2 'Unutterable Trash'

Politician Authors and the (Alleged) Decline and Fall of the Parliamentary Novel

Steven Fielding

This chapter will discuss novels that form part of the 'parliamentary' genre, particularly by authors with direct personal experience of being an MP or minister, or those who had a close relationship with such figures. It surveys the course of this genre, highlighting its tropes and focusing on the post-war period, the time of its supposed dissolution. The motives of such authors varied, although one was always to make money. If that motive was constant, there was a definite shift from celebrating to almost denigrating the world of Westminster. This was due in part to changes in the literary market and the nature of the popular novel, but also to shifts in how those in politics looked upon their own activities – and attempted to find ways of evoking a positive (i.e., remunerative) response from readers. By emphasising the influence of gender, the chapter supplies insights into what was a transforming – but in crucial instances, a not very transforming – post-war political culture.

In 1996 the acerbic Labour MP Gerald Kaufman claimed parliamentary novels were 'on the whole unutterable trash'.[1] Certainly by the 1990s the great days of the genre many credited Benjamin Disraeli and Anthony Trollope with giving life, were widely thought to be well behind it. In the 1920s Morris Edmund Speare gave a neat summary of the tropes evident in such novels during their heyday, writing that:

> The main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government. In this exposition the drawing-room is frequently used as a medium for presenting the inside life of politics.… the most dramatic and the most productive characters are, by their very greatness, the more removed from the ordinary world of ordinary men and women. The home of the noble lord of the Ministry, the country estate of the prime Minister, the Cabinet meetings in Downing Street, the lives of the 'Elysians' who live in 'castles' and have great leisure and great wealth and who often guide the State in diplomacy and in executive posts out upon the far corners of the earth, are as far removed from

[1] *Independent*, 19 January 1996.

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our ordinary ken as the complicated workings of party control, the news which brings tragedies and rejoicings to the groups in the political clubs, or the manipulation of the elaborate machinery of diplomacy, is from our ordinary intelligence.[2]

These were the stories of great men, told to help those excluded from drawing rooms and castles understand their real-life leaders' dilemmas. For many took these fictions to reflect actual politics.[3]

Writing in 1991, Christopher Harvie confirmed Speare's view regarding the importance of parliamentary novels in reconciling humble readers to the Westminster model.[4] He recognised that like all genres, this one contained elements from other genres, such as melodrama, thriller and comedy, stating it 'merged "entertainment" and ideology to produce a useful political discourse for a traditional society intent on social and economic change'. The parliamentary novel consequently played a significant part in the elite's strategy of incorporating the increasing number of voters within the existing representative system. It helped create an imagined community in which great men worked disinterestedly on behalf of the nation, one that emphasised the centrality of political institutions to the national and imperial identity.

The political intentions behind Disraeli's *Sybil* are well known. In the novel he called upon the aristocracy to assume leadership in an industrialising society to bridge the gap between the Two Nations. Moreover, while Disraeli's novels were not uncritical of politics and parliament, he presented them as the only route through which the propertied classes could transcend the crisis. According to Harvie, Disraeli succeeded: indeed, his novels formed a basic document of parliamentarianism, of a piece with the new Palace of Westminster and Walter Bagehot's *English Constitution*.

Like Disraeli, Trollope sought to entertain but also to educate. And like Disraeli he was often critical about the practice of politics – being especially fearful of the impact of the parvenu politician, the demagogue and a press intent on exploiting popular ignorance. But he still idealised Westminster (and was himself a defeated Liberal candidate in 1868). As Trollope wrote in *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864) of the lamps that guard the entry to the Member's Lobby of the House of Commons:

[2] M. E. Speare, *The Political Novel. Its Development in England and in America* (Oxford, 1924), pp. lx, 24.

[3] The primary focus of the parliamentary genre on Westminster means that novels about politics more widely, notably those written in the increasingly popular conspiracy genre, in which Westminster plays little part, such as Chris Mullin's *A Very British Coup* (London, 1982), have been excluded from consideration in this chapter.

[4] For this and subsequent references to Harvie, see *The Centre of Things. Political Fiction in Britain from Disraeli to the Present* (London, 1991).

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I have told myself, in anger and in grief, that to die and not to have won that right of way, though but for a session, - not to have passed through those lamps, is to die and not to have done that which it most becomes an Englishman to have achieved.

As a result, he believed in the benevolent power of politics, but only so long as it remained in the hands of exceptional men who were members of an aristocracy of mind and money.

Trollope and Disraeli laid down tropes that would populate parliamentary novels for generations to come.[5] But if the genre played an important part in promoting acceptance of an elite-led national political culture, it did not do so simply due to its authors' skills. It was, according to Harvie, due to a seamless web that existed between publishers, literary politicians, journalists and commentators, which meant the novel could be a place for the expression of serious political ideas. This culture was, however, cast asunder thanks to changes wrought by the First World War. That was because, in 1918, the electorate massively increased, while the impact of educational improvement and changes in publishing increased the number of readers: voters tripled, and the number of published books increased even more in the two decades that followed 1918. Such new voters and readers had different interests from their pre-war counterparts and did not necessarily want the kind of novels popular in the nineteenth century. According to this narrative, therefore, the entry of the working class – and women – onto the political stage meant that the parliamentary novel became almost irrelevant.

Harvie's assessment of what remained of the parliamentary novel at the time *The Centre of Things* was published was consequently damning and echoed that of Gerald Kaufman. He believed fictions about Westminster had descended into diversions for tired passengers at airports, their authors forced to include sex scenes to attract readers. This chapter makes no claims for the unacknowledged artistry of those who wrote such novels in the post-war period; but it seeks to rescue them from such high-handed condescension. As Harvie himself had pointed out, even Disraeli sought to entertain readers and threw in the odd romance to beguile them. Thus, while many male authors continued to emphasise the significance of a traditional patriarchal vision of Westminster, the entry of a number of female authors sought to challenge that vision. However deracinated literary critics might have considered the parliamentary novel by the end of the twentieth century, it was a genre that still had something to say about politics.

