

# Under the Guise of Humour and Critique: The Political Co-Option of Popular Contemporary Satire

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*Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice* (Ed. Jessica Milner Davis)

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## Under the Guise of Humour and Critique: The Political Co-Option of Popular Contemporary Satire

*Rebecca Higgie*

This chapter explores the process of political co-option in contemporary satire, whereby politicians successfully co-opt the vehicle of satire for their own purposes in a way that neutralises the possibility for satirical critique. Studies have consistently found that popular political satires such as the US TV series *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have become trusted forms of political commentary for viewers and citizens worldwide. As satirists have gained public trust and prominence in political media, politicians have appeared more frequently on satire programmes. From presidents to senators, prime ministers to backbenchers, politicians of all political persuasions have been interviewed by comedians, played along in quiz or panel show games, appeared in scripted skits, and even participated in self-satirisation. Recent cases, such as an appearance by then British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg on a programme called *The Last Leg* and US President Barack Obama's co-option of Colbert's segment "The Word", reveal how satire's oft-celebrated critical

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edge is blunted when politicians are able to use it to garner overwhelmingly positive public reactions.

Utilising theories of how dominant culture absorbs and often produces counterculture as a product to be consumed, this chapter will explore the complexity of satire as an oppositional yet incorporated element of mainstream political discourse in several specific case studies. Developing a theory of the political co-option of satire demonstrates how, when politicians play along, their self-interest is often forgotten if they can successfully present themselves as having the traits—good-humour, rebellion, honesty, ironic self-awareness, truth and so on—that are so celebrated by satirists and comedy fans alike. A more critical approach to studying satire will be proposed, which acknowledges satire’s possibility for critique but also allows for the possibility of political co-option.

### SATIRE’S CULTURAL CAPITAL: SOMETHING WORTH CO-OPTING

Scholarship on political satire has argued that it is a form of political communication that can engage young voters, provide useful political information and commentary, and call politicians and the media to account (Jones 2010; Gray et al. 2009a; McClennen and Maise 2014; Brewer and Cao 2006; Day 2011; Young and Hoffman 2012; Hoffman and Young 2011 and Xenos and Becker 2009).<sup>1</sup> Viewers of satire have been shown to be more politically knowledgeable,<sup>2</sup> and satire has become integral to how many people learn about and engage with politics, with many young people using satire as a source of news.<sup>3</sup> Sotos (2007) even claims that satire has become a fifth estate, a watchdog over the failing fourth estate, while McClennen and Maisel believe that “satire is saving our nation. It is correcting the misinformation of the news, holding politicians accountable, and helping reframe citizenship in ways that productively combine entertainment and engagement”.<sup>4</sup> Though much of the research on political satire has focused on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, other studies have demonstrated how satire in both the UK and Australia functions as critical, politically informative and engaging forms of humour and even as journalism (Harrington 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Lockyer 2006).

When it comes to politics, viewers have been observed to trust satirists. In 2007, one notable Pew Research Centre study found that Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show*’s satiric anchor (1999–2015), was rated the fourth most trusted journalist in the USA, alongside traditional mainstream journalists

(*Pew Summary of Findings* 2007). Two years later, a *Time Magazine* poll named Stewart the most trusted newscaster since the famed Walter Cronkite (d. 2009) (Linkins 2009). In 2010, Stewart and his faux-conservative equivalent, Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report*, held a joint rally to “restore sanity”/“keep fear alive” in public debate—a satirical endeavour of disenchantment with the US news media. It drew a crowd of 215,000 to the Washington Monument (Montopoli 2010). Brian Williams, a “real” journalist and anchor of *NBC Nightly News*, acknowledges that “many of us on this side of the journalism tracks often wish we were on Jon [Stewart]’s side. I envy his platform to shout from the mountaintop. He’s a necessary branch of government”.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, I have shown that satirists have cultural capital as “truth-tellers” (Higgin 2014) and that, increasingly, they are invited onto more serious news shows to provide both comedic and earnest commentary (Higgin 2015).

Satire itself appears to function as a sincere, trustworthy medium, especially through its self-aware use of irony. Irony, the “language of satire”, may “seemingly maintain a degree of *authenticity* to younger citizens simply because it doesn’t seem so closely aligned with the ‘manufactured’ realities that politicians, advertisers, and news media construct and would have them believe”.<sup>6</sup> Amber Day argues that irony has become a “new marker of sincerity”, a more self-aware language that seeks to expose both its own construction and the construction of others. She proposes that it provides a sense of authenticity because it “seems more transparent in its willingness to point to its own flaws and fakeries”.<sup>7</sup>

These are the dominant narratives in both scholarship and public debate about political satire, which celebrate satire as an art form that enables a more critical, politically aware electorate. Although in my earlier work I provisionally highlighted the possibility that satire could be co-opted by politicians, I have generally held to the narrative that it is a valuable form of political critique. This study acknowledges that satire may indeed provide political information and critical perspectives, but re-examines the validity of this dominant narrative by considering how satire’s critique is incorporated in and neutralised by that which it seeks to criticise. It does this by looking at politicians’ participation in satire.

