



***Joking Apart: An Analysis of the Impact Television Satire***

***has had upon the British Political Landscape 1962-1990***

***BY***

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## ***Abstract***

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the effects that television satire has had upon the British political landscape. It argues that political satire in Britain has provided a compelling and robust form of political commentary, and in fact, offers a key reading into British politics which academics often ignore. To do so, this dissertation uses key television satires – *That Was The Week That Was*, *Yes Minister/Yes Prime Minister* and *Spitting Image* – from across the period which form the crux of three case studies. In addition to this, there are several secondary themes that are explored which include: the death of deference, political bias, and the changes in taboo in relation to the rise of alternative comedy. Furthermore, Freud's relief theory will be deployed to support the arguments about the power of laughter and comedy. It is concluded that television satire has shaped the political landscape in a distinct way. It has changed the way we view politicians and how we hold them to account. Furthermore, television satire has had an enabling effect insofar that it uses humour in a rebellious way against authority which helps vent our frustrations with the political leaders of the day.



## ***Acknowledgements***

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Debbie, my brothers Zachary and Maxwell and my partner Hayley. All have shown me great patience and I will never be able to thank you enough.



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## ***Introduction***

It's not the jokes. It's not the jokes. It's what lies behind 'em. It's the attitude. A real comedian – that's a daring man. He *dares* to see what his listeners shy away from, [and] fear to express.<sup>1</sup>

Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians* (1979)

'Comedy, just like warm water, is constantly on tap in contemporary affluent society.'<sup>2</sup> However, 'debates about the nature of humour consistently highlight its simplicity, its immediacy and its limitations, to the extent that it's assumed that ways in which comedy work must therefore be quite simple.'<sup>3</sup> Conversely, rather than eschewing television comedy, historians should embrace it as a potent, and often poignant, form of political commentary. As Lawrence Black argues, 'what is without doubt is that television was a site for and symbol of debates about social change — rendering it a hugely suggestive medium and source for historians.'<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Morley notes, 'there is, in television, no such thing as an 'innocent' text – no programme which is not worthy of serious attention, no programme which can claim to provide only 'entertainment' rather than messages about society.'<sup>5</sup> 'We need to look beyond traditional corrals of news and current affairs, and to analyse the ways in which political values and the representation of politics are part of our daily pleasures.'<sup>6</sup> Yet thus far, as suggested by Brett Mills, Paul Simpson and Robert Holbert, television satire has received little academic attention.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T. Griffiths, *Comedians* (London, 1979), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> M. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* (London, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> B. Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London, 2005), p.7.

<sup>4</sup> L. Black, 'Whose finger on the button?' British television and the politics of cultural control,' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 25 (2005), p. 549.

<sup>5</sup> D. Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (New York, 1992), p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> J. Street, *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy* (Hampshire, 2001), p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> P. Simpson, *Satire as a Discourse* (Amsterdam, 2003), p. 45; R. L. Holbert, 'A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49 (2005), p. 441; Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 20

‘A key genre that deals with political discussion in such an emotive, playful, accessible, interesting, and vital manner is satire.’<sup>8</sup> Satire has played a key part to in the public sphere and what is more, satire is one of the purest forms of communication, which has performed essentially the same cultural role in every known society, past and present.<sup>9</sup> Incontrovertibly, through television, satire became universally popular with the public at large and henceforth, has served as an arena for discussing and lampooning British politics and its problems.<sup>10</sup> ‘To satirise in particular is to scrutinise, and to encourage one’s audience to scrutinise too. Thus, whereas the news too often posits politics as something to learn, ideally satire will encourage viewers to play with politics, to examine it and test it, and to feel enabled to question it, rather than simply consume it as raw information.’<sup>11</sup> Therefore, to simply dismiss political comedy and satire as cursory and ephemeral has arguably led to an unbalanced understanding of the history of British politics.<sup>12</sup> Why satire? Here it will be highlighted why this thesis focuses television satire and not television comedy as a whole:

‘As a label, ‘comedy’ can be applied across a range of styles, including traditional categories such as pastoral comedy, farce, burlesque, pantomime, satire, and the comedy of manners; yet it also applied to more modern subdivisions: cartoons, sitcom, sketch comedy, slapstick cinema, stand-up, some game shows, impressionists, caricatures, and even silly walks. Applying a single uniform definition or methodological approach to such a mixture would be highly unsatisfactory.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. Gray, *Television Entertainment* (London, 2008), p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> E. Mintz, ‘Stand up Comedy as a Social and Cultural Mediation’, *American Quarterly*, 37 (1985), p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> M. Donnelly, *Sixties Britain* (London, 2005), p. 50; J. Green, *All Dressed Up* (London, 1990), p. 65; S. Fielding, *A State of Play* (London, 2014), p. 159; Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Gray, *Television*, p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> A. Stott, *Comedy: the New Critical Idiom* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 1-2.



Historians, amongst others, have missed a key reading of British politics as jokes have social reach.<sup>14</sup> ‘The joke is not an unchanging, platonic idea, but a historical form that evolves over time.’<sup>15</sup> Jokes can communicate dominant political and social ideas in a non-serious way which therefore arguably allows political comedy and satire – via television – to tell us so much politics and society.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, television satire has provided people with a way to vent their frustrations with politicians, Westminster and the government of the day. Sigmund Freud, building on the works of Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain, advocated a theory of humour known as relief theory. ‘A good analogy is the way excess steam builds up in a steam boiler. These boilers are fitted with relief valves to vent excess pressure, and according to relief theory, laughter serves a similar function in the nervous system.’<sup>17</sup> Freud furthers his theory by stating there are two types of jokes: Innocent jokes which rely heavily on word play or puns, whereas tendentious jokes, Freud argues, serve the purpose of being aggressive and hostile, which are predominantly used in satire.<sup>18</sup> Freud furthers this point by stating that, ‘the tendentious joke is a particular favourite for use in enabling criticism or aggression towards persons in high places who claim authority. The joke then represents rebellion against such authority, a liberation from the oppression it imposes.’<sup>19</sup> George Orwell’s belief that ‘every joke is a tiny revolution’ supports the idea that humour is rebellious.<sup>20</sup> Orwell argued that that jokes upset the establishment by mocking and sniping at those in power and contended that jokes with

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<sup>14</sup> S. Critchley, *On Humour* (London, 2002), p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> J. Holt, *Stop Me if You’ve Heard This* (London, 2008), p. 104.

<sup>16</sup> G. Schaffer, ‘Till Death Us Do Part: Racial Politics and the British Working Classes 1965-75’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45 (2010), p. 458; *Ibid.*, p. 459; M. Neave, ‘Freud’s theory of humour, wit and jokes’, in J. Durrant & J. Miller (eds.), *Laughing Matters* (Harlow, 1988), p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> J. Morreal, *Comic Relief: a Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (Oxford, 2009), p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> S. Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (London, 2002), p. 93; Stott, *Comedy*, p. 139.

<sup>19</sup> Freud, *The Joke*, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> G. Orwell, *As I Please: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell –Volume Three* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 325; G. Schaffer, *The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television 1960-1980* (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 183.

the biggest bite get the biggest laughs.<sup>21</sup> However, ‘a feeling of rebellion and an enjoyment of humour that transgresses social demands do not necessarily equate with a politics of rebellion.’<sup>22</sup> Whilst satire is rebellious against authority it does not seek to inspire outright rebellion, it instead, in Freudian terms, allows us to release the excess ‘psychical energy’ that builds up and thus, our anger is abated – temporarily at least – by laughing away the excess.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, Freud argues that tendentious jokes evade our mental censors because they are presented in a non-serious manner and therefore, allow our unconscious desires to be fulfilled.<sup>24</sup> ‘Freud’s theory is in general agreement with Spencer’s model of laughter as redirected internal energy, although he modifies it beyond a biological explanation and explains the need for energetic redirection as the circumvention of internal prohibitions put in place by the superego.’<sup>25</sup> Therefore, ‘the ego launches a momentary mutiny against the superego, its grey and severe mentor.’<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, tendentious jokes tend to evoke greater laughter than innocent jokes and often have a deeper purpose than to just elicit laughter.<sup>27</sup> ‘Freud suggested that, when we hear a joke, we do not separate the content from the joke-work. We think we are laughing at the cleverness of a joke’s technique, whereas in fact we laugh at the tendentious thought behind the joke.’<sup>28</sup> Further psychological research has shown that jokes about topics that we are most frustrated with or are taboo, will get a greater reaction from their audience.<sup>29</sup> In short, tendentious jokes grant us brief moments of shared freedom.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> B. Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes* (London, 2009), p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> Freud, *The Joke*, p. 198.

<sup>24</sup> Freud, *The Joke*, p. 147; Billig, *Laughter*, p. 159.

<sup>25</sup> Stott, *Comedy*, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 156.

<sup>27</sup> Freud, *The Joke*, p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.



Freud argues that they allow us to be rebellious and succinctly states: ‘Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them.’<sup>31</sup>

Whilst no single theory can hope to explain the complexities of humour, relief theory helps facilitate a greater understanding of television satire and the role it has played in Britain.<sup>32</sup> However, to fully understand the role satire has played in Britain in the aforementioned time period, the political, and to some extent social, landscapes need to be laid out and discerned. Satire, whilst being plentiful in the early 1960s, had all but disappeared by the mid-sixties. ‘*TW3* was only a memory, The Establishment club had become little more than a front for Soho racketeers [and subsequently closed in 1964], and the original *Beyond the Fringe* team had performed for the last time together in New York. Even *Private Eye* was struggling: its sales had dropped by almost three-quarters since the heady summer of 1963.’<sup>33</sup> As a consequence satire, in its emblematic form, would not reappear until the beginning of the 1980s.

Therefore, the history presented within this thesis will be pertinent to the three shows – *That Was The Week That Was (TW3)* 1962-63, *Yes Minister/Yes Prime Minister* 1980-88 and *Spitting Image* 1984-96 – that are used as case studies for this discourse. There were several shows across the period – such as *The Frost Report* 1966-67 and *Not the Nine O’Clock News* 1979-1982 – which can be considered satirical. However, for example, whilst *The Frost Report* was seen as *TW3*’s successor it would deal with issues on a weekly basis that were often not political i.e. food and drink or medicine, and what is more it would not receive the acclaim nor the attention that its progenitor did. *Not the Nine O’Clock News* showcased the new alternative comedy performers for the first time; nevertheless, the shows focus varied from popular culture to politics and often would mock existing programmes by parodying

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<sup>31</sup> Freud, *The Joke*, p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 175; Miller, ‘Jokes and joking’, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> D. Sandbrook, *Never had it so good* (London, 2006), p. 590.



them. The shows that are focused upon within this dissertation are used because they are political in nature and what is more, they achieved mass popularity and critical acclaim, and the latter two – *Yes Minister* and *Spitting Image* – endured a far longer run than that of any their predecessors had achieved.

Ergo, at the beginning of the sixties, rivers of affluence, counter-culture and permissiveness began to course their way through the British landscape. Politically, at the beginning of the sixties, the tide was beginning to turn against the Conservative Party.<sup>34</sup> ‘Peace abroad and prosperity at home were the unifying themes of the Conservatives’ electoral appeal, particularly the latter, as the party reaped the political rewards of tax cuts, full employment, buoyant consumerism and relative price stability.’<sup>35</sup> However, the Conservatives were struggling to satisfy the electorates ‘material ambitions.’<sup>36</sup> And as a result of series of errors, stop-go economics came to the fore with high political costs.<sup>37</sup>

Once dubbed Super-Mac, a man born to lead the country, Macmillan was a political stalwart ‘but as his government lost its way, Macmillan looked increasingly looked like a tired reminder of a world that had passed, his gentlemanly nonchalance embarrassingly out-of-date when set against the youthful dynamism of John F. Kennedy.’<sup>38</sup> Macmillan’s downfall was to ultimately be the Profumo affair which symbolised the hypocrisy of the establishment on issues of morality which sat side by side the existing discourse about permissiveness and national decline.<sup>39</sup> This was partly due to the visual culture that was emerging via the mass ownership of television, and by 1963 it ‘had become ubiquitous, with about 90 per cent of the

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<sup>34</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

adult population having access to it.’<sup>40</sup> Incidentally, the affair would prove to be fortuitous for *TW3* with Frost and co. ferociously lampooning and ridiculing the affair as they sought to highlight that it was no longer mandatory to respect their political leaders. Incidentally, Macmillan’s biographer argued that without *TW3*, the temptation to focus the whole blame on Macmillan, in regards to the Profumo Affair, would have been substantially less.<sup>41</sup>

Subsequently, ‘no modern politician seemed less well-equipped to deal with television than the man who emerged, to general astonishment, as Prime Minister in October 1963.’<sup>42</sup> Sir Alec Douglas-Home was grey and old fashioned gentleman who ‘looked and sounded as if he had spent most of his life on the grouse moors – a representative of the class that had been born to rule but was now going out of fashion.’<sup>43</sup> Whereas, ‘Wilson had given thought to the functions of television in a democracy,’ he was telegenic, an accomplished public speaker and ultimately a political chameleon who could appeal to just about anyone.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, with the rise of television, Hugh Carleton-Greene not only sought to enhance its power as a medium, but expand its boundaries and widen the limits of discussion by challenging the existing order.<sup>45</sup> Greene was described as ‘the best kind of uncle who prefers chuckles to frowns and who wants his nieces and nephews to treat serious things seriously, but doesn’t wish to spoil anyone’s fun . . . He was considered a guiding spirit of television in the new era [and] was determined to drag the BBC kicking and screaming into the sixties.’<sup>46</sup> Coupled with this revolution in the media, came ‘a relaxation of church teachings,

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<sup>40</sup> A. Mughan, *Media and the Presidentialization of Parliamentary Elections* (Hampshire, 2000), p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> M. Cockerell, *Live from Number 10* (London, 1988), p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> Cockerell, *Live from Number 10*, p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> G. Wyndham-Goldie, *Facing the Nation: Television & Politics 1936-1976* (London, 1977), p. 285; C. Seymour-Ure, *The British Press and Broadcasting since 1945* (Oxford, 1996), p. 191.