[5] See, for example, H. A. Vachel, *John Verney* (London, 1915).

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Maurice Edelman

The Labour MP Maurice Edelman was one of a number – including David Walder, William Clark and C. P. Snow – who continued to contribute to the parliamentary novel during the post-war period. Their work was probably more influential than that of their predecessors: it was sold in paperback and often adapted for stage and television, frequently by Ronald Millar, who later helped Margaret Thatcher finesse her most important speeches. Despite their party differences, they painted a remarkably similar and familiar picture. Much like the Victorians, they defined the parameters of political action as the country house weekend, Cabinet room and Commons chamber, although some added Whitehall and Washington. It was a universe dominated by Westminster, over which presided wily Prime Ministers; humble party members, constituents and women rarely intruded into this world, and when they did, it was not a good sign.

As had Trollope, these authors were believed to lift the veil that still separated politicians from the public, humanising the country's leaders at a time when many still did not care to do so on their own behalf and when the press just about retained a respectable distance. At the same time, they heightened the sense that politics was a worthwhile, important and even glamorous pursuit.

First elected an MP in 1945, Edelman remained on the backbenches throughout his career. A journalist by profession, *Who Goes Home* (1953) was his first parliamentary novel and during the 1960s he also wrote a number of similarly themed television plays. If popular, some critics looked down on his work as 'journeyman fictioneering' confined within 'a smoothly operated formula', meaning it was 'just the thing for undemanding deck-chairs'.[6] His protagonists were predominantly upper class and glamorous Tories; these are political celebrities: in *Who Goes Home*, the hero Erskine even has his fashion sense praised in *Vogue*. If Labour's trade union MPs barely featured in Edelman's stories then neither did the kind of grammar school products starting to find a place within Conservative ranks. Edelman presumed readers wanted to know about the private lives of these elevated figures. As Manningham the 'revered commentator' on Parliamentary life in *Who Goes Home* claimed: 'Of course the British public like to know their Prime Minister. But what they know is myth. It's the same with every politician.'[7] Edelman promised to go beyond the myth, while creating some myths of his own.

[6] *Observer*, 4 October 1964 and 6 July 1969.
[7] M. Edelman, *Who Goes Home* (London, 1955), p. 77.

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Reviewers lauded his 'authenticity' and expressed their pleasure in being allowed to overhear private conversations. As one wrote of *The Prime Minister's Daughter*: 'I liked the sense of being let into those corridors and lobbies of power: it flatters.'[8] Quite how this critic knew whether Edelman was giving them a *bona fide* picture of behind-the-scenes political life is of course moot. But he definitely gave them what they *believed* to be an authentic picture, the circle being closed when Labour MP Richard Crossman, on first becoming a minister in 1964 considered he was 'living in a Maurice Edelman novel'.[9] Ironically it was the publication of Crossman's diaries and those of other leading figures that finally lifted the veil on Westminster without the help of any novelist.[10]

When Edelman raised the curtain he revealed – unlike Crossman – a workable system, one underpinned by tradition and largely run by men of honour. As Melville, the protagonist of both *The Minister* (1961) and *The Prime Minister's Daughter*, says of the Commons:

> It's unique in the world – there's never been anything like it before and no one can imitate it now.… You see, we have the ingredient of time. We had our revolution centuries ago, and since then we've been working with history. Parliament has somehow created itself. It has adapted itself as we've gone along.… It has lots of ordinary men and women – most of them intelligent in some way, most of them hard-working and sincerely devoted to their causes, and all of them with ordinary human strengths and weaknesses. But there's some mysterious quality about Parliament as an institution that elevates those who belong to it – certainly when they carry out their public duties.[11]

So far, so Trollope. But if there was something noble in a politician's pursuit of public duty, Edelman was at pains to underline that it came at a private cost being preoccupied by the contrast between the public and private lives of the elite. This he did, not to expose hypocrisy, but to demonstrate how difficult it was to be a politician. As one reviewer remarked of *Who Goes Home*, it was essentially an 'exposure of the vulnerability of the public figure to private attack'.[12] Indeed, such was the focus on the personal in *The Minister* one critic claimed it 'hardly qualifies as political at all'.[13] Another asserted of *The Prime Minister's Daughter* that it was 'concerned with politics almost entirely as an arena of action where personal destinies and ambitions are fulfilled or destroyed. There is little real ideological content or conflict'.[14] Similarly, of

[8] *Manchester Guardian*, 23 January 1953; *Times*, 1 October 1960; *Observer*, 4 October 1964.
[9] R. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* (London, 1975), entry for 10 October 1964.
[10] See Chapter 1. [11] M. Edelman, *The Minister* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 169.
[12] *Times*, 21 January 1953. [13] *Guardian*, 28 July 1961. [14] *Times*, 1 October 1964.

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his 1968 BBC2 play *A Matter of Principle*, the issue of how far the press should report political secrets was said to have been obscured by the extent to which Edelman presented it as a purely private battle between a journalist and politician with whose wife the former had slept.[15]

Edelman's focus on the personal element in political life was deliberate. Writing about his 1970 adaptation of *The Prime Minister's Daughter* for ITV he claimed: 'A politician lives at two levels. When he's doing his job, he's on stage.... But when he's alone with his personal problems and tensions and conflicts, he shares the *common humanity of everybody else'*. Thus, he argued, his play asked: 'How much and how little should – or can – children communicate with their parents? How close, without smothering them, can parents get to children? How responsible are parents for the sins of their children – and children for the sins of their parents?'[16] These were, for sure, not 'political' questions, but they were ones with which any adult viewer might identify and, on that basis, sympathise with the Prime Minister whose troubles Edelman outlined.

