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A Thick Ending

In 1989 the *Sun* published an editorial about *Scandal*, which retold the 1963 Profumo Affair for the big screen. Britain's most popular daily paper claimed that 'the cosy club of politicians at Westminster' was 'frothing at the mouth' because its members believed the film should not have been made. Yet, for raking over the resignation of the Minister for War after his infamous adulterous affair, the *Sun* believed the movie had performed a valuable public service. It also warned that if 'any member of the PRESENT Cabinet is up to the same tricks there will be a film about it too in 25 years' time.¹ Television executives had certainly been uncomfortable dramatizing the Profumo episode, which was why *Scandal* ended up in cinemas.² But attitudes were changing. *Sun* readers would not have to wait a quarter of a century to find out about contemporary politicians' private affairs, nor would broadcasters hesitate to follow in the tabloid's wake.

Indeed, during the 1990s the Conservative government was assailed by media accusations that many of John Major's ministers and MPs were mired in 'sleaze'. A hazy but potent term, 'sleaze' gained currency soon after the party's 1992 election victory, its fourth in a row. Spawned by journalists seeking to translate the travails of Major's troubled administration into saleable copy, 'sleaze' gave shape to a disparate set of long-standing concerns about the flawed nature of Britain's representative democracy.³ Incorporating worries about the close relationship between politicians and business, 'sleaze' sometimes referred to the practice of former ministers exploiting their insider knowledge; the extent to which Major's party relied on donations from millionaires of ill repute; or the payment of government MPs by lobbyists.⁴

If these instances of actual, near or mostly alleged corruption preoccupied the broadsheet press, the tabloids, most notably the *Sun*, employed 'sleaze' to also characterize party figures' adultery or idiosyncratic sexual practices. Some commentators distinguished between 'sleaze proper' and those 'more venial misdemeanours' of an amorous nature.⁵ Yet, the unique power of 'sleaze' came from journalists' conjoining financial with sexual corruption, something that

ensured the concept's purchase on popular views of Britain's political class. The emphasis on male MPs' bedroom antics reinforced the increasingly widespread populist belief that the decent, honourable and much-abused public should not believe in their politicians.

In reaction to this 'Tory sleaze', New Labour stormed into office in 1997 with Tony Blair offering the public a 'new politics'. Blair had been reluctant to use 'sleaze' against his opponents because as, he admitted in private, the 'reality was our politics was probably [the] least corrupt of anywhere in the world'.⁶ Soon, however, Blair's party was also accused of being 'sleazy'. As with Major's government, the charge sheet became long and eclectic: by 2007 one admittedly hostile assessment claimed Labour was guilty of 140 instances of 'sleaze'.⁷ Moreover, to the usual litany had now been added what some saw as the uniquely New Labour sin of 'spinning'. This many believed was a euphemism for lying, although its practitioners saw it as merely presenting their case to best effect. The most critical example of 'spinning' was the 'dodgy dossier', a briefing document released by Downing Street during the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War. This contained claims that Iraq had the capacity to deploy biological weapons within forty-five minutes and contributed to the view that Blair deliberately misled the public about the existence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.⁸ As with its Conservative predecessor, however, New Labour 'sleaze' mostly consisted of suspicions and allegations.

Despite promising to bring new hope to politics, Blair's period in office actually provoked growing talk that Westminster had become further detached from the 'real world' of the electors. This charge was given force by the fall in voter turnout in the 2001 general election, to a post-war low of 59.4 per cent. While participation recovered slightly in 2005, to 61.4 per cent, fewer people still supported Blair's party than had not voted. Britons, it seemed, were switching off from the parliamentary game, screening out what was good and focusing on the bad, only paying attention when, for example, in 2009 the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that many MPs had over-claimed their expenses. In this fetid atmosphere, parties on the far right, notably the BNP and UKIP, gained new audiences for their assertion that the established parties had betrayed loyal, law-abiding Britons.⁹

To interest voters in Westminster, the media reported in increasingly personal rather than policy terms, specifically concentrating on the party leaders.¹⁰ In order to get through to those unwilling to engage with the complexities of Early Day Motions and their like, the parties had for some time employed the same tactic of 'personalization'.¹¹ This process was reinforced

by the centralization of power into the hands of a few leaders, which nudged Britain further towards a more presidential style of politics, as was confirmed by the dominance of the Prime Ministerial debates during the 2010 general election campaign.¹²

To bridge the growing divide between the parties and the people, strategists started to encourage politicians to tell stories about themselves so as to evoke an emotional, as opposed to a rational, response.¹³ Those associated with New Labour were among the first to explicitly use narrative in this way. One of its leading lights, Peter Mandelson even wrote a book in 1996, part of which imagined what Britain would be like in 2005, thanks to a Blair government.¹⁴ Soon leading politicians in all parties became heroes in their own personal dramas with their life histories used to create partisan points. In the run-up to the 2010 election, for instance, the loss of David Cameron's son to cerebral palsy and Gordon Brown's left eye to rugby union were woven into tales of fortitude that suggested each was best equipped for leadership.¹⁵ What impact all this had on how – and if – people voted remains moot, but real politics was undoubtedly presented in increasingly personal, narrative and, thanks to 'sleaze', moral terms.

While politicians adopted the techniques of storytelling in part to overcome the suspicion that they could not be trusted to tell the truth, professional storytellers mixed up fact and fiction to an unprecedented extent. Blair's administration, according to one critic, was 'the most dramatised British government in history'.¹⁶ It was certainly the most *quickly* depicted and when dramatists took up the subject they eviscerated whatever remained of the boundary between that which was believed to be real and that which was definitely imagined. Thus, if Winston Churchill was over five years dead before he was portrayed in a British movie, Blair was Prime Minister for not much more than five years and still in office when *The Deal* (Channel 4, 2003) gave television viewers actor Michael Sheen's first of three takes on what he presented as a slippery and smarmy Labour leader. Such dramas moreover told a story that leaned heavily on existing preconceptions that defined Blair's government as a 'sleazy' beast, in the process helping to at least reinforce them in viewers' minds.

One of the few to escape New Labour's dramatic opprobrium was Mo Mowlam, as played by Julie Walters in *Mo* (Channel 4, 2010). Mowlam had been one of Blair's most popular Cabinet ministers, partly because of her association with the Northern Ireland Peace Process but also due to her public struggle with a brain tumour that claimed her life in 2005. She had been one of 120 women elected to the Commons in 1997, which was double the 1992 figure. This still meant women only accounted for eighteen per cent of MPs:

expectations this influx would 'feminize' politics consequently remained unfulfilled.¹⁷ That the media dubbed the 101 women returned as Labour MPs 'Blair's Babes' had in any case suggested misogyny would not be dispelled overnight. Despite that, a vague feminism now prevailed in many dramas about politics, something that strengthened optimism that women might usher in a better way of doing politics. A greater sensitivity to issues of gender and sexual difference also meant that the few gay characters depicted in such fictions were no longer presented in pathological terms.¹⁸ This led to the most unlikely of figures being seen in a new light, with Margaret Thatcher attracting unprecedented dramatic sympathy in her declining years.

Fictions about politics, which located their protagonists in complex contexts and showed them as well-intentioned if, inevitably, flawed figures, continued to be produced. Anthony Cartwright's novel *Heartland* (2009) has a Labour councillor seek re-election in a working-class town undermined by decline and riven by ethnic tension. Cartwright has the reader empathize with the councillor's various dilemmas. Similarly, James Graham's 2012 National Theatre play *This House* was set in the Commons during the fraught minority Labour government of 1974–9. Graham did not paint his party whips and MPs as angels, but they had motives more noble than mere self-aggrandizement. Writing as someone who had 'a deep admiration for our democracy, an affection for the building that houses it, a belief in what it *could* be', Graham was, however, an unusual figure.¹⁹ Like Cartwright, he also wrote for a minority audience.