<sup>45</sup> M. Collins, ‘Introduction: The Permissive Society and its Enemies’, in M. Collins (ed.), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies* (London, 2007), p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 378; *Ibid.*, p. 395.



government policies and censorship in the 1960s which represented a triumph for liberal progressivism.<sup>47</sup>

‘The first major element of the satire boom was *Beyond the Fringe* (BtF).<sup>48</sup> BtF was audacious, intelligent, and scathing satire. As one *Daily Mail* critic put it: ‘they take to the stage for ninety minutes with grey sweaters, four chairs, and a piano, and proceed to demolish all that is sacred in the British way of life with glorious and expert precision.’<sup>49</sup> There was clear appetite for satire, and as well as *Beyond the Fringe* (BtF), The Establishment club opened in Greek Street, Soho in October 1961. Peter Cook, one of the stars of BtF and founder of The Establishment, stated that the Club’s sketches ‘would be aimed at targets ‘from Macmillan to Macmillan. It will not necessarily be left wing. . . But because the Conservatives are in power it will, of course, be easier to attack what is there.’<sup>50</sup> However, arguments that the satire of the period – which included *That Was The Week That Was* (TW3) first broadcast on Saturday November 24<sup>th</sup> 1962 – was blatantly anti-Conservative never seemed to abate and it is argued that if Wilson had of been Prime Minister at the outset of the sixties, it is hard to see satire, in all its varieties, having the same potency and sharp edge.<sup>51</sup> ‘With the Conservatives defeated [in 1964], the satirists lost their principal opponents and much of their verve, and by the time Harold Wilson took charge of 10 Downing Street, the focus of national attention had already begun to shift away from the blunders of the late fifties to the exciting possibilities of the mid-sixties.’<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Collins, ‘Introduction: The Permissive Society’, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 572.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 573.

<sup>50</sup> H. Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was* (London, 2000), p. 131; Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 577

<sup>51</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 216; Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 577.

<sup>52</sup> Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 593.

‘When the history of the 1980s is written, the name Margaret Thatcher will appear on every page.’<sup>53</sup> Whilst this is an over-simplistic view of the 1980s, it would be impossible avoid the impact Thatcher and her governments had upon the decade.<sup>54</sup> The existing works of history that deal with 1980s (Turner’s *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1980s*, Harrison’s *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990*, Stewart’s, *BANG! A History of Britain in the 1980s* and Black’s *Britain Since the Seventies* to name a few) stress that Britain in the 1980s was politically, socially and economically in crisis, which prevailed in the shadow of a new political consensus: Thatcherism.<sup>55</sup> Stephen Brooke argues that the history of the 1980s needs to be expanded beyond Thatcher and Thatcherism and there are many other vital threads of the British political tapestry that can be analysed to illuminate us from a different perspective and help us reframe the key issues of the decade.<sup>56</sup> It is without doubt that an expansion of the literature is required; however, currently there is a chasm which has not yet been filled. However, the focus of this dissertation is principally concerned with the influence that satire has had upon the political landscape and therefore, it is important to predominantly focus upon this and chart the changes within the landscape comprehensively and meticulously.

Margaret Thatcher emerged victorious from the 1979 election as the first female prime minister – ‘the unlikeliest of Conservative Party leaders’ – who held the office of prime minister for a record amount of time during the twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> For well over a decade, Thatcher shaped the British political landscape – whether for good or ill – and arguably shaped Britain’s political discourse well into the next millennium.<sup>58</sup> ‘Certainly no twentieth century leader, outside wartime, exercised anything like the dominance over the country’s

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<sup>53</sup> A. W. Turner, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1980s* (London, 2010), p. 347; R. Pearce & G. Goodlad, *British Prime Ministers: From Balfour to Brown* (Oxford, 2013), p. 255; Also in *The Sun*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1990.

<sup>54</sup> S. Brooke, ‘Living in ‘New Times’: Historicizing 1980s Britain’, *History Compass*, 12 (2014), p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. x; B. Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990* (Oxford 2010), p. 442.

<sup>58</sup> Turner, *Rejoice*, p. x.

psyche that Thatcher achieved during those eleven and half years.<sup>59</sup> Thatcher was ruthless; she wanted results and had no regard for how she got them.<sup>60</sup> ‘She wanted action, and if in 1980 the Yorkshire police were making no headway in catching the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’, she would go to Leeds to manage the investigation herself; only with great difficulty did Whitelaw as Home Secretary restrain her.’<sup>61</sup>

Willie Whitelaw was crucial to Thatcher’s success, and was a much respected figure within the Conservative Party, as he acted as an emissary between Thatcher and the Party, and often alleviated and soothed the rifts that developed between them.<sup>62</sup> Without her Willie, she would have indeed struggled to ‘bring off the transition from the somewhat mandarin ‘one nation’ style of Conservatism to its free-market and populist successor.’<sup>63</sup> Thatcher was arguably the leading antagonist against the post-war consensus despite its longevity.<sup>64</sup> Whilst Thatcher struggled against the ‘Wets’ to bring about change within her own party, her predecessor Jim Callaghan, had discarded Keynesian policies in the mid-seventies.<sup>65</sup> ‘The change in policy had been spelt out by Callaghan in his speech to the 1976 Labour Party conference, explicitly turning his back on the ideas of John Maynard Keynes that had shaped the post-war consensus: “We used to think that you could spend your way out of recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending,” he declared. “I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists.”’<sup>66</sup> In short, this move from both Callaghan and

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>60</sup> J. Black, *Britain Since the Seventies* (London, 2004), p. 125.

<sup>61</sup> Harrison, *Finding a Role*, pp. 442-443.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 482-483.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 483.

<sup>64</sup> B. Jessop, ‘From Social Democracy to Thatcherism: Twenty-Five Years of British Politics’, in N. Abercrombie and A. Ward (eds.), *Social Change in Contemporary Britain* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 17.

<sup>65</sup> Black, *Britain Since the Seventies*, p. 125; The term ‘wet’ was given to Tories who did not believe in pursuing monetarists policies.

<sup>66</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 9.





Thatcher's in the furthering of monetarist policies, marked a clear break with the commitment to Keynesianism and the post-war consensus.<sup>67</sup>

Thatcher's premiership was by no means smooth. There were riots on the streets of Toxteth and Brixton amongst others, which underlined the tensions surrounding racism and Britishness, there were further IRA bombings – the explosion of a nail bomb close to the Chelsea barracks of the Irish Guards, which killed two civilians in 1981, brought the threat of the IRA back into the public consciousness – and Thatcher's infamous battle with the National Union of Miners would see an entire industry, and several communities destroyed.<sup>68</sup> Thatcher successfully sought to stymie the unions as she set a programme in place which would see the 171 collieries reduced to just 16 a mere ten years later.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, she struggled in the polls as people, at first, were showing little enthusiasm for Thatcherite economic policies which included privatisation of national industries, but once she achieved her policies, people began accept them.<sup>70</sup>

As Thatcher herself pointed out in a party political broadcast, 'we did not promise you instant sunshine.'<sup>71</sup> However, 'the success in the Falklands and then at the ballot-box [in 1983], combined with an opposition that was still divided left her stronger than any prime minister for decades.'<sup>72</sup> Despite the division of her first term, which followed her into her second term, she could at least claim that a better economic situation as inflation had fallen from 22 per cent to less than 5 per cent and the average wage had risen 14 per cent in real terms, and the basic rate of income tax had dropped from 33 per cent to 27 per cent.<sup>73</sup> 'On the other hand,

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> Brooke, 'Living in 'New Times'', p. 25; Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 81.

<sup>69</sup> Brooke, 'Living in 'New Times'', p. 24.

<sup>70</sup> Harrison, *Finding a Role*, p. 468.

<sup>71</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11; *Ibid.*, p. 225.

unemployment remained – even on official figures – over three million throughout, but this was now being regarded at least in Westminster, as a fact of modern life.<sup>74</sup>

On the other side of the political spectrum, the Labour Party was in disarray. The Social Democratic Party – created and led by the ‘Gang of Four’ who were Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams – broke away from the Labour Party in 1981.<sup>75</sup> With this split, Labour’s poll ratings in 1981 dropped from 46 per cent to 23 per cent, the biggest ever in a single calendar year.<sup>76</sup> Labour’s performance at the 1983 was disastrous whose manifesto was dubbed ‘the longest suicide note in history’ and SDP Liberal alliance as it was by that point, despite offering a less radical alternative to Labour, fared even worse.<sup>77</sup> Dennis Healey called the SDP a ‘disastrous error’ as it gave Thatcher ‘two election victories which she would not otherwise have won.’<sup>78</sup> However, the tension between David Owen (SDP leader 1983-88) and David Steele (Liberal leader 1976-88) was highly visible to the public, via the media, especially within *Spitting Image* which portrayed Steel as grumbling bed wetter, in the pocket of Owen.<sup>79</sup> This image resonated with the public and this tension, amongst other reasons, would prove to be the downfall of fragmented party in 1988.

However, the autumn of 1987 proved to be a pivotal point for Thatcher and her government. Black Monday – October 19<sup>th</sup> 1987 – saw the stock markets around the globe crash and saw ‘the Dow Jones recorded its biggest-ever percentage fall for a single day.’<sup>80</sup> The newspaper *Class War* proved to capture the mood most aptly, stating that reality had finally caught up with the yuppies, and ran with the poignant headline ‘FILO-FUCKED!’<sup>81</sup> Holes were

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>75</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 38.

<sup>76</sup> Harrison, *Finding a Role*, p. 486; Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 18.

<sup>77</sup> Harrison, *Finding a Role*, p. 494.; Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 125.

<sup>78</sup> Harrison, *Finding a Role*, p. 502.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 500.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>81</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 265.

appearing in the Conservative's economic policies; with a new recession 'it seemed much had been left undone during the good years.'<sup>82</sup> Coupled with this, issues with Europe and the poll-tax were taking their hold. With rebellion within the Cabinet surrounding Thatcher's abrasive and detrimental attitude towards Europe and revolt towards the poll tax from the majority of the electorate, Thatcher was fighting a war on two fronts which ultimately, she would lose.<sup>83</sup>

There was a mood for change amongst the electorate and the Tory party's MPs. After winning the first ballot with 205 votes to Heseltine's 152, she had not attained the margin of 15 per cent she needed for outright victory. After announcing she would stand in the second ballot, she was approached by numerous senior Tories and was told, respectfully, to bow out gracefully, for the sake of the party. 'And so, on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1990 Margaret Thatcher announced that she would not be putting her name forward for the second ballot, that she would resign as leader of the party and as prime minister once a successor had been chosen.'<sup>84</sup>

What is clear is that the 1980s can be categorised as an era of rebellion in which riots were rampant and social division was palpable. Furthermore, it can be argued that this discord would prove to be advantageous for the satirists of the day, as satire often functions best when there is an appetite for dissent and derision. Freud saw humour 'to be on the side of the powerless. It teases the world delightfully; it challenges authority and evades restriction.'<sup>85</sup> Social unrest coupled with an ineffectual opposition exposed a need for satire to reappear in its emblematic form, firstly with *Yes Minister/Yes Prime Minister* and then in its most potent incarnation to date, *Spitting Image*. Television – which Dennis Potter called the closest thing

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>85</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 168.

we have to a ‘theatre of the people’ – would prove to be the arena in which this satirical renaissance would transpire.<sup>86</sup> ‘Satire clearly has an aggressive function. It singles out an object of attack; in fact, it cannot, strictly speaking, be satire unless it demonstrates this capacity.’<sup>87</sup> Therefore, using satire as a tool of criticism represents a rebellion against authority – in this case Thatcher and the Conservative government – to be liberation from the severe conditions of the time. *TW3* was the start of this rebellion, and its successors – *Spitting Image* and to some extent *Yes Minister* – would prove to be equally as enlightening and rebellious.

Therefore, this dissertation will argue that television satire provides a potent and enduring form of political commentary. It will explore the extent to which satire has changed the British political landscape, and by default, explore what effect that has had on the nature and practice of British politics. It will use three key case studies analysing three decisive and pivotal shows which include *That Was The Week That Was (TW3)* 1962-63, *Yes Minister/Yes Prime Minister* 1980-88 and *Spitting Image* 1984-96.

*TW3* was the first show of its kind and was revolutionary, savvy and universal. At its peak, it attracted twelve million viewers and used a mixture of sketches and debates to entice its audience.<sup>88</sup> ‘Women liked it as much as men; the old as much as the young; the provinces as much as London . . . It proved that an intelligent programme of sharp humorous comment on current affairs could hold an audience of many millions. *TW3* became the symbol for the *BBC*’s new look. It was frank, close to life, analytical, impatient of taboos and often was very funny.’<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> D. Potter, *The Nigel Barton Plays* (London, 1967), p. 21.

<sup>87</sup> Simpson, *Satire as a Discourse*, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 256; Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 586; Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p. 82

<sup>89</sup> H. Greene, *The Third Floor Front: A view of Broadcasting in the Sixties* (London, 1969), pp. 133-134.

*Yes Minister/Yes Prime Minister* was stylistically different to *TW3* as it was a sitcom. Whilst may not be centred on actual political figures, and screen-writers may in fact disavow any political agenda, however, these sitcoms have illuminated and informed the populous about the inner workings of central government.<sup>90</sup> Further to this, ‘As Sir Humphrey and Sir Arnold Robinson reflect in ‘The Devil You Know’, the civil service is structurally predisposed to triumph over their ministerial charges since ‘impermanence is impotence’ and ‘rotation is castration’. Such an account of civil service power is recognisable in the reflections of politicians as diverse as Tony Benn, Richard Crossman, Barbara Castle through to Nicholas Ridley and Margaret Thatcher.’<sup>91</sup>

*Spitting Image* marks a shift in satire. Using puppets, it focused on the personalities and image of politicians. Puppets have “‘constantly and dangerously tested the boundaries of the licit and the illicit, the permitted and the unpermitted’. This has given the puppet a unique comic license for satirizing and parodying the powerful.”<sup>92</sup> It was venomous and high impact and it was often reputed that individuals’ puppets looked more like them than they did. It ridiculed politicians purely for their appearances, idiosyncrasies and mannerisms. However, what it did do positively – to some extent – is raise the profile of the politicians of the day, with the dolls providing instant recognisability for a lot of front bench politicians. Steve Punt, a former writer for *Spitting Image*, has argued that: “Once it got going, it used this terrible power that satire shows can have influencing the way an individual is seen because there two basic ways you can write satire. You can either write about the issues or the personalities. *Spitting Image* was fixed on the personalities for obvious reasons. *Spitting Image* pinned

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<sup>90</sup> N. Randall, ‘Imagining the Polity: Cinema and Television Fictions as Vernacular Theories of British Politics’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 64 (2011), p. 274

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>92</sup> J. Price, ‘Objects of humour: the puppet as comic performer’, *Comedy Studies*, 4 (2013), p. 36; S. Tillis, *Toward and Aesthetic of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* (New York, 1992), p. 36.



identifiable tags on people and because more people watch television comedy than they do parliament, those tags really stuck.”<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, several themes will be analysed including the death of deference, political bias, and the changes in taboo in relation to the rise of alternative comedy. In addition to this, the reactions to these shows will be analysed to some extent, and Freud’s theory will be deployed to support the arguments about the power of laughter and comedy.