Politicians in Edelman's world were trapped by the very system they operated. To make this point he often discussed a politician's face, his smile. In some hands this focus might have been used to expose hypocrisy but Edelman uses it to suggest tragedy. In *Who Goes Home* he refers to his protagonist's 'famous smile, the Constituency Smile, the Erskine Smile.... In its absolute form it was his election photograph', the face which Erskine presented to the world.[17] This mask was however necessary due the demands of politics, not the least of which was public expectation. During a rare heart-to-heart talk, Melville's daughter asks him why he never smiles:

> 'Smile?' Melville repeated. 'I smile all the time. My TV smile is famous. Look!'
> 'Yes,' she said tenderly, putting her hand on his. 'I'm looking. It isn't a smile at all.'
> 'Yes, it is,' he said, taking both her hands. 'It's a real smile, but a different smile.'[18]

When the scene was enacted for television, viewers could see actor David Langdon subtly convey the sadness in Melville's eyes as he performed his 'TV smile'.

According to Edelman, politicians are caught within this mask, one they are forced to wear by the nature of their work. As a character in *Who Goes Home* observes, politics is 'a sort of theatre, stuffed with unreality'

[15] *Times*, 17 September 1968. [16] *TV Times*, 11–17 July 1970: emphasis added.
[17] Edelman, *Home*, p. 52.
[18] M. Edelman, *The Prime Minister's Daughter* (London, 1964), p. 207.

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which means, declares another, every politician must possess 'a double persona, the one he is to his constituents and the public, and the one he is to his pillow. The public one is the bowdlerised version. All the swear words and the dirty bits have been taken out'. Indeed, Edelman has the novel's wise Prime Minister state: 'The Party system is a system of organized conscience. It's bad for the soul, but good for the nation' – and it is a burden those who aspire to exercise power simply have to accept.[19]

Tory Novelists

On his death in 1975 Edelman was described as 'one of the last of the "literary MPs"'.[20] He was hardly that. The Thatcher-Major years saw the publication of an unprecedented number of works, written by ministers and ex-ministers (Douglas Hurd, Tim Renton and Michael Spicer), the Chief Whip in the Lords (Bertie Denham), backbench MPs (Nigel West), former MPs (Jeffrey Archer) and ex-Central Office officials (Michael Dobbs). As with earlier parliamentary novels, their appeal lay in appearing to give readers an authentic view of politics. Like those produced by Maurice Edelman in the 1950s and 1960s, they were mainly aimed at the 'middle-brow' market, where sales of 30,000 were considered decent. A few, however, achieved mass sales: Dobbs' *House of Cards* trilogy (1989–94) ultimately sold nearly 1.5 million copies worldwide.[21] His novels did so well partly because they were adapted for television, something that also helped Archer's *First Among Equals* (1984) become a bestseller.

Evoking the excitement of being part of life-or-death decisions, close cabinet votes and critical Commons divisions, if these were hyper-real accounts of Parliamentary life meant to entertain, they also conveyed the banality of politics. Some were crime thrillers with their tongues firmly in their cheek, in which MPs performed the time-served role of amateur detective. But all had something to say about real politics. West's *Murder in the Commons* (1992) and *Murder in the Lords* (1994) saw Conservative Phillip North solve two homicides while the author made none-too subtle defences of privatisation and MPs' outside interests.

In contrast, Spicer specialised in dystopian Cold War fantasies. His first novel *Final Act* (1981) warned of the consequences of appeasing

[19] Edelman, *Home*, pp. 34, 78, 213. [20] *Guardian*, 15 December 1975.
[21] *Daily Telegraph*, 27 November 2008.

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Moscow. Set in a near future in which Europe is under direct Soviet rule, Britain's political parties are largely run by the London High Commission of the USSR. Indicating his own hostility to the EEC, Spicer has the Conservative party morph into the European Unity Party whose main object is to placate Moscow. Describing a revolt against Britain being completely integrated into the Soviet Empire, Spicer has it fail because it comes too late: Britons should have been more alert in the 1980s. *Prime Minister Spy* (1986) was another paranoid fantasy. It was however unlikely Moscow would ever have adopted the scheme outlined in the novel, which involved the KGB ensuring Adolf Hitler's son becomes Conservative Prime Minister so he can lead Britain into the Warsaw Pact.

Patrician Politics

Hurd and Renton specialised in thrillers that evoked and commented on contemporary events. The former had been writing novels since before his election to the Commons in 1973 and continued to do so, even after becoming a junior minister in 1979.[22] *The Palace of Enchantments* (1985), co-authored with his Private Secretary at the Foreign Office, was Hurd's sixth but the only one published during the Conservative period in power, which saw him become Home and later Foreign Secretary. Renton started writing only after he left frontline politics in 1992, prior to which he had been Thatcher's last Chief Whip and Major's first Minister for the Arts. Both men were of the same generation and class, having been born in the early 1930s and educated at Eton and Oxbridge; they also shared the same kind of liberal One Nation Toryism which Thatcher described as 'wet'. The hereditary peer Denham enjoyed a similar background with this pair. If his four novels published between 1979 and 1997 had more crime than politics, even *Foxhunt* (1988) has mounting inner-city discontent as part of its background.

Like those produced by Hurd and Renton, Denham's novels expressed a cautious idealism about the parliamentary system. These fictions also paint a picture of politics best left in the hands of rational, patrician, pragmatic men, those very much like their authors. They depict dangers within parliamentary democracy that only men of this stripe can negotiate, notably the overweening influence of party and the short sightedness of the people, perils Trollope had also recognised.

