This session took place mid-way through the conference and was chaired by Professor Steven Fielding. Participants included: Alistair Beaton whose latest works, ‘The Trial of Tony Blair’ (2007) and ‘A Very Social Secretary’ (2005) were both broadcast by Channel Four; Maurice Gran who, with his collaborator Laurence Marks, wrote the ITV series ‘Shine on Harvey Moon’ (1982-5) and ‘The New Statesman’ (1987-94) then Mosley (1998) for Channel Four; James Graham whose stage plays include ‘Eden’s Empire’ (2007) and ‘Tory Boyz’ (2008); and Tony Saint whose ‘Margaret Thatcher: the Long Walk to Finchley’ (2008) was broadcast on BBC 4 – and at the time of the conference was working on ‘On Expenses’ a comedy-drama for about the attempt to make public MPs’ expenses, which was broadcast by BBC4 in February 2010.

Steven Fielding:
The idea is that everybody should say something, just to introduce the subject and then we take it to questions, because this is a very rare opportunity for academics to talk to and engage with the people who actually write political fiction.

Alistair Beaton:
I don't want to say very much as I think this should be an open forum for discussion and argument. I thought I’d just say a couple of personal things.

I think one of the reasons I write about politics a lot, although not exclusively, but a lot, is that it's one of the few things I know anything about and I'm probably not any good at writing about anything else. The other thing I think to be slightly more serious, is somewhere I have a sense of outrage about what goes on in society, which sounds very grand and very pompous, but I simply feel that a lot of the time, respectable nice people in suits with nice haircuts persuade us that absolutely outrageous and terrible things are actually kind of OK, and we get drawn into that kind of discourse with politicians whereby we kind of accept their assumptions. I think one of the purposes of satire is just to sort of rattle those assumptions a little bit.

I watched Ed Milliband the other night on ‘Newsnight’, I think it was, with a panel. It was very interesting because there were lots of people who wanted him to do something about climate change, and he kept using the same mantra, which was ‘I'm in the persuasion business’. I thought, it's actually sounds quite convincing at first glance, doesn't it? Because he’s saying ‘I don’t want to bully you and tell you to not fly and not to buy a second car’ and it sounds quite convincing. But actually, if you switch back say to the Factories Act, it wouldn't have worked to say to people, would you kindly as a factory owner kind of be a bit nicer to your workers and try to do your little bit? And those of you who are sending kids up chimneys could you be so kind as to try and moderate your personal behaviour? But I, as Minister, don’t want to tell you what to do – ‘I'm in the persuasion business’. And if you think about his position, it is completely and absolutely ludicrous. He's abdicating his responsibilities as a politician and leaving it to people to make individual gestures, which are not going to save the planet.

So that for me was a tiny example of how, if you don't stop and think and challenge the assumptions, we get dragged into a discourse that’s nuts. So, that’s one of the purposes of writing about politics for me, personally. Another one is people always say ‘does satire change anything?’ and I think the answer is ‘I don't know’. But I do think it gives heart to people who agree with you, so if I'm ever accused of preaching to the converted then I say 'Well that's OK, the converted also need a bit of moral support in these hard times'. The third reason I write is to make some money and I'm not sure how else I could earn a living. The fourth is that I like entertaining people. I like making them laugh and when I can manage that, which is sometimes, it’s very, very gratifying and a lovely feeling. That’s all I have to say, it’s very personal and I’m trying to not lay down any rules - I'd love to hear opinions and discuss in the course of the next hour and that's all I’ve got to say for now.
Maurice Gran:

Hello. Can you hear me at the back and do you want to?! With Laurence Marks, I've written I suppose, three different political pieces and they were all written for different reasons. The first one which was quite early in our career was 'Shine on Harvey Moon' and that was the story of a returning soldier in 1945 who came back from the war with nothing but hope. We wrote that in '82 because people were so miserable in this country, so sorry for themselves we thought we'd write about a time which was really hard, but a time when there was hope and we made the central character into a campaigning Labour councillor. That was really written as an Attleeist piece, full of hope and righteous indignation and a certain amount of laughs. It was written from the point of view of us actually believing that politics was not a completely ignoble undertaking and actually could do good and, at times in our history, has done good.

