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STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE

New Labour, 'Sleaze' and Television Drama

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Research Highlights and Abstract

- The article explores attitudes to New Labour in particular and politics in general through analysing their dramatization on TV.
- It indicates that such dramatizations are almost wholly negative, focusing on sleaze, spin and betrayal.
- The article explains the character of such dramas as being the result of the producers' desire to present politics in terms their audiences will accept.
- It suggests that, as a consequence, popular hostility to politics is reinforced by television drama and so indicates that culture has an independent part to play in this process.

Echoing Plato's banishment of artists, mainstream political scientists have excluded serious consideration of art from their discipline. Yet, there are grounds for believing that it can help address what Gerry Stoker suggests is one of social science's greatest failings: understanding 'what politics means to citizens'. This study of New Labour's television dramatization suggests it can help political scientists better appreciate the dynamics underpinning the much-noted decline of popular trust in representative politics. It looks at the reasons for the narrowing of the public's picture of politics by focusing on the changing production context for television drama during the New Labour period, something that led it to emphasise 'sleaze'. The article suggests such dramas consequently helped make more credible the public's pre-existing prejudices about what they supposed was the corrupt nature of Britain's political class.

Keywords: New Labour; trust; representation; television; drama; fiction

During the 1990s political strategists embraced what they believed to be the power of 'narrative' and encouraged politicians across the world to tell stories designed to evoke an emotional, as opposed to a rational, response amongst electors (Salmon 2010). Those associated with New Labour were among the first in Britain to explicitly use narrative for political ends. In fact, Philip Gould recalled of his time as one of Tony Blair's closest advisors: 'People would say we need a narrative. That's to say what we need is an explanation of what is going on that *gives meaning to events*'.[1]

This article analyses the role New Labour played in more conventional narratives, that is dramas produced and broadcast by British television. It explains how one narrative theme—corruption or, more colloquially, 'sleaze'—defined fictional renderings of New Labour, the administration elected in 1997 having rightly been

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described as 'the most dramatised British government in history'.[2] The article refers to compelling survey evidence, which suggests that screen dramatizations of politics significantly influence audience attitudes and that 'drama-documentaries'—especially popular with dramatists of New Labour—are uniquely persuasive. To help assess why 'sleaze' dominated these fictional renderings the article explores the production context and motives of those who wrote such dramas. For the association between New Labour and 'sleaze' in television drama was not merely a reflection of the popular mood. It was also the result of important changes in the nature of television, which meant dramatists were increasingly encouraged to reinforce the belief that politicians of all parties were uniquely corrupt.

Why Fiction is Important to Politics

Britain is one of a number of countries to experience what many see as a decline in popular trust in representative politics. Scholars who first investigated this matter on an international scale worked within the behaviouralist tradition and so believed falling levels of trust were a reflection of social change (Inglehart 1988; Putnam et al. 1994). Robert Putnam most prominently saw its root cause as the reduction of 'social capital', that is the extent to which citizens connected with their family, friends, neighbours and co-workers. He argued that as social capital diminished so did those norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, which had once underpinned popular participation in—and regard for—representative politics (Putnam 2000).

Peter Hall pointed out, however, that, while signs of increasing antipathy towards politics were obvious in Britain, social capital had *not* declined (Hall 1999). Colin Hay and Gerry Stoker have subsequently taken the lead in looking more closely into why the British now 'hate politics' on such an unprecedented scale (Stoker 2006; Hay 2007). Employing contrasting methodologies, students of the subject disagree about the reasons for falling party memberships, turnout at elections and trust in politicians (Stoker 2010). Yet, according to Hay, what every account shares is an ignorance of: 'the cognitive processes in and through which we come to attribute motivations to the behaviour we witness, or how we develop and revise the assumptions about human nature that we project on to others' (Hay 2007, 162). As Stoker concedes, this *lacuna* is part of social scientists' wider failure to understand 'what politics *means* to citizens' (Stoker 2010, 63).

By focusing on television dramas about New Labour this article aims to help political scientists better appreciate this missing dimension by encouraging them to embrace a wider understanding of the process through which people attach meaning to representative politics. For as Catherine Zuckert has argued, fiction can help students of politics reach the parts that other approaches have hitherto failed to reach, that is: 'the attitudes, emotions, and opinions that shape and are shaped by people's circumstances' (Zuckert 1995, 189).

In their search for 'meaning', some political scientists have already noted the power of culture, in particular the extent to which the news media can shape perceptions (Doig and Wilson 1995; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Heywood and Krastev 2006). Those working in political communications in the United States also suggest that an increasing number of television viewers cannot easily distinguish between

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entertainment and news or current affairs programmes, meaning that the former now significantly effects how they think about 'real' politics.[3] Despite interest in the mediated nature of politics, few political scientists—certainly on this side of the Atlantic—have properly considered the role of fiction within this process. Just as Plato banished artists from his Republic so many political scientists have excluded consideration of art from their analysis.[4]

Plato believed artists appealed to the 'less rational part of our nature' and so distorted how the 'ignorant multitude' thought about politics (Plato 1974, 431–432). There are certainly numerous contemporaries drawn from a variety of disciplines who believe that the imagination plays an inescapable role in shaping perceptions of the real. Sociologist Margaret Somers, for example, wrote that all claims to knowledge 'are transmitted *via* some kind of cultural schema; they are culturally embedded—that is, mediated through symbolic systems and practices, such as metaphors, ritualized codes, stories, analogies, or homologies' (Somers 1999). Originating in the field of political communications, Murray Edelman believed that the role of the imagined was especially important within politics. He argued that this was because few people had direct experience of political decision-making beyond voting. Thus, Edelman claimed, art supplied an *ersatz* form of knowledge, one unchallenged by personal familiarity, meaning that: 'art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, belief about politics, and consequent actions ultimately spring' (Edelman 1995, 2–7). Following this way of thinking, historian Jeff Smith argued that '[t]he stories that Americans tell and have told about presidents' have played a critical part in forming how Americans think about their chief executives (Smith 2009, 9).

Yet, Edelman warned that there is 'no simple causal connection' between art and political belief, 'because works of art are themselves part of the social milieu from which political movements also emerge' (Edelman 1995, 2–7). Thus, just like the 'structure and agency' debate, exactly defining the role played by a text and the context in which it was produced has bedevilled discussion about the wider impact of fiction (Marsh 2010). It is now, however, generally agreed—as in the former debate—that, as Andy Medhurst put it: '[t]exts and contexts are indivisibly interrelated discourses, each is part of the other, and to conceptualise them as discrete is to render full analysis impossible' (Medhurst 1984, 35).

