



AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter
Global Thought Leader
Real Insights & Authority



THE BRITISH SATIRICAL REVOLUTION

Just over 40 years ago the BBC stopped a very popular television programme because it was offending the British Government. “That Was The Week That Was” (“TW3”) was a revolutionary British comedy programme that triggered the television satire boom. It was “live” biting, late-Saturday night programme, that broke new ground in television’s relationship with politics, and it ridiculed aspects of British life that were previously too sacred to be attacked: politicians, religion and even royalty.

Satire is a form of comedy that ridicules its subject (individuals, organizations or countries) with a view to encouraging change. It seeks to laugh people out of their follies. It ridicules with caricature and exaggeration. Its popularity rises and falls according to the popular tastes of the day. Satire goes in waves. Some of the earliest satire was written about by Horace in the second century BC. In the 1820s British cartoonist George Cruikshank was popular lampooning the social evils of his day but by the 1830s he was no longer popular because by that time Victorian prudery saw no place for personal insult in public debate.

Britain in the early 1960s was ideal for satire. Britain had just won two world wars but somehow lost the peace. The German and Italian economies were picking up faster than the British one, and even the French now seemed to have political stability. The Conservative party, now led by the elderly Harold Macmillan, had been in power since 1951 and it seemed to have run out of ideas as to how to move the country forward. The elderly American president, Dwight Eisenhower, had been replaced by the dynamic youngest president ever elected in US history: John Kennedy. The Americans were beginning to run the world at a time when most Britons could still remember the day when they did. They resented their second class world status. A century and half of British global dominance was slipping away.

There was no grand plan for the British satirical revolution. It was just one step leading to another. No one involved in the revolution at the time thought that they were writing a new page of British history. They just felt that something was wrong and something had to be changed – though they had no specific political agenda for doing it. The end result was that after 1961 British politicians would be treated with far more scepticism and far less respect. The British had lost their political innocence.

✓ Satire on the Stage

The satirical revolution operated in three main forms. The first was the stage. “Beyond the Fringe” began in Edinburgh and then went to London’s West End in May 1961. It was a comedy created by four graduates: Peter Cook (Cambridge), Dudley Moore (Oxford), Jonathan Miller (Cambridge) and Alan Bennett (Oxford). Miller and Bennett continued their scholarly interests well after their brief brush with the satire revolution.

The involvement of graduates was in itself unusual: university graduates had rarely been on the comedy stage before. That type of “low brow” entertainment was reserved for the working class comics of limited education. But traditional career choices such as the colonial civil service were now closing off for graduates. Meanwhile, the media industry generally was expanding and attracting a new, young generation of well educated ambitious graduates who were looking for career options different from those of their parents. Some of these were going into comedy.

The previous generations of comedians specialized in the saucy seaside card humour such as George Formby or absurdist humour such as BBC’s “The Goon Show” starring Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe and Peter Sellers (all of whom had had little formal education having left school early). “The Goon Show” radio programme, which ran initially in the 1950s, was a successor to the stage shows of “The Crazy Gang”, “Take It From Here” and “It’s That Man Again” of the 1940s all of which portrayed an England of quick-witted, fast tongued morale-boosting comedians that were too optimistic ever to be pessimistic (not least about the state of the economy or the war). They were all “clean” shows to which one could take one’s maiden aunt – indeed the cast of the shows contained only a few females. There was also nostalgia for a lost period of carefree innocence, when the empire was still intact, Britain was supreme, and life was apparently a lot simpler. Of all those shows, “The Goons” remain a popular show to this day (as in audio inflight entertainment). It has a cult following, even though two of the three main figures (Sellers and Milligan) have long since died. (I used speak to see Spike Milligan at Sydney’s Central Railway waiting to get trains to visits his folks north of Sydney – he was always a much-loved celebrity in the UK and Australia). Goonery is a fantasy world of anarchism.

But there was no political satire involved. Instead of commenting on current politics, the Goon Show’s only major link with the “real” world was Allied military service in World War II (in which all three comedians had served in junior roles). The show captured the situations of where idiot officers had power, there was the lying and cheating of propaganda, and the creation of false statistics – a bit like currently working in a modern corporation, really. Descendants of The Goons on television included “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” and “Fawlty Towers” (both of which starred John Cleese). Zany humour lasts longer than satire.

Another comedian from the 1950s and 1960s was Tony Hancock, who committed suicide in 1968. Hancock played a depressive introverted failed middle class person aspiring to be an intellectual. His best shows had him living in genteel shabbiness at 23 Railway Cuttings, East Cheam. His character longed to be rich and famous but he could never quite get out of his rut. His performance probably resonated with many British listeners and viewers who feared that they could end up like his character – or were already like the loser he portrayed.

