

# A State of Play

British Politics on  
Screen, Stage and  
Page, from Anthony  
Trollope to *The  
Thick of It*

Steven Fielding

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*To Pat and Tom Fielding, with love*



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## Introduction

# Depicting Democracy

Anybody who wants to understand what the British think about their democracy – that is the elections, parties, leaders and legislatures that give it shape – as well as why they think it, should take fiction seriously.<sup>1</sup> This is because plays, novels and films, along with television dramas and comedies, have long articulated Britons' hopes and (more often and increasingly) fears about the exercise of political power. Looked at in the right way, these can tell us much about Britain's political culture. Building on the insight that elections are but 'the final ceremony of a long process', *A State of Play* argues that culture is an integral part of the formal political process.<sup>2</sup> From Benjamin Disraeli's 'One Nation' to *House of Cards*' 'You might very well think that; I couldn't possibly comment' and *The Thick of It*'s 'omnishambles', concepts, characters and phrases originating in fiction have not only fashioned Westminster politicians' discourse but also, and more insidiously, helped mould how those millions beyond the Commons Chamber regard – accurately or not – the reality of democracy.

Like all prologues, this introduction sets the scene for what is to come. It outlines the key ideas and themes contained in *A State of Play* while explaining why its subject – the fictional representation of British politics since the end of the nineteenth century – is important and sketches out how it will be explored. As the book stresses the ubiquity and significance of political themes in what might superficially appear the most unlikely of works, to establish this theme, its introductory chapter begins with an analysis of one of the lesser-regarded protagonists of British political fiction.

## Learning from Lester

Lester the cockerel wanted to be leader of Big Barn Farm. The rooster believed only he could run the farm efficiently, by waking the animals very early and subjecting them to harsh discipline throughout the day. When they heard of

Lester's intentions, the four young members of the Farmyard Bunch – who enjoyed their lie-ins and mucking about – determined to find an adult to stand against him. After numerous refusals, Petal the piglet asked her mother, Mrs. Snaffles; thinking herself unworthy of leadership she reluctantly agreed, if only to stop Lester bossing everybody about. Now forced to compete for votes, Lester cynically mobilized support by organizing a football match to give the animals some fun – although fun was the last thing they'd get if he became leader. Mrs. Snaffles arranged a sports day in response. Just as they were about to vote, however, the returning Farmer dispersed the animals, restoring the natural order.

The above is a description of 'Lester the Leader', an episode of the series *Big Barn Farm*, written by Peter Cocks, which was first aired in 2008 on CBeebies, a channel intended for pre-school children. A programme meant for those who have only just begun to string together coherent sentences is not the first place many might start a book such as this. Certainly, when listing their favourite political fictions, journalists or bloggers have yet to refer to *Big Barn Farm*. In contrast, the sitcom *Yes, Minister* (BBC, 1980–8) or its more recent counterpart *The Thick of It* (BBC, 2005–12) regularly top such lists. Further down the running order often appear the melodramatic TV series *House of Cards* (BBC, 1990–5), based on the novels of Michael Dobbs; the sitcom *The New Statesman* (ITV, 1987–92); and *A Very British Coup*, the 1982 conspiracy thriller written by Chris Mullin, an adaptation of which was broadcast on Channel 4 in 1988. Yet, despite its different setting and audience, 'Lester the Leader' evoked similar ideas about politics to those found in these better-known fictions as well as earlier, long-forgotten works that never make it on to lists.

The most obvious echo is that Lester is male – just like Jim Hacker (*Yes, Minister*), Francis Urquhart (*House of Cards*), Malcolm Tucker (*The Thick of It*), Alan B'Stard (*The New Statesman*) and the rest. Of course, men have long dominated Britain's real politics: it wasn't until 1997 that women formed more than ten per cent of the House of Commons. Descriptively, then, politics has always been a male domain, so it is not surprising that fictional characters seeking or holding power are usually shown as men.<sup>3</sup> Lester, however, is not just any kind of male. That he is literally a cock was an accident of the farmyard setting, but his creator says Lester 'stands for cocky, puffed-up male values, and his regime would be hierarchical and militaristic'.<sup>4</sup> In that regard, Lester shares characteristics with those arrogant MPs with whom Agatha Christie populated many of her murder mysteries. In fact, the pompous politician was a cliché well before Christie put pen to paper, and he remains a stand-by character in comedies of various sorts.

Lester's craving for power is not motivated by his desire to satisfy the wants of the animals. Its object is to bring *him* satisfaction, as being leader will prove how important he already thinks he is. In this regard, *Big Barn Farm*'s cockerel is as one with the vast majority of fiction's self-seeking male politicians. One such character was Hamer Shawcross, anti-hero of Howard Spring's novel *Fame is the Spur* (1940), which was turned into a movie in 1947 and a 1982 BBC TV series. Shawcross represents himself, not the people: if becoming an MP and Cabinet minister brings him glory, they do not benefit.

Mrs. Snaffles is also a recognizable type: the honest outsider reluctantly drawn into politics so as to truly represent the people's interests. In the 1940s men normally played these self-sacrificing figures, such as comedian George Formby in *He Snoops to Conquer* (1944) or everyman actor Jack Warner in *Vote for Huggett* (1948). Their humble social position helped establish these working-class movie characters' renegade status within a party system depicted as a scam run by and for its privileged participants. By the start of the twenty-first century, such figures were more often women, with politics represented as a specifically male racket. These characters, like Mrs. Snaffles, promised to change politics for the better by investing it with supposedly feminine virtues grounded in their experience as homemakers. This is certainly what television's *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard* (BBC, 2006) did when she became Prime Minister at the head of her all-woman Purple Alliance. Cocks' description of Snaffles as 'female, lateral and democratic' could easily have been applied to Ros Pritchard.<sup>5</sup>

*Big Barn Farm* is, moreover, typical in presenting the electoral process as corrupt. If the narrator explains that an election 'is the thing where everyone says who they would like most to be the leader', the contest depicted is one in which the animals are appealed to on the basis of how much fun each candidate can provide. Of course, had Lester talked about his policy towards the European Union, most pre-schoolers would have been a little confused. Even so, the election evokes the infamously corrupt Eatanswill by-election described by Charles Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers* as far back as 1837 – one in which beer and money are traded for votes. 'Lester the Leader' is also part of a long-standing tradition of showing how easily voters are swayed by trinkets or stunts, one that not only includes Dickens but also A. J. Cronin's novel *The Stars Look Down* (1935) and the movie *Left, Right and Centre* (1959). Finally, 'Lester the Leader' ends in a manner reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1944): Cocks admits he had deliberately included a 'totalitarian subtext'. The Farmer's intervention also suggests that there are those whose power is greater than that exercised by the people's own representatives.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, it makes a point similar to that outlined many times in what

were, by the early twenty-first century, ubiquitous political conspiracy thrillers, one of the first of which was *A Very British Coup*.

'Lester the Leader' is just one instance in which children have been presented with dramatizations of politics. During the second term of Tony Blair's government the BBC broadcast the comedy series *My Dad's the Prime Minister* (2003–4), first on CBBC, its digital channel for older children, and then on BBC One at a time popular with 'family' audiences. The series, co-written by Ian Hislop, one of Britain's leading satirists, presented a lightly fictionalized version of Blair's premiership from the perspective of an eleven-year-old boy. Thus, the Prime Ministerial father is obsessed by how he is regarded in the media and even hosts a reception that evokes Blair's attempt to associate New Labour with 'Cool Britannia'. The Prime Minister is, however – according to Nick Newman, who wrote the series with Hislop – 'merely genially devious'.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, while J. K. Rowling's Ministry of Magic in her *Harry Potter* novels (1997–2007) was initially just incompetent, as she reacted to the politics of the War on Terror, it became increasingly authoritarian.<sup>8</sup>

A 2005 episode of the family-orientated BBC science fiction series *Doctor Who* also critically reflected on the reasons given by the British government for helping the United States invade Iraq two years previously. In it, the evil Slitheen claimed to threaten Earth with what transpired to be non-existent 'massive weapons of destruction' that could be deployed in 45 seconds. This parodied Blair's claim that Saddam Hussein held 'weapons of mass destruction' that would reach their target in 45 minutes. This was only one of a number of times over the decades in which writers for the series used it to comment on political issues. In the 1970s, the Doctor expressed views supportive of Britain's entry into the European Economic Community and in favour of the miners during their dispute with the government of Edward Heath, as well as against the tax regime of the 1974–9 Labour government which followed.<sup>9</sup> During her 1980s ascendancy, the series also took Margaret Thatcher to task, openly satirizing the Prime Minister and her policies.<sup>10</sup>

This was no recent phenomenon. In 1930 Richmal Crompton's infamous William Brown of her *Just William* series was elected Conservative Prime Minister by children in his village after beating a Liberal – of whose party one of William's more knowledgeable friends said 'they want to make things better by alterin' them jus' a bit, but not so's anyoned'd notice' – a Socialist – 'they want to make things better by taking everyone's money off 'em' – and a Communist – 'they want to make things better by killin' everyone but themselves'. In contrast, Conservatives, it was claimed, 'want to make things better by keepin' 'em just

like what they are now.' Moreover, as William explained after his victory, it was now the job of his beaten foes to oppose all his proposals. As he told them: 'You're the other side, so you oughter try 'n' stop me doin' it even if you want it. They do in pol'tics. You've gotter be against me. It's one of the rules.' If this seemed to make each party equally if differently ridiculous, of the Liberal, Crompton wrote: 'There were certainly the makings of a politician in Douglas. He didn't care what he promised.'<sup>11</sup>

We cannot quantify the impact of such works on their young audiences. Even so, a writer who in 1989 had the Doctor deliver a speech in favour of unilateralism believed that 'sadly, nobody really noticed or cared.'<sup>12</sup> How many *Doctor Who* viewers possessed strong views about one of the most controversial issues of the 1980s we will never know. But it would have been remarkable had one scene in a single episode of the series made any advocate of nuclear weapons change their minds. As we shall see, fiction – just like politics – rarely has that kind of instantaneous, transformative effect: but that does not mean it has no impact.

Certainly, the political references underpinning 'Lester the Leader' would have bypassed pre-school viewers, although possibly not all of their bleary-eyed parents or carers who, as I did, stumbled across the episode one early morning while getting ready for work. What is indisputable, however, is that the episode was based on a coherent view of democracy: as Peter Cocks says, Lester 'shouts louder than anyone else ... which accounts for the rise of many political leaders'. This reflected a broad consensus, at least as conceived by those who fictionalized politics. In painting such a picture some writers have had explicit agendas, but Cocks was typical of those many who less consciously evoked a particularly negative view. As he put it, 'while I never really make any "issue based" work the issues always seem to creep out, probably absorbed from the ether.'<sup>13</sup>

If rendered in anthropomorphic form and with entertainment to the fore, in telling his story Cocks, then, implicitly endorsed certain ideas.<sup>14</sup> 'Lester the Leader' was as a consequence just one more instance of a writer encouraging an audience to think as they do and so one more piece in the puzzle that helps explain why so many today do not much care for aspects of representative democracy.

Given that, it is time to focus on 'real', adult and human politics.

## The way we think now

Since it was first broadcast, 'Lester the Leader' has been repeated many times. The episode was shown on thirteen occasions in 2009, the year the *Daily*

*Telegraph* published evidence of the scale on which MPs were abusing the parliamentary expenses system. With headlines screaming of how the representatives of the people had tax-payers subsidize their purchases of duck houses, trouser presses and the rest, the *Telegraph* set off a bout of mass outrage. John Wick, who leaked the information, claimed he did it because Parliament was 'rotten to the core'; a survey conducted in the aftermath of the expenses scandal suggested the majority of Britons agreed.<sup>15</sup> Nearly two-thirds believed that 'the giving and taking of bribes, and the abuse of positions of power for personal gain' was 'widespread' among national politicians.<sup>16</sup> Sir Thomas Legg's subsequent investigation did not exactly vindicate these views. Finding that somewhat more than half of MPs had over-claimed on average £3,300, Legg hardly established that, as a group, they were 'rotten to the core'. It was nonetheless no badge of honour that getting on for ten Parliamentarians were eventually convicted of fraud.<sup>17</sup>

During this time MPs were horrified by what some considered their unfair depiction in the media. The Labour backbencher Chris Mullin – he of *A Very British Coup* – noted in his diary that the *Telegraph* had declared 'open season ... on us wretched, despised servants of the people', later commenting that those claiming to be disillusioned with politicians 'are mostly the same people who fail to put out their waste bins on the appointed day, allow their dogs to foul the pavement, [and] take no interest in their children's education.'<sup>18</sup> It was, ironically, because they feared antagonizing an already hostile public that MPs had balked at awarding themselves the kind of salaries many observers believed matched their responsibilities. To take a random example, quite a few of the journalists interrogating MPs about their expenses earned at least twice as much as a backbench MP, and without being subject to the same scrutiny, demands and insecurity.<sup>19</sup> MPs had looked on their allowances as a clandestine means of compensating themselves for working in many cases over seventy hours a week in a career that, as the journalist Dominic Lawson put it, 'is desperately uncertain ... and relying on the public's whim, without guarantee of a job for more than five years.'<sup>20</sup> It was, the Speaker of the House of Commons argued, a 'cruel paradox that at a time when MPs have never worked harder, their standing has rarely been lower.'<sup>21</sup>

Reactions to the *Telegraph's* revelations illustrated the depth of popular hostility toward politicians. It also confirmed how far such feelings were the product of perception rather than personal experience or knowledge. While thinking political corruption 'widespread', just three per cent of Britons said they had been asked to pay a bribe.<sup>22</sup> Many voters were in any case ignorant about the most basic ways in which representative politics worked: in 2009

sixty-two per cent confessed they knew not very much or nothing at all about Parliament while forty-nine per cent felt the same about the work of an MP.<sup>23</sup> And yet, somehow, most were confident that Westminster was close to a moral cesspit. This raises an obvious question: how do Britons come to believe what they think they know about politics? To answer that, we must go back to *Big Barn Farm* and its more illustrious counterparts.

### Why fiction?

The ability of the media to influence how people view politics worried politicians well before 2009. Facing severe criticism from certain newspapers, in 1931 Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin, borrowing a phrase from his cousin Rudyard Kipling, accused press barons of enjoying the 'prerogative of the harlot of the ages', given they exerted power without responsibility.<sup>24</sup> Preparing to stand down as Prime Minister nearly eighty years later, Tony Blair noted how the media ignored everyday parliamentary activity but was instead obsessed by the possibility of 'scandal' and 'conspiracy' and like a 'feral beast' set about 'tearing people and reputations to bits'.<sup>25</sup> Blair might be suspected of special pleading, but many academics believe that how it is reported makes a significant contribution to the low standing of representative politics.<sup>26</sup>

The public is certainly conscious of the role played by the news media. When asked in 2004 what influenced their opinions about politics, the top two sources people mentioned were television news (eighty-two per cent) and newspapers and magazines (sixty-three per cent).<sup>27</sup> So far as we can tell, nobody mentioned even one work of fiction. If its power is more subtle and harder to quantify than that of newspaper or television news, fiction does, however, play a role in shaping views of politics. Qualitative research suggests fiction can inform how people think about themselves politically and influences how they understand political issues.<sup>28</sup> As fewer people read newspapers or watch television news it is likely fiction will become an even more important source of information about politics. Most students of British politics nevertheless continue to favour focusing on official forms and processes: for them, these are what really matter in a democracy. But as a result they only have a one-sided and superficial view of the subject, such that, as one expert has conceded, political scientists do not yet know 'what politics *means* to citizens'.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, fiction is taken more seriously in the United States. As the political theorist Catherine Zuckert argued, fiction enables researchers to reach



‘the attitudes, emotions, and opinions that shape and are shaped by people’s circumstances.’<sup>30</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, many accepted that ideas about reality are strongly influenced – if not completely constructed – by storytelling.<sup>31</sup> This notion was associated with post-modern theorists, such as Jean-François Lyotard, who believed narration to be ‘the quintessential form of customary knowledge.’<sup>32</sup> It was, however, by no means confined to such esoteric figures. Thus, according to the sociologist Margaret Somers, all claims to knowledge

are transmitted *via* some kind of cultural schema; they are culturally embedded – that is, mediated through symbolic systems and practices, such as metaphors, ritualized codes, stories, analogies, or homologies.<sup>33</sup>

Within this process, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously claimed: ‘The real is as imagined as the imaginary.’<sup>34</sup> This meant that even the most elemental of political concepts – for example, the nation – could only exist once, as Benedict Anderson put it, it had been ‘imagined’ by readers of newspapers – and novels.<sup>35</sup> The political communications theorist Murray Edelman even went so far as to claim:

art creates realities and worlds. People perceive and conceive in the light of narratives, pictures, and images. That is why art is central to politics, just as it is central to social relationships and to beliefs about nature. There cannot be any representation that reproduces another entity, scene, or conception, but only constructions that may purport to reproduce reality while simplifying, elaborating, accenting, or otherwise constructing actualities and fantasies.

This process of ‘construction’ was most evident in politics, Edelman argued, because that was something of which, apart from voting, few people had direct and personal experience.<sup>36</sup> As a consequence, analysts in the United States commonly refer to the influence of fiction on real politics, notably its effect on the ‘cult of the Presidency.’<sup>37</sup>

## A very short history of British democracy

Before analyzing the effect of fictions about politics in more detail, it is important to assess the context within which they were produced: British representative democracy, as embodied by Westminster. It is the nature of this parliamentary system, one that necessarily involves people voting for others who they have

to trust to represent them, upon which fiction has commented. To be sure, there is a lot to criticize in a process that promises to reflect the people's voice, as even with the best of intentions, it is a promise can never be fully met. At the 2010 general election there were forty-six million electors, each of whom articulated conflicting and inconsistent wishes: how can any political system represent them?<sup>38</sup> Yet the means by which the British arrived at what they call democracy have only enhanced its inherently problematic character, such that while Parliament is hardly 'rotten to the core', as a body meant to represent the people, it has a way to go.

The period covered by *A State of Play* saw considerable political change. At the end of the nineteenth century the Conservative and Liberal parties stood at the fulcrum of power but with only mostly better-off men able to vote. By the middle decades of the twentieth century both main parties – Labour having replaced the Liberals – had apparently dug deep roots within an electorate consisting of all adults. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, many talked of a crisis of democracy, one in which an increasing number were alienated from the institutional means supposed to give their voice expression.

Underlying these shifts was a basic continuity that ensured the gap between the promise of democracy and its disappointing reality remained unbridged.<sup>39</sup> As the historian Edmund Morgan notably claimed, while central to the appeal of democracy, 'popular sovereignty' was a myth elites from the seventeenth century onwards mobilized to beguile those below them so as to entrench their own power.<sup>40</sup> Other historians – from High Tories to radical post-modernists – argue that the staged extension of the franchise from 1832 to 1968 took place on terms set by a Westminster cabal.<sup>41</sup> With many of its leaders mistrusting the people's voice, even the Labour party quickly embraced the established Westminster way of doing politics.<sup>42</sup> Given this, according to one interwar constitutional expert, if the political parties 'provided efficient channels of communication between head-quarters and the country ... the traffic ... has been chiefly from the centre to the circumference'. Yet, echoing the dominant contemporary view, the concentration of power in Westminster was not, the author believed, detrimental to the 'real interests of the people'. It meant there was clarity in the policies put to the country so government would be better able to implement them. In other words, there could either be an accurate representation of opinion in Parliament or effective government. This was why it was acceptable that the first-past-the-post system, which elected MPs, reflected the people's wishes only 'broadly and approximately' because it did so without ambiguity, allowing the governors to govern.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, according to the historian Kevin Jefferys, Britain never had anything more than an ‘anaemic’ political culture.<sup>44</sup> The party leaderships believed that holding an election every five years was enough democracy. Thus, even at their most popular in the early 1950s, well over ninety per cent of the population did not belong to a political party.<sup>45</sup> Of those that did, few could influence their leaders – nor, according to the leading academic expert of the day, were they meant to.<sup>46</sup> If democracy marked a revolution in the way power was exercised it was a largely passive one, with, to all intents and purposes, ‘politics’ meaning (to paraphrase Joseph Schumpeter’s maxim) the rule of the Westminster party politician rather than the people themselves.<sup>47</sup>

If this led to a situation in which many Britons looked upon their political system as distant and alien, it was only during the Second World War that an unprecedented number turned to those who articulated explicitly anti-party sentiments. This inchoate movement even briefly threatened Winston Churchill’s position as Prime Minister and led Conservative MPs to fear the people had ceased to have faith in Parliament – if, at least one speculated, they had *ever* believed in it.<sup>48</sup> This antipathy appeared to diminish after 1945, but it did not disappear. People kept voting, but that said much about how Labour and the Conservatives had attached themselves, leech-like, to existing class loyalties that usually trumped scepticism. The post-war blurring of social identities, however, saw these ties weaken and as a result Britons voted less and were more weakly attached to and trusting of the parties for whom they did vote.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, when the *Daily Telegraph* published its revelations about MPs and their expenses, it merely confirmed long-standing uncertainties about the nature of democracy.<sup>50</sup> This situation did not owe everything to social change, although that did make people less tolerant of democracy’s flaws. Nor was it the result of an informed appreciation on the people’s part of the flawed manner in which politics was organized, for many remained largely ignorant of that. At least some of the origins of the present crisis of politics can, however, be traced to how people imagined their politics to be, and in that process fiction played an important part. It is, then, time to be more specific about the nature of that role.

## Audiences and lessons

A writer without an audience is like a politician without votes: possibly interesting but definitely irrelevant. While not all pursued mass popularity – and

some deliberately appealed to minority audiences – Anthony Trollope, one of the nineteenth century's most successful political novelists, was in danger of stating the obvious when he announced that 'The writer of stories must please, or he will be nothing.'<sup>51</sup> Trollope's was a simple but crucial point: at some level all writers take account of what they – and their collaborators, including publishers, editors, producers and even those who perform their words – presume audiences want. As T. S. Eliot, who wrote *The Elder Statesman* (1959) among other politically themed works, pointed out, playwrights can only dramatize subjects that already have some meaning for audiences.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, David Edgar – author of more than his share of political dramas – asserted that as a consequence most plays are the 'possession not of the writer but of the audience.'<sup>53</sup> But as others have pointed out, that influence goes both ways. Historians Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards suggest the relationship between filmmaker and audience is a 'two-way process operating in areas of shared experience and shared perception.'<sup>54</sup> In reality, according to Edelman, the interplay between writer and audience means that fictions are 'part of the social milieu from which political movements also emerge', so there is 'no simple causal connection' between the two.<sup>55</sup>

Given the imperative for writers to make a connection with audiences, while fiction tells us something about the person who produced it, it also says much about the context in which he or she laboured, and so of wider opinion. What can be told about the latter becomes more definite if a number of texts share consistent patterns, either over time and by the same writer or within a particular period and written by different hands. In fact, many writers operate within genres, that is groups of works that repeat the same conventions, characters, plots, and even scenes because they were known to be popular with audiences, leading the genre theorist Thomas Schatz to describe them as 'a form of *collective* cultural expression.'<sup>56</sup>

While trying to please audiences Trollope also noted that a writer 'must teach whether he wish to teach or no.'<sup>57</sup> Trollope was one of a generation of novelists that students of the period claim created empathy for Britain's governors among those they ruled. In this way the likes of Trollope 'educated' their readers, many of whom belonged to those relatively well-placed classes enfranchised thanks to the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, encouraging their incorporation within the assumptions of a pre-democratic political system.<sup>58</sup> The near quadrupling of the electorate between 1918 and 1928 to include all men and women meant that while voters became overwhelmingly working-class and predominantly female, few were inclined to read Trollope. This new electorate supplied the bulk of

the audience for more popular literary forms like the detective novel and were especially drawn to the cinema, and later television. As a consequence, politics was often subsequently portrayed in ways of which Trollope would not have approved.

For much of the period covered by *A State of Play*, the kind of lessons a writer might teach was limited thanks to official and informal censorship. Due to the private way in which they were consumed and also their more middle-class audience, novels were most able to express challenging political ideas. Thus while Disraeli's novel *Coningsby* (1844) was published without difficulty, its stage version was initially prohibited.<sup>59</sup> So long as they avoided obscenity and did not defame individuals, novelists were generally at liberty to write what they wished.<sup>60</sup> Plays operated under a more restrictive form of supervision, one managed until 1968 by the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which could ban those considered immoral or a threat to public peace. By the start of the twentieth century morality rather than politics exercised censors and they even allowed the performance of interwar dramas that made an overtly Communist case. This was, however, not due to the Lord Chamberlain's liberality, but because theatre audiences by then contained few workers, and so censors doubted they would have any harmful impact.<sup>61</sup>

Cinema was, in contrast, popular with women, the young and workers in general, groups those in authority believed were vulnerable to dangerous appeals.<sup>62</sup> This meant that the film industry was heavily regulated. The 1909 Cinematograph Act gave local authorities power to prevent the exhibition of movies, while the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), established in 1913 by the industry itself, could alter the content of films or even stop their production. Mainly concerned to police moral issues, the BBFC was also able to prohibit the production of films tackling 'controversial politics'.<sup>63</sup> Few studios, in fact, sought to make such movies, believing profits came from entertaining audiences in as unchallenging a way as possible. As a result, the successful interwar producer Victor Saville could claim that in his own work 'I never attacked the establishment in any way'.<sup>64</sup>

Demonstrating their different regulatory regimes, when interwar filmmakers adapted novels with political themes, the outcome was strikingly consistent. The 1939 film version of A. J. Cronin's *The Stars Look Down* (1935) excised its protagonist's career as a Labour MP, despite the vital role it played in the original. Irrespective of Winifred Holtby's left-wing affiliations, Saville's 1938 rendition of *South Riding* (1935) was transformed into a paean to the National government.<sup>65</sup> Alexander Korda's 1936 version of H. G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come*

(1933) also ignored the author's stern critique of democracy in favour of the excitement of exploding bombs. Very unusually, the BBFC completely blocked the proposed film version of *Love on the Dole* (1933), because, like Walter Greenwood's novel, the script stressed the privations of the unemployed – and inevitably criticized government policy. Yet while 'controversial' for the cinema, it was based on a stage version passed by the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>66</sup> This situation changed with the Second World War.<sup>67</sup> In May 1940, with Labour in the coalition and Dunkirk about to be evacuated, the BBFC agreed *Love on the Dole* could be made. What had once seemed dangerous in the 1930s, wartime officials now believed had propaganda potential.<sup>68</sup> The war permanently weakened the authority of cinema's censors to control the depiction of politics.

Cinema went into a decline after the early 1950s, largely due to the advent of television. As a government-funded body, the BBC sought to avoid controversy and the appearance of partisanship, which meant its interwar radio dramas could tackle any subject – so long as this was not sex, religion or politics.<sup>69</sup> During the 1950s, those who regulated the BBC and commercial television also believed viewers needed protection from certain views, including ones that suggested not all politicians were paragons of virtue. The 1960s saw this paternalism wane such that by the start of the following decade the BBC was broadcasting dramas with openly Trotskyist agendas, much to the dismay of Conservative politicians. Indeed, by the 1990s some BBC executives and independent production companies saw their role as exposing the shortcomings of the country's political class. Thus, if the nineteenth-century political novel had promoted Westminster's virtues, by the start of the twenty-first century many television dramas reinforced popular misgivings about the institution and its inhabitants.

By the end of the twentieth century another inhibition had been cast aside – the one that prevented the dramatic depiction of real political figures. Unless they were dead, actual politicians, with one notable exception (in 1918 David Lloyd George was the first living leader to be the subject of a film biography), were not represented on stage or screen until the 1960s. Even novelists fought shy of unambiguously portraying contemporary political figures. Spring's *Fame is the Spur* was published in 1940 less than three years after the death of Ramsay MacDonald and presented a fictionalized version of the former Prime Minister's life, highlighting his vanity and careerism. The 1947 film adaptation did its best to emphasize the physical resemblance between actor Michael Redgrave and the ex-Labour leader. However, as with the novel, Redgrave's character was not called MacDonald. Similarly, while Churchill was not depicted in a British

screen production until after his death, during the Second World War certain historical Prime Ministers were given ‘Churchillian’ characteristics. *Young Winston* (1972) began a process that would see two television dramatizations of the Prime Minister’s life by 1979 and subsequently many more. Churchill would even appear in *Doctor Who* during 2010. In the 1970s television journalists also started to reconstruct contemporary political events, giving rise to the ‘docu-drama’ or ‘drama-documentary’, which mixed what was known with informed speculation. So popular did this type of drama become that Tony Blair became the first sitting Prime Minister to be regularly depicted on the small and big screen – and not in a flattering way.

### Lessons learnt?

Trollope assumed that when writers taught, readers learnt. This simplistic view underpinned the Conservative MP Charles Curran’s claim that Orwell’s novel *1984* (1949)

probably had more to do than any other single factor with the Socialist defeat in the 1951 General Election. That book did more than all the speeches, all the advertisements and all the politicians to change the climate of public opinion in England.<sup>70</sup>

It is very unlikely that *1984* enjoyed such an influence, but if it had, Orwell, who broadly supported the Labour government of the time, would have been upset.<sup>71</sup> This illustrates dramatist David Hare’s argument that ‘A work and its reception are entirely different things.’<sup>72</sup> Certainly, claims made for the influence of fiction in general vary spectacularly. Just to consider students of the novel, on the one hand are those who believe that ‘what we read affects us – drenches us ... in its assumptions’; others who argue that ‘reading provided a site for discussion, even resistance, rather than giving grounds for conformity’; and some who claim that as readers are ‘different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species’ their reactions are too differentiated to allow for meaningful generalization.<sup>73</sup> In short: it would be unwise to speculate too crudely and without evidence.<sup>74</sup>

Establishing the exact effect of fiction is however bedevilled by a lack of adequate substantiation.<sup>75</sup> In the absence of audience and reader surveys of all the works contained in this book, we however can at least make sensible, informed but cautious guesses. Even so, while counting up the number of books

sold or receipts generated by a film can establish a work's popularity, it cannot tell us how individuals reacted to what they read or saw.<sup>76</sup> Press and other reviews might aid us in assessing the impact of fictions on certain individuals, but these figures are hardly representative.<sup>77</sup> Memoirs, similarly, can also help us better gauge contemporary reactions, although they will likely be distorted by hindsight.<sup>78</sup>

To complement such material, since the 1970s US social scientists have studied the impact of screen political dramas. Their research suggests these fictions 'framed' how audiences saw issues and institutions, and 'primed' reactions to them. A film about how a candidate was packaged by his media handlers, for example, encouraged audiences to think image and its manipulation more important in determining electoral success.<sup>79</sup> A TV series that fictionalized the Nixon White House's Watergate break-in made viewers believe government dishonesty and immorality were significantly more important problems than before.<sup>80</sup> A movie depicting Senator John Glenn's career as an astronaut in heroic terms encouraged audiences to feel appreciably more positive about his candidacy for President.<sup>81</sup> The vast majority of an audience of a film that claimed the assassination of President Kennedy was due to a conspiracy believed the evidence put to them.<sup>82</sup> Finally, after watching episodes of the TV series *The West Wing* – which gave a sympathetic account of a fictional President – viewers became more positive about Presidents Clinton and Bush.<sup>83</sup> Such investigations taken together suggest that while an individual screen drama cannot overturn an audience's fundamental beliefs, it can reinforce prior opinions, if these are in sympathy with the story while increasing the salience of the narrative's subject.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, students of docu-dramas, which claim to be at least partly 'based on a true story' – without indicating precisely *which* parts – believe them to be uniquely persuasive, however inaccurate they may be. Research indicates that even audiences primed with the facts are likely to believe the most blatantly erroneous screen renderings of real events.<sup>85</sup> This is also true of those who possess first-hand knowledge of the subject depicted. Most strikingly, Geoffrey Howe, whose resignation from the Cabinet precipitated the fall of Margaret Thatcher, recalled watching *Thatcher: The Final Days* (1991), ITV's dramatized reconstruction of her enforced exit from Number 10:

At almost every moment when my actions, my words, were being depicted, I was conscious of serious, no doubt unintentional inaccuracies. Literally nothing was quite right. Yet for all those sequences where I was not on screen, disbelief



was largely suspended. The talking, moving picture is a compelling witness. 'So that's why George' – or Peter or whoever – 'did that,' I found myself thinking time and again. Beguilingly, the cameras appeared to be telling the truth, except where I positively knew them to be inventive and false.<sup>86</sup>

If this was Howe's reaction, how much more likely is it that audiences might accept as true that part of a story beyond their experience? On the basis of the work of one early anthropologist of film: very likely indeed.<sup>87</sup>

This does not mean, of course, that audiences are the passive victims of brain-washing. As experts in the field remind us, all fictions are open to contrasting interpretations, and people bring their own experiences to bear when they make sense of them.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, while plausible generalizations can be made based on the research cited above, it is still ultimately down to individuals how they react to the fictions they read or watch. But fictions can and do influence how citizens conceive of their democracy by contributing to the pool of ideas from which they draw what might be termed their 'imagined political capital,' that is the repertoire of ideas they hold about a system in which they are supposedly central figures.<sup>89</sup>

### A rough guide

Those few students of British politics who have used fiction to aid their analysis usually limit themselves to novels.<sup>90</sup> Often political theorists, they generally favour works of 'quality', with Bernard Crick notably only seeing merit in looking at 'serious' novels because, being 'the preserve of intellectuals', they 'mirror or influence to some extent the context of political beliefs, behaviour and morality'. This was in contrast to 'popular novels', which Crick considered 'simply use unreflectively a political background for a story-line'.<sup>91</sup> More recently, however, some have cast their net wider, looking to comedy to help them answer central questions in the study of contemporary politics.<sup>92</sup>

If *A State of Play* limited itself to 'quality' fictions it would be a much shorter book, for if some of the imaginative works discussed in the ensuing chapters might qualify as High Art, many do not. The MP Gerald Kaufman even claimed that Parliamentary Novels were 'on the whole unutterable trash' and one critic described their distinguishing characteristic as 'the almost complete absence of quality'.<sup>93</sup> While differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' or kitsch art – and he clearly preferred the former – Murray Edelman believed the latter exerted

more political influence precisely *because* it traded on familiar, hackneyed stereotypes.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the once-derided Hollywood Western is now seen as an important way of appreciating how many Americans came to understand the meaning of citizenship, law and political authority.<sup>95</sup>

Compared to those in political science, historians have been more willing to use an eclectic range of fictional forms to reconstruct that which Raymond Williams described as the 'structure of feeling'.<sup>96</sup> Notably, the Victorian music hall and comic strips have been analyzed to improve our understanding of how relations between the classes and genders were popularly conceived.<sup>97</sup> There are also those who claim that during the same period melodrama shaped perceptions of politics.<sup>98</sup> As its *Big Barn Farm* opening suggests, *A State of Play* addresses all parts of the artistic spectrum, from works that embraced complexity to those produced for what were once described as 'industrial audiences'. This means the book assesses different kinds of narratives, genres and forms written by a variety of figures, from active participants in politics to those who considered themselves wholly 'un-political'. Some stories are set in Westminster while others are located in milieux into which a political figure or event temporarily intrudes; politics might be a central subject or it could be marginal. Some of these narratives are dramatic – even melodramatic – but many are comedies. Indeed, while the prevalence of humour in fictions about politics might tell its own story, it does not necessarily mean the subject was not taken seriously. For, during the time when censorship prevailed, comedy's association with a carnival-like sense of disorder gave writers for the big and small screen licence to ridicule public authority.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, even after most restrictions on free speech had been lifted, two of the more popular and intelligent recent political fictions were television sitcoms: *Yes, Minister* and *The Thick of It*.

Each work of fiction has its own artistic, intellectual, socio-economic and temporal context within which it might be analyzed. That is how fiction is usually discussed, and one reason why the chapters are ordered chronologically is to allow *A State of Play* to pay regard to the times in which works were produced. Yet, the book also looks beyond context for changes and continuities across time and between the different genres and forms in which contrasting writers tackled politics. This is something few have done.<sup>100</sup> This panoramic timeframe provides us with an unrivalled insight into the shifting ways in which politics has been depicted. In certain important aspects much of substance has however not altered. From the time when Britons were governed by Tudor monarchs, fictions about politics often presented their subject in negative terms.

Indeed, according to one political scientist interested in why people now ‘hate politics’, the dramas of William Shakespeare form part of a ‘timeless’ critique.<sup>101</sup> It is certainly true that many stories contain the same kinds of characters and situations. There have on the other hand been intriguing and significant changes in the way fictions have critiqued the exercise of political power, notably in the representation of men and women, the rise of the conspiracy narrative, and the increasing depiction of real political events and figures.

More of a rough guide to the subject than an encyclopedia, the book employs the case study approach, highlighting certain works in some detail to make general points. To the uninitiated it might seem unlikely, but one of the frustrations of researching and writing *A State of Play* has been the huge number of fictions about politics that have been produced over the years. Indeed, had I known this, I may have reconsidered undertaking the project! As a result, many works have been excluded, and a few well-known authors do not receive the attention their devotees might think they deserve. However, to compensate, some relatively obscure or ostensibly unlikely fictions are studied at length.

*A State of Play* is not much concerned with how accurate a version of political reality fictions gave the public. As was observed in 1895, ‘we should have no dramas worth seeing if the dry and common routine of modern political and social life were faithfully delineated.’<sup>102</sup> In all forms of representation, including the political, distortion is inherent, and in fiction, drama is always of more value than accuracy. Some have, however, been very irritated by fiction’s lack of realism, or rather its failure to reflect what *they* took to be reality. As the *Guardian* complained in 1991, ‘As soon as our playwrights venture into politics they betray a kind of inexplicable immaturity’ and treat the subject ‘in the most simplistic fashion’ which is invariably ‘infantile’ and ‘one-dimensional’.<sup>103</sup> The editorialist clearly had an axe to grind about a certain breed of left-wing dramatist, but the general point was pertinent: fiction disfigures reality. In some sense, therefore, every political fiction is ‘simplistic’ and ‘one-dimensional’. For *A State of Play*, the important questions are why they assume the shape they do and why their nature has changed or remained consistent over time. In answering these questions we should be better able to understand the meanings Britons have attached to their representative politics.

When the book refers to ‘real’ and fictional politics, as it often does, the distinction between the two should not be fetishized. As is increasingly recognized, art and politics are both representing practices that share what Michael Saward has described as ‘strong aesthetic and cultural dimensions’.<sup>104</sup> They are furthermore inextricably linked to each other, for just as real politics creates the

necessary material for fictional politics, so the former helps shape perceptions of the latter. If writers are responsible for fictional politics, so are real politicians.<sup>105</sup> It has even been suggested that fiction might help us better understand the true nature of real politics.<sup>106</sup>

It would, in conclusion, be wrong to think that the British were perpetually panting for fictions about politics. When cinema patrons in 1930s Bolton were asked what they wanted to see on the screen, their top choices were ‘humour’, ‘beautiful things’ and ‘action’; ‘politics’ was the second least popular choice (after ‘killing’).<sup>107</sup> There have nonetheless been enough fictions about the exercise of political power to suggest that these evoked a popular response, one sufficient to encourage individuals to feel it worth their while to write about the subject. And when they wrote, in big as well as small ways, such authors helped Britons imagine what their country’s representative democracy was *really* like.

## Notes

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## Parliament Worship

The general election held on 14th December 1918, just weeks after the end of the First World War, was not quite the moment mass democracy arrived in Britain. Although 10.5 million Britons participated, if all adult men were now enfranchised, women under 30 were not, while some well-placed figures had up to three votes. Yet, the 1918 Representation of the People Act marked a huge advance on the position evident in August 1914, when the country went to war: then only forty per cent of men formed the electorate. During the nineteenth century the disenfranchised majority had nonetheless taken part in elections through often-rowdy public meetings. After the 1867 Second Reform Act tripled the electorate to over two million, however, the parties imposed an ever-firmer grip on popular political expression.<sup>1</sup> The last decades of the century consequently saw politicians move from the vulnerability of outdoor hustings open to all, to indoor meetings accessible only through the possession of a ticket. Moreover, once the 1884 Representation of the People Act increased the electorate to 5.5 million, face-to-face relations between representatives and people became ever more mediated, through the press, posters and other elements of what would come to be called 'political communications'.

The most significant outcome of the widening of the franchise was the extension of party organization. From essentially Westminster cabals the Liberals and Conservatives built a local presence across the country, one pejoratively referred to as the 'caucus'. After 1867, contemporaries frequently criticized 'wire-pullers' and 'machines', seeing the parties as perverting the free expression of the people's voice, none more vociferously than Moisei Ostrogorski in his *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (1892). If some patriots thought the Russian academic went too far, the parties regarded their role like a certain Edwardian Liberal looked upon canvassing: that is as 'a more or less systematic attempt to cajole, persuade, or convince the electors'.<sup>2</sup> As the future Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald suggested in 1909, even those new to Parliament believed that 'democracy without party is like a crowd without

purpose.<sup>3</sup> This was a democracy, then, in which the parties saw their role as giving the people a voice – whether they wanted one or not.<sup>4</sup>

While the electorate grew, politics largely remained in the hands of an elite, one in which landowners gradually gave ground to those drawn from business and the professions. The rise of the Labour party after 1900 challenged this position but, as MacDonald's comments suggest, only insofar as its leaders sought a place at the same table. Radical critics who called for direct self-government, like those syndicalists who briefly enjoyed popularity within some Edwardian trade unions, only modestly dented the dominance of that outlook.<sup>5</sup> It was perhaps inevitable that most in Westminster took a sanguine view of the place of party. In his preface to the 1902 edition of Ostrogorski's critique, James Bryce – a prominent academic and Liberal – claimed the author exaggerated the malign power of the 'caucus'. Britain, Bryce argued, was 'almost wholly free from the more sordid elements which may enter into the interest men take in their party' in other countries.<sup>6</sup> As would be the case well after 1918, figures like Bryce believed the 'Westminster model' – a conception rooted in strong government, parliamentary sovereignty, reverence for tradition, and strong misgivings about direct popular participation – embodied Britain's unique greatness and underpinned its imperial pre-eminence.<sup>7</sup>

But if some thought the parties were necessary to maintaining order, feelings remained ambiguous about their character, which politicians themselves occasionally exploited. While an insurgent Independent Labour party candidate standing in Southampton during the 1895 general election, the young MacDonald certainly indulged in anti-party rhetoric: he claimed that

when so much is uncertain, there could be raised no cry more fatal to our well-being, general progress, and good government than that which you hear in Southampton – party, party. Against that cry of my opponents I am bound to raise the answer – principle, principle.<sup>8</sup>

MacDonald would never lose his ironic antipathy to 'party', no more so than when he formed the 1931 National government. He was not alone.<sup>9</sup>

It was in this dynamic period that modern political fiction acquired many of its defining themes, subjects and forms. This chapter will consequently concentrate on those novels written as the nineteenth century electorate slowly expanded. Shakespeare's plays which continued to be performed during this time raised generic issues about the exercise of power, but fictions written about contemporary politics necessarily had a more visceral impact on audiences.<sup>10</sup> Such works initially lionized the efforts of their worthy parliamentary heroes, but by the turn of the century political fictions began to place a firmer emphasis

on entertainment and criticism. The reading public had increased, thanks to the 1870 Elementary Education Act and the expansion of the lower middle class. Emerging socialists and suffragettes also produced works often severely antagonistic to the established order, albeit for much smaller audiences. More significantly for the future, the last years of the First World War saw the cinema join the novel and theatre as a means of fictionalizing politics with the production of biographical films depicting the lives of two of Britain's Prime Ministers.

## The Parliamentary Novel

Writing in 1924, the literary historian Morris Edmund Speare claimed to be the first to identify the 'Political Novel' genre, born, as he fancifully put it, 'in the prismatic mind of Benjamin Disraeli'.<sup>11</sup> Disraeli's trilogy of *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845) and *Tancred* (1847) certainly played an influential role in shaping how novelists tackled politics. Disraeli did not, however, originate narratives that placed Parliament and parliamentarians at their heart: that honour lies with John Galt's *The Member* (1832).<sup>12</sup> The young Charles Dickens was moreover one of the first to depict an election, in *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), written a few years after ending his stint as a parliamentary reporter. Nor would Disraeli be the most popular exponent of the genre.

Speare defined the Political Novel as a work of prose fiction in which

the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government. In this exposition the drawing room is frequently used as a medium for presenting the inside life of politics ... the most dramatic and the most productive characters are, by their very greatness, the more removed from the ordinary world of ordinary men and women. The home of the noble lord of the Ministry, the country estate of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet meetings in Downing Street, the lives of the 'Elysians' who live in 'castles' and have great leisure and great wealth and who often guide the State in diplomacy and in executive posts out upon the far corners of the earth, are as far removed from our ordinary ken as the complicated workings of party control, the news which brings tragedies and rejoicings to the groups in the political clubs, or the manipulation of the elaborate machinery of diplomacy, are from our ordinary intelligence.<sup>13</sup>

These were the stories of great men told to help those excluded from drawing rooms and castles to understand their real-life leaders' dilemmas. Perhaps

George Watson's later term the 'Parliamentary Novel' is more accurate, given how the genre celebrated the centrality of the Palace of Westminster to the solution of the nation's problems. Moreover, according to Watson, a key feature of such novels was their exploration of the 'parliamentary idea', glorying as they did in what could be achieved through politics, characterized as peaceful persuasion and deliberation conducted between men of good character, benign will and suitable background.<sup>14</sup>

Whosoever's term is the most apposite, Speare and Watson make the genre sound dull, partly because they did not place equal emphasis on novelists' imperative to entertain. That such novels were mostly about aristocrats was important to their appeal and authors did not stint in describing in detail the world of privilege. It would therefore be naïve to ignore the extent to which these fictions allowed humble readers to gain a vicarious insight into the lifestyles of the rich and famous who just so happened to also rule their lives. For there was glamour and celebrity in politics at this time, and the Political Novel tapped into a popular interest. The sober Liberal leader William Gladstone was an unlikely figure to arouse cultish support, but there was a provincial fascination with his 'strange and marvelous' figure; supporters even made pilgrimages to Gladstone's home at Hawarden hoping to spot their hero cutting down trees.<sup>15</sup> When the far-less-celebrated Lewis Harcourt, son of a Liberal Cabinet minister, visited Haslingden in Lancashire during 1904 with his wife, the daughter of an American banker, to confirm his selection as candidate, the event was described in the local press as if it were a royal visit. The *Haslingden Guardian* even feared the town would not prove worthy of Mrs. Harcourt, whose 'gracious and affable demeanour won all hearts'. 'We are afraid,' it continued, 'that she would scarcely be favourably impressed with the dingy and ill-lighted streets of the town.'<sup>16</sup>

Often written by those with direct experience of politics, the Political Novel gave readers access to a lofty, desirable world, in a period in which journalists cast a respectful veil across the 'inside life of politics'. Within his social circle Harcourt was, for example, renowned as a sexual predator in whose company no girl or boy was safe, but his activities remained a secret to the great unwashed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, as an insight into the private lives of politicians, novels were seen as an important source of information. For while they rarely produced actual *romans à clef*, authors often indulged the desire for behind-the-scenes gossip by creating characters readers might view as versions of actual politicians. Certainly one reviewer referred to Anthony Trollope's characters Daubeny and Gresham as Disraeli and Gladstone as if this were a matter of fact.<sup>18</sup>

Those who wrote about politics had to touch emotion as well as reason: indeed, in order to achieve the latter, the former had to be first accomplished. Disraeli for sure did both. His trilogy, which took pot shots at Robert Peel's leadership of the Conservative party, more strategically called on the aristocracy to enter politics in greater numbers and help reunite the rich and poor, those 'Two Nations' his novels described. Yet Disraeli's texts were not just propaganda – they contained comic and romantic moments as well as unlikely melodramatic plot twists. Disraeli wanted to influence thinking *and* make money, which meant finding an audience. Moreover, while idealizing the possibilities of Westminster, Political Novels also betrayed doubts about some of its practices. Disraeli's 'wire-pullers' Tadpole and Taper allowed him to ridicule the mechanics of party competition: Ostrogorski might have conceived them. As a result, while Disraeli's biographer noted the trilogy's success in conveying the drama and excitement of Commons life, he also detected 'vaguely anti-parliamentary views'.<sup>19</sup>

If only because novels cost a substantial proportion of a manual worker's wage, readers were largely confined to the middle classes. However, public and commercial lending libraries – and the fact that stories were often serialized in monthly journals – meant that those from more humble backgrounds could read them, and for generations thereafter. Showing how far authors cannot control their readers' interpretation of their work, a future Communist read *Sybil* and used it to justify his view of the world.<sup>20</sup>

### Trollope's semi-political tales

While Disraeli is usually credited with creating the Political Novel, it was Anthony Trollope who did most to elaborate the genre, especially in his six 'Palliser' novels published between 1864 and 1880. Their main protagonist was Liberal MP and aristocrat Plantagenet Palliser who subsequently becomes the Duke of Omnium and, albeit briefly, Prime Minister of a coalition government. His wife Lady Glencora plays an important role in the series by exposing Palliser's romantic life and domestic arrangements to scrutiny. Another significant secondary figure was Phineas Finn, an Irishman of relatively modest means whose arduous rise to the Cabinet showed that politics was not the exclusive preserve of castle-dwelling Elysians – hard-working members of the middle class could also find a place. However, it is Palliser, a man of painfully acute moral rectitude with a supreme regard for the Commons, who is the keystone to all six novels.



Some critics have found Trollope wanting as a novelist of politics. According to one, he 'lack[ed] Disraeli's power of piercing to the core of a political situation, and his insight into politically minded character'.<sup>21</sup> Speare also considered Trollope as coming up short compared to Disraeli, claiming he 'never took his politics more seriously than as a means of creating another background for the portrayal of human beings, for the telling of a good story'.<sup>22</sup> As a failed Liberal candidate in the 1868 general election, one possessed by, Trollope admitted, 'an almost insane desire' to become an MP, he did not lack a personal interest.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, he wrote *Phineas Finn* (1869) only after being 'debarred from expressing my opinions in the House of Commons'. But even Trollope called his Palliser novels 'a series of *semi*-political tales,' for he was

conscious that I could not make a tale pleasing chiefly, or perhaps in any part, by politics. If I wrote politics for my own sake, I must put in love and intrigue, social incidents, with perhaps a dash of sport, for the sake of my readers.

Trollope believed that while all readers were fascinated by 'love', 'politics' appealed to 'a limited number of persons'. Indeed, he feared Finn did not succeed as a hero because the character spent too much time in the Commons for readers' tastes. Certainly, at least one reviewer of *The Prime Minister* (1876) believed it would have been improved if 'all the politicians, including Phineas Finn, his wife, and Lady Glencora, had been for once comfortably shunted into a siding'.<sup>24</sup>

Having pragmatically accommodated his readers' presumed preferences, Trollope nonetheless used his novels to advance a strongly normative view of politics, at the heart of which was, he conceded, 'a certain visionary weakness'. Indeed, in *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864), Trollope wrote that to be an MP was to have done 'that which it most becomes an Englishman to have achieved'. He also believed that 'improving the conditions of his fellows' should be the object of all those who sought elected office. In Palliser, a man of strict ethical purpose – and the character of which he was most proud – Trollope found the embodiment of that imperative, one which also vindicated the aristocratic role in politics.

Trollope, however, recognized that this vision had to be tempered. There were, he accepted, 'the intriguers, the clever conjurers, to whom politics is such a game as is billiards or rackets, only played with greater results'. His novels are consequently replete with adventurers, those who seek personal advance via the Commons, or who 'swarm into lobbies, following the dictation of their leaders, and not their own individual judgements'. Yet if critical of the party whip, Trollope believed that those subject to it had a place as a 'good round

smooth hard useful pebble' whose swallowed scruples allowed them to better serve their country. Through Palliser Trollope even celebrates the banalities of political endeavour, having him invest much time obsessively investigating the decimalization of the currency, an obscure object never achieved. Readers are clearly meant to understand that there was something supremely noble – as well as slightly ridiculous – in how seriously Palliser took such matters.

While he believed the object of all MPs should be 'improving the conditions of his fellows', Trollope looked on those in whose interests the best politicians worked with misgivings. He certainly did not believe in the universal franchise. Indeed, Trollope used his own miserable time as a candidate – 'the most wretched fortnight of my manhood', when according to him voters just wanted to be bribed and were uninterested in his ideas – to inform his depiction of canvassing in *The Duke's Children* (1880). There the narrator states that '[p]erhaps nothing more disagreeable, more squalid, more revolting to the senses, more opposed to personal dignity, can be conceived'. Canvassing cast, he claimed, poor men and women as the 'flattered' instead of the 'flatterers', leading the ostensibly solicitous Conservative candidate to privately hate those whose rudeness he had to publicly indulge.<sup>25</sup> Of the press, Trollope had an equally low regard. In the form of the obnoxious journalist Quintus Slide, newspapers are presented as able to make or break a politician's reputation by exploiting the public's ignorance and vulgarity.

Trollope's presentation of women is more paradoxical.<sup>26</sup> In the person of Lady Glencora readers are presented with an intriguing figure; indeed, Speare considered that compared to her husband she was 'by far the more masculine character'.<sup>27</sup> Glencora is in many respects better qualified for the rough work of politics than the hypersensitive Palliser and her ambition for him contrasts with his own diffidence. Yet she is also the means by which Trollope shows that female political ambition, if unconstrained, will end in disaster. Despite her husband's doubts, during Palliser's premiership Glencora becomes a hostess, intending to give herself a political role while helping him build alliances useful to his new government. But her venture ends in catastrophe: by creating jealousies among those not invited to her gatherings Glencora hastens the end of Palliser's brief tenure at Number 10.

### The ambiguities of parliament worship

Trollope idealized a political world that was, as he saw it, already under threat and his novels depicted those very real forces – the parties, press, the people in

general and women in particular – that would become more important during subsequent decades. Indeed, his 1875 novel *The Way We Live Now* added to that list, showing how a corrupt European financier could buy up everything in London, including a seat in the Commons.

After Trollope's death in 1882 his work continued to have an audience, but other voices were now emerging. While some shared his concerns, others treated politics in contrasting ways. Few, however, went as far as William Morris, whose utopian *News from Nowhere* (1890) had the Palace of Westminster converted into a dung-market as Britons, in his imagined future, ran their affairs without the help of professional politicians. Morris was an early Marxist of decidedly anarchist sympathies and not exactly a representative Victorian figure.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, while disparaged by libertarian socialists, fictions about the 'Elysians' continued to be written. However, if parliament worship was maintained, such works were often located in other genres – the thriller, for example – and had less-certain outcomes. For if Trollope's criticism of aspects of political life was more than balanced by his idealization of Parliament, increasingly, writers emphasized the former and neglected the latter.

Superficially, Oscar Wilde's play *An Ideal Husband*, which opened in January 1895, had little in common with the concerns of the Political Novel. Many critics in fact saw it as a satire on aristocratic society rather than politics and mocked Wilde's 'defective knowledge' of government.<sup>29</sup> The play's central protagonist Sir Robert Chiltern was, moreover, no aristocratic paragon. Having little money to finance his political career, while a minister's private secretary Chiltern sold Cabinet secrets to an international financier. On the other hand, he uses this tainted windfall to become an advanced Liberal MP and minister in the Foreign Office. As his wife puts it: 'you have brought into the political life of our time a nobler atmosphere, a finer attitude towards life, a freer air of purer aims and higher ideals.'<sup>30</sup> It is at this point that his past comes back to haunt Chiltern when the adventuress Mrs. Cheveley demands he issue a statement endorsing what he knows is a stock market swindle or she will publish an incriminating letter. Initially intent on following Cheveley dictates, Chiltern's wife shames him into doing the right thing. He therefore denounces the scheme in the Commons in righteous terms, thinking ruin will only follow, not knowing his friend Lord Goring now has the fatal letter. The play ends with Chiltern forgiven by his wife and praised in *The Times*, a Cabinet seat in his grasp.

Writing for a sophisticated West End audience – the future Prime Minister Henry Asquith attended the first night – Wilde exposed the complexities of morality in general and in politics in particular.<sup>31</sup> This threw some critics, with

one complaining: 'It is not very clear whether Mr. Wilde intends a covert sneer at our vaunted political morality.'<sup>32</sup> Reviewers of later productions also noted its ambiguity; any reading of Sir Robert's character, one claimed, 'is bound to depend on one's conception of Wilde's purpose and of how far his tongue was in his cheek.'<sup>33</sup> Was Wilde suggesting that the political class was tainted and that, if it was, it did not matter, because one should tolerate imperfection? Some patriotic critics simply rejected the author's premise. Of the selling of secrets, one even claimed: 'In France such a thing might happen, but not in our Parliament or in Downing Street.'<sup>34</sup>

Others, however, perceptively saw the plot as highlighting Wilde's 'moral that stainless and worthy people are very few in the world,' and that the main characters were not saints or devils but 'ordinary souls.'<sup>35</sup> Certainly, the audience is encouraged to forgive Chiltern's youthful indiscretion, which happened, as Goring puts it, 'before he knew himself'. It is Cheveley who makes Wilde's point that 'with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity' with the inevitable result: regular 'scandals'. Yet morality is part of the rhetoric of political life to such an extent, Goring observes, that 'in England, a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician'. Wilde suggests that this is a ridiculous position, a view perhaps influenced by his anticipation of imminent arrest for gross indecency.

Even more perplexing was Katherine Cecil Thurston's *John Chilcote, MP* (1906). Described as a 'showy romance' with a 'somewhat strained hypothesis,' the novel relied on the well-turned device of mistaken identity, as popularized in Anthony Hope's 1894 novel *The Prisoner of Zenda*.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps Thurston's hackneyed approach contributed to her work's popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, leading to a play staged in the West End and Broadway as well as four film versions.

Chilcote is one of Britain's greatest statesmen and the vital parliamentary voice during a grave international crisis. Yet, the man upon whose shoulders a nation's hope rests is also inadequate to the task, having been forced into politics through family pressure. He has turned to morphine to relieve the strain. Bumping into John Loder, his impoverished and long-lost cousin, during a thick London fog, Chilcote notes their physical similarity and suggests they temporarily swap roles while he indulges his addiction. Loder is what will come to be one of the most familiar characters in political fiction: the 'outsider'. He is also the better man, husband and, it transpires, politician. The arrangement becomes more frequent as Chilcote's collapse intensifies and Loder's liking for his cousin's life makes him

reluctant to give up the deceit. Falling in love with Eve, Chilcote's wife, Loder eventually tells her the truth, something she had already realized, having also fallen in love with him. Conveniently for both, Chilcote dies, allowing Loder to seamlessly take his place in private and public life.

As the Commons plays a decisive role (the nation's fate hangs on one speech in a single debate), Thurston's novel could be read as a parliamentary romance that reinforces regard for Westminster. Yet it might also be viewed as highlighting the need for an exhausted political class chosen by family and tradition to be replaced by one based on merit. It is certainly striking how easily Loder replaces Chilcote in the Commons – a copy of May's *Parliamentary Practice* is all he needs to get by. Loder is, however, a relative of the man in whose shoes he steps, a social equal albeit a hard-up one, which limits the radical implications of that latter interpretation.

Edgar Wallace took ambiguity to its ultimate level. Best known for creating King Kong, Wallace (who would contest Blackpool for the Liberals in 1931) wrote thrilling page-turners on a prodigious scale. *The Four Just Men* (1905) was one of his most successful.<sup>37</sup> Originally serialized in the *Daily Mail*, where he worked, it concerns a group of glamorous European vigilantes possessed of almost superhuman powers of ingenuity who 'consider that justice as meted out here on earth is inadequate'. Wallace has them try to prevent Sir Philip Ramon, the Foreign Secretary, from pushing through his Aliens Extradition Bill. The Four Just Men believe it will result in the deportation of continental freedom fighters enjoying a safe haven in Britain and their probable death at the hands of oppressive governments. They send a letter to Ramon outlining these concerns and indicating what will happen should he persist: he will die.

Ramon, on the other hand, genuinely believes his legislation will rid the country of an unwanted criminal element, that he is honour-bound to live up to commitments already given to foreign governments and must 'vindicate the integrity of a Minister of the Crown' by not being intimidated. In the face of Ramon's resolve, the Four Just Men spectacularly demonstrate their ability to murder him, if necessary. The press and public become involved in the hunt for the would-be assassins and as the moment at which the Bill passes through Parliament arrives, crowds gather in Westminster to show their support for the minister. Despite this, Ramon is killed, and the Four Just Men escape detection to fight another day.

Ramon is not a bad person, but he is hardly a sympathetic character. Wallace describes him as having 'that shade of blue in his eyes that one looks for in peculiarly heartless criminals, and particularly famous generals.' He has few

friends, no family and induces only fear among colleagues. A ‘cold-blooded, cynical creature ... He was the most dangerous man in the Cabinet, which he dominated in his masterful way, for he knew not the meaning of the blessed word “compromise”’. Ramon’s death is, it seems, due to his refusal to find the middle ground, as he is urged to do by the Prime Minister: in other words, he is assassinated for failing to act like a parliamentarian. In a bizarre way – the murder of a Cabinet minister – Wallace’s thriller endorses the parliamentary ideal.

## The party threat

Written in 1906 by the radical actor-director Harley Granville Barker, who believed ‘Art is not mere entertainment ... It is a moral exercise’, the play *Waste* showed how the party game prevented the advance of the right kind of policies.<sup>38</sup> Henry Trebell is an independent MP who wants to disestablish the Church of England, which Barker presents as a measure no one party can deliver even though it is the national interest. Leading Conservatives see merit in the proposal and seek to bring this independent into their Cabinet. However, Trebell is involved in a scandal: he has had an affair with a woman who dies of complications following a termination, then an illegal procedure. Given the importance of disestablishment, most are willing to overlook the episode and keep it secret, but Russell Blackborough, the aptly named character most closely identified with cynical partisanship, uses the tragedy to scupper the measure, provoking Trebell’s suicide, his political ideal in ruins.

The Lord Chamberlain refused *Waste* a licence, so it could only be produced privately. The public ban was ostensibly due to Barker’s treatment of abortion, which he implied was widespread within High Society. Barker, however, remained convinced it was really due to his depiction of the party game, one played out among sneering Elysians who only have contempt for ‘democracy’. If it is likely morality was more important in determining the Lord Chamberlain’s ban, suggesting the nation’s rulers might exploit a scandal in such a way would not have endeared Barker’s play to the censors.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the deeply serious Barker, Hilaire Belloc is generally regarded as a frivolous political figure, despite being a Liberal MP between 1906 and 1910. But Belloc also had grave misgivings about the dominance of party as well as about the subversion of parliament by financiers wishing to dictate Britain’s imperial policy. This view informed Belloc’s novel *Emmanuel Burden* (1903), which highlighted how ‘Cosmopolitan Finance – pitiless, destructive of

all national ideals, obscene and eating out the heart of our European tradition' bought political influence.<sup>40</sup> Given the comic idiom in which Belloc wrote, critics were divided as to how to view the novel. One saw it as 'a curious blend of satire, fancy and reality' in which politics was 'shown to be what it is – a rather sordid, monetary, self-seeking, social affair of polite quackery: a profession like any other, a business like any other, a mundane pot-hunt', but another regarded it as merely 'brilliant nonsense'.<sup>41</sup>

Belloc's experience as an MP only confirmed his views. As early as 1907 he wrote of the Commons: 'It does not govern; it does not even discuss. It is completely futile.' In 1910 he went further, claiming 'one must be inside the House to see how utterly futile is any attempt at representative action ... it is without any practical consequence whatever'. Belloc moreover also resented 'the vulgar futility' of getting re-elected and parted company with his South Salford constituency a few months after being narrowly returned in January 1910.<sup>42</sup> Now outside the Commons, Belloc articulated his stridently negative view of politics in *The Party System* (1911), a tract that emphasized the extent to which the parties collectively exploited the people on behalf of finance. This echoed opinions outlined in *Emmanuel Burden* and the comic novel *Mr. Clutterbuck's Election* (1910), in the latter of which Belloc depicted the party system as a game run by and for an oligarchy indebted to mostly Jewish financiers who had 'only got to wink and it's like a red-hot poker to the politicians'.<sup>43</sup> The party elites, according to Belloc, consequently served the interests of neither state nor people but took advantage of both and were so inter-related, inter-married and inter-connected that elections were meaningless.<sup>44</sup>

If Belloc believed the Liberal and Conservative parties had been captured by Jewish finance, socialist Robert Tressell's *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) saw the parties as the agents of secular capitalism. But both believed the party system exploited those it was meant to represent. Tressell – the pen name of Irish Marxist Robert Noonan – focused on local politics and presented it as class rule by other means. Hence, a clique drawn from the town's leading tradesmen dominate Mugsborough Council, which serves the 'self-glorification and the advancement of their private interests' rather than those of the mainly proletarian electorate.<sup>45</sup>

A technocratic socialist, H. G. Wells also believed the parties should be swept aside, a position he outlined in *The New Machiavelli* (1911). Unlike Belloc and Tressell, however, he believed the parties were irrelevant to the compelling issues of the day because they represented 'habits and interests, not ideas'. According to him, they exploited popular ignorance for electoral effect

rather than providing real leadership by trying to enlighten voters. The solution adopted by his hero, Richard Remington, the kind of ‘critical and imaginative and adventurous’ figure Wells argued was lacking in the real Westminster, was nevertheless to give up the party game and live in Europe with his mistress.<sup>46</sup>

It was left to the robust Tory author Horace Annesley Vachell to defend party politics, albeit in a highly qualified manner.<sup>47</sup> Vachell’s schoolboy hero Disraeli used his 1840s trilogy to encourage aristocrats to take a greater part in politics: so did Vachell’s *John Verney* (1915).<sup>48</sup> Instead of requiring them to unite a country divided between rich and poor, however, Vachell saw ‘party’ as the problem only aristocrats could solve. As one of his characters states: ‘I sometimes hear a phrase familiar enough in France and America: “Gentlemen must keep out of politics.” If they do keep out, if the “machine” triumphs, God help England!’ Vachell’s novel, then, echoed a more general view about the parties, by presenting them as at once essential and flawed. His solution – one Trollope would have endorsed – was that they should be led by the right kind of men.

