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The Televised Crisis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sitcoms: 'Them' and 'Us'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wolfie: Of course they do.

Shirl: They might not.

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

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

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

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

Educating the public

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

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

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

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

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

Sympathy for the MP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Problematic parliamentarianism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do you know what Gorki said when he arrived at some godforsaken spot in outer Russia to lecture the peasants on socialism? He said, 'Is this the rabble on which we are to build a revolution?' Well, the answer's yes Mr. Gorki, yes Mr. Brand. Because without them there is no revolution. We're all you've got, comrade.

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

As he later confirmed:

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

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

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

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

Dramatized Trotskyism

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

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

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

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

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

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

As Allen told readers of the *Radio Times*:

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

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

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

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

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

Period drama politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A transatlantic hero

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Same old roles?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Notes

- 1 O. Postgate, *Seeing Things: A Memoir* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009), p. 273.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 293, 303–8; <http://www.clivebanks.co.uk/Clangers/Voteforfroglet.htm>, accessed 23 February 2012; http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8634000/8634231.stm, accessed 23 February 2012.
- 3 M. Shulman, *The Least Worst Television in the World* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973), p. 39; <http://www.televisionheaven.co.uk/pinky.htm>, accessed 18 October 2012.
- 4 For more on this decade, see N. Tiratsoo, “‘You’ve never had it so bad’: Britain in the 1970s” in N. Tiratsoo (ed.), *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain Since 1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), pp. 163–90.
- 5 A. King, ‘Overload: problems of governing in the 1970s’, *Political Studies* 23:2–3 (1975), pp. 284–96; W. Parson, ‘Politics without promises: the crisis of “overload” and governability’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 35:4 (1982), pp. 421–35.
- 6 A. Becket, *When the Lights Went Out* (London: Faber, 2009), p. 301.
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