A dozen or so years later, we met Rik Mayall at a comedy conference and he prevailed upon us to write for him and we said 'what sort of character do you want to play?' This was about mid 80's, late 80's. I can't remember: it's all the drugs. He said 'Well I like playing characters that illustrate, or allow me to demonstrate the worst aspects of my personality. I'd like to play a coward; I'd like to play someone who's a coward, a murderer, a philanderer, a cheat and a pervert'. So one of us said, 'do you want to play a Conservative back-bencher?' And thus was born, Alan B's'tard. The amazing thing about that, well besides its longevity, because 20 years after we started writing it was a successful play in what they call London's West End, as against Scunthorpe's West End. It even became a column in the Daily Telegraph. In the column Alan was now running the Labour Party behind the scenes. We claimed that when the Tories were imploding, Alan looked around for a promising young actor with no political affiliation who he could mould into the next Prime Minister and found him in Tony Blair.

So those were two, one from the point of view of relative idealism and the other from the point of view of utter cynicism. There was a third one: a four part history of Oswald Mosely, pretty straight really. It started at the beginning and ended at the end. There were a few laughs, but it was quite serious. You know I'd grown up in a household where my father had been in the Battle of Cable Street, he wasn't actually involved in the conventional sense, he was having a kip and went out to ask them to keep the noise down. And even when I was 10, 11, 12 he still thought I should go and learn Jujitsu, emphasis on the first syllable of Jujitsu, in case the Blackshirts came back. That was true, I'm sure for Laurence too, whose father was a policeman at the time of Cable Street.

Laurence Marks:
The only Jewish policeman in the East End of London.

Maurice Gran:
So those are three very different reasons for writing and they are very personal reasons. I'm sure Laurence pretty much shares my reasons, because we seldom write anything if we don't agree why we are writing it. The last thing I want to say about 'The New Statesman' was that within weeks of the series going out, we realised that we had created an icon for the Conservative Party to look up to. I bought a newspaper, I think it was the Guardian before they changed the typeface and it had a picture on the front page of what appeared to be four or five B'stards jumping up and down at some sort of party or conference. I realised that this, when I saw the explanation, this was the Conservative Federation, the Conservative Student Annual Conference and they were all, they had all, turned into Alan. I didn't know whether to be pleased or to commit suicide. I obviously didn't.

So that's it, there's no single reason, but as a writer, or one half of a writing team, we are vulgarly looking from where the best laughs come from. I noticed, as I said, this conference is called Fiction and British
Politics, but if it was an eighteenth century novel it would be called ‘Fiction, or British politics’, as it’s getting very difficult to tell the two apart.

James Graham:
Basically I’m a political playwright – some say I am a very young playwright - who has just done some television work and I’m moving into that, but I started off at the theatre. Most of my political work has been on the stage so far. I guess I think politics and theatre almost suffer from the same kind of problems. I realised that because I came to both of them at roughly the same time, which was when I was fifteen and it was about 1997. A couple of things happened in 1997 in politics and a couple of things happened in Mansfield where I grew up. Theatrically, I was introduced to some plays, some Shakespeare, which I wasn't very interested in, but then I was introduced to some new work by new writers, which kind of blew my mind. I was also introduced to politics through a man called Tony Blair who seemed to promise lots of change.

Obviously since then I have grown to feel a little bit disappointed that I lost my political virginity, to that person. I always think theatre when I was growing up was always quite elitist, was always quite complicated, didn't appeal to me, wasn't attractive, wasn't entertaining. And politics was the same and at about the same time I just started getting interested in both.

The first play I wrote was about the miners’ strike, based on the testimonies from miners in the village where I grew up. I think the reason why I wrote that, which was political, is because I didn't have any ideas myself and that, as with a lot of politics, it presented almost a ready made dramatic structure. The miners’ strike has crisis and complications, it has a dilemma towards the end and it has a resolution, and a tragic one. So I kind of had a ready-made structure in which I just fitted lots of cheap gags and some characters.