Subtle political dramas that explored the many dimensions of political activity aimed at millions had always been fairly hard to find. During this period they became almost as rare as the unicorn. According to Neil McKay, who wrote *Mo*, television executives now completely in awe of ratings saw politics as 'boring'. The subject, he claimed, was an especially 'hard sell' when faced by commissioning editors from BBC One and ITV1, channels which aimed for mass audiences. Therefore while *Mo* was about the life and death of a Cabinet minister he 'pitched it as a personal story, not a political one', anticipating Channel 4 might think it would 'frighten the audience' with too much politics.²⁰ When the experienced television dramatist Tony Saint took a proposal to the BBC that dealt with an aspect of the 1970s Labour government, as would Graham's 2012 play, it was rejected with the comment: 'it's too political. It's too much about politics.'²¹ If the BBC's interest in political drama was on the wane – and it pushed many of those it did produce to BBC Four, its little-watched digital channel – ITV essentially abandoned the form. The biggest champion of political drama during this period was Channel 4, which specialized in populist

satires of the Westminster elite. Other than in comedy, politics was mostly represented in conspiracy thrillers, for if commissioning editors feared viewers found politics boring, these dramas promised to give them vivid storylines with lots of explosions while also indulging the by-now endemic view that the country's political class formed part of a vast conspiracy against the public.

The omnipresent conspiracy

The view that party elites had agendas inimical to the interests of those they were supposed to serve had framed many post-war political dramas, especially from the 1980s. Labour's period in office, however, saw the conspiracy narrative applied to politics with increasing enthusiasm and greater force.

The popularity of *Spooks*, which ran for ten seasons between 2002 and 2011, suggested the conspiracy device could be applied to all manner of subjects. The series' heroes were MI5 officers working within the 'Grid', who confront any number of threats to national security. While the series began in the shadow of 9/11 and continued through 7/7, Islamic extremists were but one of the conspiratorial forces encountered. Reacting to real events, members of the Grid took on British fascists, European eco-terrorists, the Russian mafia and international financial speculators, to name but a few. The series consequently depicted MI5 as standing between democracy and its overthrow.

This was something of a transformation for Britain's intelligence services. Having been part of many 1980s fictional plots against democracy, the invasion of Iraq encouraged some to look on MI5 in more positive terms. With Blair accused of manipulating intelligence to make his case for the assault on Saddam, David Hare's *Page Eight* (BBC, 2011) had his avowedly apolitical hero, MI5 operative Johnny Worricker, uphold truth against a Prime Minister implicated in illegal US torture of terrorist suspects. The process that led to the 'dodgy dossier' and his belief that politicians had become a 'self-serving cartel' directly inspired Hare's drama.²² Yet, if Iraq put Britain's intelligence services in a new light, the Americans continued to play their villainous role. Robert Harris' novel *Ghost* (2007), turned into a movie in 2010, was stimulated by the idea that, as Harris put it, 'there's something strange about Britain's slavish relationship with the United States. We don't have an independent foreign policy.'²³ *Ghost* consequently explains that the reason why the retired Blair-like Prime Minister had only ever followed policies that favoured Washington was because his wife was a CIA agent.

In *Spooks* MI5 is often pitched against the CIA and also manipulated by untrustworthy ministers. In one 2003 episode the Grid becomes an unknowing part of a government plot to assassinate a military hero, who is causing the Ministry of Defence embarrassment by publicly complaining about troops' poor equipment. As the Grid's Chief of Section states with disgust after this otherwise loyal officer has been killed: 'If the New World Order means we're in the business of destroying anyone who questions the political agenda, then I'm in the wrong job.'²⁴ This episode articulated real concerns that the government was not properly supporting soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Such was the depth of this suspicion that the 2009 movie *31 North 62 East* even has the Prime Minister betray the location of British troops to an Arab government for the sake of an lucrative arms contract.

On occasion the Grid thwarts ministerial plots and in a bizarre way the intelligence service is presented as upholding the principle of open government. In a 2006 episode its members even uncover a secret government deal to sell nuclear power to Saudi Arabia. A minister boasts he will be able to persuade the public of its merits as – in an obvious reference to Iraq – 'We managed to sell them a war on a fairy tale.'²⁵ Having thwarted that project, the Grid then discovers another clandestine pact, this time between the British and American governments, to abandon the fight against global warming – while cynically going through the motions of taking it seriously – and to instead focus on how to exploit its political consequences.²⁶

If often presenting government as unscrupulous and omnipotent, *Spooks* had it both ways by also showing it – and civil liberties – to be in danger of overthrow by those wanting to take more forceful action in the War on Terror.²⁷ At one point, elements in MI6, business and the media as well as the Cabinet Secretary seek 'a new kind of leadership' and blackmail the Prime Minister into introducing measures to sideline Parliament and reduce him to their rubber stamp. To achieve their ends the cabal manipulates public opinion by so exaggerating the reality of outside threats they demand more authoritarian measures. In a conspiracy that echoed aspects of the movie *V for Vendetta* (2006), in which people's anxieties about terrorism are induced by a fascist government, the Grid saves the day. By articulating worries that the government's response to 9/11 threatened freedom, Ben Richards' script also evoked many of the concerns expressed by liberal journalist Henry Porter, whose columns regularly complained New Labour was mounting a mighty assault on freedom, a view that underpinned his novel *The Dying Light* (2009).

Paranoid about the motives of those who exercised political power, *Spooks* formed part of a developing sense that government was for a panoply of disparate reasons conspiring against the people. The most innovative aspect of this trend was the emergence of a right-wing populism, one conspicuously articulated by Richard Littlejohn, who at various times had a platform in the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, two of Britain's best-selling newspapers.²⁸ Both outlets favoured a populist approach to politics, one Littlejohn reinforced in vituperative attacks on the Westminster elite, which echoed the rhetoric of the far right. Serialized in the *Sun*, his 2001 novel *To Hell in a Handcart* was even described by one critic as a recruiting pamphlet for the BNP.²⁹ It certainly gave grounds for viewing Littlejohn as a racist, being over-populated by Romanian criminals, bogus asylum-seekers and thieving gypsies. Yet the novel also contained characters of immigrant descent who Littlejohn intended readers to view positively; indeed he claimed that a West Indian character was the 'conscience of the book'. In any case, the asylum-seekers depicted as benefitting from the generosity of the British state were – along with recidivist young white criminals rewarded with free foreign holidays at tax-payers' expense – merely instances of a polity gone wrong, and *that* was Littlejohn's central theme.

Littlejohn painted a picture of a Britain in which the moral, hard-working majority were hemmed in and controlled by the authorities. Motorists suffer twenty-five-mile-per-hour speed limits on motorways; city centres are pedestrianized to deny vehicles access; drivers are randomly breathalyzed and their cars clamped on any excuse. In contrast, those breaking the law are indulged. Littlejohn argued public authority no longer served the public and was instead concerned to regulate the decent majority's behaviour. He does not explain, though, *why* New Labour ministers – in other contexts accused of pandering to public opinion – should want to oppress those whose votes they need to stay in power. Yet, if no reasons are given for this politically correct conspiracy, Littlejohn reinforces his vision of an alien public authority by making it seem that it is only officered by Trotskyists and gays.

In an ironic echo of George Orwell's 1984 dictum that 'who controls the present controls the past', so prevalent had the conspiracy narrative become by the start of the twenty-first century it was habitually applied to past events. Working chronologically backwards into Britain's political history, David Peace's *Red Riding* quartet of novels published during 1999–2002 was adapted by Channel 4 and broadcast in a 2009 mini-series. This presented a grim 1970s Britain as subject to various plots, including MI5's attempt to undermine Prime Minister Harold Wilson, threatened military coups and even death squads. Set

in a more than usually dour industrial Yorkshire, the series showed the systemic nature of corruption with a major building contractor controlling local police, press and politicians. If he is ultimately murdered, it is only so police officers can run the county as they see fit.