It will be concluded that television satire has provided a key political commentary, which up until now, has largely been ignored by academics and critiqued and exposed those at the heart of the British political sphere. Furthermore, the death of deference at the beginning of the 1960s – which continued into the 1980s – was intensified by all wings of the media, and it caused politicians to focus on their image and presentation. Additionally it will be asserted that theories of laughter are key to helping us understand and unlock the meanings and messages of satirical and comedic works in a quantitative way.

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<sup>93</sup> *Frost on Satire*, directed by A. Fettis (BBC, first broadcast 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010).

## *Hello, Good Evening, and Welcome to the Satire Boom: That Was The Week That Was 1962-1963*



**Illustration 1.1, ‘TW3 CLOSED’,** *Daily Express*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1963. This *Daily Express* cartoon highlights the fact that the majority of politicians that were ridiculed by satirists were Conservative. Furthermore, it highlights the debates surrounding the death of *TW3*.

The real difference between *That Was The Week That Was* and the other products of the satire boom was simply that *TW3* attracted a much larger and more diverse audience than the others could ever hope for; and what is more, it was produced by the *BBC*, still a symbol of national dignity despite the new climate of the sixties. As *TW3* became more successful, so it became more daring, and therefore more controversial.<sup>94</sup>

Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had it so Good*, (2006)

<sup>94</sup> Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 585.



*That Was The Week That Was* (TW3) – first broadcast on Saturday November 24<sup>th</sup> 1962 – came to our screens at the most opportune moment in history. There was a new mood of indignation and scepticism about politics and towards the political classes, and TW3 exploited this to good effect. Consequently, it can be argued, that this was a pivotal moment which marked the death of deference as people had become exasperated with the political landscape.<sup>95</sup> What is more, in the midst of scandal, sex and soviet spies, the Profumo Affair marked a moment in history, in which the nebulous nature of politics was no more, with Bernard Levin noting it as a ‘traumatic moment’ which revealed public men to be not so different from private men.<sup>96</sup> Hugh Carleton Greene saw this aperture as an opportunity, as he states:

‘I had the idea that it was a good time in history to have a programme that would do something to prick the pomposity of public figures; I’ve always had a considerable degree of confidence in the power of laughter. I thought it would be healthy for the general standard of public affairs in the country to have a programme which did that.’<sup>97</sup>

Ultimately, Greene was committed to giving the BBC the ‘creative freedom . . . to attract audiences, tell the truth and be playful.’<sup>98</sup>

The satire boom had begun with huge success in 1961 with *Beyond the Fringe*. Spin-offs such as Peter Cook’s Establishment Club and *Private Eye* magazine followed suit, and subsequently, TW3 would prove to be television’s slice of the satire boom.<sup>99</sup> Ned Sherrin, who created and produced TW3, said that ‘it was a new sort of revolutionary programme . . . a

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<sup>95</sup> A. Crisell, ‘Filth, Sedition and Blasphemy’, in J. Corner (ed.), *Popular Television in Britain* (London, 1991), p. 146.

<sup>96</sup> Harrison, *Finding a Role*, p. 434; B. Levin, *The Pendulum Years, Britain and the Sixties* (London, 1970), p. 88; Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 216; R. Wilmut, *From Fringe to Flying circus: celebrating a unique generation of comedy* (London, 1980), p. 85.

<sup>97</sup> Wilmut, *From Fringe*, p. 58.

<sup>98</sup> J. Curran & J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility* (Oxford, 2010), p. 230.

<sup>99</sup> Green, *All Dressed Up*, p. 65.



mixture of news, interview, satire and controversy.<sup>100</sup> *TW3* dedicated large parts of every programme satirising politicians and ‘showing people that it was no longer obligatory for them to respect their political leaders.’<sup>101</sup> John Mortimer – who was a sketch writer for *TW3* – argued, ‘nobody had really laughed at politicians before, and it liberated us all from having to be respectful.’<sup>102</sup> Ian Trethowan, later to be Director-General of the *BBC*, claimed that *TW3* ‘swept through British broadcasting as a cleansing agent, scouring away the last of the bland and the banal.’<sup>103</sup> Satire, specifically *TW3*, had to large extent, exposed television as a new line of accountability for Britain’s politicians.<sup>104</sup> *TW3* used subject matter from the heart of our polity, reframed the issues of the day into a humorous form which then in turn allowed the electorate to ask fundamental questions about political the realities in an irreverent way.<sup>105</sup>

Television had become not only a symbol for affluence; it had captured the public’s imagination and people had more time to consume media, in all its varieties.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, this highlights the impact television, and thus *TW3* was to have on Britain and British politics and arguably, television grew to unseat the press as the chief political medium due to its ubiquitous nature.<sup>107</sup> What is more, *TW3*’s irreverent approach to politics had effected how the press reported on politics. Fleet Street was always reluctant to pry into the personal lives of politicians and deal with delicate issues surrounding public figures.<sup>108</sup> However, with satire boom blazing uncontrollably, the press was becoming more courageous with their stories and

<sup>100</sup> J. Williams, *Entertaining the Nation* (Gloucestershire, 2004), p. 84; Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 207.

<sup>101</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p. 50; Williams, *Entertaining the Nation*, p. 82.

<sup>102</sup> Williams, *Entertaining the Nation*, p. 85.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84; Cockerell, *Live from Number 10*, p. 86.

<sup>104</sup> S. Wagg, ‘Comedy, politics and permissiveness: the ‘satire boom and its inheritance’, *Contemporary Politics* 8 (2002), p. 324.

<sup>105</sup> Stott, *Comedy*, p. 109.

<sup>106</sup> Black, ‘Whose finger on the button?’, p. 552; Crisell, ‘Filth, Sedition and Blasphemy’, p. 146.

<sup>107</sup> Seymour-Ure, *The British Press and Broadcasting since 1945*, p. 181.

<sup>108</sup> A. Bingham, *Family Newspapers?* (Oxford, 2009), p. 254.

with their satirical cartoons as a result of this inferno.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, whilst the Profumo affair is widely regarded as the turning point in the reporting of private lives of politicians, it is clear Fleet Street was becoming more daring before the Profumo Affair had taken place as a result of the satire boom's influence.<sup>110</sup> Notably, it was expected that *TW3* would only attract a 'fringe metropolitan audience', however, at its peak, *TW3* it attracted twelve million viewers.<sup>111</sup> Ned Sherrin had previously worked on the current affairs show *Tonight*, and he would use the foundations of *Tonight* to help develop *TW3*. Sherrin wanted *TW3* to further advance the relationship between the audience and the programme by being more daring and more controversial:

From the beginning we were looking for a 'them' and 'us' polarisation. Our 'us' constituted both the programme-makers (personified for the viewer by the actors) and the sympathetic part of the audience. 'Them' were represented by the public figures or establishment forces whom we investigated, challenged, mocked, or pilloried. If *Tonight* was establishing a conversation with its audience, *TW3* was engaged with it in a conspiracy.<sup>112</sup>

Therefore, the popularity of *TW3* and the chorus of laughter at the aggressive jokes about members of the parliament and the establishment, to some extent validated the lampooning of these targets.<sup>113</sup> Hugh Carleton Greene, the then Director-General of the BBC, recognised this and enthused that 'the programme [*TW3*] has bite and pungency and spares neither institution, nor persons, neither Prime Minister, nor bishop nor courtier.'<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>111</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 256; Sandbrook, *Never had it so good*, p. 586; Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p. 82; N. Sherrin, *Small Thing Like an Earthquake* (London, 1983), p. 67.

<sup>112</sup> Sherrin, *Small Thing*, p. 57.

<sup>113</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 159.

<sup>114</sup> Cockerell, *Live from Number 10*, p. 85.



The first edition was met with thunderous applause from the press who had reviewed *TW3*. The *Daily Telegraph* stated that ‘without reservations ‘*That Was The Week That Was*’, the *BBC*’s first late-night satirical show, is ‘brilliant’ and is as ‘lethal as a gun’ . . . If the pattern does not ossify into a formula, then for the first time it seems reasonable that one should need a licence for a television set.’<sup>115</sup> The *Guardian*’s Mary Crozier declared that, ‘if it was greatly daring of the *BBC* to start a satirical commentary on current affairs, ‘*That Was The Week That Was*’ certainly justified the venture . . . This programme shows that wit and mockery can be successful.’<sup>116</sup> However, amongst Conservative Party members it met with mixed reviews. In one monitoring report for the Conservative Party, it was stated: “The broadcast was as devastating as it was obviously designed to be, but, very regrettably, the guys responsible did not know at what point to draw the line between amusing satire and disgusting foul taste. This programme has the possibility of becoming politically dangerous.”<sup>117</sup> Amongst the monitoring reports and letters to the Conservative Central Office (CCO), most agreed that there was an anti-Conservative theme at the heart of the show. However, there were exceptions to the rule as one Conservative, a Mr Harris, writes to Mr Fawell, a Conservative Party official, stating that – “I have now seen two of these programmes and would not complain of the contents or the presentation insofar as they may appear to be derogatory to any political party. It has to be viewed with a sense of humour and tolerance and I would consider Conservatives who objected to the programme, on political

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<sup>115</sup> D. Frost *David Frost an Autobiography: Part one – from Congregations to Audiences* (London 1993), pp. 54-55; Pat Williams, *Sunday Telegraph*, 25<sup>th</sup> November 1962.

<sup>116</sup> M. Crozier, ‘Review: Weekend Television,’ *Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1962, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> *The Conservative Party Archive*, CCO 600/3/9/3, ‘That Was The Week That Was’, comments/monitoring reports - July 1962-Dec. 1963, monitoring report undertaken by the South Wales and Monmouthshire branch of the Conservative Party for Conservative Central Office (CCO), (24<sup>th</sup> November, 1962).

grounds, to be too narrow minded to be allowed any say in Party policy.’<sup>118</sup> In short, this highlights that *TW3* was recognised to be incisive, sharp, and studious from its inception.

However, despite it being considered that satire in the early sixties was not being driven by any clear ideological or political motives - it was viewed as ‘a generalised attack on authority’ - accusations of political bias never escaped the show.<sup>119</sup> ‘Richard Ingrams avers that it was doomed from the start because it ‘blatantly defied the Corporation’s obligation to be fair and provide balance.’<sup>120</sup> In addition to this, the infamous ‘Disraeli monologue’, in which Frost attacked Home for being ‘bleak with a deathly smile’, whilst also stating that the nation had a choice between ‘Dull Alec versus Smart Alec’, attracted more than 600 calls of protest and only 60 in support of it the show.<sup>121</sup> The sketch single-handedly highlighted *TW3*’s bias towards Wilson and the Labour Party, with *TW3* rarely lampooning Labour shadow ministers. What is more, the Conservative Cabinet of the day were perplexed with television, and Macmillan, and later Home, being branded as dullards as a result.<sup>122</sup> However despite this, Macmillan halted his Postmaster-General taking action against the show and stated ‘it is a good thing to be laughed over – it is better than to be ignored.’<sup>123</sup> Macmillan recognised that *TW3* had political leverage, and to take action against the show would have furthered the image of the Conservatives being grey and detached from the society they govern. Curiously, even Tony Benn remarked about the first edition of the second series that, ‘not a single anti-Labour joke was made and even I wondered if it had gone too far.’<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *The Conservative Party Archive*, CCO 600/3/9/3, ‘That Was The Week That Was’, comments/monitoring reports - July 1962-Dec. 1963, a letter to the CCO concerning *TW3* (3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1962).

<sup>119</sup> Street, *Mass Media*, p. 65.

<sup>120</sup> Crisell, ‘Filth, Sedition and Blasphemy’, p. 152.

<sup>121</sup> Sandbrook *Never had it so good*, p. 715; *Ibid.*, p. 588.

<sup>122</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p. 51.

<sup>123</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 238.

<sup>124</sup> T. Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-67* (London, 1987), p. 65.



Undoubtedly the BBC recognised that not only was *TW3* politically potent, it inadvertently admitted in several letters of reply to complaints that *TW3* was biased. In a confidential memo, the BBC blanket messaged its senior executives with a memo stating: ‘I must tell you that we are under strict instructions here to refrain from expressing adverse comment, anyway in an official capacity, upon this programme. That is not to say we condone everything they do but it is considered that it would be unwise to go on record as showing sensitivity to these satirical features.’<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, in reply to a letter of complaint:

‘If *TW3* is to exist at all as a vehicle for political comment it must have the freedom to use occasions as they arise, in the same as a cartoonist contributing to a newspaper. One does not expect the cartoonist to balance his drawings or to restrain his pen so long as he makes his point – which he does by exaggeration. . . In the same way, we feel, *TW3*, can have freedom to make its point so long as we continue to provide the fuller picture in our other programmes on current affairs.’<sup>126</sup>

Even Hugh Greene in a letter to Lord Aldington argued that, ‘that political restrictions or any too rigid attempt at balance would be bound to destroy its value and attraction.’<sup>127</sup>

Sir Cyril Osborne was a leading Conservative Party critic against the show. Osborne was an ardent Conservative whom was against the liberal permissive movement. However, despite his opposition to the show – Osborne was quoted in the *Daily Mirror* that he was ‘damn pleased’ when the show was eventually cut - he appeared on *TW3* in an interview with

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<sup>125</sup> *The Conservative Party Archive*, CCO 600/3/9/3, ‘That Was The Week That Was’, comments/monitoring reports - July 1962-Dec. 1963, an internal confidential memo amongst senior executives at the BBC (13<sup>th</sup> February, 1963).

<sup>126</sup> *BBC WAC R44/1.303/1*, ‘‘That Was The Week That Was – Publicity’, a reply to a letter of complaint (31<sup>st</sup> October, 1963).