I went from there. So, my next play was about Albert Einstein and the atomic bomb - and his guilt. I remember I found really that instantly dramatic and thought there was so much history that I don't have to make up my own stories, it's kind of already there. I stole from Shakespeare and the Greeks this idea of using history to comment on what’s happening now. I remember when I wrote a play about Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis, it was 2004 and Iraq was pretty much underway and in the most fashionable new writing for theatres, most people were writing plays directly related to Iraq as kind of a knee jerk response. Which I think is brilliant and I think theatre in particular is obviously readymade to do that. It should react immediately and quickly, because it can and something should happen that day and theatre should be able to respond that evening in a way that film and television can’t always.

So I found that and still find response-theatre exciting - I'm thinking of things like David's Hare, at the National, such as 'Stuff Happens'. I have though a few concerns about the universality of it and the durability of it. It’s a medium that's exciting, but I also think as a playwright, our responsibility is to write something that speaks for generations and would be performed in 200 years. That's why I think ‘Henry V’ will be performed in 500 years, whereas ‘Stuff Happens’ might not. The best example for me, not to comment on the quality, but just to comment on the story telling and the universality of is ‘The Crucible’ by Arthur Miller. Obviously it's a story which exists on its own, but also as a comment on McCarthyism, which was going on during his time. It was the perfect analogy, but it will still be performed in 400 years time because of the characters and the story.

So I kind of copy and cheat! I’m also aware of my age and that I have to appeal to a young audience and I work with young audiences quite a lot. I work with National Youth Theatre and wrote 'Tory Boyz', which is about young people in the Conservative Party. I didn’t know there were any young people in the Conservative Party, but apparently there are lots. I had a friend who I met at University who was young,
northern, working class and gay and those four things I thought individually were unique to the Conservative party, all together in one human being I found amazing. So that's what 'Tory Boyz' is about, a whole culture of these young gay party members of the Tory party. We did it at a National Youth Theatre with a very young cast and it was brilliant to see those engaging politics in a way that they had never done before. What was also frightening, when I rehearsed it, was that I realised that they didn't think there was a debate about politics, the idea of left and right to most 18 year olds at the moment was pretty nonexistent.

I will round off by saying that many people do cynicism and outrage and satire far better than I do, including Alistair whose 'Feel Good' I saw when I was just becoming a writer and I was inspired by it. I almost feel my job is to do a little bit of the opposite - I think I have a little bit of hope and optimism left in me still.

Voice:
You will get beaten down over the coming years

James Graham:
I try and build some of that in my work, especially with young people because I think there is no way to engage them in theatre or politics unless I instill some sense that things can be better, so that's what I'm working on.

Tony Saint:
I thought I’d just tell a little story that sums up my attitude to some of the questions that might get raised here today.

You write a film for BBC4 about Margaret Thatcher in her early years and almost immediately you are branded as a political writer, which comes as a bit of a surprise to me. I've just finished - they're actually shooting at the moment - this film about the MPs' expenses scandal. I presumably managed to land it, partly because I am "a political writer", but the story I was going to tell you was about a project I actually embarked on last year. I went to the BBC in Manchester, where they have just set up a drama department and we, on a sort of off the cuff remark from a producer, said 'why don't we do something about the Labour Party, about Jim Callaghan?' Then the bulb went off in my head as I thought that would be brilliant, as I am of that age where my political awareness kicked in. In fact actually it probably kicked in on the day that Harold Wilson resigned.

I always remember that day. I went home from school for my lunch because I lived very close to the school and there was a thing on the news that Harold Wilson had resigned. I went back to school after lunch and said to the teacher 'I saw on the news that the Prime Minister had resigned' and she said 'just go back to your seat and shut up'.

