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Grandma (sneering): I see Joe's been pushing himself forward. . . . Getting his name in the papers. . . . He'll be standing for Parliament next.

Ma Huggett (shocked): Grandma, what a horrid thing to say about anyone.

(*Vote for Huggett* [1948])

The two decades following the conclusion of the Second World War are with good reason looked upon as the zenith—the “golden age”—of Britain’s two-party political system. The interwar coalitions, splits, and minority governments were no more, while Labour and the Conservatives enjoyed unprecedented levels of support. Most notably, at the 1950 general election 84 percent of those qualified to vote cast their ballot; of these, 96.8 percent supported one or other of the two parties who claimed to have a combined total of 3 million individual members. Compared to their positions before 1939 and after 1970, Labour and the Conservatives appeared to enjoy a secure place in the people’s affections. No wonder that in 1955 the political scientist Robert McKenzie described them as “two great monolithic structures” firmly embedded in society. This view of the period was endorsed thirty years later by the historian Raphael Samuel and is the one to which most students of contemporary politics continue to adhere.¹ More

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¹ Robert MacKenzie, *British Political Parties* (London, 1955), 586; Raphael Samuel, “The Lost

broadly, a variety of sociologists and political scientists believed that during the immediate postwar decades Britain's rulers and ruled enjoyed a "moral unity" in which the legitimacy of the former to govern the latter was almost universally accepted.² Indeed, some historians claim, the "constitutionalism" within which two-party politics was deeply embedded was so integral to the British national identity that people looked on it as an almost natural force.³

The main purpose of the present article is to reexamine this conventional wisdom from the perspective of the "new political history." It forms, therefore, part of the attempt to reconcile the concerns of historians interested in political leadership and institutions with more recent emphases on the culture of politics and the relationship formal organizations enjoyed with the majority.⁴ That means in particular taking issue with historians who claim class was the unmediated social basis for party support—a proposition recently undermined by scholars who have worked on the Conservatives as well as the left.⁵ It also involves elaborating the insights of others who have researched the pre-1914 period and suggested that what, by the middle of the twentieth century, was taken to be the only way of practicing politics had been consciously constructed—and even imposed—by the political elite on the general population.⁶

To further these ends, the article makes particular use of commercial feature films, the kind of qualitative evidence most British political historians have yet to take seriously. For, despite their methodological problems, such films can facilitate the reconstruction of beliefs rarely articulated in the formal political domain. In this instance, movies that took party politics as one of their main themes help confirm the existence of a hitherto disregarded antiparty populism. These films consequently raise significant questions about the parties' "monolithic" status and the nature of the country's "moral unity" in the two decades that followed the defeat of Hitler.



The historiography of postwar British politics has long been dominated by the debate initiated by Paul Addison's *The Road to 1945*. Addison claimed that the

World of British Communism," *New Left Review* 154 (March–April 1985): 8–9; Alexander Lee, "The Changing Electoral Landscape," in *The End of Politics*, ed. Alexander Lee and Timothy Stanley (London, 2006), 1–25.

² Edward Shils and Michael Young, "The Meaning of the Coronation," *Sociological Review* 1, no. 1 (1953): 63–81; and Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ, 1963).

³ Rob Colls, "The Constitution of the English," *History Workshop Journal* 46 (Autumn 1998): 105–7.

⁴ For assessments of this "new political history," see Lawrence Black, "What Kind of People Are You? Labour, the People, and the 'New Political History,'" in *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History*, ed. John Callaghan, Steven Fielding, and Steve Ludlam (Manchester, 2003), 23–38.

⁵ Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, eds., introduction to *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990* (Cardiff, 1996); Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson, and Nick Tiratsoo, "England Arise!" *The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995); and Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in "Affluent" Britain, 1951–1964* (London, 2003).

⁶ James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); and Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language, and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

Second World War spawned a policy “consensus” embraced equally by the Labour and Conservative leaderships.⁷ Historians subsequently disputed how far the parties agreed about the extent to which government should intervene in economic and social life. Few, however, discussed the kind of state each party sought to control and the type of relationship with the people they endorsed. Both front benches accepted that “politics” was a matter of manipulating already established modes of representation centered on Westminster. As a result, historians interested in mapping out the terrain of party competition rarely found it necessary to discuss the matter. The electorate’s thoughts about how (rather than by whom) they were governed were therefore left unexplored.

This relative lack of interest in the people’s relationship with the parties took its cue from political science. Across Europe and North America, it was widely claimed, ingrained class sentiments ensured voters were unproblematically mobilized behind parties ostensibly aligned with their respective social group.⁸ Indeed, the common view remains that in Britain and elsewhere the “rise of party” was predicated on the “rise of class.” Hence, assuming postwar voters chose which party to support on the basis of how they would advance their material interests, scholars considered it “natural” for workers to vote Labour and for the middle class to incline toward the Conservatives. However, with the supposed blurring of class identities, by the 1970s—Bo Sarlvik and Ivor Crewe famously claimed—the voters became increasingly “de-aligned.”⁹

By the 1990s it was widely accepted that the “rise of individualism” (along with a less deferential press and improvements in education) had provoked a “crisis of party” characterized by a decline in the two parties’ memberships, share of the vote, and turnout at elections.¹⁰ Observers believed that a critical feature of this crisis was the emergence of “populism,” characterized as an ideology depicting society as divided between a morally pure people and an ethically corrupt elite. This antiletism—evident across the developed world—invariably focused on the established political parties because they were seen to be part of that ruling group whose interests conflicted with those of the majority.¹¹ Even in Britain, where the first-past-the-post electoral system had long prevented the representation of “out-

⁷ For more on this literature, see Steven Fielding, “Rethinking the ‘Rise and Fall’ of Two-Party Politics,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary British History, 1939–2000*, ed. Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (Oxford, 2005), 351–70.

⁸ Roberto Biorcio and Renato Mannheimer, “Relationships between Citizens and Political Parties,” in *Beliefs in Government*, vol. 1, *Citizens and the State*, ed. Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs (Oxford, 1995), 206. For a more general analysis of the impact of contemporary political science on the writing of political history, see Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, eds., introduction to *Party, State, and Society* (Aldershot, 1997), 1–26.

⁹ Bo Sarlvik and Ivor Crewe, *Decade of Dealignment: The Conservative Victory of 1979 and Electoral Trends in the 1970s* (Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁰ Hans Daalder, “A Crisis of Party,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 15, no. 4 (1992): 269–87; Geoff Mulgan, *Politics in an Antipolitical Age* (Cambridge, 1994), 7–36; Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (Oxford, 1997); Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Chatham, 1996); Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right* (Cambridge, 1994), 5–7.

¹¹ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 543–46. See also Peter Wiles, “A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism,” in *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, ed. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (London, 1969), 167.

sider” parties at Westminster, the British National Party and the UK Independence Party successfully advanced populist stances in local and European elections.¹²

This was not a new phenomenon, however. During the Second World War an unprecedented number of voters supported by-election candidates who articulated antiparty sentiments in response to Britain’s military shortcomings, claiming these were caused by politicians’ neglect of the national interest. Some even searched for a figure “above party” to replace Winston Churchill as prime minister and in 1942 alighted upon Stafford Cripps, at that point an unaligned MP.¹³ A South Wales newspaper correspondent summed up this wartime mood as follows:

Surely the time has come when we can select non-party members to represent us in the Council Chamber or better still to run our business on commonsense non-party lines. We don’t want “Yes” men. We want men with vision who are realists, men who see the things that want doing and then set about to see that they are done, individualists, not calmly following where they are whipped into lobbies. . . . We don’t want to retain the vomit of pre-war days, let us finish with all that and seek a new era. . . . The party system is one of the idle luxuries of the pre-war days. We shall have to devise a better system to carry on in the future.¹⁴

During this period even some Conservative MPs feared that the majority had ceased to put much faith in Parliament—if, at least one speculated, they had ever believed in it.¹⁵