As satire has grown in popularity and prominence in mainstream political discourse, so too has the number of politicians appearing on these programmes.<sup>8</sup> At times, this inclusion is unwelcome to the politician, who is ambushed by the satirist while out on the campaign trail, at a press conference or even on a casual walk. Australian satirical team

The Chaser were famous for such tactics, particularly for coming to press conferences dressed as serious journalists but then asking ridiculous or embarrassing questions. Other politicians have willingly participated in satire without realising it, appearing in what they thought were serious news programme interviews. This tactic was often used by Sacha Baron Cohen (performer of comic characters Ali G, Borat and Brüno), and also by Chris Morris of the British TV series *Brass Eye*. In one memorable example, David Amess, a Conservative Member of Parliament (MP), made a very earnest public service announcement on the programme about a (fake) drug called Cake. So seriously did he take the issue that, in Parliament, he asked the Secretary of State for the Home Office what was being done about Cake, seeking to make the drug illegal.<sup>9</sup>

Such instances are dwarfed, however, by the numbers of politicians who willingly and knowingly participate in satire and comedy programmes. Politicians are regularly interviewed by satirists on TV programmes like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, or they participate on comedy panel shows like the BBC's *Have I Got News For You* (*HIGNFY*) or The Chaser's *Media Circus*. Here, they are regularly taken to task or made to participate in games that directly mock them and their party, as in the 2014 appearance on *HIGNFY* of Nigel Farage, then Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Farage was asked to play a game that involved saying whether particular UKIP candidates were "fruitcakes" or "loonies".<sup>10</sup> In almost all instances, politicians play along and laugh at themselves, even in moments when they are ridiculed or embarrassed. They even participate in scripted sketches that satirise themselves, as in 2008 on *Saturday Night Live*, where then Republican presidential candidate John McCain performed a two-handed skit with comedian Tina Fey impersonating his vice-presidential running mate Sarah Palin.<sup>11</sup> Politicians also perform caricatures of themselves in non-scripted appearances, as in The Chaser's *Yes We Canberra* series in 2010, when the then Deputy Leader of the Australian Liberal Party, Julie Bishop, participated in a staring contest (with a garden gnome) that perpetuated her public image as a harsh, steely-eyed woman.<sup>12</sup>

To chronicle every appearance by a politician on a satire programme in the last decade would fill volumes as, for many, participation in satire and comedy has become part of political campaigning (Higgie 2015). Politicians have recognised that satire has a great deal of cultural capital. A rare study of motivations for going on satire programmes interviewed

British and Dutch politicians who had appeared on comedy panel shows *HIGNFY* and the Dutch equivalent, *Dit was het nieuws* (*DWHN*). Politicians reported that they did this to increase their visibility, to provide voters with more multi-faceted images of politicians in general, and to be seen as anti-elitist, just like “ordinary human beings”.<sup>13</sup> The study’s authors identified three major motivational repertoires for participation: strategic, indulgent and anti-elitist. Most politicians drew on the strategic repertoire, citing their appearance as an opportunity to increase personal visibility and to communicate political messages to a wider audience. They recognised that the programmes were viewed by a large and diverse audience: as one British MP put it, “if you want to get politics out to a wider audience, you’ve got to show politicians as being humorous, presentable, quick-witted and appealing”.<sup>14</sup>

Some politicians listed their motivation as self-indulgent, saying they participated because it was something fun to do. Another British MP said, “Parliament’s a rather boring, dull place, but it gives you a chance to go to exciting places. And the one thing about *HIGNFY*, it was exciting”.<sup>15</sup> The anti-elitist motivation was linked to a desire to come across as “ordinary human beings, with their ups and downs, their flaws and imperfections”.<sup>16</sup> A Dutch MP, for instance, felt that “voters also want to see what kind of man or woman the politician is”.<sup>17</sup> For those who drew on the anti-elitist repertoire, the authors report that “infotainment, comedy and other genres of popular culture of which *HIGNFY* and *DWHN* are part, offer sincere and appropriate ways to communicate with people”.<sup>18</sup> Though some believed that their image could be damaged if they said something stupid or failed to come across as funny, others appealed to the notion of being human or real, saying, “I think that even if they take the piss out of MPs, it might not do them any harm. It still humanises people. Get the sympathy vote” and also, “it can’t do any damage, it shows politicians as human”.<sup>19</sup>

Evidently, politicians acknowledge the importance of appearing like ordinary human beings to voters and see political satire and comedy as offering a useful tool in cultivating this more humanised public image. In her book on politics and popular culture, Liesbet van Zoonen argues that the appeal of “celebrity politicians” who participate in popular culture is “built on the impression that they are ‘just like us’ (a regular guy) and thus deserving to represent ‘us’”.<sup>20</sup> The celebrity politician then must be able to display competence or authenticity in both political and

private fields. They should project a “persona that has inside experience with politics but is still an outsider”—a public image that “builds on a unique mixture of ordinariness and exceptionality”.<sup>21</sup>

Though some studies (for example, Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Morris 2009) have shown that satire *about* politicians can result in negative perceptions of politicians, few have examined how the politician’s direct participation in satire may affect audience perceptions. One notable exception echoes many of van Zoonen’s arguments regarding the political and the private. Michael Parkin examined viewers’ responses to interviews of McCain and Obama on entertainment programmes during the 2008 presidential election. Interviews comprised purely of joking or personal anecdotes were not at all persuasive, while those most likely to persuade viewers mixed personal content with political details. He concluded, “This supports the contention that lighthearted stories make the candidate more likeable while political content gives viewers a substantive base on which to make their vote choices”, as exemplified in one interview with Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, where McCain’s support ratings significantly increased:<sup>22</sup>

Viewers came away liking McCain after seeing him play along with Stewart and make self-deprecating jokes about his temperament, but they also seemed to react to McCain’s discussion of serious issues, including his plans for the war in Iraq. McCain’s personal stories gave viewers a reason to like him without failing to provide compelling policy reasons for earning their vote.

Parkin also found that “low-interest viewers, even those from the opposition party”<sup>23</sup> were those most likely to be persuaded by such appearances. Thus, entertainment talk shows can help candidates “gain ground among non-supporters with limited political interest, who, because of their relatively weak preferences, are susceptible to persuasive appeals”.<sup>24</sup> This study demonstrated that, while politicians need to combine humour with political messages carefully, if they can strike that balance, they benefit.

