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This House

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Interview with James Graham, writer of *This House*



What inspired you to write *This House*?

I was desperate to try and understand that building - Parliament. One of the most famous exteriors in the world, but hardly any of us know how it's run on the inside, not really. The old rituals and ancient customs that define our parliamentary democracy - the template for most of the world.

Also, the surprise hung parliament in 2010 was a key motivator. It gave me a sense of urgency, an answer to the question most writers always ask of their plays: why now? Historically, hung parliaments are rare, and this was the first in my lifetime. It felt exciting to go back to the last one, and learn.

How long did it take you to research *This House*?

A long time! There weren't many books on this parliamentary period, no one had really collated together all the stories, anecdotes and evidence into one place. Also, the Whips have a code of silence. They're not meant to do interviews, publish memoirs, anything. So it was an uphill struggle. I often felt more like a journalist than a playwright. But that also made it feel more important.

Which MP's did you get to meet that were there at the time the play is set?

I was lucky enough to meet some characters in the play - like Ann Taylor, and Walter Harrison. Ann was, I think even she'd admit, not quite convinced about talking to me at first. Understandably. Most plays or dramas about politicians are not exactly flattering. But I was determined to be fair, to humanise politicians in order to better understand them. Since then, she has been one of the biggest advocates of the play, coming in to help us in rehearsals, and feeding into the script.

And Walter Harrison. What to say? He was a legend to all who knew him. He died a



couple of days after we opened at the National, but was well enough to see the reviews. I was told by his family that it pleased him to see the story being told. The time I spent with him at his home, looking at his photos, hearing his stories, was incomparable.

There's then the other parliamentarians, from the period or later, who have let me into that building or their world, to help me understand the what, and how, and where, and why.

Who is your favourite character in the play?

I love them all! I have a soft spot for all the MPs, those individual "guest roles" who sometimes leap into the play just for one scene, but are vivid, and have a clear purpose.

That said, there's something about the relationship between the two deputies - Walter and Jack - that means they have a special place in my mind and the play.

Why did you choose to look at the Whip system?

Because it's crazy. At least it was back then. Bullying, bribing, cheating, blackmailing, fighting?

But there was a noble side to it too. Propping up your party.

In a hung parliament, that's the place to be, day to day. The front line, fighting for each vote.

It's human, too. To be a whip is not to deal with exclusively with policies or ideology, it's the deal with the human beings being the facade of being an MP. And if my desire was to humanise MPs, with all their strengths and weaknesses and contradictions that we all have... well, that all happens in the whips office.

Why is our political system unique?

It's certainly old. And unique in that it's not written down. It's just passed down. It's the physicality of it that makes it unique. Like theatre, it can only exist if people turn up into the space itself. You can't engage with it remotely. It's very 'live'. Perfect for a play...

Why do think the play maintains relevance from when it was first staged at The National?

When I wrote it originally, I wanted to tap into the broader themes of our politics, not make it merely a short-term response to hung parliaments. I hope that, because its character driven, and deals with themes that go beyond the 1970s, it stands as a resonant way to explore the constant dilemma in politics, and life: principles versus pragmatism.



Does having an uncodified constitution mean convention plays a bigger part in UK politics?

Absolutely. It makes it very vulnerable - because it relies on the goodness and decency of people. But that also allows it occasionally - as in a moment in this play, between Jack and Walter - to be remarkable, and humane as it breaks the rules.

What attracts you to writing political plays?

You get to place human stories against the backdrop of nation changing events. And both the political and personal reinforce and exacerbate one another.

Are you excited for the play to tour the UK?

More excited than almost any other version of this play. The purpose of having over 40 MP characters from across the UK, named as their constituency, is to show that democracy doesn't exist or belong within the old corridors of a gothic palace in Westminster. It exists in the representatives sent forth from Leeds North East, Coventry South West, Bolton West, Merioneth, West Lothian, and beyond. Politics is national. I can't wait for this show to be too...

Background Information: The House of Commons

The action of *This House* takes place in the House of Commons, which is one of the two Houses of Parliament, based in the Palace of Westminster in London. The other House is the House of Lords.

The Members of Parliament who sit in the House of Commons are elected by the public. There is one MP per constituency, and at present there are 650 constituencies in the UK, of varying sizes, though in 1974, when *This House* is set, there were 635.



House of Commons



House of Lords

■ Inside The House ■

- The chamber of the House of Commons is relatively small - it's only big enough for about $\frac{2}{3}$ of MPs to fit in comfortably at any one time.
- The Speaker sits at one end, and controls any debate taking place. In front of the Speaker's chair is The Table of the House, on which the Mace, a symbol of the House's authority, rests. Clerks sit at one end of the Table, close to the Speaker, so that they can offer advice if necessary.
- The chamber has green benches, which are arranged facing each other with an aisle in between, on which the MPs sit. The Government Ministers, Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Cabinet sit at the front and are known as "frontbenchers" and other MPs sit behind and are known as "backbenchers". The Government sits on benches to the Speaker's right, and the Opposition sit on benches to the Speaker's left.

