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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.¹ 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.² 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.'³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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'.⁶

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.⁷ 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'.⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 1946.¹¹ 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.'¹²

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 1945.¹³ 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'.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ Many on the left blamed studio bosses – not audiences – for this, thinking it due to their undoubted right-wing bias.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ *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.'²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²²

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 1939.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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'.²⁶

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.²⁷

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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴

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).³⁵ 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'.³⁶ 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'.³⁷ *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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

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'.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ As a consequence, the *Daily Mirror* critic

believed this instalment in the Huggett saga provided 'Cosy, homely humour for the whole family.'⁴²

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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Others, however, saw the play as a 'tract', casting the Admiralty as 'a massively obstructive and complacent bureaucracy', an enemy of 'individual liberty'.⁴⁷ The *Manchester Guardian* film critic strikingly commented on how Rattigan had pitched 'the David of justice against the Goliath of bureaucratic vested interest'.⁴⁸ Rattigan – the consummate commercial playwright – was nonetheless unwilling to present his play as ideological.⁴⁹ 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.'⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ *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'.⁵² *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.⁵³

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'.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ *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'.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.'⁶¹

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.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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.'⁶⁵ 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.'⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷

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 1939.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ *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.'⁷⁰

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