

# Television dramas have increasingly reinforced a picture of British politics as ‘sleazy’

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*There were 24 TV dramas produced about New Labour and all made a unique contribution to public perceptions of politics. These dramas increasingly reinforced a picture of British politics as ‘sleazy’ and were apt to be believed by many already cynical viewers as representing the truth. **Steven Fielding** argues that political scientists need to look more closely at how culture is shaping the public’s view of party politics.*



On the evening of 28<sup>th</sup> February 2007, 4.5 million ITV viewers saw Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott receive a blowjob. Thankfully, they did not see the real Prescott on the screen but instead actor John Henshaw who played him in *Confessions of a Diary Secretary*. Moreover, the scene was executed with some discretion: shot from behind a sofa all viewers saw was the back of the Deputy Prime Minister’s head.

Prescott’s two-year adulterous affair with civil servant Tracey Temple had been splashed across the tabloids the year before and ITV had seen fit to turn this private matter into a broad comedy, one which mixed known fact with dramatic invention.

*Confessions of a Diary Secretary* is just one of twenty-four television dramas produced about New Labour which I discuss in my new article in the [British Journal of Politics and International Relations](#). Some of these dramas were based on real events, others elliptically referenced the government and its personnel; but all made, I argue, a unique contribution to public perceptions of politics.

*Confessions of a Diary Secretary* was made by the production company Mentorn, also responsible for *A Very Social Secretary* (about David Blunkett’s adulterous affair with a right-wing socialite), *The Government Inspector* (which dealt with the death of Dr David Kelly) and *The Trial of Tony Blair* (a fantasy about how in retirement the former Prime Minister is sent to the Hague for war crimes). David Aukin, Mentorn’s Head of Drama 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’. If the makers of these dramas made strong truth claims they were also motivated by a variety of political motives – even *Confessions of a Diary Secretary*, an ostensibly apolitical sex romp. Thus Henshaw claimed: ‘When Labour first got in 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 ...’

The majority of dramas I discuss highlighted a common set of themes: the abuse of power by New Labour figures; their reliance on spin (which is presented as lying) to get their way; their lax sexual morals; and essential similarity with the Conservatives. Not all did. As Prescott was fellated, *Confessions of a Diary Secretary* shows him watching Robin Cook’s 2003 resignation speech on television. Cook, it is implied, was a good politician, a man who left office rather than endorse the invasion of Iraq. Similarly, Mo Mowlam appears at the start of the comedy and is described in glowing terms. But Cook and Mowlam had both died in 2005.

Mowlam was the subject of *Mo* broadcast on Channel Four in 2010, a drama that presented the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in positive terms. But this was because its makers had, as the writer Neil McKay put it, ‘pitched it as a personal story, not a political one’ as they did not want Channel Four executives – who considered all politics to be ‘boring’ – to think they would ‘frighten the audience’ with too much Westminster. The drama is consequently mostly about Mowlam’s brain cancer. But when politics does intrude, she is presented as an exceptionally admirable New Labour figure, one who falls victim to the machinations of the dominant ‘cold politics’ of spin as personified by Peter Mandelson.

My article stresses the unique nature of the production context in which these dramas were produced, a theme also developed in my new book *A State of Play. British Politics on the Screen, Stage and Page, From Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It*. For, by the mid-1990s television dramatists were increasingly willing and able to depict real political figures through the hybrid drama-documentary. It was nearly 10 years after his death that Churchill was first depicted on British TV screens – Blair had not been Prime Minister five years before he was shown in *The Deal*. Moreover, while once broadcasters had censored critical views of politics, ostensibly in the public interest, by 1997 executives saw their function as giving them a platform. This meant television dramas increasingly reinforced a picture of British politics as ‘sleazy’ and were apt to be believed by many already cynical viewers as representing the truth.

By playing back the television audience’s own prejudices to itself, my article describes a process that 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. I consequently argue that the dramas I analyse helped diminish the repertoire of credible ideas British viewers held about those they returned to office.

In *A State of Play* I show that fiction has played an important role in articulating a variety of political ideas to a public undreamt of by politicians and policy-makers. But – as my article suggests – we have now entered an era in which the picture of politics which at least television drama now evokes is a populist one: on the small screen the vast majority of fictional politicians are ‘sleazy’ and/or involved in a conspiracy of some sort against the public. Culture is playing an important but insidious role in the current drift away from Westminster and political scientists need to start taking it seriously.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Home page image credit: Pat Guiney.*

## **About the Author**

**Steven Fielding** is Professor of Political History and Director of the Centre for British Politics at the University of Nottingham. His main areas of interest are the fictional representation of politics, the ‘crisis’ of trust in politics, British political history, and the British Labour Party.