■ Debates and Voting ■

- When debating a motion, MPs may only speak if directed to by the Speaker, who will call on them not by name, but by constituency. This is used as a structural technique in *This House* - each MP, as played by a member of the ensemble, is introduced by the Speaker.
- During a debate, precedence is given to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition.
- There are no formal time limits on debates. Debates are usually open to the public, though members of the public are not allowed to speak.
- When a debate concludes, there is a vote. This is first done as a "voice vote" in which MPs respond "Aye" or "No". However, if there is any lack of clarity, a vote known as a division occurs. This is what we see several times in *This House*. In a division, MPs physically enter the "Aye" lobby or the "No" lobby and their names are registered by a clerk. They have to be physically in the room for their vote to count.
- If an MP wants to abstain from voting, he or she may enter both lobbies and have his or her name entered on both lists.
- The final result is announced by the Speaker after the votes have been added up.
- If there is a tie, which is rare, the Speaker has the casting vote. However, this is often used to re-open the debate.

■ Televising Parliament ■

- Nowadays, the daily workings of the House of Commons is televised. The discussion about allowing TV Cameras into the Houses of Parliament began during the 1960s, with opinions fiercely divided.
- During the 1970s, when *This House* is set, a growing number of MPs began to campaign for greater transparency, and to make Parliament more relevant to ordinary voters. Arguments against included the fear that television might make Parliament seem “trivial”. Votes taken in both 1972 and 1975 concluded with the rejection of the idea to bring the cameras in.
- In 1983, cameras were finally allowed into the Houses of Parliament, with the House of Lords leading the way. In 1989, the House of Commons followed suit, and thousands of debates and procedures have been covered since.

■ Whips ■

- The main characters in *This House* are Whips. The name comes from an old hunting term for the huntsman’s assistants who rode at the back of the pack to whip the hounds back into the main group and prevent them from straying.
- Whips are Members of Parliament who are appointed by their own parties to organise and inform their own members.
- One of their jobs is to make sure that their own members vote, and that they vote in line with party policy.
- The Whips, along with the Leaders of the Government and Opposition, are responsible for negotiating behind the scenes to arrange the day to day business in Parliament.
- They are also responsible for ensuring that other MPs know what is going on, and which debates are coming up.
- If the Government has a small majority, or the Parliament is hung, as in *This House*, the Whips’ job becomes even more important as the Government can easily lose votes. It is therefore essential that the Whips keep their MPs informed not only of votes they need to be present for, but the way that they need to vote.
- Whips are also responsible for the pastoral care of MPs. This is something else which is seen in *This House*.
- The Chief Whip, who is in charge of the other Government Whips, has an official residence at 12 Downing Street.

■ Pairing ■

- Pairing is an issue which comes up several times in *This House*. Pairing is an arrangement in which an MP from one side agrees not to vote if an MP from the other side is unable to.
- Pairing is an informal arrangement which is not officially recognised by the House of Commons, but must be registered with the Whips.
- Whist pairing makes things seem fairer, it is not allowed in votes of great political importance.

Background Information: Characters

The main characters of *This House* are real people, who served in the House of Commons during the 1970s.

■ The Labour Whips



Michael Cocks

19 August 1929 - 26 March 2001

Michael Cocks was a teacher before entering politics in the late 1950s. He became Member of Parliament for Bristol South in 1970. He became Assistant Whip in 1973, and was Government Chief Whip from 1976 to 1979. After the Labour party lost the 1979 General Election, he continued as Labour Chief Whip until 1985.

Walter Harrison

2 January 1921 - 12 October 2012

Walter Harrison was an electrician and an active trade unionist who was MP for Wakefield from 1964 until his retirement in 1987. He served as a Whip from 1966 to 1970 and as Deputy Chief Whip from 1974 to 1979. One of the final scenes in *This House* centres around his key role in the Vote of Confidence in 1979.



Bob Mellish

3 March 1913 - 9 May 1998

Bob Mellish was a Londoner, and was the thirteenth of fourteen children born to a dockworker father. After leaving school, he worked for the Transport and General Workers Union, before being called up during World War 2. He became a Member of Parliament in 1946, and was Chief Whip from 1969 to 1970 and again from 1974 to 1976. He was also Chairman of the London Labour Party from 1956-1977. Despite having so many important roles within the Labour Party, Mellish was unhappy when James Callaghan succeeded Harold Wilson as Labour Party Leader, and he resigned from the party soon after Wilson's retirement.



Ann Taylor

2 July 1947

Ann Taylor became MP for Bolton West in 1974. She remained MP for that constituency until 1983. She later became MP for Dewsbury from 1987 until 2005. In *This House*, Taylor is the first female Whip. She went on to be the first female Leader of the House of Commons and the first female Lord President of the Privy Council. She has held a number of high profile positions in the House of Commons and was made Baroness Taylor of Bolton in 2005.

Joe Harper

17 March 1914 - 24 June 1978

Harper was from a working class mining family, and he himself worked at Ackton Hall Colliery in Yorkshire, before becoming MP for Pontefract in 1962. He died in office in 1978. In *This House*, his death is attributed to his decision to delay surgery because of his continued refusal to miss any votes.



