

methuen | drama

JAMES GRAHAM

PLAYS: 2

THIS HOUSE

THE VOTE • THE ANGRY BRIGADE

MONSTER RAVING LOONY



B L O O M S B U R Y

James Graham

Plays: 2

This House: 'It recreates, with startling vividness, the madness of life in the Westminster village during five action-filled years . . . Above all, the play unlocks a whole era.'

Guardian

The Angry Brigade: 'Graham is a funny writer on serious topics, and the script has his usual mix of ambition and levity. There's a thriller-ish hunt for the criminals in the first half, while the second gallops through direct action, pop-culture parodies, political theory and messy relationships. Small personal moments manage to be both bathetic and heart-wrenching.'

Independent

The Vote: 'Graham . . . not only catches an entertaining sense of the here and now . . . but more poignantly evokes the tide of history that turns us all, if we act on our prerogative, into bit-players in an epic drama.'

Daily Telegraph

Monster Raving Loony: 'James Graham's plays mine political history in order to comment on the current state of the nation . . . [But] instead of straight biography, we get a bonkers essay in nostalgia . . . This is an intriguing look at the mechanisms of democracy . . . It's packed with smart ideas about the theatricality of politics and makes an attractive case for Sutch's enduring significance.'

Evening Standard

James Graham won the Catherine Johnson Award for the Best Play 2007 for *Eden's Empire*. His previous plays include *Albert's Boy* (recipient of a Pearson Playwriting Bursary), *Little Madam* (Finborough), *Tory Boyz* (Soho Theatre), *A History of Falling Things* (Clwyd Theatr Cymru), *The Man* (Finborough), *The Whisky Taster* (Bush), *Sons of York* (Finborough), *Bassett* (National Theatre Connections), *This House* (National Theatre), which won Best Play at the Evening Standard Awards, *The Angry*

Brigade (Paines Plough/Theatre Royal Plymouth), *The Vote* (Donmar Warehouse) and *Monster Raving Loony* (Theatre Royal Plymouth/Soho Theatre). Other work includes *Finding Neverland* – a musical with music and lyrics by Gary Barlow, *Coalition* for Channel 4 and the screenplay for the film $x + y$.

JAMES GRAHAM

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**This House
The Angry Brigade
The Vote
Monster Raving Loony**

with an introduction by the author

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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Bassett (in National Theatre Connections 2011)
Eden's Empire
A History of Falling Things
This House
The Man
Tory Boyz
The Whisky Taster
Graham Plays: 1
*(A History of Falling Things, Tory Boyz,
The Man, The Whisky Taster, Sons of York)*

James Graham Chronology

- 2005 *Albert's Boy* (Finborough Theatre, London: recipient of a Pearson Playwriting Bursary)
- 2006 *Eden's Empire* (Catherine Johnson Award for Best Play)
- 2007 *Little Madam* (Finborough Theatre, London)
- 2008 *Tory Boyz* (Soho Theatre)
Sons of York (Finborough Theatre, London)
- 2009 *A History of Falling Things* (Clwyd Theatr Cymrum, Wales)
- 2010 *The Whisky Taster* (Bush Theatre, London)
The Man (Finborough Theatre, London)
Huck (Chipping Norton Theatre and national tour)
Relish (National Youth Theatre)
- 2011 *The Tour Guide* (Edinburgh Fringe Festival)
Bassett (National Theatre Connections)
- 2012 *This House* (Cottesloe, National Theatre, London: Evening Standard Award for Best Play)
- 2014 *The Angry Brigade* (Theatre Royal Plymouth/Paines Plough)
- 2015 *The Vote* created with Josie Rourke (Donmar Warehouse)
- 2016 *Monster Raving Loony* (Theatre Royal Plymouth/Soho Theatre)

Introduction

Prior to writing *This House* for the National Theatre in 2012, I'd spent five revelatory years at the little Finborough in Earl's Court, London, writing overly large and populated plays for that tiny room above a pub. There was a play about the 1950s Suez Canal Crisis, one set during the 1970s Winter of Discontent, one about a 12-year-old Margaret Thatcher going on an adventure with imaginary friends.

As a twenty-something wannabe writer I'm sure I didn't deliberately set out to write historical plays, believing probably that's what 'grown-up' playwrights did, once you'd earned your stripes. It just so happened that the researching of one event would normally throw up another story I thought was cool. Cool to me, anyway. And that would become the next idea.

This was the roll-up-your-sleeves world of fringe theatre where the bigger the play you wrote, the more work you had to do to raise money yourself, source props and costumes, build and paint the sets, and sell tickets. And it was during the research for the Thatcher show, *Little Madam*, that I first heard a story that moved, surprised and horrified me.

#spoileralert – if you don't want the intricacies of 1970s parliament unveiled here then maybe read the play first.

How did Margaret Thatcher get into power in 1979 and change the course of our national history? The election, yes, but why was the election called? A Vote of No Confidence in James Callaghan's Labour administration. But what's that? (This is me skipping from book to book, by the way, slightly before the days when you'd have easy access to the internet at home and Wikipedia was properly a thing. Imagine?)

