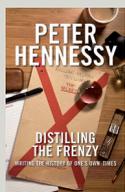




## Book Reviews



**Distilling the Frenzy: Writing the History of One's Own Times**  
**Peter Hennessy**  
Publisher: Biteback,  
£18.99

No one possesses greater amiability than Peter Hennessy, peer of the realm and professor of contemporary history. Unkind thoughts never seem to occur to him. Harsh words of censure are entirely absent from his vocabulary. Politicians of all parties are assessed with consistent generosity, though he tends to keep away from the career of Margaret Thatcher while losing no opportunity to praise the chief guardians of the post-war settlement, Clem Attlee and that great modern Tory, Harold Macmillan. He has an immense talent to amuse which has won him numerous friends everywhere, as is evident in his new book—his 16th, including edited works—where they are quoted in large number and in practically every paragraph in support of his views.

Civil servants love giving this charming scholar of modern government as much help as they can; archivists hasten to place the most important official documents before him as soon as they are released under the 30-year rule (shortly to be reduced to 20) in order to assist the studies of national defence and security issues which have always been among his chief preoccupations and are well represented in the essays which comprise this book.

Long gone are the days when as a young *Times* journalist he extracted pretty harmless but diverting pieces of information, then classified absurdly as state secrets, from daredevil officials, horrifying cabinet ministers and senior mandarins. Their often comic, unsuccessful efforts to hunt Hennessy's moles, now released under the

30-year rule, are the subject of one of the most richly enjoyable essays. Lasting peace between former combatants was celebrated in a Lords debate at the beginning of this year. Robert Armstrong, the former Cabinet Secretary, declared: "Now that the noble Lord is no longer a mischievous journalist but a learned professor, and I am a mandarin long put out to grass, we are firm friends".

It is as a result of the co-operation and confidences won through his unfailing geniality that he has become so brilliantly well-informed about contemporary history and such a sure-footed commentator on its successes and failures. The former, in his judgement, greatly outweigh the latter.

Hennessy is a master of the spoken, as well of the written, word deployed in relaxed, conversational style. Everything printed in this elegant volume formed part of a series of lectures delivered in Queen's University, Belfast earlier this year, though sadly he had nothing to say about Northern Ireland, scene of our greatest recent frenzy of all. Nowhere, however, are his sharp, witty disquisitions on our national affairs heard with keener attention or greater enjoyment than in the Lords which he joined as a cross-bencher in November 2010. Hennessy and the upper chamber were made for each other. The happy relationship was sealed when he emerged as a leading opponent of Mr Clegg's scheme to abolish and replace the institution venerated by Disraeli as 'the creation of ages' past, though known disrespectfully to the Hennessy grandchildren as Hogwarts.

The longest essay in this glittering collection provides a marvellous critique of the plans conceived by the Lib Dem leader in woeful ignorance of the history and conventions of the House he wished to destroy. Now that they are dead and buried, the way is open for the significant reform of the existing House, which Hennessy

champions vigorously. 'A streamlined House of Lords of 500 members by 2000...making better use of the combined expertise of their Lordships through more overarching select committees is the organic reform Parliament should go for.' This is a book which suggests how elements of the future should be shaped as well as recording how post-war Britain did rather better than its many detractors allow. 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian

### The Thick of it

Series 4

BBC 2, Saturday 9:45

"This is so like *The Thick of It*," has become the cliché of choice for government officials complaining about the excesses – or incompetence – of ministers or special advisors. And with good reason. When it first emerged, Armando Iannucci's programme satirised perfectly – in a heightened, hysterical way; like all the best satire – the obsessive headline-chasing and routine humiliations that characterise government at its most deranged.

The sharp-eyed observations were one thing, what really made it unmissable were the oh-so knowing pop-culture-saturated references and – of course – the glorious swearing. Sadly, linguistic flair of that calibre isn't common in real-life Whitehall 2012. If it was, the press releases would be better. Even more sadly, if the first episode is to be believed, some of that flair seems to have drained from the latest series.

We'd already lost the lugubrious Hugh Abbott of the first series – "the political equivalent of the house wine at a suburban Indian restaurant" – and now have to make do with a reduced quotient of Peter Capaldi as Malcolm Tucker, whose name has become a byword for a kind of unhinged,



garrulous nastiness: “Come the fuck in, or fuck the fuck off.”

Now, though Roger Allam is brilliant as Peter Mannion, the jaded (presumably) Tory nonplussed by the risible buzzwordery of the (presumably) Steve Hilton-inspired Stewart Pearson, the writing just isn’t as good. And because the script is less addictive, less muscular, I cared less about the characters and the coalition-themed story. The smartphone-themed initiative around which the first episode hinges is exactly the right kind of empty, ephemeral gimmick that the show should be attacking, and Mannion’s existential woe at having to launch such dross.

But the lines just aren’t as memorable, nor the scenes as iconic as Abbott being confronted in the first series by an NHS

user demanding to know whether he’d ever cleaned up his own mother’s piss. When Gordon Brown was confronted by Gillian Duffy in the 2010 general election,

“ The smartphone-themed initiative around which the first episode hinges is exactly the right kind of empty, ephemeral gimmick that the show should be attacking ”

it resonated so strongly in part because *The Thick of It* had seemed to predict it. Somehow, this time round, the stakes seem lower. Even the “InBetweeners”, the slightly predictable tag given to the

minister and adviser from the third party, don’t get the service from the writers we’ve come to expect.

Some have speculated that Ianucci’s attention has wandered across the Atlantic. *Veep*, his less verbally astringent and more plot-driven show about the US vice-presidency has won fawning praise. And rightly so – it’s certainly more compelling than the latest installment of its British antecedent.

The new series of *TTOI* isn’t bad by any means. It’s not, in Malcolm Tucker’s words, a fucking hurricane of piss or a marzipan dildo. It’s just not as seminal as it was. And I really hope it gets better, otherwise we’ll all have to think of a new cliché to console and amuse ourselves with. 🇬🇧

The reviewer is a Whitehall insider



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