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*Prime Minister*  
*CDP*  
*17/5*

Hoover Institution  
Stanford, CA 94305

10 May, 1990.

*Dear Prime Minister,*

I have already sent you some thoughts on the emerging crisis in the Soviet Union, in connection with the two immediate issues -- the Baltic States and the economy. I am enclosing a short additional note.

One terrible thing I heard several times on my recent visit there was a fear that there will be a massive outbreak of AIDS among children, because of the use of infected needles for inoculations. Disposable needles are just not available (of course, even non-disposable needles can be disinfected: but when I made this point the answer was that it simply wasn't being done, owing to the irresponsibility or laziness inherent in the whole system or culture; so that the need for disposable needles remains urgent).

But, given the facts, it struck me that on both humanitarian and political grounds it might be possible for H.M.G. to send in, or grant unconditional credits for, a supply of disposable needles for the USSR, and I venture to urge this to you.

Your European policy goes splendidly, both in principle and tactically! (I attach a recent short article of mine from

the Washington Post in part on that point, though written before your latest speeches: and you will certainly have seen the article fully in agreement with your position by Stephen Vizinczey, in the first issue of The European, which I'd expected to be a centre of Delorsism).

The thing Communism and Argentinism have in  
Common is a willingness to sacrifice the future for present  
glorification.

With very best wishes for your trip  
- and for all the new resurgence at home

Robert

P.S. I am also enclosing, as promised, Henry Fairlie's article in which you wring reluctant and grudging, but in essentials splendid tribute from him.



### Soviet Crises: Additional Points

In my note dated 7 May, the dangers of a counter-revolution, though validly put in principle, may appear overstated by the omission of two factors.

First Gorbachev has (so far) ~~outsmarted~~, and fragmented, the political opposition by his skills in manoeuvre. Except, possibly, on the Baltic issue, his position remains strong. And a move against him in the near future would be a desperate affair. (But there are desperate men around).

Second, no credible alternative leadership is, as yet, apparent; though a few defections at a critical moment might change this.

Assuming he can, as at present, keep the Baltic issue in some sort of abeyance, the critical point will come by the time the reforms due in July begin to be implemented. It seems that the leadership has reluctantly decided that the radical measures now urgently needed are not politically possible. But even partial price-reform will be enough to produce severe stresses.

Robert Conquest  
10 May 1990



# MAGGIE'S FLYING CIRCUS

*By Henry Fairlie*

**T**hey called in, agog, from Florida to New Brunswick. They were the viewers who had just watched C-SPAN's third live broadcast from the British House of Commons. They found it "Absolutely superb. . . Fascinating. . ." Perhaps predictably, they were amazed at "elected representatives speaking so beautifully," at the "perfect English spoken," even impromptu. They had enjoyed the "cut and thrust," which made the Commons "a real democracy—much more than our House of Representatives." Most striking of all, they said that they felt involved in the proceedings.

Who could have expected that American viewers would become so engaged in a full dress debate or Question Time in the legislature of another nation? If they found it "most educational," it was also in another way. In the wasteland of network programming, we have almost forgotten television's potential. No other medium could bring out so clearly the now universal nature of almost every major political and social issue. It was like watching the parliament of the global village.

So what did the viewers see? After 20 years of debates over the proposal, the televising of the Commons began, as a six-month experiment, on Tuesday, November 21, the day of the annual state opening of the new session of Parliament by the queen. This ceremony starts at 10:30 a.m., London time, when Black Rod (properly the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, so called because of his staff of office, a black wand surmounted by a gold lion) appears at the Bar of the House of Commons to summon its members to the House of Lords.

Once the Commons are squeezed into the Lords, the queen enters, robed and crowned, and takes her seat on the throne, from which she reads the Queen's Speech, although she had no hand in its composition. It is written by the government, and announces its program and priorities for the new legislative session. In her long reign, as Labour and Conservative governments have succeeded each other, the queen has both urged the nationalization of basic industries, and called for their denationalization. The crown never wobbles. This year, as her prime minister tries to steal the more attractive clothes of the opposition, Her Majesty emerged as a strong advocate for the environment and something called "the quality of life."