### SATIRE, INCORPORATION AND COMMODIFICATION

In the extensive scholarship on politics and satire there is little on direct interaction between politicians and satirists and almost none on the idea of co-option. The only relevant work here is Laura Basu’s study of the

UK political satire *The Thick of It*, which explores “whether it is possible for dissenting voices to be heard without being incorporated into the mainstream and neutralised”.<sup>25</sup> She cites UK Labour Leader Ed Miliband using *The Thick of It* term “omnishambles” in Parliament to describe the Coalition Government’s budget. The word was then picked up by other politicians and its use covered in mainstream news reports. Given that “omnishambles” is used by *The Thick of It*’s “spin doctor” character Malcolm Tucker to describe a Labour politician, Miliband’s use of the term is remarkable. Basu notes, “It is true that there is nothing novel about politicians taking up catchphrases from popular culture, but there is something both extraordinary and ironic about the leader of a political party brandishing a phrase that was coined precisely to ridicule that party”.<sup>26</sup> *The Thick of It*, popular among the politicians and journalists it ridiculed, was consequently “swallowed by the political machine, becoming a celebrated part of the very apparatus it satirises”.<sup>27</sup> Basu argues that the critical force of satire is neutralised when it is taken up by that which it critiques, and uses Raymond Williams’s idea of incorporation and Foucault’s model of the apparatus to explain this process.

Williams’s theory of incorporation acknowledges that the hegemony, or the dominant, incorporates and even produces alternative or oppositional forms. Defining hegemony as a “lived system of meanings and values” that constitutes our “sense of reality”,<sup>28</sup> he does not present it as a fixed form of ideological domination or manipulation, but as an active social process that regulates, adapts and changes how we understand and operate in the world. Thus, for Williams, the dominant “is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in society”. These elements are not just tolerated by, nor do they simply exist alongside, the dominant. Rather, they are tied to it so that “the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture”.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Frank, Jim McGuigan, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter have all extended this argument, although they do not use Williams’s idea of incorporation. Frank, for instance, examines how anti-consumerist movements and rhetoric were absorbed into a new “rebellious” form of consumption where, from the 1960s, products were designed “to facilitate our rebellion against the soul-deadening world of products, to put us in touch with our authentic selves, to distinguish us from the mass-produced herd”.<sup>30</sup> McGuigan coins the term “cool capitalism” to explain this process, one that is “largely defined by the incorporation, and thereby



neutralisation, of cultural criticism and anti-capitalism into the theory and practice of capitalism itself".<sup>31</sup> Artistic movements, such as impressionism and cubism, first rejected by the academy, only to become accepted and celebrated forms of high art, demonstrate how the formation of dominant culture involves "a dialectic of refusal and incorporation".<sup>32</sup>

This dialectic of refusal and incorporation is illuminated by Williams's concept of the residual and the emergent in a hegemony. He regards a residual element as one which has been "effectively formed in the past, but ... is still active in the cultural process", such as the rural community among a cosmopolitan society, constituting values and practices that can be seen as "alternative or oppositional to urban industrial capitalism, though for the most part it is incorporated as idealisation or fantasy, or as an exotic—residential or escape—leisure function of the dominant order".<sup>33</sup> Emergent elements relate to new phases of the dominant culture, elements which were perhaps originally oppositional, such as the popular press, but soon became incorporated as established or accepted parts of the dominant culture.

In Williams's terms, popular satire can readily be seen as an emergent element, evolving to be an oppositional yet incorporated feature of the dominant mainstream political media. It has elements that are genuinely oppositional (often anti-capitalistic and sometimes even anti-democratic, although most popular mainstream satire is strongly pro-democracy); others that appear alternative or oppositional at first but which in fact reflect dominant narratives about politics (for example, that politicians are corrupt, and journalists biased); and others that are fairly mainstream and thus dominant (for example, satire's status as a valuable commercial product and its continuation of pro-democracy narratives).

Residual and emergent forms can of course exist alongside and within the dominant, even when they appear oppositional. Seemingly anti-consumerist rhetoric is often deployed to encourage consumption. Criticisms of the damage inflicted by mass production on Third World workers, animals and the environment are absorbed by the media and then marketed back to consumers in forms such as organic, small-scale, artisanal, free range or fair trade products. While this is not to say that ethical consumption practices are of no value, they can thus be seen as alternative forms of consumption that have been incorporated into the hegemony of capitalism.

Clearly, many of the celebrated satires being subjected here and elsewhere to academic study are commercial products. US programmes such

as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* are created and distributed by vast multinational media companies such as Viacom and Time Warner. To see them, viewers must pay for a subscription or cable service, or pay for each episode via licensed download outlets like iTunes. Even when some companies upload their episodes to official websites for viewers to stream for free, access is usually restricted according to a viewer's geographical location, and advertisements are often embedded in the streaming broadcast. Satires and political comedies that are free to air on commercial stations feature advertisements. Those that are free to air on public broadcasters with few advertisements are either subsidised or entirely funded through taxpayers' money. *The Thick of It*, *HIGNFY* and *The Chaser's* various series are all examples of publically funded satires. These satires are usually available on their broadcasters' official websites: for instance, the BBC offers its programmes through BBC iPlayer and the ABC through ABC iView. These programmes are usually available for a limited period of time and only if a viewer's IP address is within the website's designated geographical area. Such restrictions by both public and private media companies are designed to sell licensing rights to foreign broadcasting and subscription companies, augmenting the revenue their programmes can generate.