The Tory Whips

Humphrey Atkins

12 August 1922 - 4 October 1996

Humphrey Atkins served in the Royal Air Force from 1940-1948 and then joined his wife's family business in Scotland before becoming director of a financial advertising agency. He was elected MP for Merton and Morden, in London, in 1955. He remained MP for Merton and Morden until 1970, and was then MP for Spelthorne in Surrey from 1970 until 1987. He was Conservative Chief Whip from 1973 to 1979, becoming Secretary of State for Northern Ireland under Margaret Thatcher.



Fred Silvester

20 September 1933

Fred Silvester graduated from Cambridge and became a barrister before entering politics. He was MP for Walthamstow West in London for three years from 1967-1970, and then for Manchester Withington between 1974 and 1987.

Jack Weatherill

25 November 1920 - 6 May 2007

Bernard Weatherill, known as Jack, was apprenticed aged 17 to the family business - Bernard Weatherill Ltd, Sporting Tailors, of Savile Row, London. He became Director, Managing Director and then Chairman of the business. He enlisted a few days after the start of World War 2, remaining in the army until 1946. He became MP for Croydon North East in 1964. Three years later, became a Whip and was made Deputy Chief Whip in 1973. He was re-elected seven times, remaining MP for Croydon North East until his retirement. Additionally, Weatherill was Speaker of the House of Commons from 1983 until 1992. On his retirement, he returned to his family business, acting as President until 2003.



Background Information 3: The 1970s



A decade of protest, power cuts and striking.

The 1970s was a decade of strikes - including postal workers, miners and rubbish collection. A three-day week was imposed during February 1972 to save electricity at the start of the miners' strike.

Use of electricity was limited - using electricity for floodlighting, advertising, heating shops, offices and restaurants was banned. Power cuts became a feature of everyday life.

During the summer of 1976, the weather was so dry that water supplies reached critically low levels.

The decade ended with the “**winter of discontent**” of 1978-9.

The phrase “the winter of discontent” is from Shakespeare’s play *Richard III*, and was first used to describe the winter at the end of 1978 and beginning of 1979 by Robin Chater, an economic writer. It was then used in a speech by Prime Minister James Callaghan. The winter was the coldest winter in 16 years, with terrible blizzards and deep snow.

During these months, there were widespread strikes led by trade





Strikes led to mountains of rubbish in streets.

unions campaigning for pay rises and fair conditions for their members. Public sector pay had been capped by the Labour government, who, in an attempt to control inflation, had limited the pay rises of public sector workers to 5%. Those striking included gravediggers, lorry drivers, NHS workers and refuse collectors. January 22nd 1979 saw the biggest individual day of strikes since the General Strike of 1926.

The economic crisis which led to the strikes also meant there was a lot of unemployment, especially amongst the young, which led to protest marches and clashes between young activists and the police.

The 1970s did see movement towards equality for women - the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970 and came into force in 1975. However, women remained amongst the most vulnerable and exploited members of the workforce.



NHS workers were amongst strikers.

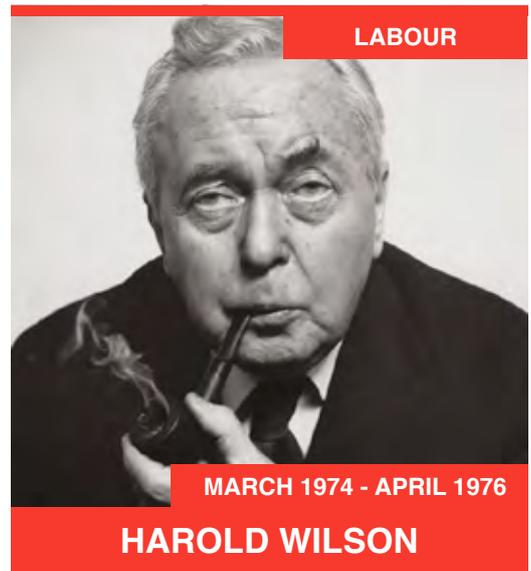


Women from Dagenham Ford Production line campaigning for equal pay.

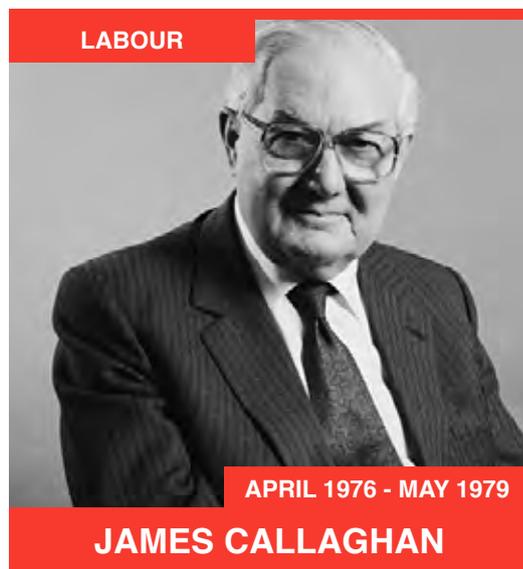
Prime Ministers During the 1970s



Edward “Ted” Heath’s government took Britain into the European Economic Community, the precursor to the European Union, but was defined by the industrial unrest in the country. Heath called a General Election in March 1974, months before he was required to do so, and fully expected to win. To his surprise, the result was the first hung Parliament since 1929.