Vachell’s eponymous hero is such a figure, a member of the gentry fallen on hard times, but who retains a traditional sense of *noblesse oblige*. A down-at-heel but sturdier Palliser, John Verney is also admirably diffident about a career in politics and only agrees to contest a seat for the Conservatives to impress the object of his affection. Indicating how flawed is the party game, Verney’s first election agent orders him to say anything to win votes. This is also the approach of Montagu Bott, described as the most famous and capable of all Conservative agents, who offers his expertise to John in a later contest. For his pains, Verney despises Bott, a character who evokes Disraeli’s despicable fixers Tadpole and Taper.<sup>49</sup> But Verney decides that in the national interest he must remain in the arena for, he declares, ‘Party politics, office-hunting – [is] the, the dirty work which even clean hands must do.’ As one of those men of ‘the better sort’ who, the author claims, can encourage voters to embrace issues ‘higher than themselves,’ Verney’s decision to continue in politics means the novel concludes on what Vachell would have seen as an optimistic note.

## Press and people

In Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*, the fictional town of Eatanswill has two papers that enthusiastically regurgitate the propaganda of the parties they serve. Seventy years later, nothing had changed, according to *A Hind Let Loose* (1910), a satire written by C. E. Montague, himself chief leader writer for the strongly



Liberal *Manchester Guardian*. Montague's protagonist is such an accomplished journalist that he writes convincingly for his city's radical and Conservative papers. Pandering to partisan prejudice, Montague nevertheless believed, should not be the role of the press in a democracy, for the public would only be able to properly exercise their citizenship once journalists informed them of the issues as they really were.

There were, however, few fictional instances of the press performing this exemplary role. Moreover, if Dickens and Montague criticized papers for being too tied to party, others painted a picture of a press free of such bonds, acting as an independent but not necessary benign political force. Thurston's *John Chilcote, MP* suggests that during a critical international crisis the most important issue was less how Russia might react but how might the *St. George's Gazette* respond, for it 'had stepped outside the decorous circle of tradition and taken a plunge into modern journalism' and used sensational headlines to attack the government.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in his 1913 short story 'The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat', Rudyard Kipling showed how a zealous but merciless press could hold a pompous, over-bearing, killjoy MP to account. If an example of newspapers keeping obnoxious politicians in check, the end was achieved through ridicule, not reason. As the keen peddlers of scandal, individual journalists were also disparaged. When Cheveley threatens Chiltern with exposure in *An Ideal Husband* she bids him to imagine their 'loathsome joy, of the delight they would have in dragging you down, of the mud and the mire they would plunge you in. Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard.'<sup>51</sup>

For some Liberals the power of the press to subvert democracy became a paramount concern with the outbreak of the First World War. Many were distressed by the alacrity with which newspapers undermined Prime Minister Asquith and prepared the ground for his erstwhile party colleague Lloyd George to become head of a Conservative-dominated coalition in 1916. Stephen McKenna, nephew of a Liberal Cabinet minister, wrote *Sonia* (1917) and due to its great success *Sonia Married* (1919) as someone distressed by divisions at the top of his party.<sup>52</sup> In the former novel, a venerable Liberal backbencher warns his nephew against becoming an MP: 'you've got ideals, you're going to do things, you aren't content to sit and watch – and that's why I'm warning you against the House.' If he disregards this advice, and becomes an MP in the 1906 Liberal landslide, his nephew is glad to be defeated in 1910. This is because, having realized Parliament's impotence, it means he can join extra-parliamentary attempts to prevent the impending European conflict by becoming a newspaper editor. According to

McKenna, the press was better able to influence opinion than any politician, describing it as having ‘foisted on the country by large headlines and hard leader-writing’ the Lloyd George government, after which ‘all control of administration fell gradually into the hands of the Press.’

Newspapers nonetheless only had power because, as Trollope feared, they exploited the people’s ignorance. If Belloc criticized the party system, he believed devices such as primaries and referenda would give the voters a stronger voice.<sup>53</sup> In having faith in the people, however, Belloc struck a lonely figure. Authors writing from various perspectives disparaged Britons for their lack of political fervour. According to Tressell, the working class ‘knew as much about the public affairs of their own country as they did of the condition of affairs in the planet Jupiter.’ Such was their ignorance his protagonist, the socialist Frank Owen, believed they should never be allowed to vote.<sup>54</sup> In Joseph Conrad’s thriller *The Secret Agent* (1907) London was the place where foreign spies, anarchists and radicals intrigue, but all the natives can muster is ‘shallow enviousness.’<sup>55</sup> In *Sonia* McKenna also compared the docile British to their insurrectionary Continental counterparts and has a young European observer describe one May Day demonstration as the gathering of

pot-bellied whimperers gassing over an Eight Hours Day and drinking enough beer to drown themselves in. The May-Days I know were the ones where the mob broke up half Turin and were shot down by the soldiery: they were men with something to fight for – and ready to fight for it. These sodden voter vermin! If they’d organize their cursed votes – if they’d fight – if they’d do anything – if they were in earnest –! My God, your English Labour!<sup>56</sup>

P. G. Wodehouse, a man of decidedly conservative views, celebrated this lack of political interest.<sup>57</sup> In his early satire *The Swoop! Or, How Clarence Saved England* (1909) the public is so obsessed with sporting news rather than stories of a more serious nature they fail to notice the country had been invaded.

## Pandering politicians

Winston Churchill’s political romance *Savrola* (1899) was set in a fictional European state. It nonetheless betrayed the soon-to-be MP for Oldham’s view that the fickle people required firm leadership, one based on a carefully constructed rhetoric that persuaded them to see the world as did wise statesmen. And yet Churchill still has his hero ask: ‘Do you think I am what I am, because

I changed all those minds, or because I best express their views? Am I their master or their slave?’<sup>58</sup> According to most other authors, the answer was: slave. While Churchill’s novel conveniently for the author suggested the people’s good could only come *via* a politician’s ambition, to them, the ambition of those seeking election was merely to pander to what was popular. In G. K. Chesterton’s fantasy *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) politicians were dismissed as being ‘such ingrained demagogues that even when you have a despotism you think of nothing but public opinion. So you learn to tack and run, and are afraid of the first breeze.’<sup>59</sup>

Those who try to do more are invariably disappointed. In *The New Machiavelli* Richard Remington’s efforts to assume the high road during the 1906 election generate only indifference and boredom. As Wells had Remington recall of the voters,

They were mostly everyday, toiling people people, full of small personal solitudes, and they came to my meetings, I think, very largely as a relaxation ... They wanted fun, they wanted spice, they wanted hits, they wanted a chance to say ‘Ear, ear!’ in an intelligent and honourable manner and clap their hands and drum with their feet.<sup>60</sup>

That was also the experience of Vachell’s John Verney. Encouraged by his agent to give voters ‘hot stuff’, Verney instead nobly serves up ‘cold facts’. Despite this, he wins, but is disappointed to learn that his victory owed less to argument and more to the support of prominent landowners and his locally prestigious name. Verney loses in the 1906 general election because he again refuses to follow his agent’s advice but also thanks to a last-minute lying Liberal leaflet.<sup>61</sup> In this way Vachell’s novel – as do many others – illustrates the people’s vulnerability to such stunts.

With *News from Nowhere* as the great exception, the people are generally shown as incapable of determining their own interests while the party game mostly throws up only those seeking to exploit that incapacity. Henry Rider Haggard, best known for thrilling adventures set in exotic locations, illustrated the potentially disastrous consequences of this situation in *Doctor Thorne* (1898). This Haggard described as ‘my only novel with a purpose’, provoked as it was by the 1898 Vaccination Act, which allowed parents with conscientious objections to prevent their children being vaccinated against smallpox.<sup>62</sup> The novel – seen as more of a ‘controversial pamphlet’ by some – predicted Britain would endure a proliferation of smallpox epidemics as a result.<sup>63</sup> In making his case, Rider Haggard also warned against endemic electoral opportunism.

Thorne lives in a corrupt borough, or, as he writes:

that is, it had always been represented by a rich man, who was expected to pay liberally for the honour of its confidence. Pay he did, indeed, in large and numberless subscriptions, in the endowment of reading-rooms, in presents of public parks, and I know not what besides.<sup>64</sup>

Therne consequently takes up the anti-vaccinationist cause not through conviction – as a medical man he believes in vaccination – but because it is convenient. A poor man looking to become an MP, Therne promises to amend the legislation to win the financial backing of those faddists who run his local Liberal party, seeing it as ‘merely one of the usual election platform formulas, whereby the candidate binds himself to support all sorts of things in which he has little of no beliefs’. Thus with his support – and of other pandering MPs – the Commons forbids the prosecution of parents objecting to their child’s vaccination. This ultimate ‘triumph of opportunism’ inevitably leads to outbreaks of smallpox, which kill thousands, including Therne’s daughter.

As Wells has Remington tell fellow Liberals after their 1906 landslide: ‘The monster that brought us into power has, among other deficiencies, no head. We’ve got to give it one – if possible with a brains and a will.’<sup>65</sup> This was a view with which Trollope would have agreed. The problem, however, was that democracy meant it was difficult for men of the right character to emerge and exert the proper kind of leadership. There were some, on the other hand, who argued that women had the ethical fortitude to save parliamentary democracy from itself.

### Parliamentary saviours?

Trollope gave a few of his female characters an interest in politics and the desire to play a modest role on the outskirts of parliamentary life. This was something of an advance on Disraeli, whose eponymous Sybil was a saint in human form, a passive inspiration to male action. Yet it was Sybil rather than Glencora Palliser who was the more representative figure in political fictions before 1918: in these, women mostly assumed the role of male politicians’ ‘moral policemen’<sup>66</sup> – that is, if they were given *any* role. Exceptionally, Ronald MacDonald’s comic novel *The Election of Isabel* (1907) has an estranged wife stand against her husband but while triumphing at the polls the result is voided so she never actually becomes an MP. More typical was Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Adventure of the Second Stain’ (1904), the plot for which turned on the Secretary for European Affairs’ wife being completely ignorant of her husband’s work.

Fictions of this time were influenced by the prevailing notion of ‘separate spheres’, which stipulated that men and women had their own domains, the one public and the other private, which were appropriate to their complementary natures.<sup>67</sup> Many leading politicians cleaved to that view, none more than Gladstone. He announced his opposition to the 1892 Women’s Suffrage Bill by claiming it would throw women into ‘the whirlpool of public life’. Gladstone feared, in particular, that by passing the Bill ‘we should invite [women] unwittingly to trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power’ and so ‘dislocate, or injuriously modify, the relations of domestic life.’<sup>68</sup> Women, in other words, would cease to be ‘women’ if they had the vote.

Even in novels published during the First World War, which saw hundreds of thousands take on hitherto ‘male’ jobs, women are nonetheless beautiful and inert trophies (such as Sheila, the naïve Cabinet minister’s daughter in *John Verney*) for whose hand in marriage male protagonists compete.<sup>69</sup> Stephen McKenna depicts the eponymous heroine of *Sonia* and *Sonia Married* as a headstrong, selfish and fickle woman who dominates the emotional lives of his politically active men. She is, however, little more than a glorified diversion from and impediment to their public work. Sonia, like so many women in political fiction, fiction normally written by men, has no interest in politics. It was, though, a woman – Katherine Thurston – who in *John Chilcote, MP* applied more completely than even Gladstone the separate spheres argument to politics.<sup>70</sup> As she wrote:

When a man touches the core of his capacities – puts his best into the work that in his eyes stands paramount – there is little place for, and no need of woman. She comes before – and after. She inspires, compensates or completes; but the achievement, the creation, is man’s alone. And all true women understand and yield to this unspoken precept.

Chilcote’s wife Eve is moreover happy being ‘an onlooker who stands, as it were, on the steps of the arena; one who, by a single forward movement, could feel the sand under her feet, the breath of the battle on her face’. But Eve’s ambitions are all focused on her husband, the problem being that Chilcote is unworthy – the wrong kind of man. Indeed, given their lack of physical affection, it is questionable how much of a man he was to her. Thurston’s association of political performance and male sexuality is confirmed when Eve, who by this stage realizes Loder’s deception, becomes conscious of his ‘strong, masterful

personality' after he dominates the Commons and so allows him to kiss her for the first time. The novel ends with Eve in possession of the right man as husband and with Loder wanting to excel in politics so as to maintain her respect for him.

John Stuart Mill first moved a Bill to enfranchise women on the same basis as men as early as 1866, and the 1892 initiative opposed by Gladstone was just one instance of the campaign to get them the vote. In the decade prior to the outbreak of the First World War the women's suffrage campaign took on a more direct character. The movement also had a cultural dimension, exemplified by the Actresses' Franchise League and the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL), whose members wrote and performed theatrical works, often didactic one-act plays that made the case for female suffrage.<sup>71</sup> *Votes for Women* by Elizabeth Robins, first President of the WWSL, was initially performed in 1907 and proved so popular she turned it into a novel, *The Convert*, published later the same year. Robins was already a well-established novelist and actor and her acquaintances included radicals like George Bernard Shaw.<sup>72</sup> Hers is probably the best-known and most dramatically successful work produced by a suffragist during this period; it also revealed some of the paradoxes in the campaign for women's votes.

If contemporary reviewers saw *Votes for Women* as a 'propagandist' work that would appeal to audiences 'less as a play than as a political argument', they nonetheless believed it had theatrical merit. Performed at the Royal Court and mainly restricted to afternoon performances, *Votes for Women* was, however, never going to have mass appeal: it was a play for 'intelligent London'.<sup>73</sup> Its heroine reflected this: Jean Dumbarton was a young heiress who progressed from being an uncomplaining dinner table diversion for eminent politicians to a keen suffragette.<sup>74</sup>

Robins is nevertheless not a critic of the Westminster model: she in fact claims women will improve Parliament if allowed to vote. This led one reviewer to observe: 'We fancy Miss Robins over-estimates the potency of the franchise, as is the way of people with things they want and have not got.'<sup>75</sup> Indeed, the novel enthusiastically validates political activity, with one character claiming there was 'something ennobling in working for a public cause'. Moreover, to make her case, one suffragette uses Parliament's reputation as 'a place of dignity ... that sacred place' against itself, after a Bill to extend the franchise is shouted down by MPs. Furthermore, Robins' case is not that women are the same as men but that they are different, and that it is their unique nature that means they will exercise the vote better than men. Women, most notably, will not be selfish. As one character claims: 'we don't only want better things for our own children;

we want better things for all. *Every* child is our child.' Indeed, 'The question of statecraft, rightly considered, always leads back to the mother. That State is most prosperous that most considers her.'

Jean becomes engaged to the charismatic Conservative MP Geoffrey Stonor, a widely admired 'coming man' whose 'straight, firm features' mark him out as the conventional hero. There are, nonetheless, questions about his character and he looks on politics as a mere game. Stonor is also a man with a past, who ten years previously had a relationship with a woman who became pregnant, although the child did not survive. Robins, however, makes it clear that he has not 'wronged' the woman, while on stage C. Aubrey Smith played him as 'a model of manly discretion'.<sup>76</sup> The affair simply went wrong.

Stonor embraces women's suffrage, but for all the wrong reasons. He is facing defeat in the general election and is told he has to 'manufacture some political dynamite' if he is to save his seat. As the campaign is presented as one in which suffragists hold the key, he embraces reform with 'an expression of shrewd malice', commenting: 'After all, women are much more Conservative *naturally* than men, aren't they?' This cynicism is transcended when Jean – who as his fiancée plays the established inspirational proto-wifely role – makes him see his support in terms of making amends to his former love and to all women. As a result, Stonor becomes a better politician and husband. Women gain the vote, and Parliament is all the better for it: the old and the new can go on together.

Robins' work suggested suffragettes were normal women, certainly not the de-sexed monsters some opponents claimed them to be. This was very unlike their embodiment as H. G. Wells' embittered man-hating fanatic Miss Miniver in *Ann Veronica* (1909). Ostensibly a political progressive, in his assumptions about gender Wells betrayed a deeper conservatism, in the same way that for all her gender radicalism Robins appeared only to want to enable Parliament to live up to its promise. As something of a lothario, Wells had a personal interest in the relationship between sexuality and politics.<sup>77</sup> The intellectuals he portrayed in *The New Machiavelli* believed sexual passion could not be combined with public service.<sup>78</sup> One even proposes a League of Social Service in which 'chastity will be first among the virtues prescribed'. For such figures, politics was the imposition of order on a chaotic world, and they would provide the rational head for the 'monster' that was the people.

In another context such dedication might be cast in a noble, self-sacrificing light. Wells nonetheless depicted these characters as bloodless figures, afraid of eating red meat and getting drunk. To make this point further, Remington comes into contact with the 'emasculated world' of the Baileys – a fictionalized version of

Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Altiora Bailey, who dominated her husband, ‘regarded sexual passion as being hardly more legitimate in a civilized person than – let us say – homicidal mania’ and enjoyed an asexual marriage whose exclusive focus was political intrigue. Remington, however, believed sex to be fundamental to existence. Faced with the choice between maintaining a passionless but politically useful marriage and starting a relationship with a physically vibrant, fecund (and submissive) younger woman, Remington opts for the latter, abandoning his career as the inevitable consequence of the ensuing ‘scandal’.

## Fact meets fiction

The *Manchester Guardian* reviewer believed McKenna’s *Sonia Married* was

agreeably peopled by characters with a place in the sun, and makes a great appeal to those who are instructed enough to speculate on their possible originals and those who like to see how our conquerors comport themselves behind the scenes.<sup>79</sup>

Spotting the real figures behind the fictional façade had always been part of the appeal of novels about politics. With the arrival of cinema, however, Britons – including those with insufficient ‘instruction’ – could enjoy the new experience of watching actors playing their ‘conquerors’.

Since Shakespeare’s day the theatre had dramatized political history as a safe way of discussing contemporary politics. Edwardian audiences certainly liked their stage history, but only if it confirmed their prejudices about the past. As the critic William Archer noticed in 1912, on the stage:

Nero is bound to fiddle while Rome burns, or the audience will want to know the reason why ... [An audience] wants to see Napoleon Napoleonising. For anomalies and uncharacteristic episodes in Napoleon’s career we must go to books; the playhouse is not the place for them.<sup>80</sup>

This was also the view of George Arliss. On the basis of five decades’ experience, mostly spent playing historical characters on stage and screen on both sides of the Atlantic, he wrote in 1940 that ‘the man in the street ... doesn’t know anything about the history of his own country, and doesn’t want to know’. ‘Cinema, and even theatre, audiences’, he argued, ‘have a very superficial idea of most historical characters’ and that dramatists needed to work with rather than challenge their ‘preconceived ideas’, no matter how wrong.<sup>81</sup>



Arliss went to the United States in 1900 and it was there he made his greatest theatrical impact, especially when assuming the lead role in *Disraeli* between 1911 and 1916 in what the *New York Times* described it as ‘one of the most popular plays of our time.’<sup>82</sup> *Disraeli* also ran in the West End during 1916, without Arliss, and was adapted for the screen three times – in 1916 in Britain and then in 1921 and 1929 in the United States, in both latter cases with Arliss as the lead. This was appropriate, as Louis Napoleon Parker, a highly successful London-based author, had specially written the play for the actor. Parker had, however, nearly abandoned the task, thinking the Conservative leader an insufficiently theatrical figure, openly admitting he ‘played havoc’ with the facts and produced what was ‘in no sense a historical play.’<sup>83</sup>

Inaccuracy hardly harmed the work, with one critic claiming of its West End outing that it worked so well because Parker realized that ‘what the theatre wants is not history but an exciting play.’<sup>84</sup> Those reviewing the London production certainly understood Parker’s liberties, noting its ‘absurdly bad’ history and construction of ‘a Disraeli beyond our wildest dreams.’ Yet, these sophisticated analysts of the dramatic arts conceded the real Prime Minister emerged ‘humanized’ and as ‘jolly old fellow with a heart soundly in the right place.’<sup>85</sup> Dennis Eadie, who took the Arliss role in 1916, was even said to speak in the ‘slow emphatic way which those who remember *Disraeli* will recall.’<sup>86</sup>

As the *Times* critic saw it, beneath the theatrics Parker highlighted ‘the passionate dreams and imperial ambitions of the great statesman.’<sup>87</sup> The playwright even has one of Disraeli’s admirers assert that her hero was concerned only with ‘making his country great.’ *Disraeli* takes just one episode in the Prime Minister’s life: his high-risk purchase of shares in the Suez Canal, which in the play he achieves by overcoming anti-Semitism on the part of the Liberal elite and attempts by German spies to thwart his efforts. Thanks to the school curriculum, buying the Canal was Disraeli ‘Disraelifying’: it was the moment that popularly defined his special place in Britain’s imperial history.<sup>88</sup> *Disraeli* had a decent run in the wartime West End but did not emulate its phenomenal success in the United States because, it was said, ‘people are not interested in the statesmen of the day before yesterday as heroes in melodrama.’<sup>89</sup> The truth of that claim could not be tested as living statesmen, those leading the country in the midst of war, were not played on stage or screen – until, that is, Maurice Elvey produced in 1918 *The Life Story of David Lloyd George*.<sup>90</sup>

Elvey’s film was an exception to just about every rule about how politics was represented on the screen for much of the twentieth century. Filmmakers avoided politics as much as possible and when they depicted a real political

figure they were, like Disraeli, safely dead. Moreover, such historical figures were of the right, whereas Lloyd George was, if idiosyncratically, on the left. Elvey's film presented its protagonist as living the life of a secular saint, and was executed in an epic manner that draws parallels with the much better known and critically highly regarded Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) and D. W. Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln* (1930). The film also has a drama-documentary aspect to it, one that anticipates later screen fictions about politics that confused the line between fact and fiction, opening with shots of Lloyd George's Manchester birthplace and filmed in real locations in his beloved North Wales. Having hitherto been played by an actor, the film concludes with the real Prime Minister processing among cheering crowds and marching troops.

The real Lloyd George was no Elysian and the film presents him as a man of the people: indeed, one of the first titles has it that the movie tells the story of the 'modest beginnings of a great career'. It also shows how the young David associated himself with the advance of popular rights, equality and reform. As a schoolboy he is even depicted bravely taking on the local squire and Anglican vicar over religious freedom. Lloyd George's early radicalism is also highlighted, notably his opposition to the Boer War. These episodes are nevertheless given a patriotic slant inasmuch as the film sees his early life – a David taking on various Goliaths – as anticipating Britain's defence of little Belgium against German oppression. The First World War cast its shadow over the film, its purpose being to celebrate the man who could claim to have taken Britain from possible defeat to likely victory, and in that capacity it hailed him as the 'Champion of Civilization'.

More conventionally, the film has Parliament as the focus of young Lloyd George's interest, the means through which he would slay the domestic Goliaths. The movie notably has him watch in awe a debate between Gladstone and Randolph Churchill, one it claims inspired the callow David to be an MP: indeed, becoming a member of the Commons was described as 'Jordan crossed'. Moreover, if his early career was based on strife, the film does its best to suggest that Lloyd George's later legislative achievements were won through parliamentary bi-partisanship. One title claims, Conservative Joseph Chamberlain 'predicted and planned' the 1908 Pensions Act; Leader of the Opposition Arthur Balfour offers Chancellor Lloyd George water during his five-hour People's Budget; and the 1911 National Insurance Bill is described as introduced 'amidst applause from all parties'. Continuity and bi-partisanship reach their ultimate extent when Lloyd George becomes Prime Minister in 1916. In the

Cabinet Room for the first time as leader of the country, he is greeted by ‘The Mighty Dead’: Disraeli, Gladstone, Wellington, Pitt, Salisbury and Campbell-Bannerman all offer advice and inspiration from beyond the grave.

Made for a quick theatrical release after the anticipated German surrender, the film was never seen by the public. For reasons shrouded in mystery, after tacitly supporting the project Lloyd George had a change of heart and the producers were prevailed upon to hand over the negatives.<sup>91</sup> Historians have yet to discover the reasons, although some speculate that the politics of the film were too radical for a Liberal anticipating leading a peacetime Conservative-dominated coalition. It nonetheless provides a remarkable insight into how British politics might have been conceived on the screen.

## Conclusion

Many of the themes established during the period when no more than twenty per cent of Britons had the vote would be reworked long after 1918. Parliament, the parties, the people in general and women in particular, the press and the importance of the character of those who aspired to leadership would be continually re-examined in changed contexts, forms, genres and for different audiences. Authors of the future would also be drawn to writing fictions that obscured the boundary between real and fictionalized politics.

Some of the fictions produced before the arrival of universal suffrage would continue to influence perceptions of democracy. After it was finally granted a licence in 1936, *Waste* was put on the public stage, although even Barker’s admirers conceded the play by then looked old-fashioned.<sup>92</sup> It was nonetheless revived in 1997 and 2008 with those responsible claiming its depiction of a political scandal made it more relevant than ever.<sup>93</sup> The same was said of *An Ideal Husband*, especially its two 1990s film versions. Moreover, thanks to Hollywood, *Disraeli* the play would be more famous in the 1930s than ever it was; similarly, *John Chilcote, MP* was given a contemporary British setting by Hollywood in 1933. Some of these re-workings were more faithful than others: by the later 1950s the the vigilantes in *Four Just Men* had become so domesticated that in a TV series inspired by Wallace’s novel one of them was an MP.

If Trollope’s heyday lay in the last decades on the nineteenth century, he continued to appeal to leading Conservatives into the twenty-first century. He wrote some of Harold Macmillan’s favourite reading: while a minister in 1951 Macmillan even wrote in his diary: ‘Trollope is a drug’. In the 1990s Prime

Minister John Major was also known for his liking for the author, as was his Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, while one of his whips, Gyles Brandreth, could quote passages at will. Such figures, however, looked on Trollope as a source of comfort in troubled times; Macmillan used them to escape into a lost world of gentility while Hurd believed they expressed a view of politics in stark contrast to the cynicism of his own era.<sup>94</sup>

When the Palliser novels were adapted for a twenty-six-part BBC TV series broadcast in 1974, love of ‘upper-crusty tittle-tattle’ rather than politics was seen as central to its rather limited appeal.<sup>95</sup> The BBC hoped the series would emulate the success of its original ‘classic serial’ *The Forsyte Saga* (1967), casting one of its stars, Susan Hampshire, as Glencora. The *Radio Times* even called it ‘Susan’s new saga’.<sup>96</sup> To better appeal to the TV audience, Simon Raven’s adaptation emphasized the Palliser’s private affairs; Raven claimed of the novels that ‘although the background is political, the drama is personal’. This meant that the story of Plantagenet’s career – one that had been the centrepiece of the most famous series of Parliamentary novels ever written – was in the 1970s turned into a tale of Glencora’s social indiscretions and manipulations.<sup>97</sup> The sugar of soap opera that Trollope had used to make the pill of politics acceptable to nineteenth-century readers had, for TV viewers, *become* the pill. As we shall see, this was but a straw in what Macmillan in another context called the wind of change.

## Notes

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## Disappointing Democracy

The 1918 Representation of the People Act tripled the electorate to just over twenty-one million but was, nonetheless, a cautious document, one befitting Britain's protracted and uneven democratization. Women would have to wait until the 1929 general election before they could vote on the same basis as men, while plural voting was not abolished until 1949. Moreover, although MPs flirted with proportional representation, the Act confirmed Britain's adherence to the first-past-the-post system as the way to elect members of the House of Commons.<sup>1</sup> As a result, if 1918 saw all working-class men and most women enter the game of politics, the nature of the contest had changed less than some hoped and others feared. The centrality of Parliament, described in one 1917 primer as 'the most ancient and authoritative legislature in this or any other known age', remained.<sup>2</sup> Representative politics also continued to be dominated by men: only thirty-eight women were elected to the Commons between 1918 and 1939.

While the structure of politics remained familiar, in the two decades following the First World War Britain experienced a unique series of upheavals. During the 1920s Labour replaced the Liberals as the party of opposition, while the country endured four general elections in quick succession as first-past-the-post struggled to accommodate three parties with similar levels of support. In 1926 the General Strike, according to some, even threatened the legitimacy of Parliament.<sup>3</sup> The international slump that followed the 1929 Wall Street Crash also threw politics further asunder and in 1931 the minority Labour government, unable to deal with the consequences of mass unemployment, resigned. It was replaced by a Conservative-dominated National coalition led by former Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, whose 'betrayal' his old party would never forgive.<sup>4</sup> As a result, politics was in almost as much flux as the world economy, with politicians apparently helpless to master events. Indeed, at the apex of the 1931 crisis MacDonald told his new Cabinet colleagues that 'the ordinary person ... has no great faith in political leaders of any kind'.<sup>5</sup>

The National government restored financiers' confidence in ministers' ability to balance the books, but unemployment reached three million in 1932 and remained at over two million for all but one of the remaining years of peace.<sup>6</sup> Despite fears, this did not lead to a huge surge in support for fascism or communism: the National coalition easily won the 1931 and 1935 general elections. The domestic challenge to democracy was nonetheless still on an unprecedented scale, while internationally the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany threatened Britain and its Empire. As a result, by the end of the decade some predicted that representative democracy was on the way out.<sup>7</sup> Others, however, continued to fervently believe in a politics that revolved around Westminster, including the Conservative schoolmistress who in 1935 looked upon Stanley Baldwin, by then Prime Minister, as 'our earthly "Rock of Ages"'.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps with less passion, no less than seventy per cent of qualified voters participated in general elections held during 1922–35 while in 1939 the three main parties claimed to have two million members.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, as Hitler prepared to invade Poland, during the summer of 1939 it was hard not to see the interwar period as defined by political frustration. Liberals bemoaned the demise of their party; Labour adherents had little positive to show for MacDonald's two brief periods in power; while even the electorally successful Conservatives were disturbed by their inability to restore the country to its pre-1914 state. As Baldwin claimed in 1934, Britain's

political advance has gone ahead of our cultural ... [T]here are a vast number of people who were enfranchised after the War who cannot yet have had the opportunity of so studying the extremely difficult and complicated questions we have to face to-day with the certainty that they can detect fallacies.<sup>10</sup>

In the same year, the former Liberal MP E. D. Simon established the Association for Education in Citizenship in the hope of 'saving [democracy] in the future by better education if', he added ominously, 'it can survive the next five or ten years'.<sup>11</sup> While many members of Britain's political class were disappointed in the electorate, a considerable number of new voters were in turn disillusioned with them. The social research organization Mass-Observation argued that a large number looked on representative politics as 'just another of the forces which exploit them and of which they know little or nothing'.<sup>12</sup> If, by the interwar years, most of the formalities of democracy were present, it seems that not everybody felt their voices were being taken seriously.

Certainly, Trollope's belief in the possibilities of parliamentary politics was shared by an ever-diminishing number of novelists. Stephen McKenna, whose

*Sonia* (1917) claimed Parliament had been subverted by the press, wrote in 1921: 'It is not through the House of Commons that England will be made a home fit for heroes.' This Liberal, distressed at his party's collapse, believed that 'politics are losing their soul; and material self-interest is being made the touchstone of government.'<sup>13</sup> Others also considered Parliament no longer performed a useful function. When Howard Spring penned *Fame is the Spur* (1940) – a novelized critique of the career of the 'traitor' MacDonald – he considered the National government had left Britons like 'sheep without a shepherd.'<sup>14</sup> Spring's was a study of leadership gone wrong and formed part of a wider literature of disappointment produced by writers on the left and centre-left. Even ostensibly apolitical novelists such as Agatha Christie, who appealed to fans of the massively popular detective genre, mostly expressed their irritation with democracy.

Compared to the novel, the theatre had always been subject to some kind of political censorship. In 1935 the Lord Chamberlain even prevented chorus girls in a West End revue singing a number which claimed newspaper headlines 'make fools think they've found fame' while wearing facemasks of leading politicians.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as a largely middle-class distraction, censors were rarely exercised about what was said on the stage about politics. That was, however, not the case with the increasingly influential cinema, which appealed to those who benefitted most from enfranchisement after 1918: the working class, women and the young.<sup>16</sup> For this reason the country's newest and by 1939 most popular dramatic form was subject to stringent controls, which meant that if politicians were depicted on the big screen they were mostly presented in heroic and historical terms, as 'statesmen' able to transcend the silly people's own fallibilities.

### Parliament: Irrelevant and wrong

Those who hoped a Parliament elected by all the people would promote radical reform were frustrated by its reality and some expressed their disappointment through novels. Trollope would have recognized many of the reasons for what such left-inclined figures saw as the failure of parliamentary politics to address the compelling issues of the day. Yet, while many novels pointed to leaders' character flaws as well as the debilitating role of partisanship, they also highlighted other factors, like Commons procedure, bureaucracy and, most disturbingly, Britain's economic decline.

Ellen Wilkinson advanced the latter explanation in her detective novel *The Division Bell Mystery* (1932).<sup>17</sup> A left-wing MP defeated in Labour's 1931 rout,

Wilkinson had already written one novel and was a well-established media figure. After the collapse of MacDonald's government – one many Labour members blamed on New York bankers – in public Wilkinson praised Parliament for 'its opportunity for public service, and its instrumentality for the installing of a lasting democracy'.<sup>18</sup> Her novel, however, struck a contrasting note. It has a venerable Conservative MP declare of ministers' need to secure a loan from an American banker: 'Imagine what Palmerston or Disraeli would have said at the idea of Britain going cap in hand to such a creature for money ... ?' Robert West, his young colleague, is also concerned. As Wilkinson writes of him:

He looked up for comfort to Big Ben, standing a gigantic Guardsman against a clear blue sky. The clock-face looked so benevolently familiar that West tried to shake off the thought that so often came into his mind in these days – this was all a façade, that the reality of Parliament was something quite different, that the real seat of Government had gone elsewhere, to Lombard Street or perhaps even across the Atlantic Ocean.

West's feelings intensify when a demonstration of the unemployed delays his entry into the Commons.

The House with its lighted windows seemed the quiet centre of the whirlpool that was London. A harassed Cabinet Minister negotiated with an American financier inside, and outside the raw material of their transactions, the people who elected the Minister and would have to pay interest on the loan, surged and demonstrated. They wanted bread. It wasn't like England ... The division bell rang for the last vote of the day. West ran up the stairs to vote. He hadn't the least idea what about. But that is the comfort of the House of Commons. It gives everybody such a comforting feeling that 'something has been done about it'. But what, and how, and why even the men who were doing the 'something' had very little idea beyond the immediate details of the day.

Even before the 1931 crisis, John Galsworthy's additions to his *Forsyte Saga*, *The Silver Spoon* (1926) and *Swan Song* (1928), suggested Parliament's irrelevance.<sup>19</sup> Like his contemporary H. G. Wells, Galsworthy believed the parties' pursuit of votes meant politicians were unwilling to do what was necessary. He used Michael Mont, an idealistic Conservative MP who selflessly wants to improve society, to expound his own remedies for Britain's ills.<sup>20</sup> Mont embraces 'Foggartism', a creed which if applied would mean that the people would 'endure a worse Present for the sake of a better Future'. Despite recognizing its merits, all the parties reject 'Foggartism', fearing the consequences of advancing unpopular policies that would hit voters' pockets. In disgust, Mont describes Parliament as

‘the best drag on Progress ever invented’. Noting the Commons’ impotence in the face of the great events of the day, Mont, like Wilkinson’s elderly MP, looks backwards:

What things had been done here! The abolitions of Slavery, and of Child Labour, the Married Woman’s Property Act, Repeal of the Corn Laws; but could they be done nowadays? And if not – was it a life?

Gripped by a sense of futility, Mont abandons Parliament to establish a pressure group intent on improving working-class housing.

If party undermined the effectiveness of Parliament, others believed the much-venerated Commons procedure was itself at fault. The protagonist in Labour MP James Welsh’s novel *Norman Dale MP* (1928) was exasperated to discover that as soon as the post-election preliminaries were concluded, and despite the country’s pressing problems, MPs immediately adjourned for a prolonged break. Like Welsh, the progressive author A. J. Cronin’s *The Stars Look Down* (1935) told the story of a young collier MP, Davey Fenwick, one also frustrated with the ‘inertia of parliamentary routine’. While Davey is taught to ‘cultivate patience’ by a more experienced Member, Cronin shows that patience is not its own reward. The miners are betrayed when the 1929 Labour government’s Mines Bill excludes nationalization, despite the leadership’s promises. Cronin makes sure readers appreciate that Davey’s contempt for the MacDonaldite argument justifying this omission – ‘We’ve got to be careful. We’ve got to be constitutional’ – is a righteous one, for it is only advanced by Labour MPs corrupted by public life.<sup>21</sup>

In speaking against the Bill, Davey highlighted the disconnection between Westminster ceremonial and the nation’s real concerns. ‘Recently, at the opening of this parliament,’ he tells the House,

we had again the opportunity of witnessing all the splendour, pomp and pageantry which, my hon. Friends will assure me, bespeaks the greatness of this nation. Did any of my hon. Friends contrast it, for one second, with the beggary, poverty, misery and penury which exists within the greatness of this nation?

The speech’s impact is, however, fatally undermined when a Conservative backbencher imitates a dog, leading MPs to roar with laughter.<sup>22</sup> While Davey’s attack on ‘gradualism’ is a specific comment on MacDonald’s shortcomings, Cronin sets his criticisms within a wider framework. ‘Gradualism’ is but one symptom of an intractable and a wider problem: parliamentary politics.

Similarly, towards the end of his life Hamer Shawcross – Spring’s MacDonald

surrogate in *Fame is the Spur* – is possessed of a rare honesty about his motives.<sup>23</sup> Despite being born in the Manchester backstreets, Shawcross reached the Cabinet and the Lords, but his rise did nothing to help his poor supporters. A successful politician, he claims, means ‘appearing to have nothing but his country’s interest at heart, [so] he must be an expert at appealing to panic, passion and prejudice. When these do not exist, he must know how to create them at the right moment’, as it was, ‘our business to throw the patient into a panic, to persuade him that he’s going to die unless he takes our medicine.’ Spring even has Shawcross speculate:

whether statesmen might not be the true pests and cancers of human society. They had controlled the affairs of the world for centuries, and the affairs of the world seemed to him now beyond any control at all. He could not think of any matter of statecraft that was not conducted with more complications, less honour and simplicity, than would go to such a matter between a few private human beings.

This lack of faith in public authority’s ability to address pressing problems was most completely expressed in Cronin’s *The Citadel* (1937).<sup>24</sup> Needing to eradicate the source of an outbreak of typhoid by replacing a foul sewer, Dr. Andrew Manson has to blow up the offending drain to force the otherwise inert local council to build a new one. So he can pursue research into the causes of silicosis, Manson then works in Whitehall’s Coal and Metalliferous Mines Fatigue Board (MFB). However, the inefficiencies and indolence of a bureaucracy subject to the whims of its political masters prevents Manson from conducting his vital work. Instead, at the pedantic behest of Dr. Bigsby of the Board of Trade, Manson investigates the correct size of bandages. Leaving in disgust, he acquires a private general practice in a poor district of the capital, where paying patients prove hard to come by. Reflecting on his experiences, Manson declaims: ‘There ought to be a better scheme. A chance for everybody – say, oh, say State control!’ Appearing to embrace the essence of what would become the National Health Service, Manson, then, ‘groaned, remembering Doctor Bigsby and the MFB. No, damn it, that’s hopeless – bureaucracy chokes individual effort – it would suffocate me.’

If structural reasons underpinned some novelists’ despair, individual moral failings also played their part. Described as a ‘kindly social satire’, Winnie-the-Pooh author A. A. Milne’s 1923 play *Success* underlined the extent to which party competition harmed the national interest.<sup>25</sup> The sole object of Conservative Cabinet Minister R. Selby Mannock is to best Labour, while he is so preoccupied with his career he pushes his daughter into a politically useful

but romantically dubious marriage. But Mannoek was once an idealist and on being reunited with his childhood sweetheart confesses:

I've been looking back at my career. After all, he's in a position of trust, a Cabinet Minister. He is responsible for all the happiness of the people, his fellow countrymen and women. How often have I thought of their happiness? How often of my personal triumph – my success? What are our intrigues for, our strategy, our tactics? To improve the condition of England? Or to improve our personal position? I look back on my career, and never once can I say, 'He did that for others.'

This brief moment of introspection is nevertheless quickly dispelled when the Prime Minister offers Manson promotion.<sup>26</sup>

Milne was a Liberal, but works depicting Labour's rise also presented Westminster as a moral hazard. In Welsh's *Norman Dale MP* his hero is even warned by a sympathetic veteran member of the Commons:

you'll get more men on the make here than you'll get anywhere else on earth. You'll find, too, that the more they are on the make, the more violently they proclaim their altruism ... You'll get more cynical hypocrites in here to the square yard than anywhere in the world; they're no' a' in the Tory and Liberal parties either.<sup>27</sup>

Welsh anticipated the warning Cronin has Davey Fenwick receive from another old hand in *The Stars Look Down*:

There's nothing like public life for searching out a man's private weaknesses. Personal ambition and social ambition and damned selfishness and self-interest, that's the curse of it.<sup>28</sup>

## The pathetic people

Such left-inclined authors also expressed distress at voters' indifference to the kind of reforms they favoured; indeed, many traced the inadequacies of parliamentary democracy back to the people themselves. Galsworthy's Mont asserts: 'we politicians don't think ahead, simply because we know it's no earthly. Every elector thinks his own immediate good is the good of the country.'<sup>29</sup> If Wells had outlined a similar case in *The New Machiavelli*, he elaborated it in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933). Voters, he declared,

that poor invertebrate mass deity ... easily roused to panic and frantic action against novel, bold or radical measures, very amenable to patriotic claptrap, very easily scared and maddened into war, and just as easily baffled to distrust



and impotence by delays, side issues, and attacks on the personalities of decisive people he might otherwise have trusted

were politically incapable. Anticipating Spring's critique of 'statesmen', Wells declared that only politicians able to rouse 'the apathetic majority of submissive mankind' provided what passed for leadership. Such figures, he claimed, were, however, imprisoned by having to appeal to the majority. This meant that progress, as Wells saw it, was impossible until government had passed into the hands of scientists free to follow their own reason.<sup>30</sup> Wells looked on parliamentary democracy as a primitive stage in humankind's development. Like the playwright George Bernard Shaw, the reforms Wells believed were necessary could not be delivered by pitiable devices such as people casting their votes for party representatives charged with debating policy in the Commons.<sup>31</sup>

Conservatives were in contrast thankful that so many supported the *status quo*. Warwick Deeping's *Sorrell and Son* (1925) told the story of a man of breeding fallen on hard times and therefore forced into contact with 'the poor, envious industrial crowd'. Yet while Deeping believed many workers wanted to sweep away civilization, he was confident they lacked the necessary skills. Moreover, his novel highlighted more amenable proletarians who help Sorrell rise back up the ladder, notably the aptly named Albert Hulks, a physically intimidating but deferential porter. 'He hadn't much head, and he said so', Sorrell writes, but Hulks possesses 'the vigour of a steam engine' with which he undertakes Sorrell's manual work, declaring: 'O, yes – I've got a back, but he's got a head, some head.'<sup>32</sup>

Some have contrasted Deeping's hostility to the working class with the apparently more benign attitudes evident in Cronin's *The Citadel*.<sup>33</sup> Yet Cronin shared Deeping's low assessment of proletarian capacities. His hero, the idealistic Manson, is for a time employed by a medical aid society financed and run by Welsh miners. When he exposes pitmen for feigning illness so they can draw compensation, however, most of Manson's patients take their business elsewhere in protest. The miners are also depicted as fearing science and a mob destroys Manson's laboratory, even though he is trying to find a cure for silicosis. Cronin's *The Stars Look Down* had already shown miners' susceptibility to irrationality when they go looting during a strike. That earlier novel also had them reject the noble Davey in the 1931 election in favour of the false promises, slurs and free beer of his unscrupulous Conservative rival. As Manson concludes when leaving South Wales:

It was a wonderful ideal, this group of working men controlling the medical services of the community for the benefit of their fellow workers. But it was an

ideal. They were too biased, too unintelligent ever to administer such a scheme progressively.<sup>34</sup>

If critical of the *status quo*, Cronin was no socialist, but even fictions written from that perspective betrayed the sense that the proletariat left to its own devices was helpless. Indeed, pessimism about popular potential was a common theme among works categorized as 'proletarian revolutionary literature'.<sup>35</sup> Thus during the early 1920s, when talk of a workers' insurrection was at its height, J. D. Beresford's *Revolution: A Novel* (1921), one of the few fictions to depict such a revolt sympathetically, still has the uprising fail. This view was also evident among moderate reformists in the Labour party. Mary Agnes Hamilton would be elected Labour MP for Blackburn in 1929; in *Follow My Leader* (1922) she has her young upper-middle-class heroine attend a workers' meeting for the first time. Confronted by proletarians in the mass, she feels there is 'something at once fascinating and horrible' about the crowd, 'frightening' even, looking upon the people there 'as an undifferentiated mass, cruel and ugly beyond anything she had ever seen'. While feeling sorry for 'their dreary helplessness', the working class remains in her eyes 'dumb, ugly, unappealing to the sense, patiently and helplessly unhappy'.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Walter Greenwood, a Labour councillor by the time *Love on the Dole* was published in 1933, has workers in his Hanky Park district of Salford be so susceptible to capitalist propaganda that the activist Larry Meath declares: 'it's driving me barmy to have to live among such idiotic folk. There's no limit to their daftness: won't think for themselves, won't do anything to help themselves'.<sup>37</sup> In *The Professor* (1938) the Communist-inclined Rex Warner also emphasized the fickleness of 'the mob' while his only leading working-class character is a 'stupid but amiable' trade union Cabinet member who, like Deeping's Hulks, is strong of body but weak of mind.<sup>38</sup>

### Wanted: Leaders

Some reformers remained optimistic that the people would eventually support their diverse causes. Liberal intellectual Ramsay Muir and the left-wing Labour figure G. R. Mitchison even wrote future histories to convince readers of the practicability of their respective projects. Significantly, however, in both cases the achievement of their aims only occurred *after* the people had been properly 'educated'.<sup>39</sup>

Other left-inclined writers emphasized the importance of leaders able to

inspire in the right way. Sandy Colquoun in Hamilton's *Follow My Leader* skilfully arouses the people's better nature at a mass meeting:

To this great concourse of people, he had a freedom of communication that enabled him to unlock the secret places of his soul and enter into the secret places of their souls ... For what was it, in the last analysis, but a belief in the divine thing in the heart and soul of every one of those who heard him, their faces lifted up to his? That was the root of the whole matter. It was in them; he could bring it out. He believed, not in himself, but in them; in himself only as expressing that thing in them which they could know and hold on to, believe and therefore realize, when some one showed them it was there: not in any one for himself, but, for each, in every one of the others.<sup>40</sup>

The robust Colquoun (possibly modeled on an idealized, pre-'betrayal' MacDonald) was, however, an exceptional figure. While such writers often gave life to characters wanting to disinterestedly represent the people's interests, they were usually frail and mostly failed to evoke a response. Colquoun was more typical – given the general pessimism about proletarian capacities – in that 'despite his overalls [he] did not look like a workman', possessed as he was of an 'intellectual' head.<sup>41</sup> The future miners' MP Norman Dale is also 'different from the other laddies, up with a passion for books and education, instead of going out to dances or "walking out with a girl"'.<sup>42</sup> Larry Meath is similarly 'a cut above' his fellow workmen, possessing a 'quality of studiousness [which] elevated him to a plane beyond that of ordinary folk; he seemed out of place'.<sup>43</sup> Meath is, though, brought down by the conditions he so passionately criticized. Joe Astell, the lone socialist on South Riding Council in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), is also a 'doomed man' living in the shadow of pneumonia and tuberculosis, the consequence of a lifetime working for a New Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup> The novel ends with Astell, having been duped by a corrupt cabal on the council, leaving for industrial Scotland, where he will redouble his work for socialism despite the certain knowledge that death will quickly follow as a result.

While the idealistic Davey in *The Stars Look Down* is healthy, he is defeated at the polls and returns to mining, while those corrupted by ambition and greed follow MacDonald into the National government.<sup>45</sup> This lesson, that good leaders fail while the bad prosper, was writ large in *Fame is the Spur*. Hamer Shawcross always wanted to be 'someone' and to that end uses his impressive physique and 'mountebank tricks' to move audiences. His rise leaves in its wake a childhood friend from the Manchester slums, the 'painstaking and uninspired' Arnold Ryerson. Unlike the glamorous Shawcross with his aristocratic bearing,

Spring describes Ryerson as actually looking like an artisan. He is also a boring speaker, but possesses a 'native integrity' and an 'utter honesty and a straightness of purpose', qualities that naturally prevent his political advance.<sup>46</sup>

Ellen Wilkinson's first novel, *Clash* (1929), was one of the few to highlight ordinary people's untutored abilities. As one of her characters claims, the efficient running of local committees during the General Strike 'just shows what a lot of organizing ability is running to waste among the workers in this one-eyed country, where a man is called a "hand" and not allowed to think.'<sup>47</sup> That Wilkinson was a woman might just have been coincidental, but her optimism in what could be done beyond conventional politics is something few of her male counterparts shared.

### Women: Still the saviours of democracy

Despite their enfranchisement, most novelists continued to present women as playing no part whatsoever within politics. In the year the Representation of the People Act extended the franchise to all women over the age of twenty-one, however, Hilaire Belloc created fiction's first female Prime Minister. *But Soft: We Are Observed* (1928) was a comedy set in 1979 – coincidentally the year Britain finally sent a woman to Number 10 – a time when Belloc claimed most men had given up on what he described as the 'dying system' of politics. More typically, in *The Stars Look Down* Cronin presented Davey's wife and mother as respectively misunderstanding and opposing his desire for a political career. Similarly, Dorothy, heroine of George Orwell's *The Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), is so preoccupied with her daily round that parliamentary contests make little impact: she hardly knows the difference between a communist and Conservative. The heroine in Hamilton's *Follow My Leader* is more significant politically, but the story nonetheless revolves around whether she will remain under the thumb of a forceful Conservative father or follow the dynamic socialist Colquoun.

If not presented as antipathetic to politics, or as the prize between two contending men, women retained their traditional role of 'moral police'. Most notably, in *Fame is the Spur*, Ann, wife of Hamer Shawcross, becomes a suffragette, is incarcerated for her beliefs and dies due to the authorities' rough treatment. She is, as Spring notes, one of many:

Up and down the country the women were roused, hundreds of thousands of them, gentlewomen and harridans, peeresses, sempstresses, laundry girls,

professional women: it was a great unifying wave of feeling, productive of a willingness to suffer which no uprising of men had seen in the long course of English history. There was no party allegiance about it. In all the parties the women were deserters ... Senseless, heroic, unheedful of consequences, the movement rolled on, sullied by violence, by arson, by every kind of destruction, advertised by anguish, by suicide, but redeemed by the quality which is rare and precious: the willingness to hand over, for a faith, body and soul to the torturer.

Had Shawcross supported votes for women, Spring continues, it

would have been the one cause of the many he advocated to which, in his old age, he might have looked back and said: That, at all events came off. Though so much else was wind and water, that endured, that came through.<sup>48</sup>

If Ann Shawcross is politically active, she is just one of a number of principled second rank characters in Spring's novel. It was unusual for women to hold centre stage as politicians in their own right, even in stories written by women. When Wilkinson wrote the detective novel *The Division Bell Mystery* (1932) she chose as her protagonist a male MP, although one of his helpers was a fiery female Member, one modelled closely on the author and who embodied some of the dilemmas faced by women in politics, being 'very young and lovable, but determined to live up to her chosen role as a grim and sexless legislator'.<sup>49</sup> Written in the same genre and in the same year, the leading female figure in Mary Agnes Hamilton's *Murder in the House of Commons* is the 'Lady from Lima', the glamorous blackmailing prostitute whose death at the hands of an MP is covered up by colleagues to save their party embarrassment. In Wilkinson's *Clash* the protagonist is female, although much of the novel is preoccupied with whether she will marry a man who regards her career as inferior to homemaking. More exceptionally, the key figure in Harold Nicolson's *Public Faces* (1932) is a junior Foreign Office minister who, in striking contrast to the men depicted, is efficient and upright. It is moreover her extraordinary willingness to sacrifice her career by telling the truth that prevents a disaster.

Vera Brittain's *Honourable Estate* (1936) was the most complete depiction of how women might improve a flawed, man-made politics, the focus of her novel being the struggle of two generations of women to achieve the vote.<sup>50</sup> Echoing the optimism of Edwardian suffragettes about the impact women will make on politics, Brittain's account is – for a writer on the left in the context in which it was written – amazingly sanguine, emphasizing as it does the possibilities of politics rather than its shortcomings. As Brittain has her heroine Ruth Harding predict, 'if only women could do something to shape the course of politics', the world

would be a better place. On that theme she addresses a meeting of working-class women, telling them that their newly acquired vote was ‘the greatest of political weapons’. Unlike the rejection experienced by Larry Meath and countless other male activists, Ruth evokes a positive response from her audience. Brittain’s novel consequently ends on an extraordinarily upbeat note, with Ruth a Labour MP and her government about to pass the Widows’ Pensions Bill.

## Comedies and detectives

Works written in supposedly apolitical genres generally presented politics as inherently ridiculous and politicians as pompous, bullying bores. The narrative in Angela Thirkell’s *August Folly* (1936), a comedy of upper-middle-class manners, for example, is punctuated with references to the Root Vegetables Bill, something of interest only to her most obnoxious characters. If it is unsurprising that politicians in P. G. Wodehouse novels were ridiculed – all his characters were – they were presented in a highly stereotyped way. In *Jeeves and the Impending Doom*, published in the same year as the General Strike, appears the Right Hon. A. B. Filmer, Cabinet minister and – indicating he is a killjoy – president of the Anti-Tobacco League. Described by Bertie Wooster’s aunt as ‘a serious-minded man of high character and purpose’, Filmer is in reality ‘a tubby little chap’ who talks of topics Wooster finds incomprehensible, leading him to conclude, rightly, that he is ‘a superfatted bore.’<sup>51</sup> Roderick Spode, a recurring character in Wodehouse stories, was established as a bully well before *The Code of the Woosters* (1938), in which he has become leader of the Black Shorts, a thinly veiled rendition of Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts. While this might be seen as Wodehouse finally taking politics seriously and satirizing fascism, it is, however, best regarded as one more instance in which he ridicules any and every politician, without discrimination.

Politics was depicted in a greater variety of ways within detective fiction, the period’s most popular genre, which by the end of the 1930s accounted for one in four of all published novels. Even the politically committed contributed to the genre, including the Oxford socialist theorist G. D. H. Cole, who with his wife Margaret wrote over twenty-five thrillers, although they avoided political subjects. As we have seen, ex-Labour MPs Hamilton and Wilkinson also turned their hands to murder mysteries set in Parliament, during which they commented on the nature of politics. Nicholas Blake (*nom de plume* of poet and communist Cecil Day-Lewis) wrote the most obviously political detective novel

of the period. His *The Smiler with a Knife* (1939) depicted a fascist attempt to overthrow democracy. Wanting to illustrate the power of the Popular Front, a strategy then advocated by Moscow, Day-Lewis has ordinary men and women drawn from across society thwart the plot. His novel ends with a left-wing coalition in power and intent on challenging rather than appeasing Hitler and Mussolini. Eric Ambler was not a communist, but as a self-confessed 'pinko' his late 1930s thrillers – notably *Cause for Alarm* (1938) – were set on a continent in which bankers, industrialists and fascists threatened the lives of his confused English protagonists who are sometimes helped by friendly Soviet agents.<sup>52</sup>

A series of ten detective tales written during 1927–35 even featured the gentleman detective – and Liberal MP – Scott Egerton. Lucy Beatrice Malleison, who wrote the stories, had, however, no apparent agenda other than selling novels. A prolific novelist, she worked under numerous pen names, in this case Anthony Gilbert.<sup>53</sup> The stories in her series were formulaic: Egerton always intervenes on behalf of someone falsely accused of murder and proves the wronged party's innocence by finding the real villain, often at personal risk. Egerton is heroic, young, clever and physically adept, at one point using jiu jitsu against an armed murderer. He additionally possesses an indomitable will; according to Malleison, 'No rocks were impossible to him, no deserts utterly pathless.' She also describes him as 'debonair, assured', 'cool, collected, detached', 'flawlessly tailored, exquisitely groomed'; as a friend tells him, 'One of these days, Scotty, they'll put you in the British Museum as a flawless specimen of the upper middle classes.'<sup>54</sup>

If Egerton followed the model of the amateur upper-class detective, best exemplified by Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, his political background makes him unusual. Moreover, while Egerton's career rarely intrudes into Malleison's plots, by making him so sympathetic she sketches out what qualities an ideal politician should possess. Thus, Egerton is a bi-partisan figure, initially a reforming Conservative but by the end of *The Tragedy at Freyne*, his first outing, a Liberal. Scrupulously conscientious – Egerton's parliamentary work sometimes involves him rising at 4 a.m. – his political views remain vague, although when articulated they would have been endorsed by most Conservative and Liberal readers. For example, Egerton backs a scheme to help struggling farmers, 'not by Government subsidy which is infernally dangerous, but by the goodwill of other industries.'<sup>55</sup> Yet, however important is his Commons career, Egerton consistently prioritizes his relationship with wife Rosemary, the pursuit of whom at one time put his political future in jeopardy: private happiness is much more important to him than public success.

While she has an MP as her hero, Malleon nonetheless makes it clear that the exemplary Egerton did not typify Britain's political class. Indeed, he is introduced by one character as 'a member of the least democratic body on this earth, the British House of Commons.'<sup>56</sup> On the rare occasions she places Egerton in the Chamber, Malleon highlights his exceptionalism, describing him sitting through an 'interminable discussion' in which 'One member after another rose and drifted into an incredibly dull monologue.'<sup>57</sup> Finally, indicating her commercial motives, when Malleon created Arthur G. Crook – 'a rather unattractive Cockney character' – who proved much more popular, Scott Egerton MP was never heard of again, despite the series being well liked.

### Agatha Christie: The politics of the apolitical

Malleon was a prominent exponent of the detective genre, but in terms of sales she was not in the same league as Agatha Christie: nobody was. Christie's phenomenal success was based on her plots, not her politics; indeed, one critic claimed she completely lacked 'political knowledge and intent'.<sup>58</sup> For a novelist supposed to have no interest in the political world, during the course of thirty-seven novels and short story collections published during 1920–40, Christie tackled it on a surprising number of occasions. Indeed, the 'politician' was one of Christie's army of stock types, depicted in a way that would have been recognized by those who read Wodehouse and other novels produced by supposedly apolitical middlebrow writers. In her work some have also perceived a new kind of conservatism, one that especially resonated with young, suburban and female readers, which mocked tradition while celebrating modernity. According to the literary historian Alison Light this was a conservatism which helped 'shape that idea of a nation of benign crossword puzzlers and home owners, enjoying privacy and moderation and domestic consumption, and indifferent to Politics at large'.<sup>59</sup> As such, Christie's novels articulated some of the 'conventional wisdoms' which ultimately benefitted the interwar Conservative party ones implacably opposed to the intervention of public authority in private life.<sup>60</sup>

Christie's mysteries are littered with occasional remarks about politics, which indicated her scepticism about a world presented as inefficient, old-fashioned, intrusive, silly and *male*. In one of her first novels, *The Secret Adversary* (1922), the young heroine Tuppence complains that dealing with government always involves filling in lots of forms and suffering delays.<sup>61</sup> It is said in *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929) that the only qualifications for becoming an MP are deep



pockets and the fortitude to 'stand up on a platform and talk a lot of junk, or kiss dirty babies in Bermondsey'.<sup>62</sup> This gentle cynicism is confirmed when, in 'Murder in the Mews' (1937), on 5th November Hercule Poirot asks his friend Chief Inspector Japp: 'To blow up the English Parliament, was it a sin or a noble deed?' Japp chuckles and replies: 'Some people would say undoubtedly the latter!'<sup>63</sup> To be interested in politics is, moreover, bad form: one reason for disliking Mr. Reilly in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940) was that he 'liked arguing about politics'.<sup>64</sup>

When depicting MPs, Christie usually presents them in ways that could only have alienated her many young female readers. In *The Seven Dials Mystery*, junior minister George Lomax is described as 'a disgusting wind-bag, an unscrupulous hypocritical old hot-air merchant, a foul, poisonous self-advertiser'. A die-hard Conservative, Lomax also bemoans the decline of family life and collapsing moral standards.<sup>65</sup> One of the suspects in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1938) is the MP George Lee, described as 'somewhat corpulent' with a 'heavy jowl and a slow pedantic utterance'. Lee is also guilty of marrying a blank-faced drone, far too young for him.<sup>66</sup> Charles Laverton-West MP, whose fiancée is dispatched in 'Murder in the Mews' is – unusually – young, good-looking, only 'slightly pompous' and if possessed of 'commonplace' ideas is at least not stupid. He is, however, completely unmoved by his loss, being only interested in avoiding scandal, which causes Japp to describe him as a "Bit of a stuffed fish ... *And* a boiled owl!" Perhaps most damningly, for many Christie readers, during his interview with the Chief Inspector, Laverton-West also revealed his dislike for women of the 'independent type'.<sup>67</sup>

Two of Christie's MPs are women, although they are even less sympathetically drawn than their male equivalents.<sup>68</sup> Mrs. Macatta is a minor character in two stories.<sup>69</sup> Described as 'always going off the deep end about Welfare and Pure Milk and Save the Children', Macatta's conversation consists entirely of public policy. When talking, she 'barked out short sentences rather than spoke them' and sometimes emitted a 'loud and virtuous snort' and was 'generally of somewhat alarming prospect'. A woman of 'great earnestness of purpose', she was widely considered a huge bore, one moreover obsessed with the 'the purification of England's morals'. Macatta was also a severe critic of men, of whom she spoke with contempt, predicting women were 'going to be the great force in government in ten years time'.

These characteristics are developed further in the forbidding shape of Lady Westholme, who appears in *Appointment with Death* (1938).<sup>70</sup> Westholme is

barely feminine, a 'big masterful woman' who 'lived entirely in tweeds and stout brogues', has a 'weather-beaten countenance', 'large red rocking-horse nostrils' and a 'booming voice'. She is widely disliked for being a bully, while 'being a true politician, she had no sense of humour'. As disparaging of men as is Macatta, Westholme similarly and equally paradoxically stands for 'old-fashioned values of family life'. She also has no small talk and speaks only of public affairs. In fact, such is her all-consuming ambition, Westholme murders a blackmailer threatening to expose a dark secret that would end her career. Significantly, Westholme is often contrasted to the young medical student Sarah King, whom she patronizes manfully. Sarah is, for Christie, the right kind of professional woman, one who seeks to complement not supplant men. The de-sexed Westholme, like Macatta, is a woman gone wrong who, like their male counterparts, threatens the socially liberal but politically conservative world of many of Christie's female readers.