Most satires also come with merchandise, from t-shirts and mugs to books and DVDs. Even smaller-scale satires run by small companies or independent producers, such as UK magazine *Modern Toss* or podcast *The Bugle*, sell mugs, shirts and bags. Viewers are encouraged to express their political awareness and love of satire through consumption, making satire a part of the identity they project through what they drink out of, wear or read. This chapter focuses, however, not on the consumption of satire as a commercial product. Despite the close nexus between ideology and capital, I intend to focus on the ideological function of satire and what happens when it is incorporated in the sense of being co-opted by the political establishment.

### CONSIDERING POLITICAL CO-OPTION

Incorporation is not of course inherently negative. Ethical consumption, for example, can be seen as a positive emergent practice within the dominant. However, Heath and Potter point out that uncritical participation in countercultural movements can induce the belief that one is "jamming" the system and that, therefore, there is no need to take any other

action to reform what some regard as the exploitative conditions of capitalism or modern politics. They conclude that, at best, “countercultural rebellion is a pseudo-rebellion: a set of dramatic gestures that are devoid of any progressive political or economic consequences and that detract from the urgent task of building a more just society”.<sup>34</sup> It is not so much rebellion as the *appearance* of rebellion.

Extending this logic to political satire, satire consumers may well feel that mocking politicians is a sufficiently radical act and accordingly do not feel the need to participate in politics. Furthermore, satire can be seen as losing some of its radical potential as this process develops. Basu argues that when *The Thick of It* becomes incorporated by the very thing it critiques, “one of its possible functions as satire is short-circuited”.<sup>35</sup> I would argue still further that not only is the critique short-circuited, it is actually co-opted in a way that benefits the politician. This goes well beyond the idea of neutralising subversion through incorporation: in co-option, the subversion actually becomes part of the politician’s own image. The subversive elements of satire that appeal to so many people—good-humour, rebellion, honesty, ironic self-awareness, truth and so on—are taken and used to construct a more affable public image for the politician concerned. This co-option moves past standard attempts at public relations to make oneself more appealing to voters: if done successfully, the politician can co-opt the satire’s cultural capital *without even appearing to do so*.

An illustrative case is that of British Conservative MP (2015–) and former Mayor of London Boris Johnson. Even before his elevation to Foreign Secretary in 2016, his remarkable public image attracted a good deal of research, often focusing on this relationship between humour, the politician and authenticity. Famous for his scruffy appearance and charismatic, bumbling-clown routine, Johnson regularly uses humour in his public appearances and has appeared seven times on *HIGNFY*, on four occasions as host. Sonia Purnell’s biography of Johnson reports that *HIGNFY* audiences “thought him unusually game and somehow authentic; and that his monumental ineptitude when he became a guest presenter—fluffing his lines on the autocue and awarding points to the wrong team—was endearing”.<sup>36</sup> Such joking, she argues, saves Johnson from “sounding too right-wing, too ambiguous or too tough”, and his bumbling persona and use of personal anecdotes often result in voters overlooking his statements’ “lack of political content”.<sup>37</sup> One review observed that “Johnson has become his own satirist: safe, above all, in

the knowledge that the best way to make sure the satire aimed at you is gentle and unchallenging is to create it yourself".<sup>38</sup>

This is an example of humour as deliberate strategy. Another telling Johnson anecdote is recounted by journalist Andy McSmith<sup>39</sup>:

When he was culture spokesman he made some minor gaffe and one journalist phoned him up and got the whole buffoon spiel. He printed it word for word in his newspaper. What so amused us was that another lobby [political] journalist had also phoned him up and got exactly the same bumbling routine, word for word, and recorded it. The two routines were identical. Boris put in a very well rehearsed performance, both times – it shows it's all a construct.

Johnson himself has acknowledged the power of humour, calling it a "utensil that you can use to sugar the pill and to get important points across" and admitting, "I make what I think is a very cunning calculation. If you clown around, you may be able to creep up on people with your ideas, and spring them on them unexpectedly".<sup>40</sup>

Though Johnson cultivates his public persona by using humour outside comedy shows, Purnell points out that *HIGNFY* really established and cemented his enduring comic image, rendering him as a "man of the people, someone who appeared to belong to the masses".<sup>41</sup> In the relationship between satire and politicians, therefore, the notion of co-option needs to acknowledge the neutralisation of satirical critique through incorporation—rarely done in scholarship. It must also take account of the fact that the politician's self-interested motivation is often overlooked by the viewer if they successfully present themselves as having the traits that are so celebrated by satirists and comedy fans alike.

Scholars like Frank have pointed out that scholarship on co-option is often mistakenly based on the notion that the authentic counterculture possesses revolutionary potential and that the dominant, especially business, subverts that threat by mimicking and mass-producing fake counterculture. Heath and Potter argue further that the counterculture cannot be co-opted by consumerism because it was produced by and indeed *is* itself consumerism. They continually state, "no one is 'selling out' here, because there is nothing to sell out in the first place".<sup>42</sup>

If we apply these arguments to the co-option of satire, we simplify and ignore some of the important ways in which satire is now being used by both politicians and citizens. First, while satire may not offer politicians a

chance to co-opt a form of authentic satirical rebellion that would, without political or capital interference, have some truly revolutionary potential, it is able to construct an *image* of the authentic. Indeed, it is often seen as authentic truth-telling by its viewers, as is evidenced by the fact that Jon Stewart was often considered more trustworthy than many journalists. When politicians co-opt this halo-effect, they are not co-opting something authentic or “real”, but they *do* co-opt an image or idea that has cultural capital *as* authentic. Even if much of this popular and influential satire becomes implicated in the dominant, it has nonetheless significant cultural capital as counter-dominant—and that gives it power.