Following the March 1974 Election, the Labour party held office, led first by Harold Wilson and then James Callaghan as Prime Minister. Wilson called another General Election in October 1974, winning by a tiny majority of three seats.



Callaghan took over after Wilson’s resignation, leading the Labour party until the end of its term.



In May 1979, the Conservative party won the General Election with a majority of 43 seats, and Margaret Thatcher became the country’s first female Prime Minister.

Drama Exercises 1 — Ensemble

This House makes use of an ensemble. Use these exercises to help groups develop ensemble work.

Ensemble: A group of items viewed as a whole rather than individually.

Activity 1: Non-Verbal Communication - Line Up!

- Ask participants to spread out in the space. Then ask them to line up in the orders below, but without communicating verbally. You will need to designate a specific place for the line up to occur, and indicate which is the “higher” end and which is the “lower”.
 - Height order
 - Age order
 - Shoe size
 - House number (or name)
 - Birthday order - January-December
- At the end of each line up, check accuracy - participants can communicate verbally at this point!
- Next, add in more complex questions. Participants still need to order themselves without communicating verbally - you may wish to include questions which are relevant during the week/day you are running the workshop, or to ask generic questions. For example:
 - How left/right wing do you consider yourself?
 - How far do you agree with Brexit/Trump/the current Government?
 - How religious do you consider yourself?
 - How far do you agree that the voting age should be dropped to 16?

Activity 2: Working as One

- Ask participants to spread out in the space, aiming to ensure that they are spread evenly.
- Ask participants to move around the space, being aware of each other, ensuring that they don't collide, but without communicating. Participants should walk at a comfortable pace, and try to avoid simply walking in a circle.
- Ask participants to continue to walk, but to add in sharp changes in direction. They must ensure that they don't bump into anyone, so must use peripheral vision effectively.

- Ask participants to heighten their awareness of each other, but, again, without communicating. Then experiment to see how well they can:
 - How left/right wing do you consider yourself?
 - How far do you agree with Brexit/Trump/the current Government?
 - How religious do you consider yourself?
 - How far do you agree that the voting age should be dropped to 16?

Optional Extension: Breathing as One

- Ask participants to make a circle, facing inwards so that everyone can see everyone else.
- Ask them to simply breathe as normal but to try to be aware of each other. Gradually, they should try to regulate their breathing with each other.
- Next, ask them to move around the room, at a gentle pace, but to maintain awareness of each other and try to keep breathing together.
- Once everyone is moving comfortably, ask participants to repeat the jump they did in the previous activity, but this time they should aim to jump together, pause, take a collective breath, and then move on.

Activity 3: Individuals Within the Ensemble

The ensemble in *This House* take on a number of roles. Use this activity to help participants work as individuals within the group.

- Elect one member of the group to be The Speaker. This person should step out of the activity, but must remain where they can clearly see everyone.
- The rest of the group should move around the space, as in the previous activity. They should try to maintain awareness of each other and should try to regulate their breathing with each other. They should avoid walking in a circle and should maintain a steady pace.
- The Speaker should shout out names of individuals. That person must then jump before continuing to walk.

Extension

- Everyone else must pause in their movement as the named individual jumps. They should then take a collective breath before moving on.
- Rather than using individual names, allocate numbers to each participant to add an extra element of challenge, or allocate other identifying attributes - the MPs of the ensemble in *This House* are identified by their constituencies.
- The Speaker can play with pace and speed, shouting out names/numbers/allocations more quickly or slowly depending on how they feel.
- Change The Speaker.

Activity 4: Using a Quote from This House

In the prologue, Walter Harrison comments:

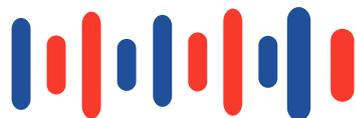
“Ever watch the way birds move en masse? Their ability to survive lies in the fact they all instinctively, turn together. On our own, we’re nowt. That’s the job of the whips. The job is to transmit in a way that is undetectable to the eagles circling above, the job is to communicate the instruction ‘turn’. ‘Turn now’. ‘Turn all of us, together, now, and we might make it. We might just bloody well make it’.”

- Split participants into groups of 8-10.
- Talk about the quote - what metaphor is Harrison using and why? Have participants seen birds moving together in this way? How would they describe it?
- Use the quote as inspiration for a short physical sequence. This should be discussed, devised and rehearsed. Participants should consider:
 - How they will move - direction, pace, proxemics, use of space.
 - Whether they will use any words - could they use any words from Harrison’s comment?
 - Whether they want to use any other sound - music, other sound effects.

Give participants time to discuss the activity, to devise and rehearse, and then share work. After watching, talk about:

- How effectively the performers worked as an ensemble.
- The impact on the audience.
- What they could do to further develop or improve the work.