A Vote of No Confidence is Parliament's way of forcing a government out of office if over half of the House want you gone. The opposition called one in March 1979, and Labour

lost. They had to go to the polls in forced and unfavourable circumstances, and 18 years of Conservative power ensued.

I knew most of that. I didn't know the Commons vote that changed history was won by only one. One single MP's vote, out of over six hundred cast. Surely it wasn't possible, I thought, for there to be a story surrounding where that 'one' missing vote came from . . . ?

Doctor Alfred Broughton, the Member for Batley and Morley, and his absence from Parliament due to illness – that one Labour vote the government needed to survive – first inspired a radio play; *How You Feeling, Alf?* (I know, a very whimsical radio-drama-like title). But the more I learned about the lead up to that incredible night of No Confidence, often dubbed one of the most dramatic nights in the House of Commons history by those who chart such things, the more I couldn't believe what I found. A hung parliament where chaos ensued, actual blood was split, and an ancient system came under its greatest strain; the closest it has ever come to collapse.

When the first hung parliament *since* that one arrived in May 2010, and the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition became a new and bizarre reality, it gave me the impetus to knock on the door of the National Theatre and just 'see'. I had imagined in the weeks that followed the election there might be a line of national treasures lining up outside Nicholas Hytner's office with way more experience than me, pitching their own response to events, and I consequently felt not a little presumptuous doing so. I was underestimating the openness, kindness, patience and thirst for a risk by Nick, the literary manager Sebastian Born, and his associate Ben Power in being willing to give me a shot.

The problem was it started off being impossible to research this play.

I knew I wanted it to be set in the offices of the whips. I had no desire to portray the view of the leaders at the top, I

wanted the dirty, mucky, grubby world of those turning the wheels in the engine room. But parliamentary whips have a code of conduct whereby they reveal nothing, publish nothing, give no interviews, take their secrets – and they are the ones with Parliament’s secrets – with them to their graves.

When Gyles Brandreth famously broke ranks and published a book, *Breaking the Code*, shining a light on some of the dark goings on amongst the whips in the 1990s, he received a note on the day of publication that contained only a ‘black spot’ on a card – a symbol that he had betrayed an ancient tradition, and was banished.

Some facts, anecdotes and stories could be pieced together through archives – Jack Weatherill’s collection of scribbles and notes held in a dusty room in Canterbury (including a particularly revelatory bit of arithmetic jotted down hastily on the night of the confidence vote) – though nothing beats face-to-face interviews.

Possibly because time had passed since the 1974–79 parliament, as had many of the characters responsible, there was a gradual relaxation towards me following an infinite amount of letter writing and phone calling. Joe Ashton, the former Labour MP for Bassetlaw and author of his own inspired-by-whips office play, was one of the first to invite me up to his Sheffield home. This led on to lunch with Bruce Grocott, formerly the member for Lichfield and Tamworth in Portcullis House. Which then followed an accidental passing in the corridor of the inimitable Ann Taylor, formerly of Bolton West who was to become one of the most important contributors to the show. Sir George Young, in the 70s a young junior Tory whip – Leader of the Commons when I met him. None of this was through anything other than just asking, and then asking those I asked to ask more people to help me. And I’m very grateful.

All of which led me to the living room in Wakefield of Walter Harrison – the most formidable Westminster figure

that you've probably never heard of, but a legend in the corridors of power. Believed to be the most intimidating whip ever to have occupied the role, Tony Blair once confirmed that Harrison was the only man he'd ever been afraid of, and sat opposite him even in his 90s I can see why. But there was a mischievous sparkle and unmistakable warmth to him that vitally informed the role I wrote for him.

In an increasingly polarized, angry and polemical political climate defined by its disunity and factionalism, both here and across the world, his deep and complicated friendship with Jack Weatherill, his Tory counterpart, which – following that fateful night of the confidence vote that the whole play leads up to – lasted long into retirement, deeply affected me, and grew to become something of the spine of the show.

I don't think you're ever particularly conscious of trends growing in your plays as you go along, but both *This House* and *The Vote* bear out, I suppose, my geeky interest in processes – how things happen. Leaving the audience to answer the 'why'.

The 2015 general election that followed the hung outcome in 2010 was unique in that, following the Fixed Term Parliament Act, it was possible for the first time ever to know years in advance the exact date of the polling day, rather than it being the prerogative and the whim of the sitting Prime Minister. Which meant, uniquely, it was possible to plan in advance for something that night . . .

I was rehearsing a show about surveillance called *Privacy* with Josie Rourke at the Donmar Warehouse in spring 2014 when she began looking ahead. Josie has an infectious passion for theatre that responds inventively and urgently to current affairs, but for as wide and popular an audience as possible. It was during a lunch break with the exceptional casting director Alastair Coomer (who coincidentally cast *This House* before moving to join Josie at the Donmar) that we began talking about how you might create an 'event' live on election night – a theatrical response, rather than

leaving it entirely to the pundits on television to make sense of events.