So the premise of this project, which I will be quick about, was to begin on the day that Harold Wilson resigned with six characters who stood to succeed Harold Wilson. Here's a spot test for everyone - six characters stood to succeed Harold Wilson, see if you can name them all. I'd start at that point and follow the process for the next five or six, seven years through the winter of discontent through the no confidence motion, through the subsequent fall out. I just got into this subject and I had an absolute ball. I have never been big on research, I'll be quite honest with you, but I was getting books left, right and centre and at one point I was actually, this is true, I was sitting at home watching unedited highlights of the 1981 special Wembley conference. My wife thought I had gone insane, but I was totally hooked by this stuff and I put together this treatment which I thought was really, really strong. It branched through into the Kinnock era and the debacle of the 1992 election, etc. etc. and I honestly have never had so much fun on a project as I had researching and writing this treatment.
I duly handed it in and waited for a reply, convinced that this was going to be a fantastic show. We were talking about casting and it struck me that, and I still maintain this is true, what actor in their right mind would not climb over dead bodies to play Michael Foot? And then came the response which was - it's too political, it's too much about politics and I had a meeting and I argued, I argued black is white that it wasn't really about politics, that it was about relationships and it was about character, it was about love, about betrayal - everything except the 'p' word. Then it sort of dawned on me that actually in as much as I'd written about politics in my short screenwriting career, what I've actually been doing to get stuff made, in my case was to write around politics, rather than about politics. I'll throw that open as a sort of interesting angle, an interesting thought that I had on the train coming down this morning.

Steven Fielding:
Thanks. Any questions?

Martin Rosenbaum:
I am a producer for the BBC - although I'm not responsible for turning down drama scripts. I wanted to ask you, Tony in particular about to what extent are you concerned about exact accuracy in the dramatic reconstruction or drama docs that you do. Because I recall reading something by Geoffrey Howe, I think it might have been in his memoirs, about when he was watching some dramatic reconstruction about some events in which he had played a part and he said of these 'when I saw how I was being portrayed, I thought to myself, I didn't say that, it wasn't like that' but when he saw the bits which involved other people he thought 'good God, did they really say that?'. There was something about it, that even though he himself knew that bits of it weren't really true, he was sucked into believing, just because of the dramatic nature of the portrayal that he was watching that the other bits were true. So people do believe these things, even Geoffrey Howe, but to what extent do you worry about accuracy and whether you may be misleading people in what you're writing?

Tony Saint:
It's obviously a worry. I suppose, the defence of a writer is to say well that kind of thing is just pedantry isn't it – 'I didn't actually say that in that room and at that time' – and it's usually because the person in question has declined to speak to you. In the case of Mrs. Thatcher, she was far too shrewd to have anything to do with us whatsoever. So, in a way, that's a defence for them, they had nothing to do with it and everything that you dramatized is just made up. I like to think that you're kind of working at getting at, sounds a bit camp to say, getting at a bigger truth, that you on a human level, from what you read about something and what you understand of something you see it that way. Of course your name goes at the front of whatever you write, so it's your take, it's your script, it's your perception so if it's wrong as long as it's not wrong deliberately, then it's just an occupational hazard. And the truth is I try not to have that many sleepless nights about it, but I probably do have a few. I certainly do when the things are about to get shown on the telly, that's when it gets me, it's a bit hairy.

Maurice Gran:
When we were writing 'Mosley', we had a scene where Mosely resigns from the Labour government in 1929, I think it was. It was one the most famous speeches of interwar political history, but it runs to something like 17 pages, which we had to encapsulate in two minutes if you didn't want a mass turnoff. So regardless of research, politicians are really long winded boring bastards, you only have to listen to a speech in the House. None of them is capable of making them in a quickly, cogently, interesting manner. Our job is to do that for them.
Why do dramatists write about politics?

James Graham:
I’ve always adapted history. I recently did a play for Radio 4 about the last few days of the Callaghan government, which I just found so fascinating and brilliant. I don’t know why but I always take an example. I once was lucky to have a workshop with Anthony Minghella, because I went to Hull University and he was an ex-pupil there. He talked about his process for adapting a novel for a film and he said what he did was basically read it three times, make detailed notes about characters and maybe settings, but that’s it. Then he would put the book down, go to a cottage without the book and write it, without the book. So what he would get would not necessarily be the facts or the details or the specifics, but he’d have the essence, truth I think rather than the facts. So you’d have the essence of the story in the characters, but you wouldn’t be burdened by what actually is incidental when it comes to drama. Obviously literally translating a book to a film would make it a very bad film as different languages are involved, which is why I can never abide people saying I didn’t think it was as good as the book when they see a film that’s just like that painting wasn’t as good as that piece of music. So that’s how I treat history and the element of facts and truth. I read it three times and then I take ownership and do what I like.

