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Epilogue

What Would Plato Say?

Writing nearly 2,500 years ago, Plato believed storytellers could sway the ‘ignorant multitude’ through manipulating the ‘less rational part of our nature’ and by making complex things seem simple. So fearful was he of their malign impact, Plato banned all artists from his ideal Republic.¹

By holding up a mirror to Britons’ hopes and fears about their democracy, fiction has, as *A State of Play* suggests, played an under-appreciated part in constructing their understanding of politics. As Plato anticipated, this mirror has never perfectly reflected reality: it has jumbled up truths with half-truths and outright falsehoods. Yet by making complex things appear simple and appealing to emotion as much as reason, fiction has arguably more effectively contributed to popular political awareness than have politicians’ little-read speeches or the dust-gathering tomes of well-meaning academics.

For good or ill, fiction is an important part of the democratic process. Yet this is something many of those immediately concerned with politics continue to ignore. To overcome the present widespread apathy, hostility and ignorance, the Houses of Parliament Outreach Service was established to undertake a number of worthy activities designed to promote practical engagement with and understanding of the legislature’s work.² The Hansard Society was established in 1944 by Stephen King-Hall in the similar belief that the more they knew about Westminster the more enthusiastically people would embrace it.³ In fact, countless other initiatives inspired by advocates of the Westminster model have been similarly motivated. But such narrowly conceived ‘education’ has done little to change most people’s perceptions.

It is arguable that for the current ‘crisis of politics’ to be properly addressed popular education about how representative politics works will always be inadequate: a sow’s ear will remain a sow’s ear no matter how much people know about it. Real politics has to change, and not in small ways either. Yet, irrespective of any future reforms, those concerned about democracy need to take the role played by fiction seriously. If, as argued here, fiction does influence

how people think about politics, then it should be of concern that it seriously misrepresents a by-no-means-wholly-imperfect situation.

What can be done? Censorship is not something that should be considered, nor should Plato's ban be employed. Like a constitutional monarch with their Prime Minister, all an author can do is warn, encourage and advise. In which case, I *encourage* citizens to become more aware of the processes through which fictions about politics are presented to them and so develop a more critical sensibility about how they are entertained. I also *advise* artists to reflect on what they are doing, to interrogate their own motives in depicting politicians in the ways that they do. Finally, I *warn* those commissioning such works, especially for television, about the harmful effect of continuing to regard all fictions about politics that do not involve melodramatic conspiracies undertaken by corrupt politicians as 'boring'.

Despite the evidence, and presumably to Plato's intense *post-mortem* frustration, there are many who think that how fiction represents British democracy does not matter. When I have raised the subject with the few real politicians I know, their response is invariably one of surprise that anyone might consider fiction worthy of serious study. A few, having considered the matter, concede I might have a point (they're possibly being polite), but then move on to what they regard as more pressing matters. Yet, as *A State of Play* argues, fiction and politics are inextricably linked: the one will always influence the other. It is about time we understood more about that relationship. This book has, in truth, just scratched the surface.

Notes

- 1 Plato (trans. D. Lee), *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 421–39.
- 2 The work of Parliamentary Outreach is outlined here: <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/outreach-and-training/>, accessed 31 August 2013.
- 3 S. King-Hall, 'The Hansard Society', *Parliamentary Affairs* 1:1 (1947), p. 6.