Set two decades earlier, *The Hour* (BBC, 2011–12) was in contrast a highly glamorized take on the early days of current affairs television. The second season involved a conspiracy in which a nightclub owner blackmails male customers from the top drawer of society and politics. He is involved with a company building nuclear bases and has formed an alliance with the Conservative Minister of Defence, a suspiciously keen advocate of atomic weapons. Sex, money, Armageddon and politics was a heady mix, one that moreover evoked Profumo and referenced the 1950s debate about whether Britain should rely on a nuclear deterrent, one that spawned the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In developing its plot, *The Hour* suggested the Harold Macmillan government's embrace of nuclear weapons was influenced by corrupt motives and enforced by an elite conspiracy. Tapping into this sentiment, Stephen Poliakoff's 2009 film *Glorious 39* even had 1930s appeasers murder opponents of their attempt to stop Britain going to war against Hitler. In reality, leading elements in Neville Chamberlain's Cabinet did want to avoid war and there were Nazi sympathizers in society, but Poliakoff's drama imagined a plot so embedded in the elite, one of such magnitude and so little scruple, it is unclear why it did not succeed.

The docu-drama of New Labour

Even the most fantastic of conspiracy dramas was based on an interpretation of actual events. As we have seen, much of the appeal of the Victorian Parliamentary Novel was that it gave readers what they thought was an insight into real politics. The Blair years, however, saw the increased employment of a new kind of dramatic approach and a fresh freedom to depict real contemporary figures, which heightened the impression that fictions were now rendering uniquely accurate versions of political reality.³⁰

Reconstructing authentic events and depicting real people by using stand-ins or actors had long been popular with documentary filmmakers.³¹ It also appealed to early television journalists, notably those working on the ITV current affairs series *World in Action* (1963–98), who first employed this method in their 1963 investigation into the Profumo Affair, when footage of the protagonists was unavailable. In 1976 *World in Action* examined how the Labour Cabinet agreed

to bail out the Chrysler car company by having journalists play ministers. Subsequently, however, while works still contained scenes the content of which was based on journalistic research, many others were inspired by guesswork and imagination or compressed known events to make them more dramatically compelling. Using this hybrid 'docu-drama' or 'drama-documentary' approach, members of the *World in Action* team reconstructed with a cast of actors Margaret Thatcher's exit from power in *Thatcher: The Final Days* (1991). If popular with dramatists and audiences, some were concerned that, as the journalist Charles Moore put it, the term 'drama-documentary' was a 'contradiction'.³² Indeed, when *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985) included a scene in which a television showed Margaret Thatcher being interviewed by Robin Day, the veteran broadcaster made known to its producers his unhappiness at the mixing of reality with fiction.³³

The early 1990s also saw the screening of dramas that, while evoking immediate political reality, did not pretend to be documentaries. BBC Two's comedy *A Very Open Prison* (1994) featured a Conservative Home Secretary in charge of prisons unable to contain their inmates. The writer-director Guy Jenkin denied it was a docu-drama, instead calling it a 'fiction arising out of real life events'.³⁴ Yet the parallels between the made-up politician and the actual Cabinet minister Michael Howard, whose Home Office faced similar problems with its prisons, were hard to miss. Even when producers made no claims to authenticity, journalists still noted 'stark parallels' between drama and fact, as they did in relation to Channel 4's *The Politician's Wife* (1995), the aforementioned story of a quintessentially 'sleazy' Conservative minister. One even suggested this highly charged melodrama 'could have been a documentary'.³⁵ As further evidence of the blurring of the boundary between reality and its representation, journalists were also apt to make comparisons between Neil Hamilton, the Conservative MP accused of taking money from lobbyists, and Alan B'Stard, the completely corrupt Thatcherite politician in ITV's situation comedy *The New Statesman* (1987–92).³⁶

During New Labour's time in office this process gained pace. It was also evident in novels, a flurry of which were written by political journalists and those who had once worked for New Labour. These traded on their authors' inside knowledge and so made much of the authenticity of at least aspects of their highly charged stories. The blurb for *Time and Fate* (2005) by Lance Price, a former press adviser to Prime Minister Blair, even claimed it revealed 'what life is really like at the top of British politics'.³⁷ Professional novelists similarly combined what was real with their imagined tales. Blair appeared in

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), set in London on 15 February 2003 when one million people were estimated to have protested against the impending invasion of Iraq. In an enigmatic episode, it is unclear if the Prime Minister is lying or truly believes in the existence of weapons of mass destruction. Gordon Burn's *Born Yesterday* (2008) even wove a story out of the news of 2007, which included Gordon Brown finally replacing Blair as Prime Minister, mixing it up with the disappearance of Madeleine McCann.

On the stage David Hare had pioneered using documentary material and interviews with real people to dramatize the privatization of the railways in *The Permanent Way* (2003), the road to the Iraq invasion in *Stuff Happens* (2006) and the international financial crisis in *The Power of Yes* (2009).³⁸ These productions carefully delineated between the imagined and the factual, so audiences were always clear which was which. Yet Hare also wrote plays that dramatized versions of real political events and figures. He did this first with *The Absence of War* (1993), based on Labour's ill-fated 1992 election campaign and which benefitted from the playwright attending on a number of high-level party meetings.³⁹ Thus, if Hare claimed Prime Minister Alec Beasley selling access and peerages for cash was 'pure fiction' in *Gethsemane* (2008), this did not prevent audiences and critics from taking him to be a version of Blair, who was accused of doing both. Indeed, Beasley was the lying Prime Minister in *Page Eight*, by which time Hare had conceded his striking similarities to the former incumbent of Number 10.⁴⁰

Hare's plays largely remained stage-bound. Even when broadcast on Channel 4, television docu-dramas had bigger audiences – as well as ones that were younger and less middle-class – than a novel or stage production. Those television dramatists who wrote about Blair's party and employed this method also had good reasons to do so, claiming they revealed their subject's 'essential truth', while making their work 'more accessible' to audiences and enjoying a greater impact than fictions that did not depict real figures.⁴¹ *The Deal*, an account of the rivalry between Blair and Brown before 1994, was the first television docu-drama to take New Labour as its subject. Director Stephen Frears claimed he was astonished to have been able to make a film about a sitting Prime Minister, seeing it as rather 'a cheeky thing to do'.⁴² *The Deal* was, however, just one of many such 'cheeky' fictions: David Blunkett, Gordon Brown, Alastair Campbell, Peter Mandelson, Mo Mowlam, John Prescott, Claire Short and, most frequently, Tony Blair found themselves played by actors on the small screen. The number of fictions 'arising out of real life events' also increased, including BBC Two's 1996 *Crossing the Floor* (Alan Howarth's

defection to Labour); Channel 4's 1997 *Mr White Goes to Westminster* (Martin Bell's election as an Independent MP); BBC One's two-part 2001 drama *The Project* (the rise of New Labour); BBC One's 2004 *The Deputy* (the adventures of a Prescott-like Deputy Prime Minister); and the same channel's 2005 *Gideon's Daughter* (the making of the Millennium Dome).