Christie imbued a few of her politicians with a contrasting set of characteristics. 'The Kidnapped Prime Minister' (1924) is set during the First World War and features the fearless premier David MacAdam, nicknamed 'Fighting Mac'.<sup>71</sup> MacAdam successfully stands between Britain and a disastrous peace treaty: without his strong leadership, Christie states, the country would have succumbed to German-inspired pacifism. As Britain faced the prospect of another war, she gave readers one more heroic politician. Lord Mayfield of 'The Incredible Theft' (1937) was a 'big man, square-shouldered' and 'always charming to women'.<sup>72</sup> A self-made engineering employer before becoming Minister of Armaments, Mayfield has designed a revolutionary new bomber and – like MacAdam – is wholly preoccupied with ensuring Britain's security.

*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* was published in the first year of the Second World War. In it, Christie suggested – as had Wilkinson in *The Division Bell Mystery* – that power had shifted from politicians to financiers.<sup>73</sup> However, in this unusually politically sophisticated novel, Christie did not think that a bad thing. The banker Alistair Blunt was a man whose face – unlike that of the Prime Minister – was unknown to the public, although he was 'A man who said Yes and No to Governments ... a man in whose hands lay supreme power.' Blunt's was, though, an apparently benign authority, representing as he did 'Good sound Conservative finance'. Without his support, the government would fall, which was why extremists of left and right wanted him dead. Blunt, unlike most of the politicians depicted in Christie's earlier stories, was also an unassuming man, preferring to discuss private matters and, like her readers, a fan of detective stories.

Poirot regards Blunt as a national saviour but also considers him ‘virtually a dictator and to a dictator his own life becomes unduly important and those of others unimportant’. Thus, to protect himself from blackmail, Blunt becomes a murderer, accidentally killing an innocent man. Discovering this, Poirot turns him over to the police, while still agreeing the banker stands for ‘sanity and balance and stability and honest dealing’. Explaining why he nonetheless exposed Blunt’s crime, Poirot declares: ‘I am not concerned with nations, Monsieur, I am concerned with the lives of private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken from them.’ Despite everything, Blunt had been consumed by ‘the love of power’, as had one of Christie’s earliest political characters. Sir James Peel Edgerton MP of *The Secret Adversary* is widely regarded as a future Prime Minister, but his obsession with unlimited power has him become the mastermind behind a Bolshevik plot. Even being Prime Minister would not have been enough. As he asks: ‘What then? Was that power? Hampered at every turn by my colleagues, fettered by the democratic system of which I would be the mere figurehead!’<sup>74</sup>

Christie’s novels suggested that politics was an unpleasant necessity and that the desire for public power was inherently corrupting. Focusing on the individual flaws of particular politicians, they nonetheless never questioned the ultimate merit of the Westminster model. Indeed, when the *status quo* is placed in peril, her politicians become heroic statesmen. As Mr. Barnes, the retired secret agent in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* says:

We’re very tiresome people in this country. We’re conservative, you know, conservative to the backbone. We grumble a lot, but we don’t really want to smash our democratic government and try new fangled experiments.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, as Blunt says, ‘We are democratic in England – truly democratic. We can grumble and say what we think and laugh at our politicians.’<sup>76</sup> When national security is at stake, though, the joking has to stop.

If most politicians were ridiculous, politics was ultimately a grave business, one Christie suggests is too serious for the participation of her readers. Politics is also a world of necessary secrets, which is why the discreet Poirot is so often consulted. As Japp says to his friend: ‘Who’s got half the Cabinet in his pocket? You have. Hushing up their scandals for them.’<sup>77</sup> Sometimes, Christie makes it clear, politicians have to lie to the people for their own good. As Poirot says:

the men who control the destiny of a country ... are particularly vulnerable to displays of popular feeling ... A statesman these days has a difficult task.

He has to pursue a policy he deems advantageous to his country, but he has at the same time to recognize the force of popular feeling. Popular feeling is very often sentimental, muddle-headed, and eminently unsound, but it cannot be disregarded for all that.<sup>78</sup>

That is why, in ‘The Incredible Theft’, Poirot covers up the indiscretions of a great man, for his skills will be needed to guide Britain safely through the gathering storm.

### Screening the past

Christie was not alone in distinguishing between the majority of politicians and those few exceptional ‘statesmen’. Generally unwilling as well as unable to depict contemporary politics, cinema’s popular historical dramas sometimes tackled the biographies of these latter figures.<sup>79</sup> *Disraeli* (1929) and *The Iron Duke* (1935) had a Prime Minister as protagonist, while *The House of Rothschild* (1934), *Clive of India* (1935), *Victoria the Great* (1937), *Parnell* (1937), *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938) and *Suez* (1938) depicted an array of leading political figures.<sup>80</sup> In these movies filmmakers told stories of selfless leaders and benevolent monarchs advancing a national interest defined in imperial terms, presenting their protagonists as wise, paternalistic and humane.

Through these dramas the big screen gave audiences the leaders many appeared to wish for during a troubled period while also outlining a view of democracy convenient to defenders of the *status quo*. Some on the left claimed that because film production was controlled by the ‘money bags’ historical dramas were ‘resolutely anti-liberal: Dizzy is always a hero, Gladstone a skunk.’<sup>81</sup> There were certainly distortions, but these owed little to the undoubted Conservative bias of the British film industry.<sup>82</sup> *Disraeli*, *The House of Rothschild*, *Clive of India*, *Parnell* and *Suez* were made in Hollywood. Undeniably inaccurate, most errors were, however, British in origin. *Disraeli*, for example, was faithfully adapted from a play penned in London, while *Clive of India* was written by W. J. Lipscomb and R. J. Minney, whose script was almost indistinguishable from their 1934 West End play, which aimed to show theatre-goers what, ‘a great and very likeable person’ Clive had been.<sup>83</sup>

American anglophilia meant that an interest in British history was a defining aspect of US national identity, something those who ran Hollywood were only too keen to satisfy, especially as Britain accounted for half their foreign earnings.<sup>84</sup>

There were other calculations: such films gave the studios 'class'. In 1928 Warner Brothers contracted the British actor George Arliss to reproduce on the screen some of his North American stage successes, including *Disraeli*. As related by Arliss, Harry Warner said of *Disraeli* that 'he did not expect it to pay, but he was using me as an expensive bait to hook people into the cinema who had never been there before.'<sup>85</sup> *Disraeli* nevertheless surprised everybody: it was a commercial and critical triumph, with Arliss winning the Oscar for Best Actor. *Disraeli* had a special appeal for the Warner brothers – the sons of Jewish immigrants – as his story echoed theirs. A Jewish protagonist who overcomes Gentile opposition to promote universal – in this case imperialist – values from which all, Gentile as much as Jew, gain, he was a model for their assimilation into American society.<sup>86</sup>

*Disraeli* appeared in another Hollywood movie, *Suez*, a biopic of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the Frenchman responsible for building the canal. By the time *Suez* went into production, Hollywood's Jewish bosses like Louis B. Mayer were openly calling on the US to join forces with Britain against Hitler.<sup>87</sup> The resulting pro-British bias in *Suez* was certainly hard to miss. According to the movie, de Lesseps' vision was of a canal open to the world, something he hoped would promote greater international cooperation. Gladstone is presented as ideologically against the scheme through a small-minded, nationalist dislike of what he calls 'fly-by-night foreign schemes'. He is a surrogate for the bull-headed American isolationism of Charles Lindbergh and his supporters. *Disraeli*, in contrast, is described by de Lesseps as one of the 'men of vision who can see beyond national boundaries' and passionately supports the project. The two make common cause and the film concocts a meeting during which *Disraeli* tells de Lesseps that in building the canal he was doing England's work. *Disraeli*'s Jewishness is ignored in the movie because it is irrelevant to the story; his imperialism, however, remains important, but that has been transfigured into a disinterested Anglo-American internationalism.

Arliss was the actor most associated with the historical genre on both sides of the Atlantic. Hardly handsome, slightly built, possessed of bad teeth and in his early sixties when he signed for Warners, *Disraeli* made Arliss a star. He subsequently played Voltaire, Nathan and Meyer Rothschild, Richelieu, Alexander Hamilton and the Duke of Wellington. When not playing historical roles, Arliss assumed the parts of fictional millionaires, prime ministers, monarchs and aristocrats. The *Daily Mirror* called him the 'incomparable Arliss', as *Disraeli* was one of Britain's most successful films of 1930, while a 1934 survey of cinemagoers had him as the country's most popular male film star, relegating Clark Gable to second place.<sup>88</sup> Yet the roles Arliss played were all bent to his same benevolent interpretation of those great men who wielded

authority in general and political power in particular. He played statesmen as kindly, approachable and even whimsical figures, although they were also wise and possessed the necessary skills to achieve their disinterested ends.<sup>89</sup> Not a man to challenge preconceptions, Arliss gave the transatlantic cinema-going public a version of leadership for which many of them appeared to hanker in a time of crisis.

The Conservatives were only party that could hope to exploit Disraeli's cinematic prominence. Baldwin was wont to cite Disraeli as evidence his party had always been concerned to improve working-class lives.<sup>90</sup> If Baldwin used the real Disraeli to win votes, Conservative Central Office was alert to the electoral possibilities of his dramatized version, and Arliss was happy to help. The party had a fleet of cinema vans that exhibited short propaganda movies, and which during the 1935 election campaign reached an estimated 1.5 million people. One of these films had Arliss play Disraeli, delivering a stirring message to present-day Britons.<sup>91</sup>

*Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* were British made and could not have been produced had Edward VIII not lifted George V's ban on depictions of the late Queen.<sup>92</sup> Produced by Herbert Wilcox and starring his wife Anna Neagle, they cast Victoria as many seemed to want to think of her: preoccupied with her subjects' prosperity and, the *Manchester Guardian* believed, 'an actively beneficent constitutional force.'<sup>93</sup> The films were extremely popular, especially with working-class audiences: Bolton cinemagoers declared *Victoria the Great* their favourite movie.<sup>94</sup> In these dramas, the *New Statesman* critic claimed, the Queen's Prime Ministers 'succeed one another like patient dogs,' complaining of their 'ludicrous inadequacy' as portraits. As a consequence Gladstone was reduced to 'the man who left Gordon to his fate' and Disraeli boiled down to 'the man who bought the Suez Canal.'<sup>95</sup> Such brevity, however, meant they outlined the role expected of Victoria's premiers: to do the monarch's work, which is to say ignore partisanship and serve the national – that is imperial – interest.

Such historical dramas depicted the people as, at best, capricious and open to manipulation. Wellington in *The Iron Duke* is 'the idol of the people' but still subject to malign newspaper speculation about his relationship with a married woman. If this press-invented scandal turns the people against him, Lord Castlereagh assures Wellington that 'Nobody thinks anything about it except the crowd. They have to be answered.' Wellington responds: 'Ah, the crowd. Dangerous cattle – eat out of your hand one day and bite your fingers off the next!' Similarly, *Clive of India* illustrated how the press could turn the people even against a man of honour. When he first returns from India, Clive is greeted

by cheering crowds, but on coming home for the last time he is stoned after journalists claim he is corrupt.

*Sixty Glorious Years* also shows how malign politicians might turn the people against their own interests. Lord Palmerston mobilizes the Queen's subjects against Albert for opposing his policy of war with Russia. The people are consequently induced to see the Prince as a traitor after the Foreign Secretary makes them 'wild with rage and fear', turning Britain into, as Albert complains, a 'mad house'. Yet the war turns out to be a terrible and pointless waste of life. Thus, while both Victoria films end with the Queen cheered by crowds celebrating her 1897 Jubilee, she has also been shown enduring their less peaceable side: when rioting against the Corn Laws they even break the windows of her beloved Buckingham Palace.

## Conclusion

It was ironic that cinema, the newest and technically most radical form of entertainment, promoted a pre-democratic form of leadership, one that diminished the political role of those who sat in the dark to enjoy it. That many of the big screen's historical dramas had a Hollywood provenance made the nature of the picture they painted even more paradoxical. Yet such films were hardly out of step with many of the novels written during the difficult interwar decades. While mocking everyday politicians, Christie echoed conventional wisdoms about the nation's dependence on a small number of exceptional men who the people should allow to get on with the job of ensuring their security.

Even works written by writers on the left expressed severe doubts about the newly enfranchised people's capacities. Many also despaired of, or simply dismissed, the possibilities of representative politics in general. One of the few novels to suggest that desirable reforms could be achieved through democracy was Holtby's *South Riding*, but her novel showed that it took the corrupt intentions of a group of councillors to improve poor people's housing: this was progress by accident.

Whatever the origins and purpose of fictions produced during the interwar period, they mostly agreed that little could be expected of the people, the ones who ensured that representative institutions were largely operated by pandering and self-interested politicians unable to take the longer view. If this fictional perspective was a reaction to the betrayals and disappointments some writers endured in the 1920s and 1930s, it was also an exaggerated and uneven

reflection of real events. Despite everything, Britain remained free of continental upheavals, while the vast majority of Britons enjoyed rising standards of living.<sup>96</sup> This would also be a standpoint that would soon be tested in the coming war with Germany, which inaugurated a new kind of conflict – a ‘people’s war’, albeit one in which Britain was led by a Prime Minister more at home in the eighteenth as opposed to the twentieth century.

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## The People's War and After

Germany invaded Poland on 1st September 1939, forcing a reluctant Neville Chamberlain to declare war two days later. Despite the Prime Minister's attempt to limit its impact, the conflict set in train transformations that meant Britain would never be the same again. Whether the Second World War was the great discontinuity some historians claim – and the precise extent to which it radicalized the country – remain moot questions, but it undoubtedly changed many people's lives and made some question how they had been governed before the conflict.<sup>1</sup> The war also paved the way for Labour's 1945 general election victory, one underpinned by the party's claim that through a welfare state, the nationalization of key industries and extensive government planning it could make Britain a more equal society.

The key political moment of the war came in late May and early June 1940 when Allied troops were evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk. The fall of France soon followed, meaning Britain stood alone against Hitler's forces and became vulnerable to invasion for the first time since Napoleon dominated Europe. Many Britons blamed this calamity on the 'guilty men' who presided over a failed appeasing foreign policy and an economic strategy that had done little to reduce mass unemployment at home.<sup>2</sup> They did not just recoil from individual politicians like Ramsay MacDonald or Stanley Baldwin, but from the interwar political class as a whole. George Orwell even spoke of 'a revolutionary situation' during this period, claiming that 'After twenty years of being fed on sugar and water the nation had suddenly realized what its rulers were like.'<sup>3</sup> For the remainder of the war, numerous independent candidates were returned to the Commons having won by-elections in hitherto Conservative strongholds, united in the assertion that it was the 'party machine' that had brought the nation to its knees. Even Winston Churchill, who replaced Chamberlain as Prime Minister just weeks before Dunkirk, was not safe from this anti-party populism.<sup>4</sup>

The catastrophic fall of France turned the conflict into what Whitehall propagandists and others called a 'people's war'. Those in authority realized that only

by fully mobilizing the population would a bankrupt country have any chance of survival. The German blitz on major cities, the conscription of unprecedented numbers of men and women into the armed forces and factory work as well as rationing meant everyone was now, supposedly, in it together.<sup>5</sup> The historian A. J. P. Taylor, who believed the conflict 'was a people's war in the most literal sense', went so far as to describe this moment as 'the brief period when the English people felt that they were a truly democratic community'.<sup>6</sup>

Taylor referred to the sense that everybody was treated equally and that many social distinctions had been put to one side; he meant Britain had become *culturally* democratic rather than politically so. Some contemporaries nonetheless hoped the war had also generated the desire and confidence on the part of ordinary people to build a 'real democracy', one in which 'active citizens' would participate as never before.<sup>7</sup> In spite of this, while Labour became the ultimate repository for the many and disparate hopes for a better Britain, few of the party's leaders who entered Churchill's coalition in May 1940 were interested in building a new form of politics. In fact, Clement Attlee's 1945 victory and the relative ease with which his government applied its programme reinforced many Labour members' faith that, as Douglas Jay put it, 'the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves'.<sup>8</sup>

Many Conservatives indignantly opposed using the war as a platform to create a new Britain: they did not see much wrong with the old one. They also envisaged dangers in expanding the state along the lines proposed by Labour, fearing that these imperilled liberty. During the 1945 campaign Churchill even claimed an Attlee government would require 'some form of Gestapo' to make its policies work. And while Labour won a landslide when measured in Commons seats, the result in votes cast was less decisive: forty per cent still sided with the Conservatives and their allies.<sup>9</sup> The years that followed were, moreover, hardly easy: rationing and 'austerity' became more severe as the country came to terms with the appalling economic impact of war. Thus, as the government built what some hoped would be a 'New Jerusalem', others wondered if change was coming too quickly, while a few believed it was not arriving quickly enough.

One area in which change was not at all forthcoming was the political representation of women. During the war women played a new role on the Home Front, performing what had hitherto been considered men's work. Even so, equal pay was something both the Churchill and Attlee governments refused to concede.<sup>10</sup> There was furthermore no significant transformation in how women participated in politics. In 1935 only nine – or 1.5 per cent of – MPs were

women; in 1945 that number nearly tripled, but still left men comprising 96 per cent of Members. Whatever happened on the wartime shop floor, the floor of the post-war House of Commons remained a predominantly male preserve.

While Britons fought a life-or-death struggle with Hitler's Germany, they also went to the cinema on an unprecedented scale: admissions grew from 987 million in 1938 to what would be their peak of 1,635 million in 1946.<sup>11</sup> The entry of Labour into government and the propaganda imperatives of the people's war meant certain topics could now be depicted, resulting in a relaxation of the British Board of Film Censors' (BBFC) ban on 'controversial politics.' What had once seemed dangerous, officials believed could now be used to motivate those fighting a war of national survival. Indeed, the 1941 movie version of the once-banned *Love on the Dole* ended with a message from A. V. Alexander, one of Labour's coalition ministers, calling for a 'new Britain' and urging 'Never again must the unemployed become forgotten men of the peace.'<sup>12</sup>

The war also generated a number of films celebrating the role of ordinary people in various roles, women almost as much as men, depicting them in what were for the time realistic dramas that showed what a vital role, from the front line to the factory work bench, everybody was playing. Ealing Studios made its name producing such populist films, which it continued to do well after 1945.<sup>13</sup> As the post-war cinema retained the freedom to be critical, when the Boulting brothers put *Fame is the Spur* (1947) on the screen, they were even more caustic about the shortcomings of the story's fictional politician than had been Howard Spring in his 1940 novel. The character's surname, however, had to be changed: 'Hamer Shawcross' sounded too much like the real Labour Cabinet minister Sir Hartley Shawcross. Even so, Michael Redgrave, who played the renamed 'Hamer Radshaw', was made to look as much like Ramsay MacDonald as possible, thereby making it impossible for audiences to avoid seeing his character as a version of one of the 'guilty men'.<sup>14</sup>

Those running the film industry nonetheless remained wedded to the idea that escapism was the best commercial policy and mostly fought shy of exploiting their new freedom to tackle overtly political themes.<sup>15</sup> Many on the left blamed studio bosses – not audiences – for this, thinking it due to their undoubted right-wing bias.<sup>16</sup> Yet even those, like the producer Sydney Box, who were frustrated by their industry's reluctance to tackle contemporary issues believed films with a 'message' lacked wide appeal.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the reason, the most significant transformation in cinema came not so much in openly politically engaged movies but in those most critics dismissed as frivolous, notably period dramas and comedies. Despite surface appearances, many of these

commented on what some saw as the promise – and others as the threat – unleashed by the people’s war.

### Wartime prime ministers

For the most part, the character of two wartime historical dramas featuring Disraeli and Pitt the Younger were consistent with the pattern established before 1939: *The Prime Minister* (1941) and *The Young Mr. Pitt* (1942) emphasized their protagonists’ heroic qualities while diminishing party and the people’s capacities.<sup>18</sup> Both heroes were Tories and their domestic antagonists, the Liberal William Gladstone and Whig Charles Fox, were shown as willing to put party before the national interest. These movies also had American connections. With a British cast and crew, *The Prime Minister*’s script was written at the Warner Bros. studio in California.<sup>19</sup> *The Young Mr. Pitt* was similarly produced in Britain, but under the auspices of Twentieth Century Fox. The genre was, however, modestly reshaped to accommodate wartime sensibilities, to suggest Disraeli and Pitt wanted to secure popular prosperity and enjoyed a special bond with the people, elements previously underdeveloped. Some noted this revisionism, notably the attentive critic who saw that *The Young Mr. Pitt* ‘attempts to rearrange the past in the political patterns of the present.’<sup>20</sup>

As with earlier biopics, however, these films mainly focused on how Disraeli and Pitt dealt with foreign threats, drawing strong parallels between past and present, as the BBFC maintained its ban on depictions of living statesmen, meaning Churchill could not be dramatized. Hollywood being under no such restriction, during 1941 Warner Bros. put a Churchill biopic in development with portly actor Robert Morley mooted as its star.<sup>21</sup> While that project came to nothing, Churchill did appear in *Mission to Moscow* (1943), an early example of a drama-documentary, which depicted the experiences of the US ambassador to the Soviet Union. Disraeli and Pitt were, then, Churchill surrogates, and both films made hard-to-miss comparisons between Napoleon, Bismarck and Hitler.<sup>22</sup>

The movies elevated their Prime Ministers largely by denigrating party politics. If *The Prime Minister* took swipes at Gladstone, the movie also showed Disraeli fighting with other Conservatives: it was as a statesman above party that audiences were invited to admire him. The Tory hierarchy tries to prevent Disraeli standing for Parliament and both sides of the Commons shout down his maiden speech. Even when he finally arrives at Number 10, Disraeli’s Cabinet is frightened of confronting Russia, so he employs secret measures with

the help of Queen Victoria. Young William Pitt is similarly presented as a lonely figure in the Commons, one initially massively outnumbered by Fox's corrupt followers.

Gesturing towards the desirability of bi-partisanship, *The Prime Minister* casts Whig Prime Minister Lord Melbourne as young Disraeli's mentor. Melbourne recognizes the sincerity of his desire to serve the nation and encourages Disraeli to enter politics even as an opponent; as Melbourne tells his protégé, 'there's more in politics than party. What matters in the end is working for England.' The film nonetheless gives no other instance in which politicians put their differences to one side. Early in *The Young Mr. Pitt*, Fox is offered the chance to join a Pitt coalition so the two might together make Britain great, but he turns down the opportunity. Presented as the quintessential politician, even kissing a baby while electioneering, only the threat of imminent French invasion forces Fox to abandon his selfish position. This meant that, as in wartime Britain, the parties finally pulled together, but only when it was – almost – too late.

*The Prime Minister* takes what would, in the 1930s, have been the daring step of depicting the Chartist disturbances of the 1840s and implies that not all working-class demands were unreasonable. It even gingerly suggests Disraeli supports them – unlike Gladstone, who is resolutely on the side of the 'great industrialists'. Disraeli's precise sympathies are nonetheless left opaque. The closest the movie comes to indicating his views is when, during a coach ride, he catches sight of a radical meeting, and pointedly sighs. A clue as to the possible significance of this highly charged (but easily missed) exhalation comes in the next scene when Mary Anne, Disraeli's future wife, corrects her maid's claim that reform was 'foolishness' by tentatively asking: 'I wonder if it is *so* foolish?'

*The Young Mr. Pitt* highlights its protagonist's popular connection more directly. The film begins with Pitt the Elder telling his son that he became Prime Minister only after 'the people themselves crowned me'. Thus, while appointed by George III, Young Pitt only wins real power by calling what the movie presents as an anachronistically modern general election. This is one in which a mass electorate – rather than the rotten boroughs – determine the result, the people having gone 'Pitt mad'. This 'madness' is temporary, however, for he soon takes the unpopular (but correct) course of warning of the danger posed by revolutionary France, very much like Churchill did about Nazi Germany before 1939.<sup>23</sup> This means that for much of the movie Pitt fights against 'the rising tide of public opinion', which wants peace and sees him as a warmonger. Indeed, the fickleness of the people, 'that many-headed monster', according to Fox, is a constant theme. Pitt is cheered and booed and cheered again in quick



succession, while he and Fox alternate in having stones thrown at them. A scene depicting Fox hosting a dinner party even ends with one of his house guests exclaiming 'What is that?!' as a window is once again smashed by the mob, to which he nonchalantly replies: 'That, my dear, is life.'

While the historical drama genre was popular with 1930s audiences, these two films received mixed responses: certainly in Macclesfield they did poor business.<sup>24</sup> Even so, *The Young Mr. Pitt* was one of the most popular British films of 1942, possibly because it more clearly evoked comparisons with Churchill than did *The Prime Minister*. But it also had as its lead Robert Donat, by then a well-established international star, while the latter had an awkward John Gielgud in his first lead role.<sup>25</sup> Gielgud moreover had to deal with the fact that he was not George Arliss, and the critical consensus was that however inaccurate had been the Arliss version, his 'cosier' rendition of Disraeli was preferable to more austere performance delivered by Gielgud, whose Conservative leader was 'worthy to the point of being wearisome'.<sup>26</sup>

## Populism in war and peace

Both biopics reinforced the long-established view that a fickle people needed wise leaders, one the country's wartime Prime Minister, Churchill, had expressed in his only novel, *Savrola* (1899). Yet according to the popular tract *Guilty Men* (1940), Dunkirk showed how Britons had been badly let down by a generation of supposed statesmen. Because of this, the people now had to save themselves through their own efforts. Many film studios, notably Ealing, consequently shifted from their established emphasis on heroic upper-class army officers and produced stories about how the lower ranks were saving the day, something encouraged by the authorities themselves.<sup>27</sup>

One film even exploited suspicions about the patriotism of some of Britain's traditional leaders. Based on a Graham Greene short story about how villagers resisted a German paratroop attack, in *Went the Day Well?* (1942) the local squire is exposed as a Nazi fifth columnist.<sup>28</sup> The movie was, however, rare in its stark representation of a Quisling elite. Thus, while Churchill wanted to stop the production of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1944) because he feared its depiction of authority would undermine morale, this said more about his insecurities than the producers' intentions: if the film criticized those in charge (as personified in the eponymous Colonel) for amateurism, it celebrated their bravery.<sup>29</sup> In any case, not all dramas indulged in populism. Noel Coward's *In*

*Which We Serve* (1943), one of the most popular films of the war, presented the conflict at sea as an extension of a country estate with all the classes in their rightful place and serving a captain who lived and breathed *noblesse oblige*.

Appropriately enough, wartime populism was most clearly expressed through cinema's most popular form: humour. In fact, even before 1939, comedy's association with a carnival-like sense of disorder gave filmmakers licence to ridicule petty public authority without falling foul of the BBFC.<sup>30</sup> The many films of Will Hay indicated how far interwar audiences enjoyed watching fun being poked at men to whom they were expected to show some deference outside the cinema – in his case police officers, teachers, prison warders and railway stationmasters.<sup>31</sup> Nor were politicians immune to screen mockery, albeit of the limited sort dished out by Agatha Christie and her ilk. The George Arliss vehicle *His Lordship* (1936) and Victor Saville's *Storm in a Teacup* (1937) each presented individual politicians as pompous, overbearing and ridiculous.

In fact, from the earliest days of cinema various comic characters had taken on politics. One such was Pimple, an anarchic, clown-like character created by music hall comedian Fred Evans who starred in a number of short films released on either side of the Great War. Unfortunately, the plot of *Pimple, MP* (1914) does not survive, so one can only imagine what havoc he wrought on the Commons.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, *Squibs MP* (1923) was part of a series of films which featured a plucky cockney flower girl, played by Betty Balfour, dubbed the 'Queen of Happiness'. In her 1923 movie *Squibs* successfully stands for Parliament when a rival milk company accuses her fiancé of bribery, although little more is known about its content.

Such films celebrated the 'little people', juxtaposing them against a flawed political elite in a manner made famous in Hollywood by Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). A film very much in this tradition was also released in 1939, although unlike Capra's it won no Oscars. The central character of *Old Mother Riley, MP* (1939) is one born of the music halls, a poor but feisty Irish single mother, washerwoman and self-described 'social leper and parasite'. A cheaply produced hack work, the third of a fifteen-long series of films produced between 1937 and 1952, it was aimed at northern, working-class audiences. The film has Riley stand for Parliament so she can oppose her landlord who plans to flatten the district where she lives and build luxury apartments. Despite intimidation from a candidate who hypocritically presents himself as the people's friend, Riley prevails. Keen to represent her constituents' interests, on first entering the Commons Riley attacks a measure, one supported

by all MPs, to close public parks so as to save money. Such amenities were, she announces, the 'poor people's gardens.'

To emphasize the chasm that separated politics from the people, the film has the Commons exclusively composed of elderly male members of the upper class, top hats and monocles to the fore. Despite the presence of over 150 Labour MPs in the real House, no workers were in evidence, nor were any of the nine female MPs to be seen. As her peroration develops, Riley widens her sights and asserts the 'Englishman's birthright to work', concluding dramatically: 'Everyone shall be employed!' Her rhetoric having won the enthusiastic support of all MPs for that proposition, Riley is catapulted into government – as Minister for Strange Affairs – where she immediately introduces legislation to abolish unemployment. Thanks to the intervention of this pariah, the bane of the 1930s was set to become a thing of the past.

Riley was played by Arthur Lucan. Clearly the censors did not believe a man in a dress calling for full employment posed much of a threat to the *status quo*. *Old Mother Riley*, MP consequently showed what could be said under the cover of slapstick humour. It also evoked themes found in a series of comedies produced during and immediately after the war that depicted politicians as a self-interested and corrupt group.<sup>33</sup> Overall, the films made it clear that politicians were an unrepresentative 'Them' while the characters with whom the disproportionately working-class, female and young cinema audience was meant to identify were 'Us'. Such unashamed crowd-pleasers – which contained thrills, laughter and romance – were however critically disregarded: *Tribune* might have been a left-wing weekly, but its film reviewer believed such movies represented all that was wrong with Britain's movie industry.<sup>34</sup>

One such picture starred George Formby. In a series of musical comedies released just before war broke out, Formby had established himself as what *Mass-Observation's* Tom Harrisson called the 'comedian of the common people'. Formby played the ultimate little man, an artless innocent of proletarian origin who somehow always managed to defeat his overbearing antagonists and get the girl. On that basis, during the war he became Britain's most popular male star, notably boosting morale by boxing Hitler's ears in *Let George Do It* (1940).<sup>35</sup> Formby's *He Snoops to Conquer* was released in December 1944 and, like all his previous ventures, was aimed at what a trade paper described as 'industrial and provincial audiences'.<sup>36</sup> The film employed his well-established devices, with Formby this time cast as humble odd-job man George Gribble matched against councillors on Tangleton town council who refuse to plan for the post-war world by building new homes. As with the Commons in

*Old Mother Riley, MP*, the film exaggerates the 'otherness' of these politicians. Despite Tangleton having a coalmine and many factories, the councillors are all depicted as employers or property owners: there are no figures that might be associated with the Labour party. To rub in the point further, the council leader owns a magnificent residence with extensive grounds, while those he is meant to represent – and who pay him rent – live in dilapidated conditions.

Thanks to the intervention of a campaigning national newspaper, George inadvertently exposes the reason why the councillors are reluctant to create a better Tangleton: they all own slum property. Yet despite their desire for new homes, the people's voice cannot be heard: indeed, the council even distorts an opinion survey to claim voters are happy in their slums. George, as a result, becomes an unlikely tribune and makes common cause with an eccentric inventor-cum-philanthropist whose daughter is a student of town planning. The latter tells George of the importance of 'decent homes for decent people to live in' and encourages him to look forward to 'everyone getting together and working to a plan instead of just muddling along, each one only thinking of his own interests'.

The film ends with George on the verge of election to the council and dedicated to building a new town. As the *Manchester Guardian* reviewer concluded, rather patronizingly, his victory gave 'one confidence in the strength and outlook of the ordinary man.'<sup>37</sup> *He Snoops to Conquer*, then, expressed approval of Labour's mooted post-war planning as well as – very unusually – Douglas Jay's 'gentlemen in Whitehall', even showing one such figure supporting George's campaign. The film was as blatant an intervention in contemporary politics as might be imagined; by 1944 housing was the most important issue for Formby's intended audience, all of whom were anticipating – and fearing – what Britain might be like after the war.<sup>38</sup> Whether it was Formby's fame or the nature of the subject, *He Snoops to Conquer* was certainly popular with British soldiers on leave in liberated Brussels.<sup>39</sup>

The third in a series of four unassuming post-war comedies, *Vote for Huggett* (1948) according to one critic contrived 'to give a rather nasty slant on politics'.<sup>40</sup> These movies featured the adventures of a south London family, spawning a BBC radio series that ran throughout the 1950s. Audiences were meant to identify with the Huggetts – Pa being played by the everyman actor (and future PC George Dixon, the epitome of reassuring authority) Jack Warner and Ma by Kathleen Harrison, who specialized in comforting, motherly roles. They were 'typical' figures, standing as they did – Pa was a foreman – on the cusp of the working and lower-middle classes.<sup>41</sup> As a consequence, the *Daily Mirror* critic

believed this instalment in the Huggett saga provided ‘Cosy, homely humour for the whole family.’<sup>42</sup>

The film begins with Pa writing a letter to his local paper criticizing the Moderate-run council’s plan to build a community centre to commemorate the war. The act of composing this missive proves comically difficult, strongly suggesting that the producers did not think the likes of Pa often did this kind of thing. By sheer chance the letter is published and the Progressive opposition takes up his proposal to build a garden and lido. Unlike Huggett, however, the two party leaders are only interested in a memorial from which they can benefit, either through selling land or winning building contracts. Indeed, when the Moderate leader’s naïve young nephew includes in a draft speech the promise to safeguard the people’s interests, his uncle firmly strikes out the sentence. The sleek, suave Progressive boss is also shown to have dubious morals: despite being married, he makes several attempts to seduce Huggett’s eldest daughter. He also patronizes Pa when they meet at the golf club, clearly an alien world to Huggett. For her pains, Ma, a woman who like millions of other respectable housewives cleans her own doorstep, is intimidated by the Moderate leader’s wife when she arrives in a chauffeur-driven limousine to frighten her with talk of the extensive social obligations of a councillor’s consort. Very much like Formby and Riley and their precursors, Pa nonetheless overcomes his many disadvantages and wins election to articulate the people’s voice.

### Liberty and the middle classes: *The Winslow Boy*

Complementing these anti-party comedies were movies that highlighted the fraught relationship between government and people. A fertile topic for Will Hay in the 1930s, the wartime expansion of the state and its consolidation under Labour increased the number and influence of ‘Them.’ Building on the reforms of the Edwardian Liberal government, Attlee’s administration took the state into people’s peacetime lives on an unprecedented scale, ostensibly to better serve their interests. Yet while *He Snoops to Conquer* suggested Formby’s screen persona believed in the good intentions of gentlemen from Whitehall, other movies expressed fears they threatened the people’s liberty.

*The Winslow Boy* (1948), adapted by Terence Rattigan from his 1946 West End play, certainly cautioned against the state’s new role. Indeed Rattigan dedicated the play to Paul Channon, whose father Henry (a right-wing Conservative MP and Rattigan’s lover at the time) had commented on early

drafts and even suggested its title.<sup>43</sup> The genesis of the play was film producer Anatole De Grunwald's suggestion that Rattigan and director Anthony Asquith make a film celebrating British justice to help the wartime propaganda effort. In researching this topic, Rattigan read about an Edwardian *cause célèbre* in which Conservative MP and barrister Sir Edward Carson had successfully represented George Archer-Shee in his attempt to clear the name of his son, who while enrolled at Osborne naval college was found guilty, without trial, of stealing a five-shilling postal order and dismissed from the service by the Admiralty. After months of wrangling, Carson forced the Crown, under whose legal immunity the Admiralty lay, to accept the boy was innocent.<sup>44</sup>

If Rattigan believed a fictionalized version of the Archer-Shee case was suitable for cinematic treatment, Asquith (whose father was Liberal Prime Minister at the time of the trial) did not, so Rattigan decided to write a play about it, starting his work just as the 1945 general election campaign began.<sup>45</sup> Opening in May 1946, it was an immediate hit: within a short time it had been broadcast on radio and television and spawned numerous provincial repertory and amateur productions, indicating its attraction to a certain kind of middle-class audience. In September 1948 it was released as a film, starring Robert Donat as barrister and Conservative MP Sir Robert Morton.

Rattigan changed a number of details to make his fictional Winslows more sympathetic than the real-life Archer-Shees. He gave the former a suffragette daughter in place of the latter's elder son, a Conservative MP, and while the Winslows were comfortable enough to employ a couple of servants, Rattigan made them less grand than their real-life equivalents. Both families nonetheless faced the same legal mountain. As a result, some theatre and film critics believed Rattigan had merely 'contrived a sort of dramatic "documentary"' of the original case, producing a 'period piece' with no contemporary relevance.<sup>46</sup> Others, however, saw the play as a 'tract', casting the Admiralty as 'a massively obstructive and complacent bureaucracy', an enemy of 'individual liberty'.<sup>47</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* film critic strikingly commented on how Rattigan had pitched 'the David of justice against the Goliath of bureaucratic vested interest'.<sup>48</sup> Rattigan – the consummate commercial playwright – was nonetheless unwilling to present his play as ideological.<sup>49</sup> Only a few years later he would claim plays of ideas were anachronistic, that 'character and narrative' was all that mattered: 'I don't think that ideas per se, social, political or moral have a very important place in the theatre.'<sup>50</sup> Yet if 'character and narrative' were to the fore in *The Winslow Boy*, ideas were also present, no matter how ambiguously Rattigan presented them.

In attempting to force the Admiralty to give his son a fair trial, Arthur Winslow confronted, thanks to its association with the Royal Navy, one of Britain's most venerated institutions, which lay at the heart of its imperial greatness. Rattigan might therefore have presented Winslow's action as a politically radical assault on tradition. The playwright, however, avoided couching the case in such terms. Instead, he has Morton claim it exposed how far the liberty of the individual was now menaced by 'the new despotism of bureaucracy'. Rattigan even has the First Lord of the Admiralty argue that 'in certain cases private rights may have to be sacrificed for the public good'. If these comments struck a tone hostile to government, Rattigan attempted to show they also expressed a consensual position. He does this through the relationship that develops between Kate, the Winslow boy's radical sister, and Morton, who hitherto has opposed all the causes she holds dear. Despite their differences, they defend individual liberty while MPs from all parts of the Commons force the First Lord to concede the Petition of Right that leads to young Winslow's vindication.

This 'sort of Liberal-Conservative' consensus is the kind of politics to which Winslow's eldest son – in the play but not the film – admits. If Rattigan's was a story of David against Goliath, the former was an upper-middle-class family whose maid – the only working-class character of any consequence and here played by Kathleen Harrison – was depicted, in the accustomed interwar terms, as a near-comedy turn. Moreover, the film version subtly nudges alert members of the audiences in a conservative direction. In a scene that only appears in the film, Rattigan has the Winslows' MP, a Conservative, say he has been busy with 'national health insurance and all that', thereby explicitly associating the reforming Liberal government of the film – and the one that oppresses Winslow – with the even more ambitious Labour administration under which contemporaries lived.

Yet, for all its concerns about the power of government, *The Winslow Boy* ultimately remains what it was originally meant to be: a celebration of British justice, albeit from a highly privileged perspective. As is declared in both play and film, the fact that the national legislature debated the Winslow case despite all the other troubles consuming the country 'could only happen in England'. From the perspective of his advantaged protagonists, Rattigan suggests the ultimately benign nature of the constitution and the positive role of the Commons. As Kate and Morton agree at the end, at least 'some people from all parties' had fought to protect liberty.

## Happy Pimlico against the state

If *The Winslow Boy* showed an upper-middle-class family defeating the Edwardian Liberal government, two comedies squarely located in the populist idiom depicted how more humbly placed Davids forced the contemporary Labour Goliath to respect their rights.

Ealing's much-celebrated *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) was the first of the films to deal with the little people's relationship with expanding public power, and that from a standpoint broadly sympathetic to Labour.<sup>51</sup> *The Happy Family* (1952), produced by Sydney Box, has left less of a mark. Described by the *London Star* as a 'warm-hearted little picture', it was adapted from Michael Clayton Hutton's 1951 West End play, one dismissed by critics as 'whimsical'.<sup>52</sup> *The Happy Family* nonetheless mined similar themes to the Ealing movie, albeit from a more sceptical position. Indeed, it virtually reproduced the earlier film's plot, and cast some of its stars – notably Stanley Holloway and Naunton Wayne – in almost identical roles, as respectively the leader of the people's revolt and the gentleman from Whitehall. Reinforcing the film's sense of familiarity, Kathleen Harrison (unaccountably absent in *Passport to Pimlico*) once again played a sensible wife and mother.<sup>53</sup>

Both films show what happens when, in the first case, a community and, in the second, a family fall foul of Whitehall. In the Ealing production, the residents of a south London square claim exemption from rationing, licensing laws and Sunday trading restrictions, indeed all forms of regulation, based on newly discovered medieval legal documents. The Box film has the Lord family refuse to be re-housed after planners accidentally put a road leading to the Festival of Britain site through their home. Both sets of protagonists endure a siege forced on them by government with the full backing of Westminster's political class. As a newsreel commentator in the Ealing film declares: 'For the first time since World War Two, Britain's party politics has been forgotten.' Now, however, the parties are united, not against Hitler but against the British people: both films consequently evoke the spirit of the Blitz, one mobilized against Whitehall.

*Passport to Pimlico* shows that despite their irritation with regulation the residents ultimately accept that untrammelled 'freedom' holds even more disadvantages – such as the anarchy of the black market – so they negotiate a compromise. It depicts state intervention in post-war life as benign if irritating and so makes the case for some restriction of liberty. In contrast, in *The Happy*



*Family* the Lords defeat Whitehall and force the new road to bend on either side of their beloved home. The movie – aimed at a more popular audience than *The Winslow Boy* – also highlights the futility of the kind of constitutional process celebrated in Rattigan’s film. While the Winslows’ case is won with the help of their MP and a cross-party Commons coalition, *The Happy Family* suggests the impossibility of making politicians represent their constituents’ concerns, which in the film adaptation is expressed in a neat vignette. After learning of their imminent eviction, Pa and Ma deferentially visit their councillor, whom they have loyally supported for years. Claiming he could do nothing about it, the councillor passes them on to the chair of the local housing committee, who refers them to the mayor, who has them contact their MP, who makes an appointment for them to see the very civil servant responsible for the planning mistake. By this point, the Lords are understandably exasperated. In the play this episode occurs off-stage, but Ma’s reaction (deleted from the film) is visceral:

disgraceful the lies they stand up and tell you when they want you to vote for them ... It only goes to show you they’ve got one face when they’re out and want to get in, and another when they’re in and think they can’t be got out.

The Ealing film embraced a progressive populism, one that gave the state a qualified but positive role in people’s lives. *The Happy Family* took the same storyline but gave it a more conservative spin, echoing the central problem of *The Winslow Boy*. Indeed, the nub of the play on which the movie was based is defined by one character as illustrating the importance of ‘upholding the civil liberties of the private individual at all costs’. That it is the Festival of Britain that is the cause of the Lords’ problems is apt, given the extent to which it represented the achievement of those radical middle-class ‘do-gooders’ who prospered under Labour. Thanks to the expansion of the welfare state, such figures had, as Michael Frayn put it, done things for a working class they envisioned as the ‘essentially inert objects of a benevolent administration.’<sup>54</sup> The Lords were members of that supposedly inert object, ones who reject state-sponsored benevolence.

The conservative – if not Conservative – nature of the Lords’ position is jokily signified by the fact that *The Happy Family*’s shop is called the House of Lords; Winston is the name of the family hare; they live on Waterloo Road and (in the film) even hang a copy of Daniel Maclise’s ‘The Meeting of Wellington and Blucher’ in their parlour. More obviously, the Lords are hardworking and aspirational: Pa is a recently retired railway driver and while a union member he is described as ‘not the striking kind’. The importance of home and its emotional attachments are both emphasized and shown as the object of their

striving during the troubled 1930s. It is this home government planners demand they abandon. The film is also built around a more private struggle than the communal one contained in the Ealing movie. The Lords are in addition people who just want to be 'left alone' in what is described as their 'tiny shrine of independence'. The state has, in other words, no legitimate role in the universe mapped out by *The Happy Family*.

The state and its personnel are as a consequence presented in a much less sympathetic light than their counterparts in the Ealing film. Both suggest that buck-passing is a key feature of Whitehall. But the privileged nature of civil servants' position is belaboured in *The Happy Family*: they not only start their day later than ordinary workers but are promoted even when they fail. Indeed, the surname of the gentleman from Whitehall charged with dealing with the Lords is Filch, a synonym for stealing. When Filch signs a letter to the Lords 'your obedient servant', it is mocked, suggesting the relationship is really the other way round. Indeed, the very idea of state planning is ironized. Hence, when Filch admits that in having to knock down the Lords' home, the government has made a mistake, Ma and daughter exclaim 'No!' in a comically exaggerated way. The play – but not the movie – even makes a direct reference to the Labour government's disastrous Groundnut Scheme, locating its fictional mistake in a context of real planning failure.<sup>55</sup>

Like *The Winslow Boy*, *The Happy Family* has an ostensibly politically mixed group oppose the government. If the Lords are overwhelmingly conservative, Cyril, boyfriend to their middle daughter, is described as a radical 'fellow traveller'. He is, however, roundly mocked for his views and played largely for laughs. Even so, Cyril is the one who persuades the Lords to resist eviction. As he tells them, in the play:

You spend your lives blowing down your noses at the rest of the world and talking about freedom when you don't even know the meaning of the word. You're like a lot of bloody sheep ... *Where would we all be if all our ancestors had given in as easily as you do? For the last thirty years you've been bamboozled by politicians, you've been hoodwinked by every sort of Government, you've been twisted by the money boys. In fifty years you've dropped from being the greatest nation in the world to the weakest pack of sheep the world has ever seen.*

Cyril's speech is curtailed in the movie, notably in the italicized section, which controversially links national decline to poor political leadership. Moreover, any revolutionary implications of the Lords' revolt are undercut when Pa raises his glass and in the film declares:

To living quietly and being left alone and not being led about like sheep, to our Englishman's castle and to all the millions of little castles belonging to little people all over the country. That's nicer than a revolution.

This is, then, a very traditional revolt. As Filch announces in the play, as he concedes defeat:

This day will go down into the glorious annals of English history, *will go down side by side with the miracles of Queen Elizabeth, Drake, Marlborough, Nelson, Wellington, Kier Hardie and Mrs. Braddock ... The day of the little man, the little man in the street.* The day the small man, the free Englishman, stood face to face and looked the Government squarely in its eyes.

Once again, the political teeth of the original play are drawn in the movie – the italicized sections do not make it on to the screen – but the message is just the same.

Irrespective of their contrasting subtexts, these two films embraced a strikingly similar view of 'Them and Us'. In both, Whitehall is run by men who, if initially not unfriendly, are ultimately indifferent – if not antipathetic – to the interests of a people depicted as comprising the modest but respectable classes, that is shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs, the self-employed and the skilled working class. The government uses physical force in both movies – unlike in *The Winslow Boy*. Both also represent a shift in tone from the war. In Formby's *He Snoops to Conquer*, if politicians are to be mistrusted Whitehall planners represented the hope of a rational future; in *Passport to Pimlico* and *The Happy Family* Whitehall had become the pinstriped enemy.

### Women: 'I like you the way you are'

During the war government officials believed feature films were an ideal way to encourage women to take on unaccustomed roles and persuade sceptics that when they did they made an important contribution to the people's war. As a result, an unprecedented number of movies portrayed women in active and decisive roles outside the home. Movies like *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Gentle Sex* (1943) showed them in factories producing bombsights and working in the Auxiliary Territorial Service to keep the army moving.<sup>56</sup> *Went the Day Well?* even depicted sweet old ladies grimly wielding murderous axes and members of the Women's Land Army, among whom numbered the young Thora Hird, merrily shooting down Germans.

There was no similar wartime imperative on filmmakers to alter perceptions of women in politics. As it was in reality, politics on the screen remained a man's

world, one in which women's role, should they have one, was mostly limited to that of moral guide. In *The Prime Minister*, for example, a go-getting Mary Anne visits Tory headquarters to insist the party endorse Disraeli. However, she is merely facilitating her future husband's career, a role she continues to lovingly perform in marriage. On her death, with the grief-stricken Disraeli contemplating abandoning politics, Queen Victoria assumes Mary Anne's role. Victoria's inspirational influence, the film suggests, in fact went further back than that. It is only after Disraeli observes Melbourne informing the young Victoria she had become Queen, and hearing her vow to bring peace and prosperity to all her people, that he finally decides to 'work for England'. If *He Snoops to Conquer* was the most radical of Formby's films, while sweetheart Jane is cleverer and more informed about planning than George, she is still restricted to supporting his election.

Daphne du Maurier's play *The Years Between*, first staged in 1944, marked a striking departure from this pattern. Diana Wentworth, an upper-middle-class wife, is mistakenly told her husband Richard has been killed during a mission in Occupied Europe. Before the war Diana had been the acme of domestic contentment with a life revolving around her spouse and son. Thinking him dead, however, she steps into Richard's shoes and becomes Conservative MP for his constituency. On his unexpected return, Richard is forced to come to terms with Diana's new role. If du Maurier's play focused on the domestic consequences of their wartime separation, it had a strong political subtext, for Richard wants Britain to go back to how it was in 1939, free of restrictions and controls, while Diana sees merit in 'service, duty, and obedience to the State'.<sup>57</sup> Enjoying a successful West End run, the play was transferred to the screen in 1946, one of a number of films that explored the difficulties faced by separated couples whom the war had turned into strangers.<sup>58</sup>

In terms of how politicians were normally depicted on the screen, Diana was an unusual figure: not only was she a woman, but also young, attractive and studiously conscientious. Diana also becomes an MP for completely non-political reasons: to aid her recovery from the trauma of widowhood through helping the war effort and being of use to vulnerable constituents. In many ways, her work as an MP is an extension of Diana's previous domestic role: she is still a self-sacrificing carer, but is now performing that role on the public stage. She is therefore the exception that proves the rule: her constituency party and parliamentary colleagues are exclusively male, generally stuffy and pompous – that is, just like politicians were popularly supposed to be.

Being a woman and untouched by established politics, in her Maiden Speech

Diana casts aside the 'party line' given to her by a Whip. Instead, she claims to speak on behalf of the millions of ordinary women making sacrifices in the hope of a better Britain, even calling for equal pay – the policy opposed in the real world by Labour and Conservative leaderships.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps indicating a wider resistance to the idea of female MPs, critics did not receive the film especially well. Some believed it 'dim and mawkish,' thought Diana too full of herself and her Commons speech cliché-riddled.<sup>60</sup> The *Daily Mail* reviewer even refused to take Diana's political role seriously, commenting: 'You can't help feeling the House was something she sandwiches between Harrods and the hairdresser.'<sup>61</sup>

Richard's unexpected return provokes a traumatic time for the couple, during which they find a new basis for their relationship. The film plays down the extent to which they disagree ideologically, but Richard still demands Diana stand down as MP and resume her domestic responsibilities. The film ends, in spite of this, with them still husband and wife, but their marriage reconfigured. Both now sit in the Commons and the last scene shows Diana listening admiringly to Richard as he addresses the Chamber. The film is unclear to which parties they now belong: they appear to be sitting on opposite sides. Certainly, Richard is still a Conservative, but critics were divided over whether Diana had become a Labour MP.<sup>62</sup> However, the most important point to emerge from this reconciliation is that more equal they might now be, but different they remain. Richard's interests are in the hard world of international affairs while Diana's remain focused on domestic matters: politically, she is confined to the 'female' sphere.

Diana Wentworth suggested women could legitimately participate in politics so long as they performed on the public stage as they were supposed to do in the private sphere. She remained a 'feminine' woman. Things were more problematic when women acted like men in politics. An echo of this attitude is found in Rattigan's stage directions for *The Winslow Boy* in which he describes the argumentative suffragette Kate as having 'an air of masculinity' about her.<sup>63</sup> A more developed version of the 'masculine' female politician appeared in *Frieda* (1947), another film about a returning serviceman. The film is mostly about Robert, an airman who comes home with a German wife after being a prisoner of war. Despite having helped Robert escape, his friends and family do not welcome Frieda, and the film makes the case for distinguishing between good and bad Germans. Robert's aunt Eleanor is standing for election on behalf of, it is pretty clear, Labour. Unlike Diana Wentworth, however, Eleanor is single and described by her nephew as 'ambitious, aggressive' and – as played by Flora Robson – has plain features and often wears mannish clothes. This is in stark contrast to Robert's more feminine mother, who is defined by her homely function.

Eleanor is concerned her association with Frieda will lose her votes and, when challenged, reveals she believes there is something inherently bad in every German. Partly thanks to this view, Eleanor is elected to Parliament. Moreover, while the other women in Robert's family home come to accept and love Frieda, Eleanor remains implacable. Yet her dogmatic Germanophobia is at odds with her feelings towards Frieda as an individual; indeed she admits that 'I'm trying not to let feelings blind me, I'm crushing it down.' This means she does not try to stop a desperate Frieda attempting suicide, as that 'seemed logical' and the best for all concerned. It is only at the very end of the film that Eleanor realizes that even Germans are 'human beings' – but it has been a long, tough ride.

The very middle-class Diana and Eleanor embodied the different ways in which women's active participation in politics was depicted on the post-war screen. For the most part, however, women – certainly those from the working class – were presented as marginal figures. While *Vote for Huggett* shows party politics to be alien to Pa Huggett, it is especially intimidating for his wife. Indeed, after Pa has been elected to the council, Ma expresses her fear that she won't be able to talk to him. 'I don't know as I can keep up with you now Joe, now that you've a Corporation and all that', she complains. 'I feel I can't talk about the things that interest you ... National Insurance and football pools and rates and taxes and drains. I can't do it Joe, I'm not made that way.' Reassuring his wife that he cannot abide pretty or clever women – and that fortunately she is neither – Pa declaims: 'I like you the way you are. And if I hear you talking about rates and taxes and all that drivell I'll take a big stick to you my girl.' For which promise Pa receives a grateful, wifely kiss.

## Conclusion

After the war cinema attendances declined, slowly at first, and then, with the spread of television, steeply. The low point of fifty-four million per year was reached in 1984, under one-third of the 1946 peak. During the people's war and the first years of the Labour government cinema was, however, the most popular means through which Britons sought entertainment. Very much as they would subsequently treat television, the public had their favourite genres and stars, but as many as two-thirds went to watch films out of habit, that is to say indiscriminately watching movies that just happened to be playing at their local cinema.<sup>64</sup>

Yet, while they mostly sought easy entertainment, cinema presented audiences with very different pictures of how they should be governed and by whom. A

covert ideological battle was waged amid the glitz, glamour, thrills and spills. Even the unlikeliest of films – ones for example based on fifty-year-old plays intended for very different audiences living in an entirely contrasting context – contributed to this debate. In 1948 Alexander Korda adapted Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* for the screen and in his hands the play was transformed into an escapist period piece, set in the 'Naughty Nineties.' It was, the *Daily Herald* commented, a 'delightful flourish of the vanished past.'<sup>65</sup> Yet Korda, a friend of Churchill's, also turned the Wilde play into an indictment of Labour's restrictions and controls. The script even added a pointed jibe against taxes, with one MP calling for the reduction of income tax because it was 'crippling' industry. But for the most part it was the bright costumes that made Korda's point. Indeed, the *Daily Mirror* claimed that the movie's 'non-austerity parade of colour and fashion is worth the price of admission,' while the *Daily Mail* referred to it making a 'whacking great assault on the eye,' with Cecil Beaton's 'dazzling dresses' providing 'a spectacle for jaded housewives.'<sup>66</sup> A few saw past the Technicolor, but only to contrast Sir Robert Chiltern – the man who sold Cabinet secrets in his youth now seen as 'that rarity, an honourable politician' – with his apparently less-principled, real and contemporary counterparts.<sup>67</sup>

Films released during this key period in British history – one that promised much radical change – were more overtly political and critical than in the 1930s. But they collectively suggest that the people's war only modestly changed pre-war attitudes. Labour might have been elected in 1945 to extend the state for egalitarian ends but these films indicate that the people's relationship to political power had not substantially changed. This chapter focused on cinema because it was there that changes in how politics was presented were the most obvious, and given the size of the cinema audience, movies had greater possible consequences. However, a similar pattern can be seen in novels.

Evelyn Waugh was no friend of the kind of egalitarianism that emerged after Dunkirk – like many conservatives, he feared the war was undermining a cherished way of life. His *Put Out More Flags* (1942) showed working-class evacuees as feckless and indigent: their poverty was their own fault. Written as he recovered from injuries sustained in combat, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) showed how the war was destroying the aristocracy and giving power to the uncultured and uncouth. Waugh's political opposite was J. B. Priestley, who had also established his reputation in the 1930s. He championed the new wartime mood, urging the people to greater radicalism. Priestley was such a celebrity he even appeared in the 1944 film adaptation of his play *They Came to a City*, which outlined the choice he believed people faced: to build on the wartime experience and go forward to a new society or go back to the old ways.

In his novel *Daylight on Saturday* (1943), set in an aircraft factory during the week in which British forces defeated Rommel at El Alamein, Priestley painted a portrait of the kind of 'guilty men' he considered responsible for the disaster that befell the country in 1940. Lord Brixen was a Conservative peer who gives a pep talk to workers in their canteen. He was 'the genteel equivalent of the slick professional politician so familiar to other democracies', 'something between a second-rate administrator and a first-rate confidence trick man'. Described as wrong on every important issue and completely ignorant of what needed to be done to win the war, Brixen nonetheless manipulated his audience into believing he wanted the kind of change they desired. But all he sought was to return to how things had been in 1939.<sup>68</sup>

If Priestley criticized past politics and warned how the people might again be duped, even he could not conceive of certain things. *Daylight on Saturday* depicted women workers in largely negative, patronizing and dismissive terms.<sup>69</sup> *Three Men in New Suits*, published just weeks before the 1945 general election, showed another limitation to his imagination. The novel anticipated how demobilized soldiers and their friends and families would react to the new post-war world. However, it betrayed a certain prejudice regarding who might lead the people's peace. Of the three soldiers upon whom the novel focuses, one is a labourer and another a modest farmer's son, but it is the scion of Sir William and Lady Strete who articulates Priestley's hopes for the future. Strete even declares, with unconscious irony, that 'We don't want the same kind of men looking after our affairs', provoking one of his less well-placed former comrades-in-arms to exclaim: 'Whoa, steady on ... Yer'll either be preachin' or in Parlyment next.'<sup>70</sup>

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## Imagining the Post-War Consensus

Many now look on the two decades immediately following the end of the Second World War as marking the zenith of Britain's two-party system.<sup>1</sup> The interwar coalitions, party splits and minority governments were no more, while Labour and the Conservatives enjoyed unprecedented support. At the 1950 general election eighty-four per cent of the electorate voted and of this number ninety-seven per cent chose one or other of the two parties who claimed to have a combined total of three million members. At this point Labour and the Conservatives appeared to hold a secure place in the people's affections: as the political scientist Robert McKenzie concluded in 1955, they were 'two great monolithic structures' deeply embedded in society.<sup>2</sup> More broadly, leading social scientists believed – encouraged by many Britons' effusive reaction to the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 – that the rulers and ruled enjoyed a 'moral unity'.<sup>3</sup>

Most contemporaries also considered that the collectivist policies introduced by the 1945 Attlee government had solved Britain's interwar economic problems. Due to this perceived success, the return of Churchill to Number 10 in 1951 did not inaugurate a significant change in policy even though many Conservatives harboured suspicions of the state. Full employment and rising living standards meant there was little reason to alter course. When Prime Minister Harold Macmillan claimed in 1957 that people had 'never had it so good', so far as the vast majority was concerned, he spoke the truth. As a consequence, many historians claim there was such an unusually high level of agreement that the two party leaderships formed part of what was in effect a policy 'consensus', which lasted until the 1970s.

There was in fact a much broader and deeper consensus that underpinned this agreement on policy – one that had reigned for decades. While after 1945 the parties might still dispute the ultimate aim of politics (greater 'equality' for Labour or more 'freedom' for the Conservatives) there had long been harmony over the kind of democracy through which they pursued these aims. Indeed, both Front Benches so intently believed 'politics' to be a question of

manipulating the existing Westminster model that they rarely discussed the matter. With Nazism defeated and Soviet Communism only appealing to a few thousand Britons, there appeared to be no alternative to the Westminster way and the rule of the party politician. Some expressed their adherence to this system beneath sardonic *bon mots*, most famously Churchill, who in 1947 claimed:

No-one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.<sup>4</sup>

Churchill's comments came during a speech in which he attacked Herbert Morrison, Labour's Deputy Leader, a man who a few years later would effusively describe 'my great love and admiration for British parliamentary democracy'.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1950s the populism given voice during the Second World War appeared to have been silenced. Yet, as some politicians reluctantly appreciated, a submissive antipathy to party politics remained. Moreover, just because large numbers voted Labour or Conservative did not necessarily mean everyone looked on their prospective representatives with naïve enthusiasm. During the 1950 and 1951 campaigns only about ten per cent of voters attended public meetings, half did not read the material posted to their homes, and forty per cent could not recall ever discussing a political issue.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in the midst of the 1950 election one eyewitness touring an East London constituency 'could not discover a single remark with any bearing on the election – on the streets, outside shops, in cafes – the people were shopping and that's all'.<sup>7</sup> Even at their peak, the parties were able to claim less than ten per cent of the electorate as members, and their figures inflated reality, in Labour's case by as much as fifty per cent.<sup>8</sup> Historically, high voting figures also said more about class loyalty than political belief; one exemplary working-class East Ender explained why he supported Labour by asking 'how else is a working man to vote?'<sup>9</sup>

During this period television supplanted cinema as the people's main source of entertainment. However, while the post-war cinema liberalized its political output, the BBC remained subject to interwar codes that echoed those of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) at its most restrictive. The public funded the BBC through a compulsory licence fee, meaning that while notionally autonomous on everyday matters, the Corporation was ultimately answerable to government, which appointed its governors and set the amount the public had to pay. This meant those who first led the Corporation were keen to avoid political 'controversy' and used its radio output to actively buttress the

Westminster model and the social order that sustained it.<sup>10</sup> The BBC turned its hand to television in the late 1930s when it established a service confined to London and parts of the Home Counties. Television broadcasting resumed in 1946 and by 1952 the BBC's network of transmitters covered most of the country, although sets were so costly only 1.5 million households possessed one. At the end of the decade, however, that number had risen to 10.5 million and by then viewers could also watch programmes provided by Independent Television (ITV), which, while financed by advertising, operated under a censorship regime and held to an ethos similar to that prevailing at the BBC.

This chapter looks at fictions that took for granted or even celebrated the kind of democracy Britain enjoyed during the post-war period. If the BBC played a role here, this was also the time when the Parliamentary Novel was revived and painted a glamorized picture of Westminster. As a 1959 *Times* editorial suggested, some believed such fictions were more frivolous than those produced by Anthony Trollope and his ilk, writers who had apparently looked on politics as 'the clash of principles'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, while considerably shorter than those written by long-dead Victorians, post-war Parliamentary Novels continued the tradition of lionizing Westminster's Elysians, helping to reinforce the sense that – as Joseph Conrad had written in 1907 – the House of Commons was '*the House, par excellence*'.<sup>12</sup>

## Respect for democracy

Given his twenty years at the BBC, first as Head of Drama for radio and then television, it is ironic that a play written by Val Gielgud was responsible for what the BBC's official historian referred to as the 'biggest "dramatic storm" of the post-war years'.<sup>13</sup> While at the time BBC television was still confined to England's south-east and most of its 343,000 licences were in middle-class hands, it is still worth exploring this controversy, for it highlights what was considered acceptable for television dramas to say about politics during this period.

Gielgud wrote *Party Manners* for the stage while on a sabbatical from the Corporation.<sup>14</sup> The play was in most respects unremarkable. If Gielgud's work had a 'message', it was the by-now banal one that 'the country has had enough of party politics'. Many novels, big-screen comedies and theatrical productions had said far worse things about Britain's political system. The plot revolved around the dilemma faced by Christopher Williams, an Old Etonian and

former Labour Cabinet minister who had been appointed head of the National Atomic Board. In this role Williams is given a report outlining how atomic energy could solve Britain's economic problems. The Labour Cabinet wants him to publish this report, believing it will swing a close election decisively in its direction. However, the document also contains secrets of great interest to the Soviet Union. The Cabinet sends one of its number, a bluff former millworker who cares nothing for national security so long as Labour wins the election, to persuade Williams to do his duty to the party. But, through working at the Atomic Board, Williams has ceased to be a good party man. Exposure to scientists 'whose sole aim is the achievement of perfect mathematical accuracy, and whose standards are not adaptable to political expediency' has made him see the world differently. Indeed, at one point Williams declares: 'I'm sick of the Party machine and the Party point of view. It's about time the Party grew up ... There's more to this business of Government than just doing the other fellow in the eye!'