It is possible to go beyond such generalisations. For while some claim that all texts are open to contrasting interpretations, thanks to a number of US studies we can establish the kind of effect screen dramas have on their audiences' political dispositions. A film about how a candidate was packaged by his media handlers encouraged audiences to subsequently think image and its manipulation much more important in determining electoral success (Sigelman and Sigelman 1974). A television series that fictionalised the Nixon Whitehouse's Watergate break-in made viewers believe government dishonesty and immorality to be significantly more important problems than before (Kaid et al. 1981). A movie depicting Senator John Glenn's career as an astronaut in heroic terms encouraged audiences to feel appreciably more positive about his candidacy for President (Adams et al. 1985). The vast majority of an audience of a film that controversially claimed the assassination of President Kennedy was due to a conspiracy of powerful opponents of his plan to

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disengage from Vietnam believed the evidence put to them. Moreover, the sense of anger and hopelessness induced by the movie saw their intention to vote fall significantly (Butler et al. 1995). Finally, after watching episodes of the television series *The West Wing*—which gave a sympathetic account of the fictional President Bartlett—viewers became much more positive about Presidents Clinton and Bush (Holbert et al. 2005).

Such investigations—which currently have no British equivalents—have their own agendas and methodologies. Taken together, however, they suggest that while an individual screen drama cannot overturn an audience's fundamental beliefs and values, they do reinforce prior opinions and increase the salience of the story's central subject (Adams et al. 1985, 334–335; Feldman and Sigelman 1985, 335). In other words, dramas that appeal to preconceived and strongly held views are likely to make audience members notably more prejudiced than they were before.

If the survey method employed by these studies can measure what audiences think about a topic immediately before and after engaging with a particular drama it cannot indicate its long-term effect. As with assessments of party election broadcasts, a survey-based approach cannot isolate what impact one work—or set of works—has on underlying attitudes, subject as they are to multifarious other influences.[5] However, if over a prolonged, period television dramas consistently took one view of a subject, one that echoed their audience's preconceptions, these studies supply strong grounds for believing that such dramas will help to delegitimize alternative perspectives of that subject in the 'real world' of politics. For as Liesbet van Zoonen suggests, screen dramas increasingly inform how audiences construct and perform their 'political self'. They are, she claims, an important resource from which popular ideas about politics are drawn (van Zoonen 2007). Thus, how such screen dramas depict real politics matters.

Method

To make its case the article employs a textual analysis of the themes articulated in 24 television fictions that: took those associated with New Labour as one of their main subjects; were first broadcast on television; and produced in the UK during the period 1994–2010 (see Table 1). As many of this number were series, this accounts for 101 unique broadcasts, a total that does not include repeat showings or DVD sales. There were numerous other depictions of politics broadcast on British television—some of which were produced in the United States about Washington politics—notably *The West Wing*—while at least one—*The Special Relationship*—touched on New Labour but was made in Hollywood. More than a few homemade series—such as *Absolute Power, Spooks and Dr Who*—included characters, subjects and references that arguably owed their origin to New Labour. However, to aid precision, this dramatic hinterland has been excluded, although it should be noted that the latter examples strongly echo the themes evident in the dramas analysed here.

Television, rather than any other medium, has been chosen due to its mass audience. When an average audience of 2.7 million was said to have watched BBC1's *The Project* (2002) some deemed it a failure—but this was a number that would have turned most novelists and writers for the stage, radio and even cinema green with envy.[6]

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Table 1: Television Fictions of New Labour, 1994–2010

Category	Title and number of episodes	Themes
Comedies: 7	*Crossing the Floor* (BBC2, 1995)	Spin; All Same; Sex
	Annie's Bar (C4, 1996): 10	Spin; All Same; Abuse; Sex
	Mr White Goes to Westminster (C4, 1997)	Spin; All Same
	Norman Ormal (BBC1, 1998)	All Same
	Sermon from St Albion's (ITV, 1998–9): 8	Spin
	My Dad's the Prime Minister (BBC1, 2003–4): 13	Spin
	The Thick of It (BBC4, 2005-): 17	Spin; All Same
Comedies depicting real figures: 4	*A Very Social Secretary* (C4, 2005)	Spin; All Same; Abuse; Sex
	The Trial of Tony Blair (C4, 2006)	Spin; All Same; Abuse
	Confessions of a Diary Secretary (ITV, 2007)	Abuse; Sex
	On Expenses (BBC4, 2010)	All Same; Abuse
Dramas: 8	*Our Friends in the North* (BBC2, 1996): 9	All Same; Corruption
	Giving Tongue (BBC2, 1996)	Spin
	The Project (BBC1, 2002): 2	Spin; All Same
	State of Play (BBC1, 2003): 6	Spin; Sex; Corruption
	The Deputy (BBC1, 2004)	Spin; Corruption; Hope
	The Amazing Mrs Pritchard (BBC1, 2006): 6	All Same; Hope
	Gideon's Daughter (BBC1, 2006)	Spin
	Party Animals (BBC2, 2007): 8	Spin; Sex; Hope
Dramas depicting real figures: 4	*The Deal* (C4, 2003)	Spin; All Same
	The Government Inspector (C4, 2005)	Spin; Abuse
	Ten Days to War (BBC2, 2008): 8	Spin
	Mo (C4, 2010)	Spin; Hope
Documentaries with dramatization: 1	*Tony Blair: Rock Star* (C4, 2006)	

Television was, moreover, part of a cultural continuum that embraced these other mediums. During this period the stage was also the venue for critical works about New Labour, most notably those penned by David Hare (Fielding 2009). Novelists similarly tackled New Labour, perhaps the most popular being Robert Harris whose *The Ghost* (2007) was turned into a 2009 movie. Indeed many of those who wrote television dramas about New Labour had done so elsewhere. Before Alistair Beaton scripted Channel 4's *A Very Social Secretary* (2005) and *The Trial of Tony Blair* (2006) he had written two New Labour satires for the stage. The porous nature of the boundary between these different forms is further illustrated by the fact that while *The Queen*

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(2006), in which Michael Sheen made his second outing as Tony Blair, was given a cinema release, it had originally been intended for the small screen.

This examination is supplemented by reference to the known intentions of writers and producers—and to the changing content in which they operated, one that pushed them further towards confirming rather than challenging audience preconceptions. In the absence of relevant audience studies, the article refers to the reactions of journalists, figures who have long been the gatekeepers of public taste and who continue to play a significant role in the ultimate impact of any television drama (Feldman and Sigelman 1985, 570–571; Gardiner 1999, 14). The article, finally, refers to comments registered on the Internet Movie Database to assess how some particularly informed audience members viewed these dramas.[7]

'Sleaze'

Part of an international process in which, according to Paul Heywood and Ivan Krastev 'corruption rhetoric has been instrumentalised for political ends', New Labour won office in 1997 with Tony Blair offering the public a 'new politics' after years of Conservative 'sleaze' had, he claimed, undermined faith in government (Labour Party 1997; Heywood and Krastev 2006, 158). It is unclear how much the issue contributed to New Labour's 1997 victory, but Conservative 'sleaze' certainly dominated much of the campaign. Blair had, however, been reluctant to use 'sleaze' against his opponents as, he admitted in private, the 'reality was our politics was probably [the] least corrupt of anywhere in the world' (Campbell 2007, 27).

Certainly, according to Transparency International's definition of the term—'the abuse of entrusted power for private gain'—British politics was not seriously 'corrupt'.[8] 'Sleaze', however, embraced more than just that sort of dishonesty. A hazy but potent term, 'sleaze' gained widespread currency soon after the Conservatives' 1992 election victory. Spawned by a news media seeking to translate the travails of the Major government into saleable copy, it gave shape to a disparate set of real and long-standing public concerns about the nature of representative politics.[9] 'Sleaze' did not create these discontents, but by drawing them together into a single concept it invested them with a compelling immediacy (Dunleavy and Weir 1995, 602–606).