By contrast, Peter Cook exuded in his early years fame and wealth. He was part of the elite now ridiculing the elite. He was clearly going places. He was a member of the bright young generation who had done well from their formal education. He was famous as one of the funniest students at Cambridge 1957-60. His energy went into the theatre rather than studies and he decided (just as well for all concerned) not to try to follow his forebears into the Foreign Office. By the time he graduated he was already making good money from his London stage shows. Although a pioneer of the satire boom, his political views remained private to the end of his life. The Labour Opposition assumed in the early 1960s that he was a closet Labour supporter - but then he was equally biting of the Labour Government after 1964. Perhaps he was just some form of mild anarchist, suspicious of all government.

“Beyond the Fringe” changed the face of British comedy with its irreverence towards much of what was “sacred” in British life. For example, there was the line from a warfare scene: “I want you to lay down your life, Perkins. We need a futile gesture at this stage. It will raise the whole tone of the war”. It is a pity that the team are not around now to work on the Iraq War and the weapons of mass distraction.

After three exciting years, the four performers began to tire of each other’s company. At the end of 1963 Miller resigned from the show, later followed by Bennet. “Beyond the Fringe” with other actors gradually wound down and was wound up completely in September 1966. All four main actors went on to other creative careers. Cook and Moore stayed together for many more joint shows, including the famous “Pete and Dud” routine. They were the one of the most popular duo acts of the 1960s and 1970s, such as “Not Only But Also” (1965-70). They specialized in ridicule rather than a biting satire on current politics. As they got older so they became less radical. Their joint appearances on television were notable for the deliberate avoidance of satire or political comment. From a television production point of view, this policy had the great advantage of not “dating” their material. Their performances could be repeated – and still are, such as in aircraft audio entertainment – with little sense that they were recorded years, if not decades, before. The sketches have reached down to a later generation who were not even born when the shows were first made.

Another “stage” location was the Establishment Club in London’s Soho “red light” district, opened in October 1961 by Peter Cook. There was strict stage censorship by the Lord Chamberlain and so there were severe limitations on what could be said and done on the public stage. But the private club offered far greater opportunity for performers. This was an elitist form of entertainment because most people in Britain never went to these private London clubs. Many

of the 7,000 members had postal addresses with London's elite district post code "SW1". The elite were turning up for a good laugh at themselves. It became a fashionable place at which to be seen.

The club was not entirely a happy experience for Cook. By early 1963, the club was losing money because of inappropriate financial behaviour by some of the staff. Also the local gangsters were making life difficult with their "protection rackets" and there was a lack of support from the local crooked police. Cook was performing in the US and could not keep a close eye on events in Soho. The club went into voluntary liquidation in September 1963. Then the role of theatre censorship changed in the late 1960s, with the Labour Government's abolition of the censorship powers of the Lord Chamberlain as part of the UK's "Swinging Sixties". Much of the rationale for a private satirical club therefore disappeared. By this time making fun of government had become a mainstream activity

✓ Satire in Print

"The Private Eye" magazine was founded in 1961 by a group of former public school-educated university students, including Peter Cook, Christopher Booker, Richard Ingram and Willie Rushton. It is the only part of the satire revolution of four decades ago that continues. For example, the current Prime Minister Tony Blair is portrayed as the oily vicar of St Albion. Many of "The Eye's" expressions have now entered common usage, such as "hack" for journalist and "tired and emotional" for drunk.

But most of "The Eye's" lasting achievements have come from its non-satirical work. In particular, "The Eye" soon gained a reputation – which continues to this day – of running stories that were too controversial to appear in the mainline media. It was a pioneer in investigative journalism. Political scandals were aired first in that magazine which would later appear in modified form in the more "respectable" news outlets. For example, in the late 1960s, the magazine revealed the sanctions-busting activities carried out by an oil company as a way of getting around United Nations sanctions against the then illegal Smith regime in Rhodesia. In the 1970s, the police leaked evidence on the eccentric behaviour of senior British politician Jeremy Thorpe until eventually the Director of Public Prosecutions was obliged to put Thorpe on trial. In the 1980s the magazine took on the crooked press baron Robert Maxwell. Litigation was always a threat and juries and judges were generally unsympathetic to the magazine. "The Eye" was a steady source of income for defamation layers. Ironically, even when "The Eye" was later on occasions proved right, the courts refused to reverse their earlier judgements.

Another "Eye" success began in 1964, when Barry Humphries and Nick Garland created the cartoon strip "The Adventures of Barry McKenzie" about an Australian living in London's Earl's Court. It helped revive "The Eye's" circulation figures and created an Australian icon. It helped launch Barry Humphries' international career. Cook later starred in the movie version, which was

equally popular. But it had little satirical content – indeed it even included the Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam playing the role of the prime minister.

Peter Cook himself was a tragic figure. His meteoric career peaked in about 1971 and (though few noticed at the time), from then onwards it was just downhill. He remained brilliantly entertaining to his friends and helped sustain “The Eye” editorially and financially for the rest of his life. But he was burnt out and had a severe alcohol problem. He died in January 1995, aged 57.