[22] For an assessment of Hurd's early novels, see Mark Stuart, *Douglas Hurd: Public Servant* (London, 1998), pp. 56–65.

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The Palace of Enchantments has a City banker take his American counterpart on a tour of London.[23] Passing a suburban street replete with roses, Virginia creepers, a red pillar box and 'small gables and pediments in architectural confusion', Hurd has him claim:

> Suburban living, that is England's gift to the twentieth century. The Scots can't do it, nor the French, let alone the Italians. Miles and miles of houses like that. Moderate incomes, moderate opinions, moderate achievements. Pleasant, sensible people, with front and back gardens. They worry about their children, but their children end up like them. They vote Conservative, but constantly disappoint the Conservatives because they are not entrepreneurs. You can cut their taxes, but you can't get them to take risks. Forget the British upper class which hypnotises you Americans. Forget the media, the cloth-capped workers, forget the bankers we're going to meet. All the minorities. It's the people up that road who count.

This vision was one that would have frustrated those Thatcherites keen to turn Britain into a nation of striving entrepreneurs. Hurd believed such moderation was moreover based on an ultimately sound parliamentary system, one largely composed of men dedicated to selfless public service. To make this point he has a German banker speak of the democratic nature of the Palace of Westminster while explaining why the novel's hero, Edward Dunsford, had abandoned a lucrative career in finance for the uncertainties of politics:

> Go one day to the House of Commons as an elector, a constituent. Be you high or low, rich or poor, the procedure is the same. You are told by a policeman to wait, in a gilded hall with soaring absurd arches, mythical patriotic saints, and an impolite post office.… Eventually the Member of Parliament arrives, trailing clouds of glory from some sanctum, some further Gothic hall which you cannot penetrate. He bustles towards you, apologises, shakes your hand, explains how he is busy, is pleasant with you. He radiates the superiority, that is the enchantment which Dunsford feels, they all feel and which you and I cannot feel.… It is the pleasure of service, the pleasure of being elected to serve others.… The service of the people, that is the real seduction.

Renton's *Hostage to Fortune* (1997) expanded on the apparent reality of this 'service' by having a Conservative Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition combine in the national interest to support Britain's entry into the Euro. In the real world, this policy was strongly opposed by the deposed Thatcher's still-vocal supporters. In Renton's novel however the Prime Minister believes Britain will benefit from the move but is aware many in his party oppose the measure and so, as both are good men, the

[23] Quotations are taken from D. Hurd and S. Lamport, *The Palace of Enchantments* (London, 1985), pp. 99–100 and 108–9.

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two leaders put partisan considerations aside and do the right thing. The constitution is moreover, Renton suggests, still sound, for when politicians fail to show the right leadership the Queen acts as a fail-safe. In *A Dangerous Edge* (1994) when the personal ambitions of a Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister bring the Cabinet to deadlock, the monarch forces the latter to declare an election, one which sees both lose their seats, allowing her to call for the novel's righteous hero to form a new government.

Written while his leader was preparing to mount an attack on the post-war consensus, Denham's *The Man Who Lost His Shadow* (1979) also depicts the mutual respect uniting men of good character on both sides of the House – even those like Jimmy Spiller, a working class ex-Communist Labour MP, and the Conservative shadow Home Secretary Sir John Elton, who disagree on every aspect of politics. Denham's hero across his four novels is Derek Thryde, a Lords whip and something of a throwback, whose universe comprises country houses, loyal retainers, pink gins and fox hunting. This comforting society is complemented by a parliament whose timeworn but grand architecture Denham describes in loving detail, along with some of the more arcane but still effective chapters of legislative procedure. Denham's is a world of sound and living tradition, one whose heroes are 'self-effacing' and whose villains are 'aggressively self-confident' bounders. Even the press is benign, with Thyrde writing of Lobby journalists that their 'ethical standards are higher than any other section of the Press in the country, probably the world'.[24]

Soap-Opera Westminster

Although they were well regarded as literary efforts, only one of Hurd's novels, *Scotch on the Rocks* (1973), was adapted for television. In contrast, the works of Jeffrey Archer were so popular they were habitually adapted for the small screen. Aiming at a transatlantic audience, Archer to begin with fought shy of depicting British politics for fear of alienating American readers. Indeed, two early novels, *Shall We Tell the President?* (1977) and *The Prodigal Daughter* (1982) tackled US politics. This emphasis changed with his fifth outing, *First Among Equals* (1984), described by his publisher as 'The book he was born to write'.[25] For Archer had only turned to novels after his time as a Conservative MP

[24] B. Denham, *Foxhunt* (London, 1988), pp. 43, 57.
[25] For the novel, see M. Crick, *Jeffrey Archer. Stranger than Fiction* (London, 2000), pp. 240–45.

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ended abruptly when, fearing bankruptcy, he stood down after just five years in the Commons. The change of career proved extremely lucrative. Archer's novels adhered to a popular formula, one that involved struggles for power and wealth between small groups of highly motivated and often over-sexed men, leading one critic to comment snootily that they 'rely on little more than the lust for money, sex and power'.[26] *First Among Equals* applied this blueprint to Westminster, charting the lives and loves of four young MPs entering the Commons in 1964, each ambitious to become Prime Minister. Archer sets his protagonists' struggles against real events, with versions of Wilson, Heath, Thatcher and others making appearances although party politics, at least in terms of policy, is rarely mentioned. Few looked upon *First Amongst Equals* as a serious political document. Conservative party chair Norman Tebbit even claimed an Archer novel was ideal hospital reading because it 'requires no mental effort'.[27] Yet, whatever his quality as a writer, Archer projected a glamorised vision of Westminster, one that quickly sold a million copies and when adapted for television reached seven million viewers.

