

State of the Nation: Class, Labour politics and the contemporary relevance of *Our Friends in the North* (1996)

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Epigraph

“These are hard times for the little people”

(Benny Barratt, played by Malcolm McDowell, *Our Friends in the North*, Episode 6:1979)

Introduction

When *Our Friends in the North* (*OFITN*) was first broadcast on BBC2 in the Spring of 1996, having “commanded the highest budget of any UK drama series ever produced by the BBC” (Nelson 1997: 235), it was welcomed as “one of the major television programmes of this or any other year” (Cathode 1996). It became, along with a small number of serious dramas of the time, one of “the public events of the 1980s and 1990s” (Caughie 2000: 204) attracting over 5 million viewers and becoming one of the channel’s most successful series to date (Anon. 1996).

The series, written by Peter Flannery¹ and based on his play originally showcased at the Barbican pit theatre in 1982, follows, over a period of 31 years, the lives of four main protagonists – Nicky Hutchinson (played by Christopher Eccleston), Mary Soulsby (Gina McKee), Geordie Peacock (Daniel Craig) and Tosker Cox (Mark Strong) – whose fortunes are “mixed, and inextricably intertwined with contemporary political and social events” (Condon 2015: 485).

As the series progresses over its 9 episodes, Nicky and Mary begin as teenage sweethearts but drift apart, and Tosker steps in to marry Mary after she becomes pregnant. Geordie escapes a shotgun wedding and becomes involved in the shady world of Soho pornography and police corruption, while Tosker becomes a Thatcherite small businessman; Mary and Tosker’s marriage ends, and following Nicky’s disillusion with local politics (after working for hustling local council leader Austin Donohue)

¹ Eaton argues against a ‘simplistic auteurist fallacy’ when suggesting that the directors of the series were collaborators with both the writer (who is generally assigned authorship of *Our Friends in the North*) and producer Michael Wearing, whose ‘stamina’ in promoting the project Flannery salutes (Eaton 2005: 26, 11).

and flirtation with Angry Brigade style political violence he and Mary get married. Nicky's infidelity again leads to them splitting up, and Mary's political career takes her from council leader to MP. Tosker eventually finds some contentment as the owner of a floating nightclub with his new wife Elaine, and while Nicky and Mary again reconcile, the final shots show Geordie walking across the Tyne bridge to an uncertain future.

Among these personal narratives, the series interweaves political issues based on real-life events, particularly making use of the career of T Dan Smith, the notorious Newcastle City Council leader whose drive to clear slums and rebuild the north east led to a 'Faustian pact' with architect John Poulson and eventual imprisonment on charges of corruption and bribery (Eaton 2005: 4–5).

While based mainly in Tyneside and London, the series has been described as "monumental" (Angelini 2010), a "state of the nation" drama (Eaton 2005), exploring, over 623 minutes, "the state of Britain in the late 20th Century" (Condon 2015: 485). Situated "in the social realist tradition of Trevor Griffiths and Ken Loach" (Harris 2006: 27), it has also been enlisted as an example of a more powerful, challenging 'critical realism' which 'commands attention':

"It invites critical reflection precisely because it invites its audience to look at things from a particular perspective (arguably centred in male working-class experience in this case) rather than offering absolute truth" (Nelson 1997: 242).

As Nicky's disillusionment with formal politics over the course of a number of episodes leads him to retreat from active politics, he becomes a successful documentary photographer in the style of Martin Parr or Chris Killip, chronicling the struggles of ordinary people in the UK and abroad. By 1987 he is photographing rough sleepers between book signings, and he discovers Geordie, drunk and aggressive, under the arches. Geordie's female companion promises that she will look after him, and this brief representation is surely an acknowledgement of, and nod towards, the social realism of *Edna the Inebriate Woman* (1971), the *Play for Today* episode which attracted an audience of nearly 10 million and raised awareness of alcoholism and its link to homelessness and rough-sleeping. In its sympathetic depiction of Edna as an alcoholic wandering through a hostile bureaucracy (as Geordie does in the later episodes of *OFITN*), the TV play "maintained the progressive social realist tradition initiated by *Up the Junction* and *Cathy Come Home* in the 1960s" (Cooke 2015b: 104). This connection underlines the lineage of *OFITN* within politically engaged quality British TV drama.

While then Director General of the BBC John Birt used his 1996 MacTaggart lecture to praise the series as a "mighty chronicle of our times" representing a glorious future for quality television (Birt et al. 2005), others saw the series as one of a dying breed of innovative political dramas squeezed

out by “the ratings driven commissioning ethos of the 1990s” (Cooke 2015a: 117) for which Birt might be seen as having significant responsibility².

This paper will not engage directly with the purely personal aspects of the narrative for individual characters, but it is often the case that these individual issues and problems reflect wider shared political elements. For instance, Nicky’s short-lived affair with postgraduate student Alice while married to Mary represents a personal sexual deception which to some extent mirrors the broader themes of political betrayal across the series. Mary’s attempts to talk to Nicky about their relationship include a discussion of the need to ‘fight for what you believe in’ (Episode 8: 1987), but while Nicky understands this in political terms, it is clear that Mary is talking about saving their marriage.