Adding to the appearance of authenticity, many dramas employed retired or backbench MPs and television journalists in cameo roles to play themselves. If this had also happened on a modest scale in *Yes, Minister* during the 1980s, digital technology now allowed television to make it appear that actors were interacting with real politicians. One 'documentary' – *Tony Blair: Rock Star* (Channel 4, 2006) – even combined interviews with real people who knew Blair as a young man with scenes that dramatized, for comic effect, the episodes they described. The same method was repeated in *Miliband of Brothers* (Channel 4, 2010), a jokey take on David and Ed Miliband. In 2008 BBC Two's current affairs programme *Newsnight* took this development a step further by commissioning *10 Days to War*, a series of eight short dramas depicting decision-making prior to the invasion of Iraq. To establish a barrier between 'drama' and 'news', these were shown prior to *Newsnight* rather than during the programme. But their subject set the agenda for discussions conducted between the 'real players' in the show itself.⁴³

The danger for audiences was that, as critic Andrew Billen wrote of *The Deal*, 'At the end, when we saw the real Tony and Gordon on College Green, we barely noticed they were not [actors Michael] Sheen and [David] Morrissey.'⁴⁴ David Blunkett, subject of the highly unfavourable *A Very Social Secretary* (Channel 4, 2005) certainly found it 'astonishing ... to hear people I know believing that it is a genuine portrayal and not a piece of fiction.'⁴⁵ Moreover, on the basis of comments published on the series' website, if viewers knew *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard* (BBC, 2006) was fictional, some wished she had been real.⁴⁶ Participants in the actual political arena also exploited the series. A petition was lodged on the Number 10 website asking New Labour to follow her policies.⁴⁷ David Cameron was also asked a question inspired by the series.⁴⁸ UKIP even acquired a web address similar to the one used by the BBC to publicize the series so as to appropriate Pritchard's populism for its own purposes.⁴⁹

Those dramatizing New Labour depicted it deep in 'sleaze' and especially guilty of spinning. That Labour and the Conservatives were, in respect of 'sleaze', the same was an early and predominant theme. Both the comedies *Crossing the Floor* and *Normal Ormal* (BBC, 1998) were about Conservatives who did well under Thatcher but left the sinking Conservative ship to join Blair. These gave

viewers a picture of politics with which they were already familiar. Indeed, of the former, a critic complained: 'its cast of sleazy Tories and sleek New Labour spin-doctors ... is so over-familiar that one can only hope for a surprise Lib Dem victory to give us some fresh targets.'⁵⁰ Peter Flannery's drama series *Our Friends in the North* (BBC, 1996) even presented New Labour – before it had won office – as the latest instalment in a never-ending story of corruption. As he put it:

Regimes come and go, but lies and betrayals go on forever. There has always been corruption in politics ... we live in an ongoing culture of corruption. *Friends in the North* is the story of people who tried to do something about it, and failed. It may be a Utopian ideal, but we must keep trying because the drift is always in the other direction. Corruption breeds corruption. I'd love to believe that a Labour victory would start a clean-up in politics, but I'm afraid they'll be trapped by the very institutions that support them.⁵¹

Michael Wearing, the series' executive producer, furthermore claimed it conveyed 'disillusionment with politics and everything politicians say they can offer' and was 'as critical of the complacency and innate corruption of the left as it is of the right'.⁵²

If these works evoked a populist hostility to politicians as a class, most were actually written by left-wingers critical of New Labour's abandonment, as they saw it, of 'socialism'. Peter Kosminsky described himself and scriptwriter Leigh Jackson as 'standard Labour-type figures' disillusioned by New Labour.⁵³ It was this disenchantment that underpinned *The Project*. As Jackson stated:

we watched the Conservatives disintegrate under a deluge of sleaze and corruption. So when Labour won, it was like a new dawn. There was a tremendous feeling across Britain of rejuvenation, of hope and idealism in the future, which I think now has evaporated.

Jackson believed that by 2002 many were consumed by 'the growing realisation that after 18 years we might have voted in another "Tory" government, only this one was more efficient and twice as ruthless'.⁵⁴ Alistair Beaton was another left-of-centre writer who saw his work as motivated by a 'sense of outrage'. Seeing New Labour as 'an authoritarian and right wing administration', his *A Very Social Secretary* asked 'what had become of Labour's roots and Labour's principles?' To answer that question, Beaton used Blunkett's affair with the publisher of the Conservative-supporting *Spectator* to illustrate the party's embrace of reaction. Opposition to the Iraq invasion motivated many such works and certainly underpinned Beaton's black comedy *The Trial of Tony Blair*

(Channel 4, 2007), which imagined the former Prime Minister charged with war crimes.⁵⁵ The road to the Iraq war – and specifically the death of Dr. David Kelly, who questioned the veracity of the ‘dodgy dossier’ – was also the central subject of Kosminsky’s *The Government Inspector* (Channel 4, 2005). This suggested that at the very least Blair and Campbell had been careless about Kelly’s fate. Iraq even influenced *The Deal*, despite it being set before 1994. Frears claimed it was produced in the belief that by 2003 Blair had revealed ‘his true colours’ by taking Britain to war.⁵⁶

From having once attempted to protect the political class from dramatic criticism, elements in the BBC now saw themselves as tribunes of a disenfranchised people. Jane Trantor, BBC One’s Controller of Drama Commissioning (2000–6), happily claimed that *The Project* would make the government feel ‘uncomfortable’.⁵⁷ Peter Ansgore, Commissioning Editor of Drama for Channel 4 (1987–97), boasted of the short-lived 1996 situation comedy *Annie’s Bar*, set in the Palace of Westminster, that it would ‘tread on politicians’ toes’; its director Baz Taylor declared: ‘MPs are there to be shot at – they are fair game’.⁵⁸ The production company Mentorn, responsible for *A Very Social Secretary* and *The Trial of Tony Blair* among others, was even described in 2007 as ‘cornering the market in a new genre of political satires that harpoon its targets right through the heart’.⁵⁹ David Aukin, Mentorn’s Head of Drama since 1998 – another self-described ‘disappointed’ New Labour supporter – even saw his work as providing something that the ‘unedited and un-analytical’ twenty-four-hour news channels could not: ‘a better sense of what’s going on behind the scenes’.⁶⁰

Women: Still hoping

The success of *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006) in the United States provoked numerous figures to ask why British television did not also produce a popular series that depicted political figures in idealized terms. In 2008 the Cabinet minister Hazel Blears even claimed such a drama would help restore people’s faith in their politicians.⁶¹ In fact, a small handful of television dramas had already outlined a positive view of politics. One such, BBC Two’s series *Party Animals* (2007), painted a picture of the inhabitants of the Westminster village such that an advisor to it claimed: ‘If the show has a message, it’s that these people care’.⁶² That Blears had not noticed these dramas perhaps told its own story, for they did not attract enough viewers to merit being turned into series or to be re-commissioned if they were. Even so, they revealed something about the

symbolic role women continued to in Britain's imaginary politics. Intriguingly, this was a function ethnic minorities did not perform, as they did in the United States. It was not until 2004 and BBC Two's drama *If ... Things Don't Get Better* that a black actor played a Prime Minister, one motivated by idealism.⁶³

Not all such dramas had women as their protagonists. In 2004 the everyman actor Warren Clarke played Bob Galway MP in *The Deputy*. Galway wants to be Prime Minister but still fights for his constituents' interests. When his cynical son asserts that all politicians are the same, he replies: 'No. We're really not.' Viewers are meant to believe that is true, in Galway's case at least. This pilot episode, for a series that was never commissioned, nonetheless presented Galway as an exceptional figure, that is an honourable man beset by Number 10's bullying spin doctor, ministers so obsessed with rising up the greasy pole they illegally tap his phone and MPs who would rather hawk their Private Members' Bill to special interests than use it to help those in distress.

In 2006 BBC One screened a whole series, midweek and at prime time, that suggested politics could be populated by people of honour wanting to reflect voters's wishes. The Prime Minister concerned was, however, not Blair or a character based on a recognizable New Labour figure, but Sally Wainwright's *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard*.⁶⁴ Pritchard was an ostensibly ordinary wife, mother and supermarket manager, possessing, according to Jane Horrocks who played the character, 'the voice of reason with the ability to cut through the flim flam of politics'.⁶⁵ Her scratch Purple Alliance, formed mostly by other women without a political background, defeats Blair in the 2005 general election on a wave of hostility to politics-as-usual. Perhaps for that reason it was especially popular with women, who formed fifty-nine per cent of the audience.⁶⁶

Wainwright claimed she wrote the series because during the 2005 campaign she 'found that I didn't really want to vote for anybody because they all seemed as bad as each other'.⁶⁷ Her series consequently shows Prime Minister Pritchard telling off President George Bush, taking steps to relocate Parliament to Bradford and giving a decisive lead on tackling global warming. Yet, having initially claimed politics wasn't rocket science, she also discovers it is more difficult than she thought. Even so, Pritchard remains true to her promise never to lie – unlike, the script makes plain, her real political equivalents.

