

Opinion

“I am not a number!”

David Davis, *The Prisoner* and the critique of surveillance

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In June 2008 the British Parliament debated the Government’s proposal to detain terrorist subjects for up to 42 days while the case against them was investigated. Despite all the best arguments – including some from the security services themselves – being against this, the government won a narrow victory, largely because pusillanimous Labour MPs, many of whom did not support the case for 42 days, feared that a vote against would jeopardise the position of the already weakened Prime Minister. Outraged by this cynicism – but much to the chagrin of his own party leader – David Davis, the Home Affairs spokesman for the Conservative opposition, flamboyantly resigned his safe parliamentary seat in the Haltemprice and Howden constituency. He hoped by doing such a principled thing that he would generate a much needed public debate about the government’s abuse of civil liberties, and the growth of the surveillance state more generally in Britain. As it turned out, this was not perhaps the way to generate such a debate, but an alternative suggested itself...

Within days of David Davis resigning his parliamentary seat and proclaiming to the country “I am not a number, I am a free man!”, a long-mooted remake of the sixties TV series *The Prisoner* was finally announced. Coincidence or what? Two fiercely independent men, storming into their respective bosses’ offices, slamming down letters of resignation... and then over the next few months finding themselves in a place whose residents may or may not be on their side and can’t quite work out why they threw in the towel. We seem to like this story, and certainly we are in need of a new drama which gets us worked up about the stealthy expansion of the surveillance state. Although *The Last Enemy*, screened earlier this year on BBC had an ending of near-Orwellian abjectness – broken hero, involuntarily chipped, sits at home knowing that wherever he tries to go, the authorities can track his movements – it didn’t capture imaginations in the way that *The Prisoner* once did.

Actually, “I am not a number, I am a free man!” is not precisely what Davis said, but the defiant affirmation by Patrick McGoohan’s Prisoner Number Six in the opening credits of each episode, railing against his unseen controllers, could as easily have served as Davis’s tagline. Davis has become alarmed by the levels of state intrusiveness into private life, by the growth of databases and the surveillance of public space, and frustrated by ordinary people’s acquiescence in this encroachment upon their traditional liberties. Writer-actor-producer McGoohan felt the same forty years ago, pouring his fears into a uniquely enigmatic thriller whose concluding episode dispensed with the motifs and conventions of popular television spy stories with which it had begun, and invited viewers to reinterpret the meaning of the whole series. He took a huge aesthetic risk, which infuriated and disappointed many viewers at the time – as well as *The Prisoner*’s co-creator, script editor George Markstein – but the end result ensured cult status for years to come.

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The series was originally transmitted between October 1967 and February 1968, and although it has been repeated several times since, and despite the vast amount of web chat that exists about it, readers under fifty may be in need of an explanation. The prisoner was a senior spy who resigned his post without giving reasons, ostensibly on a matter of (unspecified) principle. Within hours of returning to his London home, he is drugged, kidnapped and transported to "the Village", a quaint and superficially charming coastal resort, though its exact location is unclear. All residents are identified, and called, by numbers. Number Two is formally in charge, but reports by phone to an unseen and sometimes intimidating Number One. The kidnapped spy is told that he is Number Six, and although he warns Number Two that he will not be "pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed or numbered" he never reveals or uses his own name. The other men and women in the Village - all adult, some quite elderly - seem content with the way Number Two runs things, but they may not know exactly what is going on. Occasionally people go missing or die.

Some residents are friendly to Number Six, some aloof – and some are stooges used by Number 2 in a ceaseless but forlorn quest to trick, trap or force Number Six into revealing why he resigned. In spy story terms the question is – has Number Six been captured by the enemy – or is he the prisoner of his own side, too useful to be let go because of the information he possesses? His own side may be training him to withstand sophisticated interrogation techniques to which he may one day be subject by others, with real malevolent intent. Early in the series, however, it becomes apparent that there is a self consciously allegorical element in Number Six's refusal to cooperate, in his insistence on privacy and individuality and in his demand to know the identity of Number One.

The Hotel Portmeiron in Wales famously provided the set for the Village exteriors, with the interiors filmed at MGM's Borehamwood studios. The quasi-Italianate Portmeiron was built by architect William Clough-Ellis on his family estate between 1925 and 1973. The ornate, labyrinthine feel of The Village's gravelly streets and twisting stone alleyways contrasted sharply with the plain metallic control rooms and laboratories which (on screen) appeared to exist within and beneath The Village buildings. This juxtaposition of such strikingly incongruous spaces aptly conveyed the idea that a familiar and decent old world (Britain?), full of cheerful if complacent artisans, was being insidiously colonised and undermined by a new and still barely understood one, full of sinister technocrats.