The Commons then dispersed, to reconvene in its own chamber at the usual hour of 2:30 p.m. On this opening day, the Speaker first reads the Standing Orders of the House, including the historic injunction to the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to ensure that members can pass without let or hindrance to and from their House. This is a pure formality, although once the rights had to be wrested from the crown. After each Order is read, there is a rumble of assent, and the Speaker intones, "The ayes have it. The ayes have it." But this year a Labour backbencher chose to interrupt the Speaker, saying that the right of unimpeded passage should also be guaranteed to every citizen. The Speaker gazed at him with pitying scorn. It was, another member said later, the first indication of how some MPs might try to use the cameras to gain publicity outside the House.

A Conservative backbencher then moved the loyal address, thanking Her Majesty for her gracious speech. This form may have seemed servile to Americans, but it is, of course, only a motion of confidence in the government's program. Sir Ian Gow, the mover, sits for the resort of Eastbourne, populated by sedate retired people, and for only four of its 104 years' existence as a constituency has it not been represented by a Conservative. You can't find a safer seat. He did not address himself much to the government's program. His speech was a knockabout turn, full of in-jokes and parochial allusions, relished by members as if they were schoolboys back from the summer vacation.

Americans must have been mystified by most of this, but they may have appreciated his reference to a letter sent to members by an agency that promised, for a fee, to groom them for the cameras. The image they projected, it advised, would depend 50 percent on appearance (chortles); 38 percent on body language (laughter); and only seven percent on "what you say" (guffaws). But confidence was expressed that members "won't look like American anchormen." Anyone could enjoy that.

During these preliminaries, Americans had their first chance to contemplate the august, robed figure of the Speaker, his thickly plaited wig (oppressive in a warm chamber) flapping about his jowls. He is not a party leader like Tom Foley. When a new Speaker is needed, the government (in consultation with the opposition) nominates a member from its own benches, and he



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# RIZZOLI



ains Speaker until he retires or dies, even if the opposition is returned to power. Once elected, he strips himself of all partisan associations, not even eating with other members in the Commons dining room, and when he retires, does not resume political activity. Americans must have noticed that he has no gavel—there is nothing for him to bang it on, except his knee, which would be painful. His authority rests solely on members' trust in his impartiality.

His responsibility, apart from keeping order, is to ensure complete fairness to every member, particularly to minorities—not only the main opposition party, but also splinter parties such as the Scottish and Welsh nationalists, and the more independent members of the main parties who are thorns in the flesh of their leaders. The qualities required are great forbearance; the patience to sit through tedious hours of debate; presence (a Speaker of five feet six inches is inconceivable); a voice of resonant timbre; and perhaps above all, a dry, readily available humor. He must also have an intimate knowledge of every member and his interests, including those of his constituents, so that he will call on him when he should be heard. Bernard Weatherill seems to be a match for his greatest predecessors.

When the loyal address had been moved and seconded, the Speaker's voice rang out: "Mr. Kinnock." The Leader of the Opposition stood at the dispatch box on his side of the Table, which separates him from the prime minister, who has a slightly taller dispatch box. The six-day debate on the Queen's Speech had begun in earnest. But first one must set the scene as viewers saw it, because it partly explains why the Commons televises so well.

During the preliminaries, the House had been filling up, but there appeared not to be enough seats for all the members! Indeed, there are 650 members, but room on the benches for only 346. Another 91 may sit in the side galleries, but most latecomers, when the House is full, prefer to stand at the Bar (don't jump to conclusions; this mystery, too, shall be explained). Either way, they are not on the floor of the House, and so cannot participate. An arrangement by which almost half the members are denied seats in the body of the House may seem eccentric. But there is method in the madness.

The chamber of the Commons was destroyed during the Blitz. Toward the end of the war, inspired by an eloquent speech by Churchill, the House voted overwhelmingly to rebuild it as a replica of the old chamber. A semicircular arrangement of seats was ruled out. The chamber is rectangular. The Speaker's chair is at one end, the government benches to his right, the opposition to the left, facing each other across a narrow aisle. Already there is a drama of confrontation. Moreover, by choosing where he will sit, a member declares his allegiance, for or against the government. He cannot shilly-shally in the middle, like minor parties on the Continent or boll weevils in the House of Representatives. The phrase "to cross the floor" underscores the gravity of such a decision.