Second, and most important, to apply the “nothing to sell out” argument to satire, saying it cannot be co-opted because there is nothing to co-opt (it is already part of the system) implies that satire is functioning as it should and therefore does not need to change, or develop an awareness of the way it is being used by politicians, journalists and viewers. In fact, people do see satire as more than “just entertainment”. While this is not to say that satire has some inherent oppositional function that must be adhered to, audiences do *expect* subversive critique from it. It is widely seen to serve a critical function. Heath and Potter’s main critique of the counterculture is that those who participate in it uncritically view it as a *productive* rebellion, one that makes other forms of political action and reform unnecessary. If audiences of satire are to avoid this same fate, they increasingly need to be aware of how satirical critique can be incorporated or co-opted in ways that may be counterproductive to the function they expect of satire.

### CASE STUDIES

The following two examples of politicians participating in satire programmes serve to illustrate how co-option operates in particular circumstances. The first concerns UK Liberal Democrat Leader (2007–2015) and Deputy Prime Minister (2010–2015) Nick Clegg and his appearance on the British political comedy show *The Last Leg*. This example demonstrates that satire is often seen as a very honest, “anti-bullshit” medium and examines how public and media narratives around Clegg’s appearance show that a politician is enabled to embody these characteristics through participating in satire. The second example is US President (2009–2017) Barack Obama—a statesman who mastered the art of satirising himself—and an appearance on *The Colbert Report* in which he

took over Colbert's own regular segment, "The Word". This appearance is especially notable because it is an instance of the satirist completely handing over the vehicle of satire to the politician. The textual and discursive analysis of the skits and of the media/public response to them aims to illuminate the complex interplay between politicians and satirists, especially the possibility of co-option.

### *Not Talking Bullshit: Nick Clegg on The Last Leg*

On 30 January 2015, Nick Clegg appeared on Channel 4 comedy show *The Last Leg*.<sup>43</sup> This is hosted by Australian comedian Adam Hills and co-hosted by British comedians Alex Brooker and Josh Widdicombe. The show began life with a focus on disability and was described as "three guys with four legs talking about the week",<sup>44</sup> alluding to the fact that Hills and Brooker only have one leg each. Its initial premise was to be a variety show about the 2012 Paralympics, complementing Channel 4's more serious coverage, but it continued as a weekly show on topical news events and issues. Hills regularly delivers monologues ("rants") on the show, often with a very political focus. His catchphrase, "Don't be a dick", is frequently levelled at politicians. Comedians, journalists and politicians regularly appear as guests.

Clegg's ten-minute interview with Brooker resulted in significant coverage in mainstream news media and online social networking site Twitter. During the interview, Brooker made use of a "bullshit buzzer" that proclaimed the word "bullshit" whenever it was hit and he promised to hit it every time he felt that the Deputy Prime Minister was "talking bullshit" (see Fig. 3.1). Following this warning, Brooker informed his guest, "I know this is a comedy show. This isn't meant to be fun, I don't wanna see you laughing, the audience can laugh, but I'm not here to entertain you. I'm not your clown". Despite this, whenever Clegg felt the *questions* were bullshit, he playfully hit the buzzer too. Much dismayed, Brooker repeatedly objected that he was the one asking the questions and therefore only he could challenge responses. On balance, the buzzer was in fact mostly used by Brooker when Clegg stalled or failed to answer questions directly, or answered them in ways that Brooker felt were insincere.

In the interview, Clegg made several remarkably frank admissions, such as having wanted multiple times to slap his Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, during their years together in coalition. He also responded to the question, "Boris Johnson: statesman or twat?"



**Fig. 3.1** Nick Clegg (right) faces Alex Brooker and the bullshit buzzer. Still from *Alex Brooker & Nick Clegg Showdown!*, a YouTube rebroadcast of *The Last Leg*, 30 January 2015, posted 5 February 2015 (accessed 10 February 2015).

with “Bit more the latter”. At another point, Brooker referred to Clegg having reneged on his election promise never to raise university tuition fees by asking the Deputy Prime Minister, “On a scale of one to ten, with one being couldn’t give a toss, ten, literally you cannot sleep at night, how shitty do you feel about what you did with tuition fees?” Clegg stressed that he was not prime minister and had only 9% of MPs in the Coalition Government, but failed to evade the bullshit buzzer. Eventually, he admitted to a rating of 9.5 out of 10.

Clegg tried many times to interrupt Brooker in order to address the comedian’s assertion that he would not vote in the upcoming general election. He was finally allowed 30s to convince Brooker to vote, and tried asking what he cared about, only to have the comedian reply, “That’s a question to me” and that he wanted answers, not questions. Clegg then said, “If you care about how people are educated, if you care about the environment, if you care about taxes, if you care about the NHS [National Health Service], if you care about anything that affects our daily life, that is determined by politics, you should get stuck in and vote”. When Brooker responded by hitting the bullshit buzzer, Clegg

tried to appeal to the comedian's well-known love of Nando's, the fast-food chain, saying: "It's like going to Nando's and asking someone else to put in your order and then you get something you don't want. If you don't vote, you'll get a kind of government you don't want, so get stuck in there and vote. I'm not asking you to vote for me". Stopping Clegg again with the buzzer, Brooker nevertheless conceded, "Actually, tell you what, you almost had me at Nando's". At the end of the interview, Clegg asked Brooker if he would be voting and, to applause from the audience, the comedian admitted that he would. Clegg also applauded, declaring, "He said he's going to vote, did you hear that!"