Along the way various characters make remarks hostile to Labour, which would have gone down well with the kind of well-heeled West End audience for whom Gielgud intended his play. There are, for example, references to the government over-taxing and over-spending and the extent to which the trade unions now run the country. One character even claims Labour is trying to make life fair by Act of Parliament, 'though you know in your hearts that life never has been fair, and never can be fair'. Perhaps because they shared such a perspective, most theatre critics did not see the play as controversial. The *Evening Standard* reported: 'There is no propaganda in this jolly affair, and Mr. Herbert Morrison need not lose sleep over it.' Indeed, the play was executed in such a light-hearted manner even the left-wing *New Statesman* viewed it as 'passable good fun' while *Tribune* considered it 'an entertaining political trifle'.<sup>15</sup>

The play was transmitted on BBC radio's Home Service in June 1950. Back as Head of Television Drama, Gielgud decided to broadcast *Party Manners* on the small screen to kick off his autumn season of dramas, on Sunday evening 1 October 1950, it having been submitted, he claimed, to all the 'authorities for routine checking'.<sup>16</sup> The performance was live and, as was usual at this time, the play was slated to be performed again the following Thursday. *Party Manners* was, though, televised at a highly sensitive time. The February 1950 general election had seen Labour's Commons majority fall from 146 to just five seats and most commentators expected Attlee would imminently call another election to try to increase his majority, which he did in October 1951. To make matters worse, the play was broadcast at the start of the week in which Labour held its annual conference.

Labour members had long suspected the BBC was hostile to the party and in the late 1940s some had monitored its output for bias.<sup>17</sup> It was perhaps not surprising that the *Daily Herald* – Labour’s official paper – published a leader the day after the play was televised, demanding it not be re-broadcast. The editorial claimed the drama ‘reeked with snobbishness’ and was thoroughly irresponsible for suggesting Labour ministers would put their party’s interests before those of the nation. A day later the *Herald* went further and argued broadcasting the play had been ‘wildly inappropriate to the BBC’s traditions of political impartiality and public responsibility’.<sup>18</sup> Indicating the extent to which the controversy was now framed by partisan considerations, the strongly Conservative *Daily Express* commented: ‘It is perhaps not surprising that many Socialists dislike the play. The cap fits certain members of the government too well.’<sup>19</sup>

Ernest, Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, chair of the BBC governors – the body meant to ensure the Corporation represented the public interest – decided the play should not be re-broadcast. Simon had been an interwar Liberal MP but in 1946 joined the Labour party and a year later was made a life peer and appointed to his BBC post. While Simon’s decision was presented in the Conservative press as reflecting his Labour bias, it was more likely dictated by his developed concern for the health of Britain’s democracy, one he shared with others in the political establishment. In 1934 Simon had, after all, established the Association for Education in Citizenship, with Stanley Baldwin’s support, fearing ‘public opinion in this country is not good enough or wise enough to make Democracy safe in the complex, dangerous and rapidly changing world of to-day’. Through education he and others hoped to induce people to realize ‘what democracy means and to believe in it more firmly’.<sup>20</sup> In 1944 the broadcaster, writer and MP Stephen King-Hall formed the Hansard Society to similarly promote a better popular understanding of Parliament. Like Simon, King-Hall was confident that the more people knew about the Westminster model the more strongly they would embrace it.<sup>21</sup> As Simon said after the *Party Manners* controversy had broken out: ‘My fundamental interest in broadcasting is its educational side and especially in these days in anything that can be done to strengthen the belief in Democracy’. In the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union he considered the BBC had a duty to ‘do what we can to maintain and strengthen democracy and the belief in democratic values’.<sup>22</sup>

Simon later claimed of *Party Manners* that ‘It was strongly represented to me by individuals of weight and judgement that it held leading British statesmen up to contempt in a way which was improper and undesirable’.<sup>23</sup> He was referring to a complaint from Ernest Whitfield, another member of the BBC Board, one



originally lodged with the BBC Director General Sir William Haley some time before the play was broadcast. Whitfield believed it subjected ministers 'to derision and contempt' and imputed 'improper behaviour and dishonourable motives to Ministers which are quite alien to Ministers of any party in the country'. He also noted that, as the politician exerting pressure on Williams was Gielgud's only proletarian character, his work implied the working class was uniquely inclined to corruption. Haley responded that 'normal people' would not think the play had any deep political significance. With Whitfield threatening to resign if *Party Manners* was restaged for television, Simon agreed the play was 'capable of being misunderstood, and it seemed to me that if that came about it could not be in the public interest'. 'Surely', he wrote, 'this is not the moment in world history to weaken public respect for Democracy by jokes of this kind ... the integrity of cabinet Ministers ... [is] vital.' Haley reluctantly decided the play should not be performed again.<sup>24</sup>

Such was the splash made by Simon's decision it was debated in the Lords with contributions broadly following, as luck would have it, party lines.<sup>25</sup> Viscount Hailsham for the Conservatives claimed Simon had betrayed his Labour bias, although his basic point was that democracy could not be defended 'by a humourless sensitivity to criticism'. Most Labour participants echoed Simon's view with Lord Strabolgi believing 'this ridiculous and pernicious play ... is a violent attack, if you like by ridicule and satire, on the institution of democracy ... on the very essence and theory of democracy itself, and Parliamentary democracy in particular.' Lord Jowitt, the Lord Chancellor, also described the play as 'offensive', 'because I think the high standard of public life in this country is very much to be praised and I do not like any attempts to decry it, either by an attack on the Labour Party or on any other Party'.

## The rebirth of the Parliamentary Novel

Written by junior members of the Westminster club, there was little danger the post-war Parliamentary Novel would give Lord Simon offence, sympathetically focusing as the genre did on the new 'Elysians' running the consensus.<sup>26</sup> Maurice Edelman and David Walder were MPs who never sat on the Front Bench, while C. P. Snow was only briefly a junior minister and William Clark was Prime Minister Anthony Eden's public relations advisor. Their novels were sold in paperback and often adapted for stage and television, frequently by Ronald Millar, who later helped Margaret Thatcher finesse her most important

speeches. Despite their party differences – Edelman and Snow were Labour men while Walder and Clark were Conservatives – they painted remarkably similar pictures. Very much like Trollope, they defined the parameters of political action as the country house weekend, Cabinet room and Commons chamber, although some added Whitehall and Washington. It was a universe dominated by Westminster over which presided wily Prime Ministers. Humble party members, let alone constituents, rarely intruded into this world and when they did it was not a good sign.

Their novels appealed to those, such as the *Times* critic, already thrilled by ‘the drama always inherent in parliamentary life’ or like the *Manchester Guardian* reviewer of the BBC television adaptation of Edelman’s 1953 novel *Who Goes Home*, convinced its Westminster setting ‘could not fail to interest’ and demanded an entire documentary series on Parliament.<sup>27</sup> As had Trollope, they purported to lift the veil that still separated politicians from the public, humanizing the country’s leaders at a time when many still did not care to do so on their own behalf and when the press just about retained a respectable distance. At the same time they heightened the sense that politics was a worthwhile, important and even glamorous pursuit. William Clark’s *Special Relationship* (1968), for example, begins with Sebastian Fleming, an ex-Cabinet minister working in the City, who thinks

though there were great compensations in being involved with business and money making, it wasn’t the real thing – compared with the manipulation of power and the manoeuvres of politics it was like white wine and soda to champagne.

Fleming wants to return as soon as possible to pull ‘the real levers of power instead of this juggling with counters in the money world’ and become Prime Minister, described by one of his political rivals as ‘the most enthralling, and the most devastating, office in this kingdom.’<sup>28</sup>

Maurice Edelman was the doyen of the Parliamentary Novel and on his death in 1975 was described as ‘one of the last of the “literary MPs”.’<sup>29</sup> First elected Labour MP for Coventry in 1945, Edelman remained on the backbenches throughout his career. A journalist by profession, *Who Goes Home* was his first Parliamentary Novel and during the 1960s he also wrote a number of similarly themed short television plays. If popular, some critics looked down on his work as ‘journeyman fictioneering’ confined within ‘a smoothly operated formula’, meaning it was ‘just the thing for undemanding deck-chairs.’<sup>30</sup> Certainly, Edelman believed, ‘the writer has a duty to divert’, which explains why he

employed more than his fair share of crowd-pleasing plot twists and cliff-hangers.<sup>31</sup> If some devices were more plausible than others, all of them had a parliamentary basis, such as the vote of censure that dominates the last part of *The Prime Minister's Daughter* (1964).

Edelman was a left-wing member of the Parliamentary Labour party who claimed he won re-election in 1959 thanks to advocating 'uncompromising Socialism with nationalisation'.<sup>32</sup> His 'duty to divert' meant, however, that his protagonists were predominantly upper-class and glamorous Tories; these are political celebrities: in *Who Goes Home*, the hero Erskine even has his fashion sense praised in *Vogue*. If Labour's trade union MPs barely featured in Edelman's stories then neither did the kind of grammar school products starting to find a place within Conservative ranks. Edelman also presumed readers wanted to know about the private lives of these elevated figures. As Manningham, the 'revered commentator' on parliamentary life in *Who Goes Home*, claimed: 'Of course the British public like to know their Prime Minister. But what they know is myth. It's the same with every politician.'<sup>33</sup> Promising to go beyond the myth, while creating some of his own, reviewers lauded Edelman's 'authenticity' and expressed their pleasure in being allowed to overhear private conversations. As one wrote of *The Prime Minister's Daughter*: 'I liked the sense of being let into those corridors and lobbies of power: it flatters.'<sup>34</sup> Quite how this critic knew Edelman was giving them a *bona fide* picture of behind-the-scenes political life is of course moot. But he definitely gave readers what they *believed* to be an authentic picture, the circle being closed when Labour MP Richard Crossman, on first becoming a minister in 1964, considered he was 'living in a Maurice Edelman novel'.<sup>35</sup>

When Edelman lifted the curtain he revealed a workable system, one underpinned by tradition and largely run by men of honour. As Melville, the protagonist of both *The Minister* (1961) and *The Prime Minister's Daughter*, says of the Commons:

it's unique in the world – there's never been anything like it before and no one can imitate it now ... You see, we have the ingredient of time. We had our revolution centuries ago, and since then we've been working with history. Parliament has somehow created itself. It has adapted itself as we've gone along ... It has lots of ordinary men and women – most of them intelligent in some way, most of them hard-working and sincerely devoted to their causes, and all of them with ordinary human strengths and weaknesses. But there's some mysterious quality about Parliament as an institution that elevates those who belong to it – certainly when they carry out their public duties.<sup>36</sup>

If there was something noble in a politician's pursuit of public duty, Edelman was at pains to underline that it came at a private cost. Indulging his readers' interest, Edelman was preoccupied by the contrast between the public and private lives of the elite. This he explored, not to expose hypocrisy, but to demonstrate how difficult it was to be a politician. As one reviewer remarked of *Who Goes Home*, it was essentially an 'exposure of the vulnerability of the public figure to private attack'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, such was the focus on the personal in *The Minister* that one critic claimed it 'hardly qualifies as political at all'.<sup>38</sup> Another asserted of *The Prime Minister's Daughter* that it was 'concerned with politics almost entirely as an arena of action where personal destinies and ambitions are fulfilled or destroyed. There is little real ideological content or conflict'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, of his 1968 BBC Two play *A Matter of Principle*, the issue of how far the press should report political secrets was said to have been obscured by the extent to which Edelman presented it as a purely private battle between a journalist and politician with whose wife the former had slept.<sup>40</sup>

Edelman's focus on the personal element in political life was deliberate. Writing about his 1970 adaptation of *The Prime Minister's Daughter* for ITV he claimed: 'A politician lives at two levels. When he's doing his job, he's on stage ... But when he's alone with his personal problems and tensions and conflicts, he shares the *common humanity of everybody else*.' Thus, he argued, his play asked:

How much and how little should – or can – children communicate with their parents? How close, without smothering them, can parents get to children? How responsible are parents for the sins of their children – and children for the sins of their parents?<sup>41</sup>

These were, for sure, not 'political' questions but they were ones with which any adult viewer might identify, and on that basis sympathize with the Prime Minister whose troubles Edelman outlined.

Politicians in Edelman's world were trapped by the very system they operated. To make this point, he often discussed a politician's face, his smile. In some hands this focus might have been used to expose hypocrisy, but Edelman uses it to suggest tragedy. In *Who Goes Home* he refers to his protagonist's 'famous smile, the Constituency Smile, the Erskine Smile ... In its absolute form it was his election photograph, the face which Erskine presented to the world'.<sup>42</sup> This mask was, though, necessary due the demands of politics, not the least of which was public expectation. During a rare heart-to-heart talk, Melville's daughter asks him why he never smiles:

‘Smile?’ Melville repeated. ‘I smile all the time. My TV smile is famous. Look!’

‘Yes,’ she said tenderly, putting her hand on his. ‘I’m looking. It isn’t a smile at all.’

‘Yes, it is,’ he said, taking both her hands. ‘It’s a real smile, but a different smile.’<sup>43</sup>

When the scene was enacted for television, viewers could see actor David Langdon subtly convey the sadness in Melville’s eyes as he performed his ‘TV smile’.

According to Edelman, politicians are caught within this mask, one they are forced to wear by the nature of their work. As a character in *Who Goes Home* observes, politics is ‘a sort of theatre, stuffed with unreality’ which means, declares another, every politician must possess

‘a double persona, the one he is to his constituents and the public, and the one he is to his pillow. The public one is the bowdlerised version. All the swear words and the dirty bits have been taken out.’

Indeed, Edelman has the novel’s wise Prime Minister state:

‘The Party system is a system of organized conscience. It’s bad for the soul, but good for the nation’

and it is a burden those who aspire to exercise power simply have to accept.<sup>44</sup>

Edelman was not alone in presenting politics as a world of appearance, one that incarcerates rather than empowers its inmates. T. S. Eliot’s 1958 play *The Elder Statesman* showed the plight of the ‘great’ Lord Claverton, who admits ‘I’ve spent my life in trying to forget myself, in trying to identify myself with the part I had chosen to play.’ Claverton found politics attractive because it required him to assume a ‘public label’ and escape his real troubled self, although it ultimately leaves him lonely and unfulfilled.<sup>45</sup> In Edelman’s account, the need for a public face is imposed on politicians whether they want it or not, leaving them in constant danger of masks slipping. In *Who Goes Home* a rising minister is brought down by a minor indiscretion – spun by the press into the appearance of scandal – because as a politician he is expected to act in a ‘seemly’ fashion.

During the mid-1960s Edelman’s Conservative counterparts David Walder and William Clark wrote four ‘political “entertainments”’.<sup>46</sup> Not being elected to the Commons until 1961, Walder was a victim of Labour’s 1966 landslide, returning in 1970, after which he briefly reached the dizzy heights of a junior whip. Never an elected official, Clark operated at a higher level, albeit briefly. Having been a journalist, he joined Eden’s staff at Number 10 in the run-up to the Suez crisis, but resigned soon after the invasion, having disagreed with the

Prime Minister's adventure. He became a journalist again, ultimately reaching a prominent position in the World Bank.

Walder's *The Short List* (1964) and *The House Party* (1966) were light satires, comic counterparts to Edelman's more serious efforts. The political world Walder depicted was comforting and in it nothing was seriously amiss. Indeed, *The House Party* indicated that, for all their differences – which were less ideological than personal – when Labour and Conservative MPs confronted a real problem they would always pull together. Walder's protagonist was an affable Oxford don who unaccountably wants to be a Conservative MP. Comedies of minor irritation, Walder's novels mapped out what one reviewer considered a 'very cosy and familiar' universe, populated by eccentrics and local party members more interested in sausage suppers and bingo than electioneering.<sup>47</sup> Even so, the *Observer's* political correspondent credited *The Short List* with giving 'the inside story' of how constituency Conservative parties selected parliamentary candidates and told readers wanting to know about the process to read it.<sup>48</sup>

Clark's *Number 10* (1966) and *Special Relationship* assumed a very different perspective, being thrillers set amid critical international events, respectively involving the developing world and the United States. Adapted for the West End in 1967 and broadcast by ITV a year later, the former was especially popular. Located in the near future, Clark denied *Number 10* was a 'cryptic account of the Suez crisis', of which he had first-hand experience. But there were too many parallels to prevent at least one reviewer noting how far the plot concerned a 'Suez-type situation'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Sir Timothy Bligh, who served as Principal Private Secretary to Eden's two immediate successors as Prime Minister, felt 'it is clearly meant to be more than a story', being, he believed, 'a sketch of how the centre of our political system reacts (*or reacted*) to a major political crisis' by someone familiar with it.<sup>50</sup> As with Edelman and Walder, reviewers therefore believed Clark was raising the hem of the curtain.<sup>51</sup> To reinforce that impression, the appearance of authenticity was considered so important for Millar's theatrical adaptation that he was given every facility by Harold Wilson's Number 10 to ensure the stage depiction of the Cabinet Room – claimed as a theatrical first – was as accurate as possible.<sup>52</sup> The producers of the television version also placed great store in reconstructing the interiors of Downing Street as correctly as they could.<sup>53</sup>

*Number 10* focused on the Cabinet's response to a newly independent African state nationalizing British-owned mines, just like Egypt had done to the Suez Canal.<sup>54</sup> As a critic of Eden's seizure of the Suez Canal, Clark favoured the position of Holden Britwell, his liberal Foreign Secretary, who wants to resolve the matter through the United Nations before Sebastian Fleming,

the hard-line Defence Secretary, wins support for his scheme to intervene militarily, aided by apartheid South Africa. Clark has his Prime Minister, Patrick Pyrton, needing to reconcile these two men, each of whom had their eyes on his job, while keeping the party united and his government on course. Clark sympathetically points out how hard Pyrton works and the extent to which, as the Premier complains, politics is a 'cursed profession'. Pyrton is a doggedly anti-heroic, unflappable figure who exerts authority with subtlety and skill. As the crisis unfolds Pyrton has to dissemble, for if he expresses his support for Britwell too early, such was the nature of the Cabinet he might end up overthrown by Fleming. Thus for much of the novel he seemingly accedes to the Cabinet's support for intervention while actually playing for time. Indeed, Pyrton is the embodiment of the saying that politics is the art of the possible, albeit one who wears homely slippers. Therefore, while he says 'policy can only be pursued when it is possible in terms of the Cabinet and the House and the poor old electorate, not to mention our allies', he can nonetheless use 'my sails and rudder to go where I want to go, using the winds of change as my servant not my master'.

Having to keep his Cabinet and party together, outside Westminster the Prime Minister also has to appease that familiar character, the irresponsible public, which

believed the Government ought to keep the world in order, and ought to keep our enemies under control. If there was any failure, any loss of prestige or power, the Government was to blame. The exercise of power, however named, was always popular – until the bills came in.

Unable to immediately pursue the course of action he thinks best, Pyrton sees himself as a 'victim of democracy'. However, thanks to skilful sailing, reason – in the form of the Foreign Secretary's approach – prevails. If *Number 10* shows what happens when a wise man is in charge of the nation's affairs, *Special Relationship* demonstrates what occurs when such a figure is absent. In the novel, the outgoing Foreign Secretary describes the world as 'a complex and dangerous place where any action should only be taken after an infinity of weighing up pro's and con's'.<sup>55</sup> But Fleming is now Prime Minister and ignores his advice, instead rushing impetuously into a new policy, one that unravels disastrously.

Failure rather than success is also the conclusion of the attempt to change the direction of defence policy undertaken by Roger Quaipe in C. P. Snow's *Corridors of Power* (1964). Snow's many novels set politics in a context that

included Oxbridge, the scientific community and the civil service, while their protagonists are mostly intellectuals-cum-civil servants. His novels were less about Parliament than the more extensive but still elevated 'corridors of power', a phrase he coined in *Homecomings* (1956). Snow's 1964 novel is his most complete Westminster work. Quaife is Conservative Secretary of State for Defence and he wants to do 'something' with his power. He is a modern politician – middle-class rather than aristocratic and able to speak the language of television, a good man who wants to do right, that being abandoning Britain's nuclear weapons. Quaife sees Britain's nuclear deterrent as an expression of the country's super-power delusion, a view with which most of the experts in the novel agree.

Much of *Corridors of Power* takes place within what Snow calls 'closed politics'. In pursuit of his objective Quaife operates in semi-secret, due to its highly sensitive nature. This was necessary because when the nuclear cat finally escapes the bag, the press distorts his argument for dispensing with Britain's nuclear strike force, while the complexities of the issue are beyond even intelligent members of the public. Snow's implication is clear: some matters are so important that even in a democracy the people are incapable of deciding them. His intentions revealed too soon, Quaife fails to convince his parliamentary colleagues and resigns, his brilliant career at an end.

Snow's might be seen as a pessimistic account of Westminster life, but he does not want readers to draw that conclusion. His view of the limitations of power means that we are instead invited to admire men like Quaife for attempting to do something positive with their influence and for coming so close to success. In Snow's bleak-and-yet-somehow-optimistic view of politics, this is the best that can be hoped for. Quaife speaks for people who are incapable of speaking for themselves while Whitehall is the repository of reason in a world in which the irrational is a force to be reckoned with.<sup>56</sup> As Quaife says of Britain's role in the world, so the same might be said of Snow's view of politics: 'Our influence ... is finite, but it exists.'<sup>57</sup>

### The comedy of reassurance

Of the BBC's 1965 television adaptation of Edelman's *The Minister*, the *Guardian* critic observed how comforting he found his 'fine, fruity blend of political intrigue, unscrupulous women and nerve-racked politicians'. 'Why this world should be so soothing and amusing to watch on the screen I don't know,' he



wrote, metaphorically scratching his head, 'but there it is.'<sup>58</sup> If the dramatic events contained in the post-war Parliamentary Novel reassured some, how much truer it must have been of those comedies that took Westminster as their subject? While humourists could be slyly subversive, during this period many also – consciously or otherwise – presented politics as a world populated by lovable eccentrics.

The feature film *William Comes to Town* (1948) was intended for a family audience, based as it was on Richmal Crompton's 'Just William' character. Faced with yet another bill for a broken windowpane, William's father complains that the Brown household (which is middle-class enough to employ a maid) is spending too much money. Brown asserts that the family must economize, just like Britain, which he claims was enduring demands for shorter hours for more pay. Warming to his theme, William's father goes on to argue that all governments were to blame for this sorry mess and that 'I could find you a monkey with more sense than the average Member of Parliament.'

Inspired by his father's outburst, William goes to Downing Street with his gang to present their demands, which include a guaranteed shilling a week in pocket money, scrambling over its garden wall and entering via open French windows. There, William meets the Minister for Economic Affairs, played by A. E. Matthews, who specialized in playing, as here, cranky but friendly upper-class figures. A journalist hears of William's adventure and the press besieges the Brown household in pursuit of a story, infuriating William's father, who blames his son for the embarrassing fuss. To placate Mr. Brown the boys seek out the minister at a funfair where he is on a 'state visit' to persuade him to smooth things over. Being a jolly fellow, the minister joins the boys on a series of rides and happily agrees to talk to Mr. Brown, and so the film concludes with the minister, William and his father all friends at the circus.

Broadcast nearly two decades later, in the year Wilson's Labour government was forced to devalue sterling, *The Whitehall Worrier* (BBC, 1967) was a situation comedy that would not have disturbed anyone with its insight into political life. Written by Alan Melville, whose *métier* was light-hearted revue, this was an old-fashioned farce about the Right Honourable Mervyn Pugh, a Labour minister, for whom, according to *Radio Times*, 'the corridors of power are strewn with so many booby traps'.<sup>59</sup> It was the sort of comedy in which one sarcastic critic expected a character to turn up and ask 'anyone for tennis?'.<sup>60</sup> Robert Coote, who, like A. E. Matthews, specialized in kindly if not especially sharp upper-class types, played Pugh, who must have been one of Wilson's poshest ministers. While gratuitous references were made to 'Harold' and other

leading figures of the day, the plots mainly revolved around the minister's dizzy wife and the ludicrous predicaments in which his family involved him. Thus, as in *William Comes to Town*, Melville presents Britain's political class in friendly terms, composed of well-meaning if not exactly efficient figures.

Written by Vince Powell and Harry Driver, who produced a number of crudely effective sitcoms during the 1960s and 1970s, *Best of Enemies* (ITV, 1968–9) was a Westminster 'odd couple' comedy in which a newly elected Labour MP is forced to share his office with a Tory old lag. As so often in comedy, Powell and Driver employed inversion, for while the Conservative rides a bicycle to work his Labour counterpart – described in the *Daily Mirror* as 'one of the new-image Socialist bright boys' – has a flash Jaguar.<sup>61</sup> Yet, if politics provided an excuse for some modest *lèse-majesté* at the MPs' expense, the jokes were barely political. In one episode, for example, the Labour man accidentally takes Harold Wilson's trademark Gannex raincoat and donates it by mistake to a jumble sale. If the Westminster setting was incidental to the humour, the series reinforced the idea that in most regards They were just like Us.

Jack Rosenthal's comedy 'Mr Ellis Versus the People', part of ITV's *Village Hall* series, was broadcast in July 1974, equidistant between the two general elections held that year. Focusing on a world-weary Presiding Officer, polling day sees his own domestic tensions resolved and his two junior assistants' romance develop, while they are occasionally disturbed by voters variously represented as forgetful, indecisive, nervous, drunk and utterly ignorant about what they are meant to be doing. The only real crisis occurs when tea is spilt over ballot papers. Rosenthal presents voting as a quaint social custom, one that involves little discussion of politics. The only partisan figures present are moreover three benign middle-aged women acting as tellers for their respective parties. Initially mutually suspicious, they come to share each other's sandwiches and agree to go to the cinema, exhibiting the kind of cosy if apolitical consensus that would have driven Margaret Thatcher, just one year away from being elected Conservative leader, wild.

'Cosy' might also describe Arthur Hopcraft's 1972 take on local politics for the *ITV Playhouse* series.<sup>62</sup> 'Buggins' Ermine' told the story of an unassuming man on the verge of becoming Labour mayor of a northern town. This is his reward for years of loyal, quiet perseverance to party and community. Recognizing that local office had limited efficacy, he humbly recognized that 'my real place in life hasn't changed ... Breadwinner, donkey, family dogsbody'. Yet local politics gave him a chance to perform some modest public service:

... let's not piss about ... I like being on the council. It gives me something to be, never mind if half the town doesn't know what a 'reference back' is. It's a place to fight in, for one thing. Important, that ... I'm that sort of bloke. And I'm glad I'm Mayor – pleased with myself. Why not? You have to stay the course if you're going to get yourself trimmed with ermine for a year. You've got to play to score. I might get a few things done ... quietly, personally. One new factory in the town – 300 more jobs. That'd be worth a year in fancy dress.

This was an affectionate drama about politics in which Hopcraft presents politicians as playing a hidden but organic part in the life of the community. Even so, it ends on a bum note, for thanks to local government reorganization this world is changing, with the mayor's modest power being appropriated by a higher authority less connected to local people.

### A woman's (and gay man's) place

The post-war Parliamentary Novel assigned women the role of loyal (or disloyal) wife, mistress and/or flirtatious society hostess: that is, someone who helps or hinders the male protagonist's career. Such characters hardly signified that women had made much progress since Trollope's time although, unusually, Miss Muriel Beddows in Edelman's *The Prime Minister's Daughter* is a Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Pensions. This is nonetheless hardly a glamorous post, and Beddows is moreover possessed of a 'virile contralto, amplified and vibrant', whose dull Commons speech is irrelevant to the important events about to unfold.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, to David Walder's eye, national Conservative politics is a man's world, although he presents women as the most poisonous of local party activists. According to his aspiring parliamentary candidate Rupert Inglis, women had at least one vital political function: 'Wives', he believed, 'were useful – canvassing, talking at women's meetings, opening bazaars, that sort of thing. They gave you an air of respectability and in the final analysis were some sort of guarantee that you weren't queer.' Women, then, had their place in this otherwise man's world, so long as they weren't, like Edelman's Beddows, too 'masculine'.<sup>64</sup>

Prime Minister Pyrton's wife in Clark's *Number 10* was certainly feminine. In Millar's television adaptation she interrupts one of his meetings to claim: 'You run the country without the benefit of women then ask the housewife for her vote then find she's against you because you've ignored her.' This was no expression of feminism, however, for Mrs. Pyrton is in all respects a typical

political wife, one who worries that her husband works too hard and dislikes his main rival, even if she claims it's because of the size of his ears. Kept out of the picture during the unfolding crisis, she is, however, a vital conduit between Pyrton and her brother, whose position at *The Times* gives him access to useful information. This role is confirmed in *Special Relationship*, in which Clark shows the extent to which leading politicians rely on their wives to supply them with the necessary income, social background and even backbone.

Thanks to her brother, Mrs. Pyrton is the means that allows the Prime Minister to find a peaceful resolution to the African crisis, as Pyrton's brother-in-law supplies him with a photograph that suggests – as one reviewer coyly put it – the Defence Minister Fleming's 'unnatural affection' for his male private secretary.<sup>65</sup> When Pyrton confronts him, Fleming agrees to resign after the Prime Minister reminds him that 'The public will believe anything that suggests corruption in high places.' In announcing Fleming's departure to journalists Pyrton employs some clunking *double entendres*, especially when he says the ex-minister's

judgment had become a little shaky just recently. It's a *queer* thing, but somehow unmarried men don't have the chance to relax and unwind that we who live more normal married lives do. I had often felt with Mr. Fleming that beneath all his *gay* wit there was an inner sense of strain.<sup>66</sup>

As the reason for Fleming's resignation remains secret, this allows him to make a comeback in *Special Relationship* and supplant the by-now ageing Pyrton as Prime Minister. This makes Fleming fiction's first gay premier.<sup>67</sup> However, the change from the wily Pyrton to the man with dyed hair who 'thoroughly enjoyed the company of young men' was not for the better, for as Pyrton had earlier suggested, there is something amiss within the 'fiery and mysterious' Fleming who Clark variously describes as 'manic' and possessed of a 'demonic drive', his sexuality betokening a deeper instability. The novel consequently does not end well for Fleming, as his adoption of a reckless foreign policy looks likely to curtail a brief if eventful premiership.

If, according to the Parliamentary Novel, women were not quite ready to directly exercise power in Westminster, others allowed them a role on their own account, in local politics. A female councillor was the protagonist of *The First Lady* (BBC, 1968–9), in which Thora Hird played Sarah Danby, who was that rare beast: an independent councillor in a northern industrial town. Some critics believed the series mainly appealed to women, for 'most of the avid viewing public is female and rarely do they have a champion', and the middle-aged

Danby was one of the few. The erstwhile Conservative MP Julian Critchley even described the series as ‘television’s equivalent of women’s magazine fiction’, by which he meant ‘the stories have the facility that dulls the senses’.<sup>68</sup>

Alan Plater, one of the team of writers responsible for the series, had wanted Danby to be a Labour councillor, which given the setting would have been more realistic. But the BBC’s imperative to appear bi-partisan prevailed. Moreover, while some viewers welcomed a character often critical of party politicians, the first season’s script editor wanted

to refute the accusation that we are discrediting politics. If it was brought into disrepute, the political climate could degenerate into something much worse than it is. But both sides must be presented ... One wants scripts that have a point of view, where the author really feels about something, but propaganda mustn’t be intrusive. Our first function, after all, is to entertain.<sup>69</sup>

In the year Parisian students brought down their President, the spirit of Lord Simon lived on. As the *Radio Times* confirmed, *The First Lady* was meant ‘to reassure us that, in a far from perfect world, all is not lost’ thanks to the likes of Sarah.<sup>70</sup>

As an actor Hird was associated with comedy more than tragedy: Danby nicely fitted her homely and no-nonsense persona. A newly widowed mother of a grown-up son, Danby contested the seat left vacant by her husband to give her life new purpose. A more modest Diana Wentworth from *The Years Between* (1944), Danby’s political career also begins with her spouse’s death. During this career she similarly applies that womanly ‘common sense’ acquired as a wife and mother; as with Wentworth her political role built on a prior domestic identity. One critic consequently described Danby as ‘a really lovely woman, honest-Yorkshire, hot-tempered, no “funny talk” and hard as old boots. She’s a real puritan with a heart of gold.’<sup>71</sup> This was certainly how viewers were meant to see her, as the producer of the second season confirmed:

Sarah’s a remarkable woman. She’s not particularly clever, nor is she sophisticated. She is frequently muddle-headed and often pig-headed. She’s sentimental and some of her arguments are ridiculously unobjective, but she’s honest: fiercely, burningly honest ... And she’s brave, indefatigable and tenacious.<sup>72</sup>

*The First Lady* highlighted controversial issues but only to show how politics could resolve them. As what the *Radio Times* described as ‘a righter of wrongs, a sort of ombudswoman’, each episode had Danby investigate and solve an eclectic number of problems associated with local government.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in the first season, episodes concerned a long-standing councillor (wrongly) accused of

corruption, the fixing of council housing lists, poor conditions in new high-rise blocks, a restaurant serving horse meat and the introduction of comprehensive education. In these disputes, Danby was the personification of compromise, literally standing between the male leaders of the Labour and Conservative groups who alternated in holding power.

The first season of *The First Lady* was broadcast during early Sunday evening, not the usual venue for hard-hitting social realism. Indeed, as one reviewer noted: 'A kind of hush falls on Sunday TV. It's the most bland, the most homogenised night of the week. Moderation is all.'<sup>74</sup> The work of many hands, with Plater's radicalism offset by BBC caution, some episodes might have justified the *Daily Mirror* critic's description of the series as 'an incredible load of balderdash'. But as the *Sun* noted, 'the scripts tread a delicate balletic path through the contending political claims – a brisk lecture on the evils of capitalism here, a few harsh words about Socialist rigidity there.'<sup>75</sup> Others in the quality press also welcomed the series, expressing gratitude that it tackled local government in a serious way, instead of presenting it as a by-word for corruption.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

When ITV broadcast *The Four Just Men* series in 1959, it marked a new stage in the development of Edgar Wallace's 1905 thriller. Originally European vigilantes whose almost super-human abilities anticipated the likes of Batman, they stood outside politics, making good its injustices. Wallace's concept was so popular, he wrote a further four related novels, which saw the group pardoned for their well-intentioned crimes and side with the rule of law. When the first novel was filmed in 1921, their antagonist was an exploitative factory owner rather than the Foreign Secretary, thereby sidestepping any objections from the BBFC about depicting the assassination of a Cabinet minister. Taking this process of domestication further, a 1939 film turned the Four Just Men into Great War veterans, intent on defending Britain from its foreign enemies. Instead of threatening the state, the Four Just Men were now its loyal servants.

The ITV series subjected the Four Just Men to a further transformation. As these thirty-nine half-hour dramas were aimed at a transatlantic audience, two were now Americans, while a third was Italian and the fourth British. Jack Hawkins, then at the height of his fame as an actor specializing in redoubtable authority figures, most notably in *The Cruel Sea* (1953), played Ben Manfred, an independent MP. Manfred was also a war hero of some means and in all

respects – other than his membership of the House of Commons – was a conventionally gallant figure, suave, upper-class, composed and not afraid of danger. Along with his cohorts Manfred tackles a variety of injustices, ones associated with criminals, foreign dictators, Communists or others who wished to subvert the *status quo*. The series certainly did not ask any awkward questions of government, as had Wallace's Edwardian novel. Manfred even uses his position as an MP to further the cause of justice, although he is rarely shown in the Chamber.

That Jack Hawkins could for millions of television viewers play an MP committed to justice indicates that at least some did not take the idea to be inherently ridiculous. Of course, the crime-fighting MP was not unique; in ten interwar detective novels Scott Egerton had saved the innocent from the noose. Such a figure was however hardly typical. But, together with the examples discussed in this chapter, Ben Manfred indicates that there was in the immediate post-war period still mileage in fictions aimed at middle-class readers and working-class television viewers that suggested *some* politicians were honorable, decent men who wanted to do the right thing. Their time was, however, drawing to a close.

## Notes

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## The Established Order Undermined

The number of novels glamorizing Westminster and expressing sympathy for its leading figures, as well as their adaptation for the stage and small screen, suggests that during the post-war period a significant number of Britons looked on politics in similar terms. Certainly, an unprecedented proportion of voters participated in general elections and belonged to the three main political parties at this time. These parties were moreover often rooted in local popular cultures. The Young Conservatives, for example, had in excess of 150,000 members, many of whom enjoyed a vibrant collective social life that encompassed sports of various kinds and even holidays to Spain.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of this most Britons' relationship with Westminster politics was hardly intimate, certainly not before 1939 nor during the 1950s, and as the latter decade gave way to the 1960s and 1970s it became increasingly distant.<sup>2</sup> Hitherto Labour and the Conservatives had found class a useful means of mobilizing support and while they continued to employ class-based appeals, the rising salience of other forms of identity meant they became less effective.<sup>3</sup> The established working- and middle-class communities in which the parties had found a niche were being transformed and replaced by the self-conscious individualism of a new kind of suburbia. Thus, by the late 1970s, the Young Conservatives – once described as the world's most successful political youth movement – had fewer than 30,000 members. At the same time, Manchester United Football Club regularly enjoyed home crowds of over 50,000.<sup>4</sup>

Other kinds of social change further transformed the terrain of established politics. The 1950s ended with a series of race riots and the new decade saw black immigration become a vital issue, one the main parties found difficult to address. This left the field open to those outside the Westminster consensus, notably former Conservative Cabinet minister Enoch Powell, who vividly warned of a multi-racial Britain flowing with 'rivers of blood'.<sup>5</sup> By the late 1960s revolutionary students also appeared to be in the vanguard of a generation in revolt, one implacably hostile to the *status quo*, leading some

Labour ministers to fear the country was descending into chaos.<sup>6</sup> Second-wave feminism also seemed to augur a new relationship between men and women, one with consequences for the home and workplace, raising issues a male-dominated Westminster did not find congenial.<sup>7</sup> Even more pressingly, the former workshop of the world was in trouble, with politicians unable to reverse signs of economic decline. Harold Wilson's Labour government was elected in 1964 promising to unleash the 'white heat' of technological change but was quickly reduced to putting an ineffectual lid on bubbling industrial discontent. Wilson was even forced to devalue sterling, an act that many took as confirming Britain's relegation from great imperial power to the sick man of Europe.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, it did not seem to matter which party was in office: none made the situation much better, and some believed party competition actually made it worse. Such a critical view was only reinforced by changes in the media. The 1963 Profumo affair, which combined sex, secrets and Soviet spies, effectively ended Harold Macmillan's premiership. It was also an early sign that journalists were ready to lift the veil on Westminster, so long as it exposed scandal.<sup>9</sup> Yet at the same time as their memberships started to collapse, the parties became ever more dependent on the same media – and television especially – to communicate with voters.

If by the 1960s most electors viewed their real politicians through the small screen, this was also the place where they mostly encountered their fictional equivalents. Given the dominance of television it was therefore significant that during this decade broadcasters started to cast many of their inhibitions aside and showed representative politics in less-than-flattering terms. Of course, political fictions had always expressed antagonism for the shortcomings of democracy, often in the hope of promoting change. But this period saw such criticism reach an unprecedented pitch and be communicated to an unrivalled number of people, while its ultimate aim – if it had one – was unclear. The picture was nonetheless mixed. The 'satire boom' and early conspiracy dramas established new tropes that would be familiar to twenty-first-century Britons. Much criticism, however, harked back to earlier times, and was in the case of that articulated by Norman Wisdom still surprisingly deferential to those exerting political authority.

### Old wine in bigger bottles

At the forefront of this process were performers and writers with Oxbridge backgrounds, who made pointed and, for the time, shocking fun of politics.

Peter Cook's impersonation of Macmillan during the highly successful revue 'Beyond the Fringe', first staged in 1960, was especially noteworthy in a production described as comprising 'satirical reflections on authority'.<sup>10</sup> Cook's rendering emphasized Macmillan's slurred speech and strongly suggested the Prime Minister was not only out of touch but also on the verge of senility.<sup>11</sup> Cook also helped finance *Private Eye* magazine, established in 1961 by a number of former public school boys who aimed to do on the page what Cook and others did on the stage.

This early 1960s 'satire boom' was evidence that the deference to authority so important to Britain's supposed 'moral unity' was breaking down, at least among some of the country's youngest and most educated citizens.<sup>12</sup> But it was not clear what purpose this satire served and whether mocking authority in general and politicians in particular was an end in itself. Certainly many of those doing the mocking had little interest in changing anything, leading some to describe them as 'Tory Anarchists'.<sup>13</sup> Michael Palin, a student at Oxford at this time and who later became a member of the Monty Python team, described himself as 'one of that cursed generation doomed to take nothing seriously'.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, while Cook's influence waned in the 1970s – he would repeat his Macmillan impersonation long after his victim had resigned from Number 10 – those he had inspired came to play an influential role. Jonathan Lynn abandoned the law, which he studied at Cambridge, in favour of the stage, believing that 'the most useful contribution I could make to society would be to ridicule [politicians] when necessary'.<sup>15</sup> Lynn would co-write *Yes, Minister* in the 1980s.

Such apparently new and radical voices merged into existing, implicitly conservative critiques, of politics established well before 1945. Continuing to publish until their deaths in the mid-1970s, the worlds of Agatha Christie and P. G. Wodehouse had ossified into a permanent 1930s in which politics was always pointless and all politicians self-important. Christie's Guy Carpenter, the prospective parliamentary candidate in *Mrs. McGinty's Dead* (1952), was, of course, 'pompous' and according to no less a judge than Hercule Poirot also 'selfish, ambitious, and a man very nice in the manner of his reputation'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed in *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955) Christie suggests that an interest in politics is somehow un-English and a sign of mental illness.<sup>17</sup> Wodehouse's view of politics was also caught in aspic. In *Jeeves in the Offing* (1960) it is inevitable that Aubrey Upjohn – that 'pompous ass' – wants to be a Conservative parliamentary candidate. Roderick Spode even reappears in *Much Obligated, Jeeves* (1971). Once seen as a stand-in for Oswald Mosley, Spode speaks on behalf of Wooster's pal Ginger Winship, who is reluctantly

standing as a Conservative to please his demanding fiancée, a plot that echoed William Douglas-Home's 1947 play *The Chiltern Hundreds*. Like Wooster, the good-natured Ginger finds electioneering repellent, while the appalling Spode is revealed as a 'silver-tongued orator' who has audiences hanging on his every word. As Wooster says, summing up the Wodehouse view of the subject, 'The great thing in life, Jeeves, if we wish to be happy and prosperous, is to miss as many political debates as possible.'<sup>18</sup> This was in effect one of the lessons readers were encouraged to draw from Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time* series of novels (1951–75), a central character of which is the ridiculous, affected and overly ambitious Kenneth Widmerpool, who inevitably ends up an MP and minister.

Not all genres established during the interwar period retained the same view of politics. Historical movies had once given the British heroic versions of their political class, but the glossy Anglo-American *Beau Brummell* (1954) showed the wind was changing direction.<sup>19</sup> It depicted William Pitt in a starkly different way from *The Young Mr. Pitt* (1942), presenting the Prime Minister as a stern figure who tries to force the Prince of Wales to sacrifice his private pleasures to public duty. Pitt is also jealous of the hero Brummell's influence, as the latter encourages the Prince to be true to himself and pursue happiness. *Brummell* raised issues associated with the emerging 'affluent' society. Its protagonist is a man of humble origins who rises up the social ladder through his own talents. No longer defined by his defence of the national interest, as he was in the wartime movie, Pitt now personifies oppressive tradition.

Instead of choosing triumphant moments from Britain's past, filmmakers also increasingly selected some of its greatest disasters. The Charge of the Light Brigade was once considered a glorious, heroic failure, but Tony Richardson's 1968 movie of that name presented it as an unmitigated catastrophe, the responsibility of an incompetent and arrogant Establishment. More pertinently, *Khartoum* (1966) has a duplicitous, cynical and what one reviewer saw as a 'candidly villainous' Gladstone attempt to maintain British 'honour' in the Sudan without giving General Gordon the resources to do it.<sup>20</sup> When the Liberal Prime Minister turns to Gordon to fulfil the impossible mission, he calculates that his appointment will be so popular that when Gordon fails the government should escape blame. If the film also shows Gordon blackmailing the Prime Minister into sending troops into the Sudan, the *Sun's* critic still saw the former – rather like Queen Victoria did at the time – as a man of principle betrayed by 'political chicanery'.<sup>21</sup>

Even the still-cautious BBC now felt able to broadcast satires that ridiculed past political figures – albeit on BBC Two on Saturday night and scheduled against the popular football highlights show *Match of the Day*. *My Father Knew Lloyd George* (1965) was, according to producer Ned Sherrin, ‘a fictional documentary film investigating an imagined scandal at the turn of the century’ in which the Prime Minister’s wife has an affair with a junior minister. Plausibly read as an elliptical comment on the Profumo affair, that writer John Bird also played Queen Victoria suggested it was not to be taken too seriously. But Sherrin – who had produced the contemporary satirical revue *That Was the Week That Was* (BBC, 1962–3) – claimed his 1965 drama had an important point, which was

that there are so many things in this sort of case which we can’t know about – that practically every history book which seeks to tell us the truth must be full of misrepresentations because so many facts have been suppressed.<sup>22</sup>

### Television censorship

Lord Simon claimed in his 1953 memoir of his time at the BBC – one he dedicated to Labour’s deputy leader Herbert Morrison – that after the fuss over *Party Manners*, no Chair of Governors would emulate his prohibition of Val Gielgud’s play.<sup>23</sup> He was wrong. Cinema increasingly tackled *risqué* themes thanks to filmmakers employing the adults-only X certificate, one of the first examples of which was the political drama *No Love for Johnnie* (1961), described by one critic as full of ‘torrid mattress capers’.<sup>24</sup> The Lord Chamberlain’s Office, before being abolished in 1968, even permitted Peter Cook’s impersonation of Macmillan to be performed on the stage. But less than two years before Cook, a BBC executive had prevented Peter Sellers giving television viewers his version of Macmillan during *The April 8th Show* (1958), provoking the comedian to vent his frustration live on air.<sup>25</sup>

Even with Hugh Carleton Greene’s more permissive regime, which began when he became BBC Director General in 1960, politics remained a tricky subject for the Corporation as well as ITV.<sup>26</sup> Yet, while some remained wedded to the idea that television should protect its millions of viewers from dramatic criticism of the political order, the scope of what could be said slowly widened. David Turner’s *Swizzlewick* began its run as a twice-weekly series on BBC One at 6.30 p.m. during August 1964. Some saw the series as the Corporation’s attempt to emulate the popularity of ITV’s most successful soap operas, *Emergency*



*Ward 10* and *Coronation Street*. It was however a strange choice to appeal to what the *Times* reviewer described as the ‘unsophisticated serial audience’, for Turner was a satirist in the tradition of Ben Jonson, a dramatist who disliked naturalism and a loud critic of conventional mores.<sup>27, 28</sup> *Swizzlewick* therefore represented a huge leap of faith for the BBC and would test the limits of Green’s liberalism.

Swizzlewick was a Midlands market town of which, the first episode’s opening commentary archly declares, ‘We are proud to say it is a democracy.’ At the heart of this democracy, though, is corruption. Mayor Augustus Bent, described by the *Radio Times* as ‘by trade a builder in a small and shady way of business’, looks on the council as his personal milch cow.<sup>29</sup> To that end, Bent seeks to build a community centre, the contracts for which will be distributed among fellow council members. Echoing the plot of *Vote for Huggett*, the centre, ostensibly created for the public benefit, is no such thing. Rather than a meeting place for Swizzlewick’s old and young, it will be run on purely commercial grounds, complete with wrestling and bingo nights. In this bleak, if familiar, vista there is moreover no Little Man to stand up to Bent: the Labour opposition is ineffectual and compromised while the young radicals outside the council are naïve and impotent.

The series alarmed many and was the subject of a *Times* leader, which conceded that local government corruption was not exactly a new subject for comedians. It nonetheless expressed dismay that at the very time when councils were becoming more socially active – by for example supporting the arts – *Swizzlewick* suggested councillors were systematically on the make.<sup>30</sup> Ostensibly, however, the main cause of the series’ downfall was its lewdness, as Bent’s corruption is sexual as well as financial.<sup>31</sup> A lascivious, middle-aged man, he takes a shine to a comely but incompetent young council employee who he engages as his secretary. When, before her interview, she asks whether she might touch Bent’s mayoral chain ‘for luck’, only the most obtuse viewer would not have realized which part of his anatomy was being referenced.

More fatally, one of Swizzlewick’s other councillors was Mrs. Smallgood, who, according to the *Radio Times*, ‘dedicates her arid life to putting down Sex whenever it rears its ugly head’. She was Turner’s rendering of Mary Whitehouse. Turner had attended the Birmingham Town Hall meeting of April 1964 that led to the creation of Whitehouse’s Clean Up TV Campaign, during which he denounced it as a threat to art.<sup>32</sup> It was therefore inevitable – and not entirely unjustifiable – Whitehouse would complain to the BBC that the series was unsuitable for an early evening family audience.<sup>33</sup>

Critical reaction to *Swizzlewick* was in any case almost universally hostile. While Peter Black of the *Daily Mail* argued it was potentially ‘the moment of breakaway into a new and funny TV serial’, his was a lone voice.<sup>34</sup> In the *Guardian* critics felt it a ‘thoroughly amateurish performance’ and marked ‘a new low in tastelessness.’<sup>35</sup> With the clouds gathering, Turner jumped before he was pushed, resigning after cuts were made to the script without his consultation.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, he assumed a post at Coventry’s Belgrade Theatre, Britain’s first civic theatre. Not all Midlands councils, it seems, were like *Swizzlewick*’s.

If *Swizzlewick* did not last partly because it was broadcast at the wrong time, the same could not be said of Dennis Potter’s *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton*. His play was scheduled to be shown on the later evening of 23 June 1965 as part of BBC One’s Wednesday Play series. It was, however, pulled just hours before transmission, officially because of unspecified production problems, although many believed the BBC was afraid it would upset MPs.<sup>37</sup> When publicizing the abortive broadcast, the *Radio Times* inadvertently put its finger on the nub of the problem, by indicating that Potter’s play ‘deals with the kind of subject which is more likely to turn up in *Gallery* and *Panorama* than in a comedy.’<sup>38</sup> Potter had written something BBC managers considered too close to reality.

Other than fearing a negative reaction from MPs, what the BBC mostly objected to – confirming that the spirit of Simon remained alive in some hearts – was Potter’s ‘dangerous’ cynicism about party politics, especially as expressed by the constituency’s Labour agent. Indeed one executive asked the author if he was ‘some kind of fascist’. Potter duly toned things down such that, he claimed, the result ‘disfigures the play in a few important ways’. In truth, however, while bemoaning the BBC drama department’s ‘lack of integrity’, the end result hardly lacked teeth.<sup>39</sup> Thus, when broadcast six months later, *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* was considered, in the *Daily Express*, as ‘one of the best irreverent digs at the current political scene ever seen on the usually over-timid box.’<sup>40</sup>

Sensitivities about how politics should be depicted on the small screen were not confined to the BBC. In January 1969 ITV broadcast the stage version of *Private Eye*’s ‘Mrs. Wilson’s Diary’ column, which purported to be an account of life in Number 10 written by the Prime Minister’s unassuming spouse. Part of London Weekend Television’s (LWT) commitment to show ‘culture’ on Saturday nights, this musical comedy had opened in September 1967 at Stratford East, the theatre run by the left-wing impresario Joan Littlewood, where it broke box office records until transferring to the West End.<sup>41</sup> The move had been delayed by the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, which took six months to approve the script, after requiring what were described as ‘very savage cuts’. The Lord Chamberlain

did not, however, object to the play mocking politicians still in office and very much alive.<sup>42</sup> Due for broadcast in November 1968, the Independent Television Authority, which regulated output on the commercial channel, showed that it was more severe about such matters. Authority members disliked references to the Labour Deputy Leader George Brown's excessive drinking, in particular a song in which he delivers the line 'Give me that rum back, I'm making a come-back', which they wanted excised. LWT refused to show the play under such circumstances.<sup>43</sup> Some cuts were nonetheless made and the play transmitted. Yet, even the *Daily Telegraph* critic thought 'it is more jape than jibe, schoolboy fun at the expense of well-known political personalities'. As George Melly claimed, 'If it had real edge, it would never have been shown,' while authors Richard Ingrams and John Wells admitted they had written more of an affectionate lampoon than a biting satire.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, they did mock Wilson's obsession with the media and his craven desire to keep on friendly relations with the Americans, the latter of which goes badly awry when President Johnson orders his bombers to attack London.

### Pop goes political

*Just for Fun* (1963) was a movie meant for teenagers, a vehicle for pop stars to reprise their hits. It was a superficially new kind of film for an indisputably new kind of audience, but despite any novelties, the way in which the film framed politics was as old as the hills.<sup>45</sup> Between the songs, the plot pitched music-obsessed teenagers against the 'Right' and 'Left' parties whose leaderships comprised a pop-hating consensus. The film starts with a Macmillan-esque Right Party Prime Minister giving teenagers the vote while at the same time rather unwisely curtailing how much pop music could be performed on television. The teenagers organize a petition in protest and while the Left Party appears sympathetic it is secretly as hostile to pop as the Right. Denied representation by these killjoys, the youngsters form a Teenage Party and stand on an election platform of 'Fun', with real pop stars and disc jockeys – including The Spotnicks, Alan 'Fluff' Freeman and Jimmy Savile – becoming candidates. Despite the combined opposition and dirty tricks of the two adult parties, the Teenagers win power, albeit with dire consequences: at the conclusion of the film Britain is depicted collapsing into the sea.

If the film did not take itself too seriously it nonetheless showed politicians as antipathetic to, out of touch with and ultimately less powerful than

popular culture. This was not in itself new. Rudyard Kipling's 1913 short story 'The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat' ended with Commons business suspended thanks to the Chamber singing a music hall song ridiculing an especially pompous MP. That politicians opposed almost anything that gave people pleasure was furthermore a cliché assiduously mined by Christie and Wodehouse among many others. Moreover, other films had already shown that when youth culture and the political class came to blows it was the latter that came off the worst. In the original four-strong *St. Trinian's* series, which ran from 1954 to 1966, the girl boarders of an infamously disreputable school – who mixed precocious teenage sexuality and pre-teen anarchy – reduced Whitehall civil servants and their ministerial masters to nervous wrecks, their formal authority exposed as practical impotence.

Angus McGill's satire of local politics in the industrial north east, *Yea Yea Yea*, was published in the same year as *Just for Fun* was released and tackled similar themes. Bury, a lazy Conservative MP, owns the local paper, which only publishes his propaganda, while claiming that 'a properly informed electorate is essential to the safety of democracy'. The council – composed of uniformly small-minded and ridiculous figures who bicker about irrelevant matters – is, however, Labour-controlled and led by Corcoran, who models himself on Mussolini. The parties consequently dispute which of them should be credited for building the town's new council houses, even though they are cramped and insubstantial brick boxes.

Bringing their conflict to a head, Bury and Corcoran oppose each other during a general election, but their campaigns leave voters cold. The election only takes fire when both vote against local boy Jimmy Heron in a talent contest and in favour of a homely girl who sings 'Bless This House'. Heron's is a terrible pop song, mostly consisting of the lyrics 'Yea, yea, yea', but in rejecting him the politicians show themselves out of step with popular culture. Looking for someone who truly represents them, the voters turn to the aptly named Julia Ryot, a fading starlet and *bon viveur* whose main virtue is that she gave Heron top marks. Deciding to stand as a Liberal, the town marches in her support, chanting 'Yea, yea, yea' all the way to the polling station.

### Little man, little woman

A bridge between new and old, McGill's novel was freely adapted for the movie *Press for Time* (1966), described by one critic as consisting of 'a lot of simple

knockabout, and half an ounce of satire.<sup>46</sup> The film was a vehicle for comedian Norman Wisdom, an omnipresent figure in the post-war period, who inherited George Formby's mantle as the Little Man of British cinema. As with Formby, Wisdom's films were formulaic, popular – and critically disregarded. *Man of the Moment* (1955) was fairly typical of the series, with Wisdom playing a Whitehall tea-boy who accidentally becomes Britain's delegate at a crucial international conference. Through misadventure, he plays the key role in negotiations, thereby turning the tables on those mandarins and ministers who had once patronized him. Much of Wisdom's humour derived from slapstick, usually as a result of his character desperately trying to please authority figures, instead of which he inadvertently creates mayhem and makes them look ridiculous. As a representative of the audience, Wisdom brings the officious 'Them' down to the level of 'Us'.<sup>47</sup> Yet, while audiences might have laughed as he poured hot tea over haughty men, Wisdom was a deferential Little Man: he merely wanted to find a place within the *status quo*, not to overturn it.

*Press for Time* was in fact one of a number of conservative fictional interventions produced during this period. While these suggested that something was wrong with politics, once their antagonists had exposed the issue, they withdraw in the hope the political class will respond. Co-written by its star, *Press for Time* was in most respects an archetypal Wisdom movie. Playing fast and loose with McGill's novel, Wisdom portrays the estranged grandson of a doddering Conservative Prime Minister, not a million miles from Macmillan, who harks back to the 'good old days'. Norman is happy selling newspapers outside Westminster tube station, but his lowly occupation embarrasses the Prime Minister. He consequently packs him off to become a reporter on a seaside town newspaper owned by one of his smoothly ambitious backbenchers. Wisdom, of course, brings havoc wherever he goes, in particular reducing a council meeting to utter chaos. He also attends the ceremonial opening of the thousandth new council house on the 'Keir Hardy' [sic] estate. As in the novel, both parties claim credit for this achievement, the hollowness of which is demonstrated when the house in question collapses.

As in the novel, a general election intervenes, in the midst of which in the film version a beauty contest is held. Thanks to Wisdom the competition descends into anarchy and it is during this mayhem the movie takes a serious turn, in a scene that has no equivalent in McGill's novel. Wisdom confronts the squabbling Conservative MP and Labour council leader to ask:

Don't you two ever think of anybody but yourselves? I mean, you're both intelligent men. I wish I had your brains ... [But] All you do is bicker at each other

... As I see it, you two are like captains of a people's ship of life. And they rely on you two to steer them on a safe course. But because of your own selfishness, you keep taking them into storms with big waves. And if you and all the other politicians and the leaders of the world don't work together, you know, one of these days you're going to drown all the people.

What started as a private conversation is accidentally relayed by microphone to the audience, who applaud Norman's sentiment. His having touched a nerve, the two politicians have a conciliatory drink, the implied basis for transcending the party divide. Wisdom was off-screen a man of conservative views and the speech was not meant to challenge the authority of politicians.<sup>48</sup> Yet the symbolism of the collapsing council house suggests that unless they put partisanship to one side Britain will be in trouble. Wisdom is still, though, expecting the politicians to act, not for the people to take action themselves. Thus, having delivered his uniquely coherent speech, Norman is soon gripped by his usual embarrassment and quickly vacates the stage.

A character of even longer standing than Wisdom's screen persona also intervened in politics at this time. John Creasey's the Toff was an aristocratic crime fighter with the common touch who first made his appearance in 1938: *Vote for the Toff* (1971) was the fifty-fifth novel of the series.<sup>49</sup> Creasey was not only ridiculously prolific but had been a Liberal parliamentary candidate in 1950. He subsequently formed the All Party Alliance, which during the 1960s supported the creation of industrial councils to help promote harmony at the workplace and hoped to attract the best people irrespective of party to its cause.<sup>50</sup> Creasey's novel propounded a view similar to Wisdom's: with Britain in decline, partisanship should be put to one side.<sup>51</sup>

After the death of a Conservative MP, the Toff is asked to stand for the party in the ensuing by-election. Despite his elevated background, he feels he can't be a Conservative because many of his East End friends are Labour supporters. Not having considered politics as a career before, the Toff ponders the matter. Britain is a divided country, he believes, and 'unless we become a united one we can't compete with other nations'. Thus, he declares:

It is time the politicians, the parties and the people found a way of pulling together ... I believe the British people have qualities just as great as in the past, but the political system in the country brings out the worst in them instead of the best.

The need for a coalition, just as in the Second World War, becomes the basis for his National Unity campaign and while he narrowly fails to win, it is clear the

Toff's intervention has forever changed politics. As in Wisdom's film, however, it is up to the party politicians to respond.

Mrs. Harris was a no-nonsense Cockney charlady who featured in four Paul Gallico novels, the third of which was *Mrs. Harris MP* (1965).<sup>52</sup> Gallico, an American sometime resident in Britain, presented Harris as antagonistic to all parties, believing that every problem could be solved by the application of 'some common sense and good-will'. However, she knows nothing about how Parliament works 'beyond her feeling that all politicians were worth not very much.' Despite this, she somehow becomes the 'voice of the millions of the faceless about whom nobody gave a damn.' Hoping to exploit her popularity, the Centre Party adopts Harris as a candidate and she is elected to Parliament, but instead of taking the institution by storm, it perplexes her, for she becomes lost in

what seemed to be miles of shadowy corridors of Westminster Palace with hundreds of rooms opening off from them, innumerable staircases, the musty smell of age, the bustle, the noise, the shuffling of feet, the greetings and congratulations exchanged between old friends and veteran members who had been returned.

Despite her initial scepticism, Harris is overcome with awe for the history of the place.

For here at last she found herself close to and a part of a mystery which up to then had been contemplated only from afar. She was now brought into immediate contact with the difference between a faceless, placeless Government that one knew only as 'they', or 'them', and an active, vital body consisting of hundreds of men and not a few women milling about, the great majority of them as familiar with this warren as with their own homes. The very dynamism of it was shaking.

Realizing the depths of her ignorance, Mrs. Harris brings her parliamentary career to an abrupt end. 'There's a lot of difference between 'aving ideas rattling around your 'ead', she admits, 'and thinking you can run things better than others, and getting down to it when the time comes.'

Yet the newly respectful Harris still has an impact. In her farewell Commons speech, heard by many MPs, she 'succeeded in arousing a feeling of discomfort and in several of them a lingering nostalgia, as it were, for a Utopia lost' as 'she had forced some of them to a sudden glimpse of their own, long dormant and encrusted, early ideals and enthusiasms with which they had come to the House'. Like her male counterparts, Mrs. Harris had made the political class appreciate

where they had gone wrong: they now had to address the matter before it was too late.

## The power of image

The problematic political role of the press was an issue as venerable as Dickens. Given its new prominence, and presumed power, during the 1960s, television naturally became a matter of increasing interest for those writing about politics.

In 1962 the BBC broadcast a play that depicted television as helping to sustain a politician's lies. Had the author not been Terence Rattigan, by then a prestigious theatrical figure doing the Corporation a favour by writing for the medium, it is questionable whether the play would have been broadcast, as Rattigan's plot was more subversive as anything young Dennis Potter would write. Rattigan's central character was a heavy-drinking interviewer with a show strikingly similar to the BBC series *Face to Face* (1959–62), so similar its host John Freeman later received a public apology.<sup>53</sup> Rattigan was famous for claiming that character and narrative was all that mattered in drama, but as *The Winslow Boy* (1946) proved, he didn't always practise what he preached.<sup>54</sup> Thus, while the interviewer David Mann and Cabinet minister Sir Stanley Johnson were believed to be respectively versions of Rattigan and his father, *Heart to Heart* also explored the relationship between politics and television.<sup>55</sup>

Rattigan questioned the extent to which, even in the form of a series dedicated to revealing 'the real truth, the truth of the heart', television could do more than reinforce a politician's chosen public image. Mann has evidence that Johnson – 'Honest Stan', a bluff northerner with a strong line in moral probity – took a bribe while holidaying in the South of France with his mistress. Indicating the closeness of politics and the media, Johnson is a friend of the Controller of Programmes, who tries to blackmail Mann into giving the minister an easy ride. Fearing imminent exposure, Johnson hijacks the interview and, face straight to camera, looking direct at the viewer, defends himself in a way that draws parallels with how Richard Nixon dealt with accusations of financial impropriety while running for US Vice President in 1952. Instead of using a dog called Checkers to win over viewers, Johnson claims he is only guilty of loving cats and of taking his wife abroad to help her recover from the death of their favorite feline. Johnson's act as the candid politician works, the viewers are convinced and his career is saved.

