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Imagining the Post-War Consensus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Respect for democracy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rebirth of the Parliamentary Novel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, it is,' he said, taking both her hands. 'It's a real smile, but a different smile.'⁴³

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The comedy of reassurance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Notes

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- 16 Gielgud, *Party Manners*, p. xii.
- 17 S. Fielding et al., ‘England Arise!’ *The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 159.
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