Drama Exercises 2 – Sound



Activity 1: Soundscape



During the play, the audience hear soundbites from the time in which the play is set. Read the following extract, which is taken from the end of the Prologue:

*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’*

- Discuss the words in the extract:
 - What information is being given to the audience?
 - What atmosphere is being created? Can this be judged at this early stage in the play?
- Next, discuss how this extract can be turned into a soundscape. Consider:
 - How the words could be spoken.
 - What use could be made of repetition, volume, pace and tone.
 - Any other sounds or words which could be added - ask participants what sounds they associate the Houses of Parliament.
- Divide participants into groups of at least 8.
- Give participants time to create, develop and rehearse a soundscape, asking them to focus on creating atmosphere.
- Each group should perform. Discuss performances, focusing on:
 - What atmosphere the audience feels was created.
 - Anything that particularly stood out.
 - What the audience feels the performers could do to further develop or improve their work

Optional Extension Activities

- **For this activity, a copy of the published script of This House will be necessary.** Find other examples of similar soundbites in the script and allocate different extracts to different groups. Allow them time to develop their soundscapes, and then perform them in the order in which they appear in the play. Discuss the changes as the play progresses.

- At the end of **Act 2 Scene 3**, an extract of the hymn “I Vow to Thee, My Country” is heard:

‘I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above,
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love;
The love that asks no question, the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.

- Give participants the words from this, and ask them to develop a soundscape, in a similar way, using the lyrics.
- Play around with the soundscapes - what impact can be created by mixing the news soundbits with the lyrics from the hymn?



This House uses music in a number of ways. Explore this using these exercises:

Rock n Roll Suicide — David Bowie

This song is used in **Act 1 Scene 3** of the play:

Time takes a cigarette, puts it in your mouth
You pull on your finger then another finger, then your cigarette
The wall-to-wall is calling, it lingers, then you forget
Ohhh oh oh oh, you're a rock n roll suicide

Oh no love! You're not alone
You're watching yourself but you're too unfair
You got your head all tangled up but if I could only make you care
Oh no love you're not alone
No matter what or who you've been
No matter when or where you've seen
All the knives seem to lacerate your brain
I've had my share, I'll help you with the pain
You're not alone

Just turn on with me and you're not alone
Let's turn on with me and be not alone
Gimme your hands cause you're wonderful
Gimme your hands cause you're wonderful

Five Years — David Bowie

This song is used in **Act 2 Scene 2** of the play:

Pushing thru the market square
So many mothers sighing
News had just come over
We had five years left to cry in
News guy wept and told us
Earth was really dying
Cried so much his face was wet
Then I knew he was not lying

I heard telephones, opera house, favourite melodies
I saw boys, toys electric irons and T.V.'s
My brain hurt like a warehouse, it had no room to spare
I had to cram so many things to store, everything in there
And all the fat skinny-people, and all the tall-short people
And all the nobody people, and all the somebody people
I never thought I'd need so many people

Discussion

- What significance do the lyrics have to the events of the play? What about significance to the play's historical or social context?
- How do the songs contrast? Are there any similarities?
- Why do you think the playwright chose these tracks in particular?

Practical exploration

- Using the lyrics as a starting point, use the song extracts to create a physical sequence - encourage participants to consider the lyrics in a literal sense first, and then to consider them in a metaphorical sense, taking into account the context of the play - both social and historical, and the exact moments within the play at which the songs occur.
 - **Extension:** add in a soundtrack. This might be the original song or not
- Using the lyrics of the songs, divide participants into small groups and ask them to use the lyrics as dialogue. They may select parts to use, may repeat lyrics and can choose not to use certain lines, but cannot add in anything extra.
- Use the lyrics as a speech. Place the speech in the House of Commons and encourage participants to consider the tone of voice, pace and volume appropriate for this type of speech.

- **Extension:** use other participants to be an ensemble of Members. Divide them into Government and Opposition, and turn the speech into a scene. Ask participants to think about which sections of the original speech Members might agree or disagree with, and how they will express that, vocally.

- This final exercise could be done in two large groups, enabling participants to develop and rehearse a piece, then perform for each other. After performing, compare the two performances, focusing on:
 - Similarities
 - Differences
 - The impact on the audience
 - The response of “Members” to the “speech” and the consequent impact of that particular song within the context of *This House*.

Drama Exercises 3 — Staging a Scene



One of the most exciting things about *This House* is the relationship and rivalry between the Government and Opposition Whips.

This scene, from **Act 1 Scene 1** of the play, is set in the Government Whips' office. The Labour Whips have just taken occupancy, and are about to host the Opposition Whips for a discussion. Each side has planned its strategy in order to show the other that it is the most in control.

The scene contains strong language.

- Divide participants into appropriately sized groups and ask them to develop a performance of the following extract. The result should be slick and well choreographed. Suggest that participants read the script through thoroughly before attempting to stage it. Participants should ensure that they read stage directions carefully as well as the dialogue.
- The performer playing Harper leaves early on in the scene so could act as director as well.

Characters

Government

- Bob Mellish
- Joe Harper
- Walter Harrison
- Michael Cocks

Opposition

- Humphrey Atkins
- Jack Weatherill
- Fred Silvester

Opposition Office: ATKINS at a board. WEATHERILL and SILVESTER.

ATKINS Naturally there is a way for Parliament itself to boot out a government, and that's a No Confidence. If more than half the House join us against them, we force them out, but to get to that point is politically tricky; they have to be seen to be incapable of passing Bills.