<sup>127</sup> *BBC WAC, R41/289/1*, ‘That Was The Week That Was A-Z’, a reply to Lord Aldington’s complaint about bias (22<sup>nd</sup> February, 1963).



Bernard Levin on September 28<sup>th</sup> 1963, and he was afford no deference from a brutal and tenacious Levin:

**Sir Cyril Osborne:** When you grow a bit older, you won't talk quite so much and you'll listen a bit more.

**Bernard Levin:** I hope won't be quite so bigoted Sir Cyril as the people you stand for!

**Sir Cyril Osborne:** First of all I am not a socialist, but the socialist gospel has always been all wealth comes from work and you cannot have wealth without work, and satire and this folly for which you stand would leave our country hungry! Wealth comes from work!

**Bernard Levin:** Sir Cyril, hunger through satire has never been my slogan [rapturous applause and laughter from the audience].<sup>128</sup>

Whilst the BBC insisted that it that the only reason to drop *TW3* was that 1964 would an election year, it is clear that *TW3* was dropped due to political pressure with the Conservatives concerned about the power and significance of the show. As late as the 6<sup>th</sup> November 1963, a further 17 programmes were due to be commissioned from the 25<sup>th</sup> January 1964, with fees having been negotiated with the stars of the show in an internal memo.<sup>129</sup> What is more, in the minutes of a meeting of the Conservative Parliamentary Broadcasting and Communications Committee in the November of 1963, 'Sir Harmor Nicholls warned against the risk of being accused of 'gagging' the BBC in an election year. Such formal action might do harm, unlike the informal approach which had resulted in the

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<sup>128</sup> 'TW3 killed – BBC faces storm', *Daily Mirror*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1963, p. 1; *Frost on Satire*, directed by A. Fettis (BBC, first broadcast 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010); First shown 28<sup>th</sup> September 1963 on BBC One.

<sup>129</sup> *BBC WAC, T32/1/649/2*, 'That Was The Week That Was – General 1963-64', the memo outlining stars' pay and agreed date for the series to continue in 1964 (6<sup>th</sup> November, 1963). Also, the official BBC press statement about *TW3* being dropped (13<sup>th</sup> November, 1963).

taking-off of the programme *TW3*.<sup>130</sup> As a result, the press were incensed at the BBC's axing of *TW3*. "Have you ever in your born days heard of more idiotic reason for an idiotic action?" wrote Dee Wells in the *Daily Herald*.<sup>131</sup> The *Mirror* ran with the front page headline: 'TW3 killed – BBC faces storm', and commented that, 'many MPs were unhappy at the official reason given for ending the show.'<sup>132</sup> The *Daily Mail*'s Peter Black called it a 'win for crypto-idiot who think it vulgar to criticise their betters, and the crypto-fascists who cannot bear to see authority mocked.'<sup>133</sup> Only the *Daily Express* showed real support for the death of *TW3*, who went with the headline: 'It must die!' *TW3*'s sketches were described as 'savage political attacks', and rather comically, William Rushton was described as the '26 year-old fat man of the programme.'<sup>134</sup>

Therefore, cutting *TW3* was a decision based on anxiety about its political influence upon electorate at large, with *TW3* still having over nine million viewers weekly come November 1963.<sup>135</sup> Well over seven hundred letters of complaint were received by the *BBC* that the show was being taken off air, and as one complained, 'to send this successful, witty, stimulating experiment to the guillotine when so much time is wasted on harmful rubbish which is allowed to go on and on, is a keen disappointment.'<sup>136</sup> Conversely, there were letters of congratulations, with one viewer stating he speaks for the many that he hopes that there will be no of the repetition of the show. He goes on, 'the sick and corrosive satire of this type of programme is destructive of the values and loyalties on which the future strength, prosperity and greatness of our country depends, and we cannot afford to have them

<sup>130</sup> *The Conservative Party Archive, CCO 600/3/9/4, 'That Was The Week That Was', press clippings and extracts 1963*, minutes of the Conservative Parliamentary Broadcasting and Communications Committee (27<sup>th</sup> November 1963).

<sup>131</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 280.

<sup>132</sup> 'TW3 killed – BBC faces storm', *Daily Mirror*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1963, p. 1. 'That Was TW3 That Was', *Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1963, p. 8.

<sup>133</sup> Frost, *Autobiography*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>134</sup> M. Jackson, 'TW3 stopped after row', *Daily Express*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1963, p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> *BBC WAC T16/726, 'That Was The Week That Was – Programme Correspondence A-Z', letters of complaint about the axing of TW3.*

undermined any longer by the British Broadcasting Corporation.’<sup>137</sup> However, the response from Charles Curran was less than warm: ‘I cannot accept the accusations of which you have again made about the programme. The very large correspondence which we have received protesting against the declaration to end *That Was The Week That Was* does not seem to support your view of the ‘universality’ of the condemnation accorded to it by the public. Nor do the results of our audience surveys.’<sup>138</sup>

Greene joked at the time that: ‘it was in my capacity as a subversive anarchist that I yielded to the enormous pressure from my fellow subversive anarchist and put *TW3* on the air; and it was a pillar of the Establishment that I yielded to the fascist hyena-like howls to take it off again.’<sup>139</sup> Whilst Greene was ‘joking’, this quip highlights the pressure that was exerted upon Greene and the BBC to axe *TW3*. It was clear that the political furore surrounding the show was becoming unmanageable and the chaotic hysteria – especially from the Conservative Party – would ultimately lead to the axing of the show. In short, whilst Greene intended this to be a wisecrack, it provides a lucid insight into the reasons why *TW3* was axed, and to some extent his frustrations with what was to be the demise of the show which he had supported ardently since its inception.<sup>140</sup>

All of this displays that it was still popular amongst the public, it was popular amongst BBC executives – including Greene who was the show’s biggest supporter – but moreover, it had political bite and significance. The BBC had intended to run *TW3* well into 1964 but political pressure – whether it was direct or indirect – led to the axing of *TW3*. Furthermore, it was widely acknowledged that ‘a number of Cabinet ministers and their Labour shadows were

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<sup>137</sup> BBC WAC, R41/289/2, *That Was The Week That Was* – BA-BZ’, letter of complaint (30<sup>th</sup> December, 1963).

<sup>138</sup> BBC WAC, R41/289/1, *That Was The Week That Was* A-Z’, Charles Curran reply (6<sup>th</sup> January, 1964).

<sup>139</sup> G. McCann, *Spike & Co.* (London, 2006), p. 316; Green, *All Dressed Up*, p. 66; ‘When *TW3* sought advice – by BBC chief’, *Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1963, p. 18.

<sup>140</sup> Sandbrook *Never had it so good*, p. 571.



deeply unhappy with the programme.<sup>141</sup> However, Harold Wilson came out and publically stated: ‘we [the Labour Party] would very much deplore it if a popular programme were taken off as a result of political pressure.’<sup>142</sup>

Whilst there was a campaign to save *TW3*, it received little attention from both the press and the BBC. They demanded to know the real reason for the axing of *TW3* and argued that, ‘we think that as licence holders we surely have a right to the truth; and a promise that freedom of speech will return to the air immediately.’<sup>143</sup> Despite this Greene was committed to bringing satire back in some form.<sup>144</sup> However, shows such as *Not So Much A Programme*, *More A Way of Life* and *The Frost Report* had satirical elements but lacked the impact and razor sharp edge that *TW3* had, possibly because there was a Labour government, and as discussed the bias coupled with Wilson’s understanding of the power of television, conceivably made them difficult targets.<sup>145</sup> Subsequently, satire in its emblematic form would not reappear until the early 1980s.

However, what is certain is that *TW3* caused great political debate largely due to its influence and impact. It was realised by Greene that ‘political discourse can be both serious and fun... and perhaps may be more democratically useful for it.’<sup>146</sup> What is more, television was at the heart of the permissive revolution, and helped facilitate shifts in both the political and social landscapes of Britain.<sup>147</sup> *TW3* arguably helped organise the political agenda of the day via the

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<sup>141</sup> Cockerell, *Live from Number 10*, p. 99.

<sup>142</sup> ‘That was *TW3* That was’, *Guardian*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1963, p. 18; M. Jackson, ‘*TW3* stopped after row’, *Daily Express*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1963, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> BBC WAC, T32/1/649/2, ‘That Was The Week That Was – General 1963-64’, Save *TW3* campaign letter to the BBC, (21<sup>st</sup> December, 1963).

<sup>144</sup> *The Conservative Party Archive*, CCO 600/3/9/4, ‘That Was The Week That Was’, press clippings and extracts 1963’, letter of reply to a complaint that the Conservatives had forced *TW3* off air (14<sup>th</sup> November, 1963).

<sup>145</sup> Williams, *Entertaining the Nation*, p. 85.

<sup>146</sup> G. Baym, ‘Crafting New Communicative Models in the Televisual Sphere: Political Interviews on *The Daily Show*’, *The Communication Review*, 10 (2007), p. 112.

<sup>147</sup> D. Freedman, ‘Modernising the BBC: Wilson’s Government and Television 1964-1966’, *Contemporary British History*, 15 (2001), p. 23.

lampooning of political figures, and aided what some have called the ‘death of deference’. Comedy and satire more specifically, can be a fierce and robust vehicle for change. It allows us to explore subjects in manner that evades our mental censors and a ‘moments mobility is granted to the mind.’<sup>148</sup> Tendentious jokes can evade taboo because of the non-serious in which they are presented, and therefore, it can be argued that satire has a strong taboo breaking function.<sup>149</sup> *TW3* helped break the taboo surrounding politics and in turn changed the way in which the electorate engaged with their politicians. *TW3* offered the electorate a new line of accountability and analysed politics in such a way, it was accessible to every viewer, whilst also helping the electorate to vent their frustrations with their elected governors and allowed people to challenge authority via a new medium; television satire.

It also forced politicians to think about their image and presentation, and political leaders thereafter were often picked due to their televisual appeal. This was in part due to David Frost, as he was a figure who could beguile and captivate audiences of all varieties. His voice ‘departed from BBC convention by being neither the upper-middle-class accent of southern England nor a recognisable regional accent, but instead what they called ‘cheeky’ [and] ‘classless’.’<sup>150</sup> Politicians recognised his talents, and sought to be more accessible to their electorate, with Wilson being the prime example of this via the smoking of a pipe in public and cigars in private, to seem more accessible and one of ‘us’ rather than one of ‘them’ as the pipe displayed a classlessness that cigars did not.<sup>151</sup>

However, most importantly, when *TW3* was axed, it was due to political pressure from the Conservative Party, and moreover, this pressure caused the BBC to be politically anxious and

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<sup>148</sup> M. Neave, ‘Freud’s theory of humour, wit and jokes’, in J. Durant & J. Miller (eds.), *Laughing Matters* (Harlow, 1988), p. 41.

<sup>149</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 154; Freud, *The Joke*, p. 147; Schaffer, *The Vision of a Nation*, p. 182.

<sup>150</sup> Sandbrook *Never had it so good*, p. 583.

<sup>151</sup> P. Dorey, ‘Harold Wilson – 1963-64 & 1970-74’, in T. Heppell (ed.), *Leaders of the Opposition: from Churchill to Cameron* (Hampshire, 2012), p. 50.



drop the show from its schedules despite *TW3* still being popular and fashionable. Henry Fairlie in the December of 1963, criticises Hugh Greene for the sudden axing of *TW3*: ‘the thought has recently crossed my mind that Lord Reith, in present-day circumstances, would have been just as likely to put *TW3* on, but that, having put it on, he would have known why; and he would have not been found manufacturing excuses for its sudden extinction.’<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, it would be the *TW3* team who most aptly analysed the situation, with *TW3*’s Lance Percival, as Alec Douglas-Home, beginning the show singing: ‘Happy days are here, my dears, Auntie’s put the clock back years.’<sup>153</sup>

Shortly after *TW3* was axed from the airwaves, *BtF* and The Establishment club had disappeared and *Private Eye*’s readership had plummeted. The blazing satire boom had been extinguished. After the credits of the final episode on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1963 the show’s team devised one last sketch which would shrewdly encapsulate the end of *TW3* and, ultimately the end of the satire boom.

**Clerk (Roy Kinnear):** Occupation?

**Frost:** Satirist.

**Clerk:** Nothing in that line. They’ve been coming in all morning . . . It’s gone out, has satire. I don’t know what we’re going to do with you. And sit up straight. Get your hands out of your pockets. We’re the masters now.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> H. Fairlie, ‘That Was A Year That Was’, *Spectator*, 27<sup>th</sup> December 1963, p. 843.

<sup>153</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 280.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

## *Imagining the Polity: Yes Minister & Yes Prime Minister 1980-1988*



**Illustration 1.2, 'Yes Minister',** *The People*, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1985. This *The People* cartoon highlights the power struggle between the Minister, Jim Hacker and the Mandarin, Sir Humphrey Appleby.

**Hacker:** Sir Humphrey, I need help.

**Sir Humphrey:** You do. You do?

**Hacker:** I've got to make a speech. It could be very embarrassing.

**Sir Humphrey:** Oh Prime Minister, your speeches are nothing like as embarrassing as they used to be!

**Hacker:** I didn't say the speech would be embarrassing, Sir Humphrey. I said the occasion could be.

**Sir Humphrey:** Ah, yes, yes, indeed. Why?

**Hacker:** It's to be to a hostile audience of posturing, self-righteous, theatrical drunks.

**Sir Humphrey:** The House of Commons, you mean?<sup>155</sup>

*Yes Prime Minister, The Patron of the Arts* (1988)

<sup>155</sup> *Yes Prime Minister, Season Two, Episode Six, The Patron of the Arts*, directed by S. Lottersby (BBC, first broadcast 14<sup>th</sup> January 1988).