Incorporating worries about the close relationship between representative politics and the private sector, 'sleaze' sometimes embraced the practice of former Conservative ministers cashing in on their insider knowledge by becoming company directors; the extent to which the Conservative party relied on donations from dubious millionaires; and most notably the payment of MPs by lobbyists who wanted questions asked in the Commons (Dunleavy et al. 1995, 603–604; Leigh and Vulliamy 1997). If these instances of actual, near- or merely alleged corruption preoccupied the broadsheet press, the tabloids more often employed 'sleaze' to characterize party figures' adulterous affairs or idiosyncratic sexual practices. Some saw this as a result of the government's 1993 'Back to Basics' campaign, the central feature of which was ministers' stress on the importance of 'moral' conduct. That gave the press the green light to expose politicians who preached morality in public but did not practice it in private (Doig and Wilson 1995, 569–570).

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Some commentators tried to distinguish between 'sleaze proper' and the 'more venial misdemeanours' of a sexual nature (Mortimore 1995, 579). This completely missed the point, for it was the news media's conjoining of financial corruption with that of a moral nature which gave 'sleaze' its unique purchase. Rather than 'muddying the waters' and 'confusing the public' the press gave shape to a popular view of the generally corrupt nature of the political class (Mortimore 1995, 582–584). 'Sleaze' gave 'meaning to events' by drawing together what might otherwise have been seen as disconnected actions (or, often, *alleged* actions) into a seemingly coherent whole. The tabloid emphasis on adulterous affairs and other sexual adventures far removed from financial corruption reinforced—eroticized if you will—the widespread populist belief that politicians could not be trusted by a decent, honourable and much abused public. 'Sleaze' was, in other words, a reflection of, explanation for, and contributory cause behind, declining levels of trust in party politics. It provided a narrative frame within which many Britons came to understand politics—one exploited by New Labour prior to 1997 and thereafter by the party's critics.

The ease with which the tables were turned on New Labour was due to the fact that while before 1997 'sleaze' was exclusively associated with the ruling Conservatives, *all* politicians were held to be hypocritical and possessed of low moral standards—as shown in qualitative voter studies conducted just after 1992 (Radice and Pollard 1993, 8; Radice and Pollard 1994, 10). Later, more comprehensive investigations confirmed the extent to which politicians irrespective of party were regarded as a disreputable elite (Ram 2006, 190). Quantitative data told the same story. Since 1983 MORI has asked people if they trusted politicians to tell the truth or not: the number who thought politicians liars varied, without an obvious trend, from a minimum of 71 per cent (in 2004) to a maximum of 82 per cent (in 2009). Since 1994 MORI also asked whose interests respondents believed MPs put first: 'their own' was always by far the most popular answer, varying between 45 per cent (2006) and 62 per cent (2009).[10]

It should not have come as a surprise, therefore, that New Labour was accused of being guilty of 'sleaze' almost as soon as Blair entered Downing Street. As with the Major government, the charge sheet became long and eclectic: one 2007 book included 140 examples (Dale and Fawkes 2007). These instances can be grouped together under the following headings, with illustrative examples.

Financial Corruption

Focusing on New Labour's reliance on donations from rich individuals John Major claimed financial 'sleaze'—that is the buying of influence of the sort recognized by Transparency International as corruption—had become 'institutionalised' under Blair.[11] Described by the *Sunday Times* as 'the first sleaze scandal of the new Labour era', in 1997 the party returned £1 million it had received from Bernie Ecclestone due to the perception this had changed government policy.[12] Blair's last days as Prime Minister were also plagued by a police investigation of ultimately unproven allegations that the party had recommended large donors for peerages.

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Abuse of Power

Peter Mandelson—'Lord Sleaze' as the *Daily Mail* called him—was often at the heart of concerns that ministers were granting those close to them special favours.[13] In 1998 he resigned from the Cabinet following his failure to declare a loan from an MP whose business affairs his department was investigating. In 2001 Mandelson again resigned due to accusations he used his position to influence the passport application of a large donor to the Millennium Dome. In 2004 David Blunkett also resigned as Home Secretary due to evidence he had speeded up the residence visa application for his mistress' nanny. Blunkett resigned again in 2005 due his failure to declare ownership of shares in a company seeking government contracts.

Sexual Impropriety

In 1997 Robin Cook left his wife for his long-term mistress when threatened with tabloid exposure. In 1998 the married Ron Davies resigned as Welsh Secretary after a 'moment of madness' at a well-known meeting place for gay men. The public recriminations that followed the ending of Blunkett's affair with a married woman in 2004 did not directly lead to his resignation but certainly harmed his reputation as a serious public figure, as did news of John Prescott's adulterous affair with a civil servant when that hit the headlines in 2006.

Spinning

New Labour's desire to present its case in as best a light as possible was derogatively described as 'spinning', which some saw—especially under the aegis of Alistair Campbell—as tantamount to lying. One of the most infamous instances occurred when Stephen Byers' special advisor wrote on the day of the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers that it was a 'very good day' to bury bad news. The most significant example was the 'dodgy dossier', a briefing document released by Downing Street in 2003 during the run-up to the Iraq War. This contained claims that Iraq had the capacity to deploy biological weapons within 45 minutes and formed part of a wider perception that Blair had misled the public about the existence of Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction.

As with its Conservative predecessor, New Labour 'sleaze' mostly consisted of accusations of financial corruption and the abuse of power, none of which resulted in a successful prosecution. Sexual depravity also remained a key feature. By the end of Major's period in office even obscure backbench MPs with no public pretensions to moral superiority were being exposed for their peccadillos.[14] This continued under New Labour: sexual impropriety was designated 'sleazy' even when the minister concerned was single. The extension of the term to include 'spinning' was, however, a development specific to New Labour, albeit one that tapped into the long-standing conviction that all politicians are liars.

Bearing in mind Edelman's point, there was a massive gap between how people perceived and experienced 'sleaze'. According to Eurobarometer, in 2009 62 per cent of Britons believed that 'the giving and taking of bribes, and the abuse of

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positions of power for personal gain' was 'widespread' amongst MPs (Eurobarometer 2009). Pointing to the role of the press in sustaining consciousness of 'sleaze', most measures of political mistrust rose in 2009 in the wake of the *Daily Telegraph*'s exposure of MPs' inflated expenses claims. Yet even before that, in 1994, 64 per cent believed that 'most members of Parliament make a lot of money by using public office improperly' while a survey conducted just before 2009 concluded that most people viewed politics as 'institutionally corrupt' (Birch and Allen 2010, 580; Mortimore 1995, 580). Yet, these beliefs were not based on personal experience: the 2009 Eurobarometer poll discovered that just three per cent of Britons claimed they had been asked to pay a bribe (Eurobarometer 2009).

Television Political Drama before New Labour

Well before 'sleaze', fictions about politics habitually treated their subject in critical terms, often highlighting corruption. Indeed, according to Colin Hay the dramas of William Shakespeare form part of a 'timeless' critique of politics (Hay 2007, 7). In his search for explanations of why Britons increasingly 'hate politics' Hay consequently looked elsewhere, ignoring the extent to which fictions about politics significantly changed their character over recent decades.