The general opinion is, however, that these views were the product of an exceptional wartime situation and so had few long-term consequences.¹⁶ Yet, if this antipathy to representative politics diminished after 1945, it hardly disappeared, as some politicians reluctantly appreciated. Thus, in 1954, the presumptive Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell, conceded that politics was “looked upon in many quarters as a slightly odd, somewhat discreditable, rather silly occupation.” Even educated members of the public, he believed, considered politicians to be insincere, the parties often indistinguishable, and their machines intolerant of independent thinking. Gaitskell nonetheless dismissed such criticisms as the result of ignorance. Eight years before, the former National Labour MP (but future Labour candidate) Harold Nicolson had similarly pointed to the public’s lack of understanding as the cause of what he claimed was their erroneous view that “politicians are ‘they’ and not ‘us.’”¹⁷ It was in fact to promote a better popular understanding of Parliament that in 1944 the broadcaster, writer, and MP Stephen King-Hall formed the Hansard Society. Like most other members of the political elite, King-Hall was confident that the more people overcame their lack of knowledge about the Lords

¹² Alexander Lee, “Minor Parties, Independents, and the Problem of Pluralism,” in Lee and Stanley, *End of Politics*, 131–38; Mudde, “Populist Zeitgeist,” 550–51.

¹³ Steven Fielding, “The Second World War and Popular Radicalism: The Significance of the ‘Movement away from Party,’” *History* 80, no. 258 (1995): 38–58.

¹⁴ *Barry Herald and Glamorgan Times*, 26 June 1942.

¹⁵ Irene Ward, “The Future of Parliament,” *News-Letter*, April 1942, 183–86; and Norman Bower, “Political Education,” *News-Letter*, August 1942, 322–23.

¹⁶ Paul Addison, “By-Elections of the Second World War,” in *By-Elections in British History*, ed. Chris Cook and John Ramsden (London, 1973), 166.

¹⁷ Hugh Gaitskell, *In Defence of Politics* (London, 1954), 17; Harold Nicolson, *The Independent Member of Parliament*, Hansard Society pamphlet no. 2 (London, 1946), 2, 18.

and Commons, the more they would embrace the British way of doing democracy.¹⁸



Until the early 1970s, therefore, nobody thought it necessary to conduct a comprehensive survey of the public's general attitude to formal politics.¹⁹ Certainly, Gallup, the country's most prominent polling organization, rarely interrogated people about what they thought about the political system.²⁰ There were in contrast innumerable examinations of how electors regarded particular parties, their leaders, policies, and performance. It is nonetheless possible to gain some sense of popular feeling by collating the occasional polling question with findings contained in a few social surveys and some of the pioneering works of electoral sociology. Taken together they reveal the extent to which a very substantial minority felt alienated from representative politics, whether it was practiced at a local or national level, seeing it, as one observer put it (and rather confirming Nicolson's fears), as the province of "They" and not "We."²¹

First, one study claimed the "average working man" was "far more interested in sport than politics."²² This was because, a 1940s survey suggested, men and women thought politics was irrelevant to their "ordinary lives" and appeared too complex to understand and influence—a 1972 poll suggested 62 percent of people still found politics too hard to understand. Even during the 1950 and 1951 campaigns—the zenith of the "golden age" of two-party politics—only about 10 percent of voters attended public meetings, half did not read the material posted to their homes, and 40 percent could not recall discussing a political issue.²³ In the midst of the 1950 election, one eyewitness touring an East London constituency "could not discover a single remark with any bearing on the election—on the streets, outside shops, in cafes—the people were shopping and that's all."²⁴

Second, if some believed that taking an interest in politics was pointless, others were scathingly skeptical about the efficacy of party competition. As one middle-class, middle-aged man said of politicians during the 1945 election: "They're just like a lot of old fish wives. No—what else could you say? Their conversation is just like you hear in fish queues. Old women! That's what they are, bawling and screaming insults at one another."²⁵ During 1954–63 Gallup asked the public five

¹⁸ Norman W. Wilding, *Books about Parliament*, Hansard Society pamphlet no. 1 (London, 1946), 1–2; and Stephen King-Hall, "The Hansard Society," *Parliamentary Affairs* 1, no. 1 (January 1947): 6.

¹⁹ The first such survey was Granada Television, *The State of the Nation: Parliament* (London, 1973).

²⁰ The Gallup poll findings cited in this article are taken from George H. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain, 1937–1975*, vol. 1 (New York, 1977).

²¹ Mass-Observation, *The Journey Home* (London, 1944), 107.

²² Ferdynand Zweig, *The British Worker* (Harmondsworth, 1952), 189.

²³ Robert S. Milne and Hugh C. H. Mackenzie, *Straight Fight: A Study of Voting Behaviour in the Constituency of Bristol North-East at the General Election of 1951* (London, 1954), 87–89, 96; Mark Benney and Phyllis Geiss, "Social Class and Politics in Greenwich," *British Journal of Sociology* 1, no. 4 (June 1950): 320; and News Chronicle, *Behind the Gallup Poll* (London, 1951), 22.

²⁴ Report dated 18 February 1950, Topic Collection, General Elections 1944–1955, box 4, file C, Tom Harrison Mass-Observation Archive (THMOA).

²⁵ File report 2260, June 1945, THMOA, 1.

Table 1—Percentage of Those Thinking That There Were “Really Important Differences” Dividing the Parties or That They Were “Much of a Muchness”

	November 1954	February 1958	September 1959	July 1962	April 1963	Average
Important differences	53	40	64	39	49	49
Much of a muchness	39	46	30	48	39	40

Source.—George H. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain, 1937–1975*, vol. 1 (New York, 1977).

times whether there were any “really important differences” between the parties or whether they thought them “much of a muchness” (see table 1). A large minority—30 percent even in the midst of the 1959 election, when the parties strained to emphasize their distinctiveness—consistently thought the latter. Thus, if when measured in membership and voting figures this was the “golden age” of partisanship, it was also a time when at least 26 percent of those answering Gallup’s various inquiries between 1944 and 1958 favored an all-party coalition over a single party government (table 2). Given that, it should have come as little surprise when Gallup discovered in April 1963 that 47 percent believed it did not much matter which party held office.

Finally, these surveys and polls expose a widespread suspicion about the parties’ motives. In 1944 Gallup discovered that while 36 percent of Britons thought that politicians acted in the country’s interests, 35 percent believed that they looked out for themselves, and 22 percent believed that they were only concerned with party advantage.²⁶ As someone who took part in a constituency campaign during the 1945 election claimed of those working men who attended his meetings, from the questions they asked he sensed “that they all think Politics are somewhat dishonest but that they feel they cannot prove it.”²⁷ This was no wartime artifact. Nineteen years later, Gallup revealed that 42 percent considered that party politicians were mainly out for themselves, against 41 percent who believed they put the nation first.

Gaitskell had dismissed these kinds of opinions as the product of ignorance. It is true that those who, even in the election year of 1964, declared they had “not much or no” interest in politics and believed there was “not much or no” difference between the parties were disproportionately from the manual working class or women—groups with the fewest formal educational qualifications.²⁸ Yet, in the late 1940s the think tank Political and Economic Planning found that even voluntary association activists—informed men and women with experience in dealing with government—considered that “people are only in local politics for what they can get out of it” and reportedly laughed at the notion “of disinterested service.”²⁹ This echoed what Mass-Observation described as “the most frequently appearing

²⁶ Cited in Steven Fielding, “What Did ‘the People’ Want? The Meaning of the 1945 General Election,” *Historical Journal* 35, no. 3 (1992): 629.

²⁷ Dennis Wells, “Now It’s All Over: (1) The Hustings,” *News-Letter*, August 1945, 204–5.

²⁸ Ivor Crewe, Neil Day, and Anthony Fox, *The British Electorate 1963–1987: A Compendium of Data from the British Election Survey* (Cambridge, 1991), 153, 162, 171–72, 179.

²⁹ Political and Economic Planning, “Watling Revisited,” *Planning* 14, no. 270 (1947): 79–80.