Rattigan not only suggests that those running television are part of an Old Boy network which protects politicians from scrutiny but also that politicians



have the skills to manipulate the new medium. Originally intending that Johnson be destroyed by his trial-by-television, the *Daily Express* critic for one was glad Rattigan changed his mind, as this would have detracted from what he took to be the drama's moral: 'That men of sufficient wit and power can and do slip off the hook, escape the punishment they deserve and go on living among us.' He believed the play 'urges us all to do our democratic duty of suspecting our leaders, questioning their motives and resisting the smooth claims of all persuaders who seek to sell us peace or war'.<sup>56</sup>

Not everybody took the play to heart in that way. Echoing the Victorian critic who considered Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* incredible because corruption was something in which Westminster politicians did not indulge, the *Evening Standard* reviewer patriotically considered that while Nixon might have got away with such a ruse it would never work in Britain. The British media he believed could still hold politicians to account.<sup>57</sup> This, at least, is what happened on more than one occasion in the ITV series *Gazette* (1968), about a local paper in Yorkshire run by a virtuous owner and edited by a journalist of the highest ethics.

The prevailing view, however, was increasingly that the media was the tool not of truth-seekers but of power-seekers: this was certainly the argument of the 1970 movie *The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer*.<sup>58</sup> Rimmer, played by Peter Cook, is a man who comes from nowhere and uses the techniques of opinion polling, advertising and television to promote himself, first becoming a Conservative MP, then Chancellor, Prime Minister and finally President of the United Kingdom. Written by John Cleese and Graham Chapman, one-third of the Monty Python team, alongside director Kevin Billington and Cook, *Rimmer* questioned the authenticity of modern politics and posits, like Rattigan, the extent to which image had replaced reality. The basis for Rimmer's power is his ability to manipulate and even create public opinion. His success in advertising means the two party leaders – close approximations of Harold Wilson and Edward Heath – seek his services. Indicating their basic similarity, Rimmer for a time is employed by both to improve their images, but – thinking the Labour government is finished – he concentrates on helping the Conservatives, as they offer him better opportunities for advancement.

The film consequently proposes that public relations has merged into politics, that image is everything and substance nothing. Rimmer the empty vessel is the ideal politician, for he has the skills and desire to become whatever the public wants him to be. The confluence of image and politics was not quite virgin territory. Ten years before, in *No Love for Johnnie* a photographer tells the ambitious Labour politician Johnnie Byrne he could have a successful career

playing a 'middle-aged man of the world' for the camera. In a way, Byrne was already playing a role that best served his desire to rise up the greasy pole. But Rimmer takes the relationship much further. Realizing he needs a wife if he is to become an MP, Rimmer commissions a poll to discover the public's favourite woman. Forced to woo their second choice, as the Queen is taken, the result is a marriage, which, like his politics, is all appearance: as Rimmer is an empty image he is therefore, the film suggests, the perfect politician.

## Conspiracies

While this period saw a lot of apparently new wine being poured into old dramatic bottles, one truly innovative genre did emerge, which suggested that relations between people and politicians were being radically re-imagined. Belief in conspiracies was supposedly something inherent to American political culture: certainly during the 1950s many in the United States believed that key government officials were Communist agents.<sup>59</sup> The British were, however, meant to be more trusting of those who exercised power on their behalf.

Yet, if Cold War paranoia was less evident in Britain, the Boulting Brothers' movie *High Treason* (1951) still depicted members of the British Communist party following orders from Moscow to undermine national security. There was also a variety of novels – most notably Constantine Fitzgibbon's *When the Kissing had to Stop* (1960) – that took seriously the possibility of a Soviet invasion. In fact, so popular was Fitzgibbon's novel, in 1962 ITV broadcast a two-and-half-hour adaptation. Such fictions invariably posited that even the all-powerful Soviet Union needed some assistance from traitors on the left. Thus, George Shipway's *The Chilian Club* (1971) told the story of retired senior army officers who save Britain from falling into the Soviet embrace by assassinating union militants, black radicals, trendy bishops, BBC executives and student leaders. Even the Prime Minister has to be eliminated, as he wants to sell a decisive military secret to the Russians. Their laudable vigilantism having prepared the ground for a government of a pronouncedly fascist character, the gentlemen contentedly return to their club.

Fictional conspiracies originating from within government rather than an outside force were, however, rare. Mistrust of authority in general was nonetheless expressed in various 1960s spy dramas, such as the movies *The Ipcress File* (1965) and *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1965) as well as the surreal ITV series *The Prisoner* (1967). If the Bond movie series (1962–present)

suggested audiences should trust Britain's intelligence services to protect them from any external threat, these dramas signified the manipulative, double-dealing nature of government officials. They did not, though, show Britain's intelligence services intervening in domestic politics: the duplicity on show was confined to the claustrophobic world of the spies themselves.

Conspiracies were common in science fiction, a genre with a well-established record for tackling tricky subjects if only because, like comedy, it could be dismissed as irrelevant to real contemporary debate. This was certainly the case with Nigel Kneale's BBC television series featuring the scientist Professor Bernard Quatermass, which ran intermittently from 1953 to 1959. Kneale had also adapted George Orwell's *1984* (1949) for the BBC in 1954.<sup>60</sup> Orwell's novel, which imagined a Britain controlled by IngSoc, a party claiming to represent the people while it oppressed them, set the template for many subsequent fictional conspiracies. A critical supporter of the 1945 Labour government and a committed opponent of the Soviet Union, Orwell's novel parodied aspects of both. It was not, however, a specific comment on Attlee's extension of the state, although those on the right saw it as evidence that Orwell feared Labour threatened freedom. The author's attempts to clarify his intentions made little impression on readers determined to hold to their own interpretation of his novel.<sup>61</sup>

Kneale's Quatermass was a man of science, the embodiment of reason, which meant he often confronted Whitehall bureaucrats and politicians because they were uninterested in the truth, being lost in procedure, afraid of frightening the public or in possession of their own dark motives. H. G. Wells in a variety of earlier novels had promulgated the superiority of science over politics, and this remained a popular view in the 1950s. It was even articulated in Gielgud's otherwise flippant *Party Manners*, in which an ex-Labour Cabinet minister declaims:

We can't afford generous emotions, good intentions, loosely-phrased promises, windy speechifying, any longer in politics. What we need is the assembly of scientific facts, and their truthful and accurate presentation to the people. To govern in present-day conditions you need technical accomplishment, not amiable amateurism.<sup>62</sup>

*Quatermass II* was broadcast in 1955, and as the continuity announcer warned viewers, it was not for children or those 'of a nervous disposition', but was popular enough for Hammer to have Kneale adapt the series for a 1957 big-screen version. Kneale's drama anticipated Hollywood's *The Invasion of the*

*Body Snatchers* (1956), but while that was an allegory about Communists taking over American society, *Quatermass II* focused on dangers posed by clandestine government power.<sup>63</sup> Kneale had been inspired by fears over the purpose of secret Ministry of Defence research establishments, such as Porton Down. He had also been influenced by his work on *1984*, which took the Quatermass series in a more paranoid direction than in its first outing and exploited the prevailing sense that, according to Kneale, 'there were dark forces around'.<sup>64</sup>

The series concerned an illicit government establishment protected by 'a conspiracy of silence'. On being told the facility is secret, in the movie Quatermass says: "Secret?" You put a label like that on anything and law and order goes out the window.' This pointed to the real issues involved, something the *Manchester Guardian* critic noted, calling the movie 'an interesting and subversive piece of science fiction' for the way it 'tapped the ordinary man's subconscious doubts about what might happen if something went wrong behind the high and inscrutable walls of security'.<sup>65</sup> It is a wall that the people's elected representatives cannot penetrate. When a backbench MP tries to find out what is going on, he is neutralized. It is left to Quatermass to uncover the awful truth, which is that aliens have taken over the bodies of leading government officials, including the Prime Minister, and under the cover of state security have built a feeding station in preparation for an invasion of Earth. The government is, therefore, working against the people – but at the last minute Quatermass, a campaigning journalist and a group of workers manage to save the day.

As the 1960s progressed, authors working within the science fiction or futuristic fantasy genres continued to employ conspiracy as a narrative device. Government secrecy was the theme of *The Damned*, directed by Joseph Losey, who came to Britain hoping to escape the Red Scare McCarthyism of his native United States. Distributors reluctantly released Losey's film in 1963 after a two-year delay, with no press screenings and as the second half of a down-market horror double bill.<sup>66</sup> With the Cold War at its height, had it been presented as a serious film, *The Damned* would have been highly controversial, involving as it did a covert military establishment raising children capable of withstanding a widely expected nuclear war. Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) focuses on Alex, a teenage gang member who becomes the subject of an illicit government attempt to eradicate youth violence by turning him into 'something other than a human being ... a little machine capable only of good' – a clockwork orange.<sup>67</sup> While the experiment fails, had it succeeded the project would have created the basis for totalitarian rule. An episode of *The Prisoner* even features an election in the Village – the series' fictional setting – in which

ex-spy Number 6 is incarcerated.<sup>68</sup> This brings out the futility of such contests, as the authorities need elections to integrate those like Number 6, who are 'militant and individualistic'. When Number 6 sees through the device, he is drugged so that he becomes the ideal candidate, able to only mouth platitudes, and if he does not say the right thing the press invents quotes suitable for publication.

Peter Watkins' *Privilege* (1967) was the only film to posit a domestic political conspiracy at this time. Watkins was a radical writer-director whose dramatized television documentary *The Wargame* (1965) showed in disturbing detail how Britons would suffer in the event of a nuclear attack. The BBC, under some government pressure, refused to show it for fear it would demoralize viewers, something that precipitated Watkins' move into the freer world of cinema.<sup>69</sup> *Privilege* also assumed the documentary style, but was in other respects very different from *The Wargame*, being a satire set in the near future, which mooted a plot between the media, business, the church and a coalition government threatened by anarchy and communism. Using a pop star to control the minds of the young, the government deploys the singer to mobilize support for a fascist-style campaign of national unity. British critics found *Privilege* risibly unrealistic: the *Guardian* considered it 'false and contrived'. American reviewers, however, accepted its presentation of a manipulative Establishment; indeed the *New York Times* critic thought it 'brilliantly credible'.<sup>70</sup>

## The fascist threat

As industrial discontent intensified and popular hostility to black immigration became ever more apparent, an increasing number of fictions depicted a Britain under threat from the authoritarian, usually racist, right. One of the first to tackle this theme, Gillian Freeman's *The Leader* (1965) presented its aspirant Nazi leader as a seedy asthmatic mother's boy only able to attract adolescents and layabouts. Robert Muller's *The Lost Diaries of Albert Smith* (1965), republished two years later as *After all, this is England*, posited a more successful assault on democracy. Echoing how the Nazis took power in Germany, the novel is written from the perspective of Albert Smith, a lower-middle-class figure who holds many conventional conservative attitudes, such as a belief in the need for discipline, dislike of ethnic groups and nostalgia for empire. Muller shows that even those who, like Smith, embrace fascism find themselves in death camps along with those trade unionists, Jews and blacks they so despise. Like Robin Cook's *A State of Denmark* (1970), the novel warns readers how easily

democracy will be destroyed if the far right is not opposed before it becomes irresistible. The institutions of democracy are shown to be fragile and the people easily persuaded of the merits of authoritarianism.

Such novels played it safe by looking to the future. Arthur Wise took the controversial step in *Who Killed Enoch Powell?* (1970) by depicting the assassination of the man some feared would lead an imminent assault on democracy. Indeed, during the 1970 general election, the Labour Cabinet minister Tony Benn compared Powell's views on black immigration with those held by the Nazis of the Jews.<sup>71</sup> In Wise's novel Powell's killing provokes a series of riots between supporters and opponents, one that further weakens an already insipid government and leads to a narrowly averted right-wing coup.

The fascist threat was normally left to novelists: television tended to fight shy of depicting it. Even so, in 1969 BBC Two broadcast a short play '*... And Was Invited to Form a Government*', set some time in the future, with a coalition government crumbling, the country at a standstill and the newly formed National Party thirsting for power. More substantively, ITV broadcast the thirteen-part series *The Guardians* on Saturday evenings during 1971. This, according to its producer Andrew Brown, asked: 'Is democracy the best form of government? Or is there an alternative? How many threats to their freedom will the British people accept? When will they begin to resist?'<sup>72</sup> In fact, due to the sensitivity of its themes, the series was not shown in strife-torn Northern Ireland.

*The Guardians* was set in the 1980s, a time when democracy has been overthrown by the military. According to a government broadcast, the 'professional politicians' – Wilson, Heath and Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe are shown on the screen – had failed the nation. Unable to deal with a general strike, they were replaced by a Cabinet of technocrats drawn from outside politics. A New Party was then created and confirmed in power through a stage-managed election. Parliament as a consequence has become a rubber stamp, the old parties abolished and the Queen living overseas. Behind the scenes, 'the General' runs the show through the Cabinet Secretary, a civil servant obsessively dedicated to 'efficiency' and willing to follow whoever promises to deliver it. The new regime was certainly economically efficient, having solved all the problems with which viewers in 1971 would have been familiar: the country's balance of payments was in the black, inflation was down and productivity up. The government also regulated prices and incomes and adopted a fair wages policy while it had increased welfare benefits. It had even introduced measures to protect the environment. Indeed, such was the progressive nature of its reforms, the Americans were said to see the government as dangerously left-wing.

Britain is, however, a police state. During the series, the influence of Sir Timothy Hobson, the Prime Minister, increases, but if he looks towards political liberalization, he does not want to go back to democracy. A successful businessman until called to office, he is decent and principled. Yet to Hobson's eyes the post-war decades had brought confusion and trivialization, permissiveness, sexual freedom, crime and strikes. He therefore seeks to run the country on the people's behalf because he believes they do not know what is best for them. In this way, the series analyzed the merits of democracy and its alternatives with remarkable nuance. If Hobson's paternalistic regime was flawed, its opponents were hardly moral arbiters. *The Guardians* consequently ends on an appropriately ambiguous tone. Hobson's son, once a critic of the government, comes to see its virtues, agreeing with his father that the people need guidance. On Sir Timothy's death he becomes Prime Minister and continues his father's work.

### The feminine threat

The 1966 general election saw the election of just twenty-six women to the Commons, representing but 4.1 per cent of MPs. Given this position, it is not surprising that during this period even dramas that critiqued party politics from a radical perspective usually assigned women marginal roles, with *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* presenting working-class women as comically ignorant about politics. Yet the 1960s saw a new wave of feminists demand greater equality, notably in pay, something the Labour government reluctantly conceded in 1970. The revival of feminism provoked a few to imagine what it might be like should women take political control of the nation. If Pamela Kettle's *Day of the Women* (1969) and Walter Harris' *The Mistress of Downing Street* (1972) were at all representative, however, women had a long way to go before they were to be taken seriously.

Kettle's novel was described on its jacket as 'an almost Orwellian vision of the future'. A 'feminist elite' forms Impulse, an all-woman party that wins office in 1974. Impulse begins as an organization ostensibly to help young mothers enter the job market by assisting them with childcare. This was a real issue in 1960s Britain: while ministers and employers encouraged women to enter the labour force, they gave them little help to reconcile work with their domestic responsibilities. Impulse, however, had more sinister motives, for its real object was to make sure every constituency contained at least one crèche and every

crèche possessed an outstanding leader who would double as a future parliamentary candidate.

Employing sophisticated public relations techniques, Impulse presents an image which obscures the fact that its members are 'like the suffragettes with jack-boots and spurs'.<sup>73</sup> The failure of male-led politics has in any case created a disillusioned electorate, allowing Impulse to win votes from men and women. In office, the all-woman government introduces various modest reforms that many women in the 1960s would have welcomed, such as assessing wives as individuals for tax purposes. As a result women start to take politics more seriously and discuss government policy rather than gossip about trivia. Moreover, as it becomes entrenched in power, Impulse reveals its radical feminist agenda by introducing single-sex schools and discouraging marriage. It becomes apparent that the party aims to put men into servitude. At this point Eve, Kettle's naïve young protagonist, turns against the movement, arguing that biology dictates that men and women can never be truly equal, for man's role is to master the environment while women's is to help populate it. Despite her change of heart, the novel ends with Impulse set to create a feminist police state.

If *Day of the Women* was meant to be a serious imagining of female rule, Walter Harris' *The Mistress of Downing Street* (1972) was ostensibly a comic novel, replete with the first outwardly gay, lilac toga-wearing, Home Secretary and an over-sexed, and inevitably well-endowed, black American President. The novel's heroine is Viola Jones, the beautiful twenty-five-year-old widow of the Prime Minister, who the Cabinet decides should succeed her husband. As one minister states, given the government is now impotent, a woman might as well be in charge. Government is powerless because Britain and the United States are under the thumb of Janus Thudd, an international computing entrepreneur and (conveniently enough for him) robot master. In a pointed comment on the nature of the Special Relationship, Viola becomes the President's mistress, figuring the affair might help her better advance British interests. Anticipating what many said of Margaret Thatcher, Britain's real first female Prime Minister, Viola also shows that she is more of a man than her Cabinet colleagues, for it is she who leads the fight against Thudd.

## Conclusion

Despite misgivings, the BBC broadcast Dennis Potter's *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* in December 1965. Potter had become a Labour party member



at Oxford, although he recalled that 'I always kept one foot outside the circle.'<sup>74</sup> He was on the left of the party and criticized Hugh Gaitskell's cautious 1959 general election strategy, which he described as appealing to voters' 'stupidity and general selfishness'. Gaitskell, he complained, avoided addressing any of the awkward problems faced by Britain as it entered the 1960s.<sup>75</sup> Potter wanted to become an MP so he could help solve some of those problems, which is how he came to stand, at not quite thirty, as Labour candidate for East Hertfordshire in the 1964 election. The seat was safely Conservative, but like all aspiring MPs, Potter had to start somewhere. His campaign, however, proved to be an epiphany, which forever cured him of his parliamentary ambitions. Indeed, so disillusioned with party politics did he become, Potter did not even vote. Also experiencing an acute form of psoriasis, he claimed, 'I felt a kind of entropy of the emotions,' and recreated himself as a dramatist.

*Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* was one of the first products of Potter's new vocation and showed viewers what it felt like to be a principled parliamentary candidate. Clearly semi-autobiographical, it reveals how Barton loses his idealism under the weight of his agent's insistence that he should just smile his way through the campaign, get his hair cut and appeal to 'floating' voters. Working for a constituency Labour party whose chair is racist and most of whose women activists prefer gossip to debating policy, this is a traumatic experience for Barton. Indeed, after confronting only hostility, apathy and ignorance while canvassing he is physically sick.

The agent – whose dark pessimism had earlier caused Potter so much trouble with BBC executives – unexpectedly empathizes with Barton's predicament. His own cynicism, it becomes apparent, is but a shell to protect this covert idealist from the pain of perpetual disappointment. In a remarkable dramatic manoeuvre, during the final scene he turns to camera and looks viewers directly in the eye and says: 'You may despise me but don't blame me because it's all *your* fault.' While initially appearing to reflect, as he put it, 'the conventional and perhaps unthinking cynicism of the viewer', Potter uses the agent to subvert it and suggest the voters, not the parties, are responsible for the shortcomings of politics. So unusual was this device and the intent behind it that it would be another three decades before a television political dramatist repeated it.

Like H. G. Wells and many others, Potter wrote as a socialist disappointed in the people's poverty of ambition. This was set to become an increasingly rare perspective. For many of those writers who emerged during and especially after the 1960s satire boom, it was those who exercised authority in the name

of the people – not the people themselves – who were the exclusive cause of democracy’s ills. Thus, while Maurice Edelman wrote novels in which politicians were shown trapped by images the public expected them to maintain, it would be those who claimed politicians used their images to trap the public into voting for them who would grow in number. The conspiracy genre would also go from strength to strength such that in 1970 Raymond Williams considered the ‘official conspiracy, by Ministers and corporations’ a ‘common-place’ theme in television science fiction series, including *Doctor Who*.<sup>76</sup> By the 1980s conspiracies would escape the science fiction genre and be found in fictions based in contemporary Britain, be directly political – and more readily believed.

The immediate post-war period saw a mixture of new and old ways of critiquing politics. Old themes were presented in new ways while old ways took on new themes. But if the remedies to politics’ ills were contradictory or more usually non-existent, all such works pointed in one direction: *something* was wrong with democracy, and it was the fault of the politicians. This populist perspective would only grow in intensity.

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## The Televised Crisis

*The Clangers* was a children's animated television series featuring what their creator Oliver Postgate described as 'a small tribe or extended family of civil mouse-like persons living their peaceful lives on, in and around a small, undistinguished moon'. They were 'plump and shocking pink, with noses that were long, perhaps for sucking up ... soup'.<sup>1</sup> Originally broadcast on BBC One during 1969–72, the series was repeated many times thereafter. On the night of 10 October 1974 the BBC showed a special episode, 'Vote for Froglet', one designed for grown-ups, in which the narrator informs the Clangers that 'the proudest moment of the British people [is] a parliamentary election'. The purpose of the episode was, however, *not* to celebrate the state of democracy on the day the country went to the polls.

Postgate had something he wanted to get off his chest. The grandson of George Lansbury, who led the Labour party during 1932–5, Postgate was from a left-wing bohemian family. Yet, as the post-war period developed, he came to believe that 'the prospect of a just and loving social order based on the principles of true socialism', for which his grandfather and parents had worked, would not materialize. Indeed, by the 1970s he feared that 'something was going seriously wrong with the way our country was being run' and that all-out industrial warfare would lead to anarchy.

I had the feeling that we, the public, were being treated as if we were stupid. I found myself becoming more and more dejected by the sheer irrelevance of what was going on in the House of Commons ... Parliament had simply been hi-jacked by two parties of doctrinaire zealots, Labour and Conservative, whose sole interest was to defeat each other at any cost.

Inter-party wrangling, he believed, was corrupting Parliament's proper function: 'the exercise of government'.

Of 'Vote for Froglet', which Postgate called his 'pleasant little Morality Play', he recalled:

I went to the BBC and said, 'Can I do a little *Clangers* film about the election?' It's basically about the narrator, that's me, being the interlocutor as well, telling the *Clangers* that they've got to vote, either for the Froglet or for the Soup Dragon. And they refused point blank to have anything to do with it ... They all went back down to their holes and said 'Sod off! The whole thing is a waste of everybody's time!' I was trying to sell them the idea of politics, and they were determined not to have anything to do with it.<sup>2</sup>

That the Head of Children's Programmes agreed to Postgate's request to expose 'some of the absurdities of political electioneering' was remarkable, and a sign of the times. Just eight years before, BBC executives had decided against transmitting an episode of the *Pinky and Perky* puppet series entitled 'You, too, can be a Prime Minister' during the 1966 election campaign.<sup>3</sup> By 1974 Lord Simon's spirit had, it seems, been almost completely exorcised.

Postgate's was by no means an original insight, although he articulated it in an idiosyncratic manner. The *Clangers*' rejection of party politics nonetheless reflected the opinions of an increasing number of human beings, as the October election demonstrated. That contest had followed on from the poll held in February 1974, the first general election since 1929 in which Labour and the Conservatives won less than eighty per cent of votes cast. In fact, nearly twenty-five per cent had preferred the Liberals or the various Nationalist parties, meaning that Labour became the largest party in the Commons with just thirty-seven per cent of the vote. In the second election of 1974 Labour won a slightly greater share – thirty-nine per cent – and a majority of three seats. However, as overall turnout had fallen from seventy-nine per cent to seventy-three per cent in October (the second lowest since 1945 – the lowest was in 1970), the two big parties' grip on the electorate was loosening. Certainly, in October, Postgate abandoned his family commitment to Labour and voted Liberal, hoping to encourage the formation of a coalition government.

Postgate's disillusion with party politics was largely due to Britain's ongoing – but by the 1970s acute – economic problems, which many others also blamed on the trade unions. This, combined with an international crisis, produced spiralling unemployment *and* inflation.<sup>4</sup> Some experts even claimed Britain had become 'ungovernable' given unprecedented pressures from sectional interests, most notably the unions.<sup>5</sup> Polls suggested that a majority thought Jack Jones, leader of Britain's biggest trade union, was more powerful than the Prime Minister.<sup>6</sup> A miners' strike even provoked Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath to ask 'who governs?', and on that basis he fought (and lost) the February election. Five years later, Jim Callaghan's Labour government also ended in

disarray after a 'winter of discontent' saw public service unions strike against his attempt to keep down their wages. In 1976 the same government had been subject to International Monetary Fund orders when it looked like ministers would run out of cash. This intervention provoked comparisons with 1931 just as the rise of unemployment to 1.5 million in 1978 made it look like the 1930s were returning in other ways.

As affluence gave way to austerity, the guiding assumptions of the Westminster elite were attacked from the far-left, far-right as well as Scottish and Welsh nationalists. To add to the sense of calamity the IRA regularly bombed mainland Britain and on the eve of the 1979 election assassinated Airey Neave, one of Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher's closest advisers. Britain's political class consequently looked more impotent than ever. The devious, manipulative abilities warned against by Terence Rattigan and Peter Cook were nowhere to be seen. Westminster was instead subject to increasing doses of *lèse-majesté* as the era of Maurice Edelman drew to an end. When the *Daily Mirror* reviewed Edelman's ITV adaptation of his novel *The Prime Minister's Daughter*, it claimed the Palace of Westminster emerged as 'lofty, gothic, convoluted, pretentious, and worst of all, [it] seems to go on for ever'.<sup>7</sup> Still wanting to depict a glamorized politics, Edelman abandoned writing about contemporary subjects and turned to historical novels featuring a highly sexed Benjamin Disraeli.

This sense of crisis coincided with what some regard as the 'golden age' of British television, a time when broadcasters opened their channels to an unprecedented number of radical voices, airing often-challenging dramas. Claude Whatham, who directed many such works, claimed this was when producers 'put on shows *they* wanted to put on – and *made* people want to see them'.<sup>8</sup> Viewers had few options: there were still only three channels, two of them publicly funded. As ITV's regional companies enjoyed a commercial monopoly, their advertising revenues remained healthy despite the recession; holding a franchise continued to be what one beneficiary called 'a licence to print money'.<sup>9</sup> This meant that even commercial television producers had the freedom to follow their own (some might argue elitist) inclinations rather than worry too much about audience figures.

As a consequence, television – which Dennis Potter called 'the nearest thing we are ever likely to get to a "theatre of the people"' – played an important and unique part in promoting discussion of the nature and scale of Britain's political problems.<sup>10</sup> Dystopian fantasies, period dramas and even comedies all had something to say about this crisis, and when they did newspaper television reviewers soberly debated their arguments. If this was the golden



age of television it was also the golden age of television criticism. Thus, while some voters began to turn their backs on the main parties, television revealed the extent to which representative politics still meant something important to millions, even if it was not quite what party leaders thought it *should* mean.

When television dramas engaged with politics, they did so in often-contentious ways and some believed the small screen gave left-wing dramatists too much space. Indeed, Thatcher alluded to this in her first leader's speech at the 1975 Conservative conference, by claiming 'there are those who gnaw away at our national self-respect, rewriting British history as centuries of unrelieved gloom, oppression and failure. As days of hopelessness – not days of hope.'<sup>11</sup> Thatcher was referring to *Days of Hope*, Jim Allen's BBC One dramatization of labour history from the Great War to the General Strike. This was seen by the *Daily Telegraph* as 'an unashamed party political broadcast for the Communist party – the most prolonged commercial the comrades have enjoyed since the media were invented.'<sup>12</sup> Such radical dramas also made great claims for 'authenticity', another worrying trend so far as defenders of the *status quo* were concerned.<sup>13</sup>

There were, however, other views on show, ones that would have found more favour in the Thatcher household. For example, *1990*, which ran for two seasons on BBC Two during 1977–8, showed a Britain of the future slowly collapsing under restrictions imposed by a union-led dictatorship. The series featured a Scarlet Pimpernel character who helped members of the professional middle class escape their Soviet-style government to reach the land of freedom and opportunity that was the United States. Alternative views of Britain's history were also available, ones that emphasized the vital role played by traditional forms of leadership in Britain's recent past, for this was the decade when dramatizations of Churchill's life first made it to the big and small screen.

Despite complaints of bias from Conservatives, it was the Labour party that was more often than not put under the spotlight, to such an extent that in 1976 the *Daily Telegraph* critic sarcastically called on television drama departments to tackle other parties 'just for a change'.<sup>14</sup> This focus was partly a reflection of the undoubtedly left-wing interests of many of those who produced drama, but it was also because Labour stood at the fulcrum of Britain's crisis. Since 1945 Labour had built the welfare state and generally advocated government intervention, but economists now increasingly claimed that the state was to blame for the country's woes. As some leading Labour figures started to revise their attachment to intervention, the party's close ties with the trade unions came under strain. Moreover, in the constituencies a new generation of activists rebelled against their leaders, and called for different ways of doing politics, ones

in which the people, or at least trade unionists, had a more direct say. They criticized what Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961), a bible for many on the left, asserted was the party's greatest weakness: its 'parliamentarianism'.<sup>15</sup> If Tony Benn articulated such views, they were also expressed outside the party by a variety of far-left movements that had gained new life during the 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

While this was a period during which a radical but articulate minority hoped for socialist renewal, television dramas nonetheless depicted a defeated left, something recognized by critics from the *Sunday Telegraph* to the Communist Party's *Morning Star*. As the latter, Stewart Lane, noted in 1976:

the general picture which seems to be drawn is a negative one – of a parliament in which only the most astute careerist Labour politicians are successful, of occasional corruption, a party with a frustrated rank and file, honest in their endeavours but unable to beat the party machine, of ordinary Labour supporters bitter and disillusioned.<sup>17</sup>

This was, of course, a view not confined to 1970s television and had been on display in inter-war novels written by the likes of A.J. Cronin, many of which were adapted for the small screen and broadcast to an unprecedented number of people. This included the working class themselves, rather than, as in the 1930s, the largely middle-class members of Britain's broad left.

### Sitcoms: 'Them' and 'Us'

Whatever frustrations Westminster politics might generate, during the 1970s party identity still meant something tangible to millions. What that meaning was is best shown via the situation comedies of the time.

If few sitcoms were set in Westminster, a small number took on controversial political issues. *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1965–8, 1970 and 1972–5) had Alf Garnett, a bigoted East End docker and enthusiastic Conservative, regularly trade insults with his left-wing son-in-law. Many of their arguments were about the number of black immigrants settling in Britain. Immigration was the main subject of *Curry and Chips* (ITV, 1969), written by Johnny Speight, also responsible for *Till Death Us Do Part*. Its message of toleration was rather obscured however by the fact that it starred a white Spike Milligan blacked up to play 'Paki Paddy' Kevin O'Grady. Race relations was also at the heart of the conflict dividing Eddie Booth and Bill Reynolds, the protagonists in *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV, 1972–6), the former being white (and Labour) the latter black (and Conservative).

Most sitcoms, though, had ostensibly uncontroversial premises and were set in non-political worlds, such as the rag-and-bone yard (*Steptoe and Son*, BBC, 1962–5 and 1970–4), bed-sit land (*Rising Damp*, ITV, 1974–8), and suburbia (*George and Mildred*, ITV, 1976–9 and *Citizen Smith*, BBC, 1977–80). Yet even these had leading characters with overt party affiliations, if only because such comedies drew much of their humour from class conflict and Labour and the Conservatives were still respectively identified with the working and middle classes.

Ray Galton and Alan Simpson have been described as 'the fathers of sitcom' and their *Steptoe and Son* was among the most popular comedy series ever broadcast, with some episodes attracting over twenty million viewers.<sup>18</sup> Exploring the conflict between an idealistic rag-and-bone-man (Harold) and his fatalistic father (Albert), it was politicized to such an extent that, when returning in 1970 after a five-year break, Wilfred Bramble who played Albert reassured *Daily Mirror* readers that nothing had changed, saying: 'I'm still the Conservative, he's still the Labour man.'<sup>19</sup> Lazy Albert supported the Conservatives because he thought they stood for maintaining the social order while ambitious Harold believed Labour would tear down the *status quo* and help him achieve his full potential.

During its run of fifty-seven episodes both characters often referred to their respective parties but in only two are Labour and the Conservatives directly depicted. In 'My Old Man's a Tory' (1965) Harold's faith in Wilson's promise of a 'New Britain' is countered by Albert's scepticism. An active Labour member, the young Steptoe wants to become a councillor so he can do good. His father mocks this ambition, for his son is a mere worker, but then sees the possibilities of using Harold's position in local government to secure contracts for their business. Reflecting Labour's own attempt to rebrand itself as a more middle-class party under Wilson, Harold's ambition is thwarted when the constituency agent imposes a doctor onto the ward party. In 'Tea for Two' (1970) it is Albert's turn to be let down. The new Prime Minister Edward Heath is visiting the district and officials arrange for him to have tea with the old man, seeing this as an ideal photo opportunity to illustrate that Heath is in touch with ordinary people. 'Dirty old man' Albert is enthused by this prospect, so cleans himself for the first time in weeks and brings the family home to an unprecedented level of tidiness – only to be told at the last minute that Heath is too busy to call.

The parties they love betray both men. Harold's case is the most overt: the working class no longer has a place in the modern Labour party. The agent dismisses what the activists want and tells them they have to accept the more

electorally attractive man. But Conservative loyalist Albert is also patronized by Conservative Central Office officials wearing bowler hats, speaking in plummy voices and wafting cigarette holders. Party politics is thereby presented as an alien world, one run by 'Them', not 'Us', and at the end of both episodes father and son seek solace in their flawed – but at least authentic and ultimately emotionally rewarding – relationship.

*George and Mildred* also sought humour from a problematic partnership, this time between a middle-aged married couple: aspirational Mildred and stuck-in-his-ways George. If the set-up was similar to *Steptoe and Son* – and some episodes also reached *Steptoe* levels of popularity – in party terms the roles were reversed. George was Labour and proud to be working-class, looking back to the Second World War, which he said was 'supposed to end class prejudice and have our lot take over'. Mildred was apolitical but often fell into the arms of the local Conservative Association, if only because its social activities indulged her modest hope for a better life, in the form of a cheap holiday in Majorca and a Christmas ball. Such a switch says something about Labour's changing associations – in the 1960s forward-looking but by the 1970s hankering for a better yesterday, and providing ideological cover for laziness.

The series begins with the couple moving, on Mildred's insistence, to Hampton Wick, a middle-class part of Greater London. Their new neighbours are the Formiles, whose head of household is an estate agent and active Conservative. Jeffrey Formile is the yin to George's yang. The former hates the unions and thinks the working class sponge off taxpayers; the latter believes the Conservative party is only for 'rich twits' and 'chinless wonders'. The pair constantly bicker about such matters, while their sensible wives look on bemused and embarrassed, a role also assigned to women in *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour*.

Brian Cooke and Johnnie Mortimer who wrote *George and Mildred* use party politics to signify a variety of social attitudes and characteristics: the Conservatives for Mildred's aspirations and Formile's snobbishness, Labour for George's indolence. Yet – as with *Steptoe and Son* – their overall perspective is that politics stands apart from real life. When a Conservative MP dines at the Formiles, she and her husband are said to own most of Surrey while the Conservative Association is shown as full of upper-class men in blazers. When Formile encourages his six-year-old son to read Conservative pamphlets he is pleased the boy is keen to have more – only to find that he is using them to create paper planes.

Mildred's ambitions lead her to attend Conservative social events. Rigsby, the central character in *Rising Damp*, joins his local Conservative Association intent

on using it to consort with his superiors. It was therefore snobbery that explains why, in 'Stand Up and Be Counted' (1975), he canvasses for the party's parliamentary candidate. A borderline slum landlord, Rigsby is also a fantasist who looks to the Conservatives to defend a world of which he was never part. As he tells the shabby-genteel Miss Jones, a tenant in his dilapidated home: 'our world is in danger ... the Sunday afternoon game of tennis, the sound of ball against gut, scattered applause from the deck chairs'. Yet Colonel De Vere-Brown, the Conservative candidate who embodied most available 'huntin'n'shootin'" stereotypes of the upper classes, does not think Rigsby belongs to *his* world. He fails to recognize Rigsby from the club and gets his name wrong when reminded of it. One of his Labrador dogs even defecates in Rigsby's hallway, an act whose symbolism needs little interpretation.

While Miss Jones cannot decide whom to support – she even flirts (literally) with the boyish Liberal candidate – Rigsby's two student tenants favour Labour. But the Labour man is as distant from ordinary people as is the Tory, this time socially *and* sexually, for he not only hypocritically owns ICI shares and a cottage in Wales, but he is also extremely camp, likes the ballet and has a Filipino houseboy, leading Rigsby (to much audience hilarity) to call him a 'middle-class poof'. Despite this, Rigsby is so enraged by his rejection by the Conservatives that he temporarily takes up a Labour banner.

One of Rigsby's student tenants is Alan, a mild, middle-class Maoist who goes on demonstrations but is scared of the police. Writer John Sullivan used the ineffectual revolutionary – someone whose desire to change the world is presented as inherently ridiculous – as the protagonist in *Citizen Smith*. Wolfie Smith, leader of the Tooting Popular Front (membership: six) wears a Che Guevara T-shirt, a beret, long hair and an army surplus jacket and describes himself as an 'urban guerilla' and 'working-class hero'. Like Alan, he is the very epitome of a non-revolutionary's idea of a 'revolutionary'.

If the series referenced real strikes and radical figures such as Tariq Ali and Arthur Scargill, Wolfie is useless, and *Citizen Smith* is replete with examples of his incompetence. 'Power to the People', Wolfie would declaim in the first two seasons' opening titles, only to make babies cry, cars crash and encourage kids to mock him. When the Front decides to kidnap a Conservative MP they mistakenly take the local hard man instead; Wolfie makes a 'Right to Work' protest at the labour exchange but emerges with a job; and on discovering an abandoned tank the Front drive it to Westminster to capture MPs only to find the Chamber empty due to the summer recess. However bad Britain's crisis might be, the series suggests, the prospect of a left-wing revolution is something

about which viewers need not worry. Wolfie's ardour is moreover largely an excuse for not marrying his girlfriend and avoiding work: like George Roper, his left-wing politics are an excuse to dodge his responsibilities.

Like most sitcoms, *Citizen Smith* was aimed at a mainstream, family audience, the type that – if those in the studio are any guide – tittered when Wolfie asks if anyone at his Front meeting wants to 'pass a motion' and do the same when mention is made of gay liberation. If the series was not aimed at Britain's few revolutionaries, in the episode 'Rebel Without a Pause', broadcast in December 1978 at the height of the 'winter of discontent', Wolfie does briefly get serious. Standing underneath Karl Marx's memorial in Highgate Cemetery he has this conversation with non-revolutionary girlfriend Shirl:

Shirl: Maybe the people of Britain don't want [your kind of] 'freedom'.

Wolfie: Of course they do.

Shirl: They might not.

Wolfie: Well they're going to get it whether they want it or not ... They're confused Shirl, they're bewildered by the shifting sands of class ... The working class, yer actual working class, it's suddenly become trendy so now you've got different standards of it. You've got your 'working-class-working-class', the miners, shipbuilders, steelworkers, you know true grit, salt of the earth who at the end of the week get ten bob and a green apple for their sweat. And then you've got the 'middle-class-working-class': the Vanessa Redgraves, Paul Foots, ex-grammar school boys whose satchels were filled with *Das Kapital* and *Biggles Holds His Own*. You see them at universities with their collarless shirts and well-rounded vowels, like a cross between Prince Charles and *When the Boat Comes In*. And then you've got your 'upper-class-working-class', watered-down Wedgie Benns who lost their political virginity at a jolly wheeze at Twickers. They sit in their private saunas while the *au pair* turns the pages of the *Morning Star* and then they put 'Vote Labour' stickers at the back of their Rolls Royces.

By the end of his speech Wolfie is bitter and the audience quiet. This awkward moment of reflection is soon exploded however when Shirl points out that a big spider has crawled down her boyfriend's collar.

Very much like Sullivan, whose first television series *Citizen Smith* was, Wolfie is a south London working-class lad without any post-school education. Somehow or other Wolfie – from trying to explain why people were not revolutionary – ends up pointing out that many of those who speak for 'yer actual working class' were from higher up the social ladder and their voices inauthentic. As Labour constituency activists went further to the left – led by 'watered-down Wedgie Benns' or indeed the real Tony Benn – the party, at least

to Wolfie's eyes, was moving further away from *his* class and from that of the many millions who watched the series. Wolfie's sentiments were specific to the time and subject, but they nonetheless confirmed the general view that emerges from sitcomland: politics of left or right is for 'Them,' not 'Us.'

### Educating the public

While sitcoms drew the biggest audiences, serious drama remained the main fictionalized means through which television tackled politics. Instead of stressing the glamour of Westminster, as Edelman and others had done, such works now emphasized the relationship between Westminster and the mundane concerns of the constituents MPs were supposed to represent. Fictional MPs invariably sat for gritty northern industrial towns, the better to highlight the chasm dividing these two worlds. During the 1970s three ITV series concentrated on politics in this way, albeit from contrasting perspectives. Edmund Ward's *The Challengers* (1972) looked at two MPs, one Conservative and the other Labour who represent the same town. Arthur Hopcraft's *The Nearly Man* (1975) focused on just one MP, a middle-aged, right-wing Labour politician out of place in a changing party. Finally, in *Bill Brand* (1976), Trevor Griffiths highlighted the dilemmas faced by a new kind of Labour MP who was young and wanted to radicalize his party.

Edmund Ward wrote much of ITV's hugely popular big-business-orientated series *The Power Game* (1965–9). *The Challengers* drew comparisons with the former, as both were slick melodramas that explored their protagonists' personal and professional lives. Ward appreciated that some viewers might think MPs boring in contrast to globe-trotting entrepreneurs, but told *Sun* readers: 'The fact that it is about politics shouldn't put people off. Politics is people.'<sup>20</sup> Ward had some experience making the apparently dull seem interesting, notably with *Grady* (ITV, 1970), a three-part series that explored the world of trade unionism. He was, moreover, not alone. In the late 1960s Granada produced *City '68* (1967–8), a series about local government, which took viewers through the complexities of planning and presented aldermen as decent figures trying to do the right thing. On BBC One at the same time, *The First Lady* (1968–9) performed a similar didactic function.

Even so, the Director of Programmes at Yorkshire Television had not been enthusiastic about producing a series with such an overtly political theme.<sup>21</sup> Ward, however, claimed that with the Conservative government's mooted entry into the Common Market and its controversial legislation to limit union

power, 'politics had never been more important – but never had the general public been so indifferent to politics and politicians'. This lack of interest was, he speculated, due to the 'homogenised public face' the parties presented to the public. As others had done before, he aimed to explore 'the private face' and ask of his MPs: 'what sort of man is he, and why did he sign up for this sort of job?' Ward particularly wanted to show how they reconciled living in two very different contexts: on the one hand 'the exclusive club of Westminster' and on the other the world of the audience, 'the world that elected him, the constituency'.<sup>22</sup> To help prepare viewers for the series, *TV Times* explained the difficult process of getting selected as a parliamentary candidate. Reflecting the ethos of the series, one of which Lord Simon would undoubtedly have approved, the article concluded voters should be grateful to those who took on the difficult job of an MP.<sup>23</sup>

*The Challengers* showed its MPs to be hard working and concerned to make a real difference to their constituents' lives, notably helping bring new jobs to a town suffering from rising unemployment. To achieve these ends, they were often depicted co-operating: party loyalty did not come before their duty to the voters. Ward also made considerable mileage from the financial sacrifices MPs made to do their jobs, pointing out they could easily have made more money outside politics. Certainly, critics believed the series largely achieved its objectives. If the *Sun* reviewer feared readers would find the complexity and number of the storylines difficult, for herself, 'I got the spooky feeling I was actually looking at real MPs and party bosses'.<sup>24</sup> Those in the *Daily Mail* believed the series said 'something entertaining and useful' and claimed it 'brought home the real-life problems of political intrigue more than any number of books'.<sup>25</sup> In the *Guardian* Nancy Banks-Smith admitted to being sceptical about a series that had MPs as heroes, but despite herself, 'I found the activities of politicians and the subtleties of random canvass and variables of the grid clever and exciting'.<sup>26</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* critic even thought a scene in which the wife of the Labour MP claimed her husband's low income and poor conditions left him no better off than a labourer 'rang true'.<sup>27</sup>

## Sympathy for the MP

*The Challengers* steered clear of contemporary political controversy and suggested the worlds of constituency and Westminster could be reconciled. The two other ITV political drama series were, however, located within the



real events then dominating the Labour party and highlighted the tensions that existed between parliamentarians and the people.

Chris Collinson, the protagonist of Arthur Hopcraft's *The Nearly Man*, was certainly a character who evoked a number of comparisons with real Labour figures, most especially the MP Dick Taverne, who was de-selected by his left-wing constituency party in 1972. A year after the series was broadcast, MP Michael Ward even referred to Reg Prentice, another right-wing MP facing de-selection, as 'The Nearly Man'.<sup>28</sup> The series' opening titles featured a Gerald Scarfe cartoon of Wilson, James Callaghan and Collinson, encouraging viewers to see Hopcraft's character in such terms. *The Nearly Man* also referenced issues such as the role of the unions, incomes policy and unemployment, all of which were setting Labour's members against each other.

A middle-class intellectual in his early fifties – a 'pretty boy gone to seed' – with a troubled marriage and no place in the government, Collinson evoked Johnnie Byrne's predicament in *No Love for Johnnie* (1961). However, while Byrne had issues with his local party, Collinson faced the uniquely 1970s threat of radical working-class activists wanting to replace him with one of their own. Due to the changing nature of his party, Collinson, a *habitué* of fashionable London dinner parties, is now forced to return to his constituency – a place he refers to as 'Hell' – more frequently than he likes. But if the constituency is a grim place where beer, not wine, is drunk, Westminster is also presented in dour terms. It is, according to Collinson, a 'fusty warren', and a disillusioned ex-Cabinet minister now forced to work for a lobbying company even refers to 'the Corridors of Impotence'. Politics, wherever it might be conducted, is a hard, grim slog.

Hopcraft claimed he was drawn to 'well-to-do intellectuals who thread their way through Labour politics' because 'they often don't quite fit their constituencies'. As a writer, Hopcraft was known for his treatment of those who were, like himself, square pegs in round holes.<sup>29</sup> Collinson, though, was not quite past it: he still had ambitions that went beyond advancing his own career. In the 1974 play which inspired the series, Collinson tells a meeting:

It's my regret that the expectations of the great majority of working people are as vaguely felt and as diffidently pursued as they are ... We still have a deeply rooted – and general – social poverty to overcome: an ugly and hostile urban environment, overcrowded schools, inadequate hospitals.

Such injustices continued, he argued, because of 'an entrenched and resourceful resistance to change by the privileged in every facet of our daily lives. I believe

it is my function, as a politician, to breach those walls of resistance.' Assailed by voter apathy, capitalist resistance and the carping of activists, Hopcraft also makes it clear Collinson could have enjoyed a much easier life as a university vice-chancellor. He turned down such a comparatively cushy job because politics still mattered to him, however difficult circumstances had become.

The series is weighted in Collinson's favour, but Hopcraft does not demonize those who want Collinson replaced. Collinson's *bête noire*, Ron Hibbert, the new constituency agent, is a teacher who works hard to improve the lot of illiterate teenagers. His ideals are as genuine as Collinson's, being motivated by a sense of responsibility to his community and class. Moreover, Hibbert's desire to have as an MP 'one of us' Hopcraft shows to be reasonable; certainly the energy Hibbert brings to the constituency is something Collinson cannot emulate.

If Hopcraft gave a fairly even-handed view of a divided party, the critics – certainly those working for the *Sunday Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*, papers not known for their sympathy to socialism – took Collinson's side.<sup>30</sup> One completely empathized when he drank whisky to anaesthetize himself against constituents who wrote letters apparently smelling of bacon fat.<sup>31</sup> Another asserted the series 'vividly depicted the sheer frightfulness of being an MP, of having to present a smiling face to every whining supplicant.'<sup>32</sup> This perspective was endorsed by a further reviewer who bemoaned 'the tragic-comic torture of a good, fastidious brain, forced to suck up to people he despises.'<sup>33</sup> Such journalistic sympathy unconsciously evoked Anthony Trollope's reaction to the indignities canvassing the lower orders imposed on the candidate in *The Duke's Children* (1880). Whether this sentiment was grounded in class solidarity for a fellow professional forced to deal with the great unwashed or hostility to Collinson's far-left opponents is not clear: it could, of course, have been both.

### Problematic parliamentarianism

Like *The Challengers*, *The Nearly Man* was broadcast at 10 o'clock on Sunday evenings, ITV's established 'intellectual' slot and not one designed to attract huge audiences. Clearly, schedulers agreed with critics that the former series was 'too thoughtful and talkative' for peak-time viewers; certainly, the populist *News of the World* regarded the series as 'dull and tedious'.<sup>34</sup> When they considered at which time to broadcast *Bill Brand*, ITV schedulers favoured a similarly marginal time: 10.30 on a weekday evening. Trevor Griffiths, though, fought for an earlier hour because 'my class, the people I want to talk to, don't watch

from 10.30 p.m.<sup>35</sup> *Bill Brand* was consequently shown on Monday evenings at 9 o'clock – albeit in the summer.

That Griffiths was given the chance to write an eleven-part series about a left-wing Labour MP was itself remarkable and thanks to the financial confidence of Thames Television. Griffiths' made his name in the theatre as a radical playwright and was one of a number of politically committed figures – such as David Hare and Howard Brenton – whose stage work aroused the interest of BBC drama producers.<sup>36</sup> Griffiths' concerns were, then, very different to those of Ward and Hopcraft.<sup>37</sup> If *The Challengers* was a glossy civics lesson and *The Nearly Man* appealed to those who sympathized with right-wing Labour MPs, *Bill Brand* was accused of 'waving a banner for a complete Socialist State'.<sup>38</sup> A member of Stockport Labour party in the early 1960s, Griffiths had been in the running to be a parliamentary candidate in 1964, but subsequently became more sceptical about the party as a vehicle for the kind of change he desired. He saw his writing as one means of encouraging that change, and so despite theatrical success was keen to address – and influence – the millions who watched television. His first attempt, *All Good Men* (1974), essentially gave human form to Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* by criticising Labour for being so committed to the parliamentary road it failed to represent the working class. Broadcast as part of BBC One's *Play for Today* strand, the usual venue for radical writers, it was however unlikely to have been watched by many proletarian Labour voters.

Like Griffiths, Bill Brand was one of Wolfie Smith's 'middle-class working class', a young university graduate risen from the ranks of the proletariat. Once part of the Trotskyist International Socialists, before the series begins Brand has decided to do more than carp from the sidelines and so joins Labour, even though he is unhappy about its parliamentary focus. Brand therefore enters the Commons in two minds. This ambiguity is only deepened by the fact that Labour in office is cutting spending and so causing unemployment to rise and living standards to fall – much like the real government of 1976.

In this context Brand cuts a largely impotent figure, one frustrated by the conservatism of the voters, his local party and fellow MPs. His Manchester constituency is suffering but he can do little to help those textile workers occupying a factory and who call for the industry to be nationalized. When Brand does take a stand, in favour of women being free to terminate unwanted pregnancies and against the renewal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, he only makes himself unpopular with constituents and party. With a

snap general election in the offing his agent even forces the MP to undertake various constituency duties – such as judging a beauty contest – which offend his principles but might make him popular. When that election is not called, in its second half the series shifts focus to Westminster, where the Prime Minister resigns, just as Wilson had done a few months before. This throws up the possibility that David Last – a figure who evoked the real Michael Foot – the figurehead of the parliamentary left, might become leader and take Labour in a truly socialist direction. But Last fails and the new Prime Minister – cut from the same cloth as Roy Jenkins – is from the party's right and proposes further retrenchment, which will result in more suffering for the working class.

His champion defeated, Brand revisits his never-absent doubts that Labour can transform Britain in a socialist direction. Yet if he resigns, Brand will become isolated from those he wants to help: that is why he joined the party in the first place. Thus, when he questions Labour's parliamentary road, Griffiths has Albert, an aged regional organizer, ask the ingénue MP:

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.

The conclusion of the series was sufficiently ambiguous that some critics thought Brand had decided to stay in the party to continue fighting while others believed he was on the verge of resignation.<sup>39</sup> In spite of this, Brand is definitely and unusually optimistic in the last episode. For one thing, his hitherto apolitical brother has been radicalized. Initially thinking himself as part of the 'bloody rabble', participation in a Right to Work demonstration makes him believe he can be something more. Brand is similarly inspired by learning of Albert's long record of struggle, which includes fighting with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. He also meets a Chilean who has left her country after the 1973 military coup overthrew the democratically elected Communist President Salvador Allende. Brand is impressed by her determination to return home, the dictatorship defeated. All these reasons for Brand's hopefulness, however, come from *outside* Parliament and *despite* Parliament. So far as Griffiths is concerned, the parliamentary road remains deeply problematic.

As he later confirmed:

What I was trying to say throughout the series was that the traditions of the labour movement were inadequate to take the struggle further, and that we had to discover new traditions or revive even older ones. And that we had to seek connective tissue between electoral party politics, which still has a mystifying appeal, and extra-parliamentary socialist activity.

While Griffiths hoped his critique of parliamentary democracy would raise questions in ITV viewers' minds, his script rarely simplified matters. Those 'who don't know the political jargon will have to pick it up as they go along', he said.<sup>40</sup> Reviewers certainly wondered if the series – which at one point had Last and Brand trading T. S. Eliot quotes – would be incomprehensible to most. Even the former Labour MP Michael Barnes found it hard to focus on all the issues raised and doubted whether many others were up to the task.<sup>41</sup>

Critics did not respond as Griffiths had hoped they might. The first episode left one 'disillusioned' while another – admittedly writing for the *Daily Express* – thought later in the run that Griffiths had painted 'a very ugly picture of a half-baked spineless idealist'.<sup>42</sup> Reviewers in the *Daily Telegraph* were nonetheless not alone in praising Griffiths for the seriousness with which he went about his task, one conceding that despite disagreeing with Brand's politics 'I can't help respecting his dogged, ravaged integrity'.<sup>43</sup> The now seatless Taverne – a victim of real-life Brands – thought it 'tells us more about parliament, constituency politics and the Labour Party than the combined writings of most of the Westminster drama critics who masquerade as political commentators'.<sup>44</sup> The series was definitely popular with MPs: Labour's Joe Ashton claimed it was standing room only in the Commons television room when it was transmitted.<sup>45</sup> The *Guardian* even took *Bill Brand* seriously enough to publish an editorial, to argue that Parliament remained the place where the left could achieve its ambitions.<sup>46</sup>

If the political class appreciated the series, it is unclear what the rest of the six million or so who regularly watched *Bill Brand* thought of what they saw. While the script was often austere, Griffiths nonetheless worked the politics around Brand's personal dramas, notably his failing marriage, relationship with his children and death of his father. Brand's affair with a younger woman also led some to believe the ensuing nudity was 'a touch of popular titillation'.<sup>47, 48</sup> The *TV Times* also did its best to frame the series as about the fight of 'principle' against the party line, while it also described Jack Shepherd – who played Brand – as 'a cerebral sexpot'.<sup>49</sup> Sex or socialism: we frankly do not know which made the most impression.

## Dramatized Trotskyism

Griffiths was not the only radical writer to raise questions about Labour's relationship with the working class. In a series of BBC dramas, Jim Allen did that too, although as a Trotskyist he depicted a working class that had no use at all for parliamentary politics.<sup>50</sup> According to his dramas, workers needed to embrace direct action. In *The Big Flame* (BBC, 1969) Allen has a Liverpool dock strike turn into a demonstration of how workers can run the industry independent of management. Also inspired by the contemporary industrial situation, *Rank and File* (BBC, 1971) dramatized a real strike, one that broke out at Pilkington Glass in 1970. Showing how far historical drama had changed its character, *Days of Hope* (BBC, 1975) was a series that looked at British history from 1914 to 1926. Finally, *The Spongers* (BBC, 1978) showed how decisions made by a Labour council induced a single parent to suicide.

Having written for the ITV soap opera *Coronation Street*, Allen brought populist wit to his work, but it occasionally suffered from what one critic described as a 'grinding didactic emphasis'.<sup>51</sup> Often working with producer Tony Garnett and director Ken Loach, Allen's plays also used non-actors, unfamiliar faces and semi-improvised scripts; they were all filmed at real locations and employed techniques associated with television news and documentary. One reason Allen's dramas generated so much controversy was because they therefore looked so 'real'. *The Big Flame* was twice postponed because BBC executives felt that for a drama it looked too much like a documentary, although Allen and his collaborators believed their real concerns related to its political message.<sup>52</sup> The Corporation, as a public broadcaster, however, had to ensure its output was 'balanced' and such politically charged dramas produced in a documentary style first televised with *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) posed novel problems.<sup>53</sup> While other critics believed few would be fooled it was a documentary, the *Sun* reviewer stated of *The Big Flame* that 'Your brain says it's fiction but every instinct insists it is fact. It looks like truth, it smells like truth, sounds like truth.'<sup>54</sup>

In all of Allen's dramas those supposed to represent the working class – the trade unions and the Labour party – fail to do so; Parliament is presented as no place for workers to gain redress. This is made clearest in the final episode of *Days of Hope*, one which reconstructed the General Strike. Labour MP Philip Hargreaves defends his party's reluctance to see the miners' dispute as 'political' and argues that the unions should not try to bring down elected governments or attack the constitution. Sarah, his wife, replies:

Bugger the constitution. You know as well as I do that the working class of this country are conned into voting against their real interests. We don't have a democracy, we just have the appearance of one, not the reality.

After the TUC calls off the strike, Sarah tells her husband: 'You're a social democrat; and social democrats always betray.' Her brother Ben chips in:

'It's what you stand for that counts. You believe in Parliament and Parliament is just one big open sewer and if you touch it you're infected. It's their club and you finish up playing for their team.'

As Allen told readers of the *Radio Times*:

The General Strike offered the opportunity for the creation of a workers' state in Britain. This opportunity was lost by the sell-out of the TUC, the Labour Party and the Communist Party. The message is: don't let it happen again.<sup>55</sup>

*The Big Flame* has a Labour minister visit Liverpool to tell dockers they have to accept changes to their working practices – the port is to be mechanized and so fewer men are needed. While their union agrees, all 10,000 dockers defiantly go on strike in a dispute that drags on for weeks until a Trotskyist, long blacklisted by the employers, persuades the men to transform it from an industrial to a political matter by taking control of the docks. This will be hard, but even if they manage it for a few days, he claims, they will light a 'big flame' to inspire the rest of the working class to do the same. In answer to the occupation, the Labour government sends in the army, the leaders are arrested and sentenced to three years in jail.

Labour's function in keeping the workers down on behalf of capitalism was also at the heart of *The Spongers*. Unlike Allen's other work, this was about a woman and not set in the workplace. Pauline, a single parent of four children, one with Down's syndrome, has been abandoned by her husband, leaving rent arrears which the Labour council demands she pays and to this end dispatches bailiffs to her home. To save money, the council moreover takes her disabled daughter out of a specialist facility for children and places her in an old people's home. The chair of the committee that makes this damaging decision is Pauline's own councillor, who Allen presents as a smug figure, often with a Wilsonian pipe in hand, preoccupied with preparations for Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee.

Allen's dramas collectively suggest that, freed of their unions and the Labour party, the working class can liberate themselves. The General Strike was taking off just as the leaders abandoned it and in but a few short days had revealed the organizational capacity of ordinary people. *The Big Flame* begins with the men described as 'sheep' but shows that under the right conditions they can be lions.

When they take over the docks the men outlaw pilfering – for the old ways will not now do – and while the movement ends in defeat, Allen's implication is that their dispute will be the spark that lights the flame of revolution.

## Period drama politics

Allen's work was mostly located in contemporary Britain, but the phenomenal success of the BBC's 1967 adaptation of John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* novels meant that for much of the 1970s television was awash with period dramas. This phenomenon provoked some highbrow critics to despair and complain, as did T. C. Worsley of the *Financial Times*, that a 'wave of period nostalgia' had overtaken the medium.<sup>56</sup> As *Days of Hope* indicated, however, some period dramas could also be highly charged. While Allen's series was exceptional, more mainstream series also reflected on historical events and, as they did, articulated very modern perspectives.

One series that did this more explicitly than most was *Sam* (ITV, 1973–5), which claimed something had gone missing from Labour politics. Set in a Yorkshire mining town, John Finch's semi-autobiographical drama traced the life of a young boy from the depression of the 1930s to the recession of the 1970s. According to Finch,

I write about roots at a time when society is shifting and discarding. I think that if people cut themselves off from their roots, part of them doesn't survive ... I think people today do look back ... not nostalgically but fearfully, thinking: 'What have I lost?'<sup>57</sup>

One of the things apparently lost was a politics rooted in moral certainty, self-sacrifice and community loyalty, something embodied by Sam's grandfather, Jack Barraclough. A stern upholder of class pride, his commitment to the miners' union and Labour party meant the pit owners blacklisted him as a troublemaker. In an emotionally charged meeting Jack tells fellow miners where they all stand:

We shall die in the muck we've lived and worked in. We shall die in a war that's been waged since before we was born. It's *others* that shall reap what we've sowed, that shall stand on us shoulders as we stood on the shoulders of men that stood fast before us. Or are we not the men us fathers were?

The young Sam has slipped into the gathering and watches his grandfather while, significantly enough, on his uncle's shoulders, and the scene is repeated later in the series as it has left such a deep impression on the adult Sam.



Jack is the dominant figure when the series begins and while he lasts to the final episode, by then he is a physically frail, marginal figure, embodying the demise of his kind of politics. Those who come after are in various ways disappointments. While Jack's son, Frank, becomes a Labour MP, he is limp in comparison. A decent man who does not want to be 'just another politician', he is nonetheless ineffectual. When the pits are threatened with closure he shrugs his shoulders. Sam moreover finds himself in no-man's land. Starting out as the son of a single mother, he suffers the privations of the depression, but after the war becomes a manager, being neither one thing nor the other, confused socially and politically. What, Finch asked, had Jack's sacrifice, and those of the generation that came before Sam's, been for? He gave viewers no clear answer.

### A transatlantic hero

*Days of Hope* was controversial because of its far-left politics but also because its rendition of the past appeared so authentic, making its message, critics feared, that more plausible. Allen's fictional characters were presented in loving period detail and interacted with actors playing the leading political figures of the day. It was, in other words, 'that fashionable mixture of fact and fiction which allows invention but gives the illusion of documentary truth'.<sup>58</sup> However, *Days of Hope* was not alone in that respect: all period dramas obscured the difference between fact and fiction. Even *Sam*, none of whose characters were anything but fictional, was inevitably set in a real past and so deemed to have 'hovered perilously somewhere in no-man's land between documentary-drama, nostalgia and soap opera'.<sup>59</sup>

This was not a new phenomenon, but it was new to television. The inter-war cinema had turned out biopics of leading historical figures that raised similar issues, although they reinforced rather than challenged the *status quo*. It was perhaps inevitable that there would be a period drama series on Disraeli, although the 1978 ITV effort emphasized his romantic rather than his political career, presenting him as a 'randy dandy', 'a lugubrious young man in lace cravat, black curls and a nice line in velvet dressing gowns'. ATV, which produced the series, did however underline Disraeli's 'loyalty to his Queen and country [which was] unquestioned although he was of foreign blood'.<sup>60</sup> Some believed the series' simplicities were due to it being aimed as much at American as British viewers, as were many period series.<sup>61</sup> The desire to appeal to a transatlantic audience was also the obvious explanation for the series about Winston Churchill's American

mother, *Jennie* (ITV, 1974), one in which the future Prime Minister was said to emerge as an ‘insufferable, pompous and priggish young man.’<sup>62</sup> Even so, it was Churchill rather than – as in the 1930s – Disraeli to whom dramatists now turned when wanting to depict the glories of Britain’s political past.