The House, deliberately, is theater. That is the reason for restricting the number of places. There are no separate seats, only four tiers of benches on either side. Given the smallness of the chamber, these seem to enclose a stage. When the House fills up, as it did during Kinnock's and Thatcher's speeches on the address, and a week later for questions to the prime minister (the members shoulder to shoulder on the benches, the rest crowded at the Bar), one might, as one watches, be with the groundlings pressing against the stage of the Globe.

It even works when the House empties, as during the full day's broadcast on Thanksgiving. In the small chamber even an attendance of only 30 or 40 members does not look spotty, and the backbenchers carry on a serious debate without having to throw their voices across a vast empty arena. The viewer who said the Commons is a "true democracy" meant that it is a true debating chamber.

About two-thirds of the way down the chamber from the Speaker, the tiers of benches on each side are divided by a gangway. This is vital to a full understanding of what is going on. On the front benches above the gangway sit the prime minister and Cabinet on one side, and the Leader of the Opposition and shadow cabinet on the other. Behind them, above the gangway, sit their more reliable supporters. On the front benches below the gangway sit the more rebellious members of their parties—including, on the government side, ministers who have resigned or been fired—and beyond them, other more independent members. Again there is drama: the blocs of loyalists and dissidents, like the fans of opposing teams at a football game.

Mrs. Thatcher has now fired or forced the resignation of so many ministers that a completely new Conservative government could almost be formed from the benches below the gangway. (Under the strict guidelines established by the House for the use of the cameras, a quick reaction shot is permitted only when a member is mentioned in a speech. When Thatcher came to the issue over which Nigel Lawson, her Chancellor of the Exchequer, recently resigned, a reaction shot showed him scowling on the front bench below the gangway, black as thunder, waiting for his turn to speak.)

To be attacked from the benches opposite is only to be expected. Disraeli on such occasions pulled his top hat over his eyes (members then wore them in the House, except when speaking) and folded his arms, pretending to slumber. But to be attacked by a member of one's party from the benches behind one can be pulverizing. (If a member is going to attack another directly, he must inform him in advance, and the victim, even if prime minister, must be in place to listen.) I was once in the press gallery when Selwyn Lloyd, then foreign secretary, was ferociously denounced by a Conservative backbencher. The next morning most reporters said he was so devastated that he finally "rushed white-faced" from the chamber. But Lloyd later laughed at this interpretation. "Did it never occur to any of them," he told me, that "I had to sit through Hinch's speech while I desperately needed to piss?"



As for the Bar of the House, it must not be confused with the 13 (at last count) bars on the premises of the Commons that provide restorative spirits to the members, even during an all-night session. (One is also provided for members of the press gallery.) The Bar is a line drawn at the entrance to the House at the far end of the chamber from the Speaker. There is a rod that can be raised across it, but its vital symbolic significance is that when the House is in session, no one but members, the clerks of the House, and its messengers may cross it: not members of "the other place" (the Lords), or a royal messenger. It asserts the independence of the House, wrested from the crown and the Lords in centuries of conflict.

**"Mr. Kinnock."** The debate on the address is the kind of test in which the judgment of the House can be severe. It exists to estimate character, not expertise or skill in policy-making, and it is a merciless and usually accurate judge. A Conservative backbencher was once asked during a leadership crisis in the party what qualities members looked for in a leader. He replied at once, "Someone who will see the party through the bad patches." The leaders are emphatically the choices of the parliamentary parties, not the membership outside, and when the Speaker called Kinnock, one could see the House settle to take another look at him.

Kinnock spoke for about 45 minutes. He made little use of his notes, yet never faltered over word or syntax. This was the fluency of which the American viewers spoke, heightened by his Welsh lilt, which carried one mellifluously from clause to clause. From this, as from any other of his speeches, no one could cast him as a wild man of the left. That is his usefulness to the party. Yet something was lacking. He was too affable. There was nothing to rouse his supporters, or to tell the voters outside why they needed a Labour government. His rhetorical flourish at the end—"The government is out of touch, is running out of time, and will soon be out of power"—was neat but limp.