What about setting a play in a polling station, with a conveyor belt of actors passing through the space playing voters? What about setting the play at the exact date and time that it was being staged – say the final 90 minutes of polling during the *actual* final 90 minutes of polling? What if actually you could broadcast it from the theatre live into people’s homes during the last 90 minutes of polling, leading up to the exit poll announcement at 10pm and the declaration of the next government?

There were a lot of ‘ifs’ without knowing how possible any of it was – but through Josie’s determination, belief and ingenuity, we found ourselves a year later with a cast of over 40 actors including Mark Gatiss, Catherine Tate, Nina Sosanya and Judi Dench, with Channel 4 as our broadcasting partner, beaming our play live on election night into people’s homes.

There were many unique challenges (‘opportunities’, I kept trying to call them, to myself, often at 3am in the morning during the most intense working period of my life) to this project. Writing while you cast and casting while you write – the quick script turnaround meaning characters would change from day to day depending on who was available and vice versa (and Alastair Coomer alongside Josie Rourke did a forensic job of exactly matching the gender and ethnic make-up of the Lambeth constituency to the cast. This was a play about representation and democracy after all). Other challenges – how do you move the actors through the tiny Donmar Warehouse backstage area, and how do you film it? But the biggest issue was ‘time’. A play can run over and it matters not a bit, but this show, this show had to come down on the bongs of 10pm exactly. The television broadcast wouldn’t wait; there was an exit poll to declare. And because we had set the play in real time – no scene breaks, no cuts – it was like setting some balls rolling at 8.30pm when the red

light on the cameras came on and hoping they crossed the line at the exact right point 90 minutes later.

During two weeks of previews we all became a little obsessed about time, as well as the other elements you're continually focused on. Preview One came down around 10.04.19, Preview Five came down around 9.59.28. We invited the audience in the theatre into the game of it, with a clock on the wall ticking towards its inevitable conclusion.

I've never been more impressed with an acting company who got behind the challenge like it was a dragon to slay. And though it sounds like one of those theatrical legends that verges on a lie – I swear to you, we never hit 10pm exactly during any preview, but come election night, with the cameras rolling, I'll never forget standing at the back of the circle with Josie Rourke, iPhone in hand, as the last line was said and seeing 9.59 flick to 10.00 exactly on the first bong of Big Ben. And yes, it's possible that both Josie and I burst into tears. Possibly through exhaustion after the last four weeks of madness, possibly out of pride for an acting company that collectively managed to essentially and effortlessly control time like wizards.

We rushed backstage and I stood on the spiral staircase in front of the company to read aloud the exit poll. A Conservative majority. I don't think any of us expected that . . .

Since that particular moment, politics has become kind of crazy; the challenge for theatre seems almost to be how to match it in terms of drama. How to reflect the national mood, if that is even possible. I've always been something of an optimist when it comes to our democratic systems and the people running them – but that optimism and hope becomes more and more tested. The prevalent mood amongst communities and people in this country seems to be an increasingly very simple, ancient one – anger.

The Angry Brigade was built with director James Grieve and the amazing Paines Plough company in collaboration with

the Plymouth Drum, before moving to the Bush Theatre in 2015, also during the general election. I had last been at the Bush five years earlier on *The Whisky Taster*, also directed by James. Much like *The Vote*, I guess it was something of an experiment in form. Two separate theatrical styles applied to the two different halves of the play – one dramatizing the police doing the chasing, the other depicting the group of ‘anarchists’ trying to avoid being caught.

The case of these four counter culture revolutionaries, or anarchists, or extremists, whatever you want to call them depending on wherever it is you stand, is one of those exciting real life stories you come across which when you do you can’t believe you never came across it before. A cell of four young intellectuals (allegedly) setting bombs off across London – the Albert Hall, the Post Office tower – to bring down the Conservative government of the day and establish a new socio-political order leading to, upon their capture, the longest trial in English legal history. The parallels to today – an increasingly politicized youth in the face of growing generational inequality through austerity; disillusion with established party politics; the constant looming threat of ‘terror, all made it a seemingly resonant time to explore.

Monster Raving Loony, however, was an appropriately less clear-headed prospect. I knew I wanted to tackle David Sutch – the working-class Harrow boy who affected his own noble title, invented his own party, dressed up in provocatively garish attire in order to stand (and fail) in more elections than anyone else in history. The idea of trying to tell his story through the popular comic styles of the time, reflecting both his – and Britain’s – search for a voice, an identity post-war emerged slower. And by the time we reached workshop stage, I remember the director memorably summing up to the small crowd who came to test it out: ‘We came here to establish if it *could* be done, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it *should*.’

Well – we did; inviting the audience into a communal space (ostensibly a working men’s club, the type I used to go when I was younger while my mum worked behind the bar) by creating a community between them and the live performers.