Indeed, the final episode (9: 1995) largely concentrates on the relationships between the four protagonists and their wider families, with both Tosker’s successful launch of his new floating bar business and Nicky’s mum Florrie’s funeral serving as events to bring them back together. Nicky’s relationship with his father Felix is a central element, where Nicky pleads for his love and respect, and attempts to break through the Alzheimer’s disease that is destroying any chance of communication between them by reminding Felix of his youth and his part in the Jarrow March of 1936 to show how his life has not been a failure, and finally screaming tearfully at him that he has always been a ‘bastard’. Similarly, in 1995 when Mary’s son Anthony explains that he is leaving his wife, his words echo the same sentiment Mary herself had expressed when her own marriage was collapsing 20 years earlier: “We were just too young”.

Familial relationships are therefore a key theme throughout, and these issues are intertwined with the social and political issues the series raises. Of the four main protagonists it has been suggested that “All of them are lost souls – searching for impossible familial and social Utopias.” (Eaton 2005: 22).

Although Eaton suggests the series “perfectly marries the personal and the political, the domestic and the historical” (Eaton 2005: 115), I will largely be eschewing some of the personal and domestic aspects of *Our Friends in the North* to focus on those aspects which address collective social and political issues.

² An audio adaptation of the series in the summer of 2022 broadcast on BBC Radio 4 ended with an all-new episode set in 2022 in an attempt to make a direct connection with contemporary issues.

One key reason for this is to foreground the aspects of social and political conflict, often around implicit understandings of class, through which *OFITN* draws its status as a 'state of the nation' series. Eaton compares the comments of two contrasting journalists to illustrate how, across the political spectrum, it "functioned as a springboard for political debate". Veteran *Daily Telegraph* journalist W.F. Deedes wrote that when Nicky argues that corruption is the great moral issue in British politics, "we feel inclined to shout 'Bang on!'"; from an opposing political perspective, socialist writer Paul Foot said the series had "absorbed me more than anything else in thirty years of telly watching". More specifically, Foot emphasised the party-political aspect of *OFITN*: "The chances of real change through the Labour Party is the central preoccupation of *Our Friends in the North*" (Eaton 2005: 112–4). One critical voice suggested that the series "presented New Labour – before it had won office – as the latest instalment in a never-ending story of corruption...[and] evoked a populist hostility to politicians as a class" (Fielding 2014: 250).

In this paper I will argue that *OFITN*'s discussion of class and social conflict from 1964 to 1995 underpins, in televisual terms, both the historical importance and contemporary relevance of the series. More specifically, I want to show how the series' themes can be found in contemporary news and current affairs as unresolved conflicts and concerns. Clearly there are some distinctions that can be made between the ways in which social conflicts were structured in the periods covered by the series and how they are now understood. For instance, the miner's strike of the mid-1980s might be seen as a working-class defence of an industry and a way of life, while public service workers today are taking industrial action in response to a decade or more of falling real-terms wages and a crippling cost of living crisis. However, while the struggles have evolved, the broader concerns are markedly similar, and to illustrate this I will set out a number of key issues and themes found in the series which will then be juxtaposed with recent news and current affairs reports. While these news items (headlines and in some cases initial paragraphs) are not directly analysed due to considerations of space, they are presented here for the reader to explore further through the links provided as comparative evidence of *OFITN*'s salience with regard to these contemporary issues.

State of the Nation: class conflict

When 20-year-old student Nicky, arriving back in the North East in 1964 (Episode 1), suggests that going back to university after his summer in the US isn't enough, he evokes his class position in justification: "I don't want to write any more essays about working class history, I want to go on living it". Nicky has spent his summer volunteering in the US civil rights movement, and his declaration situates the drama in the context of 'working class history' in the second half of the 20th

century, also setting out *OFITN*'s stall as a wider commentary on the 'state of the nation' moving through the decades up to the mid-1990s. Class conflict – or at least, class distinction - is implied in an early scene (Episode 1: 1964) in which council leader Austin Donohue's Jaguar, with its personalised number plate (9075 AD) drives through the narrow cobbled streets of Newcastle: “down the back alleys, fluttering the washing on the lines” (Eaton, 2005: 38).