Table 2—Percentage of Those Favoring an All-Party Coalition Government

	August 1944	April 1945	February 1947	May 1950	February 1951	December 1958	Average
All-party coalition	35	43	37	43	26	35	37

Source.—George H. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain, 1937–1975*, vol. 1 (New York, 1977).

of all spontaneous comments on [Bolton] politics’ heard during their late 1930s research: ‘They (the councillors) are only out for themselves.’”³⁰



Commercial feature films are, at the very least, an intriguing means of further exploring these partially submerged attitudes, especially during the 1940s and 1950s, when cinema held a dominant position within popular culture.³¹ In 1946, attendances reached a peak of 31.4 million per week. This meant that about two-fifths of adults saw a film at least once a week, an audience disproportionately composed of manual workers, women, and the young.³² Attendances declined thereafter, at first gradually, but in the late 1950s and early 1960s, precipitously. Admissions per year, from their 1946 zenith of 1,635 million fell to 1,182 million in 1955 and then, thanks to television, to 501 million in 1960 and just 327 million five years later.³³

If only for reasons of profit, film studios wanted to appeal to their audiences’ viewpoints. Michael Balcon, head of Ealing Studios in the 1940s, certainly believed his films reflected generally held political sentiments.³⁴ Some historians agree. Arthur Marwick for one is convinced that no filmmaker “can really go beyond certain assumptions accepted within his country” and that the bigger its commercial success, “the more a film is likely to tell us about the unvoiced assumptions of the people who watched it.”³⁵ Yet how far cinema was, as the critic Raymond Durgnat had it in the title of his 1970 study, *A Mirror for England*, must be questioned. No film could simply reproduce popular attitudes, if only because those who wrote, directed, and produced movies were likely to be more middle-class, middle-aged,

³⁰ “The Elected—Worktown Councillors,” n.d., Work Town Collection, box 5, file E, THMOA.

³¹ For an assessment of the cultural significance of cinema, see Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 2000), 419–56.

³² Louis Moss and Kathleen Box, *The Cinema Audience* (London, 1943); and Political and Economic Planning, *The British Film Industry* (London, 1952), 181.

³³ Barry Doyle, “The Geography of Cinemagoing in Great Britain, 1934–1994: A Comment,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 23, no. 1 (2003): 59–61, 65–66. See also Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre, and the “New Look”* (London, 2000), 11–20; as well as Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (Oxford, 2003), 243–47.

³⁴ Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents . . . : A Lifetime of Films* (London, 1969), 159. See also Robert Murphy, “British Films Production, 1939 to 1945,” in *National Fictions: World War II in British Films and Television*, ed. Geoff Hurd (London, 1984), 17; and Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, rev. ed. (1977; repr., London, 1993), 8.

³⁵ Arthur Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France, and the USA since 1930* (London, 1980), 22.

and male than their audiences. Likewise, filmmakers worked within stylized genres whose conventions enjoyed only a tangential relationship to the world beyond the screen. In addition, certain subjects and opinions could not be discussed. Those owning the industry—notably the devout Methodist J. Arthur Rank, Britain's most powerful film producer and distributor—were morally and politically conservative men who needed little prompting from the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) to ensure their movies reinforced convention.³⁶

Indeed, due to the aesthetic power of the silver screen, some figure films could construct consciousness. As the novelist and critic Gore Vidal suggests: “We are both defined and manipulated by [cinematic] fictions of such potency that they are able to replace our own experience, often becoming our sole experience of . . . reality.”³⁷ Historians of Hollywood even believe movies encouraged Americans to think of themselves as individuals rather than members of a working class.³⁸ Others, finally, consider cinema performed an altogether different function, one that further complicates its utility as a historical source. As the foremost postwar authorities on British cinema stated, films could be a “safety valve for pent-up ambitions, which the ‘daily round and common tasks’ do little to liberate.” Balcon (perhaps inconsistently) believed Ealing comedies gave vent to people’s “more anti-social impulses,” ones they would never dare act out in their own lives.³⁹ In other words, rather than reflecting or creating attitudes, some think films called into existence what Durgnat termed “an alternative life” of fantasy with little or no bearing on the outside world.⁴⁰

Most of those currently writing on British cinema reject the idea that films performed just one of the functions outlined above. Jeffrey Richards and Tony Aldgate argue that filmmaking was a “two-way process operating in areas of shared experience and shared perception”—that which Marcia Landy terms a “dynamic interplay between producer, director, text and audience.”⁴¹ As Andy Medhurst wrote in his influential article on how to understand film, “Texts and contexts are indivisibly interrelated discourses, each is part of the other, and to conceptualise them as discrete is to render full analysis impossible.”⁴² This emphasis on the dialectical relationship between film and audience, text and context is certainly prudent. For in the absence of all but the most general of audience surveys (and Mass-Observation’s research on a few films released during the 1930s and 1940s), historians can only speculate as to the impact of specific movies on individuals.⁴³ Despite Marwick’s confidence

³⁶ Vincent Porter, “Methodism versus the Market Place: The Rank Organisation and British Cinema,” in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (London, 1997), 122–32; Jeffrey Richards, “British Film Censorship,” in Murphy, *British Cinema Book*, 167–77; Guy Phelps, *Film Censorship* (London, 1974), 146.

³⁷ Gore Vidal, *Screening History* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 6, 32.

³⁸ See, e.g., Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, NJ, 1998).

³⁹ Douglas A. Spencer and Hugh D. Waley, *The Cinema To-Day* (Oxford, 1956), 153; Balcon, *Lifetime*, 159.

⁴⁰ Robert Durgnat, *Films and Feeling* (London, 1967), 135.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, *Best of British: Cinema and Society, 1930–1970* (Oxford, 1983), 1–2, 5, 10; Marcia Landy, *British Film Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930–1960* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), 4–5.

⁴² Andy Medhurst, “‘Victim’: Text as Context,” *Screen* 25, nos. 4–5 (July–October 1984): 35.

⁴³ Jane Thumin, *Celluloid Sisters: Women and Popular Cinema* (London, 1992), 33–34.

in their efficacy, box office receipts (very like crude voting figures) say remarkably little on their own and certainly do not indicate what the public thought about key aspects of any production. Moreover, the absence of the relevant records means that even establishing the size of an audience for particular features is a hazardous task, except for a few cinemas with surviving attendance ledgers.⁴⁴

As most accept, therefore, historians cannot know for certain what audiences took from films.⁴⁵ They can, however, be fairly sure some people were oblivious to messages producers might have wanted to convey. For “going to the cinema” encompassed a repertoire of activities, of which actually watching a film—often chosen at random—was not necessarily the most important.⁴⁶ It is, moreover, apparent that those looking at the screen brought to bear their own “extratextual” influences: audience members from different classes, generations, genders, and ethnicities did not all respond to the same film in the same way.⁴⁷ Finally, while most moviemakers tried to appeal to popular sentiments, they did not always succeed. Even the big Hollywood studios—armed with sophisticated market research techniques denied their parlous British counterparts—had an imperfect grasp of the public mood. At best, filmmakers could serve up only what they imagined audiences wanted and that which the censor and their own assumptions allowed them to say.⁴⁸

These caveats should never be forgotten when interpreting the popular impact of cinema. In the case of film’s depiction of party politics—one generated by a variety of studios, across several genres, and over a number of years—the survey evidence already cited nonetheless suggests it bore some relationship to views expressed outside the auditorium. Indeed, it establishes that the very groups who mostly watched films were those who disproportionately held negative opinions about politics. Therefore—while it cannot be proved that audiences thought the way they did because of cinema or that cinema depicted politics that way because of the audience—it can be inferred that, in this case at least, British cinema did express a popular sentiment.