Situation comedy, or the sitcom, is the most popular format on television and draws far larger audiences than serious drama or documentaries.<sup>156</sup> Sitcom can ‘occupy a social position in which it appeals to, and speaks to, large audiences, and when it does have things to say, it manages to reach that large number of people.’<sup>157</sup> Unquestionably, the most prominent sitcom about politics is *Yes Minister/Yes Prime Minister* (YM/YPM).<sup>158</sup> Whilst *The Thick of It* (TTOI) – viewed as *Yes Minister*’s successor – has provided a lucid insight into the corridors of powers, with a viewership of 1.3 million, *TTOI* it simply did not have the reach of its predecessor.<sup>159</sup> Before *YM/YPM*, the electorate had a very limited knowledge about the inner-workings of government, and whilst the early 1960s had cleared some of the mist that shrouding politics, *YM/YPM* succeeded in revealing the political world to the mass population.<sup>160</sup> *YM/YPM* provided viewers with a narrative, and allowed for a greater insight into central government, and it has arguably produced the most intricate and precise political commentary about central government to date, achieving eight million viewers at its height.<sup>161</sup>

The main joke within the show was Jim Hacker – Minister for Administrative Affairs and later, Prime Minister – was in a constant battle with Sir Humphrey Appleby – Permanent Secretary for the department and then Cabinet Secretary. Hacker was set on cutting down the size of the civil service amongst other things and was blocked at every turn by Sir Humphrey

<sup>156</sup> A. Crisell, *A Study of Modern Television: Thinking Inside the Box* (Hampshire, 2006), p. 121; Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 166; J. De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2009), p. 202.

<sup>157</sup> Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 155.

<sup>158</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 190.

<sup>159</sup> Randall, ‘Imagining the Polity’, p. 267; T. Conlan, (26<sup>th</sup> October 2009), ‘TV ratings: The Thick of It draws more than a million viewers’, *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/oct/26/the-thick-of-it-bbc> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> July 2014); J. Deans, (17<sup>th</sup> January 2006), ‘Northern Lights Glows With Success’, *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/jan/17/overnights> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> July 2014).

<sup>160</sup> Randall, ‘Imagining the Polity’, p. 263; J. Lynn, *Comedy Rules: From the Cambridge Footlights to Yes, Prime Minister* (London, 2011), p. 98.

<sup>161</sup> Randall, ‘Imagining the Polity’, p. 267; Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 190; J. Blumler, ‘British Television - The Outlines of a Research Strategy’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 15 (1964), p. 231; J. Adams, ‘Yes Prime Minister: The Ministerial Broadcast – Social Reality and Comic Realism in Popular Television Drama’, In G. W. Brandt (ed.), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 63.

who believed Hacker was there to be a puppet for the civil service and do their bidding.<sup>162</sup> However, the significance of *YM/YPM* lay in the fact that ‘the main characters were able to raise difficult questions about the state of Britain’s government that could not be raised easily in any other fashion.’<sup>163</sup> Conversely, despite its popularity, this show has received very little academic attention. No academic work has yet demonstrated the effects that *Yes Minister* has had in shaping the electorate’s view of the corridors of Whitehall and the inner workings of government at pivotal moment in British history. This chapter aims to examine the role *YM/YPM* has had in British politics and plug this hole somewhat.

There were anxieties surrounding *Yes Minister* before its inception. With their experience of *TW3*, the BBC was careful to not burn their hands again. *Yes Minister* would have been broadcast in 1977, however, the political landscape was fragile and a general election always appeared imminent. ‘BBC executives did not want to run a series so critical of government at such a fevered time. Thatcher’s secured a Commons majority which meant it could finally be launched.’<sup>164</sup> However, when it finally made it to air, *YM/YPM* was saluted as a new style of political comedy which was well researched and well written and ‘there was a strong sense that the series was lifting the veil on a world still unfamiliar to most television viewers.’<sup>165</sup>

The show was able to lift the veil due meticulous research on Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn’s part. Initially, they took inspiration from the diaries of Richard Crossman which covered his time in office (1964-70) and the diary revealed – after a lengthy legal battle with the government – that the civil service hold the balance of power within government and how

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<sup>162</sup> Williams, *Entertaining the Nation*, p. 86.

<sup>163</sup> S. Granville, ‘Downing Street’s Favourite Soap Opera: Evaluating the Impact and Influence of *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*’, *Contemporary British History*, 23 (2009), p. 331.

<sup>164</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 191; Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, pp. 97-98; M., Kandiah, ‘*Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister* (1): Sir Anthony Jay, CVO’, *Contemporary British History*, 9 (1994), p. 507.

<sup>165</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 191; First edition of *Yes Minister* aired 25<sup>th</sup> February 1980.

they maintain that balance.<sup>166</sup> Further to this, Jay and Lynn were able to offer such an accurate commentary due to the fact they had relationships with high profile politicians and mandarins who they would interview regularly to gather confidential information from inside the corridors of power. Anthony Jay describes the full extent of their contacts by stating:

Patrick Nairne, who was Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health, let us wander through the private office and he showed us what was in the minister's diary to give us factual background, which was very helpful. . . We had two particular advisors from early on, one from the start and the other shortly afterwards, and both had been very senior people at Downing Street, They were technically not civil servants, though they may have been paid out of public payroll at the time, but they were not MPs. They were very valuable at pointing us in the right direction. We would send them the scripts and they would make annotations. . . We lunched with people and they would give us information that they would never have put on record or, indeed, have told to a documentary journalist or news journalist.<sup>167</sup>

Lynn added, 'We discovered that the higher up people were, the closer they were to real power, the more indiscreet they would be. We found that those who were worried about indiscretion were relatively low level civil servants or MPs who did not know anything anyway.'<sup>168</sup>

Moreover, despite *YM/YPM* being a caustic and meticulous satire, which insulted both minister and civil servant, the show was loved within the Westminster and Whitehall, and this was highlighted by the fact that members from both institutions were willing to talk to Jay

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<sup>166</sup> Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, pp. 97-98; M. Kandiah, 'Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (2): Jonathan Lynn', *Contemporary British History*, 9 (1994), p. 528.

<sup>167</sup> Kandiah, 'Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (1): Sir Anthony Jay', p. 518.

<sup>168</sup> Kandiah, 'Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (2): Jonathan Lynn', p. 527.

and Lynn.<sup>169</sup> What is more, Jay insisted that ‘politicians enjoyed it partly, I suppose, because they never saw themselves in the characters but believed they saw other politicians.’<sup>170</sup> In addition, in the House of Commons, politicians were using images conjured by *YM/YPM* to great effect to ridicule and reinforce their arguments when questioning government ministers and even the press were using Sir Humphrey’s name as a signifier of the power of mandarins.<sup>171</sup> In addition to this in 1989, Gordon Brown taunted Thatcher and her cabinet in a Commons debate stating: We have ‘do-as-you-are-told’ Ministers in a ‘speak-when-spoken-to’ Cabinet in a ‘Yes, Prime Minister’ Government.’<sup>172</sup> ‘Both politicians and officials often found it difficult to dispel the powerful image that *Yes, Minister* had fashioned: inexperienced ministers eternally pitted against condescending civil servants. In its most potent form, this image played a definitive role in shaping opinions of the Civil Service.’<sup>173</sup> This highlights that not only was it educating the mass public, it was being used as a powerful political tool amongst politicians who were ridiculing their peers as a result of *YM/YPM* shaping their perception of the inner-workings of government. Nigel Evans MP declared that: “Before my election in 1992, my experience of the civil service was limited to watching *Yes Minister* on television and wondering whether it was a documentary or a comedy. Once elected, Members of Parliament find that there is a bit of truth in both: *Yes Minister* is a comedy, but there is a strong vein of truth in it.”<sup>174</sup>

Both Jay and Lynn affirmed that they had no political axe to grind or any personal political agenda.<sup>175</sup> *YM/YPM* offered observations not solutions to the political problems of the day and Jay argued that, ‘we simply see that the world of politics and government is rich with

<sup>169</sup> Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 141.

<sup>170</sup> Kandiah, ‘Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (1): Sir Anthony Jay’, p. 512; *Ibid.*, p. 515.

<sup>171</sup> Granville, ‘Downing Street’s Favourite Soap Opera’, p. 325.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>175</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 192; Randall, ‘Imagining the Polity’, p. 275



comic opportunities and possibilities, and it seems a pity not to expose, explore and exploit them.<sup>176</sup> Despite this, Thatcher was an avid fan of the show, partly due to the fact that she saw nothing of Hacker in herself but moreover, she admired the accuracy of the show.<sup>177</sup> Thatcher even wrote a short scene to perform with the stars of the show. Paul Eddington and Nigel Hawthorne reluctantly agreed to do the sketch with Thatcher – as they were concerned over the fact that Thatcher was using it as a publicity stunt as she was in desperate need of a popularity boost but moreover, being associated with the Iron Lady - which was to be the facade for Mary Whitehouse's award ceremony for the show.

Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers and Listeners' Association (NVLA) – who launched the 'Clean up TV' campaign January 1964 – were awarding the show for its upstanding broadcasting principles.<sup>178</sup> Paul Eddington said with an air of surprise that the show was receiving the award for 'being the cleanest show on air.'<sup>179</sup> Where Whitehouse had campaigned against *TW3* for its indecency and irreverence, Whitehouse twenty years later was rewarding *Yes Minister* – which was just as critical of British politics as *TW3* was – for its brilliance and broadcasting cleanliness. Whitehouse was favourable to the due its lack of specific focus on or ridicule of, any one politician and what is more, it dealt with the issues within politics rather than attacking the personal integrity of ministers and politicians. In addition, its endorsement by Thatcher can only have aided Whitehouse's penchant attitude towards the show.<sup>180</sup>

The press colluded with the cast with gusto in blurring the lines between reality and fiction.<sup>181</sup>

Lynn after the sketch was performed, was handed an award as he stepped forward to the mic

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<sup>176</sup> Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, pp. 97-98; Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 192.

<sup>177</sup> Granville, 'Downing Street's Favourite Soap Opera', p. 316.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>181</sup> Adams, 'Yes Prime Minister', p. 69.

he retorted: “‘I’d like to thank Mrs Mary Whitehouse for this award, and I should also like to thank Mrs Thatcher for finally taking her rightful place in the field of situation comedy.” There was a brief but audible gasp from the press and then a volcanic eruption of laughter, one of the biggest laughs I ever got in my career. The room was rocking, everybody except one person: Mrs Thatcher.’<sup>182</sup> This shows that that Lynn’s first and foremost responsibility was to satire and Lynn most likely did this to put distance between the show and Thatcher. Lynn described the script as ‘crap’ and the day as ‘awful’ and what is more his disdain extended the award itself.<sup>183</sup> Neither the actors nor Lynn were enthusiastic about the scene, and Lynn was never invited back to Downing Street or offered a knighthood like his co-writer Jay, but to him it didn’t matter, the joke worked.<sup>184</sup>

Further to this, the writers never revealed Hacker’s party within the scripts. There are many important reasons for this. The show was often built around issues than party politics and because of this it did not seem to matter which party Hacker was from.<sup>185</sup> Jay argues that. ‘If we had identified the party then it could have been construed as a consistent and unremitting attack on one or other political party; obviously we did not want to do that. However, we also did not want to identify the party because we did not see the series as being about how the Labour Party or the Conservative Party when in government interacted with the civil service.’<sup>186</sup> Jay and Lynn were astonished at the support for the show from all sides of the political spectrum; however, because the show focused on Whitehall’s influence, this support was inevitable. Jay argued that, ‘If you talk to politicians, if you a get a Labour and Conservative minister together and start talking about civil servants, you will find total

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<sup>182</sup> Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>185</sup> Kandiah, ‘Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (2): Jonathan Lynn’, p. 527.

<sup>186</sup> Kandiah, ‘Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (1): Sir Anthony Jay’, p. 509; P. Fiddick, ‘The Making of a Prime Minister’, *Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1986, p. 11.

agreement – a great warmth grows up between them.’<sup>187</sup> In short, Hacker’s political anonymity – party wise at least – meant that the show appealed to all sides of the political spectrum and alienated nobody which therefore made the show universally appealing and ultimately it allowed the show’s effulgent political commentary reach many without the hindrance of bias. As Lynn aptly states: ‘Our primary intention was to make people laugh. But people believe that what they’re seeing was the truth about the way they are governed. We were writing fiction, but you can draw your own conclusions.’<sup>188</sup>

The success of *YM/YPM* went further than merely demystifying the corridors of Whitehall; it had ingrained the characters into the psyche of the nation and beyond. Mills argues that sitcoms may develop complex characters, but they must be instantly recognisable for the audience to relate to them and find them funny.<sup>189</sup> ‘One of the more startling discoveries made by the people involved in the television show, according to Derek Fowlds (the actor who played Bernard Woolley, Hacker’s long suffering Personal Private Secretary), was the fact that ‘[some people] really thought that we were—not actors, they really thought we were politicians.’<sup>190</sup> Nigel Hawthorne commented that even the Queen had difficulty differentiating the fiction from the reality: “I used to meet the Queen and she kept saying, ‘What are you doing here?’—in the theatre, you know—and I said, ‘Well, I work here, ma’am’, and she said ‘do you?’ And she’d obviously got it locked into her mind that I was Sir Humphrey.”<sup>191</sup> It therefore seemed a common response, even at the highest levels, that people mistook these characters for real governmental officials

Paul Eddington furthered this, as *YM/YPM* had an international presence and been screened in over 45 countries come 1986, stating: ‘My wife and I . . . have only got to set foot in another

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<sup>187</sup> P. Fiddick, ‘The Making of a Prime Minister’, *Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1986, p. 11.

<sup>188</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 190.

<sup>189</sup> Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 101.

<sup>190</sup> Granville, ‘Downing Street’s Favourite Soap Opera’, pp. 323-24.

<sup>191</sup> Granville, ‘Downing Street’s Favourite Soap Opera’, p. 324.

country and they lead us straight to the head of government.’<sup>192</sup> For example in Norway he had breakfast with the Prime Minister and it seemed whatever country he was to visit, he was greeted by foreign dignitaries or politicians and what is more, at that point, with the exception of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Eddington was the only man asked to address the lobby of correspondents in Westminster.<sup>193</sup> As Miriam Gross argues in the *Guardian* February 1986: ‘For the first time in our history, we seem to have two Prime Ministers. One is in 10 Downing Street, the other is Jim Hacker, who – as portrayed by Paul Eddington – has become not only a popular television figure but part of the political mythology. The manoeuvring on *Yes Prime Minister*, the uncanny parallels with some recent entanglements, has given views a new sense of what politics is like behind the scenes.’<sup>194</sup>

Therefore, *YM/YPM* helped expose the inner-workings of government by reframing the issues in a way that the electorate would find easy to digest.<sup>195</sup> Whilst the print media provided a political commentary, they did so, and continue to do so, in a biased manner. What is more, as secrecy is at the heart of central government, journalists, especially print, are forced to rely upon limited and self-interested sources.<sup>196</sup> Jay and Lynn had exclusive access to government departments and had no political agenda to meet which in turn allowed a fuller, more neutral narrative which was well researched and can arguably be considered the most engaging satirical analysis to date. It resonated with the public as well as politicians because its analysis was adroit and was seen as shining a new light upon the dark corridors of Whitehall. The electorate’s knowledge about government is acquired through the ingestion of a myriad

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<sup>192</sup> M. Gross, ‘The Secret Life of Jim Hacker’, *Guardian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1986, p. 60.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>195</sup> N. Carroll, *Humour: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2014), p. 85.

