

## – PREFACE –

### *The Sleep of Reason: The James Bulger Case*

In 1997 Venables' therapist could say that he had made exceptional progress in both his personal development and acknowledgement of the enormity of his offence. Around the same time, staff at Red Bank reported that he had become a role model for others in the unit and he had matured into an amiable young man. His recent behaviour had been exemplary. That fitted the widely held view of the two co-murderers, that Thompson was the more thuggish and likely ringleader and Venables the innocent led astray. I had always thought that was a complete misreading of what we knew. If anything, it was the other way round and Venables had seemed to me to be the most disturbed of the pair.

But by now there was a consensus that Venables posed a low risk or no risk at all to the public, although it was also recognised that the shame and remorse he felt at his crime would be with him for ever. So while Thompson was wrestling with his past as a victim of abuse, Venables appeared to be gliding towards a viable future. The two were released in June 2001 and both lived in semi-independent units specially prepared for them in the grounds of the secure unit, before moving to live with full independence, some time later. They both took on assumed names and lived with the protection of a far-reaching injunction put in place at the High Court by Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, largely in response to plausible evidence that there were people who would like to find them and kill them or, at the very least, cause them harm.

As we later learned, Jon Venables' new identity required intensive policing and a year to set up, at a cost of over £250,000. He needed everything from passports to examination certificates and medical records – not even his GP knew who he really was. A 'legacy life' – a false past – had to be created for him, and presumably for Thompson too. It is hard to image how it must be to live within such a phoney construct. The pressure, you have to conclude, must immense. In 2006 I wrote that both young men had been living quiet settled lives over the five years since their release. How little I knew. Unbeknown to anyone, including his army of minders reaching right into the heart of government, Jon Venables had terrible unresolved problems – issues I now believe he must have kept hidden throughout his time in custody – and was descending into a life of chaos and criminality.

Venables had seemed settled at first, after his release, under close supervision by the probation service. Both he and Thompson were subject to strict conditions of release, preventing them from visiting Merseyside and associating with children. Venables studied and later worked, but he began to struggle with debt and isolation. Significantly he spent a lot of time alone on the internet. His probation officer wondered what games he was playing. In fact, for at least two years before his recall to prison he had been collecting videos and still images of child pornography and in some cases sharing them. He had expressed a specific interest in looking at images of parents abusing their own children.

How he managed to behave like that for at least two years, while supposedly being one of the most closely supervised individuals ever freed on life licence, has never been fully explained.

Venables admitted the offences and received a two year-year prison sentence. He became eligible for parole, once more, in July 2011, by which time his new identity had allegedly been widely disclosed on the internet. It now seems probable that, like his co-accused Robert Thompson, Jon Venables may have been the victim of child abuse before the murder of James Bulger.

But that is not something known or proven. Like so much about this case, it exists only in the realms of speculation and, I like to think, emphasises the importance of continuing to review and examine one of the most significant crimes in modern history.

David James Smith  
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