The mainstream media covered this interview quite widely, focusing on Clegg's comments about Cameron, Johnson and his remorse over tuition fees. Comment came from the *Daily Mail* (Pleasance 2015), the *Guardian* ("Nick Clegg: I Wanted to Slap David Cameron" 2015), *The Huffington Post* (Elgot 2015), *Metro* (Westbrook 2015), *The Independent* (Saul 2015), *The Spectator* (Rifkind 2015) and the *Telegraph* ("I want to slap David Cameron" 2015). However, the response on Twitter to Clegg's appearance was much more remarkable. The hashtag #cleggleg was so popular that it trended third highest worldwide (*Worldwide Trends Sidebar* 2015). Although a few tweets decried the interview as a cynical publicity stunt, most were positive towards Clegg. Twitter users saw him as honest, genuine, an underdog and funny. The following comments illustrate the tone and narrative produced around Clegg's interview:

"Loved Clegg, found him hilarious! Nice when leaders are humanised, and you can see they're genuine people too!" (@RuleaTom 2015)

"I kind of love Nick Clegg now, love an underdog" (@ChristinaJaneH 2015)

"#isitokay to completely change my opinion on Nick Clegg after catching up on #thelastleg... Finally a Politician with a personality!" (@mummy\_of\_4\_ 2015).

"Watching #cleggleg again and loving #nickclegg even more. Showed himself to be real, funny and took his beating in good humour". (@TabithaWarley 2015).

"Just caught up on #thelastleg and I've gotta say #cleggleg made me think he's more like us than the politions [sic] who think there [sic] better than us". (@ChelleSuga 2015)



“@nick\_clegg you are too funny and intelligent to be in politics, very brave to go on the last leg”. (@pearl365 2015)

“As a Union shop steward I’ve got to say Nick Clegg has gone up massively in my estimation after watching a recording of Last Leg”. (@colinjury-orke777 2015).

What was it that caused people to respond so positively to Clegg’s appearance on *The Last Leg*? In an article for the *New Statesman*, host Adam Hills argued that Clegg “didn’t talk bullshit. More to the point, he wasn’t allowed to talk bullshit”, adding<sup>45</sup>:

In a world where the overwhelming feeling among voters, young and old, is that ‘they’re all as bad as each other’ and more often ‘they all talk such rubbish’ perhaps ‘not talking bullshit’ could be a revolutionary tactic for politicians. Because we want them to be real. We want them to talk to us. Actually to us. Maybe more politicians should use the bullshit buzzer when they prepare for interviews. Because people aren’t stupid. We know there are economic trials, we know there are harsh realities of Government, and we know sometimes tough times call for tough measures. We also know when someone is talking bullshit. And we appreciate it when they don’t.

Here, Hills repeats the Twitter narrative of Clegg being honest and real. In saying that Clegg wasn’t *allowed* to talk bullshit, he also reinforces the idea of the satirist as one who relentlessly calls the politician to account. It is impossible to say whether or not Clegg really did “stop talking bullshit”. Hills himself reflects on the possibility that certain comedic responses were prepared for the interview, saying, “I don’t know if Nick Clegg had planned to end with that [Nando’s] analogy, if he had it up his sleeve in case of an emergency, or whether through exasperation the Deputy Prime Minister blurted out the first thing that came into his head”. But, as he acknowledges, this is irrelevant because whatever it was, “it worked” and was accepted as “not bullshit”. Hills further observes that this resulted in a very sudden shift in people’s perceptions: for example with Clegg’s admission of regret about tuition fees, “the even more unthinkable happened—the audience applauded. And in its own way, so did Twitter. The guy who 30s earlier was being jeered for going back on his promise was now being lauded for feeling bad about it”<sup>46</sup>.

Of the negative tweets, many resorted to name-calling or insulting Clegg. The more thoughtful ones made statements about policy, about

the nature of coalition government and about political public relations. Examples are: “Good Television and good policy are NOT the same thing #cleggleg” (@thomasmbell23 2015); “Order for yourself at Nandos, then the staff decide to change the order because they went into a coalition with KFC #cleggleg” (@joble\_jabel 2015); and “Am shocked at #C4’s blatant attempt at manipulation of our young people by way of the #cleggleg stunt on last night’s episode of #Lastleg” (@Wirralo 2015). These tweets show a more critical approach to Clegg’s appearance on the show, demonstrating what could be considered as cynicism about politicians and the media, or healthy scepticism or simply awareness of how politicians attempt to craft their public image. Such tweets, however, were dwarfed in number by ones that cast Clegg as an ordinary, honest human being. Rather than simply “not talking bullshit”, Clegg’s success exemplifies how “performing a convincing political persona in these contexts [of televised political media] requires continuous and effortless shifts from anecdote to analysis, emotion to reason, polemic to moderation, personal to political, serious to humorous and back again”.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the simultaneously humorous and serious nature of satire offers politicians a valuable platform in which to make these shifts. The following example illustrates how the politician can successfully shift between humour and seriousness, this time with the satirist removed from the frame.

*Politicians at the Reins of Satire: Obama Delivers  
The Decree on The Colbert Report*

Although the phrase, “his own satirist”, was applied by Jonathan Coe to Boris Johnson, it could just as accurately be used to describe former President Obama. Obama embraced popular media and comedy more than any other politician, appearing on late-night television (*The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*), comedy and satire programmes (*The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Saturday Night Live*), online comedy videos (*Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis*) and podcasts (*WTF with Marc Maron*). He was regularly interviewed by comedians and satirists, but also participated in scripted skits, often satirising himself. His 8 December 2014 appearance on *The Colbert Report* partly illustrates this range. While Colbert as host does interview Obama, the President also performs a skit called “The Decree”, a presidential version of Colbert’s own segment, “The Word”.<sup>48</sup> “The Word” normally

features Colbert delivering an impassioned monologue while an on-screen text contradicts or ironically adds to the absurdity of his claims.