Bob Galway and Ros Pritchard were fictional creations while *Mo* was unambiguously about a real figure. Attracting one of Channels 4's biggest-ever audiences, McKay's drama depicted a New Labour politician in uniquely compassionate terms: his Mowlam was a warm, messily human figure whose flaws were outweighed by her desire to do good. Yet McKay remained true to the

general trend by having Mowlam ultimately fall victim to the machinations of the dominant 'cold politics' of spin, as personified by a very slippery Peter Mandelson.

Like Galway, Pritchard and Mo were presented as extraordinary political figures, a status facilitated by the latter two's gender. It certainly helped to make them more unambiguously outsiders, and so characters with whom viewers might identify. That was also the case on the stage, where David Hare continued to use female characters to suggest that, as with his New Labour Home Secretary in *Gethsemane*, politics just might become more than taking money from millionaires wanting low taxes. A similar point was made, albeit in a more jokey way, by Sue Townsend's novel *Number 10* (2002), which has a Blair-like Prime Minister only truly understand the problems besetting Britain after he travels round the country disguised as a woman called Edwina.

Not all fictions regarded women's political role in such terms. The popular sitcom *Goodnight Sweetheart* (BBC, 1993–99), written by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, also responsible for *Shine on Harvey Moon* (ITV, 1982–85) and *The New Statesman* (ITV, 1987–92), associated the increased role of women in politics with its declining authenticity. The series combined nostalgia for the 1940s politics evident in *Harvey Moon* with the cynicism for contemporary politics obvious in *The New Statesman*, expressing both through gender. In an unusual plot device, Gary Sparrow, the hero of the series, travelled between the present and wartime London: in the 1990s Gary is married to Yvonne, a successful entrepreneur, but in the 1940s he marries and has a child with barmaid Phoebe. During the sixth and final season Sparrow's 1990s wife becomes a millionaire and a close friend to the Blairs. Described as one of 'Blair's Babes', Yvonne is elevated to the peerage and chairs what her husband calls the 'luvvy lolly for Tony's cronies campaign'. The series defines present-day politics as superficial and, to Gary's mind, full of 'sleazy-looking types in chauffeur-driven limos'. In contrast, the 1940s is politically more worthwhile, such that the 1990s cynic saves Clement Attlee from an assassin. Indeed, by ensuring Attlee lives to become, as Gary puts it, the 'leader of a great reforming government', he has fulfilled his time-travelling destiny. This causes the portal to close and Gary to remain in the past, along with Attlee and Phoebe.

Sympathy for the she-devil

Significantly, Ros Pritchard and Mo Mowlam were politicians who also remained 'women' – that is, they were married and part of warm if occasionally

problematic families. Indeed, Pritchard crucially promised to apply her domestically grounded 'common sense' to politics.

In contrast, while in office, Britain's first female Prime Minister had invariably been depicted as a woman gone wrong. It was also during this time that the BBC refused to produce Ian Curteis' drama about the Falklands War. Having initially commissioned it, Curteis believed the Corporation turned its back on his work because he showed Thatcher in a sympathetic light. The Corporation claimed the play was biased and costly.⁶⁸ While in Number 10, it was seemingly impossible to see Thatcher as anything but a contentious figure, one wholly defined by her combative political identity.⁶⁹ Indeed, *Dunrulin*, an ill-fated 1990 pilot for a BBC situation comedy series that never was, had the Prime Minister act like 'a sort of latter-day female Alf Garnett', while the Thatchers live on a Falklands-themed estate with a Goose Green Road, Belgrano Avenue and Tumbledown Terrace. Their doorbell even plays Jerusalem. Such was the hostility of the stereotyping, a former *Spitting Image* producer was called in to tone things down.⁷⁰

That the Prime Minister might have been a human being with feelings was apparently too incredible to imagine. *Thatcher: The Final Days*, broadcast within a year of her enforced departure from Downing Street, confined itself to reconstructing the policy disputes that led to the Prime Minister's demise. While the script stuck to the facts, Sylvia Syms portrayed Thatcher as a hubristic, imperious and cold figure. If only because this reconstruction of events – described by one critic as 'the dramatic equivalent of a civics lecture' – only depicted scenes for which there was some corroboration, it did not contain scenes in which the Prime Minister and husband Denis were alone. Her private life remained *terra incognita*.⁷¹

During the early years of the twenty-first century the imagined Thatcher was transformed. This owed something to the passage of time, which allowed for new perspectives to emerge on an increasingly frail figure, in Gordon Burn's novel *Born Yesterday*, a lonely widow cared for by a nurse. Thatcher was not exceptional in being subject to dramatic revisionism. The radical playwright Howard Brenton's *Never So Good* (2008) showed National Theatre audiences a Macmillan emotionally crippled by his mother and errant wife. If he had never been as divisive a figure as Thatcher, it was still remarkable that someone of Brenton's views depicted such a subject so sympathetically. Indicating that time was indeed a factor in this process, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the conflict, in 2002 the BBC broadcast *The Falklands Play*, albeit in a truncated form and on BBC Four. True to the original, this showed Thatcher as a reluctant

war leader, one careful to avoid loss of life, and who even appears to cry on receiving news of British casualties. If this was not how some had wanted to see Thatcher while she was Prime Minister, it was certainly closer to reality than Steven Berkoff's horrific Maggot Scratcher who featured in his play *Sink the Belgrano!* (1986).

Curteis' drama revealed its 1980s origins by sticking to policy debates and known events rather than speculating about its protagonist's private feelings. This was not the case with subsequent Thatcher dramas, which showed her as having a fully developed emotional life, depicting their heroine as a vulnerable woman in an unforgiving man's world. Tony Saint's *The Long Walk to Finchley* (BBC, 2008) showed the young politician struggling to overcome post-war class prejudice and sexism in pursuit of a safe Conservative seat. If a largely comic rendition of Thatcher's early years, the audience is nonetheless encouraged to empathize with this bright, determined and ultimately rather sexy woman in her battle against discrimination. With Saint having her call for 'real equality of opportunity irrespective of who you are, irrespective of your background, irrespective of class, irrespective of sex', this Thatcher is even an advocate of egalitarianism.

Thatcher appears briefly in the 2006 BBC Two adaptation of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), a novel set in the 1980s and which focused on the grand household of Gerald Fedden, a well-connected and ambitious Conservative MP. In both works the Prime Minister is a distant and powerful figure, one to be courted with care. Yet when she finally accepts an invitation to a Fedden party Thatcher is shown 'getting down rather sexily' (as Hollinghurst puts it) on the dance floor after a couple of whiskies.⁷² She is, however, out of touch with what is actually going on at the event. When dancing with the novel's hero, Nick, who is gay, drunk and high on cocaine, in the television adaptation Thatcher has a look of confusion, not quite understanding Nick or the irony of the moment.

If *The Line of Beauty* showed Thatcher at the height of her powers, in 2009 BBC Two broadcast *Margaret*, Richard Cottan's tragic rendition of the Prime Minister's fall from office, the publicity for which claimed viewers would see her 'changing from leader to victim before our eyes'.⁷³ Free of the need to have scenes corroborated – viewers are told that 'much of the dialogue and many of the scenes are the invention of the author' – Cottan presents a character whose flaws are explained as due to her upbringing as well as battles with arrogant, bullying or dismissive political men. As Cottan has her say to Willie Whitelaw of her male colleagues: 'I'm a woman ... I must dominate them or they will

destroy me.' Thatcher's attempt to impose her will on others is also shown to mask an inner feminine vulnerability, confessing as she does to Airey Neave of the Commons: 'it makes me feel so small, like, well, like a woman.'