Tony Saint:
I’d just like to point out that when I wrote the film about Thatcher, yes you do have to edit enormously the things they say, but in my case, which is not true in yours, I still used their words because that seemed quite important. If they are making public utterances in your story, then you may change it for the flow, but it feels quite important that you have to use the words they have orated themselves. But also I think in a funny sort of way, it’s very hard to write those words anyway other than how they said them. I was very lucky in the case of Margaret Thatcher because her website margaretthatcher.org is an unbelievable achievement in terms of internet technology, because it’s all there, you know. So in a sense there isn’t really an excuse for making it up. But the most of the words that come out of her mouth, some of it’s pretty rabid stuff, even in that film, most people don’t notice that, because they are caught up in the story, which is exactly the point of the film. But the stuff she’s saying is all stuff she said and some of it is pretty tasty, particularly for the time.

Alan Finlayson:
You all gave essentially personal answers to the question as to why you write about politics, so I’d like to know how do you see your work, perhaps in contrast to that kind of political drama which is explicitly attached to a political movement, and sees itself as contributing to the movement and to the political process in that sense. I am thinking of the likes of Wesker or Edgar, that kind of drama. And more broadly do you experience a relationship between your political writing and some sense of commitment to particular political ideals or aspirations?

Phil Cowley:
On the point about bigger truths, when Chris Mullin was here this morning, a story he didn’t tell, but I’ve heard him say before, is that he was a campaigner of behalf of the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six. He was at a screening of a film about the Birmingham Six after they were released and he sat there at the screening at the House of Commons, furious about all the inaccuracies in it. They completely ripped apart whole chunks of the story and as soon as the screening stopped, he was just about to get up and say ‘the film is a disgrace, how can you make that’, but before he did all these Tory MP’s who had previously been very skeptical were saying ‘I didn’t realise, I’m really stunned, this is horrific, what the British justice system did to these people, we really must apologise. I think Chris, you’ve done a brilliant job’. At which point he thought I’ll just shut up. I’ll sit here and let this go on.

So I think there is a broader defense. My question is similar I think to Alan’s, not in terms of movements, but do you feel when you’re writing political drama that you owe some responsibility in terms of the
public’s view of politics. This comes back to the thing we began with in earlier session. Hazel Blears’ attacking political drama for leading to cynicism and skepticism and so on. I might think that view is cobbler’s, but I’m more interested in what you think.

Alistair Beaton:

It’s interesting that last point. I was once at a conference with Tessa Jowell where she accused me and some other writers there of creating public cynicism about politics. This was not long after they had just launched an illegal war. I did say to her, I thought launching illegal wars was maybe something to do with it. Similarly, lying about weapons of mass destruction, you know, so maybe she and her Prime Minister had a hand in it, because it’s a very easy line for politicians to take isn’t it? Somebody mentioned David Edgar, who is a very fine writer and one of the great figures of left wing theatre writing in this country. But I personally hate it, going into the theatre and feeling I’m getting a moral lecture. It’s interesting because if you’re writing things that are funny, if you’re trying to get comedy out of things, first of all you have to have something serious you want to say. I don’t think you have to, but I think it works better if you’ve got something serious to say, but if the anger bleeds through too much I’m not sure that you do a good job. I wrote a play called ‘Follow My Leader’, actually I wrote it as the Iraq War was being launched, and looking back on it, I think it was far too angry. It was so angry, it didn’t give the audience any space to find their own feelings about things. I think without realising it I’d sort of written a propaganda play and it wasn’t hugely successful and I don’t think it was so good because of that. So, just briefly coming back to the first point. I do have political views clearly, but they are not pinned to a particular party, they are vaguely left of centre, I suppose. But I personally am much more interested in stuff that explores and explodes power, rather than propagates a particular view, but again that’s entirely personal decision.