Archer's MPs are balanced in partisan terms, with two each from Labour and the Conservatives, although one of the former defects to the Social Democratic Party. They also come from contrasting classes. Although two originate from landed backgrounds, money troubles plague Simon Kerslake (Archer's middle-class Tory), while Labour MP Raymond Gould has emerged from the back streets of Leeds to become a barrister. Archer presents being an MP as a poorly paid and insecure occupation, meaning that when Kerslake struggles to pay his sons' school fees, he comes to a lucrative arrangement with a property developer who wants introductions to useful people. Archer does not, however, see anything wrong with this relationship and is at pains to stress that Kerslake's integrity remains intact.

If the four MPs' private lives all suffer due to their grand passion, Archer presents their desire to be Prime Minister as righteous, for if they are personally ambitious, they are ultimately well-motivated men. When Northern Ireland Secretary, Kerslake is nearly assassinated when the IRA booby-trap his car and despite incredible pain he staggers to the Commons to make a speech so as to prevent the defeat of his plan for peace. Gould also shows himself a man of honour when he resigns from the Labour Front Bench after the Wilson government devalued sterling, having publicly just opposed such a move. Similarly, Labour and

[26] *Times*, 5 July 1984. [27] Quoted in Crick, *Archer*, p. 252.

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Conservative cooperate to ensure a wrongfully convicted man gets justice. Archer, then, meant his story to show Westminster in positive terms.

When the novel was adapted into a ten-part ITV series in 1986, producer Mervyn Watson claimed it was a 'serious drama … [which] delves deep into the working of the MPs and the whole political system'. Reflecting the number of scenes to be shot there, the production company Granada even invested a considerable sum in carefully reconstructing the Commons Chamber, emphasising the centrality Archer's novel gave the arena.[28] Yet few television reviewers believed the series had anything positive to say about Westminster. Noting the number of naked women on view, the future *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger even described the series as embodying 'politics-with-nipples'.[29] Many saw the series in terms of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, then-popular American soap operas about the rich and powerful. As one critic had it, the series was a 'political soap at its slipperiest, and no one is safe from the suds of corruption that float out of every doorway.'[30] Indeed, some looked upon the adaptation as containing 'a hard kernel of cynicism' in which politics was 'nothing more than snakes-and-ladders, anything other than the clash of ego and ambition' and whose four protagonists were 'motivated purely by self-interest and a lust for power'.[31] According to Mary Kenny in the *Daily Mail* 'Archer brilliantly exposes the hollow obsessions which make so many politicians tick' while in its Sunday counterpart Alan Coren said of the MPs, 'not only are the four candidates venal. Shifty, toadying and egomaniacal, they are also pinheads'.[32] Robert Kilroy-Silk, about to embark on a populist media career having just resigned as a Labour MP, was one of the few to notice that Archer's protagonists did have values and distinct ideas. But he still considered the series depicted MPs as a whole as 'ruthlessly ambitious, manipulative and self-seeking', just as they were, he claimed, in real life.[33]

Despite his commercial success, Archer remained a frustrated politician. As *First Among Equals* showed, he looked on his absence from the Commons in the same way Trollope had mourned his own exclusion. But in 1985, between the publication of the novel and its television adaptation, Archer made a return to Conservative politics, when at Thatcher's insistence, he was appointed Deputy Chairman of the party. As an ironic coda to what viewers were then watching on the screen,

[28] *Mail on Sunday*, 16 February 1986; *NOW!*, 18 May 1986.
[29] *Observer*, 7 December 1986. [30] *NOW!*, 18 May 1986.
[31] *Today*, 1 October 1986.
[32] *Daily Mail*, 18 October 1986; *Mail on Sunday*, 5 October 1986.
[33] *Today*, 4 November 1986.

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halfway through the series Archer's ambitions were again thwarted, when he resigned, having been discovered paying money to a prostitute in an attempt to buy her silence. Unlike Raymond Gould, who survived a blackmail attempt after an encounter with an escort, Archer would not make Prime Minister.

Houses of Cards

Michael Dobbs was over twenty years younger than Denham, Hurd and Renton and was born almost a decade after Archer. Of a different generation, he was also a graduate of the University of Nottingham rather than Oxbridge and never became an MP. From the mid-1970s, he did, however, work for the Conservative party in various roles, including advising Thatcher while in Opposition and acting as Tebbit's chief of staff when he was Chairman prior to and during the 1987 general election. Dobbs also worked for Saatchi & Saatchi, the advertising agency with intimate Conservative party links. After Thatcher's third election triumph, he left Central Office when criticism of Tebbit's management of the 1987 campaign led to acrimony with Number 10. With Thatcher gone, he returned to assist John Major as Deputy Chairman and became a peer after David Cameron became Prime Minister in 2010.

Dobbs began to write during his post-1987 hiatus, so beginning a second career as a prolific novelist. *House of Cards* (1989), his first and most famous novel, charted the rise of Francis Urquhart, from Chief Whip in a failing Conservative government to the verge of Number 10. As Dobbs paints him, Urquhart is an antediluvian figure, one at home on the grouse moor rather than taking advice from an advertising agency. A hard-up member of the landed elite who took up politics only after being forced to sell off his family estate, he resents being surrounded by modern Tories, pushy grammar school types to whom he has to defer. Such mediocrities, as Urquhart sees them, have only succeeded thanks to their superficially amenable television manner. Unable to take any more, Urquhart turns the power and knowledge of the Chief Whip to eliminate those standing between him and Number 10. Such is his desire for power Dobbs' cold-hearted protagonist even murders to achieve his ends. Yet, when threatened with exposure by a young investigative female journalist, Urquhart throws himself from the top of the Palace of Westminster, allowing normal politics to resume.