Having established that Thatcher was indeed a 'woman,' Cottan has her indulge in a moment of reflection during which she discusses how others saw her: 'me as a man – that's what they laugh at.' In contrast to *Thatcher: The Final Days*, Denis Thatcher features large in *Margaret*, and helps establish the Prime Minister as a rounded character. It is also a noteworthy sign of Thatcher's dramatic makeover that when in the former she tells colleagues at her final Cabinet that 'It's a funny old world' there are fewer tears than in *Margaret*, and the words as delivered by Sylvia Syms are not rueful, as Lindsay Duncan expresses them, but suffused with smoldering anger.

The empathizing of Thatcher was taken a stage further in the 2011 movie *The Iron Lady*, for which Meryl Streep collected an Oscar, only the second actor to win the award for playing a British Prime Minister. This pressed deeper into its protagonist's private world, to the almost complete exclusion of politics. The film was in most respects not about the events that Thatcher shaped and was shaped by; these are treated briefly and blandly, something that would have been impossible in the 1980s. Explaining why this was, director Phyllida Lloyd claimed: 'the film is really about the *feeling* of power and the *feeling* of loss of power ... Our interest was what it *felt* like to be in the driving seat. We're exploring that journey in terms of gender. We're looking at how it might have *felt*.'⁷⁴

In exploring Thatcher's 'feelings,' which the movie has her dismiss as of no importance, the film inevitably encourages the audience to identify with its heroine, an isolated lower-middle-class woman with a love for *The King and I*, surrounded by ambitious upper-class men. There is only one character for whom they can root in this movie; as Streep claimed: 'We all have a lot more in common with Margaret Thatcher than we care to admit.'⁷⁵ But any sympathy is for the woman, *not* the leader. Indeed, *The Iron Lady* is, more than anything, about growing old and especially grieving for the loss of a partner. From beyond the grave, Denis gives his wife advice, chides her, cajoles her and supplies a running commentary on her life. In this respect, *The Iron Lady* had much in common with the romantic movie *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, coincidentally screened the year Thatcher fell from power. Also about a bereaved woman and her heartache for a lost partner, both movies conclude when the heroine decides she has to get on with life and sends her man's phantom packing.

The way we spin now

If *The Iron Lady* looked back to Britain's recent political history – with much of the politics left out – *The Thick of It* was rooted in contemporary events. Like *Yes, Minister*, with which it was often compared, it was a situation comedy set in a fictional government department whose remit allowed the series to tackle an eclectic range of issues. Instead of Jim Hacker's Department for Administrative Affairs, *The Thick of It*, first broadcast in 2005 was located in the Department of Social Affairs (which in a subsequent reshuffle has 'and Citizenship' carelessly tacked on at the end). In place of haughty Oxbridge-educated civil servant Sir Humphrey Appleby, *The Thick of It* has Malcolm Tucker, the Prime Minister's belligerent and foul-mouthed 'enforcer' or head spin-doctor keeping the elected representatives of the people in line. By this point, the spin-doctor had become a standard dramatic figure, appearing in a number of ostensibly non-political television dramas. When in 2003 ITV freely adapted Agatha Christie's 1945 mystery *Sparkling Cyanide*, it included an all-powerful, brutal figure at the heart of the Number 10 machine, intent on protecting the government's image. A year later, the popular BBC One detective drama series *New Tricks* had a New Labour spin-doctor as its murderer.⁷⁶ Spin-doctoring, of a political and non-political nature, even provided the entire subject matter for the BBC Two comedy series *Absolute Power* (2003–5).

While public choice theory provided *Yes, Minister* with its weary-eyed explanation of why the people's will would never be translated into action, *The Thick of It* was underpinned by simple moral principle. When Armando Iannucci conceived of the series he identified with the Liberal Democrats due to that party's opposition to the Iraq War and he remained a critic of how Blair had involved the country in the invasion.⁷⁷ Given the role the 'dodgy dossier' played in how the Prime Minister made his case for war, it is perhaps not surprising Iannucci claimed to have 'become increasingly appalled by how the truth is quite unashamedly contorted in political debate.'⁷⁸ Therefore, while *The Thick of It* was about many things, it was principally about how politics obscures 'truth' through 'spin'. Consequently, while Thatcher endorsed *Yes, Minister* because it expressed her own mistrust of government, Blair did not emulate her in praising Iannucci's series.

If *Yes, Minister* had a ready-made and practical solution to the problem it identified – take power away from the politicians and civil servants – *The Thick of It* had no obvious resolution to the predicament it outlined. Instead, the series contented itself with repeatedly showing how politicians were trapped within a

system they did not control. Antony Jay's mockery had a Thatcherite purpose, but Iannucci's was an end in itself: he merely invited viewers to observe, God-like, the foibles of a democracy of which they were seemingly themselves not participants. *The Thick of It* was an alienating and fatalistic political comedy, which was very appropriate given the times in which it was produced.⁷⁹

Unlike *Yes, Minister*, episodes of *The Thick of It* mapped very closely onto the political events of its day. The series – and the spin-off movie *In the Loop* (2009) – constituted a running critique of New Labour and to a lesser extent of David Cameron's 'modernized' Conservative alternative. While the party in power is never named, disputes between the Prime Minister's Office and the Treasury echoed those between Blair and Brown, the outgoing premier's obsession with his 'legacy' called to mind Blair's, and his successor shared many of the characteristics attributed to Brown. More importantly, the style of government evident in *The Thick of It* (specifically the obsession with spin) evoked what many thought of New Labour. In particular, Tucker was looked on as a parody of Alastair Campbell, the Prime Minister's Director of Communications (1997–2003), such that when Campbell bumped into Iannucci in 2010 the former apparently observed of the latter: 'If it isn't the bloke who's been making a living out of me for the past 10 years.'⁸⁰

The series' *dramatis personae* initially consisted of the minister Hugh Abbot, Glenn Cullen, his senior advisor, and Olly Reeder, Cullen's junior, all of whom are subject to Tucker's demands. Together – along with less-central types like Jamie, Tucker's deputy, and Ben Swain, Abbot's junior minister – they comprise a boys' club in which sexual bragging, aggressive mockery and occasional acts of violence are the norm. Politics for them is bloody – Malcolm and Jamie ask Olly if he wants to be a 'soldier' when he is temporarily seconded to Number 10.⁸¹ Terri and Robyn are two of the department's permanent civil servants and for a time the series' only female characters. Unlike Sir Humphrey, they are dismissed and despised by the main characters. Yet these women are invariably sensible – Terri wisely cautions against Abbot's disastrous on-the-hoof policy-making – or simply bemused by the games the men play. *In The Loop* reinforces this take on gender by depicting the Minister for International Development's Director of Communications as a polite, calm and knowledgeable woman – qualities which ultimately give her the advantage over Malcolm.

This critique of political men became more overt in the third season, broadcast in 2009, when Nicola Murray replaced Abbot. Of her experience at a fraught party conference, which sees Malcolm punch Glenn, Murray says

'it's a bit like being trapped in a boys' toilet.'⁸² The new minister also challenges Malcolm more than her predecessor: at one point she even dares to tell him that his trademark super-swearing does not solve anything. Indeed, at the height of one crisis she confronts Tucker and declares:

That's what it's all about to you isn't it? It's just about fighting and fucking power. Does it never occur to you that [it's] your poisonous male obsession with conflict which is making people despise politics.⁸³

Nothing, however, changes as a result.

As politics is about obscuring truth, the pursuit of appearance rather than reality, of spin not substance, it had no ultimate purpose. In their attempt to persuade voters they are not what they are, politicians of both parties are forced by their spin-doctors to *look* 'in touch'. Abbot is an exhausted, middle-aged man of conventional tastes, but Malcolm insists he has to seem 'funky'. Hugh's Conservative counterpart, Peter Mannion, has to pretend to be interested in the environment and is forced into a 'modern' suit and to go tie-less by Stuart Pearson, his party's version of Malcolm. Politicians are also thrown into a fevered vortex where appearance and reality are hard to distinguish. There are 'scandals' which are no such thing, while words and phrases come to mean their very opposite. This world of distorted mirrors is made apparent in the opening scene of the series' first-ever episode, in which Malcolm demands the resignation of Hugh's predecessor. This is ostensibly because the media is calling for it. However, the Prime Minister cannot look weak by acceding to journalists' wishes, so the minister is told to give 'personal reasons' for his departure, although Malcolm tells him that he will be briefing journalists that he had been sacked. The same episode has Abbot hold a press conference intended to announce a new policy initiative, but Malcolm tells him the policy is dead in the water due to Treasury objections. This means the minister has to address the press without launching anything at all. When later informed that the Prime Minister has decided to back the policy, Abbot tries to convince the media that he had in fact announced it.