WEATHERILL Naturally there is a way for Parliament itself to boot out a government, and that's a No Confidence. If more than half the House join us against them, we force them out, but to get to that point is politically tricky; they have to be seen to be incapable of passing Bills.

ATKINS Very well, Jack, I release you from your binds, go forth and multiply.

SILVESTER *(with a diary)*. Or better still, make sure most of the Odds & Sods can't even be here in the first place? ... because, well. Scottish school holidays start a week before ours, if we manage to table some votes for then, any Scot Nat members would be stuck at home, along with Labour Scottish MPs.

WEATHERILL My word, that's a strike above the bowlers head if ever I saw one. Bravo, Fred.

ATKINS *(gathers things)*. Alright chaps, The Usual Channels are now open, it's time to ride out into the field. And remember, our one advantage is our, um, oh how do I put this so it won't sound ... I can't, our 'class'. Labour Whips are foul-mouthed, brutish, trade unionist-

Government Office. 'Finance' now written on the board.

MELLISH toffee-nosed, arse-licking, dick wanking wankers, sorry Ann, with silver spoons in their mouths and rods up their arses. Full of Baronets and Major Generals, their weakness is their inflexibility so exploit it. *(Checks watch)*. Speaking of which, the Aristo-twats will be on their way now. I just want Cocks and Harrison, newcomers bugger off.

HARPER *(exiting, with TAYLOR)*. Have fun, chaps.

MELLISH Walter, feet or arse?

HARRISON Feet, I thought, arms folded. *(Demonstrates pacing with 'threatening concern')*.

COCKS I say it's all in the chairs, their mistake when we'd come here is letting us sit together so we can pass notes, lets perform the old Trafalgar, split the fleet,

HARRISON Lean forward too; Atkins and Weatherill, they're 'recliners', like fucking Jane Austen characters.

MELLISH I know, I'll do the old 'I'm busy but good busy' at my desk, (*From a knock at the door*). I keep 'em waiting. Walter, tell a joke – come in!

HARRISON Leeds United.

The Government Whips laugh politely as the Opposition Whips enter.

ATKINS Afternoon, Gentlemen.

HARRISON How do, Humphrey. Jack. New lad.

ATKINS Shall we begin?

Together, the three Opposition Whips sit, cross their legs and open their files.

Slick.

Beat.

COCKS and **HARRISON** take up their position, **COCKS** leaning forward, between **WEATHERILL** and **SILVESTER**. **HARRISON** perched on a desk, near **ATKINS**.

MELLISH is shuffling around some papers on his desk. He scribbles a few notes – distracted. The Opposition Whips patiently wait. Weatherill dusts down his trousers

MELLISH OK. Would you like to kick off?

ATKINS Mmmm-no, that's okay, you start.

MELLISH All right, we were looking at this, Rates Bill to open on the 17th, Social Security 20th, Health & Safety Bill the 21st.

ATKINS Aha (*writing. A while*)... yes, doesn't work for us, Social Security; that last week of April would be preferable – Harrison, wouldn't you like a chair, can't be doing your back any good.

MELLISH Few days before Easter, surely you're worried about getting your members in?

WEATHERILL Hmmm-no, actually, and it gives the Bill longer in committee, so the 26th then?

MELLISH Oh wait, look, Scottish school holidays then so Scots MPs will struggle to be here.

ATKINS Oh, that's a shame. Still, can't revolve around 7 Scottish Nationalists.

COCKS Well we've got Scots in our party too, as have the Liberals.

ATKINS I don't think we have any Scots in our party, do we Jack. Any Tory Scots?

HARRISON Do your private school kids break up the same week as our state school kids or is that different too?

ATKINS Well done, Walter, three minutes in and you've already played the class card, I think that's a record, I take it the swearing is due to flow shortly as well?

HARRISON Bollocks, bugger, piss.

Writing Exercises – Writing About the Play

These activities are intended for use after students have watched the production.

Each activity can be used as a discussion or a writing activity.

Activity 1

You are an actor playing a key role in *This House*. Explain how you would research the role, and how you would use vocal and physical acting skills to play the character effectively, bearing in mind that the characters were real people.

Choose from:

- Michael Cocks
- Ann Taylor
- Humphrey Atkins
- Fred Silvester

Activity 2

The two David Bowie tracks used in the play were released in 1972. You are responsible for selecting contemporary tracks for the 2018 tour of *This House*. The music must be from the last 5 - 10 years. What would you choose and why?

Consider:

- Why you think the playwright chose Rock n Roll Suicide and Five Years.
- What the lyrics of those two songs add to the production, and which contemporary songs might give a similar impact.
- The style of music, and how that would fit into the production.



David Bowie performing in his Ziggy Stardust tour in 1973

Activity 3

Read this extract from **Act 1 Scene 1** and then answer the question below:

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 walls*).
- 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 – haha, 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.
- MELLISH** And yet here we are, swapping offices. A few small steps across the lobby, but a giant leap for mankind.

