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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.¹ 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'.² 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'.³ This was a democracy, then, in which the parties saw their role as giving the people a voice – whether they wanted one or not.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸

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

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.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ 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).¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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.'¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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'.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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'.²¹ 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'.²² 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.²³ 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'.²⁴

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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'.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.'³⁰ 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.³¹ This threw some critics, with

one complaining: 'It is not very clear whether Mr. Wilde intends a covert sneer at our vaunted political morality.'³² 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.'³³ 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.'³⁴

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.'³⁵ 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*.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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'.⁴¹

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 1910.⁴² 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'.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶

It was left to the robust Tory author Horace Annesley Vachell to defend party politics, albeit in a highly qualified manner.⁴⁷ 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).⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.'⁵¹

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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.’⁵⁵ 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 ’emselves 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!⁵⁶

P. G. Wodehouse, a man of decidedly conservative views, celebrated this lack of political interest.⁵⁷ 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?’⁵⁸ 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.’⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ 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.⁶² The novel – seen as more of a ‘controversial pamphlet’ by some – predicted Britain would endure a proliferation of smallpox epidemics as a result.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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.’⁶⁵ 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’⁶⁶ – 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.⁶⁷ 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'.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ *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.⁷² 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'.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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.'⁷⁵ 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'.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ The intellectuals he portrayed in *The New Machiavelli* believed sexual passion could not be combined with public service.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰

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.⁸¹

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'.⁸² *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'.⁸³

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'.⁸⁴ 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'.⁸⁵ 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'.⁸⁶

As the *Times* critic saw it, beneath the theatrics Parker highlighted 'the passionate dreams and imperial ambitions of the great statesman'.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ *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'.⁸⁹ 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*.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹ 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.⁹² It was nonetheless revived in 1997 and 2008 with those responsible claiming its depiction of a political scandal made it more relevant than ever.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴

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.⁹⁵ 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'.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ 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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- 2 *Young Liberal*, 5 September 1910, p. 103.
- 3 R. MacDonald, *Socialism and Government: Volume II* (London: Independent Labour Party, 1909), p. 13.
- 4 J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4.
- 5 See L. Barrow and I. Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 6 M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties: Volume I*, tr. F. Clarke (London: Macmillan, 1902), xliii.
- 7 R. Colls, 'The constitution of the English', *History Workshop Journal* 46 (1998), pp. 97–128 and D. Kavanagh, 'British political science in the inter-war years', *British Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 5:4 (2003), pp. 594–613.

- See also G. M. Trevelyan, *The Two-Party System in English Political History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
- 8 *The Times*, 14 November 1934.
 - 9 See, for example, G. R. Searle, *Country Before Party: Coalition and the Idea of National Government in Modern Britain, 1885–1987* (London: Longman, 1995).
 - 10 A. Finlayson and E. Fraser, 'Fictions of sovereignty: Shakespeare, theatre and the representation of rule', *Parliamentary Affairs* 64:2 (2011), pp. 233–47.
 - 11 M. E. Speare, *The Political Novel: Its Development in England and in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 1.
 - 12 C. Harvie, *The Centre of Things* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991), pp. 32–5.
 - 13 Speare, *The Political Novel*, pp. lx, 24.
 - 14 G. Watson, *The English Ideology: Studies in the Language of Victorian Politics* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp. 133–5.
 - 15 J. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1966), pp. 23–35.
 - 16 *Haslingden Guardian*, 29 January 1904.
 - 17 M. Parris and K. Maguire, *Great Parliamentary Scandals: Five Centuries of Calumny, Smear and Innuendo* (London: Robson, 2004), p. 88.
 - 18 *The Graphic*, 22 July 1876.
 - 19 R. Blake, *Disraeli* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966), pp. 210, 217.
 - 20 J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) pp. 84–5, 260, 318.
 - 21 W. T. Young, 'Lesser novelists' in A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (eds), *The Cambridge History of English Literature. Volume XIII: The Nineteenth Century II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916), p. 423.
 - 22 Speare, *The Political Novel*, pp. 192, 200–1, 210.
 - 23 Remarks attributed to Trollope are to be found in his *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 181, 224–5, 290–1, 294–6, 300–1, 317–18, 359. For more on Trollope, see J. Halperin, *Trollope and Politics: A Study of the Pallisers and Others* (London: MacMillan, 1977).
 - 24 *The Graphic*, 1 January, 19 February and 29 April 1876.
 - 25 A. Trollope, *The Duke's Children* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 443–4.
 - 26 D. D. Morse, *Women in Trollope's Palliser Novels* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1987), pp. 2, 86, 139.
 - 27 Speare, *The Political Novel*, p. 201.
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