"The Prime Minister," the Speaker called. At her dispatch box stood a very different presence. She was nervous, even stumbled, at the beginning. She had opposed televising the House to the end. It was known that she worried about wearing glasses when she spoke. She overcame this by having the text of her speech (from which she read) printed in large type. But at first she had to read her notes on the points in Kinnock's speech she wished to answer, and she had to put on her glasses. Once she turned to her main text, the glasses stayed (noticeably) in her hand, and were even used to wag at the opposition.

I am hardly one of her fans, but from my experience of some of the great parliamentarians of the past, I have seldom seen a party leader more in command of the House. The reason for her survival was at once plain. If the rebels in her party wish to topple her—a stalking horse has already been put up to challenge her for the leadership—they had better be prepared to spill a lot of their own blood. Her spirit was clear in the effrontery of

her opening sally: "When we were in opposition which I'm sure we'll never be again." She read fast and in a monotone, but displayed precisely what Kinnock did not: strength of conviction. It was clear why *she* thought that she and the Conservatives should be maintained in power—forever!

When she sat down, members streamed out, even as the Speaker called on the leader of the Social and Liberal Democrats, who began by saying that Thatcher's gibe about never being in opposition again was offensive to the spirit of the parliamentary system. That was precisely the kind of prissy remark that has given the Liberal Democrats (born of a coalition between former right-wing Labour members and the small Liberal Party, their support drawn largely from the professional middle class) the reputation of being a party of governesses and fusspots. The House continued to empty, and there C-SPAN's coverage of the first day ended.

Kinnock made only one reference to "the new era of televised democracy." Thatcher did not mention it. Yet both leaders were on their best behavior, yielding the floor to interruptions more often and more graciously than they usually would have done. A speaker at one of the dispatch boxes can outride the clamor of several members on their feet trying to interrupt, simply by repeating the next clause of his speech, and by not budging, which causes the Speaker to call for order. Thatcher was interrupted more frequently than Kinnock—his followers were much angrier than he—and although she sometimes pleaded to be allowed "to get a little of my own speech out," she showed her experience and an unexpected charm when she met a barrage of interruptions by saying, "I have two customers over there, and one over there," and she would come to them in time.

**D**uring the proceedings on Thanksgiving Day, viewers had several chances to gauge the quality of the Speaker. When members wish to put a question about the conduct of the proceedings, they rise, "On a point of order, Mr. Speaker . . ." Points of order should be brief, but one long-winded member began by quoting a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary. There is no greater sin in the House than to be a showoff, especially an intellectual showoff. The Speaker stood. "I shall look it up," he said, and then in a voice like a spanking, "but we can't have a debate on it!" End of point of order.

During Question Time the following Tuesday, a backbencher held up a book to recommend it to the House. In all my years in the press gallery I never saw a member hold up a book. The House groaned. The Speaker stood. "Or-der Or--der!" he called, and turned to the offender. Did the book have any relevance to the question? Silence. "No," the Speaker muttered on his behalf, and called the next question. The Speaker's authority guarantees the maximum opportunity for the cut and thrust, for legitimate interruptions, while insisting on the first condition of relevance, and keeping the proceedings moving.

On Thanksgiving (as on every Thursday), the proceedings opened with Business Questions, addressed



the Leader of the House, who is a member of the Cabinet and frequently has the nominal title of deputy prime minister. He is now Sir Geoffrey Howe, recently kicked upstairs by Mrs. Thatcher from the Foreign Office. He first announces the business of the House for the week, and the questions to him are the pretext for raising a wide range of issues by asking that time should be found to debate them. This is also a splendid opportunity for purely partisan taunts from the opposition. In this spirit, Howe was asked if, with totalitarianism crumbling in Eastern Europe, the House could now expect free elections of Conservative leaders, a Conservative *glasnost*. Howe jumped to the dispatch box. The time for Conservatives to take advice on democracy and leadership from Labour would be when it showed that it could win elections.

The third day's debate on the address covered criminal justice, law and order, freedom, rights, and obligations. The House was seldom very full, but Americans could see the quality of debate between the backbenchers, and the subjects were emphatically those to which Americans could relate—crime on the streets, crack, immigration, gun laws, the recruitment and payment of police, even terrorism (though the main concern of the Commons is with the Irish Republican Army).