Other than appearing in the Hollywood movie *Mission to Moscow* (1943), Churchill had not been dramatically represented on the big or small screen before his death in 1965, due to the BBC’s general prohibition on representing living political figures and desire to maintain a distinction between ‘documentary’ and ‘drama.’ As factual programmes about Churchill were permissible, the Corporation backed the American producer Jack Le Vien’s twenty-six-part *The Valiant Years* (1961), which was closely based on Churchill’s wartime memoirs. The series was, though, not free of dramatic licence: when Le Vien could not find appropriate newsreel footage he slipped in dramatic reconstructions, hoping they would not be noticed, while Richard Burton added theatricality by impersonating Churchill in voiceovers.<sup>63</sup>

The movie *Young Winston* (1972) was the first outright dramatization of Churchill’s life, being a faithful adaptation of his *My Early Life* (1930). Carl Foreman, who wrote and produced the film, claimed Churchill was a ‘deprived youth – undeniably privileged but denied parental affection.’<sup>64</sup> The movie was moreover set in the time when Churchill was striving to find a place in the world, and so it presents him as having to live on his wits, despite an aristocratic background. Indeed, on the basis of watching the movie, the *Daily Telegraph* film critic claimed Churchill’s was ‘something of a Cinderella story.’<sup>65</sup>

With the wall between fact and fiction having been breached, the BBC broadcast two dramatic reconstructions of Churchill’s life. Both were produced in co-operation with Le Vien and designed for a transatlantic audience: *Walk with Destiny* (1974) and *Churchill and the Generals* (1979) respectively tackled Churchill’s fight against appeasement and his wartime premiership. It was the Second World War that drew dramatists to Churchill: even *Young Winston* begins and ends with VE Day. The stage for these two dramas was also consistent: traditional ‘high’ politics replete with set-piece Commons speeches, Cabinet Room discussions and horse-trading in the White House or at Three Power summits.

As with *Young Winston*, *Walk with Destiny* gave viewers an insight into Churchill’s home life, including his money troubles, fractious relationship with his son Randolph – even the health of the family dog was a point of concern. *Churchill and the Generals* in contrast ignored the Prime Minister’s private life and explored his fraught behind-the-scenes arguments with Britain’s leading

military figures, which showed him as sometimes petty and even wrong. Allan Shallcross, the latter's co-producer, however, claimed of his drama: 'We hope it is very understanding of Churchill. We depict him as a man who manipulated others, but always in the nation's need.' Scriptwriter Ian Curteis confirmed he wanted to go beyond the 'brave warrior' cliché and reveal the 'other more human sides of the man'.<sup>66</sup> If Churchill was flawed, his imperfections are, then, presented as a necessary aspect of the *only* man who could have ensured that Britain kept on fighting.

If the humanization of Churchill revealed awkward, privately embarrassing facts it was not intended to detract from his heroic status; in fact such details only helped reinforce it. Americans Foreman and Le Vien were Anglophile fans of the former Prime Minister and had no desire to undermine his place in history. Some of the Britons involved in these productions were, however, a little more critical. Richard Attenborough, who directed *Young Winston*, admitted:

I don't agree with many of his political views. But those of us in World War Two remember someone who said 'Enough' to the Machiavellian barbarian sweeping across Europe. This man gave us our voice. He spoke for us and galvanised us into action.<sup>67</sup>

Just before *Walk with Destiny* was broadcast, its star, Richard Burton even asserted that 'I hate Churchill and all his kind', naming him as one of history's 'great killers', a cowardly, 'vindictive toy soldier child' committed to the genocide of the German people. Burton was from South Wales, a place where Churchill's role in trying to crush various miners' strikes did not win him many friends.<sup>68</sup> His outburst meant Le Vien did not invite the actor to reprise the role in *Churchill and the Generals*.

There was then more ambivalence in Britain about Churchill than such transatlantic productions cared to admit. In 1967 BBC One broadcast Dennis Potter's *Message for Posterity* in which a fictional wartime Conservative Prime Minister sits for his portrait. BBC managers insisted Potter distinguish 'Sir David Browning' from Churchill in various ways, but he clearly evoked Churchill's unhappy experience with the artist Graham Sutherland, which ended with Churchill's wife destroying the portrait. The son of a miner, Potter held up Browning's role in the General Strike to particular criticism.<sup>69</sup> Potter was a man of the left but when the more conventional period drama *Upstairs, Downstairs* dealt with the 1926 strike in an episode broadcast in November 1975, Churchill's desire to crush the miners was also questioned by the moderate Conservative Richard Bellamy.

Despite peeking into his private life, the main focus of Le Vien's productions remained Churchill's public life. These are consequently dramas of Britain's elite political class and so of those men in top hats and winged collars in whose hands the fate of Britain had traditionally rested and in which the people play little part, other than as servants or as the vaguely referred-to 'public opinion'. Churchill is, however, depicted as the only leader who can unlock the courage and determination innate to the British. This had lain dormant while Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain refused to face that which, thanks to hindsight, all 1970s viewers know is the inevitable and right course. They are, in other words, stories of how one selfless Great Man saved a nation, almost despite itself. Given the conflict was known at the time as the people's war, this was, to say the least, a rather ironic interpretation of events.

*Walk with Destiny* thus shows Churchill's as the only voice of any consequence speaking out against the German threat and has his wife ask: 'I wonder if there has ever been a time when our future depended on the courage of one man?' Without Churchill's leadership, is the implication, the British would have been unable to fight on in 1940; in *Churchill and the Generals* Alan Brooke even tells Churchill: 'your voice will save us'. This second drama also depicts the War Cabinet, but it does not function as a decision-making body, just another venue for Churchill to use his voice. Labour's Clement Attlee, most notably, is sometimes seen but rarely heard. If the likes of Jim Allen claimed only the people could solve their problems, these dramas reiterated the conventional point that without the right man in charge the people were tantamount to a rabble.

### Same old roles?

In what one critic called an 'interesting turn' for the period drama genre, *Shoulder to Shoulder* (BBC, 1974) told the story of the Pankhurst family and their struggle to obtain the suffrage for women.<sup>70</sup> This six-part series inevitably, but unusually, put female characters front and centre, which had been the intention of actor Georgia Brown, script editor Midge Mackenzie and producer Verity Lambert who devised the series in response to their frustration with the lack of dramatic roles for women in television.<sup>71</sup>

Many reviewers considered theirs a worthy and didactic series, one that interpreted its subjects 'through the prism of women's lib'.<sup>72</sup> Yet, if the women were 'almost too radiant' and the series 'wall-to-wall with good intentions', this was probably because the writers (all men) were over-compensating for the

absence of serious female political characters elsewhere on the small screen – and of women in real political life.<sup>73</sup> As Michael Ratcliffe wrote in the *Guardian*, of the actresses playing the leading roles, ‘we cannot watch them without feeling that the painfully unresolved issues of today have rarely been so intelligently suggested to such a large and potentially sympathetic audience.’<sup>74</sup> Indicating how little had changed since Elizabeth Robins’ *Votes for Women* (1907), it was a series that was more propaganda than drama, one that aimed to inspire 1970s women. The *Daily Mirror* critic Mary Malone claimed the series ‘has been in emotional overdrive from the start. I hadn’t a tear left to weep’, and it left its mark on one teenage viewer who recalled its impact nearly thirty years later.<sup>75</sup>

In depicting women as politically significant in their own right, *Shoulder to Shoulder* was very much the exception. There were good factual reasons why most other period dramas showed women as subordinate. Clemmie Churchill in *Walk with Destiny* was a quintessential ‘guide’ who warned her husband against mistakes and tried to guard him from lapses of principle because that was the role she apparently played in Churchill’s life. *Days of Hope*, in contrast, had a more radical intent and greater scope to give women an active political role. Sarah, wife of the fictional Philip Hargreaves, a conscientious objector who becomes a Labour MP, was described by one critic as ‘the type of woman one rarely sees in television plays – one with a mind, a social concern and political convictions of her own, all of paramount importance in her life.’<sup>76</sup> Even so, she mostly acts as her husband’s moral guide, the one who encourages him, ineffectually it turns out, to resist the appeal of parliamentarianism.

In *Sam*, however, John Finch gave women contrasting roles, which became progressively more active and independent with the changing generations. In the 1930s Jack’s wife is apolitical but offers him sensible guidance. In the 1940s Ethel, wife of Jack’s eldest son George, is also political, and has social aspirations, which develop once they become homeowners. Out of ignorance she supports the Ratepayers in a local election because they are ‘nice people’, even though they are Conservatives in disguise. Finch, though, indicates that women’s roles were slowly transforming, for, even after Jack’s youngest son Frank becomes an MP, his wife, Polly, remains unsure for what the parties stand. When in the 1950s he has a political argument with his father, Frank banishes her to the kitchen. In her humiliation, Polly tells Frank that his action is one reason why politics is ‘just for men’ and goes on:

Look I know I’m not bright – in fact I’m probably not far off stupid. But there’s a lot like me and if I’m not given a chance to understand, what hope is there for

the rest of them that's like me? Not much of a compliment to you is it? ... Being voted into Parliament by a bunch of morons.

Guilt-ridden, Frank becomes Polly's politics tutor and later episodes show the couple talking about Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956). It is however Jack's granddaughter, university-educated Pat, who is the only woman to have a mind of her own – indeed, by the end of the series she more than anyone, man or woman, has inherited her grandfather's implacably socialist politics.

Contemporary political dramas had more liberty to paint a positive role for women, but despite that all had male protagonists. The women in *The Challengers* were in various ways subordinate, or obstacles in the case of the Conservative MP's ex-wife. Despite their marginal position in the series one critic still complained that wives and girlfriends 'were as obtrusive as ever': he certainly did not imagine politics and women mixed.<sup>77</sup> *The Nearly Man* also reinforced the impression that politics was a man's game, although one in which women suffered the domestic consequences. The wife of Chris Collinson's nemesis Ron Hibbert, for example, constantly chides him for not having time for their family and considers his dispute with Collinson unreasonable and pressurizes him to give it up.

Trevor Griffiths accurately reflected the extent to which Parliamentary politics remained a man's world at a time when only four per cent of MPs were women. But one of Bill Brand's closest colleagues is the experienced and confident left-wing MP Winnie Scoular, who acts as his mentor. Moreover, while Brand's estranged wife has no interest in his career, his mistress has a radical-feminist mind of her own. Despite these disparate characterizations, Audrey Williamson in *Tribune* primly claimed Brand was too often shown in bed talking politics with his mistress, citing that as evidence Griffiths only presented women as 'sex objects'.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, while Jim Allen's dramas celebrated the political potential of working-class men, he appeared less optimistic about women. If, in *The Big Flame*, the leaders of the docks occupation are jailed, they remain defiant, taking defeat as a strategic victory. Yet in *The Spongers* Pauline is a passive victim with no sense of control over her fate, such that she kills herself and her children as the only solution. *The Spongers* is, in contrast to Allen's other work, an almost entirely hopeless play.

## Conclusion

In July 1975, a few months after Margaret Thatcher was elected the first female leader of one of Britain's political parties, BBC One broadcast the first episode

of *My Honourable Mrs.*, a sitcom which began with the election of publisher's wife Jane Prendergast to the Commons under Conservative colours. At one level this was an innovation. While the role assigned to women in serious television dramas was only slightly more varied than in the past, this was less the case in sitcoms, the most popular of small-screen genres. In comedy, politics was a man's world – often a silly man's world – to which, due to a combination of ignorance and innate common sense, women remained outsiders. Yet the protagonist of the series was *not* Mrs. but Mr. Prendergast, played as a harmless silly-ass by Derek Nimmo. It focused on the domestic disruption Jane's elevation brought to her husband's life. *My Honourable Mrs.* was, then, a conventional role-reversal comedy from Richard Waring, a writer who specialized in the form, and one that sought humour in the very idea of a woman MP.

Yet Waring's decision to have his lady Member represent the Conservatives was, in television terms, almost radical. As we have seen, in the 1970s Labour dominated the screen: viewers were treated to what were effectively dramatized tutorials on the future of social democracy. Tariq Ali even recommended that fellow Marxists use *Bill Brand* as the basis for discussions on the inadequacies of parliamentarianism.<sup>79</sup> Some of these radical dramas presented the people as capable of acting politically without the intervention of those politicians who claimed to represent them. In Jim Allen's hands, Britain's political past was interpreted in similar terms, and in ways that transcended the border between fact and fiction. As confirmed by how women were depicted, if the small screen gave unprecedented space to radical voices, viewers could still access more traditional pictures of politics. Therefore, at the same time as revolution was being preached to peak-time audiences, Churchill's dramatizations – as an implicit rebuke to contemporary leaders – harked back to a time when Britain was presented as being led by self-sacrificing heroes intent on robustly defending the national interest and overcoming the people's own shortcomings.

No matter how many left-wing voices were given their chance on television in the 1970s – and whatever fears those on the right held about their possible effect – the decade ended in May 1979 with the election of a Conservative government. Thatcher's new administration aimed to solve Britain's crisis by attacking the power of the unions and reducing the influence of the state; it would also lead an assault on the very institutions that had arguably made the 'golden age' of television possible.

## Notes

- 1 O. Postgate, *Seeing Things: A Memoir* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009), p. 273.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 293, 303–8; <http://www.clivebanks.co.uk/Clangers/Voteforfroglet.htm>, accessed 23 February 2012; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_8634000/8634231.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8634000/8634231.stm), accessed 23 February 2012.
- 3 M. Shulman, *The Least Worst Television in the World* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973), p. 39; <http://www.televisionheaven.co.uk/pinky.htm>, accessed 18 October 2012.
- 4 For more on this decade, see N. Tiratsoo, “‘You’ve never had it so bad’: Britain in the 1970s’ in N. Tiratsoo (ed.), *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain Since 1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), pp. 163–90.
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- 6 A. Becket, *When the Lights Went Out* (London: Faber, 2009), p. 301.
- 7 *Daily Mirror*, 14 July 1970.
- 8 C. Whatham, ‘Door-to-door salesman’ in J. Finch (ed.), *Granada Television: The First Generation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 55: italics added. For more on this period, see L. Cooke, *British Television Drama: A History* (London: BFI, 2003), pp. 56–127.
- 9 <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1139047/index.html>, accessed 1 March 2012.
- 10 D. Potter, *The Nigel Barton Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 21.
- 11 <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/102777>, accessed 27 February 2012.
- 12 *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 1975. Allen was a Trotskyist with no love of the Communist party, meaning that Communists also complained about the series.
- 13 J. Caughhie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 88–124.
- 14 *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1976.
- 15 See P. Whiteley, *The Labour Party in Crisis* (London: Methuen, 1983).
- 16 L. Panitch and C. Leys, *The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour* (London: Verso, 1997).
- 17 *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 August 1976; *Morning Star*, 5 June 1976.
- 18 C. Stevens, *The Masters of Sitcom: From Hancock to Steptoe* (London: Michael O’Mara, 2011), p. 9.
- 19 *Daily Mirror*, 6 March 1970.
- 20 *Sun*, 3 January 1972.
- 21 E. Ward, *The Challengers* (London: Elek, 1972), p. xi.
- 22 *TV Times*, 1–7 January 1972.
- 23 *TV Times*, 5–11 February 1972.



- 24 *Sun*, 4 January 1972.
- 25 *Daily Mail*, 4 January and 5 February 1972.
- 26 *Guardian*, 4 January 1972.
- 27 *Daily Telegraph*, 4 January 1972.
- 28 *Tribune*, 11 June 1976.
- 29 *Guardian*, 26 November 2004; *TV Times*, 3–9 August 1974 and 1–7 November 1975.
- 30 *The Stage and Television Today*, 8 August 1974; *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 1975.
- 31 *Sunday Times*, 11 August 1974.
- 32 *Daily Telegraph*, 5 August 1974.
- 33 *Daily Mail*, 5 August 1974.
- 34 *Daily Mail*, 5 November 1975; *News of the World*, 6 June 1976.
- 35 *Times Education Supplement*, 25 June 1976.
- 36 Hare and Brenton's 1973 play *Brassneck*, which depicted local Labour politicians as bereft of principle and corrupted by property developers, was broadcast on BBC One in 1975.
- 37 For more on *Bill Brand*, see M. Poole and J. Wyver, *Powerplays: Trevor Griffiths in Television* (London: BFI, 1984); S. B. Garner, *Trevor Griffiths: Politics, Drama, History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 99–126; and J. Tulloch, *Trevor Griffiths* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 86–98.
- 38 *Evening News*, 24 June 1976
- 39 *Tribune*, 27 August 1976.
- 40 Quoted in Poole et al., *Powerplays*, p. 94; *Morning Star*, 5 June 1976; *TV Times*, 5–11 June, 1976.
- 41 *Guardian*, 3 August 1976; *Sunday Times*, 8 August 1976.
- 42 *Daily Mail*, 8 June 1976; *Daily Express*, 6 July 1976.
- 43 *Daily Telegraph*, 29 June 1976 and 27 July 1976.
- 44 *New Statesman*, 30 July 1976.
- 45 *Guardian*, 2 August 1976.
- 46 *Guardian*, 18 August 1976.
- 47 *Morning Star*, 30 June 1976.
- 48 *Tribune*, 6 August 1976.
- 49 *TV Times*, 5–11 and 12–18 June 1976.
- 50 See P. Madden, 'Jim Allen' in G. W. Brandt (ed.), *British Television Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 36–55 and A. Willis, 'Jim Allen: radical drama beyond "Days of Hope"', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 5:2 (2008), pp. 300–17.
- 51 *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 February 1969; J. Hill, *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television* (London: BFI, 2011), pp. 80–103.
- 52 *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 February 1969; *Daily Mail*, 10 February 1969.

- 53 S. Lacey, *Tony Garnett* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 57–67.
- 54 *Sun*, 20 February 1969.
- 55 *Radio Times*, 6–12 September 1975.
- 56 *Financial Times*, 23 February 1972.
- 57 *TV Times*, 9–15 June 1973.
- 58 *New Society*, 2 October 1975.
- 59 *Daily Telegraph*, 3 June 1975.
- 60 *Daily Mail*, 6 October 1978; *The Times*, 6 October 1978; ATV publicity material, BFI cuttings collection.
- 61 *Guardian*, 27 October 1978.
- 62 *Daily Mail*, 27 November 1974; *Sunday People*, 1 December 1974.
- 63 *Guardian*, 31 December 1999.
- 64 *Daily Mail*, 19 October 1971; *Guardian*, 30 October 1971.
- 65 *Daily Telegraph*, 19 July 1972.
- 66 *Daily Mail*, 8 September 1979; *Sun*, 22 September 1979; *Evening News*, 24 September 1979.
- 67 *Evening News*, 11 July 1972.
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- 69 J. R. Cook, *Dennis Potter: A Life on Screen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 45; G. Fuller, *Potter on Potter* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 31.
- 70 *Tribune*, 10 May 1974.
- 71 <http://www.televisionheaven.co.uk/shoulder.htm>, accessed 25 February 2012.
- 72 *New Statesman*, 3 May 1974; *Financial Times*, 10 April 1974; *Guardian*, 9 May 1974.
- 73 *The Listener*, 25 April 1974; *Guardian*, 9 May 1974.
- 74 *The Guardian*, 2 May 1974
- 75 jpdelz, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071047/reviews>, accessed 25 February 2012; *Daily Mirror*, 9 May 1974.
- 76 *Tribune*, 17 October 1975.
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- 79 Quoted in Tulloch, *Trevor Griffiths*, p. 91.



## Yes, Conspirator

The election of a Conservative government in 1979 brought into Downing Street that weirdest of political animals: a female. But while Margaret Thatcher was just one of nineteen women returned to the Commons in the May general election, it wasn't only her gender that made the new Prime Minister such a striking figure. The Conservative leader wanted to transform Britain by decisively transferring power from the state to the market, that is, from public to private hands. Thatcher believed that the more government was cut back the more individual liberty there would be, and so the more productive the troubled British economy would become.<sup>1</sup>

Partly thanks to Labour's move to the left, which culminated in its appalling performance in the 1983 general election, the Conservatives won a further three general elections. This near-two-decade occupation of Downing Street allowed Thatcher's party to inaugurate and then entrench profound social, economic and cultural changes, the result of which was a richer but more unequal society. While her governments transformed the people's relationship with government, it is nonetheless uncertain that many were any freer. Moreover, through her denigration of public authority and championing of the market, some argue the Prime Minister helped undermine popular confidence in representative democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Thatcher's strategy required the destruction or reshaping of many of the institutions that had defined the post-war consensus: the nationalized industries were sold off; union power curtailed; many restraints on market freedoms abolished. The incoming Prime Minister quoted St Francis of Assisi: 'Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope.' But Thatcher's imposition of what she considered to be the truth meant discord, not harmony, defined her time in office: the recession got worse and unemployment rose, as did disputes in nationalized industries about to be sold off, conspicuously so during the 1984–5 miners' strike. In 1981 there were also riots in many inner

cities and a year later there was even a brief war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. Irish Republican terrorism also intensified: in 1979 Thatcher's *confidant* Airey Neave as well as Lord Mountbatten were assassinated; and in 1984 the IRA came within inches of murdering the Prime Minister. At the same time the Cold War reached a critical stage as the United States deployed a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons on British soil, a move that enjoyed Thatcher's unqualified support. In response, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) revived, as did calls on the left for Britain to leave NATO and abandon its nuclear strike force, the latter policy endorsed by Labour for much of the 1980s.

This was a period of sustained and unusual disharmony, one in which the Prime Minister assumed the character of the Iron Lady, a force for good in her supporters' eyes but for evil to the minds of others. The Prime Minister herself looked on politics as a Manichean battle between light and darkness. As she told Conservative MPs in 1984: 'We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands. We always have to be aware of the enemy within, which is much more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty.'<sup>3</sup> This fevered atmosphere provoked civil servants Sarah Tisdall in 1983 and Clive Ponting a year later to break the Official Secrets Act by leaking government documents. Both were taken to trial for their pains. At the same time, the unexplained death of an elderly anti-nuclear activist Hilda Murrell became a *cause célèbre*, leading some to imagine she had been murdered by the intelligence services.<sup>4</sup> The publication of *Spycatcher* (1987), subtitled the 'candid autobiography' of Peter Wright, a former Assistant Director of MI5, gave credence to the belief that the security services perpetrated such terrible things.<sup>5</sup> Among other revelations, Wright admitted intelligence officers had plotted against Harold Wilson, believing him to be a Soviet agent. The more the government tried to ban Wright's book the more likely, some believed, he was telling the truth.

In the battle of good against evil, the Prime Minister looked on the BBC as riddled with appeasers and traitors. In 1986 she appointed Marmaduke Hussey as Chair of the BBC governors, hoping he would bring the Corporation into line.<sup>6</sup> As the decade went on, the broadcasting environment in which the BBC and ITV operated also changed. Channel 4, a new terrestrial channel, was launched in 1982, with a brief to air alternative perspectives. The most significant innovation was, however, the start of pay-per-view satellite television in 1989, the most important of such broadcasters being BSkyB, largely owned by Rupert Murdoch, proprietor of the *Sun*, *Times* and *News of the World* and a keen Thatcher supporter. Satellite television introduced new competition for audiences and – for ITV companies – advertising revenue. To further

increase the influence of the market in television, the government introduced the 1990 Broadcasting Act. This changed how ITV franchises were awarded, placing greater importance on the size of the bid and reducing the significance of commitments to public service programming. The Act consequently piled further pressure on the commercial channel to make cheaper programmes that delivered bigger audiences.

These transformations meant 'serious' drama and especially those one-off (and costly) plays that had given voice to the likes of Trevor Griffiths and Jim Allen in the 1970s became almost as rare as a female MP. The former's *Country* (BBC, 1981) and the latter's *United Kingdom* (BBC, 1981) marked the effective end of their contributions to television. Politically coherent voices that critiqued politics and offered (invariably left-wing) alternatives continued to be heard but were mostly confined to the theatre and so generally watched only by middle-class and middle-aged audiences. Conspiracy thrillers took their place on television. If many such dramas had a left-of-centre provenance, they ironically echoed Thatcher's own mistrust of public authority. Comedies also became increasingly vituperative in their denunciations of the political class. Yet, paradoxically, the period saw the success of the sophisticated BBC sitcom *Yes, Minister*. But while its humour was subtle, the programme still advanced the view that those in government were unworthy of the people's trust.

### A Thatcherite comedy?

On the evening of Monday, 25 February 1980 BBC Two broadcast the first episode of *Yes, Minister*, a sitcom that would run for thirty-eight episodes, first under its original title and then, from 1986 until 1988, that of *Yes, Prime Minister*. The series focused on the relationship between Jim Hacker (as Minister for Administrative Affairs and then Prime Minister) and Sir Humphrey Appleby (Permanent Secretary in the Department and then Cabinet Secretary). The basic joke was that Hacker, the elected representative, found it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to govern given the extent to which Appleby resisted his attempts to introduce change. Appleby was of course meant to be the politician's servant and so supposed to enact his will, but he believed it was Hacker's job to do the bidding of the civil service. As *Today's* television critic put it, the series was essentially saying: 'it doesn't matter a bean which way we vote or which party gets in, because real power is exercised by non-elected, mostly invisible civil servants who are not accountable to anyone but themselves.'<sup>7</sup> This was

why, co-author Jonathan Lynn claimed, the series never depicted Parliament: 'government does not take place there. The House of Commons is theatre. That's where the performance takes place. Decisions are taken elsewhere.'<sup>8</sup>

BBC schedulers anticipated that this kind of sitcom would have a limited appeal, hence its airing on BBC Two, then a channel associated with relatively 'highbrow' programmes. Indeed, Paul Eddington, who played Hacker, claimed the first script he received

broke entirely new ground in that, for the first time that I could remember, viewers of a situation comedy were being invited not only to laugh but at the same time to think about matters of vital concern to them – in this case, the way they were being governed.

He initially doubted many would want to do that.<sup>9</sup> Despite such pessimism the series was soon repeated on BBC One and found a permanent home on that channel, where it was watched by upwards of eight million viewers. It was also adapted for radio and books based on its scripts spent months in the bestsellers list. Undoubtedly the most popular sitcom ever made about politics, *Yes, Minister* also won unprecedented critical acclaim, being regarded by some as 'our most sophisticated political comedy since Trollope'.<sup>10</sup>

Ministers and civil servants had not exactly been absent from comedies and dramas. BBC radio's long-running *The Men from the Ministry* (1962–77) and the short-lived ITV sitcom *If It Moves File It* (1970) promoted the idea that civil servants were harmless, absurd and inept figures. Conversely, nor was the notion that civil servants might sometimes boss their ministers totally unknown: in 1954 Maurice Edelman's *A Dream of Treason* has one character claim: 'The politician's never been born who in the long run can stand up to a determined Civil Servant'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Antony Jay, who wrote the scripts with Lynn, had considerable experience adapting Edelman's novels for the stage and television. *Yes, Minister* was, however, greeted as a 'new kind of comedy' given the extent to which it was based on interviews with former denizens of Whitehall. There was even talk of a 'deep throat' within the government machine who checked the scripts for accuracy.<sup>12</sup> As Lynn asserted:

Our primary intention is to make people laugh. But people believe that what they're seeing is the truth about the way they are governed. We're writing fiction, but you can draw your own conclusions.<sup>13</sup>

Jay was less coy when he told the *Daily Mail* that the politics viewers saw on television news was a half-truth; *Yes, Minister* showed, he claimed, the other

half.<sup>14</sup> Certainly most critics believed in the ‘uncanny accuracy’ of the series.<sup>15</sup> One admitted that the writers’ ‘ears [are] so close to the corridors of power parquet that I accept their every characterisation and observation as gospel.’<sup>16</sup> The former Labour minister Gerald Kaufman confirmed it was ‘chillingly accurate’, while the *Morning Star* critic also welcomed the series for exposing, as had Tony Benn and others on the left, the power and bias of top civil servants.<sup>17</sup> When Ludovic Kennedy (one of a number of real television journalists and newsreaders who played themselves in the series) interviewed Hacker, one reviewer even claimed the latter’s ‘bumbling, pompous innocence’ was ‘as familiar as virtually any episode of *Panorama*’.<sup>18</sup>

There was therefore a strong sense that the series was lifting the veil on a world still unfamiliar to most television viewers. However, unlike when Edelman and Trollope had performed the same trick, the picture revealed was *not* admirable. When, during the third episode of the first season, Sir Humphrey states that it is the civil service that governs rather than the politicians, there is an audible gasp from the studio audience. Shocking or not, *Yes, Minister* became many people’s source for understanding what Whitehall was really like. Nigel Hawthorne, who played Appleby, took his neighbours to the recording of an early episode and reported: ‘They kept on coming back, and they are just ordinary people, but they said: “we never knew it was like this”’.<sup>19</sup> As the producer of *The Thick of It* (2005–12) Armando Iannucci later asserted, *Yes, Minister* ‘was more than a sitcom, it was a crash course in Contemporary Political Studies – it opened the lid on the way the Government really operated’.<sup>20</sup>

Lynn subsequently revealed that the writers’ ‘best source’ were the published diaries of the Labour Cabinet minister Richard Crossman supplemented by interviews with two of Harold Wilson’s advisers, Marcia Falkender and Bernard Donoghue, both of whom had served in Downing Street during the 1960s and 1970s. This was, of course, the period when Britain was said to be ungovernable and the series was coloured by that experience. In fact *Yes, Minister* would have been broadcast some three years earlier had it not been for the minority status of the Labour administration meaning a general election always seemed imminent: BBC executives did not want to run a series so critical of government at such a fevered time. Thatcher’s secure Commons majority meant it could finally be launched.<sup>21</sup>

If critics lauded the series for its presumed accuracy, *Yes, Minister* was also widely seen as ‘cynical’, although most believed its scepticism appropriate. When the series promoted him to Prime Minister, Lynn said of Jim Hacker:



He's a politician who is primarily a public-relations figure, a good public performer, who is not remarkably intelligent but who is talented in being evasive. He is the leader of his party, who is briefed by lots of people and then put on television. He gives the illusion that he is responsible to the public, whereas in fact he is simply gathering their votes in order to remain in power.<sup>22</sup>

Eddington confirmed: 'Jim would concede anything and everything if he thought it would give him a little bit of extra kudos with voters. Ramsay MacDonald would be Jim's model – well meaning, vain and ineffectual.'<sup>23</sup> A Liberal supporter with a keen interest in politics, Eddington, however, admitted that the series' scorn for politicians sometimes disturbed him.<sup>24</sup>

While the series was running Jay denied *Yes, Minister* furthered any political objective, claiming 'we simply see that the world of politics and government is rich with comic opportunities and possibilities, and it seems a pity not to expose, explore and exploit them.'<sup>25</sup> If at least one contemporary critic believed it was 'resolutely apolitical' the series nonetheless represented a coming together of two distinct but complementary ways of viewing politics.<sup>26</sup> Lynn was a product of the 1960s satire boom and embraced its anti-establishment perspective, seeing all politicians as 'unprincipled hypocrites.'<sup>27</sup> The older Jay, author of *The Householder's Guide to Community Defence Against Bureaucratic Aggression* (1972), sympathized with the real Prime Minister's politics. He even helped write some of her speeches and gave informal advice to the Family Policy Group established by Thatcher to encourage parents to be more 'responsible.'<sup>28</sup> This regard was reciprocated and from its earliest days *Yes, Minister* was described as 'Mrs. Thatcher's favourite television series' and she let it be known that it provided her with 'hours of pure joy.'<sup>29</sup> In correspondence with Lynn, Thatcher praised the scripts for giving such a 'perspective' 'insight into the thought-processes of politicians and civil servants.'<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in 1984, with the help of Press Secretary Bernard Ingham, the Prime Minister wrote a short sketch, which she performed with Eddington and Hawthorne when they received an award from Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association. Neither actor – one gay and the other a pacifist – wanted to participate, fearing Thatcher was appropriating the series for her own purposes. But in the end they obediently, if uneasily, read their lines.<sup>31</sup>

*Yes, Minister*, then, gave viewers a very particular perspective on Whitehall. If it mined the comic possibilities in the Hacker-Appleby relationship – which evoked Bertie Wooster and Jeeves – and thereby highlighted tensions that existed between elected representatives and their civil servants, it also

questioned the possibility that either worked for the public good. Politician and bureaucrat were presented as self-interested figures who looked on the public as a source of votes and cash: in other words, neither represented the electorate. As Jay later conceded, this viewpoint owed much to public choice theory, the very outlook that underpinned Thatcher's philosophy:

The fallacy that public choice economics took on was the fallacy that government is working entirely for the benefit of the citizen; and this was reflected by showing that in any [episode] in the programme, in *Yes, Minister*, we showed that almost everything that the government has to decide is a conflict between two lots of private interest – that of the politicians and that of the civil servants trying to advance their own careers and improve their own lives. And that's why public choice economics, which explains why all this was going on, was at the root of almost every episode of *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed the left-wing journalist Bruce Eder went so far as to claim that every episode said

that the only thing standing between the British people and true reform of their government are (a) leaders with sufficient courage to make hard decisions (like Maggie), with good solid Parliamentary majorities instead of fragile coalitions (again, like Maggie); and (b) a recalcitrant civil service.

It was, he asserted, 'a weekly commercial in support of Thatcherism'.<sup>33</sup> While Lynn subsequently claimed to be uneasy about such a close association with the Prime Minister's politics, he nonetheless wrote to her in 1983 to express 'my congratulations and my good wishes on your magnificent and excellent election victory'.<sup>34</sup>

The basic premise of the series was certainly one that found favour with the real incumbent of Number 10: the state was too big, inefficient, did not reflect the public interest and should be reduced. Thus, in 'The Compassionate Society' a new hospital with 500 administrative and ancillary staff but no patients is presented as the acme of the civil service ideal, being run solely for the benefit of National Health Service (NHS) employees.<sup>35</sup> When Jim Hacker commits himself, in the episode 'The Writing on the Wall', to reducing 'red tape' and slimming down what he calls the 'over-manned and feather-bedded' civil service, this is presented as a righteous ambition – and the one Appleby consistently tries to frustrate.<sup>36</sup>

However, the series took on another issue close to Conservative hearts, presenting comprehensive education as epitomizing civil service practice. As explained in 'The Bed of Nails', abolishing grammar schools became government

policy not because it was in the interests of the pupils but because the National Union of Teachers wanted it – and teachers were the chief clients of the Department of Education.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, in ‘The National Education Service’ state schools are described as having low academic attainment, a non-competitive ethos and teaching subjects such as what Hacker calls ‘homosexual technique’.<sup>38</sup> ‘The Greasy Pole’ moreover shows how politics impedes entrepreneurial effort when Hacker prevents a profitable new chemical factory being built in a marginal constituency to appease locals’ irrational fears.<sup>39</sup> The affected businessman complains ministers rarely help those like him but instead bend over backwards to placate the unions. Similarly, the state is presented as featherbedding those on the dole. In ‘The Tangled Web’ Sir Humphrey says in an unguarded moment that unemployment would be halved in weeks if people who refused two job offers lost their benefits – but that no government had the guts to do this. The viewer is meant to believe him.<sup>40</sup>

The unrepresentative nature of politics is an endemic theme. Sir Humphrey notes in ‘The Economy Drive’ that MPs are chosen by ‘thirty-five men in grubby hats or thirty-five women in silly hats’ while Hacker, in ‘A Real Partnership’, calls being a backbench MP ‘a vast subsidized ego-trip’ for ‘self-opinionated wind-bags and busy-bodies’.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, however bureaucratic Whitehall might be, local government is, according to ‘The Challenge’, even worse – and councils a byword for waste and extravagance, spending money on things like ‘gay bereavement centres’.<sup>42</sup> In ‘Power to the People’ Hacker claims most councils are run by ‘militant loonies’, ‘corrupt morons’ who ‘ruin the inner cities ... let schools fall to bits ... demoralize the police and undermine law and order’.<sup>43</sup> As a consequence the minister wants to introduce direct democracy to local government. This forces Sir Humphrey and a far-left council leader to form an unlikely alliance to prevent the public being given a louder voice in local affairs. As the latter puts it, there is a danger ordinary people might demand the introduction of ‘silly, conventional ideas’. Hacker abandons this reform, however, when told that direct democracy would make the parties irrelevant and so allow MPs to become independent of the Whips – and *his* orders.

The series therefore presents British democracy as a racket run by the political class for its own benefit. As Sir Humphrey claims matter-of-factly in ‘Power to the People’:

British democracy recognizes that you need a system to protect the important things in life and keep them out of the hands of the barbarians. Things like opera, Radio 3, the countryside, the law, the universities. Both of them. And we are

that system. We run a civilized, aristocratic, government machine tempered by occasional general elections. Since 1832 we have been gradually excluding the voter from government. Now we've got them to a point where they just vote once every five years for which bunch of buffoons will try to interfere with our policies.

While such sentiments would have pleased Thatcher, if not all Conservatives, the series did question her government's defence and foreign policies. Once he becomes Prime Minister, Hacker decides Britain does not need a new generation of nuclear missiles, so proposes cancelling Trident and instead building up the country's conventional forces. This was a highly controversial topic at the time, one over which Labour and the Conservatives were at loggerheads. Hacker seemed to favour the position outlined by the former, leading some to view the series as 'subversive' on this issue.<sup>44</sup> Diplomatic *realpolitik* was also criticized. In 'The Whisky Priest', Italian terrorists are discovered using British weapons, which provokes an outraged Hacker into wanting to expose the matter, until he is informed that if he does awkward questions will be asked about how the highly profitable British arms industry sells its goods.<sup>45</sup>

### The comedy of ridicule

While *Yes, Minister* presented its humour in a realistic and nuanced manner, many other comedies focusing on politics did so in a hyper-real way, with cartoonish, one-dimensional characters. *Spitting Image* (ITV, 1984–96) helped set the tone by holding up all politicians to ridicule through the use of grotesque puppet caricatures and broad satiric writing, the ultimate conclusion of which was that politicians were a combination of the stupid, venal and mad. The series' producer, John Lloyd, claimed: 'the high and mighty have had it all too much their own way and anything that can be done to question what they do is good'. However, he claimed that *Spitting Image* had to go further in its search for humour than did 1960s satirists as 'The fact that it's no longer dangerous and exciting to say an MP is corrupt or lazy – as it was then – makes it all much harder.'<sup>46</sup>

The bluntly anti-political nature of the series was confirmed by Peter Fluck, one of those responsible for the puppets, when he stated: 'I just hate people who stand up there and tell us "I should be organising you all"; I just hate them.'<sup>47</sup> This initially concerned a few reviewers, one of whom considered *Spitting Image* guilty of merely making indiscriminate 'savagely and hurtful personal attacks'.<sup>48</sup> The series' twelve-year run – albeit on ITV's 'alternative' time slot of later

Sunday evenings – suggested that those who appreciated such humour were nonetheless a significant part of the television audience. Certainly some critics thought that ‘These malevolent puppets are the only sources of satire around. Satire punches huge holes in pompous facades and fat pretension and is needed in these unholy times.’<sup>49</sup>

If *Spitting Image* was the most prominent example of this trend, *Whoops Apocalypse* (ITV, 1982) had preceded it by two years. That Andrew Marshall and David Renwick’s series lasted just one season was due to their premise that politicians’ stupidity would inevitably lead to nuclear holocaust. In the midst of a revived Cold War, their series imagined a dumb movie-star President – clearly inspired by Ronald Reagan, elected to the White House in 1980 – and his religion-mad advisor taking the world over the edge, while Britain’s ineffectual Prime Minister fantasizes he is a superhero. The *Daily Express* believed it would ‘offend every government and institution in sight’ and led the *Financial Times* to concede that ‘mankind as a political animal tends towards absurdity’.<sup>50</sup> Marshall and Renwick turned to the big screen 1987, but this time *Whoops Apocalypse* satirized the recent Falklands War and had Peter Cook play the Prime Minister, effectively reprising his once-shocking Macmillan impersonation. The indiscriminate ridicule heaped on all the movie’s political characters meant, however, that nobody in particular was offended, such that even the *Daily Mail* believed readers should go see it, if they liked ‘tasteless, pointed and irreverent’ comedies.<sup>51</sup>

Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran’s *The New Statesman* (ITV, 1987–92) ostensibly took aim at Thatcherism through the Conservative backbencher Alan B’Sard. Rik Mayall, who played B’Sard, even claimed the series would help mobilize opinion against Thatcherism.<sup>52</sup> Certainly some on the left, like Janet Street-Porter, saw B’Sard as embodying

all that’s most loathsome about the new Tories. They’ve come up from nowhere, married well, want all the attributes of yuppiedom like fast cars, radio telephones and masses of power. They clog up wine bars, flash their Rolexes, primp in XJS mirrors and dominate restaurants with their braying arrogance.<sup>53</sup>

However, as others noted, B’Sard was but a lightning rod for a more profound political disillusion. Peter Patterson detected

a streak of rage ... beneath the slapstick surface ... that goes way beyond a disenchantment with the present administration ... It is not saying: ‘What a rogue this MP B’Sard is,’ but, ‘MPs are all rogues or simpletons and the system itself is thoroughly rotten’ ... Its message is the moral degeneration of

democracy itself, and it is the show's profound contempt and distaste for the democratic process which leaves such a bitter taste.<sup>54</sup>

Even so, this was a sentiment some believed appropriate, one critic commenting that 'just this sort of crudity, applied to the pompous, prim and proper milieu of the Mother of Parliament makes it all the more effective. What a rapier can't do a sawn-off shotgun can – make mincemeat of pretensions.'<sup>55</sup>

## Enemies without and within

During the 1980s the IRA remained the most dangerous terrorist organization in Britain, although other groups often originating in the Middle East did sometimes leave their mark. Such activity spawned a number of action adventures and thrillers, which, rather out of step with the general trend, emphasized democracy's profound dependence on the military and security services.

*Who Dares Wins* (1982) was producer Euan Lloyd's attempt to cash in on interest in the Special Air Service (SAS) after its members stormed the Iranian embassy in London in May 1980 and freed twenty-six hostages held by gunmen demanding autonomy for Khūzestān. Lloyd had worked in the action-adventure genre for many years, one of his most successful films being *The Wild Geese* (1978), which glorified the role of white mercenaries in Africa. His 1982 movie starred Lewis Collins, who also featured in the popular television series *The Professionals* (ITV, 1977–81), where he played, coincidentally enough, a former member of the SAS. In fact, the film and series shared many of the same production staff, indicating the extent to which they were cut from the same cloth. *The Professionals* anticipated the themes contained in *Who Dares Wins*, charting as it did the adventures of agents working in CI5, a fictional government law enforcement agency whose generous remit meant it tackled an eclectic range of perceived threats, from Communist spies to Middle East and home-grown (but KGB-financed) terrorists to organized crime.

George Cowley was head of CI5. Described in one episode as 'not a very civil civil servant', he was the very antithesis of Sir Humphrey Appleby, being a man with a strict moral code and no carnal weaknesses other than a liking for fine malt whisky: he embodied the righteous rule of law. Under Cowley's fierce leadership CI5 thwarted all manner of attacks on democracy, including the attempted blackmail of a member of the shadow cabinet by the KGB and a German terrorist group modelled on the Baader-Meinhof Gang, which

assassinated an MP. The agency also exposed political corruption. In an episode written by Edmund Ward (of *The Challengers*) and broadcast in November 1978, Cowley acts as an avenging angel of democratic probity. He finds evidence that a leading building firm had secured government contracts through bribing a minister, civil servants, councillors and police officers. Cowley's contempt for those who had systematically betrayed the people's trust is palpable.

*Who Dares Wins* was, as even the critic of the *Sunday Express* put it, 'a protracted public relations job for the SAS'.<sup>56</sup> Evoking memories of the Iranian embassy siege, the film ends with the SAS freeing hostages (including the US Secretary of State and British Foreign Secretary) held at the US Ambassador's official residence. Instead of Khūzestānis, however, the hostage-takers were extremist peace campaigners financed by an Arab-looking figure who travelled about the West subsidizing any number of radical organizations. While the script has an SAS officer distinguish between those 'ordinary, decent people committed to peace' and the 'hard-core' figures who in the film use terrorism to secure nuclear disarmament, CND saw it as attempting to discredit its cause. Certainly the movie failed to clearly distinguish the two groups, with its opening scenes mixing footage of a real CND demonstration with that of actors playing the fictional terrorists.

*Who Dares Wins* showed the extent to which democracy needed the protection of bodies like the SAS: the statesmen held hostage are helpless and elderly, wanting the youthful, armed vigour of the SAS to liberate them. Moreover, the film concluded on an especially alarmist note, suggesting that members of the Establishment sought to appease terrorism. A character referred to as 'Sir Richard' expresses disapproval of the SAS action and greets the terrorists' financier as an old friend. It is not clear if Sir Richard is a top civil servant or a minister – one critic believed he was a Labour MP.<sup>57</sup> That latter theory certainly has some credibility given the film concludes with the pair going to lunch as a list of recent (and real) terrorist outrages rolls up the screen, to the strains of the Red Flag, the Labour party's official anthem.

The terrorists in *North Sea Hijack* (1979) were motivated by financial considerations rather than ideology but faced an implacable – and female – Prime Minister who evoked the country's new premier. In the same year as *Who Dares Wins* showed the SAS freeing a fictional Foreign Secretary, Hardiman Scott's novel *Operation 10* (1982) had the IRA abduct the real Iron Lady. Scott had been a leading BBC political journalist and he took to writing thrillers on his retirement. *Operation 10* was his first effort and suggested that, despite Conservative fears, the BBC was not completely stuffed full of left-wingers.

While the IRA snatch Thatcher, she lives up to her iron-willed reputation such that her captors come to reluctantly admire their prisoner. Moreover, the likes of Deputy Prime Minister Willie Whitelaw and Cabinet Secretary Sir Robert Armstrong are shown demonstrating calm efficiency during the crisis. And, of course, Thatcher is freed from captivity unharmed, thanks to the police and security services.

Set in a near future after Britons, exhausted by mass unemployment, return to power a Labour government committed to unilateralism, Scott's second thriller, *No Exit* (1984), is a warning against the consequences of such folly. Following Labour's real 1983 manifesto he has the government abandon nuclear weapons, leave NATO as well as the EEC and order the US to evacuate its military bases. Having, as Scott imagines it, made a bad economic situation disastrous, Labour also leaves Britain weakened militarily and isolated diplomatically. Voters consequently swing back to the Conservatives, but before the new administration can repair the damage elements in the Soviet Union attempt an invasion, which the dashing, conventionally masculine Conservative Prime Minister thwarts in the nick of time.

It was no surprise that the *Guardian* reviewer claimed of *No Exit* 'Mrs T should love it.'<sup>58</sup> We don't know if Thatcher read Scott's thriller, but Frederick Forsyth claimed the Prime Minister enjoyed his *The Fourth Protocol*, published in the same year.<sup>59</sup> Forsyth was a well-established writer of bestsellers that mixed fact with not-implausible fiction. *The Fourth Protocol* told how the General Secretary of the Soviet Union sought to swing a general election Labour's way. Forsyth has the real British defector Kim Philby convince the Secretary that 'dedicated, dyed-in-the-wool Marxist Leninists' – consisting of those like the actual leader of the Greater London Council Ken Livingstone, who 'eats and breathes politics twenty-four hours in every day' – had established a firm grip on the party. Indeed, Forsyth devotes over twenty pages to Philby's memo outlining this 'fact.'<sup>60</sup> Philby claims that while the 1983 defeat had seen Labour apparently revert to moderation under Neil Kinnock, this was but a tactic, for should Kinnock ever win power he would be immediately toppled by the Hard Left, who would install their own candidate. The resulting government would take Britain out of NATO and ultimately into the Soviet camp. It was therefore in the interests of the Soviet Union for Labour to defeat Thatcher at the forthcoming general election.

Having spent billions of roubles failing to encourage voters to embrace unilateralism (Philby bitterly describes the British working class as 'the most conservative in the world') he proposed that only something truly shocking



would persuade ‘even level-headed’ Britons to turn to Labour.<sup>61</sup> This ‘shock’ was to be the explosion of a nuclear device close to a US base, so Britons would blame the Americans and send millions of them into the neutralist camp. As the election campaign reaches its conclusion British intelligence thwarts the plot, thanks in part to the by-now inevitable intervention of the SAS. The bomb having been defused, Thatcher secures re-election and the General Secretary is deposed by moderate elements in Moscow. All is well with the world.

Forsyth was clearly no friend of CND, describing those women who established peace camps outside US military bases to protest against the stationing of cruise missiles as having ‘infested the fields’ and being ‘possessed of the strangest personal habits.’<sup>62</sup> When adapting the novel for a 1988 film version he was, however, forced to collaborate with those whose political views were very different from his own. In particular, director John Mackenzie – who had worked with Ken Loach – wanted attacks on Labour dropped because he claimed they would bore cinema audiences.<sup>63</sup> As a result, when *The Fourth Protocol* reached the big screen all references to Britain’s domestic politics had been excised.

### Conspiracies within

Euan Lloyd made just one more film after *Who Dares Wins* and *The Fourth Protocol* was the last Forsyth novel adapted for the big screen. Beginning with the BBC Two dramatization of Robert McCrumb’s novel *In the Secret State* (1980), continuing with the film *Defence of the Realm* and culminating with the BBC Two series *Edge of Darkness*, 1985 was the year in which a very different kind of thriller made its mark. These dramas expanded on fears tackled more tentatively and indirectly in earlier times by the likes of Nigel Kneale’s *Quatermass II* (BBC, 1955) by presenting the security services in a strikingly sinister way. Indeed, the intelligence and armed services, as well as other elements in government cast as in cahoots with big business and Washington, were depicted as conspiring against the very people they were meant to protect.

*In the Secret State*, according to Peter Ackroyd, appealed to ‘a morbid but infinite capacity to be outraged by the attack of “them” against “us” by presenting Britain as on the verge of becoming a police state.’<sup>64</sup> Playing on fears about the intrusive and extensive nature of the surveillance of supposed enemies of the state, the adaptation of a novel set in the last years of the Labour government, however, suggested these powers could be abused by the far left as much as the

Establishment. In contrast, those reviewing *Defence of the Realm* and *Edge of Darkness* placed them squarely in the context of the aforementioned Tisdall and Ponting prosecutions and Hilda Murrell's death, believing they made these fictional conspiracies more believable. Indeed, when reviewing *Defence of the Realm* one critic claimed recent events had made the kinds of apparently outlandish claims made in such screen dramas now appear reasonable.<sup>65</sup> *Edge of Darkness* was even described in *The Times* as a 'sophisticated parable of the 1980s', one that proved so popular – attracting nearly five million viewers – that it was quickly repeated on BBC One.<sup>66</sup> The majority of those who watched the series certainly considered it 'all too believable' and provided them with 'food for thought'.<sup>67</sup>

*Defence of the Realm* and *Edge of Darkness* both had initially apolitical protagonists, respectively a journalist and police officer. Starting as trusting innocents, they each stumble across complex government conspiracies to cover up a nuclear near-accident in the former and in the latter to obscure the illegal production of weapons-grade plutonium. Both stories take these *naifs* into the heart of the 'nuclear state', something Michael Wearing, who produced *Edge of Darkness*, claimed was 'a state-within-a-state', which 'has grown up without public debate or democratic control, and threatens the very survival of our planet'.<sup>68</sup> Judith Williamson believed *Defence of the Realm* developed this idea further, taking many contemporaries' 'half-formed fears and paranoid' about the existence of a 'nuclear state' by representing it 'as a sort of secret ministry ... conveniently vague, closer to the psychical than political reality'.<sup>69</sup>

While Nick Mullen is a tabloid journalist, *Defence of the Realm* shows how far the media is implicated in obscuring truth on behalf of government. The owner of the paper on which Mullen works even has a major financial interest in the construction of US air bases, so prevents the publication of his story that an accident on one such base nearly led to a nuclear explosion. Indeed, Mullen had unknowingly written a bogus story instigated by Special Branch aimed at discrediting an MP threatening to expose the incident. Thanks to documents leaked by a civil servant who is subsequently prosecuted for breaking the Official Secrets Act, Mullen realizes the intelligence services have misled him. Finding it impossible to publish the truth in Britain, Mullen manages to get his story into the West German press, although by then he has been assassinated in a staged domestic 'accident'.

While Troy Kennedy Martin had worked on his script since the middle 1970s, the conspiracy outlined in *Edge of Darkness* also consciously evoked contemporary events, specifically the Thatcher government's privatization

programme.<sup>70</sup> In Martin's series ministers want to sell the state-owned nuclear power industry and allow Northmoor, officially a nuclear waste facility, to be bought by Grogan, an American capitalist described as 'the first nuclear entrepreneur'. Northmoor is, however, secretly producing plutonium and Grogan wants it to fuel the US government's escalation of the Cold War arms race. Further suggesting its relevance to real politics, the series begins with Labour MP Michael Meacher, a close associate of Tony Benn, addressing students and claiming that new political forces were emerging to challenge the *status quo*.

The protagonist Craven is an honest copper whose daughter is a member of one such radical group, an environmental activist who discovers Northmoor's secret. The old forces based in Parliament are in contrast helpless or complicit. Thus, while the Commons' Energy Select Committee brings to light evidence that Northmoor employees are guilty of murder, MPs cannot prevent the facility falling into Grogan's hands. The conspiracy, then, succeeds and with Craven left shouting helplessly from a hillside only a few days away from death by radiation poisoning, Martin implies that nothing will stop the world from being consumed by a nuclear disaster.

Nuclear weapons also lay at the heart of the conspiracy outlined three years later in Channel 4's adaptation of Chris Mullin's novel *A Very British Coup*. In 1980 Mullin, then editor of *Tribune* and a Benn *confidant*, wondered what might happen should the kind of government towards which the Labour left was at that time successfully working – one committed to unilateral nuclear disarmament – ever be elected.<sup>71</sup> His novel suggests things will not end well: the Establishment – top civil servants, intelligence officers, media barons, the BBC, as well as elements within the Labour movement itself – conspire with the White House to overthrow it. Mullin consequently claimed his novel was 'written for anyone who is concerned about parliamentary democracy'.<sup>72</sup> The novel was published in 1982, and although Benn's star was on the wane, a Labour general election victory based on his programme still remained possible.

If nothing else, the novel gave an insight into the kind of opposition the Labour left imagined it faced. None of Mullin's acquaintances thought a radical left-wing government would be allowed to implement its programme. Indeed, when Benn reviewed the novel, he claimed it illustrated 'what might actually happen'.<sup>73</sup> Labour's decisive defeat in 1983, one many blamed on Benn and unilateralism, put an end to such speculation. In the years that followed the party moved back to more centrist policies; in 1989 Kinnock embraced multi-lateralism. When Channel 4 broadcast *A Very British Coup* in 1988 it therefore appeared during a very different political moment. Yet, if the election of a

far-left government now seemed unlikely, series producer Ann Skinner claimed *Spycatcher's* revelations meant Mullin's hypothesis could no longer be regarded as a fantasy.<sup>74</sup> Certainly many reviewers considered Wright's book made *A Very British Coup* more believable.<sup>75</sup>

For the Labour left, the series vindicated what MP Ken Livingstone claimed was 'the very shallow hold of democracy and freedom in Britain today', making the point 'in a much more effective way than any socialist theoretical tract could have done.'<sup>76</sup> The novel had concluded pessimistically with Harry Perkins, the noble Labour Prime Minister, blackmailed by the intelligence services into a quiet resignation to be succeeded by a colleague acceptable to the Americans. The television series ended on a slightly more ambiguous note. In response to blackmail, Perkins defiantly calls an election, although the sound of helicopters and references to the 1973 CIA-engineered coup in Chile suggest he will not be allowed to win. As in the majority of such dramas, it looked like another Establishment conspiracy would succeed.

### Politics *is* a conspiracy

*Edge of Darkness* suggested that surveillance techniques developed in Northern Ireland were being deployed on the mainland. *Hidden Agenda* (1990), one of the few feature films about the Ulster conflict, made similar claims. Indeed, while ostensibly about the 'Troubles', the movie was more about the subversion of Westminster.<sup>77</sup> Written by Jim Allen and directed by Ken Loach, it was inspired by John Stalker's investigation into a number of suspicious shootings of IRA suspects by the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which he abandoned in 1986 after being falsely accused of fraud. The story also reproduces allegations made by the former intelligence officer Colin Wallace, an advisor on the film, about how the security services undermined Westminster politicians, which echoed those made in *Spycatcher*. The film furthermore criticizes government policy in Northern Ireland, describing Ulster as a colony fighting for its freedom. Audiences are even lectured on this theme when Jim McAllister, a real-life Sinn Fein politician, playing a representative of the party, compares the IRA – presumably for the benefit of an American audience – to George Washington.

In the film Peter Kerrigan is a British police officer, charged with investigating the killing of an American civil rights activist.<sup>78</sup> The murder, it transpires, was at the behest of the intelligence services and Kerrigan uncovers a tape suggesting a wider conspiracy that includes Conservative politicians, business leaders, top

civil servants and the intelligence services as well as the White House. This is aimed to first discredit the Conservative leader Edward Heath so Thatcher can replace him; the conspirators are then said to have fostered the industrial unrest that led to the Winter of Discontent, which facilitated Thatcher's victory in 1979. Confronted by Kerrigan, the leading conspirators – who include a thinly veiled version of the late Airey Neave – blandly admit their culpability, with one asserting: 'My dear chap, politics *is* a conspiracy.' Fearing the consequences for his family should he persist, Kerrigan backs off and returns home. As with *A Very British Coup*, the film ends on an uncertain note, with the murdered activist's partner still trying to expose this conspiracy, although given the forces ranged against her, it seems unlikely she will succeed.

If *Hidden Agenda* used conspiracy to explain why Labour lost power in 1979, according to Alan Bleasdale's Channel 4 series *GBH* (1991) it was also the reason why the party was so divided during the 1980s. This series derived from a novel Bleasdale had tried to write during the mid-1980s when Militant Tendency, a clandestine Trotskyist group that aimed to take over the Labour party from within, had assumed control of Liverpool city council.<sup>79</sup> Militant was active across the country but it was in Bleasdale's Liverpool where its impact was most pronounced. Liverpool council even rejected spending restrictions imposed by the Conservative government because Militant hoped resistance would spark a revolutionary working-class response. Instead, the city faced financial meltdown, leading the national Labour party to suspend its organization in Liverpool as a prelude to expelling those suspected of Militant membership.

Bleasdale, a non-aligned socialist, made his name with *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982), a series that highlighted the plight of a group of unemployed men in Liverpool. Horrified by the policies of the Thatcher government as well as the extreme response of elements of the left, Bleasdale subsequently explained that *GBH* reflected the extent to which 'I was just very angry by the manner with which we in this country were being treated by the politicians of this country'. *GBH* constituted, he claimed, 'a plea for common decency'. This graciousness is embodied by his hero, Jim Nelson, a mild-mannered head teacher of a school for children with special needs. Nelson claims to speak for 'all those of us who refused to learn about life from manifestos and Marx and *Das Kapital*' and he defines his idea of socialism as 'the redistribution not only of wealth but also of care and concern and decency and belief in human kindness'.

Nelson's antagonist is Michael Murray, Labour leader of the northern city council for whom he works. If both are Labour members, Murray – a

character some saw as inspired by the charismatic Liverpool Militant Derek Hatton – was corrupt, vain and under the influence of a clandestine Trotskyist group. Murray employs thugs to intimidate Nelson for inadvertently breaking a citywide strike and has them frighten his vulnerable pupils in the most upsetting manner. Those who believed Militant were ‘good socialists’ – like Labour MP Frank Allaun – thought Bleasdale smeared people who only wanted help their fellow men.<sup>80</sup> Others, like the *Sun*’s Garry Bushell, initially welcomed the series when it seemed to be a study of ‘Marxism and madness’ but lost enthusiasm when it turned out to embrace, in his view, left-wing paranoia.<sup>81</sup> Bleasdale’s version of Militant, it turns out, is a front controlled by the intelligence services, right-wing media and reactionary judges designed to discredit the left. Bushell was not the only one to reject this device. The *Guardian* published an editorial that complained of Bleasdale employing ‘the usual left-wing conspiracy theory, embarrassing in its clichés’ in which ‘the heroic Left are always victims of an MI5/police/state conspiracy and the media are invariably grasping toe-rags.’<sup>82</sup>

## A lost left

As striking as Bleasdale’s reliance on an Establishment conspiracy to explain Militant was his nostalgia for a lost politics of the left, one illustrated through the two protagonists’ fathers. Murray’s George Orwell-reading docker dad died before his son’s birth, having been overwhelmed by the demands of being ‘the workman’s friend’. Murray’s father’s nobility and self-sacrifice was a standing indictment of his own shortcomings. Nelson’s late father was also a Labour man, of the sort who read the *Daily Herald* but did not consider himself ‘political’; his son contrasts this level-headed commitment to Murray’s ‘scab’-chanting thugs. Nelson’s constituency party is moreover on the rural fringe of Murray’s extremist-run city. Its members consist of farmers and rural labourers – hardly typical of the real Labour party at this or any other time – presented as sensible and down-to-earth folk who universally support Nelson. In contrast, Murray’s inner city, where Labour more typically enjoyed support, is shown as anarchic and dangerous, being full of rioting white louts and black rastas.

*Shine on Harvey Moon* (ITV, 1982–5) was also wistful for an apparently disappeared ‘sensible’ Labour party and ran for four seasons on either side of the party’s 1983 disaster. Written by the same team that would produce *The New*

*Statesman*, this was a remarkably partisan series, yet, because Marks and Gran wrote in a popular idiom, it was generally dismissed as a 'lowbrow drama' or 'a gentle thing – a nostalgic little comedy'.<sup>83</sup> Possibly for that reason, even the *Daily Express* liked the series, although one of its critics was irritated by 'Dickens-like factory scenes with Harvey arguing trade unionism with an impossible overseer like an unfrocked manager'.<sup>84</sup> As some noted, however, the series embraced an 'unusual kind of nostalgia', tackling as it did anti-Semitism and class prejudice.<sup>85</sup>

According to Marks, Harvey Moon 'is just Mr. Average. He's a Joe Bloggs who's struggling to get by'.<sup>86</sup> Returning home after the Second World War to an estranged wife and two children, Harvey's is a world of austerity. But it is also one of optimism, thanks to the Labour government, one with which Harvey closely identifies. Ambitious for himself and his family, Harvey is however no selfish individualist, and believes his aspirations can be fulfilled only as part of the more general improvement of conditions for the working class, something he hopes will occur under Labour. The series moreover sides with Harvey and his view of the world by notably pointing out the realities of falling sick before the NHS and even shows the role unions played in improving working conditions.

The first season takes this 'Mr. Average' on a political journey, which leads to his election as a Labour councillor in Hackney, an odyssey Marks and Gran depict as a normal part of the life of this ordinary man. The women in Harvey's family are, however, less political: his mother is a deferential Tory while his wife is lost in a world of consumerism. Labour politics is moreover presented as not without flaws. On first entering the party, Harvey dislikes being referred to as 'comrade' and finds its procedures irritating and po-faced. Many of its members are also very middle-class. Indeed, one leading activist is a solicitor who employs Harvey as his clerk and when he becomes a parliamentary candidate he has Harvey serve drinks at a celebratory reception. There, Harvey engages with a group of left-wing intellectuals so alienating he quotes Orwell's comment that socialists were often the reason people disliked socialism. Moreover, while Harvey hopes for a 'classless society', even under Labour privilege remains, leading him to make a pointed remark about Cabinet ministers sending their sons to Eton. Furthermore, on the night he is elected councillor, Harvey meets Herbert Morrison, who mistakenly believes he has won thanks to dirty tricks – of which Morrison thoroughly approves – thereby contrasting Harvey's idealism with the cynicism of Labour's real Deputy Leader.

## The same old story

If some comedies about politics assumed a more aggressive form after 1979, there were also continuities. In October 1984 the popular series *Minder* (ITV, 1979–94) gave viewers one more variation of the ‘outsider’ storyline. Stepping into the shoes of Old Mother Riley and George Formby was another unlikely tribune of the people – Arthur Daley, the kind of entrepreneur who sold goods that had probably fallen off the back of a lorry.

When Daley’s car lot is subject to a compulsory purchase order issued by the council he stands in a ward by-election to publicize what he claims is an injustice. But Daley has unknowingly stepped into a vital contest, for the council is on a knife-edge between Labour and the Conservatives: whoever wins the ward takes control of the borough. Daley the dodgy businessman initially relishes the favours he will be able to extract should he hold the balance of power. But beneath it all, Daley is a decent figure, realizing that from this position he can also do much good, and says he will ‘put an end to the cabals’. Fearing Daley’s ‘integrity and commitment could cause havoc in the Town Hall’ the two parties – as they often do in such stories – combine to scupper his candidacy, by pressurizing the police to investigate his business and inducing the local press to smear him. Despite all this, Daley triumphs, only to be disqualified for giving voters free boxes of chocolates, albeit ones long past their sell-by date.