This House

This House had its world premiere at the Cottesloe Theatre on 25 September 2012. The cast and creative team were as follows:

Labour Whips

Michael Cocks	Vincent Franklin
Walter Harrison	Philip Glenister
Bob Mellish	Phil Daniels
Joe Harper	Richard Ridings
Ann Taylor	Lauren O'Neil

Tory Whips

Humphrey Atkins	Julian Wadham
Jack Weatherill	Charles Edwards
Fred Silvester	Ed Hughes

The Members' Chorus

Clockmaker/Redditch/Nuneaton/ Peebles/Ensemble	Gunnar Cauthery
Batley/Ensemble	Christopher Godwin
Walsall N/Plymouth Sutton/ Speaker 2/Ensemble	Andrew Havill
Coventry SW/Lady Batley/ Ensemble	Helena Lymbery
Paddington S/Chelmsford/ S Ayrshire/Henley/Ensemble	Matthew Pidgeon
Speaker 1/Liverpool Edgehill/ Ensemble	Giles Taylor
Bromsgrove/Abingdon/Paisley/ Fermanagh/Ensemble	Tony Turner
Esher/Ensemble	Rupert Vansittart

When the production transferred to the Olivier Theatre on 23 February 2013, Reece Dinsdale took over from Philip Glenister and David Hounslow from Richard Ridings.

<i>Director</i>	Jeremy Herrin
<i>Designer</i>	Rae Smith
<i>Lighting Designer</i>	Paule Constable
<i>Music</i>	Stephen Warbeck
<i>Choreographer</i>	Scott Ambler
<i>Sound Designer</i>	Ian Dickinson

Characters

Labour Whips

Michael Cocks, *forties*, Yorkshireman

Walter Harrison, *fifties*, Yorkshireman

Bob Mellish, *fifties*, Londoner

Joe Harper, *fifties*, Yorkshireman

Ann Taylor, *twenties*, Lancashire

Tory Whips

Humphrey Atkins, *fifties*, Berkshire

Jack Weatherill, *fifties*, Worcestershire

Fred Silvester, *thirties*, London

The roles opposite can be played either by an ensemble of actors, ranging from one extreme (one actor per MP) to the other (a small handful playing all parts). Invention is encouraged.

The Members' Chorus

Bromsgrove
Woolwich West
Rochester and Chatham
Paddington South
Esher
Belfast West
Belfast North
Armagh
Fermanagh
Western Isles
Merioneth
Caernarfon
Peebles
Walsall North
Ilford North
Thurrock
Coventry North West
Redditch
Chelmsford

Plymouth Sutton
Abingdon
Batley
Paisley
South Ayrshire
Henley
Lowestoft
Stirlingshire West
Liverpool Edge Hill
Welwyn and Hatfield
St Helen's
Coventry South West
Newham North East
West Lothian
Rushcliffe
Ashfield
Perry Bar
Birmingham
Stechford
Mansfield
Glasgow Garscadden

The Strangers' Gallery

Speaker
Clerk
Clockmaker
Teller
Serjeant at Arms
Lady Batley
Paramedic
Barber

This House is a fictional account which has been inspired by true events. The incidents, characters and time lines have been changed for dramatic purposes. In some cases fictitious characters and incidents have been added to the plot and the words are those imagined by the author. The play should not be understood as biography or any other factual account.

A Note on Staging

The play is set in the Palace of Westminster.

The main locations are the Government Whips' Office and the Opposition Whips' Office, located either side of the Members' Lobby.

The Members' Chorus sit in the House of Commons Chamber, set to one side or at the back. The Members stand and assume the part of the MP for their particular constituency when called by the Speaker, who sits in the Speaker's Chair observing the action.

Prologue

The Westminster Clock Tower.

The small anteroom behind the famous Big Ben clock face, looming large and high.

Michael Cocks stands, back to us, staring out through the frosted panels of the clock.

The Division Bell rings.

The **Speaker** rises from his chair in the Commons Chamber.

Speaker Order. ORDER!

The Members' Lobby. Members are running around the palace in a panic – announced, as always, by the Speaker as they enter.

Speaker The Member for Bromsgrove! The Member for Woolwich West!

Bromsgrove Oi, Bill. (*Whistles.*) Bill, what's the bother?

Woolwich West He's bloody going, i'nt he?! Off to see the Queen.

Bromsgrove No, bollocks, says who?

Woolwich West Harrison.

Bromsgrove . . . *Walter?* Oh no . . .

Woolwich West Some time today. That's it, another bastard election. (*Goes.*)

Bromsgrove Oh, shit-a-fucking-brick, no – (*Goes to run.*)

Speaker The Member for Rochester and Chatham!

Rochester and Chatham Is it true?

Bromsgrove You should know, he's your leader, love. (*Goes.*)

Rochester and Chatham Oh don't be like that. Terry!

Speaker The Member for Paddington South!

Paddington South *enters, holding a red ministerial box.*

Rochester and Chatham Well?

Paddington South ARSE!

Rochester and Chatham It's true, then?

Paddington South Bloody typical, the Labour lot catch wind of it first and we're in ruddy *power*. Shows who your friends are. Christ!

Rochester and Chatham Look, the Deputy.

Paddington South Jack!

Jack Weatherill, *the Conservative Deputy Whip, enters. He wears an incredible suit.*

Weatherill Afternoon.

Paddington South Is it true, he's calling it today?

Weatherill I understand your concern –

Rochester and Chatham Concern?