One of the first novels to depict an election, Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* (1837), showed how the contending parties bribed voters. Such corruption was nonetheless presented indulgently. The rising politician in Oscar Wilde's play *An Ideal Husband* (1895) sold Cabinet secrets to an international financier. Yet Wilde dismissed this as an early indiscretion in what was an otherwise honourable career. Winifred Holtby's novel *South Riding* (1936) even showed how political corruption could have benevolent ends. This lenient view was less evident in the post-war cinema, which often depicted politicians as self-interested and corrupt (Fielding 2008, 121–124). Moreover, financial corruption invariably went hand-in-hand with loose morals, a connection also made in the BBC television comedy series *Swizzlewick* (1964), although that was soon withdrawn under a barrage of complaints. In fact, post-war broadcasters were sensitive to the charge of bringing politics into disrepute. Thus in 1950 the Chair of the BBC Governors prevented the showing of a light comedy because it suggested a Cabinet Minister would put party before country (Gielgud 1950, vii–xiii; Briggs 1979, 686–687). In 1969 ITV broadcast *Mrs Wilson's Diary*, based on an irreverent play about life in Number 10—but only after the Independent Television Association ensured that references to George Brown's drinking had been cut.[15] Such instances were in any case offset by series like *The Challengers* (1972), *The Nearly Man* (1975) and *Bill Brand* (1976), all broadcast on ITV. These showed politicians to be decent, if flawed, and defined representative politics as a serious dialogue between idealism and pragmatism. Indeed Edmund Ward claimed he wrote *The Challengers*, which focused on two neighbouring Labour and Conservative MPs, to show viewers how important was the work of those they sent to Westminster.[16]

The 1980s saw a shift in the tone and allowable content of television depictions of politics. ITV's *Spitting Image* (1984–96) held up all politicians to ridicule through the use of grotesque puppet caricatures and sharp satiric writing. It was, however, *Yes Minister* (BBC 1980–88) that made the crucial impact—in terms of the size of its

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audience and the extent to which it was believed to echo reality. Certainly most critics believed in the 'uncanny accuracy' of the series'.[17] As the producer of *The Thick of It* (BBC 2005-) Armando Iannucci subsequently asserted, *Yes Minister* 'was more than a sitcom, it was a crash course in Contemporary Political Studies—it opened the lid on the way the Government really operated'.[18] This presentation of 'reality', co-writer Antony Jay later admitted, was informed by public choice economics, which lay 'at the root of almost every episode'.[19] That meant that while the series did not show civil servants, politicians and public employees to be technically corrupt, they were presented as systematically self-interested and all-too-ready to fleece the taxpayer.

If *Yes Minister* was a comedy many believed spoke the truth about Whitehall, during the latter years of Conservative rule television produced an increasing number of drama-documentaries on a variety of topics. Due to a prohibition on representing living political figures, the BBC had not depicted Winston Churchill dramatically during his lifetime. The Corporation was generally keen to distinguish 'documentary' from 'drama'.[20] However, in 1974 the BBC broadcast *Walk with Destiny*, a dramatization of Churchill's life in which Richard Burton took the lead. Parallel with this break down between fact and fiction, the method of reconstructing actual events and depicting real people by using stand-ins or actors was becoming more popular with television journalists, notably those on the ITV documentary series *World in Action*. One of its first full-scale reconstructions examined how the Labour Cabinet agreed to bale out the Chrysler car company in 1976 in which journalists played ministers. As they developed, such programmes contained scenes based on journalistic research but included others generated by guesswork or which compressed actual events to make them more interesting to viewers. Using this method, ITV dramatized Margaret Thatcher's exit from power in *Thatcher: the Final Days* (1991).

Popular with dramatists and audiences others were concerned that, as Charles Moore put it, the term 'drama-documentary' was a 'contradiction'.[21] Certainly, students of dramas 'based on a true story' believe them to be uniquely persuasive, however inaccurate they may be (Lipkin 2002 and 2011). Research suggests that even audiences primed with the facts are likely to believe the most blatantly inaccurate screen renderings (Butler et al. 2009). This is also true of those who possess first hand knowledge of the subject depicted. Geoffrey Howe, whose resignation precipitated Thatcher's fall, recalled watching *Thatcher: The Final Days*:

> At almost every moment when my actions, my words, were being depicted, I was conscious of serious, no doubt unintentional inaccuracies. Literally nothing was quite right. Yet for all those sequences where I was not on screen, disbelief was largely suspended. The talking, moving picture is a compelling witness. 'So that's why George'—or Peter or whoever—'did that', I found myself thinking time and again. Beguilingly, the cameras appeared to be telling the truth, except where I positively knew them to be inventive and false (Howe 1994, 683).

The early 1990s also saw the screening of dramas that, while evoking immediate political reality, did not pretend to be documentaries. BBC2's *A Very Open Prison* (1994) featured a right-wing Home Secretary in charge of prisons that leaked

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prisoners. The writer-director Guy Jenkin denied it was a drama-documentary, instead calling it a 'fiction arising out of real life events': the parallels between the made-up politician and Michael Howard were certainly hard to miss.[22] Yet, even when its producers made no claims to authenticity, journalists still noted the 'stark parallels', in this instance between the subject matter of Channel Four's *The Politician's Wife* (1995)—a story of an adulterous, quintessentially 'sleazy' Conservative minister—and real events. One even suggested it 'could have been a documentary'.[23] As further evidence of the blurring of the boundary between reality and its representation, political journalists were also apt to make comparisons between Neil Hamilton, the Conservative MP accused of various instances of 'sleaze' and Alan B'Stard, the completely corrupt Thatcherite politician in the knock-about ITV comedy series *The New Statesman* (1987–92) (Leigh and Vulliamy 1997, 47–59).

The New Labour Dramas

The New Labour period coincided with the decline of 'serious' television dramas of the sort that challenged audience preconceptions, in favour of soap operas, costume dramas and crime serials, a process begun in the 1980s. Greater competitive pressures meant those commissioning drama especially for BBC1 and ITV1 increasingly played safe, meaning the range of dramas narrowed and became more formulaic. In the chase for audiences now scattered amongst many more channels than ever before, those responsible for commissioning terrestrial television dramas became concerned as never before to give audiences what they presumed they wanted (Davies 2000, 66–67; Cooke 2003, 163, 191–194).

The view of politics presented by the New Labour dramas was consequently of a *very* particular sort. As can be seen in Table 1 television generally evoked a New Labour associated with 'sleaze': significant references to spinning are present in 18 works; sexual impropriety in six; the abuse of power also in six; but financial corruption (possibly for legal reasons) in just three. That Labour and the Conservatives were, in respect of 'sleaze', all the same was a theme present in twelve fictions, making it the second most popular. Indeed, one of the earliest themes articulated on the screen was that Blair's party shared much in common with the Conservatives. Both *Crossing the Floor* (BBC2, 1996) and *Normal Ormal* (BBC1, 1998) were about Conservatives who did well under Thatcher but left their sinking ship to join, seamlessly, New Labour. Finally, only four works gave viewers any hope that this dismal situation might be overcome through some form of change, emanating either from within New Labour or without.

