



COMEDY OF ERRORS

Looking for laughter lines

INTRODUCTION

For her speech at the Conservative Party conference in 1990, Margaret Thatcher decided to attack the Liberal Democrats by mocking their recently adopted yellow bird logo. So the prime minister's speechwriters advised her to drop in a reference to Monty Python's famous 'dead parrot' sketch.

The suggestion was met with silence, before an impassive Thatcher asked: "This Monty Python. Is he one of us?"

Lady Thatcher was an extreme case of a politician born without a funny bone, but she wouldn't be the only one with an undeveloped sense of humour. And where she inspired the comic routines of the likes of Ben Elton and Alexei Sayle, with stand-ups Marks Steel and Thomas and impersonator Rory Bremner following in their wake, the political comedians of 2013 don't seem to have caught the imagination as they once did.

So, are comedy folk as political as they once were? And are politicians as funny as they used to be? Rephrase that second question: are politicians ever funny?

To answer these questions and a few more, *Total Politics* has turned to some of the best up-and-coming comics around...



KEVIN DAY

As research for this piece, I asked several friends in an Edinburgh Festival bar about humour in politics. Every single 'hilarious' reply contained a combination of the words "they", "all are", "comedians" and "anyway".

This assumption by much of the general public, that politicians are all comedians, is a gross insult to those of us who are actual comedians, because it seems to ignore the fact that virtually nothing about British politics, and those who practise it, is funny.

As a regular writer on *Have I Got News For You* (HIGNFY) I can't tell you how excruciating it is to watch MPs trying to out-joke Merton and Hislop with awful puns about the opposition that wouldn't pass muster in a nursery, but would, sadly, bring the House down at PMQs.

Because that's the problem with many MPs; they do think they're funny, in the same way that some footballers think they're funny until proved otherwise in public every Saturday night live on TV (yes, you, Mark Lawrenson)

Obviously, there are some funny political animals – genuinely funny people, not that forced jollity and getting-stuck-on-a-zip-wire-looking-like-a-Serrano ham japey that passes for humour in the Johnson household. Jacob Rees-Mogg, for example, was urbane, witty and clever enough to be urbane and witty after he'd been on HIGNFY and not during it. During it, he was simply polite, smiley, honest and passionate about his politics. Consequently he charmed even the notoriously liberal studio audience, who cheered him to the rafters.

Nigel Farage knows his way around a joke and is very clever at using humour to deflect from the vagueness of his policies but, with conference season approaching, we'll see further proof that the average male MP is no funnier than any middle-class, middle-aged man propping up your local bar (and it's always male MPs who want to be funny: women in politics, as in life, tend not to try and compete).

But the question is, why should political people be funny? I'd much rather that funny people were political.

Every MP I've met is committed and enthusiastic – exactly how they should be, even the Tories. Being good with a one-liner or able to juggle fish is not a bonus, as far as I'm concerned.

However, we comedians have a bigger and wider platform from which to examine and challenge the status quo, and it's rather a shame that, at present, so few of us are choosing to do so.

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Mike Egerton, Jonathan Malachi

Shook Factor



RICH PEPPIATT

A politician walks into a bar. The bartender says, "Good morning, Mr Farage" Make someone laugh, and you'll briefly buy their attention (hello to both of you still reading this...). In our multi-tasking, hyper-jabbering, headphone-in-every-orifice society this makes the humble gag a powerful political tool. Inevitably, most politicians are useless at them.

Infuriatingly, I dislike everything about Farage except Farage. The man's got an ear for a joke, particularly (and endearingly) at his own expense. In fact, if anybody is still reading this, it's probably you, Nigel Farage.

For me, the best jokes work because of the teller's vulnerability, laying bare a truth that on levels both deeply personal and unnervingly universal. (Failing that, fart jokes work, too).

Modern politics struggles with humour because it's designed specifically to prevent any such vulnerability. No one has ever had good sex using a bin liner as a condom, and no good comedy was ever buffered by a protective layer of SpAds and party press officers. Admittedly, the stakes are higher; if a comedian's joke falls flat, they move swiftly onto the next (then sob uncontrollably all the way down the M40 home). A politician drops a clanger, and the *Daily Mail* is door-stepping their grandparents before the proverbial pin has even hit the floor. The media, and in particular the press, loves to characterise politicians as humourless drones, but will positively relish stripping an MP's duff quip from its context and spinning it as a scandal if they think it'll shift copies. Politicians, for their part, are all too happy to give this faux-outrage news-sludge credence with suitably pithy quotes if it'll knock a rival. And so, po-faced planet politics keeps turning.

In keeping with many in the public eye, politicians have a tendency to take themselves more seriously than the average person. There are exceptions. The first politician I remember spending any length of time with was Tom Watson, and – in what may be the very definition of a backhanded compliment – I remember being pleasantly surprised that he wasn't a tosser. In fact, he was top craic.

Another time, during a gig I did at the House of Commons, Colonel Bob Stewart, seated in the front row, was a surprisingly riotous and enjoyable heckler, particularly on the topic of late-night pay-per-view TV pornography.

(Fret not, Bob, there's no way my opening joke was strong enough to hold anyone's attention that far down the article...)

► **Rich Peppiatt is a writer and broadcaster. www.rich-peppiatt.com**



GRÁINNE MAGUIRE

How do comedians fit in at party conferences? As a stand-up comedian, I'm used to performing for tough crowds with intimidating acts but the Labour Youth reception at last year's conference was different. Ed Balls was opening, Harriet Harman was in the middle, then me performing a set that largely revolved around my creepy obsession with Ed Miliband – and then Miliband himself was headlining.