On this occasion, Obama “interrupts” (presumably by pre-arrangement) as Colbert is about to start “The Word”, saying he is sure he can do the comedian’s job and promising just to read what Colbert was going to read from the teleprompter. In a fascinating example of the satirist handing the reins of satire over to the politician, Colbert then exits the frame entirely, leaving Obama to perform alone in what both the President and on-screen text label “The Decree”. He delivers the sketch as if speaking the satirist’s words and uses the opportunity to poke fun at himself while advocating for more young people to sign up for healthcare insurance—an issue with which he was then concerned. He opens by saying, “As you know, I, Stephen Colbert, have never cared for our President. The guy is so arrogant, I bet he talks about himself in the third person”. The on-screen textual commentary adds, “In between those long pauses”. Once again, Obama demonstrates Coe’s insistence that the best way to ensure that satire is gentle is to deliver it yourself. The irony of calling himself arrogant for talking in the third person while actually talking in the third person allows him to address criticism of being aloof or arrogant by demonstrating a self-aware sense of humour. His reference to long pauses (an often-parodied trait of Obama’s speaking style), and other jibes about the rate at which he has aged since being elected in 2008 are personal attacks, not ones about politics or policy. The only negative reference to policy initiatives is when he describes the launch of the government healthcare website as “a little bumpy”, accompanied by the on-screen text, “Commander-In-Understatement” (a pun on Commander-in-Chief). These acknowledgements and personal jibes present Obama as able to take criticism and having a good sense of humour, avoiding any specific address or acknowledgement of criticisms about policy.

Predominantly, the skit seriously advocates for health care. Speaking as Colbert, Obama acknowledges that “Obamacare” (the controversial scheme favoured by him as Democrat President) is now law with some aspects that even Republicans like, such as enabling people under 26 to remain on their parents’ health insurance policy. Since young people can now get cover for less than a hundred dollars, he satirically points out that the only way to kill the scheme would be to make signing up unappealing to them. He jibes at the Republican Party, with the on-screen text explicitly casting them as heartless or dismissive when it comes to



**Fig. 3.2** Barack Obama hosts “The Decree” on *The Colbert Report*, 8 December 2014. Still from *President Obama Delivers The Decree*, a YouTube rebroadcast, posted 9 December 2014 (accessed 16 November 2015).

healthcare. Obama states that if (as was threatened) the Republicans were to repeal Obamacare, they would have to come up with their own healthcare policy: the text commentary suggests catchphrases such as “fracking the elderly” and “WalkItOff.gov” (see Fig. 3.2). These comments reflect narratives casting the Republicans as poor on environmental issues (the controversial mining technique of fracking), heartless (willing to “frack” the elderly) and old-fashioned (“walk it off” is a phrase often associated in pop culture with older generations who ignore or dismiss medical complaints).

As with Clegg’s appearance, “The Decree” was covered in many online publications and in newspapers, magazines and television broadcasts, such as *Bloomberg* (Talev 2014), *CNN* (Mercea 2014), *The Huffington Post* (“President Obama Takes Over on ‘Colbert Report’” 2014), *The Independent* (Moodley 2014), *New York Daily News* (Warren 2014), *Time Magazine* (Miller 2014), *Vanity Fair* (Robinson 2014) and *Variety* (“Watch: President Obama Takes Over ‘The Colbert Report’ for ‘The Decree’” 2014). The response on Twitter, however, was nowhere near as pronounced as for #cleggleg, although similar narratives did circulate regarding Obama being “funny” (@GavinWakeUpCall 2014; @pradeep\_aradhya 2014), “likeable” (@ClaudiaGiroux 2014), “a good sport” (@ClaudiaGiroux 2014) and “human” (@VoiceOfMorris 2014).

The sketch's most interesting aspect is the way Colbert hands over the vehicle of satire to his guest. The founding premise is that Obama thinks he can do Colbert's job and proceeds to do it. Although this is obviously a gimmick and the sketch has clearly been prepared for him, Obama is positioned as standing in for Colbert, a mouthpiece for Colbert's words. This, since his words are supposedly those of the satirist, can be seen as a kind of endorsement of Obama by Colbert. In addition, while the monologue may criticise him personally, Obama, by delivering this criticism himself (as Boris Johnson does), ensures that "the satire aimed at [him] is gentle and unchallenging".<sup>49</sup> Colbert's subsequent interview with Obama is somewhat more pointed—it includes ridiculing him as a Roman emperor who ignores the Constitution, with Colbert calling him "Baracus Maximus I"—but criticism is neutralised by Obama's laughing responses as he takes the quips in his stride and plays along.

#### CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBILITY OF BOTH CRITIQUE AND CO-OPTION

Satire can certainly offer political commentary; but can it provide a critique that is not automatically incorporated into the dominant, commodified as a product, co-opted by politicians or used to create a feeling of rebellion that disarms one's willingness to participate in politics? This question deserves more careful exploration by scholars, public intellectuals and viewers alike. One recent study claims that satire is "saving our nation", critiquing academic arguments that focus on the potentially negative effects of satire. It calls such narratives "the satire scare"<sup>50</sup> that accuses satire of creating cynicism, disengaging voters and over-simplifying politics. Such narratives do indeed fail to acknowledge the positive contribution of satire to political discourse, but it is equally necessary to avoid simplistic and overly celebratory claims that satire is "saving our nation" in the way it calls politicians to account.