One of the pivotal scenes (Episode 3: 1967) of individualised class conflict involves Mary and Tosker (who are now married after Mary and Nicky had drifted apart), having dinner at a fancy restaurant with Nicky and his new merchant banker girlfriend Helen (who he met through the 'Trots', the far-left group he has recently joined). Tosker struggles with the Italian menu, his spaghetti slipping off his fork before it reaches his mouth. In response to Helen's banking job, Tosker asks sarcastically if she 'works on the tills', wonders how much she earns, and later emphasises that his manual job is to 'stencil addresses onto crates'³. Tosker asks “How much?” when the dessert trolley arrives, and bristles when Helen rejects his use of the term 'sweetheart' as patronising. He demands to pay his (and Mary's) half of the bill when Nicky offers to pay, and when they are alone Helen tells Nicky that “you are moving on, you're changing, they are staying behind, that's all.” Helen is assuring Nicky of his social mobility, and condemning Tosker and Mary as part of his working class past. Eaton characterises this as perhaps a hackneyed 'fish out of water' scene in which a working class protagonist's discomfort highlights the pretensions of those who yearn for social mobility that is unlikely to arrive (Eaton, 2005: 53–4). Nevertheless, it offers one of the key set pieces of Bourdieusian class distinction via cultural capital in the narrative.

In 1970 (Episode 4), Nicky walks to a meeting of the anarchist cell that his political disillusion has driven him towards while (perhaps ironically) Lennon's 'Working Class Hero' plays; later, he attempts to raise Geordie's political awareness by showing him around the railway arches where homeless people sleep. As they watch, the police arrive to hose them down and disperse them, Nicky getting arrested for his protests.

Crisis charity say numbers of new rough sleepers in London have risen dramatically

(*Crisis*, 31 January 2023: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/29-increase-in-people-new-to-rough-sleeping-in-london-crisis-responds/>)

³ This is a reference to Rhodesia and international political 'corruption'; Mary thought he was sending engineering parts (“pump gear”) to South Africa, but as Tosker explains that is just a cover, a 'fiddle' to obscure the firm's role in avoiding sanctions against Rhodesia. This minor aspect of the narrative was originally written as a key element, with Tosker as an uninterested cog in the shady world of sanctions-busting. This gave the original play its name, as a reference to the 'friends' of Apartheid South Africa in the Rhodesian government (Eaton 2005: 6).

Rough sleeping up 21% across London

Huge annual rise blamed on cost-of-living crisis

(*Enfield Dispatch*, 5 February 2023: <https://enfielddispatch.co.uk/rough-sleeping-up-21-across-london/>)

For Tosker, 1970 is the point at which his (lack of) interest in politics begins to shift towards a positive position as a proto-Thatcherite. Nicky had earlier (Episode 3 1967, during the restaurant scene) called Tosker a working class Tory; he replied ambiguously (“How do you know how I vote?”). By 1970, Tosker’s fruit and veg business is successful enough for him to rent his own shop, but when his assistant Terry asks for a pay rise, he sacks him, justifying his decision by setting out the key political lesson he has learned (in contrast to Nicky’s move to the radical left) over the years: “Them’s that’s in charge can do what they like, and the rest can like it or lump it”. This underlines Tosker’s petit bourgeois Conservatism, and in light of her subsequent journey, Mary’s response perhaps can be seen as a liberal left counterpoint (especially in the context of her later rise in the ranks of ‘New Labour’), asking if he can afford a shop, “why can’t Terry have his rise?”. In a later episode (7: 1984) Tosker’s induction into his local masonic lodge, and the opportunities it offers, perhaps represents his final step into the role of the middle class businessman. For our purposes here though, Tosker’s attitude implicitly echoes a broader position that pay rises for workers are economically unsustainable.

Inflation-busting pay rises for public sector workers 'unaffordable', says minister

(*Sky News*, 27 November 2022: <https://news.sky.com/story/inflation-busting-pay-rises-for-public-sector-workers-unaffordable-says-minister-12756396>)

Episode 7, set in 1984, is largely dominated by the miner’s strike, a period when a Conservative government was challenged by concerted industrial action, and class conflict was therefore, in implicit form, at the forefront of public debate. The voices of striking miners have been found to be largely absent from historical and cultural accounts of this period, (Shaw, 2012) and while *OFITN* is clearly an authored, fictionalised version, it nevertheless offers a relatively rare insight into the experiences of miners on both sides of the conflict, and uses the strike “as a reflective backdrop, one that inspires and changes the lives of the series’ characters as they draw strength or inspiration from the developing conflict” (Shaw 2012: 177). The Thatcher government planned carefully for the strike,

ensuring that power stations had large stockpiles of coal to avoid power cuts and meeting secretly with coal board leaders to co-ordinate actions (Anon. 2014; Wilsher et al. 1985: 40); but publicly argued that they were not directly involved, and that the strike must be resolved by the miners negotiating with the leaders of the National Coal Board (Adeney et al. 1988: 203)

This deception is referenced in *OFITN* when Eddie Wells, Labour politician and Nicky's political mentor, confronts Claudia Seabrook, Conservative Minister for Employment in the House of Commons about how they will resolve the conflict. Eddie mentions Thatcher's quoting of St Francis of Assisi on the steps of Downing Street in 1979 promising to bring harmony where there is discord; the minister responds by dismissing his plea: "The government has no role to play in what is purely an industrial dispute". Elsewhere in this episode it is made clear that Seabrook and the government she represents is wholly implicated in the dispute, and the 'arm's length' buffer is a convenient fiction.