For all its disorderly conglomeration of architectural styles, its cosy cottages and its nooks and crannies, The Village was a meticulously controlled environment – a prison in all but look. All amenities – from tapwater to telephones, are regulated by the authorities. Access to some areas requires an "electropass". Covert cameras embedded throughout the Village scan all its open spaces and relay images – including the interiors of people's homes – to large screens in an underground bunker, or to Number Two's office. Some of the technologies used in the service of control were real at the time – computers, voice identification, delete, credit cards – while some were pure science fiction, notably "Rover", a robot guardian in the form of a large white membranous ball which could be summoned to pursue would-be escapers, shepherding them back to the Village from land or sea, smothering the more recalcitrant of them with its skin.

The exact provenance and purpose of the series is disputed. The shades of Orwell, Huxley and Kafka were always hovering there, but how prominently they were meant to be seen isn't clear. There were indisputable continuities of character and ethos with *Danger Man*, McGoohan's previous TV series, the global success of which had given him the clout to pitch *The Prisoner* to financier Lew Grade. In particular it may have owed something to a 1964 episode of that series, set in a spy training school. George Markstein's novel *The Cooler* may also have contributed it, as may his belief that the security services had created a real-life Village during in WW2. McGoohan seems always to have had something loftier than a spy story in mind and he and Markstein fell out over the narrative direction of the series.

McGoohan had total control over the last four of its seventeen episodes, choosing – counter-intuitively for popular television – to resolve the allegorical and metaphysical questions it posed, but not – to

Markstein's chagrin – the spy story ones. In McGoohan's manic conclusion, Number One - the off-screen bad guy throughout the series, the one in final control, is revealed not as an uber-powerful figure in government, but as ...us! When Number Six triumphantly rips the mask from the face of Number One he sees... himself. Visually, the moment is a little banal, not unlike Dorothy lifting the curtain on the old Wizard of Oz, but theologically the point is deftly made; each of us is in control, complicit in the kind of social order we make, responsible for what the world becomes.

Not bad for popular television, but rather as Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* lost its way as a specific critique of the Vietnam War, so *The Prisoner* lost its way, after a very promising beginning and middle, as a critique of lost political freedoms. An appeal to Promethean individualism - McGoohan's forte – was hardly a fully rounded response to the subtle and complex control mechanisms prevailing in the modern world, even then. But if the whole was not greater than the sum of the parts, some of the parts were themselves excellent. One of these forty year old episodes has Number Six exploiting the fact that he is under total electronic surveillance by saying and doing gnomically suspicious things in full view of the cameras, until a vain and paranoid Number Two is driven mad trying to unravel the (non-existent) secret behind Six's random actions. Where else was there a plot like that?

McGoohan's wayward theology aside, I've never shaken the feeling that the series owed something, if only subliminally, to JG Ballard's 1961 short story *The Overloaded Man* and it is certainly illuminated by it. Set in Menninger Village – thereafter referred to simply as "the Village" – a cluster of "corporate living units" each of distinct architectural appearance, which serves as the residential quarters for the staff of a nearby psychiatric clinic specialising in mind-enhancement, it concerns a man who has recently resigned from his job, who is at odds with his bosses and who discovers that someone has had a hidden camera trained on his home. The man may well be mad, or he may be making a sane response to the oppressiveness of the Clinic and the Village, but either way Ballard's story shares an unhinged and aslant quality with McGoohan's series. "Overloaded" is actually a dead-on description of the brooding and explosive Number Six: he carries a heavy burden of information, his sanity is often threatened and he is frequently pushed to breaking point.

Karl Menninger – after whom Ballard names his Village – was an influential and well-intentioned American psychiatrist who, after WW2, championed psychological and behavioural controls that would one day consign crude and atavistic practices such as physical punishment to the scrapyard. Human behaviour was easily manipulable, Menninger believed, freedom in the traditional sense a myth. Kind and clever men in white coats would eventually deliver the means to create a peaceable social order, subduing individuality in the process. Menninger epitomised the upbeat, progressive optimism that McGoohan loathed about the coming world, and if nothing else, *The Prisoner*, far more so than Ballard's story, indicts what we might legitimately call "Menningerism". Number Six is never physically tortured, but at various times in the series psychological techniques, including hypnosis, disorientation, indoctrination, hallucinogenic drugs and subliminal suggestion are used in an effort to extract the reason for his resignation and to get him to conform.

