

A representative of the people

Bill Brand
Trevor Griffiths
Spokesman

Another magnificent and timely offering from Spokesman: the screenplay of Trevor Griffiths' 11-part series *Bill Brand*, first shown on ITV in 1976. The story follows the political and personal journey of a newly-elected young left-wing Labour MP in the 1970s as he challenges the politics and programme put forward by the Labour Party in government.

What makes this publication of the screenplay so timely is that as we, the readers, follow the debate that Brand and fellow members of the labour movement – left, right and centre – engage in, we are inevitably led to reflect on and take up our own positions on more recent Labour government politics and decision making.

In the series, Griffiths explores social democracy in practice, drawing on the governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. He creates a complex, dense and convincing picture of the MP's life, in parliament, in his constituency, in committee meetings, the Whip's office, the tearoom, at the party conference and so on.

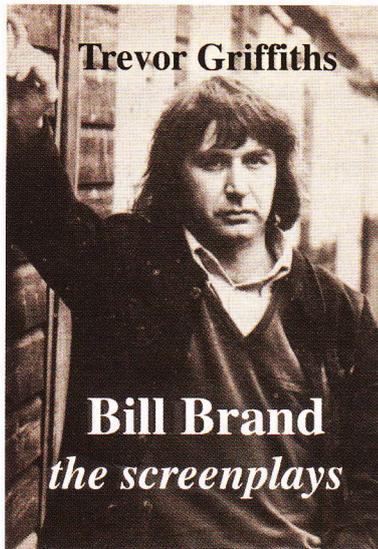
As Griffiths explains: 'We're investigating the stuff, the actual tissue and texture, of the social democratic processes within a major party. About which people know next to nothing.'

So, as we engage with Bill Brand and the men and women he interacts with, we also learn a lot about the inner workings of the system, the compromises and the deals and the personal and political prices paid to stick to one's principles.

The writing, as always with Griffiths, is sharp, richly textured, truthful, often very funny and also very moving. He demonstrates his deep understanding of the socio-political and cultural issues that underpin the series – which remain remarkably similar 30 years on.

The holders of different points of view within the Labour Party and the trade unions, and in Brand's personal life, are all given the space they need to air them, and we, as readers, are thereby also given the space to make up our own minds. For example, we witness Bill Brand's frustration with the party's economic policies:

'A Labour government kept in power by the likes of me, is currently fulfilling – yet again – its historic role as the supreme agent of international capitalism in Britain.



'Is this the rabble on which we are to build a revolution?' Well, the answer's yes ... We're all you've got, comrade

Left to right: Jack Shepherd, Trevor Griffiths, Alan Badel and Arthur Lowe during the filming of *Bill Brand*

And all the classic features of that process re-emerge: chronic large-scale unemployment, massive sustained cutbacks ... coupled with the steady, sheltered recovery of profits in the private sector ... [and the] definition of the left ends with a Labour government ... which they must then keep in power at all costs ...'

We also read/listen to the chair of his constituency party executive committee voice his frustration at Brand's vote against the government's attempt to extend temporary measures introduced under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1974 for detention without trial from seven days to ten:

'You've gotta stay in touch. You can't run all the time. So that people can see where you're going. [Brand looks down at his boots again, head on hands.] Do you know what Gorki said when he arrived at some godforsaken spot in outer Russia to lecture the peasants on socialism? He said, "Is this the rabble on which we are to build a revolution?" Well, the answer's yes Mr Gorki, yes Mr Brand. Because without them there is no revolution. We're all you've got, comrade.'

Don't be put off reading this because it is a screenplay. As always, Griffiths includes detailed scene descriptions, which give us insights into each of the characters and help us visualise their complex interactions. It's almost as if we were reading a novel in 11 chapters and animating it in our own heads. It engages us dramatically because we are constantly being pulled in different directions by the arguments and wondering whether Brand, too, will end up compromising his principles.

One small caveat about the published text: it would help to have the positions held by the characters included next to their names in the cast list. I found myself backtracking a lot and writing in the information myself. A great read nonetheless.

■ Romy Clark