In general a writer should represent him or herself, that’s your job. It’s the opposite of propaganda. One of your chief obligations as a writer is to give the bad guys some good lines which is not what propagandists can do. The only real exception to the rule that propaganda is ultimately self-defeating I suppose for me would be ‘The Resistible Rise Of Arturo Ui’. But the key word is in the title - the Resistible Rise – so there are questions posed there about why people like that get to the top.

So writers, hopefully, using the word hopefully in the wrong way, you become a writer because you have a point of view. You don’t become a writer to represent someone else’s point of view, and if you share that point of view to the extent that you are unable to balance your characters out, it is going to be hard to make good drama.

Can I briefly come back on something there about giving the bad guys good lines, which I think is really important. When I was asked if I wanted to write about the Blunkett scandal, the resignation, my first reaction was very cautious, as I thought that this could turn into a slightly silly sex romp comedy. I’m not very good at writing that stuff. Then I realised that Blunkett was a man of extraordinary achievements, who started from a very poor background, blind from an early age, separated from his parents at age five to go off to a special school and he climbed to the post of Home Secretary. I mean he is a major figure and when I realised that and starting thinking about it and how he was a man of the left who had become Labour’s symbolic man of the people and then used to kind of conceal an authoritarian and right wing administration, which is what to my mind the Blair administration had become. Then there was a personal art there and a personal tragedy and it meant that your opponent at a certain level was respected. So some people said we thought you were too sympathetic to Blunkett, we felt sorry for him, but I kind of liked that. I think it gives your drama a bit of depth and it’s another way of really saying I agree with giving good lines to the bad guys.
Tony Saint:
I think it's quite a comment, I've just written down the work 'commitment' you used there, from my point of view, I don't know if the other guys agree but as a writer of whatever, your commitment has to be to the audience, or a commitment to entertain in my case. But I think that's the point, it's never going to be... everyone seems to agree that polemic and propaganda is not what, not good work and it's trying to find a connection with an audience, which is what certainly drives me along, I haven't got that much to say about anything really (laughter). I was going to say on the subject of cynicism and Politian throwing brickbats back at writers and everything.

I was saying to someone earlier on, what the problem with the West Wing is, there is problem with the West Wing and I kept thinking about what it was. From my point of view, sitting in this country, watching the West Wing is that I can't understand a programme which is predicated on the idea of political competence. It just doesn't add up, it doesn't make any sense, that's the big elephant in the room in the West Wing. These guys are just too good at what they do ...(voice) and decency.. exactly and I think in a way I think it's, well it's the obvious chicken and the egg argument, why would we be cynical about them for god's sake. People like Chris Mullins, an interesting case in point, here's a guy who actually one of the sort of exceptions, who is obviously a political character everyone knows his political affiliations, but he has a certain amount of respect across the board in what he writes, as well as in his public life. So it is possible and a lot of people will say the same about Tony Benn, I don't know if it's as true in his case, I'm slightly more ambivalent about that. But I don't think it's necessarily, I don't think public judgment about politicians is actually that general, I think it is much more specific than politicians who aren't liked, like to pretend it is.

Liz Frazer:
There's a problem about how dramatists and journalism personalise politics. This is a kind of generalised complaint that comes up in many different contexts, that it comes down to personalities, that great historical structural changes are translated into interpersonal dramas and so on and that's clearly something that is terribly difficult to avoid and evade. I think it's interesting that you are all kind of emphasising the personal also in your own attempts to analyse what you are doing.

I don't know if this is really a question but it seems to me that one of the difficulties, with thinking about how politics is constructed in dramas and film and elsewhere, is that politics has this terribly elusive quality and that representations of party competitions doesn't quite get it and representations of interpersonal conflicts clearly doesn't get it. And so how on earth do you come to get to grips with things like justification and legitimation and the heart of what we think about as political processes because they are terribly abstract. I wonder if that you are aware of that as a tension and I think that some of us as political theorists have tried to feel our way to articulating exactly what the difficulty is and how it might possibly be avoided or addressed and I was wondering if any of you had thought about that as a dilemma at all?