Government 'misleading' over role in rail strikes, legal advice suggests

The TUC said an independent legal opinion undermined the Government's claims that the rail dispute is just between the train operators and unions.

(*Independent*, 26 June 2022: <https://www.independent.co.uk/business/government-misleading-over-role-in-rail-strikes-legal-advice-suggests-b2109582.html>)

Political disillusion, apathy, cynicism

In episode 1 (1964), Nicky's father Felix's history in the Labour Party is referred to during Nicky's birthday party (where the class position of his family is signified by the use of the 'best china'), when Eddie Wells and Nicky discuss the likelihood of Harold Wilson winning the 1964 election. Felix offers his view: "It doesn't matter who wins the elections, nothing changes". For Felix, this weary cynicism emerges from his experience of being 'stabbed in the back' by the party when it condemned the Jarrow marchers. Nicky counters this with optimism founded on marches in Mississippi and Alabama which, he argues, shows that things can change for the better. Eddie similarly suggests that things might be different this time, and this scene early in episode 1 sets up a key theme in which the Labour Party is a (potential) vehicle for social change and reform for the working classes, while also being seen as stifling or betraying these class interests.

By 1974 (Episode 5:) and the impending collapse of the Heath government, Felix taunts Nicky when he notices that, despite their earlier criticisms of the Labour Party as another arm of the establishment, the left-anarchist movement (disparagingly referred to as the 'Trots') he is currently involved with were calling for a Labour government. Felix reminds Nicky of his earlier suggestion that it is better to be ruled "by proper Tories, not Tories in drag". Again, Nicky is drawn back to supporting the party despite concerns that it's policy platform is similar to the ruling Conservatives.

Labour meltdown: 'Pathetic' Keir Starmer dubbed 'Tory-lite' in FURIOUS online backlash

LABOUR leader Sir Keir Starmer faced a furious online backlash with him being dubbed "Tory-lite" following his praise for Boris Johnson on coronavirus

(*Express*, 1 May 2020: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1275928/Labour-Party-news-Keir-Starmer-update-coronavirus-UK-lockdown>)

Starmer's 'radical' promises have gone as he targets power - but we still don't really know who he is

(*Sky News*, 28 January 2023: <https://news.sky.com/story/starmer-radical-promises-have-gone-as-he-targets-power-but-we-still-dont-really-know-who-he-is-12797445>)

Corruption: Housing

The necessity of political change is highlighted in episode 1 (1964) when Nicky and Eddie Wells are out canvassing for the party. They visit elderly constituents in old slum housing, with wallpaper falling from damp mouldy walls. It is clear that when the old man asks his bedridden wife who she will be voting for, it is unlikely she will survive to see the result. By 1967 (Episode 3), Nicky's disillusion with local Labour politician Austin Donohue leads him to confront his former boss about bribes and 'consultancy fees', and dozens of MPs "on Edwards' payroll" putting their interests above the "ordinary working class people" who vote for them.

Local politicians are schmoozed by construction mogul John Edwards in an attempt to secure the contract to build his (cheaply constructed and ultimately unsafe) high-rise flats, who suggests that they take a paid -for trip to see similar projects in Stockholm or Piraeus ("it won't cost you a penny

to see it"). Edwards understands that these politicians can be manipulated into enriching him and his business interests.

The new flat that Mary and Tosker move into (and which is featured in a promotional film for the building company) soon develops damp and mould; Tosker, in another example of the political cynicism that *OFITN* implies is largely justified, says it's 'pointless' to complain (Episode 3: 1967).

EXCLUSIVE: Harrowing video of baby in mouldy flat 'struggling to breathe' after being hospitalised

A distraught mum-of-four says her baby is "struggling to breathe every night" because of their mould-ridden flat.

(*Mirror*, 29 December 2022: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/harrowing-video-baby-mouldy-flat-28778410>)

Mould complaints in England's social housing double over two years

Ombudsman criticises 'disappointing' response by landlords in wake of Awaab Ishak's death from respiratory illness in 2020

(*Guardian* 2 February 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/feb/02/mould-damp-complaints-social-housing-ombudsman-tenants-landlords>)

Later, MP Claude Seabrook (father of Claudia, who later in the series becomes a Conservative minister in the Thatcher government) meets with Edwards and local politician Austin Donohue at a gentleman's club to discuss taking up Edwards' offer of the chairmanship of a new international construction company. Seabrook needs reassurances that it will be 'very amply funded' (Episode 3: 1967); Edwards acknowledges Seabrook's contacts abroad, making clear that his remaining an MP is an important part of the role, and it is clear that in exploiting his political power to the advantage of the new company Seabrook will be well rewarded personally⁴.

⁴ The setting is important here; while Tosker's encounter with Nicky's girlfriend Helen (see above 'state of the nation: class conflict') occurs in a restaurant, Seabrook meets Edwards in the kind of elite wood-panelled establishment which is perhaps members only, the waiters formal in dress and manner.