As striking as the thematic dominance of 'sleaze' is the extent to which these works aspired to some kind of authenticity, for the breaking down of the boundary between real and fictional politics continued apace. Stephen Frears, who directed Channel Four's *The Deal* (2003), an account of the Blair-Brown relationship before 1994, claimed he was astonished to have been able to make a film about a sitting Prime Minister, seeing it as rather 'a cheeky thing to do'.[24] *The Deal* was, however, just one of eight such 'cheeky' fictions: David Blunkett, Gordon Brown, Alistair Campbell, Peter Mandelson, Michael Martin, Mo Mowlam, John Prescott, Claire Short and, most frequently, Tony Blair found themselves played by actors on the small screen. The number of fictions 'arising out of real life events' also increased,

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including *Crossing the Floor* (Alan Howarth's defection to Labour); *Mr White Goes to Westminster* (Martin Bell's election as an independent MP); *The Project* (the rise of New Labour); *Gideon's Daughter* (the making of the Millennium Dome) and *The Deputy* (the adventures of a Prescott-like Deputy Prime Minister). *The Thick of It* can also be included in this category, for despite denials, the central character Malcolm Tucker was essentially based on Campbell. The series also echoed real events, with the season broadcast in late 2009 including episodes in which: a minister had to decide whether to send her child to a private school or a failing comprehensive; a newly installed, socially inept Prime Minister is beset by plotting colleagues; and an election is called by the governing party which it is widely expected to lose.

To add to the appearance of authenticity many works employed retired or backbench MPs (such as Edwina Currie, Roy Hattersley and David Steel) and political journalists (like Michael Crick, John Humphrys and Jon Snow) in cameo roles as themselves. If this had also happened on a modest scale in *Yes Minister*, digital technology now allowed television to make it appear that actors were interacting with real politicians through the blending of archive footage with dramatic scenes. One 'documentary'—*Tony Blair: Rock Star* (Channel 4, 2006)—even combined interviews with real people who knew the actual Blair as a young man with scenes that dramatized, for comic effect, the episodes they described. In 2008 BBC2's current affairs programme *Newsnight* took this process a step further by commissioning *10 Days to War*, a series of eight short dramas that depicted decision-making prior to the invasion of Iraq. To establish some sort of a barrier between 'drama' and 'news' the episodes were shown prior to *Newsnight* rather than in the programme itself—but their subject nonetheless set the agenda for discussions conducted between the 'real players' in the programme itself.[25]

The boundary between representation and actuality was in other words, significantly blurred during the New Labour period. Those who wrote such dramas had good reasons to produce them, claiming they revealed their subject's 'essential truth', while making it 'more accessible' to audiences and had a greater impact than fictions that did not depict real figures.[26] Yet, the danger for audiences was that, as Andrew Billen wrote of *The Deal*: 'At the end, when we saw the real Tony and Gordon on College Green, we barely noticed they were not [actors Michael] Sheen and [David] Morrissey'.[27] Of those who expressed a view as to the realism or otherwise of the dramas analysed here on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), 60 per cent described what they had viewed as being 'realistic', 'authentic', 'believable', or 'plausible'. Perhaps the most extreme comment was about *The Deal* of which it was said: 'Watch the news afterward and you won't know which program was the real one'.[28] In contrast 40 per cent expressed different levels of disbelief and articulated an appreciation of dramatic license, although even some of this latter group expressed discomfort at not being able to differentiate between 'drama' and 'documentary'. David Blunkett, subject of the highly unfavourable *A Very Social Secretary*, certainly found it 'astonishing ... to hear people I know believing that it is a genuine portrayal and not a piece of fiction' (Blunkett 2006, 829–830).

One reason political strategists sought to use narrative was because it promised to help them appeal to voters' emotions more than their reason. The dramas assessed here not only enjoyed unique claims to authenticity but they also retained drama's

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established power to tap into viewers' emotions. Of watching *Our Friends in the North* on DVD fifteen years after its original broadcast one IMDb poster claimed: 'I cried all over again at human weakness, corrupt politics, illusions and disillusionment ... All the younger generation should see this. It encapsulates their immediate historical background and provides a context by which they could understand why England is in the state it's in today.[29] Of *The Government Inspector* another poster wrote: 'I was almost moved to tears at the tragic waste of his life. He was truly a martyr for the truth'.[30] Such comments are evidence of the intensity of the viewing experience and suggest that these dramas—like the literature devoted to corruption in 18th-century Britain—helped make their themes 'emotionally more plausible' (Stratmann 2007).

Numbers

Of the 24 works analysed here, nine were broadcast on BBC1 or ITV1, channels that aimed to attract mainstream viewers. Notably, just two were screened on the latter, one of those being the short-lived late Sunday evening comedy series *Sermon from St. Albion's* (1998–9), a slot associated with minority audiences and former home to *Spitting Image*. The majority of works were produced for Channel 4 or its digital offshoot More4 (eight) as well as BBC2 or BBC4 (seven). These channels had very particular remits: in the case of Channel 4 it was to attract younger and more diverse viewers while BBC4 claimed to be 'the most intellectually and culturally rewarding channel on television'.[31]

By the 1990s when commissioning work, broadcasters' primary aim was to attract viewers. In the case of BBC1 and especially ITV, whose only source of income is advertising revenue, this meant big audiences. As Stephen Coleman's research into the attitudes of soap opera producers suggests, by this period, those seeking mass audiences fought shy of depicting politics for a variety of reasons, the most important of which was the belief that audiences would not stand for it (Coleman 2008, 6–14). According to Neil McKay, who wrote *Mo* (2010) for Channel Four, broadcasters were mostly afraid that their presumed audience saw politics as 'boring'. The subject, he claimed, was an especially 'hard sell' when faced by commissioning editors from BBC1 and ITV1. Therefore, while *Mo* was about the life and death of a Cabinet Minister the production team 'pitched it as a personal story, not a political one' as they did not want Channel Four executives to think they would 'frighten the audience' with too much politics.[32] When producer Charles Pattinson persuaded Michael Jackson, Controller of BBC2 to commission *Our Friends in the North* (1996), he was, in a similar fashion, forced to characterise it as a 'posh soap' rather than about political corruption (Eaton 2005, 24). For the same reason, Ben Richards who wrote the BBC2 series *Party Animals* (2007) described it as drama about 'young people who work in politics, rather than a drama about politics itself.'[33] While Tony Saint scripted *On Expenses* (2010) for BBC4, he also had experience of Corporation commissioning editors rejecting projects saying 'it's too much about politics'. This meant Saint had 'to write around politics, rather than about politics' and—like his peers—'find a connection with an audience' that did not depend upon politics (Fielding 2011, 345–46).