<sup>196</sup> Randall, ‘Imagining the Polity’, p. 263.

of media texts about the process of politics.<sup>197</sup> What is clear is that *YM/YPM* aided the digestion of these texts and helped broaden the electorate's grasp of the political landscape.

Jay and Lynn recognised that the practice of government did not take place in the House of Commons – which was exposed as a theatre where the performance takes place – but in fact, it actively took place in the corridors of Whitehall.<sup>198</sup> What is more, both Jay and Lynn both recognised that the conflict between government ministers and civil servants was an area of politics few had any real insight into compared the conflict between the government and the opposition.<sup>199</sup> However, *YM/YPM* went further than just highlighting this division. It furthered the idea of 'us' and 'them'. 'If it mined the comic possibilities in the Hacker-Appleby relationship . . . 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.'<sup>200</sup>

It can be argued that despite satire receiving such little academic attention - which is predicated upon the assumption that it is ephemeral and simplistic and has little to say on social and political concerns – *YM/YPM* illuminated millions of minds about governmental practices.<sup>201</sup> Undoubtedly, *YM/YPM* shaped attitudes about the real power of their elected officials due 'uncanny accuracy' of the series.<sup>202</sup> As Jay notes: 'part of the fun of writing *Yes Minister* was that nothing quite like it had been done on television in terms of highly

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<sup>197</sup> J. Jones, *Entertaining Politics* (Plymouth, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>198</sup> Lynn, *Comedy Rules*, p. 119.

<sup>199</sup> Kandiah, 'Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (1): Sir Anthony Jay', p. 507.

<sup>200</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, pp. 192-93.

<sup>201</sup> Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 3.

<sup>202</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 191; Adams, 'Yes Prime Minister', p. 64.



researched comedy about government and politics.’<sup>203</sup> Whilst it is hard to prove the extent to which satire shapes attitudes, ‘persuasion models from the discipline of social psychology reveal how the constant repetition of clear messages, in contexts that reinforce the credibility of those messages, tend to change attitudes.’<sup>204</sup> ‘Comic amusement is a complex response to many aspects of the jokes’ told within *YM/YPM*. Whilst the jokes were unfailingly funny, it was the messages behind the jokes that made *YM/YPM* unique.<sup>205</sup> Paul Eddington, who portrayed Hacker, supported this and declared that the scripts he received ‘broke entirely new ground in that, for the first time that I could remember, views of situation comedy were being invited not only to laugh but at the same time think about matters of vital concern to them – in this case, the way they were being governed.’<sup>206</sup> As Lynn pointed out: ‘we should watch what the people we elect are doing in our name, and try and keep them honest: it is a hopeless task, but we should try. And we should ridicule them when they are not.’<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Kandiah, ‘Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (1): Sir Anthony Jay’, p. 511.

<sup>204</sup> M. V. Flinders, *Defending Politics* (Oxford, 2012), p. 157.

<sup>205</sup> Carroll, *Humour*, p. 103.

<sup>206</sup> P. Eddington, *So Far, So Good* (London, 1995) p. 140.

<sup>207</sup> Kandiah, ‘Yes Minister and Yes Prime Minister (2): Jonathan Lynn’, p. 534.

## *Personalities, Politicians and Puppets: Spitting Image 1984-1996*

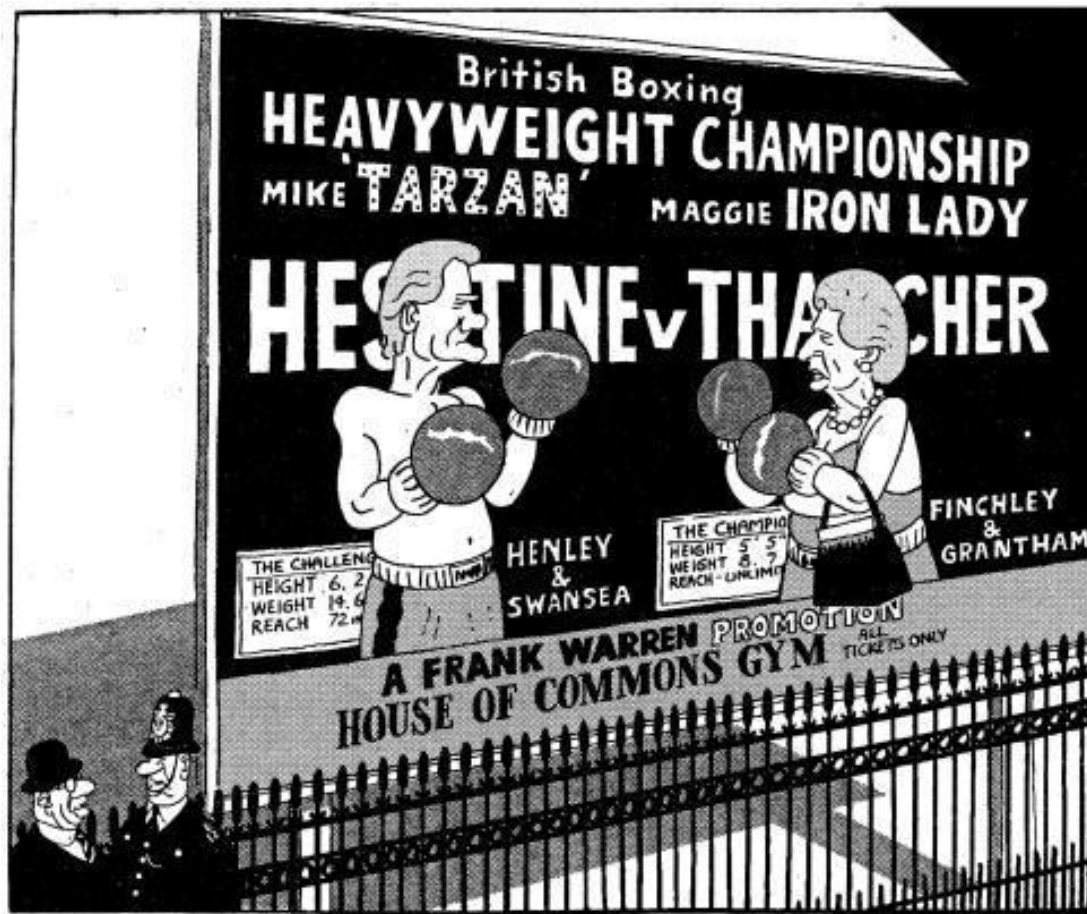


Illustration 1.3, 'Tarzan v The Iron Lady', *The Evening Standard*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1990. This *Evening Standard* cartoon highlights Thatcher's downfall and fight against 'Tarzan' as he was dubbed by the writers of *Spitting Image*.

"I don't believe satire changes anything, though you think it will when you're young. But on *Spitting Image* in the Thatcher days, we sometimes had the feeling we were the only effective opposition. At least we were airing the issues; the Labour Party wasn't. They were fucking useless."<sup>208</sup>

Roger Law in H. Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was* (London, 2000).

<sup>208</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 327.

By the 1980s, respect for politicians and British political institutions had all but eroded. An array of political crises had displayed politicians in a poor light. Suez (1956), the Profumo Affair (1963), and the Thorpe affair (1970s) amongst others had highlighted the political failings of the governing classes of the period.<sup>209</sup> Whilst this lack of deference did not affect electoral turnout – with elections between 1955 and 1992 had an average turnout of 75.8 per cent – the electorate had become more exasperated and politically vocal.<sup>210</sup> What is clear is that there was an appetite for rebellion against the political classes and *Spitting Image* – first broadcast 26<sup>th</sup> February 1984 – was ready to satisfy the public's craving for derision and irreverence which was highlighted by the shows motto: 'if we all spit together we'll drown the bastards'.<sup>211</sup>

'Caricature can follow the traditional conception, both of caricature and of allegory, by emphasizing an original which may be exaggerated and distorted, but which it ultimately refers back to and therefore affirms the existence of. On the other hand, it can, like allegory, be directed against the very concept of a unified coherent original.'<sup>212</sup> *Spitting Image* followed this tradition. Their instantly recognisable puppets emphasised and exaggerated physical characteristics - via caricature - of the parliamentary figures of the day, whilst also containing allegorical content which allowed the electorate to discern the personalities and political realities of the day in greater detail. Furthermore, puppets 'appear to possess certain characteristics that we inherently find amusing, as well as a likeability and non-threatening nature that enable them to do and say things that we are not socially permitted to do.'<sup>213</sup> *Spitting Image* functioned – in Freudian terms – as a way of letting off steam ('psychical energy') acting as safety valve for popular resentment via the lampooning and questioning of

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<sup>209</sup> Harrison, *Finding a Role*, p. 434.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 510.

<sup>211</sup> S., Wagg, 'You've never had it so silly: The politics of British satirical comedy from *Beyond the Fringe* to *Spitting Image*', in D. Strinati & S. Wagg (eds.), *Come on Down?* (London, 1995), p. 278.

<sup>212</sup> A. Bown, 'Caricature in Dickens and Thackeray', *Comedy Studies*, 3 (2012), p. 76.

<sup>213</sup> Price, 'Objects of Humour', p. 36.



the gloomy political landscape. As John Lloyd – a producer of *Spitting Image* – reflected: ‘I can’t remember in my lifetime a government that was disliked as much, so certainly it came at the right time.’<sup>214</sup>

Similarly to *YM/YPM*, there is very little formal literature written *Spitting Image* and this can be ascribed to the fact that ‘television is seen to be a low cultural form compared to, say literature and art, and the same holds true comedy; combine the two and you’re left with one of the most maligned cultural forms.’<sup>215</sup> *Spitting Image*, and *YM/YPM* to some extent, can be categorised as ‘invisible’ television which is a show which despite longevity and high viewing figures, it has not been analysed in any significant way.<sup>216</sup> Yet whilst television satire, and comedy more broadly, is often routinely dismissed as ephemeral and inconsequential, it is the longevity and popularity that actually afford the medium permanence and stability.<sup>217</sup> However, the few academics that have commented agree that not only was it one of the main purveyors of satire of the 1980s, it was one of the most popular cultural phenomena.<sup>218</sup>

‘While it could be argued that the satirical edge of *Spitting Image* was cruder and more insulting than that of *That Was The Week That Was*, it provoked less hostile comment, which could mean that public expectations of politicians were lower than in the early 1960s.’<sup>219</sup> This view was furthered by Ian Hislop, who has argued that: ‘As television comedy, *Spitting Image* goes probably a lot further than *That Was The Week* went, but people are less shocked. You can’t come on having Millicent Martin singing mildly topical songs because no one’s going to say ‘ooo’ anymore. You have to go further than that to get people’s attention.’<sup>220</sup>

<sup>214</sup> G. Stewart, *BANG! A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London, 2013), p. 253.

<sup>215</sup> Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 153.

<sup>216</sup> B. Mills, ‘Invisible Television: The Programmes No One Talks About Even Though Lots of People Watch Them’, *Critical Studies in Television*, 5 (2010), p. 8.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>218</sup> Wagg, ‘You’ve Never Had It So Silly’, p. 276; Turner, *Rejoice*, p. 127.

<sup>219</sup> Williams, *Entertaining the Nation*, p. 85.

<sup>220</sup> *Arena: Whatever Happened to Spitting Image?*, directed by A. Wall (BBC, first broadcast 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

*Spitting Image* was to do exactly that and was to ‘wield the sharp scalpel of satire like little else before.’<sup>221</sup>

This shift highlights a change in taboo since the beginning of the sixties, which in turn led to the rise of what was then dubbed ‘alternative comedy.’ There was a clear appetite for a new wave of comedy amongst the public, and ‘against the backdrop of Margaret Thatcher’s administrations (1979–1983 and 1983–1987) and the discordant soundtrack of rebellious punk music, [alternative comedy] enjoyed burgeoning success.’<sup>222</sup> Alternative comedy was by and large, left wing, anti-sexist, anti-racist and it challenged the derogatory nature of comedy of comedians such as Bernard Manning and Benny Hill who were bulldozed off the air waves to make room for a new generation of comedy.<sup>223</sup> ‘I don’t want to sound like a preacher,’ said Ben Elton, the man who came to personify alternative comedy for the public, ‘but we can make people laugh without being racist or sexist.’<sup>224</sup> What is more, attacks on Thatcher were rooted in the foundations of the alternative comedy movement and was a unifying thread within the movement, however, despite this, alternative comedians such as would often attack the Labour Party for failing to form an effective opposition to the incessant and relentless Thatcherite agenda.<sup>225</sup> Ultimately, alternative comedians made criticising politics acceptable again. As result of its popularity - and Thatcher’s insistence that 25 per cent of BBC and 100 per cent of Channel Four’s programmes should be made by independents – alternative comedy began a regular occupant upon British screens.<sup>226</sup>

Alternative comedians followed in the ‘crusading spirit’ of *TW3* and thus, with the changes of

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<sup>221</sup> T. Birchenough, (21<sup>st</sup> March 2014), ‘Arena: Whatever Happened to Spitting Image? BBC Four’, *The Arts Desk*, <http://www.theartsdesk.com/tv/arena-whatever-happened-spitting-image-bbc-four> (accessed 20th June 2014).

<sup>222</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 52; L. Peters, ‘The roots of alternative comedy? — The alternative story of 20th Century Coyote and Eighties Comedy’, *Comedy Studies*, 4 (2013), p. 6.

<sup>223</sup> Peters, ‘The roots of alternative comedy?’, p. 6; B. Logan, (27<sup>th</sup> July 2009), ‘The New Offenders of Stand Up Comedy’, *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/jul/27/comedy-standup-new-offenders> (Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> June 2014);

<sup>224</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 56.