The very kind of Tory Dobbs has Urquhart detest, the author undoubtedly indulged in some playful intra-party stereotyping; and while Urquhart dominates the novel his dreadful plot ends in failure. When

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Andrew Davies adapted Dobbs' novel for BBC1 in 1990 he transformed it into a very different piece of work. No Conservative, Davies gave *House of Cards* a darkly comic edge the novel lacked, parodying the parliamentary novel by turning qualities previous novelists working in that genre had praised against themselves, and critiquing how real Conservatives exercised power. For Urquhart in Davies' hands becomes the inhuman embodiment of the pursuit and exercise of political authority. Moreover, in this bleaker vision, Davies has Urquhart succeed: rather than commit suicide he throws his accuser to her death.

The series was extremely popular. Timing helped: its first two episodes were broadcast while Conservative MPs divested themselves of Thatcher and chose another leader. If *First Among Equals* was compared to a soap opera, critics saw *House of Cards* in Shakespearean terms; according to one critic, it was 'Richard III in modern dress'.[34] Many drew parallels with ongoing real-life events, and while some thought Davies guilty of hyperbole, others believed that 'as in the best satire, exaggeration reveals a truth'.[35] Responding to the success of the series, Dobbs resurrected Urquhart to live on as Prime Minister in two further novels, both of which Davies adapted. In his hands, *To Play the King* (BBC, 1993) and *Final Cut* (BBC, 1995) drew parallels between Urquhart and Thatcher, ones absent in the original series and Dobbs' novels. In the latter, Urquhart even wants his own version of the Falklands War – by which he means a cynically engineered conflict – and his downfall, like Thatcher's, is precipitated by the resignation of a Foreign Secretary over Europe.

Urquhart nonetheless remains the embodiment of traditional political power: as Davies has him say in *To Play the King*, 'The forces that drive me come from centuries of history'. A self-described 'loyal servant of the state' Urquhart exploits those who demonstrate 'human' qualities. Indeed, the recognisably Thatcherite policies pursued by his government are themselves criticised for their 'sheer lack of humanity' by a Prince Charles–like monarch in the 1993 series. Very unusually, Davies implicates viewers in these policies by having Urquhart address them directly through the camera. Looking at viewers in *To Play the King* he declares:

> Under the show, the struggle for power. Deep down below it all, deeper than honour, deeper than pride, deeper than lust and deeper than love is the getting of it all. The seizing and the holding on. The jaws locked, biting into power and hanging on. Biting and hanging on.

[34] *Western Mail*, 15 December 1990.
[35] *Spectator*, 24 November 1990; *Independent*, 25 November and 3 December 1990; *Today*, 1 December 1990.

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From this speech, there is an immediate dissolve to a group believed to be IRA terrorists being shot down by the military while out shopping, evoking the murder of unarmed Irish terror suspects on Gibraltar in 1988. They have been killed on Urquhart's orders, and, the act having been accomplished, he turns to viewers and, anticipating any queasiness on their part, states: 'I thought you liked strong leadership'. In *The Final Cut*, Urquhart also reminds viewers that if they want a strong leader, which was said to have attracted many to Thatcher, then whatever that person does, they 'partake in it'.

In the concluding series, Urquhart becomes the victim of his own cold-hearted approach to power. Knowing her husband's days in office are numbered, Urquhart's wife wants him to avoid the kind of humiliation that befell Thatcher. Having already started a liaison with the Prime Minister's security advisor, Commander Corder, she has him arrange Urquhart's assassination while unveiling a statue to Thatcher's memory. Once the act is over, Davies has Corder immediately approach Urquhart's closest rival and effectively anoint him on behalf of the security services stating that 'anything you need, we're right behind you'. In this way, Davies merges the parliamentary novel with the conspiracy genre, suggesting the central role of dark and secret forces in British politics.[36] In Dobbs' third novel, Urquhart was also assassinated, but while it would have been little comfort to his protagonist, his death was not the product of any conspiracy. For Dobbs did not have the same political outlook as his television interpreter; indeed, as he archly put it, in contrast to those cynics at the BBC he believed politics could still consist of 'truth, justice and [the] triumph of good'.[37]

Tory Men and Their Women

Tory novels of this period were stories by men about men, with women restricted to their accustomed role as their protagonists' hobbies, hindrances or helpmates. In *First Among Equals*, apart from Archer's fictionalised Thatcher, women play all of these roles. Raymond Gould, the one who makes it to Number 10, not only survives blackmail from a prostitute – he also has an affair with an American lawyer. News of the latter (but not the former) comes to the attention of Gould's much-neglected wife, who spends most of the novel stuck in Leeds where she does her husband's constituency work. Yet even this self-sacrificing spouse can

[36] This was also the case in the future Labour MP Chris Mullin's *A Very British Coup* (1982), which was similarly adapted into a popular TV series in 1988.
[37] M. Dobbs, *To Play the King* (London, 2007), p. 9.

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only take so much, inducing Gould's mistress to give up the man she still loves because she fears a divorce will stop him becoming Prime Minister. Gould's wife similarly forgives her husband for all his erring so he can remain on course for Downing Street.

If these novels suggest a good woman in politics is one who sublimates herself to her husband's ambition, they also indicate that women could be too ambitious, a favourite Trollopian trope. Edward Dunsford, in Hurd's *The Palace of Enchantments*, has a wife more ruthless than he is, to the extent that she urges him to abandon his principles when they are politically inconvenient. Indeed, early in the novel, Dunsford figures 'life without women, though still difficult, would be a damned sight simpler'.[38] When his wife leaves Dunsford because he puts principle before ambition, he becomes a happier man. Varying this theme, in Renton's *The Dangerous Edge*, the protagonist's wife is sexually excited by politics, but this visceral effect does not mean she appreciates its subtleties. She is, in any case, primarily concerned that her husband rise to the top so he can earn enough money to finance her lavish lifestyle. In other words, she is one more source of tension in an already high-pressure career.