Beginning with this extract, explain how the production show the differences between the Labour (Mellish) and Conservative (Atkins) characters. Consider:

- Casting
- Use of vocal acting skills
- Use of physical acting skills
- Staging

You could focus on a small number of specific characters, or write more generally. Ensure that you use examples to justify your views.

Activity 4

Read this extract from **Act 2 Scene 1** and then answer the question below:

TAYLOR (Smiles. Beat ...). Michael? Would you mind not apologising for swearing around me. I know it's a running joke, but I'm trying to fit in as one of the lads, and it, just ... you know –

COCKS Oh, look, Ann, I'm sorry, it's not ... (sighs. Stands, aware of **Harrison next door**). S'just, I'm trying to, I'm trying to run a different kind of ship, and ... and well truth be told, I don't want you to be like the lads, I want the lads to be more like you.

How are women portrayed in *This House*? Consider:

- Female characters, particularly Ann Taylor, and others such as the Members for Coventry South West and Welwyn & Hatfield, and Lady Batley.
- Significant women who are mentioned or who have impact on the play, even though they do not appear.
- The way that women are talked about by male characters.
- The social and historical context of the play.

Ensure that you use specific examples to justify your views.

Writing Exercises (Drama) – Writing About Live Theatre

These activities are intended for use after students have watched the production. Activities 1-4 are aimed at GCSE students. Activities 5-8 are aimed at AS/A Level students.

Activity 1

Choose one key character in the production. Analyse and evaluate how successfully the performer communicated the character to the audience. You should consider both physical and vocal acting skills. You may choose to focus on one key section, or to refer to scenes throughout the play.

You should make reference to

- The use of physical acting skills
- The use of voice
- Interaction with other performers
- Use of space
- The impact on you as a member of the audience

Activity 2

Analyse and evaluate how two or more actors in one key scene or section of the play used acting skills successfully to communicate character and plot to the audience. You should explain why you have chosen to write about the selected scene or section, and why you feel it was a key scene or section of the play as a whole.

When analysing and evaluating the acting, you should make reference to:

- The use of physical acting skills
- The use of voice
- Interaction with other performers
- Use of space
- The impact on you as a member of the audience

Activity 3

Analyse and evaluate the impact that design elements had on the production. You should write about two elements. You could choose to focus on:

- Lighting
- Sound
- Set
- Costume
- Use of props

You should make reference to:

- The style of the production
- The way your chosen elements were used to enhance the production and to communicate meaning to the audience
- Your response to the performance as member of the audience

Activity 4

Analyse and evaluate the use of movement in two key sections within the production, to communicate meaning to the audience. In your answer refer to:

- The style of the production
- How movement is used to create character and communicate meaning
- Your response to the performance as a member of the audience.

Activity 5

Analyse and evaluate the impact that music has on the play. Consider:

- The use of interpolated music, for example, when Harrison is listening to Wagner in the Government Whips' Office.
- The use of music “outside” of the world of the play, for example the live performance of Rock N Roll Suicide.

You should explain

- The way that music enhances the action and communicates meaning to the audience.
- The way the music fits with the style of the performance.
- Your response as member of the audience.

Activity 6

Analyse and evaluate the visual impact of a key scene or section of the play. You should explain why you have chosen to write about the selected scene or section, and why you feel it was a key scene or section of the play as a whole.

When analysing and evaluating the visual impact, you should make reference to:

- Key elements of set, props and costume
- Lighting and other technical effects
- The staging of the scene or section, including directorial decisions and the performers' use of space.
- The impact on you as a member of the audience

Activity 7

Explain how the performers used their skills to create or change the mood or atmosphere for the audience during the production, and assess their success in doing so at particular moments.

You should consider:

- The shape of the changing political landscape during the period of time in which the play is set, and how this impacts on the atmosphere throughout the play.
- Where you feel the playwright wants the audience sympathies to lie.
- Your feelings about the characters throughout the play.

Activity 8

Explain and analyse the impact of the ensemble in the production.

You should consider:

- The impact of actors playing multiple roles.
- Physical sequences.
- The use of music or live singing.
- The impact on you, as a member of the audience, of having some actors playing one character and others playing a number of characters.

Discussion and Debate



Discussion and debate are at the heart of the play. Despite its 1970s setting, many of the issues within the play are pertinent to a contemporary audience.

Use these discussion points with participants. Feel free to structure your debate to suit your group, though guidelines are provided - use them if they will help.

Atkins: It doesn't work, Michael. One party governs, and one party opposes. That's our system. That's this building. Two sides of the house, two sides of the argument, facing off against each other: the gap between the government and opposition benches the precise length of two swords drawn. Their tips, touching. We are not built for cooperation, Michael. You get a chance, we try and stop you. We get a chance, you try and stop us. That's our way.

Discussion and Debate — what's the difference?

- A discussion is often informal, and is usually an exchange of ideas or opinions. It does not always involve opposing views, and there is not always a conclusion. A discussion offers participants the opportunity to share knowledge, information and experiences as well as views and personal opinions.
- A debate is a more formal contest of argumentation between opposing individuals, sides or teams. A debate always has more than one side, and usually has a conclusion. Within a debate, participants attempt to persuade others that the view of their side or team is correct.