Cold War-derived concerns about "brainwashing" were rife in the early sixties. Aldus Huxley had warned against western education systems taking up technologies such as "speedlearn" (explored in the sixth episode of *The Prisoner*) in *Brave New World Revisited*. At the same time, Jacques Ellul and Marshall McLuhan were offering a distinctively Catholic critique of the threat posed by modern technologies to the human spirit, which seem to have had a particular resonance with the devout McGoohan, who had at one time considered the priesthood as a career. The same conservative, anti-modernist sensibility is apparent in Anthony Burgess' 1961 *Clockwork Orange* - the Ludovico technique to which rebellious young Alex is subject would not have been out of place in The Village. Although *The Prisoner* traded on a number of potent sixties motifs - the bathos and faux-conviviality of Butlin's style holiday camps, Laingian ambivalence about the locus of sanity, Fleming and Deighton-style spy stories (without the sex, of which McGoohan disapproved) and appealed to the liberal left because it was so obviously against overweening state power, its roots in a fundamentally conservative sensibility should not be neglected.

It is the self same sensibility – a celebration of a somewhat homogenous civil society, a minimalist state and sturdy self-reliant individuals pursuing happiness in their own sweet way - which David Davis (a former soldier) brings to bear on the contemporary surveillance state, but let's face it, the Haltemprice and Howden by-election in no way fulfilled his aim of generating significant debate about it. By-elections are not nowadays the way to get us talking about "issues". Like it or not, movies and miniseries are the touchstones now. *The Prisoner* was the first television series to generate a debate about surveillance, and in their day the university courses which addressed it (in the UK and the USA), the subsequent tie-in novels (one by the late great Thomas Disch) and the study groups and newsletters nurtured by its fan club stirred undercurrents of thought more effectively than politicians usually manage to do. Repeats on television, boxed sets of videos and DVDs – a 40th anniversary set of DVDs has been brought in the past year – have all prolonged and renewed *The Prisoner's* appeal. It's also true that spoofs (by musician Jools Holland and comedian Stephen Fry), co-option by advertising (Renault) and a Scientology-like reverence for the series by the crazier end of its fan-base have reduced some its motifs and images to clichés, but no-one can say that it did not get us talking.

And therein lies the importance of ITV's forthcoming six-part remake of *The Prisoner* in 2009, starring established thespian Ian McKellen as Number Two and upcoming Jim Caviezel as Number Six, and slated for release (so to speak!). It is bound to invite comment and comparison with the original. It might improve on it, it might be inferior; either way it will stir memories of its groundbreaking forerunner. In recent years popular "event movies" such as *Enemy of the State* and *Minority Report* have allowed us to consider where we have got to in terms of surveillance and to question where we might be going. They may not change anything, but the debate they generate in the media alerts us, if only patchily, to developments we may otherwise have missed. It makes us more aware, equips us with a frame of reference for interpreting events around us. *The Truman Show* has already reprised some of *The Prisoner's* themes, linking surveillance in a small town to worldwide reality TV, so that avenue is closed off. Recent films of stories by Philip Dick (many of which were written in the sixties, but not prominent at the time) have raised the bar in terms of mind manipulation narratives, and cannot but affect any modern reconceptualisation of *The Prisoner*. The BBC's *Last Enemy*, which at least recognised the immense investment in surveillance technology which already exists in Britain, failed despite hype to generate much interest or anxiety.

What David Davis tried to do in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election was right, and took a rare kind of political courage. There was no great risk of losing his seat – he won safely once again – but he cared enough about something to risk looking foolish. On reflection, newsworthy as political resignations can be, precipitating a by-election was probably not the most effective way to raise the debate. Such is the nature of contemporary culture and contemporary politics that, on some matters, well-crafted television dramas can become talking points to a degree that merely political initiatives cannot match. In 2009, Davis could do worse than hitch his star (and his gravitas) to *The Prisoner* remake and become part of the arguments that will inevitably swirl around it. Who better? The sensibility to which the original series gave expression is markedly similar to Davis's own, and McGoohan, warts and all, was a kindred spirit. Ideally, the remake will give us more than nostalgia to look forward to, but even if it fails to say something new and compelling about resisting surveillance – which will indeed be hard – the glance backwards to the original will still be worth it.

Afterword

The original Prisoner Number Six, Patrick McGoohan, died just as this issue was going to press on 13th January, 2009. He was 80 years old. This article is dedicated to his memory.