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Yes, Conspirator

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Thatcherite comedy?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The comedy of ridicule

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Enemies without and within

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conspiracies within

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Politics *is* a conspiracy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A lost left

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

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

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

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

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

The same old story

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

- 5 Wright co-authored his account with Paul Greengrass, who would later direct the Bourne films, which posited the existence of a section of the American intelligence service beyond politicians' control.
- 6 *Guardian*, 27 December 2006.
- 7 *Today*, 3 December 1986.
- 8 J. Lynn, *Comedy Rules: From the Cambridge Footlights to Yes, Prime Minister* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 119.
- 9 P. Eddington, *So Far, So Good* (London: Hodder, 1995), p. 140.
- 10 *Daily Telegraph*, 10 January 1986.
- 11 M. Edelman, *A Dream of Treason* (London: Panther Books: 1965), p. 89.
- 12 *The Times*, 18 February 1980; *Daily Express*, 11 November 1982.
- 13 *New York Times*, 16 November 1986.
- 14 *Daily Mail*, 31 December 1987.
- 15 *Guardian*, 19 March 81.
- 16 *Mail on Sunday*, 23 December 1984.
- 17 *Sunday Times*, 29 March 1981; *Morning Star*, 1 March 1980.
- 18 *Evening Standard*, 19 November 1982.
- 19 *Sunday Times*, 2 March 1980.
- 20 http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/advocate_yesminister.shtml, accessed 3 September 2011.
- 21 Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, pp. 97–9, 107–8.
- 22 *New York Times*, 16 November 1986.
- 23 *Daily Mirror*, 4 January 1986.
- 24 *The Times*, 18 February 1980.
- 25 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/5784ac84-bc50-11df-8c02-00144feab49a.html#axzz1W7mw4dxu>, accessed 3 September 2011.
- 26 *Observer*, 19 January 1986.
- 27 Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, p. 113.
- 28 <http://www.margareththatcher.org/document/84534111EFFE4C5CAAEE2FA5E16E3D673.pdf>, accessed 5 May 2013.
- 29 *Daily Telegraph*, 4 December 1987; *Daily Mirror*, 12 November 1982.
- 30 Churchill Archive Centre, Margaret Thatcher papers, M. Thatcher to J. Lynn, 15 June 1983, THCR 2/4/1/19 f218.
- 31 Eddington, *So Far, So Good*, p. 191; Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, p. 154, 158–9.
- 32 Interviewed on *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dreams of Freedom*, Part 1 – ‘F&#k You Buddy’, first broadcast on BBC Two, 11 March 2007.
- 33 *The Voice*, 12 April 1988.
- 34 Thatcher papers, J. Lynn to M. Thatcher, 10 June 1983, THCR 2/4/1/19 f218.
- 35 First transmitted 23 February 1981.
- 36 First transmitted 24 March 1980.

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

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