✓ Satire on Television

The third – and most influential - location was the key medium for getting the British satirical revolution established in British culture: television. Had it not been for television, the satirical revolution might well have disappeared into theatrical history without making any popular impact.

The BBC began television broadcasts in 1936. They ran for a few hours each day and were “high brow” drama, news and some sport. The broadcasts stopped throughout the war. Television resumed after the war but again with the same limited format. Politicians were treated with great respect. A sample television interview question from that time was: “Prime Minister, may I ask you to remind us of your achievements over the past year?”

Commercial television began in 1954 and introduced a few new ideas for entertainment. In 1961, BBC Director-General Carleton Greene decided to dramatically up the ante to reassert the BBC’s dominance in entertainment. He wanted the BBC to get away from its 1950s cosy comedy complacency. He asked current affairs producer Ned Sherrin to create a new type of programme that would blend current affairs and entertainment. Therefore, in BBC departmental terms, the programme was based on “current affairs” and not “comedy” and this helped explain its freshness.

Sherrin was aware of “Beyond the Fringe” and the Establishment Club and so he wanted to create a similar type of entertainment for television. “TW3” was first broadcast on November 24 1962. The show coincided with a major sex and spy scandal involving War Minister John Profumo and celebrity call-girl Christine Keeler. The scandal provided a great deal of material for the weekly show. Other scandals also got an airing, as well the more ordinary errors of politicians and other leading figures.

Suddenly, “TW3” became one of the BBC’s most watched and talked about television programmes, with an audience of 12 million. It had never occurred to most viewers that “respectable” figures could lead such shady or foolish private lives or make such silly errors in office. Indeed, it had never occurred to them that anyone would dare make fun of any politician on television.

“TW3” phrases entered the everyday language. For example, after ridiculing Christian leaders, the show’s compere David Frost ended with: “But, seriously, folks they are doing a grand job”. It then became fashionable to end statements of criticism with: “But seriously so and so is doing a grand job”.

However the elite figures had the last laugh. Their problem with “TW3” was not the satire but its availability to the masses. They thought the masses were not really “adult” and sophisticated enough to cope with it. Around this time the British Government tried to stop the publication of the explicit DH Lawrence novel “Lady Chatterley’s Lover”. The barrister prosecuting the publisher Penguin asked the jury: “Would you allow your maids and servants to this read this book?” Upper class, wealthy people were able to purchase the book while travelling on the Continent – the problem was that the workers could be able to buy a paper-back version.

Similarly, satire in “Beyond the Fringe” and the Establishment Club was fine because it was limited to a small number of upper class people who went to such places. Meanwhile, the reach of “The Private Eye” was mainly limited to a small readership. The problem arose when satire became available to the masses. The politicians continued to complain about “TW3”.

The 1963 “TW3” season ended on December 28. It was assumed that it would return for another season after the break. But it was cancelled by BBC management in early 1964. The show was too successful by being too controversial. It was creating too many bureaucratic problems for management. Macmillan had resigned in October 1963 and was replaced by Alec Douglas-Home. There was a honeymoon period while the new Prime Minister got used to his job, not least confronting the formidable Leader of the Opposition (and soon-to-be Prime Minister) Harold Wilson. A “TW3” sketch summarised the upcoming election as “Dull Alec versus a smart-alec” – and it received a large number of complaints (909).

BBC management argued that 1964 would be an election year and the programme was too controversial to go to air because it could upset the politicians. It could be too influential on the voters. Even after the 1964 election had been held, “TW3” did not return. The window of opportunity had closed. With Harold Wilson’s dynamic new Labour Government, there seemed no longer a need for satire. The satirists had done their job and now the UK was set for an era of reforming, modernizing zeal. Or so people evidently liked to believe.

Later satire programmes were introduced (and some even involved few members of the original “TW3” cast). But they did not have “TW3’s” impact. The British television satire boom had peaked. It would continue, through comedies such as “Yes Minister” and “Yes Prime Minister” but none would ever generate the controversy of “TW3”. (Apparently, Mr Blair does not like his staff to say “Yes Prime Minister” to him when agreeing with him because of its link with the comedy – life imitating art, or something to that effect).



The show made stars of virtually all the performers, including the anchor person David Frost. Frost was born in 1939, the son of a Methodist minister and he became a fluent lay preacher. After graduating from Cambridge (the first of his family to go there), he became a nightclub performer. Sherrin saw him perform and asked to become involved in “TW3”. He went on to present other television programmes, particularly interviews of major political figures. He is now probably Britain’s most experienced television presenter. Frost is now himself a “respectable figure”. In 1983 he married a daughter of the Duke of Norfolk and he was knighted in 1993. Having made his name ridiculing the ruling elite, he is now firmly a member of it. Seriously, though, he is doing a grand job.

Keith Suter