

Monday 20 April 2015



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Record Complaints as BBC Names Anscombe for Stella Interview

"They're all in it together" claims Formio in attack on "Oxbridge gang" who call shots at broadcaster

by **Saul Bollox** for Canterbury Gazette Online



Can Laura Anscombe set aside her personal ties to Stella Herbert?

Herbert MP, Stella's father, throughout Herbert's four decades on the political frontline. Ladies Cynthia Anscombe and Mary Herbert – themselves doughty players on the political stage – remain bridge partners.

Of the present generation, Laura's brother Henry Anscombe last week took a sudden sabbatical from his senior diplomatic role at the Foreign Office in order to manage Stella Herbert's campaign.

"Sabbatical?!" spluttered Nicholas Formio when he heard the news. "What's that, a holiday for people who did Latin? Except that, instead of two weeks in Lanzarote, you get to spend two years lazing around at home in your pants." The Green Party were swift to condemn Formio's "reactionary and unacceptable class-based rhetoric."

The fiery campaign team that Henry Anscombe manages includes Byronic poet John Dove and two of Stella Herbert's students, philosophy graduates Beatrice Tremain and Alistair Erskine. If rumours of a romantic link between Henry Anscombe and Beatrice Tremain are to be believed, yet another cord entangles the Anscombes with the Herberts.

Laura Anscombe is currently in Ukraine, where she will film a high-profile interview with President Petro Poroshenko (to be broadcast on BBC2 on Sunday evening). She has declined to comment on either the Herbert furore or amateur video footage, released yesterday, apparently showing her talking very animatedly to John Dove before getting into a taxi and racing off.

A spokesman for the BBC praised the broadcaster's "much-treasured fairness," described the allegations of a stitch-up as "silly", and dismissed the Dove footage as "inconsequential."

Newsnight's Laura Anscombe will interview Green parliamentary candidate Stella Herbert, the BBC announced yesterday. The two are childhood friends. Political opponents have called into doubt Anscombe's ability to remain impartial when questioning Herbert over her bid for the key seat of South Thanet.

Focus on the outcome in the constituency has intensified in recent weeks as Herbert has pegged back key rival Nicholas Formio, leader of the British Independence Party.

Formio's response to the announcement was swift and withering. "It's hardly going to be a grilling, is it?" he said at his lunchtime press conference. "The Anscombes and the Herberts are as thick as thieves. It's all a total bloody stitch-up."

The BIP chief was not alone in his angry reaction. The BBC received 1090 complaints, a record for a programme before its broadcast. By 6pm #stitchup2015, originated by the BIP's media office, had been used over 1,500 times. For a while mid-afternoon, it was the top trending topic on Twitter in the UK. A doctored picture of Anscombe and Herbert gazing lovingly into each other's eyes quickly became a meme.

But what is the truth behind the BIP's conspiracy theory? There is no evidence to support Formio's claim that the two shared "gluten-free Farley's Rusks and Babycinos in Fortnum and Mason's in the mid-80s" or that the last time they faced off was "on the croquet lawn at Roedean."

However, the two families are undoubtedly close knit. Laura's father Sir Peregrine Anscombe was a trusted adviser to the late Sir Jack