Weatherill – and rest assured, both of you, when there's news, *if there's news*, it will be announced through the usual channels. Please excuse me. (*Goes.*)

Paddington South (*calling after*) The usual channels? Come on, Walter Harrison is already spreading it around like shit on a field! How can a Labour whip be announcing it before the Tories? Jack?

The Government Whips' Office, to one side of the Members' Lobby.

One main office with an adjoining door to another, off. Desks, sofas, TV, safe, drinks cabinet.

Humphrey Atkins *sits calmly, listening to classical music.*

Weatherill *enters.*

Weatherill Chief. Bit of a to-do out there. (*Begins clearing out his drawers.*)

Atkins I imagine so, yes. Just enjoying the calm before the storm.

Speaker The Member for Paddington South!

Atkins Enter.

Paddington South *knocks on the door. Atkins gets to his feet now and begins to ‘pack away’ with real purpose, emptying his (black) ministerial briefcase, even shredding paper. Throughout this, the lights occasionally dim and flicker, due to power shortages.*

Paddington South I don’t believe it, Chief – *bloody hell.* Finally, I finally get my hands on one of these. (*His box.*)

Weatherill Please, there’s a good chap, / this really isn’t the . . .

Paddington South But I won’t be coming back you know. The seat’ll go red this time, you just watch. It’s anarchy out there, blue-arsed flies.

Atkins That’s why they call it a snap election, Nicholas. It isn’t a ‘bend slowly until it gives’ election, it isn’t a ‘stir gently over a medium heat, reduce to simmer and then serve’ election. It’s a ‘snap’. Quick and painless, off like a plaster –

The phone rings.

Paddington South Painless?! Hah!

Atkins (*answering*) Whoever you are, yes, it’s true, clear your desk. (*Phone down.*) A key component in the element of surprise is the element of surprise.

Clerk *knocks.*

Weatherill Come in.

The Clerk enters, and during the remaining dialogue Atkins removes everything from his black box and hands it to the Clerk, as well as keys, signing everything away.

Paddington South Dammit, what a rotten bloody system this is, the whole thing. God!

Atkins *(as he de-junks)* Cruel as it may seem at this present juncture, this ‘rotten system’, the foundation stone of democracy, is one of the few things this country has manufactured and exported that *hasn’t* been sent back. Envied the world over for its simplicity. One person, one vote, sending one member, to represent them in one house. And the party with more warm bodies than any other, *governs*. As one.

Paddington South Yes, but this time they won’t be sending *me* back, that’s what I’m saying!

Weatherill *(warmly)* You’ll be fine, Nick. Chin up.

Atkins *(carrying on)* And this building, this hallowed earth upon which we stand, this mother of all parliaments – yes she’s showing her age, but like all good ‘mums’, she’s showing it with dignity and with grace – *(To Clerk, taking back some keys.)* hang on – this House serves to remind us that we are but its temporary trustees, Nicholas. *(Removing his key fob.)* This is mine. *(Handing back the keys.)*

Clerk *begins retrieving Paddington South’s red case – emptying it, keys, signature.*

Atkins And when Parliament dissolves at 5 p.m. today, I am no longer the Member for Spelthorne, nor Jack the Member for Croydon North East, nor you the Member for Paddington South. But Paddington, sadly, will go on without you. It is a lesson we all must learn. Earth, and dust. *(Lightly touching his black case on the table.)* Hope to see you again, old friend.

Clerk *exits, taking with him the two cases.*

The Opposition Whips’ Office – the other side of the Members’ Lobby.

Bob Mellish, *Labour Chief Whip*, has also begun to pack up, picking from sausage and chips wrapped in newspaper as he goes.

Speaker The Member for Bromsgrove!

Bromsgrove (*entering, sees Mellish packing*) Oh, Jesus Christ.

Mellish No, it's Bob actually, but the likeness is uncanny. Saveloy?

Bromsgrove Chief, what's going on?

Mellish Look I know as much as you do, Terry; where the bleeding 'ell is Walter – ?

Walter Harrison, *Labour Deputy Whip*, bursts in, closing the door behind him.

A beat. Waiting . . .

Harrison raises his arms in victory, cheering. **Mellish** then follows suit.

Harrison WHEY!

Bromsgrove Oh no.

Mellish We are on our way *back*! Come on! (*Continues packing away, with Harrison now.*) Where are the others? Where's Cocks?

Harrison Michael? Dunno.

Bromsgrove Yeah, alright for you, innit? Not defending a tiny majority, are you? Eighteen hundred, me! What are you, Walter – Wakefield? Ha ha. Wake – Kill for Wakefield, bloody hell. Couldn't have given me an effing mining town, could they? Mill town, salt of the earth, no. And they've only gone and merged me with Redditch, now. *Redditch*, for God's sake; that's killed it.

Harrison Bugger off; Redditch? It's manufacture, / industry, workers –

Bromsgrove Oh, bollocks, honestly Walter, that's . . . *needles*, that's all they make, that's all they bloody well make in Redditch. Needles. *That's it.*

Harrison (*at the chips*) Oi, what's this, no mushy peas? Travesty.