Tory Women Strike Back

After Thatcher fell from power a number of Conservative women wrote parliamentary novels with an approach familiar to readers of romantic fictions made popular by Jilly Cooper. Edwina Currie was the leading exponent of this trend, one encouraged by the popularity of her *A Parliamentary Affair* (1994). Currie was elected to the Commons in 1983 and even before becoming an MP had developed a talent for attracting media attention. In 1986 she became a junior health minister until forced to resign two years later after making injudicious remarks about salmonella in eggs. A married woman, she conducted a secret affair with John Major, who was also married, as he rose up the ministerial ladder, beginning a literary career when it was clear her ambitions would remain thwarted during his premiership. Liverpool-born, Jewish and mixing authoritarian populism with social liberalism, she was not a classic Tory. Indeed, according to Currie's friend and fellow MP Gyles Brandreth, writing a few months before the publication of her first novel, in the Commons Tea Room:

[38] Hurd and Lamport, *The Palace of Enchantments*, p. 23.

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She's the easy butt of every joke. In the Chamber, she speaks well, with conviction and authority, but noone seems to rate her. Perhaps *it's because she behaves like a man* – she interrupts, she's loud, she's opinionated.[39]

Whether due to her 'mannish' ways or not, Currie was certainly a despised figure among a variety of male colleagues, from wet to dry.

Currie's motives for writing her first novel were initially simple: she hoped it would be a 'meal ticket'. It seems however that writing became a kind of therapy, a 'refuge from the awfulness and uncertainty of my political life', where she could express her increasing distaste for the Commons. It also became a form of 'revenge, for all the snide remarks, for all the arrogant macho assumptions of Westminster'.[40] For *A Parliamentary Affair* had as its protagonist Elaine Stalker a newly elected and very Currie-like MP. While she claimed to have read Trollope to help her writing style, unlike the author of *The Prime Minister* (1876), Currie wanted to include as much sex as possible, confiding to her diary, 'I want the book to sell, dammit'.[41] It was consequently dubbed a 'bonkbuster'. Serialised in the *Daily Mail*, sell it definitely did, with as many as 250,000 copies bought within months of publication.[42]

On the back of this success, Currie wrote a sequel, *A Woman's Place* (1996), published in the same year as Sara Keays' *The Black Book*. Jo Delvere, Keays' heroine also evoked her creator's story insofar as she becomes secretary to an MP. Like Currie, Keays had thwarted ambitions, once harbouring hopes of becoming a Conservative MP. These were, however, smashed in 1983 when her twelve-year relationship with minister Cecil Parkinson became public, as did news that she was bearing his child. In the fallout, Parkinson, a close Thatcher favourite, resigned from the government, much to his leader's distress. Many in the party blamed Keays for his downfall. An editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* headed, in a nod to one of Trollope's Palliser novels, 'Can You Forgive Him?', even suggested that 'a quiet abortion is greatly to be preferred to a scandal'.[43] A year later came Alice Renton's *Maiden Speech* and Vanessa Hannam's *Division Belle*; in contrast to Currie and Keays, they were professional writers whose connection to politics came via marriages to Conservative MPs, in Renton's case, the sometime novelist, Tim. Their protagonists were also MPs' wives with, like their authors, careers to pursue.

[39] G. Brandreth, *Breaking the Code* (London, 1999), p. 210. Emphasis added.
[40] Edwina Currie, *Diaries, 1987–1992* (London, 2003), pp. 12, 94, 148, 162–63.
[41] Currie, *Diaries*, pp. 26, 45. [42] *Guardian*, 11 March 1994.
[43] S. Keays, *A Question of Judgement* (London, 1985), pp. 144–45.

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With married heroines in their thirties or forties whose children still lived at home, these novels were aimed at similar kinds of readers, ones their authors assumed had little knowledge of Westminster. Keays, for example, felt obliged to explain what *The Black Book* was – a document that allegedly contains MPs' various indiscretions so they can be, if needed, used to ensure their loyalty – which gave her novel its title. Presumably to help readers identify with their protagonists, the authors also made them express a lack of interest in or even hostility towards politics. Thus, Keays' Delvere knows nothing, 'except what a mess the Government seems to be making of everything'. When told that Parliament 'belongs to all of us, doesn't it, and we've got to look after it. It's our Parliament. What happens here affects all of us and it's up to all of us to see that it's what we want it to be', Delvere realises she had never thought of the institution in such terms, but 'only as something imposed from above'.[44] Even the MP Stalker only stands for Parliament after becoming the mother of a handicapped child, which encourages her to become interested in the politics of health.

If such works were not regarded as political documents, Currie claimed of her second effort: 'Underneath the sex and the humour, the novel is intended to have a serious theme. It is designed to expose the decline of Parliament and the appalling treatment of women there.' It was, she claimed, 'my way of exposing what I consider are the faults and abuses of the system'.[45] Indeed, the novels had much to say about the alien nature of a male-dominated Westminster, and the low status of women and the issues they were presumed to think important, like family and relationships, held there. As one of Keays' characters states, there were so few women MPs because politics promotes 'aggressive and adversarial behaviour, rather than sharing and compromise'.[46]

The novels depict their male Conservative politicians as the ultimate embodiments of masculine selfishness, to whom wives and children were to be subordinated. Renton has a Central Office figure hope her heroine will be a 'good wife', by which he means 'one who'll do all the expected duties' and certainly not 'some free-thinking career woman'.[47] To be the wife of an MP, Renton makes it clear, is to return to a 'pre-historic' world and to give up her separate identity.[48] Similarly, Hannam's protagonist is described as 'the sort of wife the Party did not need: a woman who spoke her mind'. She is, even so, forced to put her son's welfare after that of her

[44] S. Keays, *The Black Book* (London, 1996), pp. 15, 58.
[45] *Guardian*, 22 January 1996. [46] Keays, *Black*, p. 27.
[47] A. Renton, *Maiden Speech* (London, 1997), p. 60. [48] Renton, *Maiden*, p. 98.