*Minder* was hardly original in suggesting local politics was corrupt. *County Hall* (BBC, 1982) tried (but failed) to challenge this stereotype and at the same time become an early evening soap opera to rival *Coronation Street*. The series attempted to humanize council employees by focusing, as producer Brian Spilby put it, on ‘stories about their romances, their worries, their wives and husbands and children, their joys and their tragedies.’<sup>87</sup> Working for a council run by a coalition of Liberals, ratepayers and independents, during its short run the series had its characters involved in storylines for which the political setting was mostly irrelevant.

A more familiar view of local government prevailed in the movie *The Long Good Friday* (1980) and the ITV series *Muck and Brass* (1982). The former’s genesis predated the 1979 Conservative victory but the East End gangster Harold Shand – who announces that ‘I’m not a politician. I’m a businessman with a sense of history’ – was taken as a comment on early Thatcherism. But Shand was also a more traditional figure: the immoral entrepreneur who gets his way by corrupting councillors. If Shand was not a politician, he had at least



one in his pocket, along with key members of the Metropolitan Police. With ambitions to be at the forefront of the lucrative redevelopment of the redundant London docks, Shand consequently enjoys illegal access to plans courtesy of a councillor who is doubly corrupt, being himself a builder benefitting from local government contracts.

An IRA bullet ends Shand's reign. Tom Clarke's *Muck and Brass* in contrast charted the unstoppable rise of Tom Craig from petty jerry-builder to a property tycoon who effectively runs a Midlands city. Although Conservative council leader Maurice Taylor is idealistic – he has plans to bring culture to the masses through an ambitious arts complex – colleagues and opponents knee-deep in corruption thwart his ambition. Despite Taylor's call for 'open government' development, contracts are a carve-up as many councillors are also builders who obtain work through graft. Asked to write a docu-drama about John Poulson, who during the 1960s systematically corrupted councillors across Britain in pursuit of multi-million-pound building contracts, Clarke instead came up with what he called

a poor man's *Dallas* ... an illumination of the way things are. Most people in our society wander round being discontented most of the time and not knowing why but it's because the system, including local government, is working against them.<sup>88</sup>

According to Clarke, local corruption was but one aspect of the way in which the 'system' exploited the people. His series therefore ends with Craig, lauded as embodying 'the spirit of enterprise', controlling the city's politics through acolytes in both parties, Taylor sidelined and his arts centre ditched in favour of a hugely profitable brewery. With no George Formby or Arthur Daley to oppose him, the public interest has been consumed by Craig's insatiable search for private profit.

## Conclusion

Clarke's reference to the 'system' confirms the pervasiveness of the conspiracy theme in 1980s political dramas, many of which were produced by those with left-wing views. For, as Lez Cooke observes, the 'political thriller, feeding on conspiracy and paranoia, was one vehicle progressive dramatists and film makers turned to in the 1980s' to articulate their opposition to Thatcherism while capturing audiences.<sup>89</sup> A belief in conspiracy was also convenient to many

on the left: it explained why they lost elections while avoiding the possibility that their policies were simply unpopular or otherwise flawed.

By the early 1990s the conspiracy genre had become the most commonplace means by which those wanting to dramatize politics framed their stories. It was used to explain real events as diverse as why the identity of Jack the Ripper had never been revealed (in the 1988 ITV mini-series of the same name) and why Stephen Ward took all the blame for the 1963 Profumo Affair (according to the 1989 movie *Scandal*). In 1992 the BBC broadcast the mini-series *Natural Lies*, which fictionalized attempts to hide evidence that mad cow disease – which blighted many British farms – had, as some feared, begun infecting humans. Blurring the boundary between fiction and reality, one reviewer believed it demonstrated ‘the lengths to which the British government and the food industry would go to suppress the story’.<sup>90</sup> At no point however did the script suggest the involvement of government – the story is in fact about a cover-up undertaken at the behest of a rogue entrepreneur. This might be a comment on the confusing hyper-complexity of the conspiracy outlined in *Natural Lies*, something in which such thrillers often indulged. But it also suggested that some viewers now needed few fictional prompts to believe government was at the heart of any and every supposed plot against the public.

Whatever the radical intentions of those responsible for conspiracy thrillers, they promoted a pessimistic and disabling view of politics. In the 1970s Trevor Griffiths and Jim Allen had written television dramas also critical of contemporary politics but which suggested alternatives, ones in which the people themselves might take an active part in developing. Conspiracy thrillers however – and it was a sign of the times that Allen wrote *Hidden Agenda* – depicted an all-powerful ‘secret state’ that usually prevailed over those who sought to resist. If Griffiths and others in the 1970s encouraged viewers to take their fates into their own hands, these thrillers entertained audiences while confirming their political fatalism. Certainly that was Hilary Wainwright’s assessment of *A Very British Coup*. If the series was meant to be propaganda for the Labour left, she found it a demoralizing drama in which the people remained marginalized figures, there to be manipulated by the Establishment.<sup>91</sup>

In these conspiracies journalists played a paradoxical part. A few individuals – like Nick Mullen of *Defence of the Realm* – attempted to expose the truth. But for the most part those owning or running the media are presented as leading conspirators against the people. While writers had long expressed scepticism about the political role of the press and television, the 1980s saw that perspective become predominant, one that was especially significant as politics became ever

more mediated, as indicated in the 1988 BBC Two series *Campaign*, about an advertising agency. The central character in the movie *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983), for example, is a BBC journalist willing to pass himself off as a socialist or Conservative depending on where the advantage lies. He is all ambition and no principles, willing to betrayal family and friendships, and even prepared to fabricate the past as well as the present if that serves his purposes. More generally, from David Hare and Howard Brenton's National Theatre play *Pravda* (1985) to the television sitcoms *Hot Metal* (ITV, 1986–8), *KYTV* (BBC, 1989–93) and *Drop the Dead Donkey* (Channel 4, 1990–8), the media was depicted as willing to bend the political truth if that served its corporate interests.

The Thatcher period therefore represented a marked degeneration in the depiction of politics. If *Shine on Harvey Moon* suggested that at least some of those active in party politics had the best interests of the electors in mind, this was because Marks and Gran located their series in the 1940s. As the latter recalled, they wrote the series

because people were so miserable in this country, so sorry for themselves we thought we'd write about a time which was really hard, but a time when there was hope and we made the central character into a campaigning Labour councillor. That was really written as an Attleeist piece, full of hope and righteous indignation and a certain amount of laughs. It was written from the point of view of us actually believing that politics was not a completely ignoble undertaking and actually could do good and, at times in our history, has done good.

In contrast, their *The New Statesman*, set in contemporary Westminster, was a work of 'utter cynicism', which depicted politics as ineffably corrupt and without hope.<sup>92</sup> By the 1980s, it seems, political fiction could only express optimism for the future if it was set in the past.

## Notes

- 1 An insightful overview of 'Thatcherism' can be found here: A. Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
- 2 For example, C. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 108–9.
- 3 <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105563>, accessed 20 August 2012.
- 4 David Aaronovitch provides an excellent account of the Murrell case and the period as a whole in *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), pp. 163–86.

- 5 Wright co-authored his account with Paul Greengrass, who would later direct the Bourne films, which posited the existence of a section of the American intelligence service beyond politicians' control.
- 6 *Guardian*, 27 December 2006.
- 7 *Today*, 3 December 1986.
- 8 J. Lynn, *Comedy Rules: From the Cambridge Footlights to Yes, Prime Minister* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 119.
- 9 P. Eddington, *So Far, So Good* (London: Hodder, 1995), p. 140.
- 10 *Daily Telegraph*, 10 January 1986.
- 11 M. Edelman, *A Dream of Treason* (London: Panther Books: 1965), p. 89.
- 12 *The Times*, 18 February 1980; *Daily Express*, 11 November 1982.
- 13 *New York Times*, 16 November 1986.
- 14 *Daily Mail*, 31 December 1987.
- 15 *Guardian*, 19 March 81.
- 16 *Mail on Sunday*, 23 December 1984.
- 17 *Sunday Times*, 29 March 1981; *Morning Star*, 1 March 1980.
- 18 *Evening Standard*, 19 November 1982.
- 19 *Sunday Times*, 2 March 1980.
- 20 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/advocate\\_yesminister.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/advocate_yesminister.shtml), accessed 3 September 2011.
- 21 Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, pp. 97–9, 107–8.
- 22 *New York Times*, 16 November 1986.
- 23 *Daily Mirror*, 4 January 1986.
- 24 *The Times*, 18 February 1980.
- 25 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/5784ac84-bc50-11df-8c02-00144feab49a.html#axzz1W7mw4dxu>, accessed 3 September 2011.
- 26 *Observer*, 19 January 1986.
- 27 Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, p. 113.
- 28 <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/84534111EFFF4C5CAAEE2FA5E16E3D673.pdf>, accessed 5 May 2013.
- 29 *Daily Telegraph*, 4 December 1987; *Daily Mirror*, 12 November 1982.
- 30 Churchill Archive Centre, Margaret Thatcher papers, M. Thatcher to J. Lynn, 15 June 1983, THCR 2/4/1/19 f218.
- 31 Eddington, *So Far, So Good*, p. 191; Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, p. 154, 158–9.
- 32 Interviewed on *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dreams of Freedom*, Part 1 – ‘F&#k You Buddy’, first broadcast on BBC Two, 11 March 2007.
- 33 *The Voice*, 12 April 1988.
- 34 Thatcher papers, J. Lynn to M. Thatcher, 10 June 1983, THCR 2/4/1/19 f218.
- 35 First transmitted 23 February 1981.
- 36 First transmitted 24 March 1980.

- 37 First transmitted 9 December 1982.
- 38 First transmitted 21 January 1988.
- 39 First transmitted 16 March 1981.
- 40 First transmitted 28 January 1988.
- 41 Respectively first transmitted 10 March 1980 and 6 February 1986.
- 42 First transmitted 18 November 1982.
- 43 First transmitted 7 January 1988.
- 44 *Daily Express*, 10 January 1986; *London Standard*, 10 January 1986.
- 45 First transmitted 16 December 1982.
- 46 *Guardian*, 25 February 1984; *Observer Magazine*, 19 February 1984.
- 47 *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 26 February 1984.
- 48 *Daily Express*, 20 March 1984.
- 49 *Scotsman*, 24 March 1984.
- 50 *Daily Express*, 13 March 1982; *Financial Times*, 24 March 1982.
- 51 *Daily Mail*, 6 March 1987.
- 52 *The Independent*, 20 April 2006.
- 53 *Today*, 16 September 1987.
- 54 *Daily Mail*, 14 January 1991.
- 55 *Scotsman*, 26 September 1987.
- 56 *Sunday Express*, 29 August 1982.
- 57 *Observer*, 29 August 1982.
- 58 *Guardian*, 2 August 1984.
- 59 *Daily Mail*, 23 February 1987.
- 60 F. Forsyth, *The Fourth Protocol* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), pp. 53–65, 82–91.
- 61 *Ibid.*, pp. 116–17.
- 62 *Ibid.*, pp. 391–2.
- 63 *Western Mail*, 4 April 1987.
- 64 *The Times*, 11 March 1985.
- 65 *The Scotsman*, 28 December 1985.
- 66 *The Times*, 2 November 1985; L. Cooke, *Troy Kennedy Martin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 158.
- 67 BBC Written Archive, Television Audience Reaction Report, Edge of Darkness, TV/85/167.
- 68 *Daily Mail*, 2 November 1985.
- 69 *New Socialist*, February 1986.
- 70 Cooke, *Troy Kennedy Martin*, pp. 153–6.
- 71 *Guardian*, 7 March 2006.
- 72 *The Times*, 20 August 1982.
- 73 *Guardian*, 30 August 1982; *Tribune*, 10 September 1982.
- 74 *Mail on Sunday*, 2 June 1988.

- 75 *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 May 1988; *Guardian*, 8 July 1988.
- 76 *Evening Standard*, 5 July 1988.
- 77 B. McIlroy, *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland* (Trowbridge: Flicks, 1998), pp. 93–6.
- 78 *The Observer*, 6 May 1990.
- 79 M. Crick, *The March of Militant* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986).
- 80 *Independent*, 3 July 1991.
- 81 *Sun*, 3 July 1991.
- 82 *Guardian*, 22 July 1991.
- 83 *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1982; *Daily Mail*, 9 January 1982.
- 84 *Daily Express*, 10 September 1982.
- 85 *Sunday Times*, 17 June 1984.
- 86 *Daily Star*, 9 March 1984.
- 87 *Sun*, 13 February 1982.
- 88 *Daily Express*, 12 January 1982; *The Times*, 29 December 1981.
- 89 Cooke, *Troy Kennedy Martin*, pp. 167–8.
- 90 *Observer*, 21 June 1992.
- 91 *Guardian*, 8 August 1988. For parallels in the United States, see M. Ryan and D. Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- 92 S. Fielding (ed.), 'Roundtable: why do dramatists write about politics?', *Parliamentary Affairs* 64:2 (2011), p. 342.



## Still No Job for a Lady

While the Conservative ascendancy saw the rise of conspiracy narratives and anti-political satires it had a modest effect on fictional depictions of gender in politics, one especially remarkable given Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister for much of that time. Indeed, even after Thatcher resigned in 1990, some continued to believe that men and women were wholly distinct animals, politically or otherwise. The London *Evening Standard's* veteran movie critic Alexander Walker, for example, complained of Stephen Fleming, the Conservative minister in Louis Malle's *Damage* (1993), that he

acts, thinks and reacts to love at first glance the way a woman would do – that's to say instinctively, impulsively, irrationally, instantly ... One tries to understand his motivation and one is continually frustrated because it is that of a female sensibility inside a masculine character.<sup>1</sup>

Things certainly end badly for Fleming, just as they did in Josephine Hart's original 1991 novel, as his 'unmanly' impulsiveness sees him lose lover, family and career.

Dramas sometimes applied the traditional view – that men and women had discrete characters and roles – to Thatcher, notably in the James Bond movie *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). This found humour in the apparent paradox of a female Prime Minister. The film concludes with Thatcher phoning 007 to thank him for once again thwarting the KGB. The Prime Minister is in the Number 10 kitchen preparing a meal for husband Dennis, like any good housewife; to make the call she even has to discard her Marigold gloves. Bond, the epitome of untamed masculinity, has, however, disappeared for a naked moonlight dip in the Mediterranean with his young lover, contemptuously leaving the Prime Minister to talk to a squawking parrot.

Bond films appealed to broadly conservative sentiments. But many of Thatcher's left-wing critics also saw her as a contradiction which reversed the one Walker had seen in *Damage*, as they believed she exhibited a masculine sensibility unaccountably contained in a female body. According to them, her



desire to break up the welfare state and make the economy more competitive was the very antithesis of those nurturing qualities historically connected with women, thanks to their longstanding association with the domestic sphere. This meant that, ironically, such ostensibly progressive voices depicted the Prime Minister in ways that relied on Gladstone-era norms about how women should behave. That said, even some of Thatcher's admirers called her the 'best man' in the Cabinet while the Conservative leader's early embrace of the title of 'Iron Lady' suggested she also held to a complex gender identity.<sup>2</sup>

This uncertainty about how to characterize Thatcher was largely because, while she reached the top of the greasy pole, the Prime Minister operated in what remained overwhelmingly and overtly a man's world. The number of women MPs tripled between 1979 and 1992, but that still meant only sixty sat in the Commons at the start of the Conservatives' fourth successive term, less than ten per cent of the total. Thatcher, though, was unconcerned by men's dominance of Westminster and did nothing to promote other women in her party. The Prime Minister even defended errant male behaviour and did her best to prevent the resignation of her favourite Cabinet minister Cecil Parkinson when in 1983 he was exposed as the father of an illegitimate child. Both matters became more salient during the run-up to the 1997 general election. Labour courted popularity with women by increasing the number of its female parliamentary candidates.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, in its search for 'Tory sleaze', the popular press exposed numerous instances of Conservative men betraying wives or otherwise falling foul of conventional morality.<sup>4</sup> This meant that by the time the Conservatives finally left office in 1997, Westminster's almost exclusive association with a certain kind of traditional masculinity was viewed as increasingly problematic.

Political fictions had always been gendered, but the Conservative time in government saw the production of more self-conscious and critical, if often contradictory, instances. As we shall see, many of these were novels written by leading members of Thatcher's party, usually men who took for granted their dominance of Westminster. During the mid-1990s, however, a number of Conservative women ventured into print and expressed their alienation from the political *status quo* in novels that concluded with female protagonists abandoning Westminster to seek happiness in family life. As such endings suggest, even female critics found it difficult to imagine politics as anything other than a masculine game. If the dominance of a particular male ethos was a problem – and while some remained oblivious to it, others keenly believed it was – then the solution remained beyond anyone's grasp: flight not fight appeared to be the only sensible response.

## Having it both ways?

In *Yes, Minister*, the series so beloved of Thatcher, the main protagonists were all men: women generally assumed their traditional subordinate position, albeit with a caustic edge. Thus Jim Hacker's wife, Annie, calls herself sarcastically in the first episode 'a happy, care-free politician's wife'. Her role is mostly confined to tartly commenting on the absurdities of politics or, like her student activist daughter, performing the role of Jim Hacker's moral policeman. Dorothy Wainwright, Hacker's Chief Political Advisor, effectively takes up Annie's role in *Yes, Prime Minister*. Wainwright is, however, unusual in having a significant political role, one that pitches her against Sir Humphrey Appleby in a battle for Hacker's ear, a conflict which reveals the latter's sexism.

The series had already exposed the misogyny of those running Whitehall in the 1982 episode 'Equal Opportunities'.<sup>5</sup> Still just a minister, Hacker discovered how few women filled top administrative positions in his department and so accelerates the promotion of a token woman to a higher rank. Having overcome Appleby's opposition, Hacker discovers that the beneficiary of his positive discrimination intends to leave public service. She tells him that she wants a job that gives her a sense of achievement, one that is relevant and where she will be treated as an equal – so she is going to work for a merchant bank. Richard Last in the *Daily Telegraph* believed the episode exposed the hypocrisy of entrenched male attitudes better than 'half a hundred shrieking feminist tracts on Channel 4'.<sup>6</sup> If it did, the story also gave Antony Jay the chance to underline his belief in the merits of private enterprise on this as on so many other issues.

Initially billed as ITV's answer to *Yes, Minister*, *No Job for a Lady* (1990–2) was the only sitcom to have a female MP as its protagonist during this period.<sup>7</sup> As played by Penelope Keith – whose previous television comedy roles included a suburban snob and an aristocrat – Jean Price might have been Labour, but she was posher than most real Tories. While a sitcom, the series attempted to make serious points, and to mark its first episode the *TV Times* published an article by Labour MP Harriet Harman on the problems women faced in Parliament. Setting the tone of the series, Keith also told the *Daily Mail* she believed that there should be more women in the Commons.<sup>8</sup> *No Job for a Lady* consequently highlighted the lack of provision the House made for women in terms of toilets, crèches and family-friendly working hours. Yet, if advancing a vaguely feminist agenda, the first episode also sought laughs in Price missing a vote because one of her high heels falls off and her handbag gets caught in a door. The series, in other words, tried to have its cake and eat it.

As an *ingénue* MP, Price's role is to ask the kind of questions the ITV audience might pose, such as what was the difference between a Standing Committee and a Select Committee? The answers she receives from her male interlocutors do not enlighten and instead emulate Humphrey Appleby's bureaucratic gobbledygook, so as to underline the alienating, nonsensical and arcane nature of parliamentary procedure. The Commons is therefore presented as a place in which form is a substitute for action and its many committees are, for example, described as 'argumentative rubber stamps'. Unlike *Yes, Minister*, however, *No Job for a Lady* suggests an important reason politics assumes this character is because it is run by *men* who are, despite their different party labels, all sexist. Among them is a Labour whip only interested in what will get his party into power and who therefore steers Price away from principled but unpopular stands. Price's main antagonist is, however, Godfrey Eagan, her Conservative pair, a friend of apartheid and lobbyist for the tobacco and pharmaceutical industries, indeed the very acme of 'Tory sleaze' before the term had been invented, complete with a braying, silly-ass laugh. No wonder the *Sunday Telegraph* complained of the series 'clumpingly predictable' stereotypes.<sup>9</sup>

Dismissed as 'tame twaddle' with little to say about real politics, the series lacked the finesse of *Yes, Minister*.<sup>10</sup> Despite that, *No Job for a Lady* tackled live issues, such as the censorship of pornography, police corruption and immigration. But its treatment only highlighted Price's naivety or impotence, such as when the man she saves from wrongful imprisonment tries to steal her VCR. Moreover, while the series presented Price as benign figure, not everybody saw her that way. After watching a 1992 episode in which she encourages a secretary to take her employer to an industrial tribunal for letting colleagues call her 'Melons' due to the size of her breasts, the *Sun* critic claimed: 'snooty Socialist Jean Price is all too typical of today's breed of Left-wing wimmin, a man-hating harridan'. In what was to be an election year, readers were told *No Job for a Lady* showed them what terrible things Labour would do if Neil Kinnock became Prime Minister.<sup>11</sup>

According to *No Job for a Lady*, politics remained a man's game. That should have come as no surprise to many viewers, for according to her *Spitting Image* puppet, even Thatcher was not a proper woman, her masculine qualities being indicated by the fact that she wore suits, smoked Churchillian cigars and in one sketch relieved herself standing up in a urinal.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, while Janet Brown impersonated the Prime Minister in *For Your Eyes Only*, one of her most popular imitators was Steve Nallon. If Thatcher's supposed maleness was exploited for comic effect, the left-wing dramatist David Hare used it for more

serious purposes. His play *The Secret Rapture* (1988), later made into a 1993 film, and movie *Paris by Night* (1988) gave audiences two female Conservatives cast in the Thatcher mould. These were, Hare makes clear, women gone wrong: their passions are political not maternal; they are selfish and harsh, not giving and caring.

*The Secret Rapture*'s Marion is a junior Conservative minister destined for higher things. She is also and not coincidentally self-centred, judgemental and career-focused, in contrast to Isobel, her younger, selfless, empathetic and apolitical sister. Marion induces her sibling to bear all their family's responsibilities, which as an elder sister she would normally be expected to take up. She embodies all the faults Hare believed defined Thatcher's government, notably materialism and an abstraction from emotions. Thus he has Marion see her family as something only fit for weekends. At one point she even declares: 'God, how I hate all this human stuff.'<sup>13</sup>

Clara Paige of *Paris by Night* is an MEP with a brilliant Westminster career before her. She also neglects her son, who she often leaves in the care of her more domestically inclined sister, and despises her husband for his various fallibilities. Paige's politics are overtly Thatcherite and adhere to the view that the basis of freedom is, as a Conservative intellectual tells her, 'to do what you want to'. According to Hare, Clara 'is a character who believes a lot of quite stupid and half-thought things.'<sup>14</sup> He has her put these ideas into practice by murdering the man to whom she had sold a failing business because she fears he will ruin her career by taking the story to the press.

Hare saw his two characters as watered-down versions of their real counterparts, with whom he came into contact while researching *Paris by Night*, revealing that:

When I went to Blackpool to see the new Tory woman, as it were, in captivity, I was struck by how much more generosity, breadth and soul I had given my principal character than was on immediate show in the simultaneously controlled and hysterical atmosphere of their Annual Party Conference.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Hare allows Marion and Clara to realize they have chosen the wrong course. Yet if Marion lives to benefit from her insight, when Clara discovers a more caring side through the love of a younger man this provokes her betrayed husband to shoot her.

Hare juxtaposed his noxious political women against their benign domestic sisters: in *The Secret Rapture* Marion effectively victimizes Isobel. For his pains, feminists accused the playwright of trading in traditional gender stereotypes.<sup>16</sup>

Hare, however, at least innovated insofar as he had female politicians trampling over other women, a role normally reserved for men. Thanks to 'sleaze', though, men's accustomed position was revived when Channel 4 broadcast Paula Milne's 1995 series *The Politician's Wife*. This focused on how the spouse of an adulterous Conservative Cabinet minister reacted to his affair being exposed in the press. Milne's series closely echoed real events, and she even included a scene that evoked David Mellor's attempt to save his place in government by forcing his family to face the cameras so as to prove they had forgiven his infidelity.

This was a highly melodramatic and explicitly gendered rendition of contemporary events. For Flora, the loyal and virtuous wife has not only been betrayed by husband Duncan, she also discovers that her marriage was from the start a political convenience. Hoping to gain a peerage and vicarious participation in high politics, Flora's father had encouraged her relationship with the dashing Duncan, given he was tipped to be a future Prime Minister. Duncan was in turn only attracted to Flora because her father was a party grandee who could furnish him with useful contacts. Duncan is then consumed by political ambition: not only does Flora mean nothing to him, he also has no interest in their children. For him, even making love has no emotional meaning: it is just a perverted power game. Milne leaves viewers in no doubt about the political consequences of this situation, for Duncan is a right-wing Minister for the Family intent on privatizing Child Benefit, and so, as one Tory figure notes, with ambitions to 'smash one of the sacred cows of the welfare state' on his way to Number 10.

Other than Duncan's gay Special Advisor, all the men in *The Politician's Wife* are aligned with the Dark Side. In contrast, even the escort with whom Duncan betrays his wife is not all bad: it was her ex-partner who ensured the relationship reached the press. Flora is moreover just one of an army of wronged women, from middle-aged, middle-class party activists to poor single parents and working mothers who desperately need their local nurseries to remain open. The series presents all of them as exploited, ignored or victimized by the male-run Conservative party. In the *Guardian* the feminist commentator Suzanne Moore thought the series 'as topical and gripping a deconstruction of patriarchy as you could wish for'. That was, however, a contested view: critics in the right-wing press detected a 'feminist triumphalism' and even a 'vengeful, feminist spitefulness' in the series.<sup>17</sup>

Yet while Milne subjected Conservative politics to a broad feminist critique her conclusion was ultimately pessimistic. For in Flora's covert campaign to destroy Duncan and replace him as MP, she uses all the low, manipulative

techniques associated with her husband and becomes as hardened as her spouse. As those critics like Hare had claimed of Thatcher and her kind, Milne's Flora had become, politically speaking at least, a man: this appeared to be the only way to succeed in politics.

## Tory novelists

The Thatcher-Major years saw the publication of an unprecedented number of works written by ministers and ex-ministers (Douglas Hurd, Tim Renton and Michael Spicer), the Chief Whip in the Lords (Bertie Denham), backbench MPs (Julian Critchley and Nigel West), former MPs (Jeffrey Archer) and ex-Central Office officials (Michael Dobbs). As with earlier Parliamentary Novels, their appeal lay in appearing to give readers an authentic view of politics. Thus, the *Spectator* reviewer wrote of Douglas Hurd's first novel (co-written with Andrew Osmond), *Send Her Victorious* (1968), that its 'documentary approach, the coating of surface realism' gave him confidence the authors 'know how politicians talk, how diplomats react and government departments work'.<sup>18</sup> Like those produced by Maurice Edelman in the 1950s and 1960s, these novels were mainly aimed at the 'middle-brow' market, where sales of 30,000 were considered decent. A few, however, achieved mass sales: Dobbs' *House of Cards* trilogy (1989–94) ultimately sold near 1.5 million copies worldwide.<sup>19</sup> His novels did so well partly because they were adapted for television, something that also helped Archer's *First Among Equals* (1984) become a bestseller.

Evoking the excitement of being part of life-or-death decisions, close Cabinet votes and critical Commons divisions, if these were hyper-real accounts of parliamentary life meant to entertain they also conveyed the banality of politics. As Critchley wrote in *Hung Parliament* (1991): 'MPs lead dullish and frustrating lives, obliged as they are to listen to ministerial speeches and bounded as they are by ambitious rivals, resentful wives and curmudgeonly constituents.'<sup>20</sup> Some were crime thrillers with their tongues firmly in their cheek, in which MPs performed the time-served role of amateur detective. But all had something to say about real politics. West's *Murder in the Commons* (1992) and *Murder in the Lords* (1994) saw Conservative Phillip North solve two homicides while the author made none-too-subtle defences of privatization and MPs' outside interests. Critchley's *Hung Parliament* and *Floating Voter* (1992) were also murder mysteries, which gave him scope to make snide comments about leading Conservative contemporaries.

In contrast, Spicer specialized in dystopian Cold War fantasies. His first novel, *Final Act* (1981), warned of the consequences of appeasing Moscow. Set in a near future in which Europe is under direct Soviet rule, Britain's political parties are ultimately run by the London High Commission of the USSR. Indicating his own hostility to the EEC, Spicer has the Conservative party morph into the European Unity Party, whose main object is to placate Moscow. Describing a revolt against Britain being completely integrated into the Soviet Empire, Spicer has it fail because it comes too late: Britons should have been more alert in the 1980s. *Prime Minister Spy* (1986) was another paranoid fantasy. It was, however, unlikely Moscow would ever have adopted the scheme outlined in the novel, which involved the KGB ensuring Adolf Hitler's son becomes Conservative Prime Minister so he can lead Britain into the Warsaw Pact.

### Patrician politics

Hurd and Renton specialized in thrillers that evoked and commented on contemporary events. The former had been writing novels since before his election to the Commons in 1973 and continued to do so, even after becoming a junior minister in 1979.<sup>21</sup> *The Palace of Enchantments* (1985), co-authored with his Private Secretary at the Foreign Office, was Hurd's sixth but the only one published during the Conservative period in power, which saw him become Home and later Foreign Secretary. Renton started writing only after he left frontline politics in 1992, prior to which he had been Thatcher's last Chief Whip and Major's first Minister for the Arts. Both men were of the same generation and class, having been born in the early 1930s and educated at Eton and Oxbridge; they also shared the same kind of liberal One-Nation Toryism that Thatcher described as 'wet'. The hereditary peer Denham enjoyed a similar background. If his four novels published between 1979 and 1997 had more crime than politics, even *Foxhunt* (1988) has mounting inner-city discontent as part of its background.

Like those produced by Hurd and Renton, Denham's novels expressed a cautious idealism about the parliamentary system. These fictions also paint a picture of a politics best left in the hands of rational, patrician, pragmatic men, those very much like their authors. They depict dangers within parliamentary democracy that only men of this stripe can negotiate, notably the overweening influence of party and the short-sightedness of the people, perils Trollope had also recognized.

*The Palace of Enchantments* has a City banker take his American counterpart on a tour of London.<sup>22</sup> Passing a suburban street replete with roses, Virginia creepers, a red pillar box and 'small gables and pediments in architectural confusion', Hurd has him claim:

Suburban living, that is England's gift to the twentieth century. The Scots can't do it, nor the French, let alone the Italians. Miles and miles of houses like that. Moderate incomes, moderate opinions, moderate achievements. Pleasant, sensible people, with front and back gardens. They worry about their children, but their children end up like them. They vote Conservative, but constantly disappoint the Conservatives because they are not entrepreneurs. You can cut their taxes, but you can't get them to take risks. Forget the British upper class which hypnotises you Americans. Forget the media, the cloth-capped workers, forget the bankers we're going to meet. All the minorities. It's the people up that road who count.

This vision was one that would have frustrated those Thatcherites keen to turn Britain into a nation of striving entrepreneurs. Hurd believed such moderation was moreover based on an ultimately sound parliamentary system, one largely composed of men dedicated to selfless public service. To make this point he has a German banker speak of the democratic nature of the Palace of Westminster while explaining why the novel's hero, Edward Dunsford, had abandoned a lucrative career in finance for the uncertainties of politics:

Gothic in architecture and in spirit. The Gothic of the English nineteenth-century – darkness, pinnacles, discomfort, too hot, too cold, poor food. But splendid, the splendour not of reality but of dreams. It is a palace of enchantments ... Go one day to the House of Commons as an elector, a constituent. Be you high or low, rich or poor, the procedure is the same. You are told by a policeman to wait, in a gilded hall with soaring absurd arches, mythical patriotic saints, and an impolite post office. You wait, minutes, quarters of an hour. If you are importunate or self-important you will fill in a green card, and the policeman carries it away, but it makes no difference. Eventually the Member of Parliament arrives, trailing clouds of glory from some sanctum, some further Gothic hall which you cannot penetrate. He bustles towards you, apologises, shakes your hand, explains how he is busy, is pleasant with you. He radiates the superiority, that is the enchantment which Dunsford feels, they all feel and which you and I cannot feel ... It is the pleasure of service, the pleasure of being elected to serve others ... The service of the people, that is the real seduction.



Renton's *Hostage to Fortune* (1997) expanded on the authenticity of this 'service' by having a Conservative Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition combine in the national interest to support Britain's entry into the Euro. In the real world, this policy was strongly opposed by the deposed Thatcher's still-vocal supporters. In Renton's novel, however, the Prime Minister believes Britain will benefit from the move, but is aware many in his party oppose the measure and so, as both are good men, the two leaders put partisan considerations aside and do the right thing. The constitution is moreover, Renton suggests, still sound, for when politicians fail to show the right leadership the Queen acts as a fail-safe. In *A Dangerous Edge* (1994), when the personal ambitions of a Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister bring the Cabinet to deadlock, the monarch forces the latter to declare an election, one which sees both lose their seat, allowing her to call for the novel's righteous hero to form a new government.

Written while his leader was preparing to mount an attack on the post-war consensus, Denham's *The Man Who Lost His Shadow* (1979) also depicts the mutual respect uniting men of good character on both sides of the House – even those like Jimmy Spiller, a working-class ex-Communist Labour MP and the Conservative shadow Home Secretary Sir John Elton, who disagree on every aspect of politics. Denham's hero across his four novels is Derek Thyde, a Lords Whip and something of a throwback whose universe comprises country houses, loyal retainers, pink gins and fox hunting. This comforting society is complemented by a Parliament whose time-worn but grand architecture Denham describes in loving detail along with some of the more arcane but still-effective chapters of legislative procedure. Denham's is a world of a sound and living tradition, one whose heroes are 'self effacing' and whose villains are 'aggressively self confident' bounders. Even the press is benign, with Thyde writing of Lobby journalists that their 'ethical standards are higher than any other section of the Press in the country, probably the world'.<sup>23</sup>

### Soap-opera Westminster

Despite being well-regarded literary efforts, only one of Hurd's novels, *Scotch on the Rocks* (1971), was adapted for television, in 1973. Such was their popularity, the work of Jeffrey Archer was in contrast habitually adapted for the small screen. The disdain poured on Archer in Critchley's *Floating Voter* suggests that not every Conservative thought of him highly, although Thatcher claimed to admire his novels.

Aiming at a transatlantic audience, Archer to begin with fought shy of depicting British politics for fear of alienating American readers; indeed two early novels, *Shall We Tell the President?* (1977) and *The Prodigal Daughter* (1982), tackled US politics. This emphasis changed with his fifth outing, *First Among Equals* (1984), described by his publisher as ‘The book he was born to write.’<sup>24</sup> Archer had only turned to novels after his time as a Conservative MP came to an abrupt end when bankruptcy forced his resignation in 1974. His change of career nonetheless proved extremely lucrative. Archer’s novels adhered to a popular recipe, one that involved struggles for power and wealth between small groups of highly motivated and often over-sexed men, leading one critic to snootily have it that they ‘rely on little more than the lust for money, sex and power.’<sup>25</sup> *First Among Equals* applied this formula to Westminster, charting the lives and loves of four young MPs entering the Commons in 1964, each ambitious to become Prime Minister. Archer sets his protagonists’ struggles against real events, with versions of Wilson, Heath, Thatcher and others making appearances, although party politics, at least in terms of policy, is rarely mentioned. Few consequently looked upon *First Amongst Equals* as a serious political document. Conservative party chair Norman Tebbit even claimed an Archer novel was ideal hospital reading because it ‘requires no mental effort.’<sup>26</sup> Yet, whatever his quality as a writer, Archer projected a glamorized vision of Westminster to an unprecedented number, one that quickly sold a million copies and when adapted for television reached seven million viewers.

Archer’s MPs are balanced in partisan terms, with two each from Labour and the Conservatives, although one of the former defects to the SDP. They also come from contrasting classes. If two originate from landed backgrounds, money troubles plague Simon Kerslake, Archer’s middle-class Tory, as well as the Labour MP Raymond Gould, who while a barrister has emerged from the back streets of Leeds. Archer presents being an MP as a poorly paid and insecure occupation, meaning that when he loses his marginal seat Kerslake comes to a profitable arrangement with a property developer who wants introductions to useful people. Archer does not however see anything wrong in this relationship and is at pains to stress that Kerslake’s integrity remains intact.

If the four MPs’ private lives all suffer due to their grand passion, Archer presents their desire to be Prime Minister as righteous, for if personally ambitious these are ultimately well-motivated men. When Northern Ireland Secretary, Kerslake is nearly assassinated after the IRA booby-trap his car, and despite incredible pain he staggers to the Commons to make a speech so as to prevent the defeat of his plan for peace. Gould also shows himself a man of honour

when he resigns from the Labour Front Bench after the Wilson government devalues sterling, having publicly just opposed such a move. Similarly, Labour and Conservative co-operate to ensure a wrongfully convicted man gets justice. Archer, then, meant his story to show Westminster in positive terms.

When the novel was adapted into a ten-part ITV series in 1986, producer Mervyn Watson claimed it was a 'serious drama ... [which] delves deep into the working of the MPs and the whole political system'. Reflecting the number of scenes to be shot there, Granada even invested a considerable sum in carefully reconstructing the Commons Chamber, emphasizing the centrality Archer's novel gave the arena.<sup>27</sup> Yet few television reviewers believed the series had anything positive to say about Westminster. Noting the number of naked women on view, the future *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger even described the series as embodying 'politics-with-nipples'.<sup>28</sup> Many saw the series in terms of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, then-popular American soap operas about the rich and powerful. As one critic had it, the series was a 'political soap at its slipperiest, and no one is safe from the suds of corruption that float out of every doorway'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, some looked upon the adaptation as containing 'a hard kernel of cynicism' in which politics was 'nothing more than snakes-and-ladders, anything other than the clash of ego and ambition' and whose four protagonists were 'motivated purely by self-interest and a lust for power'.<sup>30</sup> According to Mary Kenny in the *Daily Mail*, 'Archer brilliantly exposes the hollow obsessions which make so many politicians tick', while in its Sunday counterpart Alan Coren said of the MPs, 'not only are the four candidates venal. Shifty, toadying and egomaniacal, they are also pinheads'.<sup>31</sup> Robert Kilroy-Silk, about to embark on a media career having just resigned as a Labour MP, was one of the few to notice that Archer's protagonists did have values and distinct ideas. But even he considered the series depicted MPs as a whole as 'ruthlessly ambitious, manipulative and self-seeking', just as they were, he claimed, in real life.<sup>32</sup>

Despite his commercial success, Archer remained a frustrated politician. As *First Among Equals* showed, he looked on his absence from the Commons in the same way Trollope had mourned his own exclusion. In 1985, between the publication of the novel and its television adaptation, Archer made a return to Conservative politics when at Thatcher's insistence he was appointed Deputy Chair of the party. As an ironic coda to what viewers were then watching on the screen, halfway through the series Archer's ambitions were again thwarted when he resigned, having been discovered paying money to a prostitute. Unlike Raymond Gould, who survived a blackmail attempt after also having an encounter with an escort, Archer would not make Prime Minister.

## Houses of cards

Michael Dobbs was over twenty years younger than Denham, Hurd and Renton and born almost a decade after Archer. Of a different generation, he was also a graduate of the University of Nottingham rather than Oxbridge and never became an MP. From the mid-1970s he did, however, work for the Conservative party in various roles, including advising Thatcher while in Opposition and acting as Tebbit's chief of staff when he was Chairman prior to and during the 1987 general election. Dobbs also worked for Saatchi and Saatchi, the advertising agency with intimate Conservative party links. After Thatcher's third election triumph, he left Central Office when criticism of Tebbit's management of the 1987 campaign led to acrimony with Number 10. With Thatcher gone, he returned to assist John Major as Deputy Chairman and was elevated to the peerage after David Cameron became Prime Minister in 2010.

Dobbs began to write during his post-1987 hiatus, so beginning a second career as a prolific novelist. *House of Cards* (1989), his first and most famous novel, charted the rise of Francis Urquhart, from Chief Whip in a failing Conservative government to the verge of Number 10. As Dobbs paints him, Urquhart is an antediluvian figure, one at home on the grouse moor rather than in an advertising agency. A hard-up member of the landed elite who took up politics only after being forced to sell his family estate, he resents being surrounded by modern Tories, pushy grammar school types to whom he has to defer. Such mediocrities, as Urquhart sees them, have only succeeded thanks to their superficially amenable television manner. Unable to take any more, Urquhart turns the power and knowledge of the Chief Whip to eliminate those standing between him and Number 10. Such is his desire for power, Dobbs' cold-hearted protagonist even murders to achieve his ends. Yet, when threatened with exposure by a young investigative female journalist, Urquhart throws himself from the top of the Palace of Westminster, allowing normal politics to resume.

The very kind of Tory Dobbs has Urquhart detest, the author undoubtedly indulged in some playful intra-party stereotyping, and while Urquhart dominates the novel his dreadful plot ends in failure. When Andrew Davies adapted Dobbs' novel for BBC One in 1990 he transformed it into a very different piece of work. No Conservative, Davies gave *House of Cards* a darkly comic edge the novel lacked, parodying the Parliamentary Novel by turning qualities previous novelists working in that genre had praised against themselves and critiquing how real Conservatives exercised power. Urquhart in Davies' hands becomes

the inhuman embodiment of the pursuit and exercise of political authority. Moreover, in this bleaker vision, Davies has Urquhart succeed: rather than commit suicide, he throws his accuser to her death.

The series was extremely popular; indeed Edwina Currie thought it 'infinitely better' than the novel.<sup>33</sup> Timing helped: its first two episodes were broadcast while Conservative MPs divested themselves of Thatcher and chose another leader, albeit in a less bloody way than was depicted on the screen. If *First Among Equals* was compared to a soap opera, critics saw *House of Cards* in Shakespearean terms; according to one critic it was 'Richard III in modern dress'.<sup>34</sup> Many drew parallels with ongoing real-life events and while some thought Davies guilty of hyperbole, others believed that 'as in the best satire, exaggeration reveals a truth'.<sup>35</sup> Responding to the success of the series, Dobbs resurrected Urquhart to live on as Prime Minister in two further novels, both of which Davies adapted. In his hands, *To Play the King* (BBC, 1993) and *The Final Cut* (BBC, 1995) drew parallels between Urquhart and Thatcher, ones absent in the original series and Dobbs' novels. In the latter Urquhart even wants his own version of the Falklands war – by which he means a cynically engineered conflict – and his downfall, like Thatcher's, is precipitated by the resignation of a Foreign Secretary over Europe.

Urquhart nonetheless remains the embodiment of traditional political power: as Davies has him say in *To Play the King*, 'The forces that drive me come from centuries of history.' A self-described 'loyal servant of the state', Urquhart exploits those who demonstrate 'human' qualities. Indeed the recognizably Thatcherite policies pursued by his government are themselves criticized for their 'sheer lack of humanity' by a Prince Charles-like monarch in the 1993 series. Very unusually – indeed the last time was probably in *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* (BBC, 1965) – Davies implicates viewers in these policies. One of the series conceits is that Urquhart – like the agent in Dennis Potter's earlier television play – occasionally addresses the camera. Looking at viewers, in *To Play the King*, he declares:

Under the show, the struggle for power. Deep down below it all, deeper than honour, deeper than pride, deeper than lust and deeper than love is the getting of it all. The seizing and the holding on. The jaws locked, biting into power and hanging on. Biting and hanging on.

From this speech there is an immediate dissolve to a group believed to be IRA terrorists being shot down by the military while out shopping, evoking the murder of unarmed Irish terror suspects on Gibraltar in 1988. They have been

killed on Urquhart's orders. The act having been accomplished, he turns to the viewers, and – anticipating any queasiness on their part – states: 'I thought you liked strong leadership.' In *The Final Cut* Urquhart also reminds viewers that if they want a strong leader, which was said to have attracted many to Thatcher, then whatever that person does they 'partake in it'.

In the concluding series Urquhart becomes the victim of his own cold-hearted approach to power. Knowing her husband's days in office are numbered, Urquhart's wife wants him to avoid the kind of humiliation that befell Thatcher. Having already started a liaison with the Prime Minister's security advisor Commander Corder, she has him arrange Urquhart's assassination while unveiling a statue to Thatcher's memory. Once the act is over, Davies has Corder immediately approach Urquhart's closest rival and effectively anoint him on behalf of the security services, stating that 'anything you need, we're right behind you'. In this way, Davies merges the Parliamentary Novel with the conspiracy genre, suggesting the central role of dark and secret forces in British politics. In Dobbs' third novel, Urquhart was also assassinated, but while it would have been little comfort to his protagonist, his death was not the product of any conspiracy. Dobbs did not have the same political outlook as his television interpreter; indeed, as he archly put it, in contrast to those cynics at the BBC he believed politics could still consist of 'truth, justice and [the] triumph of good'.<sup>36</sup>

## Tory men and their women

Tory novels of this period were stories by men about men with women restricted to their accustomed roles as their protagonists' hobbies, hindrances or helpmates. In *First Among Equals*, apart from Archer's fictionalized Thatcher, women play all of these parts. Raymond Gould, the one who makes it to Number 10, not only survives blackmail from a prostitute, he also has an affair with an American lawyer. News of the latter (but not the former) comes to attention of Gould's wife, who spends much of the novel stuck in Leeds, where she does most of her husband's constituency work. Yet even this self-sacrificing spouse can only take so much, inducing Gould's mistress to give up the man she still loves because she fears a divorce will stop him becoming Prime Minister. Gould's wife similarly forgives her husband so he can remain on course for Downing Street.

If these novels suggest a good woman in politics is one who sublimates herself to her man's ambition, they also indicate that women could be *too* ambitious.

Edward Dunsford in Hurd's *The Palace of Enchantments* has a wife more ruthless than her spouse to the extent she urges him to abandon his principles when they are politically inconvenient. Indeed, early in the novel, Dunsford figures 'life without women, though still difficult, would be a damned sight simpler'.<sup>37</sup> When his wife leaves him because he puts principle before ambition he becomes a happier man. Varying this theme, in Renton's *The Dangerous Edge*, the protagonist's wife is sexually excited by politics, but this visceral effect means she cannot appreciate its subtleties. She is in any case primarily concerned for her husband to rise to the top so he can earn enough money to finance her lavish lifestyle. In other words, she is one more source of tension in an already high-pressure career.

Under the guise of comedy, Critchley's two novels show how one Tory man reacted to those women who challenged their subsidiary role. Both involve the murder of a female MP and an aspiring parliamentary candidate. In *Hung Parliament* (1991), while MP Emma Kerr is sexually adept she is a bore outside the bedroom, common to boot, and a blackmailer, which is why she ends up murdered. Critchley sets *Floating Voter* (1992) at the Conservative annual conference, to which a variety of transgressive horrors fetch up, men as well as women. This cast includes Hyacinth Scragg, a big-breasted Young Conservative from the West Midlands, and most notably Amaranth Wilikins, who is intent on securing a constituency in time for the next election. To attract attention, when speaking at the conference, for every anti-Labour point she advances Wilikins removes a layer of clothes, in effect doing a striptease. Yet Wilikins ends up a corpse not a candidate, for she is a woman with a past, which includes being a porn model.

### Tory women strike back

After Thatcher fell from power a number of Conservative women wrote novels that combined the Parliamentary Novel with an approach familiar to readers of romantic fictions made popular by Jilly Cooper. Edwina Currie was the leading exponent of this trend, one encouraged by the popularity of her *A Parliamentary Affair* (1994). Currie was elected to the Commons in 1983 and even before becoming an MP had developed a talent for attracting media attention. In 1986 she became a junior health minister until forced to resign two years later after making injudicious remarks about salmonella in eggs. A married woman, she conducted a secret affair with the similarly placed John Major as he rose up the ministerial

ladder, beginning a literary career when it was clear her political ambitions would remain unfulfilled during his premiership. Liverpool-born, Jewish and mixing authoritarian populism with social liberalism, she was not a classic Tory. Indeed, according to Currie's friend and fellow MP Gyles Brandreth, writing a few months before the publication of her first novel, in the Commons Tea Room:

she's the easy butt of every joke. In the Chamber, she speaks well, with conviction and authority, but no one seems to rate her. Perhaps *it's because she behaves like a man* – she interrupts, she's loud, she's opinionated.<sup>38</sup>

Whether due to her 'mannish' ways or not, Currie was certainly a despised figure among a variety of male colleagues, from Alan Clark on the Conservative far right to Critchley on its 'wet' wing.

Currie's motives for writing her first novel were initially simple: she hoped it would be a 'meal ticket'. It seems, however, that writing became a kind of therapy, a 'refuge from the awfulness and uncertainty of my political life', where she could express her increasing distaste for the Commons. It also became a form of 'revenge, for all the snide remarks, for all the arrogant macho assumptions of Westminster'.<sup>39</sup> *A Parliamentary Affair* had as its protagonist Elaine Stalker, a newly elected and very Currie-like MP. While she read Trollope to help her writing style, unlike the author of *The Prime Minister* (1876) Currie wanted to include as much sex as possible, confiding to her diary 'I want the book to sell, dammit'.<sup>40</sup> It was consequently dubbed a 'bonkbuster'. Serialized in the *Daily Mail*, sell it definitely did, with as many as 250,000 copies bought within months of publication.<sup>41</sup>

On the back of this success, Currie wrote a sequel, *A Woman's Place* (1996), published in the same year as Sara Keays' *The Black Book*. Jo Delvere, Keays' heroine, also evoked her creator's story insofar as she becomes secretary to an MP. Like Currie, Keays had thwarted ambitions, once harbouring hopes of becoming a Conservative MP. These were, however, smashed in 1983 when her twelve-year relationship with Cecil Parkinson became public, as did news that she was bearing his child. In the fall-out, Parkinson, a close Thatcher favourite, resigned from the government, much to his leader's distress. Many in the party blamed Keays for his downfall. An editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* headed, in a nod to one of Trollope's Palliser novels, 'Can You Forgive Him?', even suggested that 'a quiet abortion is greatly to be preferred to a scandal'.<sup>42</sup> A year later came Alice Renton's *Maiden Speech* and Vanessa Hannam's *Division Belle*; in contrast to Currie and Keays these were professional writers whose connection to politics came via marriages to Conservative MPs, in Renton's case the sometime



novelist, Tim. Their protagonists were also MPs' wives with, like their authors, careers to pursue.

With married heroines in their thirties or forties whose children still lived at home, these novels were aimed at similar kinds of readers, ones their authors assumed had little knowledge of Westminster. Keays, for example, felt obliged to explain what was the Black Book that gave her novel its title. Presumably to help readers identify with their protagonists, the authors also made them express a lack of interest in or even hostility for politics. Thus Keays' *Delvere* knows nothing, 'except what a mess the Government seems to be making of everything.' When told that Parliament 'belongs to all of us, doesn't it, and we've got to look after it. It's our Parliament. What happens here affects all of us and it's up to all of us to see that it's what we want it to be', *Delvere* realizes she had never thought of the institution in such terms, but 'only as something imposed from above'.<sup>43</sup> Even the MP *Stalker* only stands for Parliament after becoming the mother of a handicapped child encourages her to take an interest in the politics of health.

If such works were not widely regarded as political documents, Currie claimed of her second effort: 'Underneath the sex and the humour, the novel is intended to have a serious theme. It is designed to expose the decline of Parliament and the appalling treatment of women there.' It was, she claimed, 'my way of exposing what I consider are the faults and abuses of the system'.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the novels had much to say about the alien nature of a male-dominated Westminster and the low place women and the issues they are presumed to think important, like family and relationships, held there. As one of Keays' characters states, there were so few women MPs because politics promotes 'aggressive and adversarial behaviour, rather than sharing and compromise'.<sup>45</sup>

The novels depict their male Conservative politicians as the ultimate embodiments of masculine selfishness, to whom wives and children were to be subordinated. Renton has a Central Office figure hope her heroine will be a 'good wife', by which he meant 'One who'll do all the expected duties' and certainly not 'some free-thinking career woman'.<sup>46</sup> To be the wife of an MP, Renton makes it clear, a woman has to return to a 'pre-historic' world and give up her separate identity.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Hannam's protagonist is described as 'the sort of wife the Party did not need: a woman who spoke her mind'. She is, even so, forced to put her son's welfare after that of her husband's career. Yet when she does attend constituency functions, hidebound female party activists criticize her for appearing bare-legged.<sup>48</sup>

Those women who accept this position are not presented in a positive light. Cabinet Minister Ted Bampton (Currie's unflattering rendering of her old boss

Ken Clarke) appears in *A Woman's Place*. He is a sexist bully, married to Jean, an accommodating wife, whom he addresses thus:

'You're a good woman, you know that? You don't argue with me and mess me about, not when it comes to my job, and I don't interfere with you. You know your place – running things here in the home, bringing up the girls, and not bothering yourself with silliness outside. Why can't the rest be like that? Makes life much easier.'

Jean laughed, a slow reassuring chuckle. 'Because women don't know their place any more, and many wouldn't be content to live the way we do. More fool them, I suppose. But it suits me.'

At the door he turned. 'I suppose we're a bit old fashioned, the pair of us.'

'So what? We're more typical of couples in this country than the feminists would believe. And the happier for it.'

'Thank God for that.'<sup>49</sup>

As Hannam has the Chancellor of the Exchequer in an exclusively male Conservative Cabinet tell his supine wife, Thatcher might have once been Prime Minister, 'but we've come to our senses since.'<sup>50</sup>

The politicians to whom the novels' heroines are expected to suborn themselves are a very particular bunch. *Division Belle's* James Askew is described as having a 'controlled, ambitious heart' and being in possession of no feelings. He is a machine, not a man. If these qualities are invaluable in his political career they are nearly the undoing of his marriage.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Roger Dickson – Stalker's lover who ultimately becomes Prime Minister – is 'cold-blooded' and said to reserve most of his emotions for politics.<sup>52</sup> As a character in Keays' novel states of Westminster: 'the place is full of odd-balls and misfits ... I've a theory that it's often men with some kind of hangup who go into politics to make themselves feel important.'<sup>53</sup> Not all MPs fit that bill, notably Arnold Hobbs, but he is in his late sixties and one of the 'old school, the kind of MP who believes in public service'. Keays' novel nostalgically believes that things were better in the past, with one character claiming of MPs that 'they don't have the same values as in the old days' when they weren't so pompous.<sup>54</sup>

This largely gendered critique of Westminster complemented an eclectic distaste for Conservative activists. According to Renton, they were obsessed with law and order, capital punishment and bypasses; they were also racist and xenophobic. The chair of her heroine's constituency party was, for good measure, a convicted drink-driver who aspired to the post because it boosted his self-importance. Some authors put their own snobbishness on show the better to denigrate the party's rank and file. Hannam thus describes female

Conservatives as thinking it fashionable to wear crimplene cocktail dresses in primary colours; her heroine's husband's constituency chair even eats meals watching television.<sup>55</sup> Readers were clearly meant to view politics as distasteful on many levels, including the aesthetic.

Whatever their emphases, these novels systematically present politics as antithetical to domestic happiness and so female fulfilment. On watching the real Betty Boothroyd elected Speaker at the start of *A Parliamentary Affair*, Elaine Stalker wondered if – given Boothroyd was unmarried and childless – it was impossible to be an MP and, 'like millions of other women,' also have a husband and children?<sup>56</sup> In Stalker's case the answer was ultimately in the negative. Having happily given up housework and morning sickness to pursue a political career, *A Woman's Place* ends with Stalker marrying the acme of conventional masculinity, a reserve officer in the Guards and returning to a career outside politics where 'success [is] not based on hypocrisy but on hard work and talent.'<sup>57</sup> In the Renton and Hannam novels domestic life that is torn asunder by politics only returns to tranquillity when their heroines' husbands quit Westminster. Indeed, James Askew only saves his marriage by appreciating that marriage is a partnership, that his wife has her own life, and family is superior to political ambition.

If these novels express any hope for a different kind of politics it is not one embodied by women, suggesting that these Tory writers could not, at this point, imagine a time when their sisters might enjoy a more equal place at Westminster. For Currie, hope is personalized in young Fred, who will marry Stalker's daughter; for Renton it takes the shape of the Green Party boyfriend of her protagonist's daughter who thinks it might be worth his while becoming a Conservative.

## Conclusion

Novels that crossed the divide between political and romantic fiction continued to be written after the Conservatives left office. Michael Howard led the party to its third defeat in a row in 2005; a year later his wife Sandra wrote *Glass Houses* (2006). Wives or daughters of men from other parties also contributed to the sub-genre: Susan Crosland wrote *The Prime Minister's Wife* (2002); Melissa Benn penned *One of Us* (2009); Rosie Wallace produced *A Small Town Affair* (2010). These remained relatively rare literary creatures, however, suggesting publishers were not confident they could find them a guaranteed audience of sufficient size. Perhaps that was why, despite the success of her first two efforts, Currie moved on to other subjects. Similarly, the former Conservative minister Ann Widdecombe

published four novels between 2000 and 2005, but steered clear of Westminster. Even more strikingly, none of Louise Bagshawe's fourteen efforts written between 1995 and her election as Conservative MP in 2010 touched politics; indeed they were all located in the lucrative 'chick lit' genre, one that celebrated the glamorous and wholly apolitical lives of their twenty-something female protagonists.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the Tory Parliamentary Novel therefore retained its traditional masculine character. In the midst of his *House of Cards* trilogy, Michael Dobbs tried his hand at a female-friendly political novel with *The Touch of Innocents* (1994). This inevitably had a male politician consumed by his need for power, one that leaves his private life empty; he is opposed by a female nemesis who in contrast puts family first. It took another twelve years before Dobbs wrote another similarly themed work, *First Lady* (2006). For the most part, however, Dobbs' output after Francis Urquhart's second and final death in 1994 consisted of three series of novels about a variety of maverick, irredeemably masculine, Conservative heroes. First came a trilogy about down-at-heel Tom Goodfellowe MP (1997–2000) and then a quadrilogy featuring former SAS killing machine Harry Jones MP (2007–12). In between Dobbs wrote four historical fictions exploring the life of the ultimate Tory idol, Winston Churchill (2002–9).

Similarly, after he resigned as Foreign Secretary in 1995, Douglas Hurd returned to writing novels featuring calm, reassuring and male Prime Ministers navigating choppy waters. In what was a significant departure from Hurd's norm, in *The Shape of Ice* (1998) and *Image in the Water* (2001) he nonetheless presented readers with a female Chancellor of the Exchequer. Joan Freetown is Hurd's version of Margaret Thatcher in all but name. In contrast to her more relaxed and balanced male peers, Freetown is consumed by politics and hard work: as a result she has alienated her children and is semi-detached from an emasculated husband. This intimidating, histrionic and inhumane Boadicea also puts her colleagues on edge, for even Freetown's hair is 'harsh' and her voice 'sharp'. Evoking the perspective of many of Thatcher's left-wing critics, Freetown was, according to Hurd, 'half-masculine, half-feminine'.<sup>258</sup> Politics in his as in so many others' eyes still remained no job for a lady.

## Notes

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- 2 H. Nunn, *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy: The Political Culture of Gender and Nation* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2002), p. 22.

- 3 L. Peake, 'Women in the campaign and in the Commons', in A. Geddes and J. Tonge (eds), *Labour's Landslide: The British General Election 1997* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 165–77.
- 4 P. Dunleavy and S. Weir with G. Subrahmanyam, 'Public response and constitutional significance', *Parliamentary Affairs* 48:4 (1995), pp. 602–16.
- 5 First transmitted 11 November 1982.
- 6 *Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 1982.
- 7 *Today*, 10 May 1989.
- 8 *TV Times*, 3–9 February 1990; *Daily Mail*, 10 May 1989.
- 9 *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 February 1990.
- 10 *Daily Mirror*, 10 February 1990.
- 11 *Sun*, 21 January 1992.
- 12 For an excellent analysis of Thatcher's depiction on television during this period, see M. K. Harmes, 'A creature not quite of this world: adaptations of Margaret Thatcher on 1980s British television', *Journal of Popular Television* 1:1 (2013), pp. 53–68.
- 13 D. Hare, *The Secret Rapture* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 68.
- 14 *International Herald Tribune*, 2 August 1988.
- 15 *New Woman*, September 1988.
- 16 *Scotsman*, 12 July 1989; *New Statesman and Society*, 9 June 1989.
- 17 *Guardian*, 18 May 1995; *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1995; *Sunday Express*, 4 June 1995.
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- 19 *Daily Telegraph*, 27 November 2008.
- 20 J. Critchley, *Hung Parliament* (London: Headline, 1991), p. 68.
- 21 For an assessment of Hurd's early novels, see Stuart, *The Public Servant*, pp. 56–65.
- 22 Quotations are taken from D. Hurd and S. Lamport, *The Palace of Enchantments* (Sevenoaks: Coronet, 1985), pp. 99–100 and 108–9.
- 23 B. Denham, *Foxhunt* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 43, 57.
- 24 For the novel, see M. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer: Stranger than Fiction* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), pp. 240–5.
- 25 *The Times*, 5 July 1984.
- 26 Quoted in Crick, *Jeffrey Archer*, p. 252.
- 27 *Mail on Sunday*, 16 February 1986; *NOW!*, 18 May 1986.
- 28 *Observer*, 7 December 1986.
- 29 *NOW!*, 18 May 1986.
- 30 *Today*, 1 October 1986.
- 31 *Daily Mail*, 18 October 1986; *Mail on Sunday*, 5 October 1986.
- 32 *Today*, 4 November 1986.
- 33 E. Currie, *Diaries: Volume II, 1992–1997* (London: Biteback, 2012), p. 84.
- 34 *Western Mail*, 15 December 1990.

- 35 *Spectator*, 24 November 1990; *Independent*, 25 November and 3 December 1990; *Today*, 1 December 1990.
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- 38 G. Brandreth, *Breaking the Code* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 210. Emphasis added.
- 39 Currie, *Diaries*, pp. 12, 94, 148, 162–3.
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 45.
- 41 *Guardian*, 11 March 1994.
- 42 S. Keays, *A Question of Judgement* (London: Quintessential, 1985), pp. 144–5
- 43 S. Keays, *The Black Book* (London: Doubleday, 1996), pp.15, 58.
- 44 *Guardian*, 22 January 1996.
- 45 Keays, *The Black Book*, p. 27.
- 46 A. Renton, *Maiden Speech* (London: Review, 1997), p. 60.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 48 V. Hannam, *Division Belle* (London: Headline, 1997), pp. 16, 90, 144.
- 49 E. Currie, *A Woman's Place* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), pp. 478–9.
- 50 Hannam, *Division Belle*, p. 144.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 35, 178.
- 52 E. Currie, *A Parliamentary Affair* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), p. 74.
- 53 Keays, *The Black Book*, pp. 64–5, 110–11.
- 54 *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 107.
- 55 Hannam, *Division Belle*, pp. 85–6.
- 56 Currie, *A Parliamentary Affair*, p. 20.
- 57 Currie, *A Woman's Place*, p. 499.
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## A Thick Ending

In 1989 the *Sun* published an editorial about *Scandal*, which retold the 1963 Profumo Affair for the big screen. Britain's most popular daily paper claimed that 'the cosy club of politicians at Westminster' was 'frothing at the mouth' because its members believed the film should not have been made. Yet, for raking over the resignation of the Minister for War after his infamous adulterous affair, the *Sun* believed the movie had performed a valuable public service. It also warned that if 'any member of the PRESENT Cabinet is up to the same tricks there will be a film about it too in 25 years' time.<sup>1</sup> Television executives had certainly been uncomfortable dramatizing the Profumo episode, which was why *Scandal* ended up in cinemas.<sup>2</sup> But attitudes were changing. *Sun* readers would not have to wait a quarter of a century to find out about contemporary politicians' private affairs, nor would broadcasters hesitate to follow in the tabloid's wake.

Indeed, during the 1990s the Conservative government was assailed by media accusations that many of John Major's ministers and MPs were mired in 'sleaze'. A hazy but potent term, 'sleaze' gained currency soon after the party's 1992 election victory, its fourth in a row. Spawned by journalists seeking to translate the travails of Major's troubled administration into saleable copy, 'sleaze' gave shape to a disparate set of long-standing concerns about the flawed nature of Britain's representative democracy.<sup>3</sup> Incorporating worries about the close relationship between politicians and business, 'sleaze' sometimes referred to the practice of former ministers exploiting their insider knowledge; the extent to which Major's party relied on donations from millionaires of ill repute; or the payment of government MPs by lobbyists.<sup>4</sup>

If these instances of actual, near or mostly alleged corruption preoccupied the broadsheet press, the tabloids, most notably the *Sun*, employed 'sleaze' to also characterize party figures' adultery or idiosyncratic sexual practices. Some commentators distinguished between 'sleaze proper' and those 'more venial misdemeanours' of an amorous nature.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the unique power of 'sleaze' came from journalists' conjoining financial with sexual corruption, something that



ensured the concept's purchase on popular views of Britain's political class. The emphasis on male MPs' bedroom antics reinforced the increasingly widespread populist belief that the decent, honourable and much-abused public should not believe in their politicians.