Why would Boris Johnson need an £800,000 loan?

When Boris Johnson was prime minister, he was offered a loan of up to £800,000 to top up his income.

We found this out last week, when details of the loan, and allegations the BBC's chairman, Richard Sharp, was involved in arranging it, surfaced following a report by the Sunday Times.

(*Guardian*, 24 January 2023: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-64392524>)

In Episode 4 (1970), Police Commissioner Blamire instructs Inspector Conrad to 'proceed no further with the Edwards case' in which Seabrook is implicated, further intertwining political and police corruption (which we will return to shortly).

The Thatcher reforms of the housing market are foregrounded in episode 8 (1987) when Tosker tells his new wife Elaine he is selling the 'dosshouses' he owns to instead become a 100% mortgage provider for those council tenants looking to take advantage of right-to-buy legislation and purchase their homes. He points to the new front doors, uPVC windows and ornamental ponds installed by the new owners of these houses as evidence of the success of the scheme (another acknowledgement of Bourdieu's signifiers of class distinction). Mary, at this point leader of the local council, later explains to Elaine how 'right-to-buy' works to deplete the stock of social housing, enrich mortgage lenders (who can charge high rates of interest and repossess when necessary) and reduce local government revenues due to the statutory discounts they are obliged to offer. She compares those (such as Tosker and his mentor Alan Roe) who exploit the system in a financial sense with the earlier housing scandal explored in the series: "At least Austin Donohue *built* the houses he made money out of". From this perspective, the critique here suggests the relatively low-level, regionalised corruption of housing construction has been replaced by a national, financialised corruption in which building is replaced by banking in a government incentivised scam.

Revealed: Tory peer Michelle Mone secretly received £29m from 'VIP lane' PPE firm

(*Guardian*, 23 November 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/23/revealed-tory-peer-michelle-mone-secretly-received-29m-from-vip-lane-ppe-firm>)

Corruption: Metropolitan Police

Alongside fraud and misconduct in housing and politics, a related theme is the corruption of the Metropolitan police. An early scene shows a police officer being arrested in order to suppress his accusations of institutionalised misconduct.

When Deputy Chief Constable Roy Johnson - who Eaton describes as “occupy[ing] the moral epicentre of the entire tale” (2005: 44) - interviews the whistle-blower Berger about corruption in the Metropolitan Police, he asks him to start at the beginning; Berger replies that “There is no beginning; there’s no sign of an end”; this kind of deeply embedded, institutional corruption is not something that can be quickly or easily corrected.

Johnson calls for a ‘quiet’ but ‘thorough’ investigation into the corruption, (Episode 2: 1966), the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Edward Jones refuses: “What do we say to the people we police – ‘please behave yourselves, please obey the laws even though we don’t’?” This is presumably arguing that any investigation would represent the police in such a way as to be too damaging to public conceptions of the Met – an ‘appalling vista’⁵ that the Commissioner is unwilling to entertain.

Two or three Met officers to face court a week, commissioner says

Two or three Met Police officers per week are expected to appear in court on criminal charges in the coming weeks and months, the force's chief has said.

Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley says the public should "prepare for more painful stories" as the force confronts the issues it faces.

(BBC News, 25 January 2023: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-64400235>)

Metropolitan Police expected to be heavily criticised for being racist, sexist and homophobic in report

(BBC News, 17 March 2023: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-64400235>)

⁵ As an appeal court judge, Lord Denning commented in the appeal of the Birmingham Six to the effect that if the appeal were allowed it would be an acknowledgement of police corruption so heinous that such an ‘appalling vista’ must be resisted and denied.

Crime boss Benny Barratt makes a deal with the Metropolitan Police vice squad to protect his business interests, and the links between this element of the narrative and that of corruption in housing is underlined when he, as a landlord, cruelly forces out a long-term tenant (and friend of Geordie) (Episode 3: 1967)). In this way, the police corruption and the scandals around the housing market are tied together as part of the wider critique of a society where “rectitude and the making of moral choices is no longer possible” (Eaton, 2005: 44)

Anticipating Margaret Thatcher’s election in 1979 (Episode 6), senior police officers plan to extract a price from the new government (of “support, resources and hardware”) in exchange for being asked to “deal with the consequences of past political failures”, rather than attempting to put right their own historical failings. Roy Johnson returns to press the case for a full inquiry into police corruption, noting that most of the officers removed due to the current investigation left via “medical discharges and early pensions” rather than meaningful punishment. The new Commissioner Jellicoe complains that corruption is only one of many problems on his desk, but Johnson (as the moral epicentre mentioned above) asks “Police officers involved in robbery and murder, what could be more important than that?”

Two or three Met police officers to face trial every week, commissioner predicts

Mark Rowley tells London assembly that police bracing for corrupt officers in court until 2025 as ‘systemic failings’ rooted out.