Writing in the later 1950s—and in contrast to those who stressed the country’s “moral unity”—Richard Hoggart suggested British workers saw society as a Man-

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Sue Harper, “A Lower Middle-Class Taste-Community in the 1930s: Admissions Figures at the Regent Cinema, Portsmouth, UK,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 24, no. 4 (2004): 565–87; Julian Poole, “British Cinema Attendance in Wartime: Audience Preference at the Majestic, Macclesfield, 1939–1946,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 7, no. 1 (1987): 15–34. For a heroic attempt to establish the relative national popularity of films, see John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter, 2000).

⁴⁵ Thumin, *Celluloid Sisters*, 33–34.

⁴⁶ Mass-Observation, “Film and the Public: Chance of a Lifetime,” *Sight and Sound* 19, no. 9 (January 1951): 349–50. More generally, see Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London, 1987); Annette Kuhn, “Cinema-Going in Britain in the 1930s: Report of a Questionnaire Survey,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 19, no. 4 (1999): 531–43; and Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties*, 4–11.

⁴⁷ Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, “Moved to Tears: Weeping in the Cinema in Postwar Britain,” *Screen* 37 (1996): 173; Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London, 1991), 122.

⁴⁸ William Hughes, “The Evaluation of Film as Evidence,” in *The Historian and Film*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge, 1976), 67–71.

ichaeon conflict between “Them’ and ‘Us.” According to him “Them” comprised those civil servants, local authority officials, teachers, police officers, magistrates, and others who exerted power over “Us.” In Hoggart’s hands this sense of “Them’ and ‘Us” was generated by a specifically proletarian experience of a class-divided society.⁴⁹ Yet, as we have seen, it was also how others defined the relationship the people as a whole endured with their elected representatives. Certainly, the films analyzed here depicted politicians as an antagonistic “Them” juxtaposed against an “Us” of “little people” defined in cross-class terms.

During the 1930s British cinema registered this populist view of “Them”—but only for comic effect. Comedy’s traditional association with a carnival-like sense of disorder gave filmmakers license to ridicule petty public authority and so appeal to audiences without falling foul of the BBFC.⁵⁰ Thus, despite the dominance of the Conservatives at Westminster, the films of music hall comedian Will Hay show that poking fun at men who were supposed to generate deference—in his case police officers, teachers, prison wardens, and railway stationmasters—was no bar to success.⁵¹ The military catastrophes that marked the early years of the Second World War encouraged some Britons to view established institutions with even greater skepticism. The film industry, however, fought shy of giving that perspective too open a vent.⁵² Winston Churchill infamously wanted to stop the production of the comedy-drama *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1944) as he believed its portrayal of authority would undermine morale. That, however, said much more about his insecurities than the intentions of the producers.⁵³ A small number of films nonetheless did dramatically underline popular suspicions: the drama *Went the Day Well?* (1942) depicted a member of the landed gentry as a Nazi fifth columnist.⁵⁴

With the expansion of the state during the war and as a consequence of the 1945–51 Labour government, the number of “Them” to lampoon massively increased. For while the welfare state and nationalized industries were supposed to serve popular interests, doubts remained about those who exerted authority, the general temper being best illustrated by two comedies. Ealing’s *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) is probably the most famous film to deal with the people’s relationship with public power—and that was from a standpoint broadly sympathetic to Labour.⁵⁵ *The Happy Family* (1952), in contrast, was produced by the (until recently) critically disregarded Sydney Box. A relatively obscure and more modestly produced film, it nonetheless mined similar themes, albeit (and despite Box’s own progressive intentions) from a more skeptical position. Indeed *The Happy Family*,

⁴⁹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth, 1957), 62–63.

⁵⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin first broached the notion of comedy as “carnival” in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX, 1982). For an application of Bakhtin’s ideas to British film comedies see Landy, *British Film Genres*, 332–33.

⁵¹ For Hay, see Landy, *British Film Genres*, 347–52.

⁵² File report 2260, June 1945, THMOA, 2. For a general view of films during the conflict, see Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1986).

⁵³ A. L. Kennedy, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (London, 1997).

⁵⁴ Penelope Houston, *Went the Day Well?* (London, 1992).

⁵⁵ For example, see Andy Medhurst, “Myths of Consensus and Fables of Escape: British Cinema, 1945–1951,” in *Labour’s Promised Land? Culture and Society in Britain, 1945–1951*, ed. Jim Fyrth (London, 1995), 39–46. On the politics of the studio, see Barr, *Ealing Studios*.

while based on a successful West End play, virtually reproduced *Pimlico*'s plot and cast some of its leading actors in the same kind of roles.⁵⁶

Both films show how in the first case a community, and in the second a family, could fall foul of power. In the Ealing production, the residents of the south London district of Pimlico claim exemption from rationing, licensing laws, and Sunday trading restrictions. The Box film has the Lord family refuse to be rehoused after civil servants planned for a road to run through their home. As the Lords stand firm, they are forced to endure a siege imposed by Whitehall—in *Pimlico*, one ordered by the Labour cabinet with Churchill's support. In each case the public is depicted as on the side of the besieged—as audiences were presumably also meant to be. The Ealing film concludes by showing that whatever their irritations with state regulation, the denizens of Pimlico realize that untrammelled freedom holds even more disadvantages, and they come to a compromise. Thus, the film depicts state intervention in everyday life as irritating but ultimately a power for good. In contrast, the Lord family defeats Whitehall, the new road being forced to bend on either side of their home. It was not for nothing that Pa Lord raised his glass to toast “living quietly and being left alone and not being led about like sheep, to our Englishman's castle and to all the millions of little castles belonging to little people all over the country.”⁵⁷

Irrespective of their contrasting subtexts, these films embraced a strikingly similar view of “Them and Us.”⁵⁸ In both, Whitehall is depicted as run by men who, if initially not unfriendly, were ultimately indifferent—if not antipathetic—to the interests of the respectable “little people” who sat on the borders of the working and middle classes. In the Ealing film, Pimlico is depicted as mainly comprising shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs, and the self-employed, while the Lords own a shop, and Pa is a skilled railway engine driver.

This preoccupation with the conflict between “Them and Us” remained an underlying motif in many comedies produced during the 1950s.⁵⁹ It was registered in films as disparate as the slapstick Norman Wisdom vehicle *Man of the Moment* (1955) and the sophisticated Boulting Brothers' satire *Carlton-Browne of the FO* (1959). In the former, Wisdom reprised his popular Chaplinesque “little man” role and accidentally becomes a delegate at an international conference. Through misadventure he plays a key role in negotiations, thereby turning the tables on those mandarins and ministers who had previously treated him with disdain. The Boultings' film also took an international crisis as its theme and suggested that Britain's civil and military elite was inbred, incompetent, and indolent—as well as incapable of defending the national interest. Similar themes had of course been given an airing during the Second World War.



Despite accepting those films that mocked petty officials, the BBFC usually drew the line at those that dealt with “controversial politics”—and the board assumed

⁵⁶ Andrew Spicer, *Sydney Box* (Manchester, 2006), 148–51; Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939–1949* (London, 1992), 88–89.

⁵⁷ *The Happy Family*, directed by Muriel Box (1952).