Importantly, issues of co-option have not yet been raised in anti-satire studies. In raising and analysing them here, it is not my intention to increase negativity about satire in politics. Rather, I propose that championing of satire should be tempered by a willingness to consider how it is implicit in the political systems it criticises, how its critique may be (partially) neutralised by incorporation, and how its power and cultural capital may be co-opted by its targets. Satire is certainly not to be dismissed

as “merely part of the system”: the complex relationship between the two demands a more nuanced and critical approach that regards satire as an incorporated yet oppositional element of the dominant political discourse.

In summary, comedy is often presented as an honest medium: while “just a joke”, comedy also “tells it how it is”. Comedic licence grants both comedians and satirists more leeway to approach taboo topics than in serious discourse, and the result is often presented and accepted as bravely honest. While many popular narratives about politics are indeed perpetuated by satire, journalism and voters do the same independently of comedy, casting politicians as self-interested, elitist and corrupt figures. Unsurprisingly, politicians often complain about unfair and cynical comedy, calling—as British MP David Blunkett did—for broadcast satire and political comedy to be reclassified as current affairs in order to face more regulatory scrutiny (Sherwin 2013). However, politicians also benefit from playing along with the satirical approach. For scholars, therefore, the issue should not be whether a politician is truly being honest or sincere in such a frame—this is impossible to determine—but rather a focus on whether playing along and *appearing* to be “not talking bullshit” creates an image that disarms the viewer’s critical faculty, or whether the appropriation actually conveys some positive information. Paraphrasing Boris Johnson, does the viewer realise what medicine is being taken by this “sugaring of the pill”? And what does that signify for the genre of political satire? Terminology is important here. Given that co-option is sometimes associated with a complete “taking over” or “infiltrating” of a movement or practice,<sup>51</sup> the more nuanced term “incorporation” may promise more for future analysis. The stronger term that I have used here and elsewhere has value nevertheless in disrupting the predominant discourse in political satire scholarship. It needs to acknowledge that satire is not a pure form of truly radical subversion—or one that would be truly radical if it were not for the intrusions of politicians, journalists and commercialism generally. As an art form, satire has been commodified, a part of mainstream political media that often furthers mainstream values about freedom and democracy when it criticises politicians for being corrupt. Equally, however, satire is not so implicit in the system that it *is* the system, leaving nothing to be co-opted. Like other residual or emergent elements of a hegemony, satire possesses both oppositional and incorporated elements. To account

adequately for these diverse elements, more critical approaches, both satire's possibility for critique and its possibility of political co-option, must be acknowledged. Public and academic debates about satire should both take account of the way in which satire has already been incorporated into political media, and consider the implications of this for how we view politics and politicians who play along with satirists.

## NOTES

1. Since this chapter reviews a large body of literature, where a study is referred to as a whole, citations are made in-text, while specific citations appear in Notes. In both cases, for complete details, see the list of References.
2. Megan Boler and Stephen Turpin, "*The Daily Show* and *Crossfire*: Satire and Sincerity as Truth to Power", 2008, pp. 401–2.
3. Michael Gettings, "The Fake, the False, and the Fictional: *The Daily Show* as News Source", 2007, p. 16; and Kristen Heflin, "Laughter Helps Interpret the News", 2006, p. 31.
4. Sophia A. McClennen and Remy M. Maisel, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?: Mockery and American Politics*, 2014, p. 175.
5. Quoted in Chris Smith, "America Is a Joke", 12 September 2010.
6. Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2010, p. 246.
7. *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, 2011, pp. 42, 32.
8. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson, "The State of Satire, the Satire of State", 2009b, p. 6.
9. Jonathan Gray, "Throwing Out the Welcome Mat: Public Figures as Guests and Victims in TV Satire", 2009, p. 162.
10. Viewable at: "Nigel Farage Plays 'Fruitcake or Loony'—Have I Got News for You: Series 47, Episode 2—BBC One", 2004.
11. Viewable at: "McCain QVC Open—Saturday Night Live", 2008.
12. Viewable on "Yes We Canberra", 2010; originally broadcast by Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).
13. Kuik Coleman, Anke Stephen and Liesbet van Zoonen, "Laughter and Liability: The Politics of British and Dutch Television Satire", 2009, p. 662.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 657.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 662.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 657.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 662.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 659, quoting British MPs.

20. *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Pop Culture Converge*, 2005, p. 82.
21. Van Zoonen, p. 84.
22. Michael Parkin, *Talk Show Campaigns: Presidential Candidates on Daytime and Late Night Television*, 2014, p. 149.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
25. Laura Basu, “British Satire in *The Thick of It*”, 2014, p. 90.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
28. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977, p. 110.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 113–4.
30. Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, 1997, p. 229.
31. Jim McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism*, 2009, p. 38.
32. McGuigan, p. 50.
33. Williams, p. 122.
34. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, 2006, *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, p. 69.
35. Basu, p. 97.
36. Sonia Purnell, *Just Boris: The Irresistible Rise of a Political Celebrity*, 2011, p. 177.
37. Purnell, pp. 3, 212.
38. Jonathan Coe, “Sinking Giggling into the Sea”, 2013.
39. Purnell, pp. 245–6.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 235.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
42. Frank, p. 7; Heath and Potter, p. 178.
43. “Alex Brooker and Nick Clegg Showdown!”, 2015. All quotations are from this video.
44. *The Last Leg*, 2015.
45. Adam Hills, ““The Unthinkable Happened”: Comedian Adam Hills Reviews Nick Clegg’s Performance on *The Last Leg*”, 2015.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Liesbet van Zoonen, Stephen Coleman and Anke Kuik, “The Elephant Trap: Politicians Performing in Television Comedy”, 2011, p. 146.
48. “President Obama Delivers The Decree” 2014. All quotations are from this video.
49. Coe 2013.
50. McClennen and Maisel, p. 175.
51. E.g. by Heath and Potter 2006, and by Frank 1997.



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