But it was during Question Time on November 28 that one could best see why the American viewers felt so involved. Although ministers know questions in advance, after each answer any member may put supplementary questions, which the Speaker allows to range freely from the original one. This is when the spontaneity, the ability to think on one's hind legs, and the facility of language are most evident. First there were 45 minutes of questions to the ministers responsible for defense and related matters of foreign policy. In quick succession, the subjects included: an accident to a nuclear submarine berthing in Cardiff; security measures for armed forces against terrorist attacks; the government commitment to the nuclear deterrent; NATO defenses in Europe; the production of chemical weapons in the U.S.S.R.; the cost of the British armed forces; the government's "grudging and penny-pinching" attitude toward ex-servicemen disabled by radiation; and the interest American companies, specifically General Dynamics, are showing in British defense industries.

At 3:15 on Tuesdays and Thursdays the Speaker calls the first question to the prime minister. The subjects on which Thatcher received supplementaries included: spending on health care, and her proposed reform of the Health Service; the privatization of industry and public utilities, specifically water (an unpopular proposal); a demand that she "let Scotland govern itself" (haughtily rejected); the policy of Britain and the European Community toward changes in Eastern Europe ("a substantial identity of views"); the beggars on the streets; what she called "damaging interunion strife" among Vauxhall car workers; and the movement of some government agencies to provincial cities to bring

employment to parts of the country where she did badly in the last election.

Certainly a great deal more information is extracted from ministers and even the prime minister than by journalists at presidential news conferences in the United States. It is not for the ministers to move on to another questioner as a President can do; the next question is called by the Speaker only when he thinks the supplementaries have exhausted their usefulness. Televised Presidential news conferences are vehicles for Presidential image-building and aggrandizement; Sam Donaldson is a pussycat compared with members of the Commons when they go after a prime minister.

I was in the press gallery when Anthony Eden used Question Time to announce the agreement to form SEATO, the Southeast Asian equivalent of NATO. As is customary when a major new policy is announced, Clement Attlee, as Leader of the Opposition, said only that the opposition would consider the question, and ask for a debate later. But the rebellious left-wing Aneurin Bevan, a member of the shadow cabinet, rose to the dispatch box. It was at once evident that he had overindulged at lunch. He repudiated not only Eden and the idea of SEATO, but his own leader, pronouncing what his party's attitude would be. (In the event, the Labour Party supported SEATO.) Two days later, Bevan was expelled from the shadow cabinet and banished below the gangway.

There are interesting contrasts between the Commons and the House of Representatives. The salary of MPs (at \$1.54 to the pound) is \$34,739; that of Representatives, before the recent increase, \$89,500. The average size of an MP's staff is 1.6 persons; of a Representative's (personal, not committee) staff, 18 persons. In its last session, the Commons met for 1,978 hours on 218 days; the Representatives for 749 hours on 140 days. The number of bills considered by the Commons in 1988-89 was 215; by the Representatives, 1,745. These last two figures suggest how much more time the Commons spends on full and general debate. One last contrast says a lot. MPs do not have offices. If their constituents come to see them, they must talk in the public lobby of the Houses of Parliament. This not only discourages pestering constituents. It means that a lobbyist would have to do his importuning in the public eye.

Setting aside local, county, and municipal government, all political activity in Britain is focused on the drama in that theater of the House of Commons. The painful contrast with the proceedings on the floor of the House of Representatives (also carried live by C-SPAN) was explicitly or implicitly remarked on by viewers. But there is another, perhaps more telling contrast. In the last general election in Britain, 75.4 percent of the people voted; in the United States, only 50.2 percent—by far the lowest figure in the democracies. The concentration of political activity on the Commons, the participation of the Cabinet, the dramatization of the debates, all combine to involve the British people, even without television. It is thus that politics becomes a worthy and adventurous calling. ●



# BOOKS & The Arts

## Stanley Kauffmann on Films

### Wonderful Women, and More

A couple of miracles. The first one has been on hand since 1972: Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel, **Enemies, A Love Story**. Set in New York in 1949, the book is a romantic comedy, with touches of a Feydeau farce, about survivors of Nazi persecution. This is self-evidently a daring project, and Singer triumphs completely, which is to say that the book not only meets its challenge, it clarifies why Singer took on the challenge.