⁵⁸ Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties*, 136–37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 56–63; Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London, 1997), 64.

politics was almost inherently controversial. Before the Second World War, politics was therefore depicted rarely and, inevitably, only in low comic form—such as in *Old Mother Riley MP* (1939), in which the feisty washerwoman becomes the “minister for strange affairs” and ends unemployment. This effective prohibition on films that tackled contemporary issues in a serious manner was lifted during the war, allowing for the release of *Love on the Dole* (1941), the production of which had hitherto been blocked by the board. Like the novel upon which it was based, the film stressed the privations of the unemployed and criticized government policy. If that seemed dangerous in the 1930s, it has been argued that wartime Whitehall officials thought it useful to encourage the production of such a movie for propaganda purposes.⁶⁰ For the most part, however, those running the industry fought shy of exploiting their new freedom to tackle political themes.⁶¹ Consequently, few postwar films addressed subjects with direct contemporary social or political relevance. Thus, in the late 1940s, while crime dramas accounted for 37 percent of films exhibited, and love stories, for 20 percent, only 1 percent could be categorized as concerned with a “social issue.”⁶²

Cinema’s leading figures had long enjoyed close links with the Conservative Party, while few would have seen the point of alienating Labour ministers, given the importance of a favorable government trade policy to their industry.⁶³ Sue Harper and Vincent Porter also suggest that the “British film establishment” embraced a strongly paternalistic view of society, one that expected the lower orders to know their place.⁶⁴ Given this, it is no wonder they did not encourage films that questioned what they presumed to be an essentially benevolent status quo. That was certainly the view of the left, many of whom disparaged the studio bosses’ stress on the production of what they saw as “escapist” movies.⁶⁵

Hackles were raised when distributors refused to handle *Chance of a Lifetime* (1950) because, some believed, film mogul Rank found its message—capital and labor should cooperate for the common good—politically unacceptable. In his defense Rank claimed the decision was based on commercial grounds. The film, he said, had many fine qualities but would not attract a public that sought entertainment rather than education.⁶⁶ Even those, like producer Sydney Box, who were frustrated by their industry’s reluctance to tackle political issues conceded that films that did take on such themes would lack wide appeal.⁶⁷ The example of *Love on the Dole*, which despite being lauded by the critics was a box office disappointment, possibly informed Box’s outlook.⁶⁸ Thus, when Betty Box came to produce *No Love for Johnnie*, a film about an MP, she claimed: “I didn’t wish to

⁶⁰ Caroline Levine, “Propaganda for Democracy: The Curious Case of *Love on the Dole*,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 4 (October 2006): 846–74.

⁶¹ Richards and Aldgate, *Best of British*, 84–85.

⁶² Political and Economic Planning, *British Film Industry*, 203–8.

⁶³ T. J. Hollins, “The Conservative Party and Film Propaganda between the Wars,” *English Historical Review* 96, no. 379 (1981): 366–69; Peter Forster, “J. Arthur Rank and the Shrinking Screen,” in *Age of Austerity, 1945–1951*, ed. Phillip Sissons and Michael French (Harmondsworth, 1964), 287–305.

⁶⁴ Harper and Porter, *Decline of Deference*, 267.

⁶⁵ Fielding, Thompson, and Tiratsoo, *England Arise!* 156–58.

⁶⁶ Geoffrey MacNabb, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London, 1993), 202–3; Richards and Aldgate, *Best of British*, 118–19.

⁶⁷ Spicer, *Sydney Box*, 148.

⁶⁸ Levine, “Propaganda for Democracy,” 849–50.

lean on the political side of the piece—it was intended to entertain, which is what movies are supposed to do.”⁶⁹

There are, then, a variety of possible reasons why between 1944 and 1964 only nine movies (six comedies and three dramas) took politics as their main theme and why they tackled it in such a censorious manner.⁷⁰ It is, however, reasonable to assume that an important influence was the fact that many potential customers were uninterested in politics and skeptical of, or even hostile to, the parties. Yet, if such films represented a small share of the output of British studios, such was cinema’s popularity: millions still saw them. There were, moreover, many other different kinds of films in which politicians were as a matter of course depicted in a derogatory way or in which they were the hapless butts of cynical jokes. *The New Lot* (1943), for example, contains one scene in which a working-class character jokingly claimed, “There’s only one good man ever got into Parliament,” that man being Guy Fawkes.⁷¹ In one of the stories contained in the 1955 horror movie *Three Cases of Murder*, Orson Welles played an arrogant foreign secretary sent mad after destroying the career of a charismatic political opponent. The comedies *Billy Liar* (1963) and *The Punch and Judy Man* (1963) both show councillors as pompous, out-of-touch, socially ambitious, and self-interested figures that their heroes take great pleasure in ridiculing. These nine movies, finally, formed part of a wider cultural continuum, starring, as they did, popular figures taken from the stage, music hall, or radio and being adapted, as many were, from variety turns, plays, and novels.

He Snoops to Conquer (1944) starred George Formby, who was then still one of Britain’s most popular male movie stars, having won over the public in the late 1930s with his portrayal of an artless innocent of proletarian origin who always managed to triumph over adversity.⁷² As the country’s leading cinema trade paper said of his 1944 effort, Formby’s film was designed for “industrial and provincial audiences.”⁷³ The same could have been said of *Vote for Huggett* (1948). This was the third in a series of four unassumingly produced Gainsborough Studio comedies released during 1947–49. They featured the everyday adventures a fictional south London family and spawned a BBC radio series that ran throughout the 1950s. Audiences were meant to closely identify with the Huggetts—Pa being played by the everyman actor Jack Warner (who would later play Police Constable George Dixon), and Ma, by Kathleen Harrison, who specialized in reassuringly motherly roles (such as Mrs. Lord in *The Happy Family*). They were supposed to see them (like the Lords and the residents of Pimlico) as “typical” figures, standing as they did on the cusp of the upper working and lower middle classes.⁷⁴

Somewhere in Politics (1948), produced by the small regional Mancunian Stu-

⁶⁹ Betty Box, *Lifting the Lid: The Autobiography of Film Producer Betty Box*, OBE (Lewes, 2000), 212.

⁷⁰ This figure was established with the help of staff at the British Film Institute.

⁷¹ Cited in Jo Fox, “Millions Like Us? Accented Language and the ‘Ordinary’ in British Films of the Second World War,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 4 (October 2006): 837–38.

⁷² Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel*, 191.

⁷³ Cited in Alan Randall and Ray Seaton, *George Formby* (London, 1974), 27–28.

⁷⁴ Philip Gillett, *The British Working Class in Postwar Film* (Manchester, 2003), 80–87; Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (London, 2001), 82–86; Spicer, *Sydney Box*, 84, 111–12.

dios, featured the music hall star Frank Randle, whose portrayal of a bawdy old man appealed to northern working-class audiences who liked their comedy broad.⁷⁵ In contrast *The Chiltern Hundreds* (1949) aspired to greater levels of sophistication, being based on William Douglas-Home's successful West End play of the same name. The critically regarded Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat produced *Left, Right, and Centre* (1959). This formed part of their "state of England trilogy," which satirized the postwar status quo, albeit in a more gentle way than did the Boulting Brothers (whose acerbic reflection on industrial relations *I'm All Right Jack* was released in the same year).⁷⁶ Reflecting the changed nature of cinema audiences, *Just for Fun!* (1963) was designed for an exclusively young audience as a vehicle for various pop stars to reprise their hits. Between the songs, there was a plot of sorts, one that strongly echoed attitudes expressed in the earlier films and that pitched music-obsessed teenagers against Right and Left Parties whose leaders formed part of a pop-hating consensus.

All three dramas had literary origins. *The Years Between* (1946), while based on Daphne Du Maurier's West End play, was one of a number of films that explored the difficulties faced by married couples separated by the Second World War.⁷⁷ During this time many wives discovered hidden resources by escaping their domestic routine and taking on new jobs previously reserved for men. With the peace, their returning partners often wanted things to return to normal. In this movie, the heroine's husband—a Conservative MP and soldier—was presumed killed in action, but after three years as a prisoner of war he came home to find his wife representing his constituency and engaged to his best friend. The film ends, however, with the couple happily reconciled—and both sitting in the Commons. Ramsay MacDonald was widely thought to have provided the template for Hamer Radshaw, the central character in Howard Spring's 1940 novel, on which *Fame Is the Spur* (1947) was based. Michael Redgrave played Radshaw, the working-class boy who became a cabinet minister. He was made up to look very much like MacDonald, who by the 1940s was generally viewed as having betrayed his party for the sake of self-regarding ambition. The film mined this theme with alacrity.⁷⁸ It was another fourteen years before party politics was again the subject of a screen drama: *No Love for Johnnie* (1961) was similar in substance, if not style, being Rank's answer to the "realist" *Room at the Top* (1959). It was based on a novel written by the Labour MP Wilfred Fienburgh and published posthumously in 1959. The film, like the book, also focused on a left-wing politician, Johnnie Byrne, all too willing to sacrifice principle for position. Unlike the novel, however, the movie dwelled more on Byrne's sexual—rather than political—adventures.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Philip Martin Williams and David L. Williams, *Hooray for Jollywood* (Ashton-under-Lyne, 2001), 87–91.