Rob Hutton:
I am a journalist and I wondered to what extent especially those of you who do more historical drama are conscious of the dangers of getting spun. I mean I enormously enjoyed 'The Deal' when that was broadcast, but in retrospect it bought almost entirely the Brownite dogma, with Tony Blair as a lightweight who had out manoeuvred the good and decent Gordon Brown, who would have won the leadership if he had not been so heavily grieving for his friend John Smith. Whereas we now know there were perfectly good reasons that even Scottish MPs thought that Gordon would be a terrible Prime Minister. I wonder whether if that, I suppose half jokingly, affected the events that followed up to 2007 because it bought into the assumption that there was only one man who could lead the Labour Party and he had been cruelly wronged. Is this something that troubles you?
James Graham:
Obviously it's a concern, but I don't see the point ever in just keeping an existing perspective going and sticking to the norm. It's very unfashionable to be me and to be 27 and to write historical political dramas. In the new writing theatre circuit, certainly in the kind of trendier less established theatres like the Royal Court in London, they don't really want a play about Harold McMillan and at the National, they want me, but they don't want Harold McMillan and at the National they want Harold McMillan but they don't want me. They want -- you have to be either called David or Howard or people of a certain age. So I am constantly aware that to justify the very fact that I am 27 and very presumptuous of me to think that I can write a play about the Suez Canal crisis. But there's just no point in me going over the trodden ground. The danger then is that you deliberately try to do something a bit left field and wacky to justify it. I don't think I do, but I am constantly aware that there is something to subvert and there is this constant debate in the theatre about left and right, but there are no right wing plays and everything is left wing both the writer, the creative team and the audience and everyone gets together at half past seven watches something that supports their world view and then goes home warm and safe.

So sometimes I've decided to be a little ‘right wing’. I wrote a play about Tories and was quite supportive of them, thinking well they are probably going to get into power so I may as well start talking about them. I did a play about Margaret Thatcher, I remember, and again I thought, talking about your question - all drama is really human and I think that with drama it thrives on whether you empathise and understand them and so I don't think it's something I ever try and avoid I think it's actually a starting point, which probably isn't very helpful.

So in 2006 I thought I would try and do a very fringy London play and try to at least be a little bit understanding and sympathetic towards Margaret Thatcher. It was very mad, she was a 12 year old girl and she got locked in her bedroom for something, her toys came to life (she was locked in because she wouldn't apologise or something) and then she went on a magical adventure with her toys. I'm making it sound great, but it was like a Dickensian Christmas Carol where she went into her future, where she had to decide whether she was going to be Margaret Thatcher or not. On the same day I remember a review coming out from Time Out saying that they couldn't believe I was so mean and they only gave it two stars and they accused me of being a misogynist and presumptuous, at the age of 25 at the time, for doing it. On the same day, the Times Review came out and they said they couldn't believe how nice I'd been to her. It was completely wrong. So I think you are just aware that the audience and especially the critics come with a massive amount of baggage, especially about someone as explosive as Thatcher. So in a way, it doesn't really matter if you've got a spun image of something or your own personal view of something - people are going to come loaded with their point of view anyway.

Maurice Gran:
I want to go a little bit further on the question of writing about personalities rather than writing about the clash of philosophies and the clash of organisations. As was just said, all drama is basically a protagonist and a dilemma so it's very hard to write non-personal drama that's not about characters. But I also feel quite strongly that when we review the 20th century, in which the theory that personalities didn't matter, seem to prevail a lot in political philosophy, we can just see this monumental march of monsters across the century from Stalin to Hitler, to Mao, Churchill, Thatcher, Scargill -- people who shape our world were individuals. I am pretty sure having just dipped into the most recent biography of Trotsky, that if he had won the tussle with Stalin things would not have been a different there either. So I think that in any case to try to mediate history for an audience, you have to personalise it but I'm not convinced that the great character, the great man/woman theory of history is all that wrong.
Tony Saint:
I was just going to say on the question about being spun, very quickly in my particular case. It would be nice to be spun. But no one ever talks to me about these things. So I can't be blamed from that point of view, but yes I mean, having just written something about the MPs’ expenses, primarily about Michael Martin. He did exactly the same as Margaret Thatcher, which was refuse to have anything to do with it, and then I suspect as will happen with the Margaret Thatcher film it's rather the kind of supporting cast, the cronies or the families or whoever who come out and have a go at you. Then see the film, then stop having a go at you as they realise it was never that bad in the final analysis anyway. I’m not sure that this was what you were getting at about personalising, but I just couldn't possibly apologise for doing that, because that’s the nature of the beast. I would almost define as political drama as humanising politics.