Mellish Oh give over, 'mushy peas'.

Bromsgrove Chaps –

Harrison Like having a bath with no bubbles.

Mellish You uncouth Northern brute, you –

Bromsgrove I'M BEING SERIOUS! . . .

They'll boot me out. 'Cause I did what I was told, towed the party line, stayed loyal.

Harrison Do you ever look up at the sky? Terry? Ever watch the way birds move en masse? Their ability to survive lies in the fact they all imperceptibly, instinctively, turn together. On our own, we're nowt. That's the job of the whips. The job is to transmit in a way that is undetectable to the eagles circling above, the job is to communicate the instruction '*Turn*'. 'Turn now.' 'Turn all of us, together, now, and we might make it. We might just bloody well make it.'

Bromsgrove I hate birds. They shit on you from a great height.

Harrison You'll be alright. And if not, there's other elections, other seats.

Beat.

Bromsgrove (*nods, turning sadly; stops, turning back*) Oh what's the point of it all . . . ? Eh . . . ? What's the bloody . . . *point?*

He exits.

Mellish Don't worry about him, he'll be OK.

Harrison Yeah. Although, no, he won't be, will he, but . . .

Mellish That's life.

Harrison That's politics.

Harrison *leaves the Opposition office, stepping into:*

Members' Lobby. Bumping into Weatherill, coming the other way. They don't shake.

Weatherill Ah, Walter. The 'man of the hour'.

Harrison Jack. I see you're off to inspect the troops. (*At his large notebook.*) My oh my, look at this, that's a new one, what is it, leather? Bit big, though.

Weatherill Oh, do you think? I rather like it, substantial, plus the lines are not too thick.

Harrison (*taking a small notebook from his back pocket*) Here, look, see? Small and simple.

Weatherill (*taking his, flicking*) Hmm, yes, 'old reliable'. Well, not without its charms, easily accessible I suppose, but where's that sense of authority, Walter? The *weight* of information.

Harrison Members see a big fat thing like that, they think you're compensating for something.

Weatherill Ah, well. You believe what you like. I must get on.

Harrison So will I still be dealing with you, do you think, after the big heave-ho, the old switcheroo?

Weatherill I'll go where I'm put, Walter, of course; and 'switcheroo' – come off it, you know we're staying in. I mean / yes, of course –

Harrison Staying in, have you / seen the polls?

Weatherill It will be tight. Yes, I have seen the polls, Walter; we're in the lead in the polls –

Harrison Only just; nowt in it.

Weatherill In dark times, the electorate sticks with the devil it knows.

Harrison Ay up, they're only dark because you can't keep the lights on! I mean surely the most basic test of a government is that they can keep the blinking lights on, Jack?

Weatherill Still, after all this, perhaps you'll finally get to be the *Chief Whip* now, 'Deputy'.

Harrison Well. Perhaps you will be *your* side, an' all, 'Deputy'. (*Makes to go.*)

Weatherill And, erm. How *did* you find out so quickly? The election?

Harrison I don't kiss and tell, Jack. Should know that about me by now.

Weatherill (*beat; holding his hand out*) Walter.

Harrison (*shaking it*) Jack.

Up in the Clock Tower. Cocks is still facing the clock, staring out.

Clockmaker *arrives, climbing up the stairs, into the room, jangling keys.*

Clockmaker 'Bout done, are we, Mr Cocks? Only they'll be coming up to turn the light off.

Cocks Oh. Yeah, no. Course. Ta for letting me, uh . . .

Clockmaker That's alright. My predecessor, he left me a note. 'Mr Cocks goes up the clock, no questions asked.'

I thought it were a nursery rhyme at first. (*Beat. Pointing up.*) What's the deal with the light, anyway?

Cocks The Ayrton Light, above the clock. Shines when Parliament is seated; put out when it rises. Lot of funny rules and traditions here, you'll start to learn.

Clockmaker Londoner all my life, me, never even knew you could stand behind that thing.

Cocks Most famous face in the world. Never stopped ticking, you know, since it first, like . . . Even during the war, the Blitz, bombs raining down. Stubbornly, just – kept on ticking.

Clockmaker Yeah, well, it's only a couple ticks away from the old, uh . . . so come on.

Cocks *exits swiftly down the stairs, as Big Ben begins to strike. The Ayrton Light snaps off –*

*Brief sound bites of the February 1974 general election as in the dimly lit Commons Chamber the **Members** chorus take their seats: 'Tories predicted victory' – 'Exit polls suggest a tight race' – 'Margaret Thatcher discounting the Liberals, preferring two-party politics' – 'First hung parliament in half a century' – 'The "squatter in Downing Street"' – Dimbleby chasing St John Stevas: 'Will Tories do deal with Liberals?' – No deal – 'Labour form a minority government'.*

Act One

Scene One

The Government Whips' Office. Afternoon.

Humphrey Atkins is packing a box. **Bob Mellish** bounces in with his own box of things.

Mellish (*mockingly*) Oh Humphrey, me ol' cocker –

Atkins Oh, don't start, Bob, alright?