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Figures gathered by the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board confirm commissioning editors' fears that for the most part audiences for dramas that took politics as their subject were, in television terms, not large. When broadcast on the two main channels political fiction performed comparatively poorly.[34] *Confessions of a Diary Secretary* attracted 4.5 million viewers, which meant it was only ITV's 26th best-watched programme in the week of its transmission. Similarly *The Deputy*'s 5.4 million seems respectable until one discovers that 25 BBC1 programmes did better that week. Perhaps the best performing drama with a New Labour theme during this period was *State of Play*, which involved the murder of an MP's mistress and the corruption of government by the oil industry. Its six episodes averaged 5.2 million viewers, one of which was the 14th best performing programme in the week of its broadcast.

Political programmes did—relatively—better on the minority channels. *The Trial of Tony Blair* was the most watched programme on More4; *On Expenses*, about the MPs' expenses scandal, was the second most watched programme on BBC4; and *Mo* the third most popular on Channel Four. However, this still meant only 508,000, 827,000 and three million viewers watched these programmes respectively. While always in the channel's weekly top 10, the long-running *The Thick of It* only averaged 220,000 viewers on BBC4—and when it transferred in its third season to BBC2 no episode in the series appeared in that channel's top thirty, a fate also shared by *Party Animals*, whose eight episodes reputedly averaged just one million viewers.

Motives

Given these difficulties, it is striking the extent to which the 'connection' most commissioning editors believed would appeal to their presumed audience was one that emphasised 'sleaze'. So far as these influential gatekeepers were concerned, if politics was not to be 'boring' it had to be 'sleazy'. This embrace of a populist disdain for representative politics as a whole paradoxically gave writers, many of whom strongly identified with the left, a platform to attack New Labour for its abandonment of 'socialism'.

Thus, while, at one level Peter Flannery wrote a 'posh soap', his *Our Friends in the North* was also a drama that presented New Labour as the latest instalment in a never-ending story of endemic political corruption. As he put it:

> Life's a circle. Regimes come and go, but lies and betrayals go on forever. There has always been corruption in politics ... we live in an ongoing culture of corruption. *Friends in the North* is the story of people who tried to do something about it, and failed. It may be a Utopian ideal, but we must keep trying because the drift is always in the other direction. Corruption breeds corruption. I'd love to believe that a Labour victory would start a clean-up in politics, but I'm afraid they'll be trapped by the very institutions that support them.[35]

Michael Wearing, the series' executive producer, furthermore claimed it conveyed, 'disillusionment with politics and everything politicians say they can offer' and was 'as critical of the complacency and innate corruption of the left as it is of the right'.[36]

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Peter Kosminsky described himself and scriptwriter Leigh Jackson as 'standard Labour-type figures' disillusioned by New Labour.[37] It was this disenchantment that underpinned *The Project*. As Jackson stated: 'we watched the Conservatives disintegrate under a deluge of sleaze and corruption. So when Labour won, it was like a new dawn. There was a tremendous feeling across Britain of rejuvenation, of hope and idealism in the future, which I think now has evaporated'. Jackson believed that by 2002 many were consumed by 'the growing realisation that after 18 years we might have voted in another "Tory" government, only this one was more efficient and twice as ruthless'.[38] Kosminsky looked back with nostalgia to the early 1980s when the far-left ruled the Labour party:

> Back then, to be interested in politics, to be active in politics, was quite a sexy thing to do. It is now the province of crooks and charlatans. People about whom your first instinct is not to believe them. People have lost sight of the fact that it is possible to be passionate about politics, to live and breathe it. To want to change the world in a good way. Not to become powerful and famous and rich and have large flats in Notting Hill that you can't really afford.

Moving on from that reference to Peter Mandelson's mortgage troubles, Kosminsky added that, with New Labour, 'there is a ferocious and vicious determination to speak with one voice. ... You can call it spin or you can call it lying, it amounts to the same thing'.[39]

Alistair Beaton was another left-of-centre writer who saw his work—'stuff that explores and explodes power'—as motivated by a 'sense of outrage,' the object of which was to 'rattle' politicians' assumptions. Seeing New Labour as 'an authoritarian and right wing administration' his *A Very Social Secretary* asked: 'what had become of Labour's roots and Labour's principles?' To answer that question, Beaton used Blunkett's affair with Kimberley Quinn, publisher of the Conservative-supporting *Spectator*, to illustrate New Labour's embrace of reactionary policies. Beaton's *The Trial of Tony Blair* was moreover an 'exploration of anger' motivated by his opposition to the invasion of Iraq.[40] Iraq even influenced *The Deal*, which covered the period 1983–94: Frears confirms that it was produced in the belief that by 2003 Blair had revealed 'his true colours' by taking Britain to war.[41] Other writers had more diffuse if no less critical motives. Sally Wainwright claimed she wrote *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard* because during the 2005 election she 'found that I didn't really want to vote for anybody because they all seemed as bad as each other'.[42] Wainwright's Ros Pritchard stood up to the parties and exposed what the drama suggested was their dissembling and hypocrisy.

In contrast to their predecessors' concern to protect politicians from denigration, by the New Labour period, influential television figures sought to expose politicians to criticism. Jane Trantor, BBC1's Controller of Drama Commissioning (2000–6) happily claimed for example that *The Project* would make the government feel 'uncomfortable'.[43] After the 2003 Hutton Inquiry some like David Hare and Alistair Beaton believe the BBC rowed back from this confrontational role.[44] If true, there were others who sought the mantle. Peter Ansgore, Commissioning Editor of Drama for Channel Four (1987–97) boasted of the situation comedy *Annie's Bar*, set in the Palace of Westminster, that it would 'tread on politicians' toes'; its director

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Baz Taylor declared: 'MPs are there to be shot at—they are fair game'.[45] The production company Mentorn, responsible for *A Very Social Secretary*, *The Government Inspector* and *The Trial of Tony Blair* was even described in 2007 as 'cornering the market in a new genre of political satires that harpoon its targets right through the heart'.[46] David Aukin, Mentorn's Head of Drama since 1998—another self-declared 'disappointed' Labour supporter—saw such work as providing something that the 'unedited and un-analytical' 24 hour news channels could not: 'a better sense of what's going on behind the scenes'.[47]

Mentorn also produced *Confessions of a Diary Secretary*, the only New Labour drama broadcast by ITV1 at prime time. While a rendering of John Prescott's adulterous affair with a civil servant, writer Tony Basgallop still felt obliged to claim:

> I wasn't trying to write a political satire. I was using a political background to frame the story on. It is a very typical story that you see going on throughout the country all the time but having Whitehall as the background made it a lot more fun.[48]

If Basgallop implied the drama had apolitical motives, John Henshaw who played Prescott, suggested otherwise. 'When Labour first got in', Henshaw said, 'you had the impression Prescott was a stand-up bloke, the salt of the earth. I saw him as a potential Harold Wilson figure. ... But power corrupts ...'.[49]

Flight or Fight?

These dramas do not map out a positive alternative to the kind of Westminster politics they criticise. While populist in outlook, the dramas make it clear that the people do not possess the capacities necessary to be directly politically active themselves. In some the people are almost as bad as New Labour. Thus, if spin is held up to ridicule in *Crossing the Floor*, the electorate is also described as 'completely gullible'. The only two members of the public depicted in *A Very Social Secretary* were, as described in the cast list, 'Fat Woman' and 'Drunk'. The former self-pityingly considered herself as disabled whereas she just needed to stop eating kebabs in bed; the latter was a racist fan of Blunkett's desire to stop asylum seekers entering the country.

