Interview with Jimmy McGovern

When did you first become aware of Reg’s story?
I came across it in the newspapers and the media at the time. It must have been about ten years ago that I first approached Reg and interviewed him at length. Other things got in the way but it was always at the back of my mind that I must tell Reg Keys' story.

What was it about Reg’s story that made you want to turn it into a film?
It’s the strength and the weakness of the story that’s the same thing. The strength is a wonderful story about a man who takes on the British Prime Minister. The weakness is, when David takes on Goliath, you want David to win but David in this case loses. However, in the film, he wins because he gets the one thing he’s always wanted, which is to say his piece to Blair. And he says it in the most public way possible, at the height of the election campaign at the count itself.

How involved was Reg throughout the production process? How did you strike the balance with telling the truth of his story but ensuring Reg was happy?
Of paramount importance is the truthfulness of the story and I think if it came to a clash between the truth and what Reg wanted then we would have had to walk away from it but that never did arrive. As you can imagine, the bitterness of some of those campaigning scenes we portray were very painful for Reg. People accusing his campaign of being just a cry of pain, telling him he was an idiot for allowing his son to join the army. They are very representative of what took place on the doorstep so they are in there but that stuff is not easy for Reg at all.

Has Reg seen the film?
Yes, he came up here and he watched the first cut because we didn’t want anything factually incorrect in there. We put him in a room on his own and he watched it and he found it profoundly moving. He was really supportive of us all.

Did you meet Richard at any point?
Yes, I met him a few times. I interviewed Richard at length and he came up to the shoot quite a lot. There was a wonderful moment in the shoot – Reg was there with the actor playing Reg, Richard was there with the actor playing Richard. It was the day that we got the Welsh Male Voice Choir up so you can imagine the emotion.

How important was it to you to meet the other families of the ‘Six’, who lost loved ones in the same incident?
Very, very important. Their main concern was if we were going to portray the deaths of their loved ones but we have never, ever done that. The only person whose death we thought we had a right to show was the death of Keys, nobody else.

What does Tim Roth bring to the role as Reg?
He’s just a wonderful actor. He’s A-list and we thought the film deserved an A-list guy. He was top of the wish list but because he’s over in America you just don’t expect it. But he talks about reading the script in bed and saying to his wife, round about page 20, “I’m doing this”, round about page 40, “I am doing this”, and round about page 60, “I am definitely doing this”. I think getting Tim was a huge boon but what you then need is someone to play opposite him. Anna is an absolutely brilliant, brilliant actress. She is wonderful, Anna Maxwell Martin, the things she can do.

What are you hopes for the film? How do you hope the audience will react to it?
I just hope they get a big audience because it’s a film that deserves to be seen. It’s an important film. Who knows whether they’ll appreciate the film or not, or whether they’ll like the film or not but I think they’ll be moved by it certainly at times. I think because of the mood in the country and everything that happened, people will see this as some sort of attack on Iraq but I keep stressing, this is nothing to do with damning Blair, this is all to do with praising Reg Keys. That’s what the film is about.

Interview with Reg Keys

What were your thoughts when you were first approached about the idea of the film?
It completely came out of the blue. I used to get one or two time-wasting calls for various projects and they all fizzled out to nothing. I always remember, it was Colin who rang me and said he’d like to meet us. I said, “if you want to see me I’m here” and they actually travelled down to Solihull to see me so that’s when I thought these guys were serious. Jimmy then sent me back the script to see if I wanted to make any amendments and he’d more or less got it spot on first time.

What made you want to go ahead with the film?
I strongly felt it was a story that needed to be told. The consequences for one family alone, which can be multiplied several fold, of how this Iraq war unfolded upon my family and the impact it had, I felt was a story that needed to be out there. For me, there’s no better person to do that, to take on the underdog, than Jimmy. I felt privileged to be honest. It’s a huge thank you to Jimmy and to Colin for sticking with it. I want people to know what happened to those six lads and the injustice of it. They mustn’t be forgotten and if they are immortalised in a film, that’s good. That’s what I want.