Mellish Start? *Moi?!?*

Atkins Let's at least try and conduct this transfer with a modicum of decorum, shall we –

Mellish A 'modicum of decorum', blimey what's that, odds on favourite for the 2.15?

Atkins That's a 'no' then, I take it. (*Lifting a painting from the wall.*)

Mellish You can leave that if you like –

Atkins Get your own. Gift from my wife, anniversary.

Mellish Look, I'm sorry, Humphrey, genuine commiserations and all that. Politics is a cruel sport, second place gets you naff all.

Atkins Yes, well, in – ha ha, in your case, Bob, first place gets you 'naff all' as well. Four seats more than us? Labour may be the largest party, but not a majority in the House. Some might say that means we *all* lost.

Mellish And yet here we are, swapping offices. A few small steps across the lobby, but a giant leap for mankind.

Atkins Bob. It's a hung parliament. You've got no idea, have you? (*Making to leave.*)

Mellish Oi, what's your combination for the safe? I need to change it.

Atkins I'll inform the Clerk, he can come and arrange for it to –

Mellish Oh come on, Humphrey, just give me your bloody –

Atkins Bob, no, I'm not telling you, / it's a combination that –

Mellish Oh well, that's grown up, isn't it?

Atkins (*continuing*) – we've been using for . . . It's not about being 'grown up'.

Mellish So / how am I meant to – Right, OK.

Atkins (*continuing*) It's about protocol, Bob, procedure; call the Clerk.

Mellish Fine. Oi. (*Holding out his hand.*) No hard feelings, eh?

Atkins (*beat; putting down; shakes*) Listen. I mean this, because I like you –

Mellish Oh Humphrey, I like you too, come here.

Atkins We're going to get you. Alright? So don't get comfortable. A minority government? No one with any sense or gumption gives you more than a matter of weeks. You're gonna fall, and fast, and hard. So start finding things to land on. Now.

Atkins goes. **Mellish** less cocksure now. *Beat.* **Harrison** enters, laughing, clapping.

Harrison Wheeey. Home sweet home, Chief.

Mellish We're fucked. We're fucked, aren't we?

Cocks enters, carrying some files and boxes. **Harrison** and **Mellish** snap out of it, cheering.

Harrison Alright, Michael. Here we are, eh? (*Offering his hand.*)

Cocks I know – quick, lock the doors before they realise. (*Shaking.*)

Joe Harper *enters, in full State Opening regal garb, to more cheers.*

Mellish Bloody 'ell, Joe, look at you, joining the circus or what?

Harper Laugh all you want, Chief, but you have to treat me with a bit of respect now I'm a servant to Her Majesty's Government. No-o, I just played a 'key role' in the opening of Parliament, and not only that, *look at this, me white staff!* (*Displays it, laughing.*) Get to keep it for ever, this. I'm gonna wander round with it always. At work, round the house. Tesco's.

Ann Taylor *enters, holding a box.* **Mellish** *cheers, as per, expecting the others to . . . but they just stare. A beat.* **Mellish** *clears his throat.*

Taylor Hello.

Harrison Looking for your office, love? 'Tis a bit of a maze, here / let's see if –

Mellish No, she's not looking for it, she's found it. This is Ann Taylor, new Member for Bolton. She'll be joining our team. And I know everyone'll make her feel very welcome.

Harrison . . . Uh yeah, course. Here, Ann, take a seat –

Mellish She's a woman, Walter, not an invalid.

Harrison Well, alright! I was just –

Taylor No, that's fine, honestly. Thank you. 'Walter'?

Mellish (*at the walls*) Art! I need art, someone get me some art.

Clerk (*entering, with the black briefcase*) Gentlemen.

Harrison (*pointing*) And lady.

Mellish Nothing with a ship on it – what’s this?

The Clerk gets Mellish ‘set up’, handing him passes and demonstrating the case on his desk.

Clerk Your ministerial box.

Harper It’s black, not red.

Clerk The Chief Whip’s is black.

Harrison ‘The forces of darkness, and evil’ . . .

Mellish Do pack it in.

Clerk Key. Opens from the bottom, not the top. It’s heavy, you’ll get used to the weight.

Mellish (*taking it*) I know, I know. I have done this before, you know?

Harper (*having a go*) Flippin’ ’eck, have your arm off, that.

Clerk (*taking it back, opening, demonstrating*) Lead surround. Traditionally so that if your ship sank, it would sink to the bottom of the ocean. In reality, it’s for bomb blasts.

Mellish Bomb blasts?

Clerk To protect the contents.

Mellish What about *my* contents?

Clerk They aren’t Parliament’s concern. (*Handing the case over and leaving.*)

Mellish (*after him*) And can I get some art? Oi, and the phones too, they don’t . . . (*Sighs.*)

Cock (*sitting, playing*) Walter, look. Adjustable chairs.

Harrison Never! (*Sitting.*) Ha! All this time, them bastards! Bloody ’ell, I knew their poll ratings had been up and down all year but I didn’t know their arses had as well.

Mellish Eh, should see how comfy it is in the back seat of my car – oh wait, didn't I mention, I get back my ministerial car?