Yes, *Minister* often showed Hacker trying to implement policy and coming up against various impediments, the most important of which was the civil service, but he was sometimes allowed to prevail. In contrast, politicians in *The Thick of It* have to run just to stay still. Their days consist of fighting media-concocted or real crises, meaning that policy development let alone implementation hardly exist. The point of holding office is not to do anything except, as Malcolm says, to keep the other lot out. He is consequently uninterested in the contents of

Olly's PhD thesis but does want any intelligence Reeder has gained from his relationship with a Conservative special advisor. Policy is something ministers come up with in the back of speeding car.

In one of the few episodes in which a specific policy is mentioned, Hugh publicly supports the closure of schools for children with special needs and speaks in favour of integrating them into mainstream schools.⁸⁴ Yet in private he objects to the measure, as does Glenn, whose son attended a special needs school. But they both toe the line. When she first becomes a minister, Nicola declares she wants to promote social mobility. Glenn, though, points out that this will cost money the Department does not have, so Murray falls back on the cost-free and essentially meaningless 'Fourth Sector' initiative. This she describes as a 'self-eating cake' in which 'extraordinary ordinary people' are meant to 'inspire' others out of poverty.⁸⁵ The essential pointlessness of political activity is brought home in the 2007 special episode, 'Spinners and Losers', which shows the manic goings-on that follow the Prime Minister's resignation as supporters and opponents of the Chancellor dash about Westminster plotting and scheming. After an exhaustive night it transpires that it has all been a waste of time as the Chancellor has done a deal with his main challenger to ensure his succession. It is no wonder, then, that a weary Hugh claims that the only time he gets any satisfaction is when he defecates – because in doing that he has created *something*.

If ordinary people were mostly absent from *Yes, Minister*, the series' implicit argument was populist insofar as honest taxpayers were shown as ill-served by politicians and civil servants. *The Thick of It* similarly focused on the Westminster village, but when it occasionally depicted the people the series did not do so in an especially flattering way. It is clear that giving *them* any more power won't result in a better kind of politics; for Iannucci the people are no judges of their best interests.⁸⁶ Thus, when they come into contact with politicians, the public is shown as aggressive and possibly mad. When Mannion is persuaded to set up a blog, the comments it generates are either hostile or pornographic: 'This is the problem with the public', he says – 'they're fucking horrible'. *In the Loop* has one of the minister's constituents complain that the constituency office wall threatens to fall into his mother's garden. While the constituent has a real grievance, he is also mentally unstable and obsessive. As Hugh confides to Glenn, 'when you meet the real, the actual people' with their 'beady eyes and mean mouths sneering' he feels that they're 'from a different fucking species'. Glenn does not demur.⁸⁷

At the same time as denigrating popular agency, the series highlights the breakdown in the relationship between the people and their representatives.

Abbot's comments followed an encounter with a working-class woman, which illustrates this point. It also closely echoed a real incident from the 2001 general election campaign when Sharon Storer confronted the Prime Minister in front of the world's media about how the National Health Service was mistreating her partner. Storer's complaint was that he had been kept too long in a corridor waiting for a bed. *The Thick of It* has Abbot inspect a factory, the only reason being to generate publicity for himself. As he enters the building a woman, in a heavy Welsh accent, repeatedly asks: 'Do you know what it's like to clean up your own mother's piss?' It transpires that her mother is resident in an inadequately staffed care home. Abbot is unable and seemingly unwilling to deal with her problem and the woman finds it impossible to talk calmly. For the minister, this is a deeply embarrassing moment, knowing as he does that there is a camera trained on his face. The woman's problem cannot, therefore, be dealt with in its own terms: it has become a media event. Journalists are, though, uninterested in the woman: to the television news producer, the story – which leads his broadcast – is 'Minister looks like a tit', not that there are problems in care homes.

A more depressing example of the failure of political action and communication it is hard to find, and one in which all parties are at fault, trapped in their own conflicting logics. The woman's problem remains unsolved while Abbot looks a 'tit' on the news. The only possible winner is the media, although while beguiled by pictures of a 'tittish' minister, they fail to notice massive overspending and possible corruption at the Ministry of Defence.

The main protagonists in *The Thick of It* are guilty of lying and scheming and of being incredibly rude, but they are not depicted in exclusively negative terms. There is some sympathy for the individuals incarcerated within a mad political system. Hugh is invariably tired: commuting between work and home means he spends little time with his family. Nicola has various domestic problems, including an unreliable husband. She also wants to send her daughter to a private school rather than a failing comprehensive. For reasons of media management, Malcolm forces her daughter to attend the latter, the result being she rebels and is excluded. In an episode transmitted in the wake of the 2009 'expenses scandal', when he sees Nicola sitting in an expensive chair, Malcolm tells her to bin it, arguing: 'People don't like their politicians to be comfortable, they don't like you having expenses, they don't like you being paid, they'd rather you live in a fucking cave.' A minister, he says, is to the public a 'human dart board'.⁸⁸

This tempered sympathy was not quite unique to *The Thick of It*. David Hare's *The Absence of War* presented his Labour leader as ensnared by advisors who tell

him not to speak of his principled belief in socialism for fear of putting off voters. When despite – or because of – this advice his party faces defeat he returns to his old rhetoric but finds that he has lost himself in spin. In *Gethsemane*, Hare's Home Secretary starts in politics as an idealist, but the demands of office – and the apparent necessity of keeping the media happy – means she has also lost her way. Similarly, episodes in Charlie Brooker's dystopic comedy series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011–13) showed politicians subject to an exploitative and intrusive media, which trades on a facile public's flippant disregard for serious politics.⁸⁹ Gordon Burn's *Born Yesterday* also reflected – very unusually – on the humanity of Britain's real leaders, noting the pain Brown suffered when smiling due to his terrible rugby injury, but also Blair's joy of being father to a young child. According to Burn, both were caught in a world hurtling ever onwards and over which they had no control. This was, in others words, sympathy for those trapped by the political system and a wider culture. There is no hope of escape, for them or us.

The third season of *The Thick of It* even brought out the hitherto terrifying Malcolm's more vulnerable side. By this point, echoing the trajectory of Brown's administration, the government is facing oblivion at the polls. Journalists start to openly mock him. But even at his zenith, Malcolm was often reduced to chasing round Whitehall to prevent scandals – or usually the appearance of scandals – breaking out. His main mission was to stop the media reporting the truth (or mis-reporting the truth by sometimes making up its own version). Moreover, despite his verbal brutality and threats of violence, Malcolm was forced to do deals with journalists because it was the media that was calling the shots, not the Prime Minister's supposedly omnipotent enforcer.