I was so nervous I could actually hear my nerves, like a white noise vibrating around my head. This was either going to be the greatest gig of my life or a moment I and my therapist would have to untangle for years.

I told my first joke... a silence that felt like school

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years echoed around the brightly lit room. And then, like the sweet release of summer rain... laughter. It was like riding a buckaroo. A big, politically-engaged buckaroo. I left the stage exhilarated and weak with gratitude. Miliband, who luckily had missed my set, so hadn't felt the need to call security, happily posed for a picture with me afterwards. Comedians at party conferences don't sound like the best mix, but then if romantic comedies have taught us anything, it's that it's the unlikeliest matches where the real love is found. Best gig ever.

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JOE WELLS

In recent years there's been a growing trend of politicians turning their hand to stand-up comedy. Because I'm a political comedian I've been a first-hand witness to Tom Levitt, Lembit Öpik and Stephen Pound's failed attempts at mastering the art form.

Hearing about the time when a train passenger saw Lembit's penis and enduring Levitt's Ken Dodd impression are both horrible experiences, surpassed in painfulness only by the YouTube footage of Sarah Teather doing a short stand-up set at the 2011 Lib Dem conference, the kind of footage you would read about being used to torture prisoners in Guantanamo Bay.

What's horrible about politicians doing stand-up is not the fact that they're no good at it – that's understandable; it takes time to learn how to be a comedian. It's not like being education secretary or health minister, where you can just pick it up as you go along.

What is horrible is that these politicians seem to think that if they act like zany, up-for-a-laugh goof-

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balls then I'll respect them more than if they behave like the aggressively dull individuals they actually are.

The truth is the opposite: I don't want funny politicians, I want funny friends, funny colleagues and funny comedians. When someone has control over our education, healthcare and nuclear weapons I want them to be as boring as is humanly possible.

Politicians, like accountants, geography teachers and Gwyneth Paltrow, have always – and should always – be boring and unfunny. I urge any politicians reading this, be proud of your dreariness. Let it shine dull and go unnoticed by all around you. Remember, you aren't an interesting person, your favourite band is Coldplay, you like the novels of John Grisham and you were never cut out for stand-up comedy.

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CHRIS COLTRANE

Why are the jokes our parents tell us when we're teenagers the most awful, embarrassing jokes in the world? It's because our parents have unjust authority over us. It's because our parents are exercising unjust control over our lives, while simultaneously trying to be our friend. As teens, we understand the tyranny inherent in the dictator who won't let us stay out after midnight, and we reject their attempt to be both buddy and autocrat.

When politicians try telling jokes, the same concept applies – turned up to 11.

Politicians are not 'one of us'. They could be, if the public believed they were working in our interests, but as poll after poll proves, we, the public, think the opposite. The public believes MPs are corrupt, expenses-fiddling, corporate-serving lackeys who'd sooner sign a contract to sell an entire town's infrastructure than defend a community, if it meant there might be a part-time executive job in it for them at the other end. In fact, according to a survey I just made up, an astonishing 84 per cent of the public would sooner entrust the task of public office to a crocodile than to a politician. Whatever way you look at it, that's a pretty shocking result.

In stand-up, we have the concept of status. Low-status comedians are often loser characters, shy and awkward, but this social weakness is played up to become an endearing strength. Similarly, high-status comedians – those comics who are clearly more articulate, educated and quicker of wit than their audience – are still fundamentally on the audience's side. They may be from a different social world, but there's never any danger that the comic will step off stage and close the audience's local fire station.

This is the key difference. You can only joke with us when you're on our side. But when the public perceives MPs as working in other people's interests – and some MPs as genuinely cartoon-evil villains – an MP's joke is as funny as James Bond found it when Auric Goldfinger said, "No, Mr Bond, I expect you to die!" Your jokes will work at conference, for sure, but to the outside world you're almost certainly the enemy, and any joke you try telling us is exactly as funny as a privatised NHS.

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JAMES SHERWOOD

Politics needs more good comedy and less bad comedy. Mind you, so does comedy. Good comedy should be genuine, true, and authentically human. These are the qualities that make for good, likeable, trustworthy politicians too. That's why both are so rare.

If you ask a floating voter if they think, say, Ken Clarke has a good sense of humour, they'd probably guess yes, but I bet no one can recall him telling a joke. What they mean is that when he talks, they feel they're getting to know him. He seems to be a human being, so he probably likes a laugh. If you repeat your brief like a robot, you'll never be believed, and you'll never be funny.

The funniest political moment I can think of is William Hague's last appearance in the Commons as Tory leader. He said that he'd found debating with Tony Blair exciting and fun, and, "from my point of view, wholly unproductive". It's not the kind of killer line that a joke writer would supply a party leader with, but you could tell Hague was saying it for one reason alone: it was true. Blair's laughter at that moment was involuntary, one of the few moments he publicly lost control during his entire premiership.

Compare Clegg and Cameron in the rose garden in May 2010. Clegg's "Did you say that? Oh right. I'm off" is natural and believable, and he's entirely at ease (that seems a very long time ago now). Cameron's "Come back!" is pantomime-ish and fake. Cameron requires a clearly signposted change of mood to show his audience that he's joking now.

If politicians speak with authenticity, there'll be humour. This is the kind of humour they should be aiming for. The worst is the compulsory joke-telling of conference speeches. They look like a twin-town mayor attempting to say, "welcome" in an unfamiliar language, and getting rapturous applause for trying so hard and failing so badly.

Find a way of telling the truth, and see if that gets a laugh. It may not get you into a book of political quotations, but it'll give you one of the strongest connections with an audience you can ever make.

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