⁷⁶ Bruce Babington, *Launder and Gilliat* (Manchester, 2002), 190, 196–201.

⁷⁷ Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel*, 102.

⁷⁸ Brian McFarlane, "Fame Is the Spur: An Honourable Failure," in *The Family Way: The Boulting Brothers and British Film Culture*, ed. Alan Burton, Tim O'Sullivan, and Paul Wells (Trowbridge, 2000), 122–33; Richards and Aldgate, *Best of British*, 75–86.

⁷⁹ Melanie Williams, "No Love for Johnnie," in *24 Frames: The Cinema of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Brian McFarlane and Roy Ward Baker (London, 2005), 127–28; Harper and Porter, *Decline of Deference*, 239.



Taken together these movies broadly evoked what a significant proportion of cinema audiences thought about two-party politics. They depicted politicians as a group apart, preoccupied with advancing their own interests. Party difference was revealed to be a fiction, one that masked the parties' mutual concern to take advantage of the people. While a few films showed that challenging the party system could achieve some positive changes, there was no sense that there was in reality a viable alternative.

First, the films made it clear that politicians were "Them," while the characters with whom the disproportionately working-class, female, and young audience was meant to identify were "Us." When Randle's character stood for the council, he wanted to further a conflict with his employer, the incumbent. Formby portrayed a humble odd-job man; his political nemesis, a powerful property owner. Pa Huggett, while a foreman (in working-class terms a high-status job), was still patronized and ridiculed by the Progressive leader—a suave solicitor—at the latter's exclusive golf club. Ma Huggett, a woman who cleaned her own doorstep, just like millions of women, was intimidated by the Moderate leader's wife when she arrived in a chauffeur-driven limousine to talk about the extensive social obligations of a councillor's consort.

The Years Between was exceptional in that it depicted Diana Wentworth, the film's young and attractive (albeit firmly upper-middle-class) heroine, as a very sympathetic MP and so hardly one of "Them." This is mainly due to her gender, which, on its own, set Diana apart from other politicians—as the film is keen to point out. In addition, she becomes an MP for nonpolitical reasons: to aid her recovery from the trauma of widowhood through helping the war effort and comforting her neighbors. Diana's ignorance of politics is continually emphasized and even used as an excuse for a joke at the expense of the Commons, with one character claiming her lack of knowledge meant that "she'll be in the same boat as half the other MPs."⁸⁰ Her otherwise exclusively male constituency party and parliamentary colleagues are, moreover, shown to be stuffy and pompous. Being a woman and untouched by established politics, in her maiden speech Diana consequently puts aside the ascribed "party line" given to her by a Whip. Instead she speaks on behalf of the millions of ordinary women making wartime sacrifices in the hope of a better postwar Britain, even calling for equal pay—a policy opposed in the "real world" by both party leaderships.

If *Left, Right, and Centre* had a female politician among its cast of characters, she was a more conventional figure—a Labour parliamentary candidate who had moved out of the working class via the London School of Economics, just to fall in love with her Conservative opponent. Hamer Radshaw's wife was, however, more in the Diana Wentworth mold—an independent-minded suffragette patronized by her husband for a supposed ignorance of political practicalities. Similarly, for Johnnie Byrne, women are either an impediment to advancement—in the form of his still politically idealistic, Communist wife—or amorous diversions from Commons intrigue. Other than these cases, politics was depicted as an exclusively male world, provoking Ma Huggett's fear that she would be unable to hold conver-

⁸⁰ *The Years Between*, directed by Compton Bennett (1946).

sations with her husband after he had become a councillor. “I don’t know as I can keep up with you now Joe, now that you’ve a Corporation and all that” she complained. “I feel I can’t talk about the things that interest you. . . . National Insurance and football pools and rates and taxes and drains. I can’t do it Joe, I’m not made that way.” Reassuring his wife that he could not abide pretty or clever women—and that she was neither—Pa went on to declaim: “I like you the way you are. And if I hear you talking about rates and taxes and all that drivell I’ll take a big stick to you my girl.”⁸¹ For his firm promise Pa received a grateful wifely kiss. With a few exceptions party politics was also shown to be a middle-aged and old man’s world. The teenagers of *Just for Fun!* heard a Left Party member even claim he preferred what audiences were presumably meant to think to be the deadly alternatives to pop music of “folk songs, Morris dancing, [and] Robert Burns.”⁸²

Second, politicians were presented as concerned only with advancing themselves—and that was usually at the people’s expense. Huggett’s attempt to become a councillor is seen by family members as presaging a move up the social ladder. Byrne and Radshaw’s rise out of the working class and their political ascent are depicted as indivisible parts of the same process. In both of these cases the people are just a means to an end. Despite being warned against it, Radshaw delivered an inflammatory speech to striking miners in South Wales so as to bolster his national reputation—although it led to the death of one of those provoked into riot. Byrne is shown as contemptuous of his constituents. *No Love for Johnnie* starts with him campaigning vigorously in his northern industrial seat, surrounded by attentive supporters. Yet, as soon as his reelection is secured, Byrne is off on the first train to London, and we learn that he hardly ever goes north between contests. Even when a constituent took the trouble to visit him in Westminster to discuss a problem, Byrne remains lounging on the Commons terrace drinking a beer.

Politicians are also shown to be corrupt. Formby helped expose the fact that his local council’s refusal to build new homes after the war was because its leading light owned slum property and wanted to protect his income. This at a time, in the aftermath of D-day, when housing was a pressing issue in the “real world.”⁸³ Pa Huggett criticized the Moderate council’s plans to build a community center to commemorate the war, and the Progressives took up his proposal to build a garden and lido instead. Unlike Huggett, however, the party leaders were only interested in a memorial from which they could benefit—each stood to gain from their preferred scheme, through either ownership of land or construction contracts. Indeed, when the Moderate leader’s naive young nephew included in a draft speech the promise to safeguard the people’s interests, his uncle firmly struck out the sentence. The Progressive boss is also shown to have dubious sexual morals: despite being married he made several unsuccessful attempts to seduce Huggett’s eldest daughter.

Party difference is, third, presented as largely fictional. In *The Chiltern Hundreds* the aristocrat Tony Pym stood for the Conservatives in the 1945 general election

⁸¹ *Vote for Huggett*, directed by Ken Annakin (1948).

⁸² *Just for Fun!* directed by Gordon Flemyng (1963).

⁸³ Fielding, Thompson, and Tiratsoo, *England Arise!* 36–38, 61–62.

in a constituency held by his family for generations. However, he loses to Labour, a reverse that leads Pym's wealthy American fiancée to question his suitability as a husband. An opportunity to retrieve the situation presents itself when the Labour man is elevated to the Lords, thereby forcing a by-election. Hoping to revive his love affair, but also indicating the ultimate meaninglessness of party labels, Pym stands again. This time he is the Labour candidate but loses to the Conservative, the family butler, thereby suggesting the extent to which the parties are socially—as well as politically—interchangeable.

In *Left, Right, and Centre*, the Labour and Conservative parliamentary by-election candidates fall in love, but their respective machines put what few differences they have to one side and combine to destroy the affair. Moreover, at the climax of the campaign a Conservative speaker mistakenly addresses a Labour meeting. His peroration is nonetheless met with rapturous applause and generates the same response when he finally delivers the speech to its intended audience. Despite the parties' contrasting social compositions, which the film does note, the left-right dichotomy is still presented as inconsequential, and the main purpose of electoral activity is depicted as giving the false impression that party difference was vital. That the gap between the parties was nothing compared to the chasm that separated them from the public is underlined by ordinary people being shown as having no interest in the by-election, especially when compared to a forthcoming pop concert. Even the most lurid partisan rhetoric fails to rouse their passions since it was irrelevant to their lives.

