


Satire as tragedy: Alastair Beaton

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 Is satire the new political journalism? [Alastair Beaton](#) made the case for comedy as more than entertainment, more than social comment, it's politics in action. Speaking at the [London College of Communication's](#) stimulating new series of talks on 'Culture on the edge' he was clear that jokes swing votes.

Beaton was the genius behind much of [Not The Nine O'Clock News](#), [Spitting Image](#) and, most recently, [A Very Social Secretary](#) and [The Trial Of Tony Blair](#). He is a passionately left-wing politico, but also a dedicated craftsman who has fashioned some terrific stuff for stage and screen (and some rather sillier books such as his 'bollocks' series). Under interrogation from the excellent LCC students and the rest of the audience Beaton was open and honest about his motives.

He admitted that he sometime shudders when he watches how his films cruelly expose the private lives and inner thoughts of people like David Blunkett and Tony Blair to the harsh light of his satirical drama docs.

"There is something fundamentally decent about Blair [compared to Bush]. But it's not my job to be fair. He was not fair to the people of Iraq. I have my limits. I always keep their kids out of it. But if I've been fair by my judgement then I think that's ok."

As I said to Beaton, this is interesting from a journalist's point of view. We are always told that we must be responsible in our coverage of politics. We must be accurate and try and give some context, even if we are biased. But for the satirist, it is power without accountability.

And Beaton was honest enough to accept that he was pleased that Blunkett thought that satire had hurt him and ended his career.

But Beaton is also imaginative and human enough to see the pathos of politician's inevitable decent into hubris and defeat. In that sense, his work is more tragedy than comedy. I asked him why he always took on targets that would please the Left. He was quite clear:

"I would not attack people who do not have power. I would not attack people I don't disagree with".

I think that is why that ultimately his work is somewhat predictable and slightly comforting rather than challenging. I wish I had a fraction of his skill. He is that rare thing, a satirist who gets better rather than bitter. But as a journalist I like to think that at our best, the news media will always be more incisive than satire. Ultimately, journalists are about testing those in power rather than campaigning against them. We are about trying to question rather than condemn. But we are not half as funny...

Congratulations to [Pratap Rughani](#) who orchestrated such a stimulating series of events. it's Andrew Gilligan up next. Sign up for the [Polis](#) newsletter to find out about the next event.

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