The series' fatalism was confirmed in its final season, broadcast in 2012. With Malcolm's party now in opposition to a coalition government, the series once again evoked reality by having its own version of the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press. Investigating the practice of leaking information to the press provoked by a suicide – as had been the 2003 Hutton Inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly – this fictional inquiry forces each character to account for their actions. Malcolm especially comes under the microscope as it becomes apparent that he had illegally given the suicide's medical records to journalists. Facing exposure, he addresses the inquiry:

Let me tell you this. The whole planet is leaking, everybody is leaking. You know, everyone is spewing up their guts on to the internet, putting up their relationship status and photos of their vajazzles. We've come to a point where there are people,

millions of people, who are quite happy to trade a kidney in order to go on television and to show people their knickers, and to show people their skid marks, and then complain to *OK!* magazine about a breach of privacy. The exchange of private information: that is what drives our economy. But you come after me because you can't arrest a land mass, you can't cuff a country, you can't lynch that guy there can you? But you decide that you can sit there and you can judge and ogle me like a Page Three girl. You don't like it? Well, you don't like yourself. You don't like your species and you know what neither do I. But how dare you come and lay this at my door, how dare you blame me for this *which is the result of a political class which has given up on morality and simply pursues popularity at all costs*. I am you and you are me.⁹⁰

This *omni culpa* could be taken to be the special pleading of a cornered man, but the tone in which actor Peter Capaldi has Tucker deliver the speech suggests viewers are meant to take it as serious comment. In which case, while summing up the ethos of the series, Tucker suggests that as politics merely mirrors wider cultural processes, the problems *The Thick of It* highlights are ultimately insoluble. Confirming that rather hopeless conclusion, while the series ended with Malcolm's arrest and the sacking of Stuart Pearson, despite a brief moment of celebration in both parties, the remaining protagonists soon return to the fray. Awful politics goes on, and on, and on.

Conclusion

In 2012 Labour leader Ed Miliband described the government's Budget as an 'omnishambles', a term coined by Malcolm Tucker during a rant against Nicola Murray.⁹¹ Indeed, so popular did the word become that those responsible for the *Oxford English Dictionary's* content named omnishambles as their 'word of the year'. This suggested the series enjoyed a significant influence, certainly with journalists, one of whom claimed it helped frame how his colleagues viewed the workings of government.⁹² Yet, compared to *Yes, Minister*, *The Thick of It* had a modest audience. While the former attracted up to nine million viewers per episode when broadcast on BBC One, the latter never made it to the Corporation's main channel. Starting out on BBC Four, where its audience was registered in the hundreds of thousands, when promoted to BBC Two in 2011, *The Thick of It* rarely found itself in that channel's weekly top twenty, meaning somewhat fewer than one million viewers watched any one episode.

When *Yes, Minister* began there were just three television channels, no DVDs and no internet. Tucker's close relationship with the F word also meant

The Thick of It would never appeal to the successors of Mary Whitehouse, whose National Viewers' and Listeners' Association gave *Yes, Minister* an award precisely because of its lack of profanity. *Yes, Minister* had started on BBC Two as executives had considered it too challenging for a mass audience. Possibly *The Thick of It* fell foul of such fears, now more deeply ingrained than ever they were in 1980, that a sophisticated comedy based in Westminster would alienate mainstream viewers. Perhaps not coincidentally, when *Yes, Minister* was revived in 2013 it was broadcast on the digital channel Gold, after the BBC demonstrated a pronounced lack of interest. As a result, while doing well for Gold, *Yes, Minister* attracted an audience of about 200,000 per episode.⁹³

Politics was of course still dramatized in a variety of popular genres, notably the conspiracy thriller. One of the most influential fictions produced in this form was *V for Vendetta*. First published as a comic strip in the early 1980s, then as a 1988 graphic novel and finally adapted into a 2006 film, *V for Vendetta* was located in a dystopic Britain ruled by an authoritarian government.⁹⁴ The movie was set in a post-9/11 context, while the original work had been influenced by its authors' fear that Thatcherism would lead to a fascist state. Despite these differences, each shared the same suspicion of organized political power.

The hero of *V for Vendetta* assumes the identity of Guy Fawkes and in that capacity arouses the people to overthrow a regime to which their own fear and indolence had given life. Fawkes has an ambiguous place in Britain's political culture. Every year on 5 November many ostensibly celebrate his failure to blow up the Palace of Westminster in 1605, which he hoped would install a Catholic monarchy. Yet some critics of democracy's shortcomings regard Fawkes in more positive terms. In the wartime movie *The New Lot* (1943), for example, one character jokingly claimed Fawkes was the 'one good man ever got into Parliament'. More recently, in 2004 the right-wing libertarian Paul Staines established the Guido Fawkes blog, whose guiding assumption is that all politicians are crooks.⁹⁵ For David Lloyd, co-creator of *V for Vendetta*, Guy Fawkes was, however, 'a kind of revolutionary anarchist'.⁹⁶

Unlike most contemporary political fictions, *V for Vendetta* was hopeful: both print and screen versions conclude with the people possibly ready to assume responsibility for their own governance. But in what was described as an 'ambitious postmodern assault upon the symbolic foundations of the modern state', in the movie the Palace of Westminster is blown up before real democracy can flourish.⁹⁷ Thus, while expressing faith in the people, *V for Vendetta* depicted government in familiarly oppressive terms.

Paradoxically, at the start of the twenty-first century, when dramatists sought something positive in Britain's democracy they found it in the monarchy. Queen Victoria had long been a popular subject and, as we have seen, from her early fictionalizations she emerges as concerned for her subjects' welfare while enjoying a supportive relationship with most of her Prime Ministers, most especially Benjamin Disraeli. *Mrs. Brown* (1997), produced in the wake of 'Tory sleaze', was the first to revise this latter view, with critics rightly describing Antony Sher's Disraeli as 'beady-eyed, silken-tongued', 'cunning and supercilious'.⁹⁸ In stark contrast to previous depictions, the film has him cynically wonder, given Victoria's unpopularity during her long period of mourning Albert's death, 'Do we need her?' Throughout the movie his motives are selfish and the grieving widow his pawn. If the older Victoria's relationship with Disraeli was recast in *Mrs. Brown, Victoria and Albert* (BBC, 2001) and the 2009 movie *The Young Victoria* transformed her association with Lord Melbourne. Previous dramas showed an avuncular Melbourne schooling the young Queen in monarchy. *Victoria and Albert*, however, suggested he manipulated Victoria so he could remain in office; *The Young Victoria* even presented him discouraging Victoria's desire to improve her people's lot. When the film has Victoria and Albert marry, theirs is a partnership intent on reform: as Albert asks, 'There are people who are lost, and whose business is it to see to their welfare?' Not the politicians, it seems.

The King's Speech (2010) did not have Victoria's grandson assailed by manipulative or unfeeling politicians but suggested it was vital George VI overcame his painful stammer because Britons needed his radio broadcasts to inspire them to victory during the Second World War. This meant relegating the importance of Winston Churchill's rhetoric and casting him as a supporter of the struggling King. This was a role the real Churchill never played: indeed, in his battle against appeasement during the 1930s, the King was firmly on the other side. The monarch's position on appeasement had also been finessed – not to say distorted – earlier, in *Bertie and Elizabeth* (ITV, 2001), which anticipated the later movie's stress on the monarch's strong sense of public service and the need for self-sacrifice.

George's daughter also benefitted from sympathetic dramatic treatment, notably from Peter Morgan, who in *The Deal* and *The Special Relationship* (BBC, 2010) cast Blair as unprincipled and vainglorious. His *The Queen* (2006) showed Elizabeth II at bay after the death of Princess Diana in 1997 and has her assailed by a hysterical public, attacked by an unfriendly media and surrounded by political forces ambiguous about her survival. Elizabeth's crime, according to Morgan's film, was merely that she was a bit old-fashioned, had standards and

took her public duties seriously. His 2013 play *The Audience* built on that portrait, and in a series of vignettes in which Elizabeth meets her many Prime Ministers she emerges a wise and witty person whose happy life had been upended by her unwanted job as monarch, a task she nonetheless executes with admirable skill. Indeed, such was Morgan's treatment of his subject that *The Audience* was described as 'a two-hour exercise in propaganda for Elizabeth Windsor'.⁹⁹

These dramas presented Victoria and her successors as the heart of a heartless political world, the only figures who wanted to put the people's interests first – unlike the politicians, those the people elected to do that job. It was, to say the least, ironic that the monarchy, that part of the British constitution completely immune to popular sovereignty, was at the start of the twenty-first century represented in such terms.

Notes

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