The films, finally, suggest that however bad the position, change was unlikely. While *No Love for Johnnie* concentrated on Byrne's shortcomings, the film suggests he was not typical of all MPs. The prime minister's parliamentary private secretary, for example, tells Byrne: "You're the most unmitigated, grasping and self-important bastard that I've ever met in a lifetime's politics." The premier himself claimed politicians were just "ordinary blokes," no worse than others, although expected to live by a higher morality. Yet, Byrne's type of amoral "political technician" is presented as in the ascendant: he is the future. It was, symbolically, the terminal illness of a decent MP that gave Byrne his chance to become assistant postmaster general and take a first step up the ministerial ladder. Similarly, Radshaw's wife is depicted as a woman of principle—but she dies thanks to her hunger strike in Holloway Prison in pursuit of votes for women. Radshaw's boyhood friend, Arnold, also stands by his beliefs. Not being, as Arnold puts it, a "practical politician," he remains a poor and powerless figure—albeit one that stands as a constant rebuke to Hamer's selfish ambition.⁸⁴

The kinds of political activity normally open to the "little people" are also presented as rather pointless. While the Right Party prime minister gives teenagers the vote in *Just for Fun!* he also limits how much pop music can be played on television. The teenagers organize a petition in protest, but their pleas are ignored, and while the Left Party pretends to be sympathetic, it is as hostile to pop as the Right. The futility of trying to make politicians reflect their constituents' concerns had earlier been illustrated in *The Happy Family*. After learning of their imminent eviction, the Lords visited their councillor, whom they had loyally supported for years. Claiming he could do nothing about it, the councillor passed them on to

⁸⁴ *No Love for Johnnie*, directed by Ralph Thomas (1961).

the chair of the local housing committee, who referred them to the mayor, who had them contact their MP, who made an appointment for them to see the very civil servant responsible for the original decision. He naturally told them that he had arrived at the right verdict.

Some films showed that independent candidates—and even a new party—could achieve something. With the help of an eccentric millionaire and his beautiful young daughter, Formby's character wins a council by-election as an independent, thereby ensuring the construction of new homes fit for heroes. Pa Huggett defeats the corrupt intentions of both the Progressives and the Moderates by winning his by-election aided by three wealthy spinsters and so guaranteeing that a genuinely popular war memorial will be built. Denied representation, the youngsters in *Just for Fun!* form a "Teenage Party" and stand on a platform of "Fun" with real pop stars such as Kenny Lynch and disc jockeys like Jimmy Saville as candidates. Despite the combined opposition of Left and Right, the Teenagers win power—albeit with dire consequences: at the conclusion of the film Britain is depicted as collapsing into the sea.

If little could be changed, audiences were offered some compensation, at least by two of the dramas. While Spring's novel held up its protagonist to a harsh light, it did at least allow him to find some sort of redemption. This was something John and Roy Boulting's screen version denied Radshaw. Instead they heaped upon his head unmitigated retribution: despite becoming a peer, he ends his days a lonely, confused, and derided old man. Byrne's failure to secure a position in the newly elected Labour government was due to his marriage to a woman suspected of Communist links. Once she had left him, Byrne was considered eligible for office. Knowing this, he put ambition before any residual feelings he might have held for his wife and rejected her attempt to foster a reconciliation. Having been spurned by a young model, at the end of the film, Byrne's future—like Radshaw's past—looked publicly successful but privately barren. This was of course in stark contrast to Formby's character's amorous success and the Huggetts' and Diana Wentworth's conjugal bliss, that being their reward for properly representing the people's wishes.



Audience reactions to these films remain clouded in obscurity. The published opinions of professional film critics do, however, give some clues as to possible responses. While it is not uncommon for film historians to use press reviews to gauge opinion, they nonetheless need to be read with caution: like those who produced movies, critics were very different from the majority of the paying public.⁸⁵ Even so, it is significant that reviewers rarely criticized the films' negative depiction of party politics and often echoed what we know to be popular views.

Due to the low critical status of the kind of comedy in the Formby and Randle films, reviewers had nothing of substance to say about them. Presumably anticipating a hostile reaction, the producers of *He Snoops to Conquer* did not furnish

⁸⁵ Isabel Quigly, "Being a Film Reviewer in the 1950s," in *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration*, ed. Ian MacKillop and Neil Sinyard (Manchester, 2003), 213–20; Thumin, *Celluloid Sisters*, 34.

the press with a preview showing.⁸⁶ Nor did critics deign to write at any length about a youth exploitation film of the caliber of *Let's Have Fun!* Those employed by the tabloids did, however, have something to say about *Vote for Huggett*. The *Daily Mirror's* critic, for instance, thought it provided “cosy, homely humour for the whole family” and, notably, did not consider its depiction of politics worthy of comment. In contrast a counterpart on the *Daily Graphic* believed the film contrived “to give a rather nasty slant on politics”—although the reviewer also had nothing positive to say about the film and despised the Huggetts.⁸⁷

As a Launder and Gilliat production, critics took *Left, Right, and Centre* more seriously, and the majority were disappointed by the restrained nature of its critique of the parties. The leading reviewer, Penelope Houston, even described it as “a political comedy entirely and carefully devoid of political references.”⁸⁸ The *Sunday Express* liked the movie for attacking politicians’ pomposity but complained it was “almost neurotically anxious not to offend too deeply” the parties’ sensibilities. This meant its satiric jabs punctured few politicians’ self-esteem—something the reviewer thought desirable.⁸⁹ Others agreed it was too anodyne: the *Star's* critic even bemoaned the producers’ failure to have a proper “dig at the dirty old dog’s game of politics.”⁹⁰

The *New Left Review* critic considered *No Love for Johnnie* was “so revealing of British attitudes to politics.”⁹¹ Reviewers were nonetheless divided over its depiction of MPs. It is, however, noteworthy that the papers with the largest (and most working-class) circulations accepted as accurate the film’s depiction of life at Westminster. That bastion of middle-class liberalism, the *Manchester Guardian*, for example, believed the film gave an erroneous impression of politics as “a pointless charade, in which even the rare idealists are no more admirable than the frank careerists.”⁹² Yet, the critic in Britain’s (if not the world’s) biggest-selling Sunday newspaper, the *News of the World*, happily echoed the movie’s perspective by claiming it would make the political elite “get the message that ambition without loyalty can only corrupt.”⁹³

It would be simplistic to imagine that these movies just reflected popular opinion. As Houston said of the Boultings’ *I’m All Right Jack*, it looked “like the work of soured liberals, men who have retired from the contest and are spending their time throwing stones at the players.”⁹⁴ Producers had their own perspectives. Indeed, the reviewer for the left-wing Labour weekly *Tribune* thought that, by depicting the parties as indistinguishable, *Left, Right, and Centre* promoted the very apathy Launder and Gilliat purported to find so contemptible.⁹⁵ It would nonetheless be wrong to imagine that filmmakers possessed the ability to dra-

⁸⁶ Randall and Seaton, *George Formby*, 127–28.

⁸⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 11 February 1949; *Daily Graphic*, 11 February 1949.

⁸⁸ Penelope Houston, “Conscience and Comedy,” *Sight and Sound* 29, no. 4 (Summer–Autumn 1959): 163.

⁸⁹ *Sunday Express*, 19 July 1959.

⁹⁰ *Star*, 16 July 1959.

⁹¹ Alan Lovell, “Film Chronicle,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 8 (March–April 1961): 54–55.

⁹² *Manchester Guardian*, 13 February 1961.

⁹³ *News of the World*, 12 February 1961.

⁹⁴ Houston, “Conscience and Comedy,” 163.