(*Guardian*, 25 January 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/25/met-commissioner-predicts-two-or-three-officers-to-face-trial-every-week>)

Met Police receiving tens of calls each week about corrupt officers on new integrity hotline

(*MyLondon News*, 25 January 2023: <https://www.mylondon.news/news/zone-1-news/met-police-receiving-tens-calls-26066523>)

A Sense of Decay: Things Fall Apart

In 1974 (Episode 5) Prime Minister Edward Heath announces on television, “the grave emergency” which means restrictions on electricity usage “for heating and other purposes in your home, ushering in the ‘3-day week’”.⁶

National Grid to pay households to use less electricity, as coal-fired power generators put on standby

National Grid ESO says the move is not a sign that electricity supplies are at risk and insists "people should not be worried".

(Sky News 24 January 2023: <https://news.sky.com/story/national-grid-to-pay-households-to-use-less-electricity-as-coal-fired-power-generators-put-on-standby-12793319>)

Coal power stations unlikely to provide emergency energy top-up next winter

An energy analyst says we are "sleepwalking into a capacity crunch" and the "potential loss of the coal contingency is bad news for next winter".

(Sky News, 15 March 2023: <https://news.sky.com/story/coal-power-stations-unlikely-to-provide-emergency-energy-top-up-next-winter-12834638>)

The late 80s peak of Thatcherism sees Mary as the leader of the city council under pressure to cut costs. In an early morning phone call to a colleague she confirms that budget cuts mean that they will be “sacking people”, providing “only what we are legally obliged to provide”, and effectively “abandoning our commitments”. Mary later confronts Claudia Seabrook about the damage done by central government, forcing the council into closing libraries and day centres and sacking home helps. Claudia responds with a call for individual personal responsibility – the shooting of Chris Collins on the council estate (that has become a ‘no-go area’ for the police) is due to a “breakdown in law and order”.

Nottingham City Council: Job cuts and price rises proposed for budget

⁶ This was caused primarily by the industrial action taken by the miners and railworkers protesting against inflation and the pay rises that failed to keep up with it.

Job cuts and revised charges for services like parking and leisure centres have been proposed as a council looks to plug a £32.2m funding gap.

(BBC News 13 December 2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-63957064>)

‘Worse than austerity’ – councils warn that any cuts to their budgets next year would mean they are only able to offer the bare minimum in local services

(County Councils Network, 27 October 2022:

<https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/worse-than-austerity-councils-warn-that-any-cuts-to-their-budgets-next-year-would-mean-they-are-only-able-to-offer-the-bare-minimum-in-local-services/>)

Political chicanery

Eddie Wells’s run as an Independent Labour candidate in the 1974 election (Episode 5) is nearly derailed when the official Labour candidate accuses him of being responsible for the earlier death of his wife and daughter in a car crash due to a ‘drink problem’. Mary confronts the Labour candidate who made the comments to a newspaper, and it is clear that the story is a baseless smear, but the story has a considerable impact and Eddie wins by a slim majority.

Nicky sympathises with Eddie, and implies that the political smear as a campaigning tool is an example of a deeper political malaise: “We’re back in the dark ages. Anything’s possible, except the things we really want”. In seeing ‘no hope’, Nicky is arguably expressing what Mark Fisher famously described as capitalist realism:

“The widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.” (Fisher 2009: 2). From this perspective, the Labour candidate embodies an acceptable version of capitalism challenging the legitimacy of any alternative emerging from the left (which even Eddie’s ‘old left’ labourism represents). Eddie later (Episode 8: 1987) attempts to expose the Tory MPs corrupt links with PR firms and lobbyists, while Nicky is dismissive of any such parliamentary attempt to challenge power: “Nobody cares; nobody expects anything better from politicians these days”. However, at a parliamentary meeting he discovers that his own assistant is also secretly paid for by a Tory PR firm and has been placed specifically to discredit him, and the campaign has to be abandoned.

Lobbying fears as MPs' interest groups receive £13m from private firms

(*Guardian*, 17 February 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/feb/17/lobbying-fears-as-mps-interest-groups-receive-13m-from-private-firms>)

In 1979 (Episode 6) Nicky has returned to the Labour Party and considers whether his previous political positions might hinder the local constituency party's plan to adopt him as their candidate: "The National Executive would never accept me"; but his supporters are unconcerned – the NEC can't intervene "if we do it absolutely by the book". In a heated party meeting, Nicky's friends are called Trotskyists, while his opponents are accused of putting all their efforts into attacking the left: "if you put half as much effort into insulting the Tories as you do your own comrades in the working class..."

Flannery's script here, as at other points, can be read as ambiguous; the left wingers in (and outside) the party are hardly lionised, and the response of one of the labour 'moderates' – "What do you know about the working class – you're a frigging polytechnic lecturer" – could be seen as a telling critique of the pretensions of the 'Trots'. Still, the audience is surely inclined to sympathise with Nicky's concerns and principles. When it is confirmed that the NEC will overrule any decision to select Nicky, he asks "And that's democracy is it?" his opponent simply states "It's fact"⁷.