<sup>225</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 58; Peters, ‘The roots of alternative comedy?’, p. 6.

<sup>226</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 58.



attitude towards what was considered taboo, there was a space created for comedy to focus on politics in critical way, and therefore ridicule politicians in an avant-garde and innovative way.

*Spitting Image* would seek to occupy this space and, like *TW3*, it spared nobody from its lampooning and with the use of grotesque puppets, it portrayed politicians as mixture of ‘stupid, venal and mad.’<sup>227</sup> As one IBA official noted in a memo to the Director of Television, David Glencross, quipped: ‘this is an interesting marriage of *The Muppets* and *Not The Nine O’Clock News*.’<sup>228</sup> 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.’<sup>229</sup> So, ‘although the satirical form diversified and established itself in the mainstream [in the 1980s], its central joke still remained the same. The new shows continued to mock all politicians and the business of politics generally.’<sup>230</sup> The show almost had an anti-political feeling about it which Peter Fluck, who co-created the show, supported by stating in an interview the *Sunday Telegraph*: ‘I just hate people who stand up there and tell us “I should be organising you all”, I just hate them.’<sup>231</sup>

*Spitting Image* would prove to be controversial from the start of its run, as IBA officials were worried about certain sketches. Within the debut show, there laid a sketch about Prime Ministers who rot away at Chequers after they leave 10 Downing Street, under the watchful eye of Queen Victoria. Part of this sketch included Harold Macmillan spilling soup into his lap, however, the censors at the IBA censored this, much to the furore of one viewer.<sup>232</sup> In a letter to David Glencross, Charles Denton (who was director of programmes and supporter of

<sup>227</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 195.

<sup>228</sup> *ITA/IBA/Cable Television Archive*, 5081/2/93, ‘Central prog. - Spitting Image - Volume one’, internal memo (17<sup>th</sup> January, 1984).

<sup>229</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 195.

<sup>230</sup> Street, *Mass Media*, p. 67.

<sup>231</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 195.

<sup>232</sup> P. Brown, ‘Taking the Mickey, but not the Mac’, *Guardian* (25<sup>th</sup> February 1984), p. 3.

*Spitting Image*), questioned why there was a need to alter the first episode of *Spitting Image*, stating his puzzlement and anger:

‘Whilst I understand your point Macmillan is an old man and held in sort of special regard I am at a loss to know why a show of him spilling soup into his bib is particularly offensive when within the same item a Harold Wilson puppet is physically abused, a Michael Foot puppet is thrown out of a window, a Douglas-Home puppet (in a wheelchair) falls downstairs and the President of the United States puppet is shot in the head. Whilst I know that many of the figures are very lifelike, I think it might be as well to remind everybody that they are ‘just’ puppets.’<sup>233</sup>

This complaint goes some way to highlighting the change of attitude amongst the public. If *TW3* had proposed to run a sketch of this type, and then it was removed, no doubt it would have been lauded as a dignified move. However, the exasperation of censorship was at the fore and arguably, people were demanding more scathing satire.’

There are many comparisons between *TW3* and *Spitting Image*. Firstly both focused more on the personalities and centred on actual politicians unlike *YM/YPM*. Secondly, both faced the scorn of Mrs Mary Whitehouse, who said *TW3*: ‘was the epitome of what was wrong with the BBC – anti-authority, anti-religious, anti-patriotism, pro-dirt and poorly produced.’<sup>234</sup> Whitehouse was a critic of *Spitting Image* from its inception, and the writers and producers responded to this by putting her in the show, in her first appearance on the show she states: ‘Hello, I’m Mary Whitehouse. I didn’t actually see *Spitting Image* last week, but it was DISGUSTING!’<sup>235</sup> But thirdly, and arguably most importantly, both were broadcast under Conservative governments, which in turn caused constant questions surrounding the show

<sup>233</sup> *ITA/IBA/Cable Television Archive*, 5081/2/93, ‘Central prog. - Spitting Image - Volume one’, a letter of complaint to the Director of Television about the first show. (28<sup>th</sup> February 1984).

<sup>234</sup> B. Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), p. 269.

<sup>235</sup> *Spitting Image, Series one, Episode two*, directed by P. Casson (*ITV*, first broadcast 4<sup>th</sup> March 1984).

about bias. However, as Roger Law argued at the time: ‘If you don’t like what public figures are doing, you’ve got absolutely no way of changing anything, it helps to slag them off. Saatchi and Saatchi are doing the opposite to us. People say we’re too savage but you never hear of anyone going to Saatchi and Saatchi to complain that they’re grossly benevolent.’<sup>236</sup>

However, John Lloyd believed their viewership gave the show a mandate to be critical: ‘It was getting 15 million viewers that was more people than it took to elect the Tory government, which I think was 13 and half million voters. And it gave us an extraordinary amount of clout. *Spitting Image* caused such a stir, I believe uniquely in the history of television, I had to go and actually defend it line by line, word for word to the Independent Broadcasting Authority.’<sup>237</sup> *Spitting Image* was proving to be so divisive that John Lloyd even received death threats, with one viewer stating he wanted to castrate him.<sup>238</sup> What is more, it met with criticism from celebrities such as Sir Robin Day who, during a conversation with Melvyn Bragg, called the puppets ‘grotesque’, and asks, ‘is it right to show people bashing others over their heads and leather-clad thugs on motorcycles and put that into 10 million homes?’<sup>239</sup> Day was referring to Norman Tebbit’s puppet, who was often portrayed as Thatcher’s thug enforcer, and was described in one sketch of *Spitting Image* debating who would replace Thatcher, as a ‘MEAN BASTARD!’<sup>240</sup> However, Bragg argued that ‘the leather-clad thug, who wants to get people, has some truth in it.’

Consequently, because the Conservatives were in government, they were bound to be focal point of attention. Thatcher, being a dominant and almost imperious leader, was often portrayed as very masculine, who would use urinals and smoke cigars, and even her voice was provided by a man. Steve Nallon - who played Thatcher - *Daily Mirror*: ‘I’m sure Mrs

<sup>236</sup> Wagg, ‘You’ve Never Had It So Silly’, p. 278.

<sup>237</sup> *Arena: Whatever Happened to Spitting Image?*, directed by A. Wall (BBC, first broadcast 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

<sup>238</sup> ‘We’ll kill Spitting Image TV boss’, *Daily Mirror* (22<sup>nd</sup> January 1986), p. 16.

<sup>239</sup> R. Brooks, ‘Skinhead’ Norman in storm over his Spitting Image’, *Guardian* (4<sup>th</sup> November 1990), p. 3.

<sup>240</sup> *Spitting Image, Series one, Episode ten*, directed by B. Cousins (ITV, first broadcast 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1984).

Thatcher hates it, so I don't suppose I'm in line for an OBE."<sup>241</sup> However, whilst the show would have its critics, Thatcher in some respects benefitted from the show. As Ian Hislop argues: 'Sometimes it's very difficult to make satire work . . . it would be difficult to find any evidence of satire having dented Mrs. Thatcher's popularity or strength, largely because the perceived vision of her, as an extremely strong, arrogant, aggressive woman, was exactly the image she wanted to project.'<sup>242</sup> She was perceived by *Spitting Image* as a tough headmistress who kept her cabinet in line. As one *Guardian* commentator has noted: 'Maggie was a fully formed comedy character before comedians had even gotten to her. Her bouffant and handbag and nasal voice were comedy gold, but she was also earnest, principled and said exactly what she meant. You knew exactly what Maggie stood for. And that made it easy to mock her.'<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, Chris Emmett who was a voice artist for the show, saw the Thatcher cabinet as vulnerable: 'Look at the present cabinet. From an impressionist's point of view there couldn't be a more boring faceless lot in the universe. They all have perfect, plummy, Tory, middle-class voices.'<sup>244</sup> "Mrs Thatcher thought it was a dreadful programme, but I know plenty of people in the Cabinet who thought it very funny," Lloyd insists.<sup>245</sup> Nevertheless, as Geoff Perkins – a producer of the show – states that you can't help but offend people 'when you tackle sensitive subjects.'<sup>246</sup>

Therefore, the IBA were always going to receive complaints from the Conservatives. For example, a letter from a Conservative MP complained: 'Whilst accepting that *Spitting Image* should not be taken over seriously, there comes a point when the impartiality and political

<sup>241</sup> T. Purnell, 'My dear, he's an imposter', *Daily Mirror* (25<sup>th</sup> February 1985), p. 11.

<sup>242</sup> Granville, 'Downing Street's Favourite Soap Opera', p. 327.

<sup>243</sup> B. O'Leary, (10<sup>th</sup> April 2013), 'Margaret Thatcher, Heroine of British Comedy', *Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/10/margaret-thatcher-hero-british-comedy> (Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>244</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. 127.

<sup>245</sup> B. O'Leary, (10<sup>th</sup> April 2013), 'Margaret Thatcher, Heroine of British Comedy', *Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/10/margaret-thatcher-hero-british-comedy> (Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>246</sup> T. Purnell, 'Naughty but Nice', *Daily Mirror* (31<sup>st</sup> October 1987), p. 13.

balance become such that it is necessary to remind the IBA of its duties and responsibilities. In last night's production there were no fewer than six sketches deriding the Prime Minister and the Government . . . and not a single adverse story re the Labour Party.'<sup>247</sup> What is more, there is evidence that IBA officials were far braver than their BBC counterparts had been in regards to sensitivity around election time. Norris McWhirter – who was a serial campaigner against *Spitting Image* over an issue regarding flash-frames amongst other things – had written to the IBA chairman George Thompson and accused *Spitting Image* of being inherently anti-right. George Thompson bravely replied:

You were concerned about political balance. Governments have always historically been a prime subject for satire, on television as in the press and elsewhere. Satire has always tended to direct itself at establishment figures than at those who are more remote from positions of power and influence. The most recent episodes of *Spitting Image* have satirised Mr. Kinnock, Mr. Hattersley (and other Shadow Cabinet members), Dr. Owen, Mr. Steel (and other Alliance politicians), Mr. Gorbachev, Colonel Gadaffi, President Mitterand and Derek Hatton, and many other targets which are plainly not associated with the Conservative Party. . . I would be concerned if the show was as 'anti-right' as your letter suggested, but I am clear this is not so. ITV schedules have not been proposed to the IBA for the whole of next year. However, the fact that 1987 may or may not be an election year should not inhibit the style of *Spitting Image*, within the provisions of the Broadcast Act.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> *ITA/IBA/Cable Television Archive*, 5081/2/93, 'Central prog. - Spitting Image - Volume One', a letter of complaint from Richard Holt MP about balance of the show (27<sup>th</sup> October 1986).

<sup>248</sup> *ITA/IBA/Cable Television Archive*, 5081/2/93, 'Norris McWhirter –IBA Spitting Image – Volume two', a letter of reply to Norris McWhirter who had pursued a lengthy legal battle against the IBA, whilst serially complaining about other issues with the show, and eventually lost and was forced to pay huge damages. (10<sup>th</sup> December 1986).



Furthermore, *Spitting Image* was not only accused of bias, but irresponsible broadcasting. In a very emotive letter to John Whitney, one viewer was enraged:

‘It is generally known that satire is a very responsible form of writing holding up a person or society to ridicule or showing the foolishness of an idea . . . in order to help, and it should continue to help, to improve the life in the society. BUT *Spitting Image* IS A TACTLESS, VERY RUDE, OFFENSIVE AND IRRESPONSIBLE TELEVISION PROGRAMME, WHICH HAS NOTHING IN COMMON WITH SATIRE, AND SHOULD NOT COVER ITSELF UNDER SATIRE’S NAME. If the producer of *Spitting Image* is an irresponsible man, then the public expect that those, who are in the higher management of radio and television, are very intelligent and responsible people, who will not tolerate irresponsible broadcasting, otherwise they could be sent into jail.’<sup>249</sup>

However, this does not mean the show was anti-Tory per se, as it was noted by Alwyn Turner: ‘Pop music, comedy, fiction: all felt moved to remark upon political developments, normally from a hostile position. Their voices were seldom acknowledged by the Thatcher governments, but even so their impact was felt – perhaps more so than the official opposition.’<sup>250</sup> The Labour Party was just as much a target for derision because as Roger Law summarises in the opening remarks of this chapter, ‘they were fucking useless.’<sup>251</sup> In a internal memo to the Director General (John Whitney), a researcher was asked to keep a record of how many sketches included Mrs Thatcher in the third series beginning in 1986:

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<sup>249</sup> ITA/IBA/Cable Television Archive, 5081/2/93, ‘Central prog. - Spitting Image – Volume Two’, a letter in response to Geoff Perkins, the then producer of *Spitting Image*, appearing on the BBC’s *Open Air*, sarcastically stating *Spitting Image* was an irresponsible show (7<sup>th</sup> December 1987).

<sup>250</sup> Turner, *Rejoice!*, p. xxi.

<sup>251</sup> Carpenter, *That Was Satire*, p. 327.



‘Number of sketches: 83; number of sketches featuring Mrs Thatcher: 11; Number of sketches featuring other Conservative politicians but not Mrs Thatcher: 4. One important point: not all the sketches featuring Mrs Thatcher or Conservative politicians are critical of them. In at least three of the sketches which feature Mrs Thatcher, for example, it is Mr Kinnock or the Labour Party being mocked. . . Overall I would say *Spitting Image* has been surprisingly even-handed in its mockery.’<sup>252</sup>

Consequently, what the above highlights is that *Spitting Image* divisive, which arguably can be accounted for as a sign of it being effective at what it did. It was searing and scathing of the political classes as a whole and sought to ridicule any vice or folly in an era of polarised politics. As one critic in the *Scotsman* in 1984 put it: ‘satire punches huge holes in pompous facades and fat pretension and is needed in these unholy times.’<sup>253</sup>

Notably, as a result of *Spitting Image*’s success, it was able to offer more than simple derision and irreverence. It was able to instil knowledge into the minds of viewers about who was at the heart of government. This view was supported by Steve Fallon: ‘I think the show’s strength was that many of its characters were better-known than their real-life equivalents. Thatcher appeared on television every day, but most of the cabinet ministers didn’t. It’s nothing to be proud of, but *Spitting Image* created a world where somebody of fifteen would know not only who the prime minister was, but also the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the trade secretary. Not to mention how ridiculous they were.’<sup>254</sup> Roy Hattersley – who was portrayed as a man who sprayed every word as opposed to saying it due to his lisp – has argued that the puppets have helped the careers of some politicians and he claimed that, ‘there has, for example, been a rapport between me and school-children because of my

<sup>252</sup> ITA/IBA/Cable Television Archive, 5081/2/93, ‘Central prog. - *Spitting Image* – Volume One’, an internal memo keeping track of Mrs Thatcher’s appearances on *Spitting Image* (18<sup>th</sup> February 1986).