In reaction to this 'Tory sleaze', New Labour stormed into office in 1997 with Tony Blair offering the public a 'new politics'. Blair had been reluctant to use 'sleaze' against his opponents because as, he admitted in private, the 'reality was our politics was probably [the] least corrupt of anywhere in the world'.<sup>6</sup> Soon, however, Blair's party was also accused of being 'sleazy'. As with Major's government, the charge sheet became long and eclectic: by 2007 one admittedly hostile assessment claimed Labour was guilty of 140 instances of 'sleaze'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, to the usual litany had now been added what some saw as the uniquely New Labour sin of 'spinning'. This many believed was a euphemism for lying, although its practitioners saw it as merely presenting their case to best effect. The most critical example of 'spinning' was the 'dodgy dossier', a briefing document released by Downing Street during the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War. This contained claims that Iraq had the capacity to deploy biological weapons within forty-five minutes and contributed to the view that Blair deliberately misled the public about the existence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.<sup>8</sup> As with its Conservative predecessor, however, New Labour 'sleaze' mostly consisted of suspicions and allegations.

Despite promising to bring new hope to politics, Blair's period in office actually provoked growing talk that Westminster had become further detached from the 'real world' of the electors. This charge was given force by the fall in voter turnout in the 2001 general election, to a post-war low of 59.4 per cent. While participation recovered slightly in 2005, to 61.4 per cent, fewer people still supported Blair's party than had not voted. Britons, it seemed, were switching off from the parliamentary game, screening out what was good and focusing on the bad, only paying attention when, for example, in 2009 the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that many MPs had over-claimed their expenses. In this fetid atmosphere, parties on the far right, notably the BNP and UKIP, gained new audiences for their assertion that the established parties had betrayed loyal, law-abiding Britons.<sup>9</sup>

To interest voters in Westminster, the media reported in increasingly personal rather than policy terms, specifically concentrating on the party leaders.<sup>10</sup> In order to get through to those unwilling to engage with the complexities of Early Day Motions and their like, the parties had for some time employed the same tactic of 'personalization'.<sup>11</sup> This process was reinforced

by the centralization of power into the hands of a few leaders, which nudged Britain further towards a more presidential style of politics, as was confirmed by the dominance of the Prime Ministerial debates during the 2010 general election campaign.<sup>12</sup>

To bridge the growing divide between the parties and the people, strategists started to encourage politicians to tell stories about themselves so as to evoke an emotional, as opposed to a rational, response.<sup>13</sup> Those associated with New Labour were among the first to explicitly use narrative in this way. One of its leading lights, Peter Mandelson even wrote a book in 1996, part of which imagined what Britain would be like in 2005, thanks to a Blair government.<sup>14</sup> Soon leading politicians in all parties became heroes in their own personal dramas with their life histories used to create partisan points. In the run-up to the 2010 election, for instance, the loss of David Cameron's son to cerebral palsy and Gordon Brown's left eye to rugby union were woven into tales of fortitude that suggested each was best equipped for leadership.<sup>15</sup> What impact all this had on how – and if – people voted remains moot, but real politics was undoubtedly presented in increasingly personal, narrative and, thanks to 'sleaze', moral terms.

While politicians adopted the techniques of storytelling in part to overcome the suspicion that they could not be trusted to tell the truth, professional storytellers mixed up fact and fiction to an unprecedented extent. Blair's administration, according to one critic, was 'the most dramatised British government in history'.<sup>16</sup> It was certainly the most *quickly* depicted and when dramatists took up the subject they eviscerated whatever remained of the boundary between that which was believed to be real and that which was definitely imagined. Thus, if Winston Churchill was over five years dead before he was portrayed in a British movie, Blair was Prime Minister for not much more than five years and still in office when *The Deal* (Channel 4, 2003) gave television viewers actor Michael Sheen's first of three takes on what he presented as a slippery and smarmy Labour leader. Such dramas moreover told a story that leaned heavily on existing preconceptions that defined Blair's government as a 'sleazy' beast, in the process helping to at least reinforce them in viewers' minds.

One of the few to escape New Labour's dramatic opprobrium was Mo Mowlam, as played by Julie Walters in *Mo* (Channel 4, 2010). Mowlam had been one of Blair's most popular Cabinet ministers, partly because of her association with the Northern Ireland Peace Process but also due to her public struggle with a brain tumour that claimed her life in 2005. She had been one of 120 women elected to the Commons in 1997, which was double the 1992 figure. This still meant women only accounted for eighteen per cent of MPs:

expectations this influx would ‘feminize’ politics consequently remained unfulfilled.<sup>17</sup> That the media dubbed the 101 women returned as Labour MPs ‘Blair’s Babes’ had in any case suggested misogyny would not be dispelled overnight. Despite that, a vague feminism now prevailed in many dramas about politics, something that strengthened optimism that women might usher in a better way of doing politics. A greater sensitivity to issues of gender and sexual difference also meant that the few gay characters depicted in such fictions were no longer presented in pathological terms.<sup>18</sup> This led to the most unlikely of figures being seen in a new light, with Margaret Thatcher attracting unprecedented dramatic sympathy in her declining years.

Fictions about politics, which located their protagonists in complex contexts and showed them as well-intentioned if, inevitably, flawed figures, continued to be produced. Anthony Cartwright’s novel *Heartland* (2009) has a Labour councillor seek re-election in a working-class town undermined by decline and riven by ethnic tension. Cartwright has the reader empathize with the councillor’s various dilemmas. Similarly, James Graham’s 2012 National Theatre play *This House* was set in the Commons during the fraught minority Labour government of 1974–9. Graham did not paint his party whips and MPs as angels, but they had motives more noble than mere self-aggrandizement. Writing as someone who had ‘a deep admiration for our democracy, an affection for the building that houses it, a belief in what it *could* be’, Graham was, however, an unusual figure.<sup>19</sup> Like Cartwright, he also wrote for a minority audience.

Subtle political dramas that explored the many dimensions of political activity aimed at millions had always been fairly hard to find. During this period they became almost as rare as the unicorn. According to Neil McKay, who wrote *Mo*, television executives now completely in awe of ratings saw politics as ‘boring’. The subject, he claimed, was an especially ‘hard sell’ when faced by commissioning editors from BBC One and ITV1, channels which aimed for mass audiences. Therefore while *Mo* was about the life and death of a Cabinet minister he ‘pitched it as a personal story, not a political one’, anticipating Channel 4 might think it would ‘frighten the audience’ with too much politics.<sup>20</sup> When the experienced television dramatist Tony Saint took a proposal to the BBC that dealt with an aspect of the 1970s Labour government, as would Graham’s 2012 play, it was rejected with the comment: ‘it’s too political. It’s too much about politics.’<sup>21</sup> If the BBC’s interest in political drama was on the wane – and it pushed many of those it did produce to BBC Four, its little-watched digital channel – ITV essentially abandoned the form. The biggest champion of political drama during this period was Channel 4, which specialized in populist

satires of the Westminster elite. Other than in comedy, politics was mostly represented in conspiracy thrillers, for if commissioning editors feared viewers found politics boring, these dramas promised to give them vivid storylines with lots of explosions while also indulging the by-now endemic view that the country's political class formed part of a vast conspiracy against the public.

## The omnipresent conspiracy

The view that party elites had agendas inimical to the interests of those they were supposed to serve had framed many post-war political dramas, especially from the 1980s. Labour's period in office, however, saw the conspiracy narrative applied to politics with increasing enthusiasm and greater force.

The popularity of *Spooks*, which ran for ten seasons between 2002 and 2011, suggested the conspiracy device could be applied to all manner of subjects. The series' heroes were MI5 officers working within the 'Grid', who confront any number of threats to national security. While the series began in the shadow of 9/11 and continued through 7/7, Islamic extremists were but one of the conspiratorial forces encountered. Reacting to real events, members of the Grid took on British fascists, European eco-terrorists, the Russian mafia and international financial speculators, to name but a few. The series consequently depicted MI5 as standing between democracy and its overthrow.

This was something of a transformation for Britain's intelligence services. Having been part of many 1980s fictional plots against democracy, the invasion of Iraq encouraged some to look on MI5 in more positive terms. With Blair accused of manipulating intelligence to make his case for the assault on Saddam, David Hare's *Page Eight* (BBC, 2011) had his avowedly apolitical hero, MI5 operative Johnny Worricker, uphold truth against a Prime Minister implicated in illegal US torture of terrorist suspects. The process that led to the 'dodgy dossier' and his belief that politicians had become a 'self-serving cartel' directly inspired Hare's drama.<sup>22</sup> Yet, if Iraq put Britain's intelligence services in a new light, the Americans continued to play their villainous role. Robert Harris' novel *Ghost* (2007), turned into a movie in 2010, was stimulated by the idea that, as Harris put it, 'there's something strange about Britain's slavish relationship with the United States. We don't have an independent foreign policy.'<sup>23</sup> *Ghost* consequently explains that the reason why the retired Blair-like Prime Minister had only ever followed policies that favoured Washington was because his wife was a CIA agent.

In *Spooks* MI5 is often pitched against the CIA and also manipulated by untrustworthy ministers. In one 2003 episode the Grid becomes an unknowing part of a government plot to assassinate a military hero, who is causing the Ministry of Defence embarrassment by publicly complaining about troops' poor equipment. As the Grid's Chief of Section states with disgust after this otherwise loyal officer has been killed: 'If the New World Order means we're in the business of destroying anyone who questions the political agenda, then I'm in the wrong job.'<sup>24</sup> This episode articulated real concerns that the government was not properly supporting soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Such was the depth of this suspicion that the 2009 movie *31 North 62 East* even has the Prime Minister betray the location of British troops to an Arab government for the sake of an lucrative arms contract.

On occasion the Grid thwarts ministerial plots and in a bizarre way the intelligence service is presented as upholding the principle of open government. In a 2006 episode its members even uncover a secret government deal to sell nuclear power to Saudi Arabia. A minister boasts he will be able to persuade the public of its merits as – in an obvious reference to Iraq – 'We managed to sell them a war on a fairy tale.'<sup>25</sup> Having thwarted that project, the Grid then discovers another clandestine pact, this time between the British and American governments, to abandon the fight against global warming – while cynically going through the motions of taking it seriously – and to instead focus on how to exploit its political consequences.<sup>26</sup>

If often presenting government as unscrupulous and omnipotent, *Spooks* had it both ways by also showing it – and civil liberties – to be in danger of overthrow by those wanting to take more forceful action in the War on Terror.<sup>27</sup> At one point, elements in MI6, business and the media as well as the Cabinet Secretary seek 'a new kind of leadership' and blackmail the Prime Minister into introducing measures to sideline Parliament and reduce him to their rubber stamp. To achieve their ends the cabal manipulates public opinion by so exaggerating the reality of outside threats they demand more authoritarian measures. In a conspiracy that echoed aspects of the movie *V for Vendetta* (2006), in which people's anxieties about terrorism are induced by a fascist government, the Grid saves the day. By articulating worries that the government's response to 9/11 threatened freedom, Ben Richards' script also evoked many of the concerns expressed by liberal journalist Henry Porter, whose columns regularly complained New Labour was mounting a mighty assault on freedom, a view that underpinned his novel *The Dying Light* (2009).

Paranoid about the motives of those who exercised political power, *Spooks* formed part of a developing sense that government was for a panoply of disparate reasons conspiring against the people. The most innovative aspect of this trend was the emergence of a right-wing populism, one conspicuously articulated by Richard Littlejohn, who at various times had a platform in the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, two of Britain's best-selling newspapers.<sup>28</sup> Both outlets favoured a populist approach to politics, one Littlejohn reinforced in vituperative attacks on the Westminster elite, which echoed the rhetoric of the far right. Serialized in the *Sun*, his 2001 novel *To Hell in a Handcart* was even described by one critic as a recruiting pamphlet for the BNP.<sup>29</sup> It certainly gave grounds for viewing Littlejohn as a racist, being over-populated by Romanian criminals, bogus asylum-seekers and thieving gypsies. Yet the novel also contained characters of immigrant descent who Littlejohn intended readers to view positively; indeed he claimed that a West Indian character was the 'conscience of the book'. In any case, the asylum-seekers depicted as benefitting from the generosity of the British state were – along with recidivist young white criminals rewarded with free foreign holidays at tax-payers' expense – merely instances of a polity gone wrong, and *that* was Littlejohn's central theme.

Littlejohn painted a picture of a Britain in which the moral, hard-working majority were hemmed in and controlled by the authorities. Motorists suffer twenty-five-mile-per-hour speed limits on motorways; city centres are pedestrianized to deny vehicles access; drivers are randomly breathalyzed and their cars clamped on any excuse. In contrast, those breaking the law are indulged. Littlejohn argued public authority no longer served the public and was instead concerned to regulate the decent majority's behaviour. He does not explain, though, *why* New Labour ministers – in other contexts accused of pandering to public opinion – should want to oppress those whose votes they need to stay in power. Yet, if no reasons are given for this politically correct conspiracy, Littlejohn reinforces his vision of an alien public authority by making it seem that it is only officered by Trotskyists and gays.

In an ironic echo of George Orwell's 1984 dictum that 'who controls the present controls the past', so prevalent had the conspiracy narrative become by the start of the twenty-first century it was habitually applied to past events. Working chronologically backwards into Britain's political history, David Peace's *Red Riding* quartet of novels published during 1999–2002 was adapted by Channel 4 and broadcast in a 2009 mini-series. This presented a grim 1970s Britain as subject to various plots, including MI5's attempt to undermine Prime Minister Harold Wilson, threatened military coups and even death squads. Set

in a more than usually dour industrial Yorkshire, the series showed the systemic nature of corruption with a major building contractor controlling local police, press and politicians. If he is ultimately murdered, it is only so police officers can run the county as they see fit.

Set two decades earlier, *The Hour* (BBC, 2011–12) was in contrast a highly glamorized take on the early days of current affairs television. The second season involved a conspiracy in which a nightclub owner blackmails male customers from the top drawer of society and politics. He is involved with a company building nuclear bases and has formed an alliance with the Conservative Minister of Defence, a suspiciously keen advocate of atomic weapons. Sex, money, Armageddon and politics was a heady mix, one that moreover evoked Profumo and referenced the 1950s debate about whether Britain should rely on a nuclear deterrent, one that spawned the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In developing its plot, *The Hour* suggested the Harold Macmillan government's embrace of nuclear weapons was influenced by corrupt motives and enforced by an elite conspiracy. Tapping into this sentiment, Stephen Poliakoff's 2009 film *Glorious 39* even had 1930s appeasers murder opponents of their attempt to stop Britain going to war against Hitler. In reality, leading elements in Neville Chamberlain's Cabinet did want to avoid war and there were Nazi sympathizers in society, but Poliakoff's drama imagined a plot so embedded in the elite, one of such magnitude and so little scruple, it is unclear why it did not succeed.

## The docu-drama of New Labour

Even the most fantastic of conspiracy dramas was based on an interpretation of actual events. As we have seen, much of the appeal of the Victorian Parliamentary Novel was that it gave readers what they thought was an insight into real politics. The Blair years, however, saw the increased employment of a new kind of dramatic approach and a fresh freedom to depict real contemporary figures, which heightened the impression that fictions were now rendering uniquely accurate versions of political reality.<sup>30</sup>

Reconstructing authentic events and depicting real people by using stand-ins or actors had long been popular with documentary filmmakers.<sup>31</sup> It also appealed to early television journalists, notably those working on the ITV current affairs series *World in Action* (1963–98), who first employed this method in their 1963 investigation into the Profumo Affair, when footage of the protagonists was unavailable. In 1976 *World in Action* examined how the Labour Cabinet agreed

to bail out the Chrysler car company by having journalists play ministers. Subsequently, however, while works still contained scenes the content of which was based on journalistic research, many others were inspired by guesswork and imagination or compressed known events to make them more dramatically compelling. Using this hybrid 'docu-drama' or 'drama-documentary' approach, members of the *World in Action* team reconstructed with a cast of actors Margaret Thatcher's exit from power in *Thatcher: The Final Days* (1991). If popular with dramatists and audiences, some were concerned that, as the journalist Charles Moore put it, the term 'drama-documentary' was a 'contradiction'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, when *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985) included a scene in which a television showed Margaret Thatcher being interviewed by Robin Day, the veteran broadcaster made known to its producers his unhappiness at the mixing of reality with fiction.<sup>33</sup>

The early 1990s also saw the screening of dramas that, while evoking immediate political reality, did not pretend to be documentaries. BBC Two's comedy *A Very Open Prison* (1994) featured a Conservative Home Secretary in charge of prisons unable to contain their inmates. The writer-director Guy Jenkin denied it was a docu-drama, instead calling it a 'fiction arising out of real life events'.<sup>34</sup> Yet the parallels between the made-up politician and the actual Cabinet minister Michael Howard, whose Home Office faced similar problems with its prisons, were hard to miss. Even when producers made no claims to authenticity, journalists still noted 'stark parallels' between drama and fact, as they did in relation to Channel 4's *The Politician's Wife* (1995), the aforementioned story of a quintessentially 'sleazy' Conservative minister. One even suggested this highly charged melodrama 'could have been a documentary'.<sup>35</sup> As further evidence of the blurring of the boundary between reality and its representation, journalists were also apt to make comparisons between Neil Hamilton, the Conservative MP accused of taking money from lobbyists, and Alan B'Stard, the completely corrupt Thatcherite politician in ITV's situation comedy *The New Statesman* (1987–92).<sup>36</sup>

During New Labour's time in office this process gained pace. It was also evident in novels, a flurry of which were written by political journalists and those who had once worked for New Labour. These traded on their authors' inside knowledge and so made much of the authenticity of at least aspects of their highly charged stories. The blurb for *Time and Fate* (2005) by Lance Price, a former press adviser to Prime Minister Blair, even claimed it revealed 'what life is really like at the top of British politics'.<sup>37</sup> Professional novelists similarly combined what was real with their imagined tales. Blair appeared in



Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), set in London on 15 February 2003 when one million people were estimated to have protested against the impending invasion of Iraq. In an enigmatic episode, it is unclear if the Prime Minister is lying or truly believes in the existence of weapons of mass destruction. Gordon Burn's *Born Yesterday* (2008) even wove a story out of the news of 2007, which included Gordon Brown finally replacing Blair as Prime Minister, mixing it up with the disappearance of Madeleine McCann.

On the stage David Hare had pioneered using documentary material and interviews with real people to dramatize the privatization of the railways in *The Permanent Way* (2003), the road to the Iraq invasion in *Stuff Happens* (2006) and the international financial crisis in *The Power of Yes* (2009).<sup>38</sup> These productions carefully delineated between the imagined and the factual, so audiences were always clear which was which. Yet Hare also wrote plays that dramatized versions of real political events and figures. He did this first with *The Absence of War* (1993), based on Labour's ill-fated 1992 election campaign and which benefitted from the playwright attending on a number of high-level party meetings.<sup>39</sup> Thus, if Hare claimed Prime Minister Alec Beasley selling access and peerages for cash was 'pure fiction' in *Gethsemane* (2008), this did not prevent audiences and critics from taking him to be a version of Blair, who was accused of doing both. Indeed, Beasley was the lying Prime Minister in *Page Eight*, by which time Hare had conceded his striking similarities to the former incumbent of Number 10.<sup>40</sup>

Hare's plays largely remained stage-bound. Even when broadcast on Channel 4, television docu-dramas had bigger audiences – as well as ones that were younger and less middle-class – than a novel or stage production. Those television dramatists who wrote about Blair's party and employed this method also had good reasons to do so, claiming they revealed their subject's 'essential truth', while making their work 'more accessible' to audiences and enjoying a greater impact than fictions that did not depict real figures.<sup>41</sup> *The Deal*, an account of the rivalry between Blair and Brown before 1994, was the first television docu-drama to take New Labour as its subject. Director Stephen Frears claimed he was astonished to have been able to make a film about a sitting Prime Minister, seeing it as rather 'a cheeky thing to do'.<sup>42</sup> *The Deal* was, however, just one of many such 'cheeky' fictions: David Blunkett, Gordon Brown, Alastair Campbell, Peter Mandelson, Mo Mowlam, John Prescott, Claire Short and, most frequently, Tony Blair found themselves played by actors on the small screen. The number of fictions 'arising out of real life events' also increased, including BBC Two's 1996 *Crossing the Floor* (Alan Howarth's

defection to Labour); Channel 4's 1997 *Mr White Goes to Westminster* (Martin Bell's election as an Independent MP); BBC One's two-part 2001 drama *The Project* (the rise of New Labour); BBC One's 2004 *The Deputy* (the adventures of a Prescott-like Deputy Prime Minister); and the same channel's 2005 *Gideon's Daughter* (the making of the Millennium Dome).

Adding to the appearance of authenticity, many dramas employed retired or backbench MPs and television journalists in cameo roles to play themselves. If this had also happened on a modest scale in *Yes, Minister* during the 1980s, digital technology now allowed television to make it appear that actors were interacting with real politicians. One 'documentary' – *Tony Blair: Rock Star* (Channel 4, 2006) – even combined interviews with real people who knew Blair as a young man with scenes that dramatized, for comic effect, the episodes they described. The same method was repeated in *Miliband of Brothers* (Channel 4, 2010), a jokey take on David and Ed Miliband. In 2008 BBC Two's current affairs programme *Newsnight* took this development a step further by commissioning *10 Days to War*, a series of eight short dramas depicting decision-making prior to the invasion of Iraq. To establish a barrier between 'drama' and 'news', these were shown prior to *Newsnight* rather than during the programme. But their subject set the agenda for discussions conducted between the 'real players' in the show itself.<sup>43</sup>

The danger for audiences was that, as critic Andrew Billen wrote of *The Deal*, 'At the end, when we saw the real Tony and Gordon on College Green, we barely noticed they were not [actors Michael] Sheen and [David] Morrissey.'<sup>44</sup> David Blunkett, subject of the highly unfavourable *A Very Social Secretary* (Channel 4, 2005) certainly found it 'astonishing ... to hear people I know believing that it is a genuine portrayal and not a piece of fiction.'<sup>45</sup> Moreover, on the basis of comments published on the series' website, if viewers knew *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard* (BBC, 2006) was fictional, some wished she had been real.<sup>46</sup> Participants in the actual political arena also exploited the series. A petition was lodged on the Number 10 website asking New Labour to follow her policies.<sup>47</sup> David Cameron was also asked a question inspired by the series.<sup>48</sup> UKIP even acquired a web address similar to the one used by the BBC to publicize the series so as to appropriate Pritchard's populism for its own purposes.<sup>49</sup>

Those dramatizing New Labour depicted it deep in 'sleaze' and especially guilty of spinning. That Labour and the Conservatives were, in respect of 'sleaze', the same was an early and predominant theme. Both the comedies *Crossing the Floor* and *Normal Ormal* (BBC, 1998) were about Conservatives who did well under Thatcher but left the sinking Conservative ship to join Blair. These gave

viewers a picture of politics with which they were already familiar. Indeed, of the former, a critic complained: ‘its cast of sleazy Tories and sleek New Labour spin-doctors ... is so over-familiar that one can only hope for a surprise Lib Dem victory to give us some fresh targets.’<sup>50</sup> Peter Flannery’s drama series *Our Friends in the North* (BBC, 1996) even presented New Labour – before it had won office – as the latest instalment in a never-ending story of corruption. As he put it:

Regimes come and go, but lies and betrayals go on forever. There has always been corruption in politics ... we live in an ongoing culture of corruption. *Friends in the North* is the story of people who tried to do something about it, and failed. It may be a Utopian ideal, but we must keep trying because the drift is always in the other direction. Corruption breeds corruption. I’d love to believe that a Labour victory would start a clean-up in politics, but I’m afraid they’ll be trapped by the very institutions that support them.<sup>51</sup>

Michael Wearing, the series’ executive producer, furthermore claimed it conveyed ‘disillusionment with politics and everything politicians say they can offer’ and was ‘as critical of the complacency and innate corruption of the left as it is of the right.’<sup>52</sup>

If these works evoked a populist hostility to politicians as a class, most were actually written by left-wingers critical of New Labour’s abandonment, as they saw it, of ‘socialism’. Peter Kosminsky described himself and scriptwriter Leigh Jackson as ‘standard Labour-type figures’ disillusioned by New Labour.<sup>53</sup> It was this disenchantment that underpinned *The Project*. As Jackson stated:

we watched the Conservatives disintegrate under a deluge of sleaze and corruption. So when Labour won, it was like a new dawn. There was a tremendous feeling across Britain of rejuvenation, of hope and idealism in the future, which I think now has evaporated.

Jackson believed that by 2002 many were consumed by ‘the growing realisation that after 18 years we might have voted in another “Tory” government, only this one was more efficient and twice as ruthless.’<sup>54</sup> Alistair Beaton was another left-of-centre writer who saw his work as motivated by a ‘sense of outrage’. Seeing New Labour as ‘an authoritarian and right wing administration’, his *A Very Social Secretary* asked ‘what had become of Labour’s roots and Labour’s principles?’ To answer that question, Beaton used Blunkett’s affair with the publisher of the Conservative-supporting *Spectator* to illustrate the party’s embrace of reaction. Opposition to the Iraq invasion motivated many such works and certainly underpinned Beaton’s black comedy *The Trial of Tony Blair*

(Channel 4, 2007), which imagined the former Prime Minister charged with war crimes.<sup>55</sup> The road to the Iraq war – and specifically the death of Dr. David Kelly, who questioned the veracity of the ‘dodgy dossier’ – was also the central subject of Kosminsky’s *The Government Inspector* (Channel 4, 2005). This suggested that at the very least Blair and Campbell had been careless about Kelly’s fate. Iraq even influenced *The Deal*, despite it being set before 1994. Frears claimed it was produced in the belief that by 2003 Blair had revealed ‘his true colours’ by taking Britain to war.<sup>56</sup>

From having once attempted to protect the political class from dramatic criticism, elements in the BBC now saw themselves as tribunes of a disenfranchised people. Jane Trantor, BBC One’s Controller of Drama Commissioning (2000–6), happily claimed that *The Project* would make the government feel ‘uncomfortable’.<sup>57</sup> Peter Ansgore, Commissioning Editor of Drama for Channel 4 (1987–97), boasted of the short-lived 1996 situation comedy *Annie’s Bar*, set in the Palace of Westminster, that it would ‘tread on politicians’ toes’; its director Baz Taylor declared: ‘MPs are there to be shot at – they are fair game’.<sup>58</sup> The production company Mentorn, responsible for *A Very Social Secretary* and *The Trial of Tony Blair* among others, was even described in 2007 as ‘cornering the market in a new genre of political satires that harpoon its targets right through the heart’.<sup>59</sup> David Aukin, Mentorn’s Head of Drama since 1998 – another self-described ‘disappointed’ New Labour supporter – even saw his work as providing something that the ‘unedited and un-analytical’ twenty-four-hour news channels could not: ‘a better sense of what’s going on behind the scenes’.<sup>60</sup>

## Women: Still hoping

The success of *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006) in the United States provoked numerous figures to ask why British television did not also produce a popular series that depicted political figures in idealized terms. In 2008 the Cabinet minister Hazel Blears even claimed such a drama would help restore people’s faith in their politicians.<sup>61</sup> In fact, a small handful of television dramas had already outlined a positive view of politics. One such, BBC Two’s series *Party Animals* (2007), painted a picture of the inhabitants of the Westminster village such that an advisor to it claimed: ‘If the show has a message, it’s that these people care’.<sup>62</sup> That Blears had not noticed these dramas perhaps told its own story, for they did not attract enough viewers to merit being turned into series or to be re-commissioned if they were. Even so, they revealed something about the

symbolic role women continued to in Britain's imaginary politics. Intriguingly, this was a function ethnic minorities did not perform, as they did in the United States. It was not until 2004 and BBC Two's drama *If ... Things Don't Get Better* that a black actor played a Prime Minister, one motivated by idealism.<sup>63</sup>

Not all such dramas had women as their protagonists. In 2004 the everyman actor Warren Clarke played Bob Galway MP in *The Deputy*. Galway wants to be Prime Minister but still fights for his constituents' interests. When his cynical son asserts that all politicians are the same, he replies: 'No. We're really not.' Viewers are meant to believe that is true, in Galway's case at least. This pilot episode, for a series that was never commissioned, nonetheless presented Galway as an exceptional figure, that is an honourable man beset by Number 10's bullying spin doctor, ministers so obsessed with rising up the greasy pole they illegally tap his phone and MPs who would rather hawk their Private Members' Bill to special interests than use it to help those in distress.

In 2006 BBC One screened a whole series, midweek and at prime time, that suggested politics could be populated by people of honour wanting to reflect voters's wishes. The Prime Minister concerned was, however, not Blair or a character based on a recognizable New Labour figure, but Sally Wainwright's *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard*.<sup>64</sup> Pritchard was an ostensibly ordinary wife, mother and supermarket manager, possessing, according to Jane Horrocks who played the character, 'the voice of reason with the ability to cut through the flim flam of politics'.<sup>65</sup> Her scratch Purple Alliance, formed mostly by other women without a political background, defeats Blair in the 2005 general election on a wave of hostility to politics-as-usual. Perhaps for that reason it was especially popular with women, who formed fifty-nine per cent of the audience.<sup>66</sup>

Wainwright claimed she wrote the series because during the 2005 campaign she 'found that I didn't really want to vote for anybody because they all seemed as bad as each other'.<sup>67</sup> Her series consequently shows Prime Minister Pritchard telling off President George Bush, taking steps to relocate Parliament to Bradford and giving a decisive lead on tackling global warming. Yet, having initially claimed politics wasn't rocket science, she also discovers it is more difficult than she thought. Even so, Pritchard remains true to her promise never to lie – unlike, the script makes plain, her real political equivalents.

Bob Galway and Ros Pritchard were fictional creations while *Mo* was unambiguously about a real figure. Attracting one of Channels 4's biggest-ever audiences, McKay's drama depicted a New Labour politician in uniquely compassionate terms: his Mowlam was a warm, messily human figure whose flaws were outweighed by her desire to do good. Yet McKay remained true to the

general trend by having Mowlam ultimately fall victim to the machinations of the dominant 'cold politics' of spin, as personified by a very slippery Peter Mandelson.

Like Galway, Pritchard and Mo were presented as extraordinary political figures, a status facilitated by the latter two's gender. It certainly helped to make them more unambiguously outsiders, and so characters with whom viewers might identify. That was also the case on the stage, where David Hare continued to use female characters to suggest that, as with his New Labour Home Secretary in *Gethsemane*, politics just might become more than taking money from millionaires wanting low taxes. A similar point was made, albeit in a more jokey way, by Sue Townsend's novel *Number 10* (2002), which has a Blair-like Prime Minister only truly understand the problems besetting Britain after he travels round the country disguised as a woman called Edwina.

Not all fictions regarded women's political role in such terms. The popular sitcom *Goodnight Sweetheart* (BBC, 1993–99), written by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, also responsible for *Shine on Harvey Moon* (ITV, 1982–85) and *The New Statesman* (ITV, 1987–92), associated the increased role of women in politics with its declining authenticity. The series combined nostalgia for the 1940s politics evident in *Harvey Moon* with the cynicism for contemporary politics obvious in *The New Statesman*, expressing both through gender. In an unusual plot device, Gary Sparrow, the hero of the series, travelled between the present and wartime London: in the 1990s Gary is married to Yvonne, a successful entrepreneur, but in the 1940s he marries and has a child with barmaid Phoebe. During the sixth and final season Sparrow's 1990s wife becomes a millionaire and a close friend to the Blairs. Described as one of 'Blair's Babes', Yvonne is elevated to the peerage and chairs what her husband calls the 'luvvy lolly for Tony's cronies campaign'. The series defines present-day politics as superficial and, to Gary's mind, full of 'sleazy-looking types in chauffeur-driven limos'. In contrast, the 1940s is politically more worthwhile, such that the 1990s cynic saves Clement Attlee from an assassin. Indeed, by ensuring Attlee lives to become, as Gary puts it, the 'leader of a great reforming government', he has fulfilled his time-travelling destiny. This causes the portal to close and Gary to remain in the past, along with Attlee and Phoebe.

### Sympathy for the she-devil

Significantly, Ros Pritchard and Mo Mowlam were politicians who also remained 'women' – that is, they were married and part of warm if occasionally

problematic families. Indeed, Pritchard crucially promised to apply her domestically grounded 'common sense' to politics.

In contrast, while in office, Britain's first female Prime Minister had invariably been depicted as a woman gone wrong. It was also during this time that the BBC refused to produce Ian Curteis' drama about the Falklands War. Having initially commissioned it, Curteis believed the Corporation turned its back on his work because he showed Thatcher in a sympathetic light. The Corporation claimed the play was biased and costly.<sup>68</sup> While in Number 10, it was seemingly impossible to see Thatcher as anything but a contentious figure, one wholly defined by her combative political identity.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, *Dunrulin*, an ill-fated 1990 pilot for a BBC situation comedy series that never was, had the Prime Minister act like 'a sort of latter-day female Alf Garnett', while the Thatchers live on a Falklands-themed estate with a Goose Green Road, Belgrano Avenue and Tumbledown Terrace. Their doorbell even plays Jerusalem. Such was the hostility of the stereotyping, a former *Spitting Image* producer was called in to tone things down.<sup>70</sup>

That the Prime Minister might have been a human being with feelings was apparently too incredible to imagine. *Thatcher: The Final Days*, broadcast within a year of her enforced departure from Downing Street, confined itself to reconstructing the policy disputes that led to the Prime Minister's demise. While the script stuck to the facts, Sylvia Syms portrayed Thatcher as a hubristic, imperious and cold figure. If only because this reconstruction of events – described by one critic as 'the dramatic equivalent of a civics lecture' – only depicted scenes for which there was some corroboration, it did not contain scenes in which the Prime Minister and husband Denis were alone. Her private life remained *terra incognita*.<sup>71</sup>

During the early years of the twenty-first century the imagined Thatcher was transformed. This owed something to the passage of time, which allowed for new perspectives to emerge on an increasingly frail figure, in Gordon Burn's novel *Born Yesterday*, a lonely widow cared for by a nurse. Thatcher was not exceptional in being subject to dramatic revisionism. The radical playwright Howard Brenton's *Never So Good* (2008) showed National Theatre audiences a Macmillan emotionally crippled by his mother and errant wife. If he had never been as divisive a figure as Thatcher, it was still remarkable that someone of Brenton's views depicted such a subject so sympathetically. Indicating that time was indeed a factor in this process, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the conflict, in 2002 the BBC broadcast *The Falklands Play*, albeit in a truncated form and on BBC Four. True to the original, this showed Thatcher as a reluctant

war leader, one careful to avoid loss of life, and who even appears to cry on receiving news of British casualties. If this was not how some had wanted to see Thatcher while she was Prime Minister, it was certainly closer to reality than Steven Berkoff's horrific Maggot Scratcher who featured in his play *Sink the Belgrano!* (1986).

Curteis' drama revealed its 1980s origins by sticking to policy debates and known events rather than speculating about its protagonist's private feelings. This was not the case with subsequent Thatcher dramas, which showed her as having a fully developed emotional life, depicting their heroine as a vulnerable woman in an unforgiving man's world. Tony Saint's *The Long Walk to Finchley* (BBC, 2008) showed the young politician struggling to overcome post-war class prejudice and sexism in pursuit of a safe Conservative seat. If a largely comic rendition of Thatcher's early years, the audience is nonetheless encouraged to empathize with this bright, determined and ultimately rather sexy woman in her battle against discrimination. With Saint having her call for 'real equality of opportunity irrespective of who you are, irrespective of your background, irrespective of class, irrespective of sex', this Thatcher is even an advocate of egalitarianism.

Thatcher appears briefly in the 2006 BBC Two adaptation of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), a novel set in the 1980s and which focused on the grand household of Gerald Fedden, a well-connected and ambitious Conservative MP. In both works the Prime Minister is a distant and powerful figure, one to be courted with care. Yet when she finally accepts an invitation to a Fedden party Thatcher is shown 'getting down rather sexily' (as Hollinghurst puts it) on the dance floor after a couple of whiskies.<sup>72</sup> She is, however, out of touch with what is actually going on at the event. When dancing with the novel's hero, Nick, who is gay, drunk and high on cocaine, in the television adaptation Thatcher has a look of confusion, not quite understanding Nick or the irony of the moment.

If *The Line of Beauty* showed Thatcher at the height of her powers, in 2009 BBC Two broadcast *Margaret*, Richard Cottan's tragic rendition of the Prime Minister's fall from office, the publicity for which claimed viewers would see her 'changing from leader to victim before our eyes.'<sup>73</sup> Free of the need to have scenes corroborated – viewers are told that 'much of the dialogue and many of the scenes are the invention of the author' – Cottan presents a character whose flaws are explained as due to her upbringing as well as battles with arrogant, bullying or dismissive political men. As Cottan has her say to Willie Whitelaw of her male colleagues: 'I'm a woman ... I must dominate them or they will



destroy me.' Thatcher's attempt to impose her will on others is also shown to mask an inner feminine vulnerability, confessing as she does to Airey Neave of the Commons: 'it makes me feel so small, like, well, like a woman.'

Having established that Thatcher was indeed a 'woman,' Cottan has her indulge in a moment of reflection during which she discusses how others saw her: 'me as a man – that's what they laugh at.' In contrast to *Thatcher: The Final Days*, Denis Thatcher features large in *Margaret*, and helps establish the Prime Minister as a rounded character. It is also a noteworthy sign of Thatcher's dramatic makeover that when in the former she tells colleagues at her final Cabinet that 'It's a funny old world' there are fewer tears than in *Margaret*, and the words as delivered by Sylvia Syms are not rueful, as Lindsay Duncan expresses them, but suffused with smoldering anger.

The empathizing of Thatcher was taken a stage further in the 2011 movie *The Iron Lady*, for which Meryl Streep collected an Oscar, only the second actor to win the award for playing a British Prime Minister. This pressed deeper into its protagonist's private world, to the almost complete exclusion of politics. The film was in most respects not about the events that Thatcher shaped and was shaped by; these are treated briefly and blandly, something that would have been impossible in the 1980s. Explaining why this was, director Phyllida Lloyd claimed: 'the film is really about the *feeling* of power and the *feeling* of loss of power ... Our interest was what it *felt* like to be in the driving seat. We're exploring that journey in terms of gender. We're looking at how it might have *felt*.'<sup>74</sup>

In exploring Thatcher's 'feelings,' which the movie has her dismiss as of no importance, the film inevitably encourages the audience to identify with its heroine, an isolated lower-middle-class woman with a love for *The King and I*, surrounded by ambitious upper-class men. There is only one character for whom they can root in this movie; as Streep claimed: 'We all have a lot more in common with Margaret Thatcher than we care to admit.'<sup>75</sup> But any sympathy is for the woman, *not* the leader. Indeed, *The Iron Lady* is, more than anything, about growing old and especially grieving for the loss of a partner. From beyond the grave, Denis gives his wife advice, chides her, cajoles her and supplies a running commentary on her life. In this respect, *The Iron Lady* had much in common with the romantic movie *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, coincidentally screened the year Thatcher fell from power. Also about a bereaved woman and her heartache for a lost partner, both movies conclude when the heroine decides she has to get on with life and sends her man's phantom packing.

## The way we spin now

If *The Iron Lady* looked back to Britain's recent political history – with much of the politics left out – *The Thick of It* was rooted in contemporary events. Like *Yes, Minister*, with which it was often compared, it was a situation comedy set in a fictional government department whose remit allowed the series to tackle an eclectic range of issues. Instead of Jim Hacker's Department for Administrative Affairs, *The Thick of It*, first broadcast in 2005 was located in the Department of Social Affairs (which in a subsequent reshuffle has 'and Citizenship' carelessly tacked on at the end). In place of haughty Oxbridge-educated civil servant Sir Humphrey Appleby, *The Thick of It* has Malcolm Tucker, the Prime Minister's belligerent and foul-mouthed 'enforcer' or head spin-doctor keeping the elected representatives of the people in line. By this point, the spin-doctor had become a standard dramatic figure, appearing in a number of ostensibly non-political television dramas. When in 2003 ITV freely adapted Agatha Christie's 1945 mystery *Sparkling Cyanide*, it included an all-powerful, brutal figure at the heart of the Number 10 machine, intent on protecting the government's image. A year later, the popular BBC One detective drama series *New Tricks* had a New Labour spin-doctor as its murderer.<sup>76</sup> Spin-doctoring, of a political and non-political nature, even provided the entire subject matter for the BBC Two comedy series *Absolute Power* (2003–5).

While public choice theory provided *Yes, Minister* with its weary-eyed explanation of why the people's will would never be translated into action, *The Thick of It* was underpinned by simple moral principle. When Armando Iannucci conceived of the series he identified with the Liberal Democrats due to that party's opposition to the Iraq War and he remained a critic of how Blair had involved the country in the invasion.<sup>77</sup> Given the role the 'dodgy dossier' played in how the Prime Minister made his case for war, it is perhaps not surprising Iannucci claimed to have 'become increasingly appalled by how the truth is quite unashamedly contorted in political debate.'<sup>78</sup> Therefore, while *The Thick of It* was about many things, it was principally about how politics obscures 'truth' through 'spin'. Consequently, while Thatcher endorsed *Yes, Minister* because it expressed her own mistrust of government, Blair did not emulate her in praising Iannucci's series.

If *Yes, Minister* had a ready-made and practical solution to the problem it identified – take power away from the politicians and civil servants – *The Thick of It* had no obvious resolution to the predicament it outlined. Instead, the series contented itself with repeatedly showing how politicians were trapped within a

system they did not control. Antony Jay's mockery had a Thatcherite purpose, but Iannucci's was an end in itself: he merely invited viewers to observe, God-like, the foibles of a democracy of which they were seemingly themselves not participants. *The Thick of It* was an alienating and fatalistic political comedy, which was very appropriate given the times in which it was produced.<sup>79</sup>

Unlike *Yes, Minister*, episodes of *The Thick of It* mapped very closely onto the political events of its day. The series – and the spin-off movie *In the Loop* (2009) – constituted a running critique of New Labour and to a lesser extent of David Cameron's 'modernized' Conservative alternative. While the party in power is never named, disputes between the Prime Minister's Office and the Treasury echoed those between Blair and Brown, the outgoing premier's obsession with his 'legacy' called to mind Blair's, and his successor shared many of the characteristics attributed to Brown. More importantly, the style of government evident in *The Thick of It* (specifically the obsession with spin) evoked what many thought of New Labour. In particular, Tucker was looked on as a parody of Alastair Campbell, the Prime Minister's Director of Communications (1997–2003), such that when Campbell bumped into Iannucci in 2010 the former apparently observed of the latter: 'If it isn't the bloke who's been making a living out of me for the past 10 years.'<sup>80</sup>

The series' *dramatis personae* initially consisted of the minister Hugh Abbot, Glenn Cullen, his senior advisor, and Olly Reeder, Cullen's junior, all of whom are subject to Tucker's demands. Together – along with less-central types like Jamie, Tucker's deputy, and Ben Swain, Abbot's junior minister – they comprise a boys' club in which sexual bragging, aggressive mockery and occasional acts of violence are the norm. Politics for them is bloody – Malcolm and Jamie ask Olly if he wants to be a 'soldier' when he is temporarily seconded to Number 10.<sup>81</sup> Terri and Robyn are two of the department's permanent civil servants and for a time the series' only female characters. Unlike Sir Humphrey, they are dismissed and despised by the main characters. Yet these women are invariably sensible – Terri wisely cautions against Abbot's disastrous on-the-hoof policy-making – or simply bemused by the games the men play. *In The Loop* reinforces this take on gender by depicting the Minister for International Development's Director of Communications as a polite, calm and knowledgeable woman – qualities which ultimately give her the advantage over Malcolm.

This critique of political men became more overt in the third season, broadcast in 2009, when Nicola Murray replaced Abbot. Of her experience at a fraught party conference, which sees Malcolm punch Glenn, Murray says

'it's a bit like being trapped in a boys' toilet.'<sup>82</sup> The new minister also challenges Malcolm more than her predecessor: at one point she even dares to tell him that his trademark super-swearing does not solve anything. Indeed, at the height of one crisis she confronts Tucker and declares:

That's what it's all about to you isn't it? It's just about fighting and fucking power. Does it never occur to you that [it's] your poisonous male obsession with conflict which is making people despise politics.<sup>83</sup>

Nothing, however, changes as a result.

As politics is about obscuring truth, the pursuit of appearance rather than reality, of spin not substance, it had no ultimate purpose. In their attempt to persuade voters they are not what they are, politicians of both parties are forced by their spin-doctors to *look* 'in touch.' Abbot is an exhausted, middle-aged man of conventional tastes, but Malcolm insists he has to seem 'funky.' Hugh's Conservative counterpart, Peter Mannion, has to pretend to be interested in the environment and is forced into a 'modern' suit and to go tie-less by Stuart Pearson, his party's version of Malcolm. Politicians are also thrown into a fevered vortex where appearance and reality are hard to distinguish. There are 'scandals' which are no such thing, while words and phrases come to mean their very opposite. This world of distorted mirrors is made apparent in the opening scene of the series' first-ever episode, in which Malcolm demands the resignation of Hugh's predecessor. This is ostensibly because the media is calling for it. However, the Prime Minister cannot look weak by acceding to journalists' wishes, so the minister is told to give 'personal reasons' for his departure, although Malcolm tells him that he will be briefing journalists that he had been sacked. The same episode has Abbot hold a press conference intended to announce a new policy initiative, but Malcolm tells him the policy is dead in the water due to Treasury objections. This means the minister has to address the press without launching anything at all. When later informed that the Prime Minister has decided to back the policy, Abbot tries to convince the media that he had in fact announced it.

Yes, *Minister* often showed Hacker trying to implement policy and coming up against various impediments, the most important of which was the civil service, but he was sometimes allowed to prevail. In contrast, politicians in *The Thick of It* have to run just to stay still. Their days consist of fighting media-concocted or real crises, meaning that policy development let alone implementation hardly exist. The point of holding office is not to do anything except, as Malcolm says, to keep the other lot out. He is consequently uninterested in the contents of

Olly's PhD thesis but does want any intelligence Reeder has gained from his relationship with a Conservative special advisor. Policy is something ministers come up with in the back of speeding car.

In one of the few episodes in which a specific policy is mentioned, Hugh publicly supports the closure of schools for children with special needs and speaks in favour of integrating them into mainstream schools.<sup>84</sup> Yet in private he objects to the measure, as does Glenn, whose son attended a special needs school. But they both toe the line. When she first becomes a minister, Nicola declares she wants to promote social mobility. Glenn, though, points out that this will cost money the Department does not have, so Murray falls back on the cost-free and essentially meaningless 'Fourth Sector' initiative. This she describes as a 'self-eating cake' in which 'extraordinary ordinary people' are meant to 'inspire' others out of poverty.<sup>85</sup> The essential pointlessness of political activity is brought home in the 2007 special episode, 'Spinners and Losers', which shows the manic goings-on that follow the Prime Minister's resignation as supporters and opponents of the Chancellor dash about Westminster plotting and scheming. After an exhaustive night it transpires that it has all been a waste of time as the Chancellor has done a deal with his main challenger to ensure his succession. It is no wonder, then, that a weary Hugh claims that the only time he gets any satisfaction is when he defecates – because in doing that he has created *something*.

If ordinary people were mostly absent from *Yes, Minister*, the series' implicit argument was populist insofar as honest taxpayers were shown as ill-served by politicians and civil servants. *The Thick of It* similarly focused on the Westminster village, but when it occasionally depicted the people the series did not do so in an especially flattering way. It is clear that giving *them* any more power won't result in a better kind of politics; for Iannucci the people are no judges of their best interests.<sup>86</sup> Thus, when they come into contact with politicians, the public is shown as aggressive and possibly mad. When Mannion is persuaded to set up a blog, the comments it generates are either hostile or pornographic: 'This is the problem with the public', he says – 'they're fucking horrible'. *In the Loop* has one of the minister's constituents complain that the constituency office wall threatens to fall into his mother's garden. While the constituent has a real grievance, he is also mentally unstable and obsessive. As Hugh confides to Glenn, 'when you meet the real, the actual people' with their 'beady eyes and mean mouths sneering' he feels that they're 'from a different fucking species'. Glenn does not demur.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time as denigrating popular agency, the series highlights the breakdown in the relationship between the people and their representatives.

Abbot's comments followed an encounter with a working-class woman, which illustrates this point. It also closely echoed a real incident from the 2001 general election campaign when Sharon Storer confronted the Prime Minister in front of the world's media about how the National Health Service was mistreating her partner. Storer's complaint was that he had been kept too long in a corridor waiting for a bed. *The Thick of It* has Abbot inspect a factory, the only reason being to generate publicity for himself. As he enters the building a woman, in a heavy Welsh accent, repeatedly asks: 'Do you know what it's like to clean up your own mother's piss?' It transpires that her mother is resident in an inadequately staffed care home. Abbot is unable and seemingly unwilling to deal with her problem and the woman finds it impossible to talk calmly. For the minister, this is a deeply embarrassing moment, knowing as he does that there is a camera trained on his face. The woman's problem cannot, therefore, be dealt with in its own terms: it has become a media event. Journalists are, though, uninterested in the woman: to the television news producer, the story – which leads his broadcast – is 'Minister looks like a tit', not that there are problems in care homes.

A more depressing example of the failure of political action and communication it is hard to find, and one in which all parties are at fault, trapped in their own conflicting logics. The woman's problem remains unsolved while Abbot looks a 'tit' on the news. The only possible winner is the media, although while beguiled by pictures of a 'tittish' minister, they fail to notice massive overspending and possible corruption at the Ministry of Defence.

The main protagonists in *The Thick of It* are guilty of lying and scheming and of being incredibly rude, but they are not depicted in exclusively negative terms. There is some sympathy for the individuals incarcerated within a mad political system. Hugh is invariably tired: commuting between work and home means he spends little time with his family. Nicola has various domestic problems, including an unreliable husband. She also wants to send her daughter to a private school rather than a failing comprehensive. For reasons of media management, Malcolm forces her daughter to attend the latter, the result being she rebels and is excluded. In an episode transmitted in the wake of the 2009 'expenses scandal', when he sees Nicola sitting in an expensive chair, Malcolm tells her to bin it, arguing: 'People don't like their politicians to be comfortable, they don't like you having expenses, they don't like you being paid, they'd rather you live in a fucking cave.' A minister, he says, is to the public a 'human dart board'.<sup>88</sup>

This tempered sympathy was not quite unique to *The Thick of It*. David Hare's *The Absence of War* presented his Labour leader as ensnared by advisors who tell

him not to speak of his principled belief in socialism for fear of putting off voters. When despite – or because of – this advice his party faces defeat he returns to his old rhetoric but finds that he has lost himself in spin. In *Gethsemane*, Hare's Home Secretary starts in politics as an idealist, but the demands of office – and the apparent necessity of keeping the media happy – means she has also lost her way. Similarly, episodes in Charlie Brooker's dystopic comedy series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011–13) showed politicians subject to an exploitative and intrusive media, which trades on a facile public's flippant disregard for serious politics.<sup>89</sup> Gordon Burn's *Born Yesterday* also reflected – very unusually – on the humanity of Britain's real leaders, noting the pain Brown suffered when smiling due to his terrible rugby injury, but also Blair's joy of being father to a young child. According to Burn, both were caught in a world hurtling ever onwards and over which they had no control. This was, in others words, sympathy for those trapped by the political system and a wider culture. There is no hope of escape, for them or us.

The third season of *The Thick of It* even brought out the hitherto terrifying Malcolm's more vulnerable side. By this point, echoing the trajectory of Brown's administration, the government is facing oblivion at the polls. Journalists start to openly mock him. But even at his zenith, Malcolm was often reduced to chasing round Whitehall to prevent scandals – or usually the appearance of scandals – breaking out. His main mission was to stop the media reporting the truth (or mis-reporting the truth by sometimes making up its own version). Moreover, despite his verbal brutality and threats of violence, Malcolm was forced to do deals with journalists because it was the media that was calling the shots, not the Prime Minister's supposedly omnipotent enforcer.

The series' fatalism was confirmed in its final season, broadcast in 2012. With Malcolm's party now in opposition to a coalition government, the series once again evoked reality by having its own version of the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press. Investigating the practice of leaking information to the press provoked by a suicide – as had been the 2003 Hutton Inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly – this fictional inquiry forces each character to account for their actions. Malcolm especially comes under the microscope as it becomes apparent that he had illegally given the suicide's medical records to journalists. Facing exposure, he addresses the inquiry:

Let me tell you this. The whole planet is leaking, everybody is leaking. You know, everyone is spewing up their guts on to the internet, putting up their relationship status and photos of their vajazzles. We've come to a point where there are people,

millions of people, who are quite happy to trade a kidney in order to go on television and to show people their knickers, and to show people their skid marks, and then complain to *OK!* magazine about a breach of privacy. The exchange of private information: that is what drives our economy. But you come after me because you can't arrest a land mass, you can't cuff a country, you can't lynch that guy there can you? But you decide that you can sit there and you can judge and ogle me like a Page Three girl. You don't like it? Well, you don't like yourself. You don't like your species and you know what neither do I. But how dare you come and lay this at my door, how dare you blame me for this *which is the result of a political class which has given up on morality and simply pursues popularity at all costs*. I am you and you are me.<sup>90</sup>

This *omni culpa* could be taken to be the special pleading of a cornered man, but the tone in which actor Peter Capaldi has Tucker deliver the speech suggests viewers are meant to take it as serious comment. In which case, while summing up the ethos of the series, Tucker suggests that as politics merely mirrors wider cultural processes, the problems *The Thick of It* highlights are ultimately insoluble. Confirming that rather hopeless conclusion, while the series ended with Malcolm's arrest and the sacking of Stuart Pearson, despite a brief moment of celebration in both parties, the remaining protagonists soon return to the fray. Awful politics goes on, and on, and on.

## Conclusion

In 2012 Labour leader Ed Miliband described the government's Budget as an 'omnishambles', a term coined by Malcolm Tucker during a rant against Nicola Murray.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, so popular did the word become that those responsible for the *Oxford English Dictionary's* content named omnishambles as their 'word of the year'. This suggested the series enjoyed a significant influence, certainly with journalists, one of whom claimed it helped frame how his colleagues viewed the workings of government.<sup>92</sup> Yet, compared to *Yes, Minister*, *The Thick of It* had a modest audience. While the former attracted up to nine million viewers per episode when broadcast on BBC One, the latter never made it to the Corporation's main channel. Starting out on BBC Four, where its audience was registered in the hundreds of thousands, when promoted to BBC Two in 2011, *The Thick of It* rarely found itself in that channel's weekly top twenty, meaning somewhat fewer than one million viewers watched any one episode.

When *Yes, Minister* began there were just three television channels, no DVDs and no internet. Tucker's close relationship with the F word also meant



*The Thick of It* would never appeal to the successors of Mary Whitehouse, whose National Viewers' and Listeners' Association gave *Yes, Minister* an award precisely because of its lack of profanity. *Yes, Minister* had started on BBC Two as executives had considered it too challenging for a mass audience. Possibly *The Thick of It* fell foul of such fears, now more deeply ingrained than ever they were in 1980, that a sophisticated comedy based in Westminster would alienate mainstream viewers. Perhaps not coincidentally, when *Yes, Minister* was revived in 2013 it was broadcast on the digital channel Gold, after the BBC demonstrated a pronounced lack of interest. As a result, while doing well for Gold, *Yes, Minister* attracted an audience of about 200,000 per episode.<sup>93</sup>

Politics was of course still dramatized in a variety of popular genres, notably the conspiracy thriller. One of the most influential fictions produced in this form was *V for Vendetta*. First published as a comic strip in the early 1980s, then as a 1988 graphic novel and finally adapted into a 2006 film, *V for Vendetta* was located in a dystopic Britain ruled by an authoritarian government.<sup>94</sup> The movie was set in a post-9/11 context, while the original work had been influenced by its authors' fear that Thatcherism would lead to a fascist state. Despite these differences, each shared the same suspicion of organized political power.

The hero of *V for Vendetta* assumes the identity of Guy Fawkes and in that capacity arouses the people to overthrow a regime to which their own fear and indolence had given life. Fawkes has an ambiguous place in Britain's political culture. Every year on 5 November many ostensibly celebrate his failure to blow up the Palace of Westminster in 1605, which he hoped would install a Catholic monarchy. Yet some critics of democracy's shortcomings regard Fawkes in more positive terms. In the wartime movie *The New Lot* (1943), for example, one character jokingly claimed Fawkes was the 'one good man ever got into Parliament'. More recently, in 2004 the right-wing libertarian Paul Staines established the Guido Fawkes blog, whose guiding assumption is that all politicians are crooks.<sup>95</sup> For David Lloyd, co-creator of *V for Vendetta*, Guy Fawkes was, however, 'a kind of revolutionary anarchist'.<sup>96</sup>

Unlike most contemporary political fictions, *V for Vendetta* was hopeful: both print and screen versions conclude with the people possibly ready to assume responsibility for their own governance. But in what was described as an 'ambitious postmodern assault upon the symbolic foundations of the modern state', in the movie the Palace of Westminster is blown up before real democracy can flourish.<sup>97</sup> Thus, while expressing faith in the people, *V for Vendetta* depicted government in familiarly oppressive terms.

Paradoxically, at the start of the twenty-first century, when dramatists sought something positive in Britain's democracy they found it in the monarchy. Queen Victoria had long been a popular subject and, as we have seen, from her early fictionalizations she emerges as concerned for her subjects' welfare while enjoying a supportive relationship with most of her Prime Ministers, most especially Benjamin Disraeli. *Mrs. Brown* (1997), produced in the wake of 'Tory sleaze', was the first to revise this latter view, with critics rightly describing Antony Sher's Disraeli as 'beady-eyed, silken-tongued', 'cunning and supercilious'.<sup>98</sup> In stark contrast to previous depictions, the film has him cynically wonder, given Victoria's unpopularity during her long period of mourning Albert's death, 'Do we need her?' Throughout the movie his motives are selfish and the grieving widow his pawn. If the older Victoria's relationship with Disraeli was recast in *Mrs. Brown, Victoria and Albert* (BBC, 2001) and the 2009 movie *The Young Victoria* transformed her association with Lord Melbourne. Previous dramas showed an avuncular Melbourne schooling the young Queen in monarchy. *Victoria and Albert*, however, suggested he manipulated Victoria so he could remain in office; *The Young Victoria* even presented him discouraging Victoria's desire to improve her people's lot. When the film has Victoria and Albert marry, theirs is a partnership intent on reform: as Albert asks, 'There are people who are lost, and whose business is it to see to their welfare?' Not the politicians, it seems.

*The King's Speech* (2010) did not have Victoria's grandson assailed by manipulative or unfeeling politicians but suggested it was vital George VI overcame his painful stammer because Britons needed his radio broadcasts to inspire them to victory during the Second World War. This meant relegating the importance of Winston Churchill's rhetoric and casting him as a supporter of the struggling King. This was a role the real Churchill never played: indeed, in his battle against appeasement during the 1930s, the King was firmly on the other side. The monarch's position on appeasement had also been finessed – not to say distorted – earlier, in *Bertie and Elizabeth* (ITV, 2001), which anticipated the later movie's stress on the monarch's strong sense of public service and the need for self-sacrifice.

George's daughter also benefitted from sympathetic dramatic treatment, notably from Peter Morgan, who in *The Deal* and *The Special Relationship* (BBC, 2010) cast Blair as unprincipled and vainglorious. His *The Queen* (2006) showed Elizabeth II at bay after the death of Princess Diana in 1997 and has her assailed by a hysterical public, attacked by an unfriendly media and surrounded by political forces ambiguous about her survival. Elizabeth's crime, according to Morgan's film, was merely that she was a bit old-fashioned, had standards and

took her public duties seriously. His 2013 play *The Audience* built on that portrait, and in a series of vignettes in which Elizabeth meets her many Prime Ministers she emerges a wise and witty person whose happy life had been upended by her unwanted job as monarch, a task she nonetheless executes with admirable skill. Indeed, such was Morgan's treatment of his subject that *The Audience* was described as 'a two-hour exercise in propaganda for Elizabeth Windsor'.<sup>99</sup>

These dramas presented Victoria and her successors as the heart of a heartless political world, the only figures who wanted to put the people's interests first – unlike the politicians, those the people elected to do that job. It was, to say the least, ironic that the monarchy, that part of the British constitution completely immune to popular sovereignty, was at the start of the twenty-first century represented in such terms.

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95 For more on Guy Fawkes, see J. Sharpe, *Remember, Remember: A Cultural History of Guy Fawkes Day* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005).

96 Interview with D. Lloyd, 2 April 2013.

97 L. Call, 'A is for Anarchy, V is for Vendetta: images of Guy Fawkes and the creation of postmodern Anarchism', *Anarchist Studies* 16: 2 (2008), p. 169.

98 *Guardian*, 5 September 1997; *Daily Telegraph*, 5 September 1997.

99 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/22/theatre-queen-worry-democracy-politicians>, accessed 8 May 2013.

## Epilogue

# What Would Plato Say?

Writing nearly 2,500 years ago, Plato believed storytellers could sway the ‘ignorant multitude’ through manipulating the ‘less rational part of our nature’ and by making complex things seem simple. So fearful was he of their malign impact, Plato banned all artists from his ideal Republic.<sup>1</sup>

By holding up a mirror to Britons’ hopes and fears about their democracy, fiction has, as *A State of Play* suggests, played an under-appreciated part in constructing their understanding of politics. As Plato anticipated, this mirror has never perfectly reflected reality: it has jumbled up truths with half-truths and outright falsehoods. Yet by making complex things appear simple and appealing to emotion as much as reason, fiction has arguably more effectively contributed to popular political awareness than have politicians’ little-read speeches or the dust-gathering tomes of well-meaning academics.

For good or ill, fiction is an important part of the democratic process. Yet this is something many of those immediately concerned with politics continue to ignore. To overcome the present widespread apathy, hostility and ignorance, the Houses of Parliament Outreach Service was established to undertake a number of worthy activities designed to promote practical engagement with and understanding of the legislature’s work.<sup>2</sup> The Hansard Society was established in 1944 by Stephen King-Hall in the similar belief that the more they knew about Westminster the more enthusiastically people would embrace it.<sup>3</sup> In fact, countless other initiatives inspired by advocates of the Westminster model have been similarly motivated. But such narrowly conceived ‘education’ has done little to change most people’s perceptions.

It is arguable that for the current ‘crisis of politics’ to be properly addressed popular education about how representative politics works will always be inadequate: a sow’s ear will remain a sow’s ear no matter how much people know about it. Real politics has to change, and not in small ways either. Yet, irrespective of any future reforms, those concerned about democracy need to take the role played by fiction seriously. If, as argued here, fiction does influence



how people think about politics, then it should be of concern that it seriously misrepresents a by-no-means-wholly-imperfect situation.

What can be done? Censorship is not something that should be considered, nor should Plato's ban be employed. Like a constitutional monarch with their Prime Minister, all an author can do is warn, encourage and advise. In which case, I *encourage* citizens to become more aware of the processes through which fictions about politics are presented to them and so develop a more critical sensibility about how they are entertained. I also *advise* artists to reflect on what they are doing, to interrogate their own motives in depicting politicians in the ways that they do. Finally, I *warn* those commissioning such works, especially for television, about the harmful effect of continuing to regard all fictions about politics that do not involve melodramatic conspiracies undertaken by corrupt politicians as 'boring'.

Despite the evidence, and presumably to Plato's intense *post-mortem* frustration, there are many who think that how fiction represents British democracy does not matter. When I have raised the subject with the few real politicians I know, their response is invariably one of surprise that anyone might consider fiction worthy of serious study. A few, having considered the matter, concede I might have a point (they're possibly being polite), but then move on to what they regard as more pressing matters. Yet, as *A State of Play* argues, fiction and politics are inextricably linked: the one will always influence the other. It is about time we understood more about that relationship. This book has, in truth, just scratched the surface.

## Notes

- 1 Plato (trans. D. Lee), *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 421–39.
- 2 The work of Parliamentary Outreach is outlined here: <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/>, accessed 31 August 2013.
- 3 S. King-Hall, 'The Hansard Society', *Parliamentary Affairs* 1:1 (1947), p. 6.

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