Guidelines — setting up a discussion

- Depending on the context of the group, a discussion may or may not require rules or a structure.
- A discussion is less formal, and should give participants the opportunity to express their views and opinions.
- Useful “rules” could include:
 - No interrupting - if someone is speaking, others must wait for their turn to speak, even if they strongly disagree with the speaker.
 - Hands up (or an alternative signal) to indicate the wish to speak.
 - A small but obvious token (a ball, a book) which is passed around and participants can only speak when they are holding it.
 - One person (could be the group leader/teacher or a volunteer participant) to chair the discussion - their job is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and that no one is unfairly treated.
- Have a specific time for the discussion to end.



DEBATE

Guidelines — setting up a debate

- A chairperson is needed to conduct and control the debate.
- The topic or motion must be introduced to all participants.
- Split the participants into For and Against - you may allow participants to choose their side based on their views about the motion, or you might split them randomly to allow them to develop their debating skills!
- Have a specific time for the discussion to end.
- Give participants a set time to research and plan their arguments.
- The sides then take time to present their cases. The case For the motion goes first. Set a time for presentations, and ensure that the chairperson sticks to these. The case Against the motion then speaks.
- If preferred, a second person from each side may then present further arguments. Again, ensure that time limits are adhered to.
- Each side should then have time to prepare a rebuttal - this gives them the opportunity to present a defence against any points made by the opposing team in their initial presentations.
- The Against team presents its rebuttal first, followed by the For team.
- Each team then makes its closing statements. The Against team goes first, with the For team concluding the debate.
- The chairperson must ensure that no one is interrupted, that both sides wait their turn, and that elected speakers are the only ones who present the arguments.
- At the end of the debate, the winner is chosen. It may be that the teacher/ group leader chooses this based on who presented the most convincing arguments, or it could be that the group is split in such a way to enable an audience to have listened to the debate, who then vote.

Each of the following can be used for discussion OR debate, or as the starting point for a piece of persuasive or argumentative writing.

Topic / Motion 1

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

- How far do you agree with this comment, made by Tory Whip Jack Weatherill in the Prologue of *This House*?

OR

- Debate: It is more sensible to vote for the existing government in times of difficulty, than to risk the added instability of change.

Topic / Motion 2

“Cruel as it may seem , this ‘rotten system’, 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.”

- How effective do you believe our system of electing government to be?

OR

- Debate: The British electoral system is not fit for purpose.

Topic / Motion 3

“A Conservative government always eventually falls because they believe themselves *entitled* to power. And Labour governments always fall ... because they don’t.”

- What is your view about the two major political parties in the UK and how far do you agree with this statement?

OR

- Debate: The key attribute for a successful government is the belief that they are entitled to power.

Topic / Motion 4

Read this extract from **Act 2 Scene 1** of *This House*:

TAYLOR (*Smiles. Beat ...*). Michael? Would you mind not apologising for swearing around me. I know it's a running joke, but I'm trying to fit in as one of the lads, and it, just ... you know –

COCKS Oh, look, Ann, I'm sorry, it's not ... (*sighs. Stands, aware of Harrison next door*). S'just, I'm trying to, I'm trying to run a different kind of ship, and ... and well truth be told, I don't want you to be like the lads, I want the lads to be more like you.

- Do you think that British politics is still a “Man's World”, even in 2018?

OR

- Debate: Even in 2018, British politics is as a place for men and not for women.

Topic / Motion 5

Read this extract from **Act 2 Scene 3** of *This House*:

COCKS Audrey. Cut to the chase. Your persistent displays of disloyalty, under normal circumstances, would not only not be tolerated, but –

**COVENTRY
SOUTH WEST** Disloyalty? Who to? It'd be disloyal to go against my principles, surely?

- Where should the loyalties of an MP lie? Should their own principles be more important than the views of their party?

OR

- Debate: An MP's party view should outrank that of the individual member.

Topic / Motion 6

COCKS

... Flatter yourself if you want that they voted for you personally, but they didn't. They voted for the *party*. Based on class. Based on economic group. Based on geography. Based on what their effing mums and dads used to vote for. Not you. OK? This is how it works.

- How far do you agree with Cocks's view that MPs are not voted for "personally", and that social and economic influences, as well as tradition, are far more important to voters when they are choosing who to vote for?

OR

- Debate: The individual candidate has no influence over the will of the voters?

Topic / Motion 7

Read this extract from **Act 2 Scene 1** of *This House*:

HARRISON

(*Surveying the scene*). Jesus, would you look at it; whips office has turned into a casualty come day-care centre. You alright there, Arthur?

LIVERPOOL SOUTH WEST

(*staring at Welwyn & Hatfield breastfeeding*).

ALL

Arthur

TAYLOR

Might get a blue plaque, Helene. 'Welwyn and Hatfield, at this spot. First to breastfeed in Westminster.'

WELWYN &

I don't want a plaque, I don't want anything I'm not ... I'm not a flippin martyr, I'm not flying any flags. I don't want to be here, I want to be at home – there'll have to be system, a place where –

- Do you think that Britain does enough to ensure that mothers who wish to are sufficiently supported in returning to work after giving birth?

OR

- Debate: The UK does not do enough to support mothers who wish to return to work after giving birth.