<sup>253</sup> Fielding, *State of Play*, p. 196.

<sup>254</sup> S. Rowe, (15<sup>th</sup> April 2014), ‘How we made *Spitting Image*’, *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/apr/15/how-we-made-spitting-image> (accessed 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014).

showing on *Spitting Image*.<sup>255</sup> Additionally, a letter to the *Grimsby Telegraph* argued that: ‘The public at the time began to take an interest in current affairs, and although what was portrayed in *Spitting Image* such as how Mrs Thatcher, the then Prime Minister, dominated her cabinet was greatly exaggerated (although others may state that this was true), it allowed many ordinary working class people to keep up-to-date on how their country is run, and read into subjects more closely that they had seen on *Spitting Image*.’ And also as result of the show’s popularity, ‘many of the young people of that generation could name who held what position in government partly because of the programme.’<sup>256</sup>

Michael Heseltine even attributed his political success to *Spitting Image*, arguing: “What was I in the 1980s? An obscure member of a British government and suddenly – Hezza! Tarzan! Hello Michael – everywhere I went it was a bloody miracle.”<sup>257</sup> The show popularised him as Tarzan, a nickname he had acquired during a parliamentary debate in 1976 after becoming incensed with Labour MPs, ‘Heseltine took the ceremonial mace from the table in front of the Speaker, and brandished it at his Labour opponents.’<sup>258</sup> In the early nineties, “The real Tarzan wanted to buy our dummy of him”, says Roger [Law]. “We told him could have it if he made a suitable donation to the Labour Party. We never heard from him again.”<sup>259</sup>

If the electorate’s awareness and concept of politics has changed, it can be argued that *Spitting Image* has aided this evolution and growth and has shaped the political landscape in an unforgettable way. It appears that history repeats itself, as a *Guardian* journalist quipped in the 1960s (when writing about *TW3*): ‘satire is in the air as well as on it; lampoons abound; a public figure who is not mocked had better start asking himself just how public he is.’ In

<sup>255</sup> R. Brooks, ‘Skinhead’ Norman in storm over his *Spitting Image*, *Guardian* (4<sup>th</sup> November 1990), p. 3.

<sup>256</sup> M. Brown, ‘Spitting Image Taught Us All a Valuable Lesson’, *Grimsby Telegraph* (13<sup>th</sup> October 2006), p. 18.

<sup>257</sup> M. Kennedy, ‘Hezza and his mate: Puppets up the Ante’, *Guardian* (13<sup>th</sup> July 2000), p. 12.

<sup>258</sup> J. Goodden, (21<sup>st</sup> March 2013), ‘Michael Heseltine at 80’, *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/posts/Michael-Heseltine-at-80> (Accessed 8th August 2014).

<sup>259</sup> A. Antonowicz, ‘What a Bunch of Dummies’, *Daily Mirror* (16<sup>th</sup> November 1992) pp. 20-21.

the same manner twenty four years later, a *Daily Mirror* columnist contended in 1987, 'being included in Spitting Image can be hurtful. But being ignored is the unkindest cut of all.'<sup>260</sup>

However, it was all to end in the mid-nineties, with the *Daily Mail* summing up the mood aptly with the headline: **TV BOSSES AXE THE INCREASINGLY UNFUNNY SPITTING IMAGE.**<sup>261</sup> Viewership had dropped to around six million and arguably, the shock value had all but disappeared and as Armando Iannucci states: 'one of the problems is that they have had the same government for fifteen years – it gets boring attacking the same people all the time.'<sup>262</sup> Ian Hislop argued that: 'the fact that ITV has decided to drop Spitting Image from its schedules has been taken as evidence that British politics is now too lifeless to even satirise.'<sup>263</sup> Nevertheless, *Spitting Image* had a profound impact upon the British political landscape, and what is more, was far longer lived than either *TW3* or *YM/YPM*. It not only mocked the politicians of the day, but it helped make them accessible to mass population. As a result, it provided a vent for people's frustrations with their political masters, and additionally, it educated the electorate about their true nature of their political masters. Whilst these features were often exaggerated, there was a certain level of truth within every depiction and the images *Spitting Image* ingrained into the British psyche have long out lived the show.

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<sup>260</sup> N. Shrapnel, 'That was no breach', *Guardian*, (25<sup>th</sup> January 1963), p. 1; T. Purnell, 'Naughty but Nice', *Daily Mirror* (31<sup>st</sup> October 1987), p. 13.

<sup>261</sup> B. Took, 'TV BOSSES AXE THE INCREASINGLY UNFUNNY SPITTING IMAGE', *Daily Mail* (13<sup>th</sup> March 1995), p. 9.

<sup>262</sup> A. Cuff, 'Spitting Image's cruel puppets set for final meltdown', *Guardian* (13<sup>th</sup> March 1995), p. 20.

<sup>263</sup> I. Hislop, 'Bored to Cheers', *Guardian* (17<sup>th</sup> March 1995), p. 3.



## *Conclusion*

Humour is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritation and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place.<sup>264</sup>

Mark Twain (1835-1910)

When concluding, it is clear that television satire has helped shape the political landscape and opened a new line of accountability for Britain's politicians. Furthermore, political satire in Britain has provided a compelling and robust form of political commentary, and in fact, offers a key reading into British politics which academics often ignore. Comedies and satires have a far broader appeal in terms of demographic, they have a wider reach and often attract far higher audiences than dramas or documentaries, yet academics tend to focus on the latter.<sup>265</sup> Satire's unrestrained approach to serious political issues has made it easier for people to discern the actions and promises of politicians because they are as framed as part of a narrative that people are familiar with and to which they can relate.<sup>266</sup> Previously, satire has not been considered an important form of political commentary, but when analysing the effects that satire has had – the liberation of comedy in sixties with *TW3*, the education and insight that *YM/YPM* provided, and the relief and the rebellion of *Spitting Image* granted to the electorate during Thatcher's premiership – it can be argued that it has served many distinct and important roles in British society.<sup>267</sup> There was a significant shift in the media's attitude towards politics and politicians during the period, who began to take a more vigorous role as the 'watchdogs' of society which helped to inform the public and guard their interests

<sup>264</sup> M. Bolton, *HA!: Humor for the lighter side of life* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 121.

<sup>265</sup> De Groot, *Consuming history*, p. 202.

<sup>266</sup> L. Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Maryland, 2005), p. 106.

<sup>267</sup> R. Caulfield, 'The Influence of "Infoenterpropagainment": Exploring the Power of Political Satire as a Distinct Form of Political Humor', In J. C. Baumgartner & J. S. Morris (eds.), *Laughing matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, (New York, 2008), p. 4.

by exposing corruption, gluttony and immorality.<sup>268</sup> Likewise, satirists began to take this responsibility seriously – starting with *TW3* but especially more so in the 1980s with the revival of satire in its emblematic form – by facilitating public debate and holding the powers within society to account.<sup>269</sup> Consequently, the image of politicians within the public consciousness crumbled in the face of complacency, incompetence and malfeasance, and consequently, deference towards the political classes was at an all time low.<sup>270</sup>

*TW3* was satire's inaugural show on television. Television was to embody everything that the permissive revolution stood for and ultimately, facilitated satire's move out of the smoky clubs and into the living rooms of millions of people.<sup>271</sup> *TW3* coupled with a changing media landscape challenged the taboo surrounding politics and denounced the government of the day in an unprecedented way and aided the death of deference. *YM/PM* provided an insight into the shadowy corridors of power in a way in which the print media could not. Fictional representations of politics and government on television were scarce before the 1980s.<sup>272</sup> It framed the issues of the day in comprehensive and discernible way via a neutral narrative that was driven not by political bias but by the need to lift the veil on the true nature of British politics. *YM/PM* affected the way we viewed politics, specifically the relationship between a minister and their mandarin, and the show was lauded for its impeccable accuracy.

*Spitting Image* was revolutionary in style using puppets ensured that the characters used were instantly recognisable. It helped engaged people – especially young people – with politics and raise the profile of the government of the day, whilst ridiculing, sniping and sneering at them at the same time. Peter Fluck argued that politicians believed that if there was not a puppet of

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<sup>268</sup> P. Norris, *Democratic Deficit* (New York, 2011), p. 175.

<sup>269</sup> J. Lloyd, *What are the Media doing to our politics?* (London, Constable, 2004), p. 29.

<sup>270</sup> Adams, 'Yes Prime Minister', pp. 64-65.

<sup>271</sup> Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, p. 50; Green, *All Dressed Up*, p. 65.

<sup>272</sup> Adams, 'Yes Prime Minister', p. 68.

them on TV, something was seriously wrong with their career.<sup>273</sup> It took aim at both sides of the House of Commons and the hostile and tendentious jokes enabled the electorate to express rebellion against the government and mock them with a point of reference that anyone could relate to. Because there is a belief that there is innocence within laughter, it is often argued that they it is ‘just a joke’. However, the puppets’ portrayals of the politicians of the day focused purely on the personalities, and thus, helped illuminate the electorate and educate them about their governors. In short, it was what behind the jokes that mattered. It can be argued that the ridiculing nature of the puppets allowed the electorate to vent their frustrations and evade their mental censors as the hostility of the jokes work by making the enemy – in this case the Thatcher cabinet – look amoral, unscrupulous and venal and the Labour opposition look feeble, weak and ineffective.<sup>274</sup> It is undeniable that the public’s perception of politicians changed over the period significantly, and undoubtedly, television satire contributed to this shift to some degree.

To build on Freud and Billig, satire whilst being rebellious, does not inspire outright rebellion and revolution. It instead provides a release of ‘psychical energy’ which relieves our subconscious desire for rebellion and placates the mind.<sup>275</sup> Humour can be considered be a reinforcing power rather than a revolutionary power. Whilst satirists criticised and ferociously savaged the governments of the day, rather than subverting the world of power, humour can strengthen it.<sup>276</sup> *YM/YPM* aphorisms were used as shorthand by the media and politicians alike to criticise the relationship between a minister and their respective mandarin, but did little to change that relationship. John Lloyd furthers this when assessing the downfall of Thatcher: “What did for her was not our show [*Spitting Image*], which she survived

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<sup>273</sup> S. Rowe, (15<sup>th</sup> April 2014), ‘How we made Spitting Image’, *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/apr/15/how-we-made-spitting-image> (accessed 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014).

<sup>274</sup> Freud, *The Joke*, p. xxi.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>276</sup> Billig, *Laughter*, p. 212.

comfortably, but her own Cabinet,” says Lloyd. “In fact, we helped her image. We didn’t intend it, but people saw her as invincible and knew she was not to be brooked. Satire only works if the jokes you are making have a ring of truth. It was only an enhancement of what was actually the case.”<sup>277</sup> What is key is that satire often changes perceptions, not the actuality. In short, ‘jokes are an important thermometer of social change; they are not a thermostat regulating such change.’<sup>278</sup>

‘For a democratic polity to exist it is necessary for a participatory society to exist,’ and television satire facilitates this participation.<sup>279</sup> Television encouraged a monumental shift from a textual culture to a visual one and since the start of the 1960s television has been the main arena in which people seek to gain information about the nebulous political sphere. Moreover, television satirists would seek to demystify the political landscape and provide an engaging commentary which delighted and ridiculed the government and draw considerable attention to the political dilemmas of the day.<sup>280</sup>

Furthermore, theories of humour can help us unlock the meanings of jokes, and to some extent the effects – that satire has. Jokes are forms of contact, communicative acts which can carry dominant ideas and transmit them to a wide audience. What is more, whilst we often believe we are laughing at the intelligence of a joke, our response is far more complex and the joke summons up feelings that are beyond just pleasure.<sup>281</sup> For Freud, laughter is a release of pressure (‘Psychical energy’). Therefore, when *Spitting Image* depicted the Tory Cabinet as emasculated and debilitated by a dominant Thatcher – who makes them sing the

<sup>277</sup> T. Rowley, (9<sup>th</sup> April 2013), ‘I was Maggie Thatcher’s voice in Spitting Image – and my Tory gran hated it’, *Daily Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/margaret-thatcher/9982150/I-was-Maggie-Thatchers-voice-in-Spitting-Image-and-my-Tory-gran-hated-it.html> (Accessed 30 July 2014).

<sup>278</sup> C. Davies, ‘Puritanical and Politically Correct? A Critical Historical Account of Changes in the Censorship of Comedy by the BBC’, in G. E. C. Pattern, C. Powell & S. Wagg (eds.), *The Social Faces of Humour: Practices and Issues* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 52.

<sup>279</sup> C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 43.

<sup>280</sup> J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility* (Oxford, 2010), p. 195.

<sup>281</sup> Carroll, *Humour*, p. 103.



national anthem as she enters the room as the Queen – these images helped to vent the electorate’s frustrations with the government as arguably they were laughing at the emasculation, for example, because it was true to some extent. Humour is dependent on an ‘us’ and ‘them’ polarisation which ultimately at the heart of satire.<sup>282</sup> Admittedly, whilst Freud’s relief is employed here, there are other theories that can help unlock different aspects of humour within British comedy and satire, as ‘no single theory can hope to explain the complexities of humour.’<sup>283</sup>

Furthermore, the role British satire plays in society needs to be explored further. Satire needs to be divided and defined appropriately into specific sub-genres e.g. television satire, print satire and political cartoons. With an in-depth analysis, this line of research could cultivate a new intellectual terrain within British academia. What is more, ‘the examination of humour is still in its infancy.’<sup>284</sup> ‘Although laughter, like language, is often cited as one of the distinguishing features of human beings, philosophers have spent only a small proportion of their time and pages on it and on the allied topic of amusement when compared with the volumes devoted to the philosophy of language.’<sup>285</sup> Further analysis of relief theory, amongst others, is unquestionably vital.

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<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>283</sup> M. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* (London, 2005), p. 175.

<sup>284</sup> Mills, *Television Sitcom*, p. 7.

<sup>285</sup> T. Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York, 2005), p. 381.





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