Broxtowe Labour claims MP selection 'rigged' by national party amidst resignations

(*Nottingham Post*, 1 March 2023: <https://www.nottinghampost.com/news/broxtowe-labour-claims-mp-selection-8200996>)

Keir Starmer's 'purge' of Labour's left is destabilising an otherwise buoyant party at a crucial time, MPs say

⁷ These narratives of political betrayal have deep roots in the Labour movement, going back to the 'stab in the back' when Labour leader Ramsey MacDonald crossed the floor of the House of Commons to join Tories and Liberals in an austerity coalition government (Farr 2015).

(*Independent*, 13 October 2022: <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-labour-left-destablisiing-party-mps-1908982>)

The (un)deserving poor

The underclasses (which, Eaton suggests, emerge largely following the defeat of the miners, and the deindustrialisation of the UK economy) are represented in *OFITN* in 1984 (Episode 7) as welfare dependent, crude, and aggressive. When Felix goes to complain to Chris Collins' parents about their son's loutish behaviour, he is met by apathy from his mother (who seems, to Felix, to be young enough to be Chris's sister); she suggests that Felix should 'thump him'. Chris' stepfather then denies any responsibility for the 'mentally deranged little bastard': "If he was mine, I'd kick his fucking head in for him". When Felix objects to this swearing the stepfather becomes violent, and Felix is beaten and attacked by man and dog.

The series seems to be making a contrast here between the dignified working classes (downbeat, betrayed, but noble in demeanour) and the new violent, amoral welfare scroungers that Thatcherism begat, and this seems something of a mis-step. While the term 'underclass' is not explicitly used in the series itself, Eaton's application of it when discussing this scene (Eaton, 2005: 83) suggests that the framing is justified. However, the notion of an underclass is hugely problematic; it has "little intellectual substance...lacks a consistent, defensible theoretical basis, [and] is not a class in any of the usual senses" (Katz, 1993: 22).

Savage has suggested that Standing's term 'precariat' is preferable, given that 'underclass' has been used to "define a group who are responsible for their own misfortunes because of their pathological behaviour". By contrast 'precariat' acknowledges that this group's vulnerability is structurally produced, and avoids clichéd stereotypes (Savage 2015: 352–3). While the depiction of Collins' family situation in this scene is, implicitly, tied to the political and economic changes that intensified during the Thatcher years, the stereotypes identified here allow the kind of 'pathological' interpretation that Savage criticises. Even if we accept the series' broad strokes in depicting the class struggles of the 1980s, this element can only be seen as a flaw in its radical intent⁸. In the final episode (9: 1995) Chris Collins now has his own son Sean, an aggressive thirteen-year-old car thief desperate for the attention of his father. In a meeting with residents of the estate angry about Sean's behaviour, Mary seems to blame his parents for 'abandoning' him. A later scene (Episode 9,

⁸⁸ Savage notes in fact that the early 2010s saw 'poverty porn' reality tv programmes pruriently documenting the bad behaviour of the poor, making use of precisely the stereotypes linked to notions of the 'underclass' (Savage 2015: 353)

49m) shows Sean trying to talk to his father only to be verbally abused and rejected. Geordie defends Sean: “Just talk to the kid man, it’s not much; don’t walk away”, and is headbutted for his intervention. Sean is eventually killed as he crashes a stolen car, seemingly intentionally, into a wall.

The ‘underclass’ framing of Sean (and family) here allows for some sympathy with Mary’s argument, despite Anthony angrily rejecting her argument as being a liberal echo of the government’s rhetoric: “If you and your new labour party sound any more like the Tories they’ll sue you for plagiarism!”.

Given the overall trajectory of the series, this scene is awkward. In many ways Mary remains (arguably alongside Deputy Chief Constable Roy Johnson) one of the moral centres of the series, but this storyline can be read two ways. We can, for instance, sympathise with Mary’s framing and to some extent accept the ‘feral underclass’ rhetoric which perhaps underlines it, and therefore see Anthony’s response as a personal attack against his mother driven by their difficult relationship. However, this would work to blunt the wider criticism of right-wing neoliberal ideology across the series. Alternatively, we can accept Anthony’s framing, situating Mary as a ‘new Labour’ style politician preferring to see individual moral failings as the cause of social problems rather than systemic issues. This is, it seems, equally jarring in that Mary then becomes part of the problem rather than a vehicle for a meaningful solution.

Minor notes: Race, Gender, Disability

A further lacuna that might arguably be acknowledged in the series is what might now be called intersectionality, drawing together the multiple categories of social identity which combine to construct the subject in relation to social power and challenging the “interaction of multiple systems of oppression” (Romero 2018: 1). Some elements of social identity linked to class are briefly acknowledged, but these are generally marginalised.