⁹⁵ *Tribune*, 24 July 1959.

matically turn their audiences' heads. Bearing in mind the predominance of political comedies, it is worth considering Graham Greene's view. While working as a film reviewer during the 1930s, he defined "a humorist in the modern English sense" as someone "who shares the popular taste and who satirizes only those with whom the majority are already displeased." If this led to what Greene disparaged as "safe and acceptable" comedies, their very aesthetic conservatism meant they endorsed more than they challenged popular opinion.⁹⁶ Along with what we know from surveys and opinion polls, the critics' general endorsement of the films' hostile sentiments further supports that interpretation.



This article has argued that these nine films depicted a commonly held view of the parties. Yet, given the assumption that they were firmly attached to the people due to their robust class identities—and formed part of a widespread "moral unity"—most interpretations of postwar British politics have left no room for populism. In the early 1950s the two main parties won their highest share of the vote and had their largest memberships. That looks more significant than a few movies.

Numbers, however, do not tell their own story, especially when some often-quoted figures are unreliable and subject to misinterpretation. Labour's official membership was greatly inflated, while the Central Office never knew how many Conservative subscribers there were in the country, many of whom in any case joined to take advantage of local associations' social facilities.⁹⁷ Thus, if party memberships rose after 1945, they never reached the peaks claimed, and their wider significance is moot. Furthermore, if class sentiment encouraged unprecedented numbers to visit the ballot box, many did that to show solidarity with "Us." As one East End proletarian Labour supporter fatalistically asked: "How else is a working man to vote?"⁹⁸ Voting did not necessarily mean people looked upon their prospective representatives—derived from different sections of "Them"—in especially high regard.⁹⁹

Yet, it is true that, outside cinemas' darkened auditoriums, antiparty populism was rarely given a coherent shape. Rather inevitably, this was a sentiment without organization. It nonetheless did exist, as the parties themselves appreciated. When confronted by antiparty feeling during the Second World War, the party leaderships argued that Britain would fall into anarchy if the voters abandoned them. The outcomes of the postwar general elections do not, however, show that they had destroyed populism. In fact the parties were merely playing an old trick by appropriating populist feeling for their own ends. The Conservatives had long tried

⁹⁶ Graham Green, *The Pleasure Dome: The Collected Film Criticism, 1935–1940*, ed. J. Russell Taylor (Oxford, 1980), 41.

⁹⁷ Steven Fielding, *The Labour Governments, 1964–1970*, vol. 1, *Labour and Cultural Change* (Manchester, 2003), 43–49; Fielding, Thompson, and Tiratsoo, *England Arise!* 182, 187.

⁹⁸ James H. Robb, *Working-Class Anti-Semite: A Psychological Study in a London Borough* (London, 1954), 187.

⁹⁹ For an earlier attempt to question the meaning of turnout at this time, see Steven Fielding, "'Don't Know and Don't Care': Popular Political Attitudes in Labour's Britain, 1945–1951," in *The Attlee Years*, ed. Nick Tiratsoo (London, 1991), 16–25.

to associate the party with the “nation” and claimed their Liberal and Labour opponents represented a variety of selfish sectional interests.¹⁰⁰ On the other side, Labour won in 1945, asserting it was the “people’s party,” while the Conservatives were elitists uninterested in the majority’s welfare. Harold Wilson would later embrace this appeal in the 1960s.¹⁰¹ Appeals to class, of course, featured prominently in campaigns, but it was only those politicians who most appeared to transcend “party” who won power at Westminster. Therefore, while they did not conceive of it as such, the parties appreciated the importance of this evanescent populism and did their best to exploit and so contain its implications. The evidence analyzed here suggests that even during their “golden age” the parties only partly succeeded.

Like Labour and the Conservatives, in seeking an audience, filmmakers also aimed to exploit populism. They similarly—although undoubtedly unintentionally—possibly helped contain it. One of the important functions of comedy is—playfully and temporarily—to overturn the status quo. If they exposed real tensions between the rulers and the ruled, the political comedies did not seek a resolution. Instead they ridiculed “Them” as an end in itself. As Christine Geraghty has said of those comedies that explored the shortcomings of public bureaucracies in the 1950s, they were “both stultifying and rebellious,” ultimately retreating behind convention.¹⁰² Thus, while performing various other functions, the comedies might best be seen as primarily providing a modest safety valve for the public’s unhappiness with formal politics. The Formby and Huggett films most obviously echoed themes expressed in Frank Capra’s Hollywood films, notably *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), in which an honest, simple individual prevails over the elite’s self-interested cynicism. Like *Mr. Smith*, these efforts were fantasies, offering no practical solution to their audience’s discontents but allowing them to laugh at their representatives’ supposed foibles.¹⁰³ The two dramas served a similar purpose, by reassuring audiences that those who held political power did so at the cost of their private happiness. In this sense, the films formed part of a pervasive “culture of consolation,” which had for some time reconciled urban audiences to a world in which they suffered but felt they could not change.¹⁰⁴

Despite what some might imagine, the view of politics given shape by these films was not unique to the postwar decades. A few cinema historians have commented on the cynicism of films such as *Left, Right, and Centre*. However, accepting the established narrative of postwar political history, John Hill considered that it was the result of a disillusion with Labour’s failure to build a New Jerusalem and so was only a feature of late 1950s productions.¹⁰⁵ More broadly Harper and

¹⁰⁰ Peter Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), 346; Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class* (Oxford, 1990), 259–93.

¹⁰¹ Steven Fielding, “Labourism in the 1940s,” *Twentieth Century British History* 3, no. 2 (1992): 143–45, and “Revisiting Labour’s 1964 Campaign,” *Contemporary British History* 21, no. 3 (September 2007): 309–24.

¹⁰² Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties*, 56.

¹⁰³ Frank Strickner, “Representing the Working Class: Individualism and the Masses in Frank Capra’s Films,” *Labor History* 31, no. 4 (1990): 454–67.

¹⁰⁴ As outlined in Gareth Stedman Jones, “Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class,” in his *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), 179–238.

¹⁰⁵ John Hill, *Sex, Class, and Realism: British Cinema, 1956–1963* (London, 1986), 145–47.

Porter see the films of the 1950s as registering the breakdown of what had once been Britons' "unquestioning obeisance to authority."¹⁰⁶ Yet, the Formby and Huggett movies were much more damning than the films that came later, suggesting—along with the two sieges depicted in *Passport to Pimlico* and *The Happy Family*—something less than a popular respect for power. Further indicating the endemic—rather than conjunctural—nature of the populist perspective, Tom Harrison of Mass-Observation, an organization with a close interest in the subject, believed attitudes evident in the early 1960s were much the same as those he had noted during the late 1930s.¹⁰⁷ It was, after all, in 1931 that Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald told cabinet colleagues that "the ordinary person" was someone "who has no great faith in political leaders of any kind."¹⁰⁸

The evidence cited here should encourage historians to place postwar voting and membership figures into a more satisfactory context. It should, in fact, do more and prompt them to rigorously reexamine their assumptions about the political history of modern Britain. For, as some "new political historians" (and a few older political scientists) have argued, hostility to party was inherent to the practice of "mass" politics as it developed during the later nineteenth century.¹⁰⁹ There are firm grounds for believing that populism is not a recent phenomenon provoked by social change but something deriving from endemic tensions at the heart of representative democracy. If, in Britain, antiparty populism was usually a latent and formless force, one expressed in the darker corners of public life, the time has come for historians to take more seriously its nature and significance. For, the existence of populist sentiments says much about the problematic relationship between formal politics and popular culture during the "rise," "golden age," and (we are assured) "fall" of party.

¹⁰⁶ Harper and Porter, *Decline of Deference*, 1.

¹⁰⁷ Tom Harrison, *Britain Revisited* (London, 1961), 85.

¹⁰⁸ "Notes by the Prime Minister on a General Election," 26 September 1931, Papers of Herbert Louis Samuel, 1st Viscount Samuel, A/81, CP 247 (31), House of Lords Record Office.

¹⁰⁹ See Margaret Canovan, "'Trust the People': Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (March 1999): 2–16, and "'People,' Politicians, Populism," *Government and Opposition* 19, no. 3 (July 1984): 312–27.