In many other dramas, the people are helpless victims. *Our Friends in the North* has the young teenager Sean, abandoned by his 'underclass' parents and emotionally damaged by their neglect, who takes to breaking into houses. Instead of helping the boy, Mary the New Labour MP seeks to subject him to an ASBO. Sean consequently dies while driving a stolen car, unloved by his parents and uncared for by New Labour. Similarly in *The Project* the only significant character who exists outside the New Labour bubble is a nurse and single parent, one of whose children has asthma. She is in various ways dependent on Blair's party and is consequently shown as subject to multiple betrayals. In *The Thick of It*, one of the few members of the public to be depicted appears in an episode that echoes a moment from the 2001 general election campaign when Sharon Storer confronted Blair in front of the world's media about how the NHS was mistreating her partner. *The Thick of It* instead has the minister Hugh Abbot inspect a factory and be met by a woman who repeatedly asks: 'Do you know what it's like to clean up your own mother's piss?' It transpires

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that her mother is resident in an inadequately staffed care home. She has been sent almost mad by her frustration at the situation and all she can do is helplessly reiterate her question as she is passed from the minister to his senior, and then junior, adviser. She is looking for help but will receive none.

Such dramas suggest that flight not fight is the only option. In *The Government Inspector,* Dr David Kelly takes the ultimate exit by committing suicide to escape the invidious position in which the government's spin machine has placed him. Ashley, Blunkett's Asian civil servant in *A Very Social Secretary* who despairs of his apparent desire to deport all Muslims suspected of terrorism in the end leaves his service saying she has had enough. It is another woman, Pat, Blunkett's constituency agent who resigns from the Labour party asking: 'What is it about power, eh, David? What is it that turns a decent man like you into a reactionary old bastard?' In this and other dramas the only flight advocated is one that ends in cynical resignation.

Hope?

A small handful of dramas assumed a more positive perspective. One series screened on BBC1, during mid-week and at prime time, depicted a Prime Minister mired in what might have been seen as 'sleaze'. For unbeknownst to them, fifteen years before entering Number 10 their had been an unwilling participant in a money laundering operation. In addition, the Chancellor was having an affair with a much younger special advisor, a liaison that resulted in a pregnancy and termination. Even worse, the Prime Minister's main financial backer induced them to encourage the Home Office to award a lucrative contract to a company in which they had an interest.

The Prime Minister concerned was, however, not Blair, nor a character based on a recognisable New Labour figure, but Wainwright's *Amazing Mrs Pritchard*. She was the 'ordinary' wife, mother and supermarket manager whose scratch Purple Alliance, formed mostly by other women without a political background, defeated Blair in the 2005 general election on a wave of hostility to politics-as-usual. On being elected Pritchard had promised to never lie but having been told of her husband's indiscretion she knew she had to either retain her honour and resign or act as if she hadn't been told. Urging the latter course, Pritchard's press secretary told her that every previous Prime Minister had 'some skeleton or other in the cupboard'. Showing how different she was to her predecessors, Pritchard replied: 'well, shame on them'. The press officer was but one of a number of advisers who wanted their boss to, as Pritchard put it, 'compromise my integrity and get used to it, like a *real* politician'. As this was the final episode of the series viewers were left not knowing which course Pritchard would take. Those watching had, however, been given a wholly empathetic insight into her dilemma, as was also the case with Chancellor Catherine Walker's affair. Neither instance was presented as 'sleazy' but as an unfortunate moment in their characters' difficult, high-pressured lives.

Ros Pritchard was an entirely fictional creation, a fantasy solution to what Wainwright saw as the Hobson's choice faced by voters in 2005. Bob Galway, the protagonist of *The Deputy* was a more conventional politician, one widely believed to have been based on John Prescott, at that point unsullied by public knowledge

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of his adultery. Galway was consequently portrayed as a man of the people, a 'sweary, boozy pudding with a heart of gold'.[50] He wants to become Prime Minister but still fights for his constituents' interests. Thus when Galway's son asserts that all politicians are the same he replies 'No. We're really not'—and the viewer is meant to believe that is true, in his case at least. For the drama presents Galway as an exceptional figure, an honourable man beset by the Prime Minister's bullying spin doctor, ministers so obsessed with rising up the greasy pole they illegally tap his phone and MPs who would hawk their Private Members' Bill to special interests rather than use it to help those in distress.

As in the other dramas, however, the people are shown to be totally dependent on Galway's agency: the scene depicting his surgery sees him overwhelmed by a wave of humanity, each member of which has their particular and special needs. What is different however is that Galway is a good man—like Pritchard is a good woman—and so will try to help these helpless figures. Thus, the implication of such dramas is that the basic fault with British politics lies not in its flawed structure but in the flawed characters of its leading figures: they advance a deeply moral critique.

If Galway had a passing resemblance to Prescott, *Mo* was unambiguously about Mo Mowlam, former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. This drama-documentary focused on Mowlam's fight with cancer but also highlighted her role in furthering the Peace Process. Neil McKay's script was unusual in depicting a New Labour politician in positive terms—Mowlam is presented as an empathetic figure who enjoyed a rapport with ordinary people. But, like Galway, she is presented as exceptional within New Labour's ranks, a uniquely good person. Mowlam moreover ultimately falls victim to the machinations of the dominant 'cold politics' of spin as personified by Peter Mandelson.

These dramas had protagonists painstakingly presented to audiences as the exceptions that proved the 'sleazy' rule. Pritchard was a Prime Minister elected because she was *not* a politician, while Galway and Mowlam were atypical figures. Thus, of *Mo*, one IMDb poster commented: 'Betrayed by a duplicitous Prime Minister, shafted by the appalling Peter Mandelson, Dr Mowlam finally saw the truth of this maxim, as, stricken with a brain tumour, she sees Politicians for the pack of unscrupulous, self-serving, power-mad individuals they really are'.[51]

Party Animals was the only drama of the period to paint politicians collectively as a mixed bag of idealists, pragmatists, the devious and naïve: even its most flawed character had redeeming features. Westminster politics was consequently painted as a reflection of these very human traits, rather than the domain of a uniquely corrupted class. The New Labour junior minister Jo Porter is for example presented as personally ambitious but also principled, whose commitment to her career contributes to the destruction of her marriage. When Porter is attacked in the press for neglecting her child the viewer is consequently encouraged to sympathise. Similarly, when Ashika the young Conservative researcher is exposed as having what one press headline calls a 'sleazy affair' with her married MP boss, viewers have seen the context for the affair and so are able to appreciate how un-sleazy it actually is.