Aspects of race and racism are addressed only obliquely in *OFITN*. In one of the first scenes in episode 1 (1964), as Nicky arrives home after his summer working in the US civil rights movement, he enters his parent’s home to see them watching *The Black and White Minstrel Show* on the television, and we are invited to consider Nicky’s parents as indifferent to, if not complicit in the oppression this represents.

In his meeting with MP Claude Seabrook, construction mogul John Edwards (Episode 3: 1967) suggests to Seabrook that being an MP is useful when “dealing with foreigners”; as he says this he waves his hand across his face, wrinkling his nose to suggest distaste at the colour of such foreigners’

skin. The upper middle classes thus are also implicated in the racism that is part of their social privilege.

Early in the series we are introduced to Mary's brother, Patrick, who we see using a wheelchair. We learn that he has cerebral palsy, and in 1970 (Episode 4) Patrick dies after breathing in the damp and mould of Mary and Tosker's flat. While implicitly making an intersectional point here – that Patrick's disability joins with his class position to make him particularly vulnerable to the effects of poor housing – this is the only explicit reference to disability in the series.

Mother and daughter driven from mouldy home for three years back in temporary housing days after return

A disabled mother and her daughter who were driven out of their home for almost three years by mould and damp have been forced into temporary accommodation for a second time just days after returning – and at a cost of nearly £4,000 a week.

(*Independent* 9 February 2023: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/damp-mould-social-housing-disability-b2278252.html>)

Feminism and wider issues of gender are occasionally raised (for instance in Helen's response to Tosker calling her 'sweetheart', but a kind of casual misogyny is represented, often largely uncritically, at other times. Geordie for instance leaves Newcastle quickly when he finds his girlfriend is pregnant. Mary objects to this, but the off-screen girlfriend has no further part to play in the series. In 1974 (Episode 5) Mary is studying for a law degree, and Tosker's anger at being neglected erupts: "I used to be important... I've just been forgot about...all I do is pay for everything". Threatened, he asserts his patriarchal supremacy as the one who pays the mortgage and the bills, and pays other women to look after the kids and clean the house. "What else am I supposed to pay other women for?". This demand for sexual access to Mary on the basis of the 'debt' he is owed later plays out in joyless perfunctory sex. Tosker's misogyny, largely a minor element in his character, becomes foregrounded here.

Conclusion

Commenting on Flannery's representation of Nicky's dalliance with the far left, Eaton suggests that it is impossible to depict a 1970s political commune "in any way other than the ludicrous and

stereotypical” (Eaton, 2005: 63), and while Eaton defends Peter Flannery’s writing and blames the iconography of the period for what (even in 1996) seems laughably crude, a similar criticism could be made of much of the characterisation in the series. Many characters could be considered ciphers, one-dimensional bit players whose only contribution is to provide a foil against which the core characters can react. Claudia Seabrook and her Thatcherite coterie, for instance, are arguably stereotypical 1980s Tories, with Claudia herself a pussy-bowed Maggie ‘wannabe’. The ‘undeserving poor’ character who is Chris Collins’s step-father represents what Eaton sees as the newly emergent ‘underclass’, “shaven-headed, half-human”, with a Rottweiler snapping at the heels of any adversary (Eaton, 2005: 84). While this story element provides further acknowledgement of the effects of Thatcherism and de-industrialisation in the 1980s, it can also feel sketchy and formulaic. It has been suggested that one of the strengths of the series is its “avoidance of agit-prop or programmatic political mouthpieces by intermingling the personal and political” (Nelson 1997: 242), but for contemporary viewers scenes such as those mentioned above may still feel forced and overtly polemical. Clearly however, such difficulties might be forgiven in a ‘state of the nation’ drama production spanning 31 years and including 166 major and supporting characters⁹. It is surely still worthwhile interrogating *OFITN*, even with such flaws, given both its reputation as a ground-breaking ‘state of the nation’ television event, and the extent to which the political struggles it depicts between 1964 and 1995 continue to plague Britain in the early decades of the 21st century. Nelson sees the final rapprochement between Nicky and Mary, where he chases her car to make a date for lunch that day rather than the next – that is, to waste no more time and to get on with their lives - as “suggesting a realisation that personal relationships, and possibly family life, have a priority over more public politics. In this reading, *Our Friends*’ final note would seem to advocate the uncertainty of the political contemporary” (Nelson 1997: 243). I would only add that the evidence presented here suggests that the series’ ‘public politics’ also offers a critique of the political contemporary of the 2020s.

Epigraph/Epilogue

When the psychiatrist assessing Geordie’s mental health prior to sentencing for arson asks what kind of voice told Geordie to set the fire, Geordie, having heard Eddie Wells speaking on television, replies “Labour Party”.

⁹ According to the IMDB cast list (*Our Friends in the North (TV Mini Series 1996)* - IMDB, n.d.).

Psychiatrist: "Were you ever a member of the Labour Party?"

Geordie: "Would that prove I was mental?"

(Our Friends in the North Episode 8: 1987)

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