Harrison Oh, you smug little tart, Chief.

Mellish Right, let's stop mucking about, shall we?

He turns a blackboard over – during this, and for the rest of the play, the whips should light up fags and smoke as and whenever fits. Most should probably spark up now . . .

Mellish Now. I don't know if any of you have read a newspaper this week but apparently we, the Labour Party, are now in power.

All Whey-hey.

Mellish With one big problem.

Harper Aww.

Mellish It's a mathematical problem, and one we definitely have to balance. 301, us. The Tories 297. And then we have the odds and sods. Liberals 14, the Scots 7, Irish 11, Welsh 2, others 3, meaning an Opposition total of 334. (*Writes 'Total 301 v. 334.'*)

[The table created could look something like this:

	TORIES:	297
	LIBS:	14
		7
		11
		2
		3
LAB:	301 v.	334]

Mellish In other words, we're all up shit creek, we've got the biggest boat, but they've got more paddles. Or to put it a simpler way . . . combined, there are more of them than us.

This sinks in.

So how do we survive? Answer: haven't a clue. None us has any experience of a hung parliament, so it's a learn-on-the-job type thing. But we are going to war, gentlemen, so make no bones. On the other side of the lobby are a bunch of bastards – sorry, Ann – already plotting our demise . . .

Speaker The Member for Esher!

The Opposition Whips' Office.

Atkins *unpacking at his new desk.* **Esher** *drinks a whisky.*

Esher It stinks over here.

Atkins No it doesn't.

Esher Always has, this side. Nasty ruddy odour. And it's colder.

Atkins Was there anything I can help you with, Colonel?

Esher My new office, don't like it. It's cramped and there's this ugly painted thing in there.

Atkins That's the Member for Gloucester, Colonel, she's sharing your room.

Fred Silvester *knocks and enters.*

Silvester Mr Atkins? How do you do, I'm / Fred Silvester –

Atkins Fred Silvester; new member for Manchester Withington, formerly of Walthamstow West. Welcome back. Nice to know we picked up a few seats while haemorrhaging others. You've been assigned to the Whips? (*Taking his letter.*)

Esher Manchester you say? God awful place, can't be doing with it. Either needs a good clean or a good fire, I don't mind which.

Atkins Colonel, Mr Silvester here will relocate you to a new office this afternoon.

Silvester Oh, right. Yes, of course.

Esher Posture, man. People aren't afraid of a man who slouches. I'll be in the Smoking Room, let me know when that banshee is exorcised from my office.

He exits. Atkins takes out a phone wire cable from his pocket and smiles, dumping it in his bin.

Atkins The 'spoils of war'. (*Reading Silvester's file.*) You were in advertising.

Silvester Yes. Well, sort of.

Atkins You either were or you weren't.

Silvester I was.

Atkins It should help, of course. Called to the bar, I see.

Silvester Gray's Inn.

Atkins He's right about your posture, you know.

Silvester I'll work on it.

Atkins Do you prefer Fred or Frederick?

Silvester Fred's fine.

Weatherill *enters, clutching his folder. Sharply dressed, as ever.*

Weatherill Oh, Chief. How boring, this whole thing.

Atkins So I'm starting to realise. Jack Weatherill, Governm – . . . *Opposition* Deputy Whip; Fred Silvester of / Manchester Withington –

Weatherill Oh, Manchester Withington, formerly Walthamstow West, yes, hello.

Silvester How do you do. Gosh, what a fine suit, I must say.

Weatherill Oh, thank you.

Atkins Yes, Jack has many a fine suit – (*Looking up at his painting.*) This look alright, here?

Weatherill (*handing Silvester a card*) Family are tailors by trade, place up on Savile Row. You should pop along. I don't mean – not to imply that you need to.

Silvester No, of course.

Weatherill But, you know.

Atkins Fred was about to begin the annual game of musical chairs, weren't you, Fred?

Silvester Yes – oh, right, yes. (*Exits.*)

Weatherill (*calling after*) Have fun. (*To Atkins.*) Seems a good sort, bit wet behind the ears.

Atkins So were we all once. They dry out. (*Goes to adjust his chair, and realises it isn't adjustable. Tutting.*) Oh. The chairs, for God's . . . (*Sighs.*) I swear, Jack. This is but a temporary situation. It'll be over by Christmas.

Weatherill Hmm, 'over by Christmas', where have I heard that before?

Government Whips' Office.

Mellish Obviously the Tories are gonna vote against us every time, all the time, so what then? (*Looks around. A sense of him 'grooming' the quiet one, here . . .*) Michael?

Cocks Uh, well. Our only hope of getting bills through the House is the odds and sods, drawing 'em over to our side.

Walter, he's built up the contacts, made the relationships –

Mellish We all have to have those relationships now, can't just rely on Walter. And Michael's right. A 'rainbow' coalition. And as you know, at the end of the rainbow is a pot of gold.

Harrison Oh, lovely, Chief, beautiful.

Mellish That said, the world and his wife gives us about as much chance of lasting the spring as an Austin Allegro climbing a hill –