Nick Randall:
I think one of the difficulties for us outsiders looking in, is that we end up analyzing the stuff that gets made so you go off and will watch ‘Moseley’ or watch ‘A Very Social Secretary’. I'm interested in what doesn't get made and why it doesn't get made. So I wonder if you could comment on some of the projects that got aborted that were political and say something about the reasons why.

Matthew Bailey:
I just wanted to pick up on a couple of things. It strikes me that we've got in some ways, an unrepresentative panel up there because you have written about the Tories and in some senses they have been less dealt with in political fiction in Britain, but I wanted to link that into the comment you made about the West Wing and something that came up with Joe Ashton and Chris Mullin, about whether there is something inherent, something easier about writing about disillusionment and maybe cynicism and defeat than and to take the idea of the Tories, a party that is actually quite popular and wins. And why is it possible in America to write something like the West Wing and perhaps less possible to write it here?

Alistair Beaton:
I'll just pick up on the first of those questions, what doesn't get made. We have to be careful of this because there will be an absolute tsunami of resentment and bitterness from the four people up here, of all the genius that's been wasted by television executives particularly. All I would say is that in theatre most things get made if you, in other words, in my experience they are not stopped for political reasons. In television my two experiences of Channel 4 were terrific because for the Blunkett film, Blunkett's lawyers were on our backs on a fortnightly basis, threatening injunctions. It was very, very heavy all the way. The Channel 4 lawyers were very supportive with one or two little adjustments just to keep us safe, but it was terrific, really very courageous. In my experience, the BBC is currently in a state of just deep funk, they are very, very nervous and very frightened and it's hard getting hard hitting things through.

On the other hand it's very easy for that to degenerate into paranoia because perhaps it's a crap idea you've given them. It’s nothing to do with the politics; you can never quite rule this out. Just a quick example, many years ago I wrote a play for the Bush which was very, very political, it was while Margaret Thatcher was in power and it was an absolute disaster and rehearsals were a nightmare and the director was a nightmare and it was all just pants. And eventually the whole cast led by Alfred Molina, just walked out, half way through rehearsals and resigned. We agreed that we'd just say to the press that it was for administrative reasons. Well, the press went berserk and generally assumed that it had suppressed for political reasons, so I would have the Times and the Daily Mail ringing up saying, presumably this was just a very political play and I would say well I can't possibly comment. Is this political censorship they asked, well I said that I really didn't know. So it was perceived as an act of political censorship whereas it was actually just another theatrical shambles.
James Graham:  
I do have a theory, which has so many holes in it, you’ll be able to pick it apart straight away, about the West Wing / British divide. I just wonder - having done so many plays about British Prime Ministers from James Callaghan to Eden to Thatcher - whether it’s something in the very constitution of British politics? I wonder whether that means that constantly every narrative of a British political figure begins with their rise, so it starts quite well, but then complications occur and there’s crisis, then ultimately tragedy and failure. I can’t think of any 20th century Prime Minister where that hasn’t been the narrative of their career and that’s very Shakespearian and very tragic and I wonder whether drama naturally here lends itself to that because of the very nature of our political system. In American you get your two terms and you can leave on a massive high and be very popular. Here politicians usually end with failure. So I just wonder whether that has something to do with that. As for not having work made, I’m lucky; I’m kind of too young to have not had work made yet. Although I did have a political speech about monetarism in my ITV Christmas drama which was for some reason left out, so you’ll never see it but it was brilliant.

Maurice Gran:  
There are problems with TV in this country, unlike the theatre, where there are still 20 or 30 people who could say yes to a play. At the BBC there are 20 or 30 people who can say no and one person who’s having a nervous breakdown and can’t say yes. I normally pronounce funk with a silent ’n’ when I’m talking about the BBC.

Steven Fielding:  
Thank you. And on that bombshell we’ll end this session.