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Conclusion

More typical of the fare offered to television audiences during the New Labour years, *Mr White Goes to Westminster* (1997), was a comic rendering of Martin Bell's election as independent MP for Tatton, broadcast within months of the actual event. David Aaronovitch complained it depicted MPs as 'a collection of shyster politicians ... playing their money and career games at the expense of a noble, but manipulated people'.[52] He claimed this distorted reality, as the politicians he knew were no more dishonest than any of his other acquaintances. We do not know how representative a group were the politicians who formed part of Aaronovitch's circle. He was however privileged in being able to distinguish between real politicians and those as television imagined them. For most Britons—90 per cent of who say they go at least a year without any face-to-face contact with their MP and whose ignorance about how they are governed is generally accepted—what they see on the screen is their main source of information about politics.[53]

As this article has established, television dramatizations of New Labour represented an intensification of the fictional association of politics with corruption and placed a unique stress on the authenticity of the works making that link. If this process owed something to the fact that the public was increasingly apt to see politicians in such terms, it also owed much to the changing context in which such dramas were produced. Especially in the context of television in the New Labour period, writers were expected to take full account of what their commissioning editors presumed audiences wanted: 'sleazy' politicians. In playing to audience preferences, the US studies cited earlier show how dramatists further entrench them. Paul Abbott aptly summed up this process. The writer of *State of Play*, the BBC series that suggested the oil industry had a tight grip on New Labour policy making, Abbot said: 'I think we are naturally suspicious of ... government and I just wanted to present a story that would capitalize on the audience's natural paranoia' (Randall 2011, 274). Abbott in other words saw his role as building on preexisting sentiments and exploiting them for dramatic effect. Thus, in depicting what they believed was New Labour's close association with 'sleaze' television dramatists can only have further entrenched popular belief in this link. As one IMBd poster said of Peter Kosminsky's *The Project,* which emphasized the centrality of spin—which Kosminsky interpreted as lying—to Blair's party, it was '**worth watching *if only to confirm what we already know*'.[54]

In playing back the television audience's own prejudices to itself, this process evokes the one outlined by William Connolly in his analysis of the relationship between evangelical Christianity, the media and the Republican party in the United States, in which each element amplifies the other (Connolly 2005). Hence, in trying to find a 'connection' with audiences the dramas analysed here helped diminish the repertoire of credible ideas they held about politicians by emphasising others. The result was that fictions which sought to paint a more hopeful picture—those in which moral as opposed to 'sleazy' politicians took centre stage—failed to attract sufficient audiences: *The Deputy* was a pilot for a series that never was; while neither *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard* nor *Party Animals* were commissioned for second seasons. Indeed, most tellingly, one press reviewer was so primed to associate politics with

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corruption in television dramas they mistook the intentions of the producers of the latter series and saw it as yet another fiction depicting ‘a sleazy Westminster anthill where Labour and Tory blur into a moshpit of bed-hopping ambition’ and in which ‘[p]oliticians never keep their promises’.[55]

More research on this subject is clearly needed. Some surveys of how British audiences react to British television political dramas would be welcome. It would also be useful to systematically assess the range of ideas provided by different kinds of fiction over time, including those popular forms, like soap operas and detective series, which did not have a strong political theme but in which political representatives occasionally featured. Similarly comparing how politics has been represented in television dramas produced in other countries also beset by declining trust in politics would help isolate the extent to which Britain is a unique case. Andrew Marr is certainly not alone in believing that Britain’s political culture is more antagonistic towards to politics than are others, such that the *The West Wing* could not have been made in this country.[56] Such a view is, however, untested by sustained research.

Even so, on the basis of the present article it is now plausible to claim that if the decline of social capital undermined popular regard for representative politics, culture played its own and independent part in this process. For, during the New Labour period, changes in the production context of television drama meant that it increasingly reinforced a picture of British politics as ‘sleazy’. It is therefore time for political scientists to take fiction in all its forms much more seriously, for in fearing the effect artists might have on the ‘the less rational part of our nature’, it looks like Plato might have been right.

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Notes

1. *Jackanory Politics*, Radio 4, transmitted 21 February 2008.
2. *Daily Telegraph*, 6 January 2007.
3. See for example, Moy and Pfau 2000.
4. See Plato 1974, 421–439. Perhaps one of the first mainstream texts to discuss the importance of cinema to politics was Nimmo and Combs 1983.
5. Denver 2007, 137–9. This is recognised by Holbert et al. 2005, p. 440. On the importance of the informal discussion of a drama, see Lenart and McGraw 1989, 710–711.
6. *The Times*, 13 November 2002.
7. The methodological issues raised by using comments posted on the Internet Movie Database are highlighted by van Zoonen 2007, 533–5. In this article, reference is only made to comments from UK residents, amounting to 130 in total. These comments were unevenly distributed: three works did not generate any, eight just one, while at 23, *State of Play* produced the most.
8. http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results, accessed 2 February 2011.
9. There is much evidence of an unsystematic nature that in the immediate post-war period some voters associated politics with dishonesty; see Fielding 2008, 112–113.

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10. http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=15&view=wide and http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2443&view=wide, accessed 5 February 2011.
11. *The Guardian,* 17 December 2007.
12. *The Sunday Times*, 12 October 2008.
13. *The Daily Mail*, 4 October 2008.
14. *The Independent*, 7 January 1997.
15. *Daily Express*, 4 January 1969.
16. *TV Times*, 1–7 January 1971, p. 7.
17. *The Guardian*, 19 March 1981.
18. http://www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/advocate_yesminister.shtml, accessed 3 September 2011.
19. Interviewed on *The Trap: What Happened To Our Dreams of Freedom, Part 1—'F&#k You Buddy,* first broadcast BBC 2, 11 March 2007.
20. http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/1999/dec/31/guardianobituaries, accessed 30 August 2011.
21. *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 1991.
22. *The Guardian*, 23 March 1995.
23. *The Mail on Sunday*, 12 March 1995 and 7 May 1995.
24. Interview with Stephen Frears, 28 May 2010.
25. http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/03/10_days_to_war.html, accessed 15 April 2011.
26. Interviews with: Neil McKay, 27 May 2010; Peter Kosminksy, 20 May 2010; and Alistair Beaton, 24 May 2010.
27. *New Statesman*, 6 October 2003.
28. Phantomapple, posted on 23 November 2003.
29. Jackie Scott-Mandeville, posted on 23 November 2009.
30. Reservoir_Dawg, posted on 19 March 2005.
31. http://www.channel4.com/about_c4/promises_2001/promises_intro2.html and http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/02_february/11/placetothink.shtml, accessed 1 March 2011.
32. McKay interview.
33. *Sunday Telegraph*, 4 February 2007.
34. The following figures are taken from: http://www.barb.co.uk/index/index, accessed 20 April 2011.
35. *The Times*, 9 January 1996.
36. *The Observer*, 31 December 1995; *The Daily Telegraph*, 9 January 1996.
37. Kosminsky interview.
38. *The Independent*, 10 November 2002; *The Observer*, 10 November 2002.
39. *The Times Magazine*, 2 November 2002.
40. Beaton interview.
41. Frears interview.
42. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Amazing_Mrs_Pritchard, accessed 13 February 2007.
43. *The Guardian*, 29 May 2002.
44. Interview with David Hare, 24 May 2010; Beaton interview.
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51. Ianlouisiana, posted on 1 February 2010.
52. *The Independent*, 4 January 1998.
53. Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement* 7 (2010), pp. 61–71; Ram 2006, 192–3; Coleman 2008, 1.
54. bob the moo, posted on 16 February 2002: emphasis added.
55. *Metro*, 22 March 2007.
56. *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 November 2002.

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