How involved were you with the development and production of the film?
Because Tom was killed with five others, it was a very delicate area as you have to bear in mind the other families that are involved with this. The one thing I learnt after being thrown into the pot with five other families, becoming one group with all the meetings with the MOD, is how different people react to the grief and that there’s no right way and no wrong way. It’s what works for that person. I contacted the other families and Colin and Jimmy then arranged a meeting in Liverpool with everybody to see where to go with this. We talked it through so that everybody was comfortable with how the opening sequences would unfold. I think how it has been dealt with is very tactful.
I then met Tim Roth on the evening before filming started and I was struck by how easy it was. It was like meeting an old friend in the pub. He asked me if I’d got my wedding ring from the time as he wanted to wear that ring. I had a tie pin on in the news reel footage and he wanted that tie pin to wear. I went to watch the scenes for the funeral cortège and the reading of Tom’s eulogy. I was standing at the back and Tim said, “Reg, was your jacket buttoned or unbuttoned when you stood up to go and make your speech? Were you holding Sally’s hand? Did you give it a squeeze?” He wanted to know every detail of my body language at the time. The attention to detail was quite remarkable.

**How did you find going on set?**
I went up for the funeral cortège and the burial in a church which was very similar to a church where Tom was buried and with the gun salute over the grave. As a tribute to Tom, I brought along the Union Jack that draped his coffin, his hat and his belt which they put on the coffin in the funeral scene. When the camera pans over to the coffin, you’ll see a cap and a white belt and those are Tom’s actual items.
I was surprised by how long something took to film be honest! The detail and perfection was an eye opener for me.

**How does it feel to have Tim Roth play you?**
I felt honoured that Tim was taking it on, an actor of his pedigree.

**What has Jimmy brought to the story?**
Jimmy’s strengths lie in championing the working class man, especially somebody who has a story to be told when he feels he’s been a victim of the establishment. When Jimmy took it on, people assured me you couldn’t have a better writer for this type of story, a gritty, working class lad that comes from nowhere trying to remove a country’s Prime Minister with no political experience whatsoever. I don’t think I could have got anybody better to have done it. There’s no finer writer than Jimmy to do this. I’m quite struck by his humility and I found him a remarkable chap to work with. When he was asking me what I was doing on the day Tom was killed, I said I was at a garden centre shopping. Jimmy asked, what did you have to eat? What did you buy? How much did you pay for it? I’m thinking, is any of this relevant?! But it is in Jimmy’s mind. He’s thinking about his scenes and his camera shots. He’s picking all these little seeds to plant in the viewer’s mind and I suppose that’s where his professionalism comes into play.

**What are your hopes for the film? How do you hope the audience will react?**
At the funeral scenes I watched, people were crying in the church even though there was nobody in the coffin. It was all just make believe but even when the choir burst into song, David Blair the director was wiping tears from his eyes. I just feel that hopefully I have made Tony Blair realise what going to war does to people, how it impacts on an ordinary working family. That’s what I hope to achieve from it. That story has now been told and I feel job done. After the film, after the Iraq Inquiry, I can consign Iraq to my past and try and move on. This film sort of helps me with that bottom line. I’ve told the story.
Interview with Anna Maxwell Martin

What made you want to take up the role of Sally?
I was massively affected by it when I read the script. Reg and Sally went through a huge amount and the story is incredibly important and needs to be told. Reg is an extraordinary person and I felt very honoured to have been asked to play Sally.

What do you think of the script?
The script was brilliant. As always with Jimmy’s work and whoever he collaborates with, it’s always the best writing. There are so many great writers on the scene now like Jed Mercurio and Sally Wainwright, but Jimmy has always been a trailblazer. I would do anything he wrote for me and like I did with this, say yes before even reading it because I know it’s all going to be good. Jimmy and Robert have bought a brilliant truth - it’s not sentimental and they get to the heart of the matter.

Did you meet Reg himself at any point?
He’s a super person. He came to set and I met him a few times. After filming Reg, I went straight into Macbeth at the Young Vic and he came to see it as well which was very kind!

What research did you do?
There is a limited amount of footage of Sally, a film that was made about them after the death of their son and a small amount of news footage so I looked at those. Both Tim and I spoke to Reg before and during the project to make sure we were being accurate.

How did you find working with Tim Roth?
Tim was great. We had a good time although the subject matter was pretty intense. It’s one of those jobs where you have a great group of people and David Blair is a wonderful director. It was a brilliant collaborative process.

How do you hope the audience will react to the film?
There are true heroes and Reg is one of them.