshire. This time it was to be an Elizabethan scene with Vanessa’s mother, Rachel Kempson, as Queen Elizabeth I. It was to be a two-day job with an overnight stay at a hotel near Ashbourne. I was to spend the night at our Education Centre, near Parwich, a few miles away. After the first day’s filming I drove them to the hotel and was invited to have a meal with them. During the meal I was shocked by their conversation concerning a very delicate family matter. It was as though I was not at the table, as if I did not exist. You see films featuring an aristocratic family having dinner, the servants standing a few paces from the table, upright and staring into space. They only existed when their ‘betters’ wanted another potato putting on their plate.

After the meal we retired to the lounge for coffee. I was given my instructions for the next day. I was to pick them up at 07.30

hours. Then, as an afterthought, Vanessa told me to bring a flask of coffee. I asked her for the flask. She said that she did not have one and that I would have to buy one. I reminded her that it was 22.30, the shops were closed and would not be open as early as 7.30 am. She said her mother was tired and they were retiring for the night. As they were walking away she turned round and said: 'Don't forget the coffee.' This was like Healy asking for Perrier water at four o'clock in the morning, knowing full well that there was none at the Centre and not bothering where it came from or how it arrived.

I told myself that this was just another little problem to solve. When Tony Banda broke Healy's china cup during the night, Tony was beside himself worrying about what would happen in the morning when Healy found out. I was able to get one by getting comrades up in the middle of the night. On that occasion Comrade Clare Cowen saved the situation.

I had to spend some time working out the options. I decided that the only thing to do was to get up early, go into Ashbourne, buy one, and get it filled at the hotel. But how was I going to buy a flask so early in the morning? This would have to be solved the following morning. The Education Centre Security was asked to give me a call at 06.00 hours. I went into Ashbourne and headed for Woolworths, and waited outside for the cleaners. The first to arrive was the cleaning supervisor, who had the key. I managed to talk her into selling me a flask. She was to give the cash to the first checkout point to open.

At the hotel I asked reception to have the flask filled with coffee. I told them who it was for and asked them to put it on Lady Redgrave's bill. (It was a few weeks before I was able to get the money for the flask.) When Vanessa arrived to settle the bill she noticed the item: flask of coffee. 'What is this?' I explained, and we headed off for the wonderful Haddon Hall. Later, I was seated outside the room being used as a dressing room with the flask on the chair next to me. The expected request for the coffee was forthcoming, but no word of thanks. Weekends such as this could have been very interesting and enjoyable if it was not for the overbearing atmosphere.

I suppose Vanessa was herself a victim and no doubt found

herself in situations that she could not handle. Once Healy put her in charge of a course at the Parwich Education Centre. I was one of the unfortunate students. The first day of the first week we were instructed to write an essay on why we had joined the Workers Revolutionary Party. I was the only one who had joined before the formation of the WRP, and the previous Socialist Labour League. I had joined the 'Group', from which the two later organisations came. To answer the essay question, I had to go over my activities in the working class since 1950 and earlier, and the forming of my ideas since 1945. I could not put it straight down on paper. I had to plan it out, and then write it down. At the end of the session I still had not finished. I was given extra time. When I had finished I took it to her room. She said that she could not understand why it had taken me so long.

The second session was called and Teacher handed back our books with comments: well done, could have been better, poor, and so on. I got: too long. It was obvious in her summing up that what she was looking for was a simple explanation as to why communism would be a better system than capitalism. I think this was about as much as she could cope with.