Herman Broder, a Polish-Jewish scholar in his 30s, was hidden for several of the war years in a hayloft on a Polish farm. He is now married to Yadviga, the Polish-Catholic peasant girl who cared for him, and they live in Coney Island. Herman is infatuated with, is having an affair with, Masha, a Jewish camp survivor, separated from her husband and living with her mother in the Bronx. Yadviga doesn't know about Masha; when Herman stays overnight in the Bronx, he tells the simple Yadviga that he is on the road selling books. But Masha knows about Yadviga and enjoys her secret victories over the wife. Herman is having trouble enough dealing with these two obligations when Tamara shows up in Manhattan. She is the Jewish woman whom Herman married before the war, who bore him two children and who, he believed, had died in the camps along with the children. (She limps from a German bullet still in her hip.) Now she adds to Herman's already frenzied life an unvindictive but persistent threat.

The miracle is that, without sacrificing one iota of conviction about these people's pasts—they have indeed been through horrors—Singer also makes the

marital-amorous predicaments farcically torturous. It's as though Singer were saying: If you died, you died. If you survived, life is waiting for you again, with all the vanities and lusts and silliness and joys of being alive.

Singer created the first miracle. Now his book itself creates a second: it caused—inspired—Paul Mazursky to make a good film of it. Not all who know Mazursky's earlier work (*Blume in Love*, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, etc.) will readily believe this. In the past he has striven to be "European," and the results have mostly been pathetic—with the pathos of a small man overreaching himself. This time there is no imitation: he works directly from what he understands and what he can see. Of course with Singer's novel in hand, he had a considerable head start over his past efforts, and he has made the multi-textured most of it.

The screenplay, which Mazursky wrote with Roger L. Simon, condenses the

book but not drastically and with no warping or prettifying. Most of the dialogue—freighted with exasperation, wry patience, seasoned acceptance—comes from Singer. The cinematographer is Fred Murphy, who did so well for John Huston in *The Dead* and seems to have envisioned this film in plaques of light; the light of each of the apartments that figure in the story, the light of a cheap hotel room, are all individualized and apt. Mazursky has directed with a refreshing absence of frill. Once in a while he lets in a camera-conscious touch, like a shot in which a woman walks from middle distance to immense close-up, but in the main he merely serves the story well.

He has served it best with his casting and with the performances he evokes. Herman is Ron Silver, harried and passionate, saturnine yet struggling, in a cheap shirt that doesn't quite fit and an almost omnipresent cheap hat. If Silver seems unlikely as a man about whom three women would care, then Mazursky has fulfilled Singer. An older man, envious of Herman's women, says, "Where do you find them? No offense, but to me you look like a nothing." (That "no offense" is a real Singer touch.) Silver makes the man's passion for Masha so consuming, his guilt and gratitude with Yadviga so painful, his fear and shame with Tamara so quietly true, that we remember a reality: only in plays and films do people have to be large-scale to have large feelings.

Alan King plays a rich Central Park West rabbi for whom Herman does ghostwriting on Jewish subjects. No one could call King a reticent actor, but after he has been around for a while, we're convinced that his overripe manner has at last found its right use.

The three women are the crown of the film. A young Polish actress named Margaret Sophie Stein, new to the American screen, plays Yadviga perfectly. In Coney Island, of all places, she makes the area around her a preserve of the ultra-simple ethos from which she came. Yadviga's servility, her very vulnerability are

### FILMS WORTH SEEING

**Henry V.** The young British actor Kenneth Branagh has adapted and directed and stars in a version of the Shakespeare play that challenges the Olivier film yet is very much itself. For the most part, Branagh succeeds stirring. (Reviewed 12/4/89) **My Left Foot.** Christy Brown, an Irish victim of cerebral palsy, who wrote and painted with his left foot, did an autobiography that now makes a salty, non-maudlin, highly moving film, crammed with fine acting. (11/27/89) **Mystery Train.** If you like Jim Jarmusch's work, this will really test you. A spare account of three sets of lives that cross in a seedy Memphis hotel. A piece of daring yet gratifying minimalism. (12/11/89) **sex, lies, and videotape.** Four young people, two of them married to each other, swimming more dreamily than they know in a sexual sea. Extraordinary. (9/4/89) —SK