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husband's career. Yet when she does attend constituency functions, hidebound female party activists criticise her for appearing bare-legged.[49]

Those women who accept a subdorinate position are not presented in a positive light. Cabinet Minister Ted Bampton (Currie's unflattering rendering of her old boss Ken Clarke) appears in *A Woman's Place*. He is a sexist bully, married to Jean, an accommodating wife, whom he addresses thus:

'You're a good woman, you know that? You don't argue with me and mess me about, not when it comes to my job, and I don't interfere with you. You know your place – running things here in the home, bringing up the girls, and not bothering yourself with silliness outside. Why can't the rest be like that? Makes life much easier.'

Jean laughed, a slow reassuring chuckle. 'Because women don't know their place any more, and many wouldn't be content to live the way we do. More fool them, I suppose. But it suits me.'

At the door he turned. 'I suppose we're a bit old fashioned, the pair of us.'

'So what? We're more typical of couples in this country than the feminists would believe. And the happier for it.'

'Thank God for that.'[50]

As Hannam has the Chancellor of the Exchequer in an exclusively male Conservative Cabinet tell his supine wife, Thatcher might have once been Prime Minister, 'but we've come to our senses since'.[51]

The politicians to whom the novels' heroines are expected to suborn themselves are a very particular bunch. *Division Belle*'s James Askew is described as having a 'controlled, ambitious heart' and in possession of no feelings. He is a machine not a man. If these qualities are invaluable in his political career they are nearly the undoing of his marriage.[52] Similarly Roger Dickson – Stalker's lover who ultimately becomes Prime Minister – is 'cold-blooded' and said to reserve most of his emotions for politics.[53] As a character in Keays' novel states of Westminster: 'the place is full of odd-balls and misfits.… I've a theory that it's often men with some kind of hangup who go into politics to make themselves feel important.'[54] Not all MPs fit that bill, notably Arnold Hobbs, but he is in his late sixties and one of the 'old school, the kind of MP who believes in public service'. Keays' novel nostalgically believes that things were better in the past, with one character claiming of MPs that 'they don't have the same values as in the old days' when they weren't so pompous.[55]

[49] V. Hannam, *Division Belle* (London, 1997), pp. 16, 90, 144.
[50] E. Currie, *A Woman's Place* (London, 1996), pp. 478–79 [51] Hannam, *Belle*, p. 144.
[52] Hannam, *Belle*, pp. 5, 35, 178.
[53] E. Currie, *A Parliamentary Affair* (London, 1994), p. 74.
[54] Keays, *Black*, pp. 64–65 110–11. [55] Keays, *Black*, pp. 58, 107.

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This largely gendered critique of Westminster complemented an eclectic distaste for Conservative activists. According to Renton, they were obsessed with law and order, capital punishment and road bypasses; they were also racist and xenophobic. The chair of her heroine's constituency party was, for good measure, a convicted drunk-driver who aspired to the post because it boosted his self-importance. Some authors put their own snobbishness on show, the better to denigrate the party's rank and file. Hannam thus describes female Conservatives as thinking it fashionable to wear crimplene cocktail dresses in primary colours; her heroine's husband's constituency chair even eats meals watching television.[56] Readers were clearly meant to view politics as distasteful on many levels, including the aesthetic.

Whatever their emphases, these novels systematically present politics as antithetical to domestic happiness and so female fulfilment. On watching the real Betty Boothroyd elected Speaker at the start of *A Parliamentary Affair*, Elaine Stalker wondered if – given Boothroyd was unmarried and childless – it was impossible to be an MP and, 'like millions of other women', also have a husband and children?[57] In Stalker's case the answer was ultimately in the negative. Having happily given up housework and morning sickness to pursue a political career, *A Woman's Place* ends with Stalker marrying the acme of conventional masculinity, a reserve officer in the Guards and returning to a career outside politics where 'success [is] not based on hypocrisy but on hard work and talent'.[58] In the Renton and Hannam novels domestic life that is torn asunder by politics only returns to tranquillity when their heroine's husbands quit Westminster. Indeed, James Askew only saves his marriage by appreciating that marriage is a partnership, that his wife has her own life, and family is superior to political ambition.

If these novels express any hope for a different kind of politics it is not one embodied by women, suggesting that these Tory writers could not, at this point, imagine a time when their sisters might enjoy a more equal place at Westminster. For Currie, hope is personalised in young Fred who will marry Stalker's daughter; while for Renton it takes the shape of the Green Party boyfriend of her protagonist's daughter who thinks it might be worth his while becoming a Conservative. Yet, despite the severe limits of such Tory feminism, the wave of novels encouraged by the financial success of Currie's first effort show how far the parliamentary novel was changing, albeit slowly. It is remarkable how many of the

[56] Hannam, *Belle*, pp. 85–86. [57] Currie, *Affair*, p. 20. [58] Currie, *Place*, p. 499.

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tropes associated with the genre in its late Victorian heyday were still being loyally reproduced well after 1945. But while even Jeffery Archer wanted readers to admire his monomaniacal male protagonists, the emphasis was changing thanks to different authors writing for different readers to the ones Disraeli and Trollope had in mind. By the 1990s the parliamentary novel had not died nor was it especially poorly, but it was being transformed.

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