

From A Very British Coup (1982) to Secret State (2012): The Changing Anatomy of Power and the Subversion of Democracy

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The transformation of Chris Mullin's *A Very British Coup* into the 2012 television thriller *Secret State* provides a fascinating illustration of how British political anxieties changed over three decades.

Both works address the same fundamental question:

What happens when a democratically elected government attempts to exercise political authority against powerful institutions that are not themselves democratically accountable?

Their answers, however, reflect substantially different historical circumstances. In Mullin's 1982 novel, the central conflict is between an elected socialist government and a conservative establishment determined to preserve Britain's Cold War political and economic order.

In *Secret State*, the conflict shifts toward the influence of multinational corporations, financial interests, private contractors and security institutions whose activities increasingly transcend national democratic control.

The distinction is not simply between socialism and capitalism. It concerns a deeper transformation in the organization of political power: from an identifiable national establishment defending an ideological order to overlapping networks of public and private power that can constrain elected governments without openly challenging the constitutional system.

One historical clarification is important. Mullin's novel was adapted for television in 1988 as *A Very British Coup*, starring Ray McAnally. *Secret State*, starring Gabriel Byrne, is a later, substantially reworked adaptation rather than a straightforward modernization of the novel.

Part I. Five major themes

1. Corporate Capture: When Economic Power Becomes Political Power

Central question: Who actually governs when a government depends on private economic institutions?

Corporate capture describes a situation in which private economic interests acquire disproportionate influence over public policy, regulation or governmental decisions.

The crucial distinction is between ordinary political influence and capture. Businesses have legitimate interests in public policy, and democratic governments must consider economic consequences. Capture arises when institutions become systematically responsive to particular private interests at the expense of their public responsibilities.

In A Very British Coup

Corporate influence is embedded within the established British class structure. Harry Perkins, a working-class Labour prime minister, seeks to implement a democratic socialist programme involving public ownership, economic redistribution and an independent foreign policy.

His opponents include influential business figures, financial interests, senior civil servants and other members of the establishment.

The conflict is relatively transparent at the ideological level: a socialist government threatens existing concentrations of property and economic power.

Corporate interests are therefore part of a broader conservative coalition seeking to prevent a structural transformation of British society.

In Secret State

The relationship is more complex.

A catastrophic industrial explosion associated with the fictional American petrochemical corporation PetroFex exposes an entanglement of corporate influence, government decision-making, national security and financial pressure.

Prime Minister Tom Dawkins discovers that determining responsibility is not simply a matter of identifying negligent corporate executives. Corporate influence reaches into institutions ostensibly responsible for investigating and regulating those same interests.

The central issue becomes whether the British government retains sufficient autonomy to act against a corporation whose economic and political connections give it extraordinary leverage.

The underlying mechanism

Concentrated economic resources

Capital, investment, employment, expertise

Privileged political access

Lobbying, financial leverage, revolving doors

Policy and regulatory influence

Agenda-setting, selective enforcement, dependency

Reduced democratic autonomy

Elected officials retain formal authority but face narrower practical choices

The most significant change between the two works is that economic power in Secret State is not merely defending an existing political order. It has become deeply integrated into the ordinary functioning of government.

This suggests a distinction between two forms of democratic vulnerability:

- **External pressure:** Corporate interests attempt to defeat or obstruct an elected government's programme.
- **Internal dependency:** Government institutions become so reliant on private economic actors that independent public decision-making is increasingly difficult.

The second is more subtle because democratic procedures may continue to operate normally even as the range of politically feasible decisions contracts.

2. The Deep State and Establishment Backlash

Central question: Can permanent institutions override the political direction chosen by voters?

The term deep state requires careful definition.

It can refer to clandestine networks within security, intelligence or administrative institutions that pursue objectives independently of elected authorities. In broader political discourse, however, the expression is often used loosely to describe ordinary bureaucratic resistance, institutional continuity or disagreement with political leaders.

These phenomena should not be conflated.

A professional civil service, independent judiciary and constitutionally constrained security apparatus can protect democracy. Their independence is not itself evidence of a clandestine political conspiracy.

The problem arises when officials or informal networks deliberately employ powers entrusted to them to defeat lawful democratic decisions through unauthorized or deceptive means.

In A Very British Coup

The establishment is a recognizable constellation of institutions:

- Senior civil servants and intelligence officials.
- Military and security elites.
- Financial and business interests.
- Influential newspapers and other opinion-forming institutions.
- Political actors committed to preserving Britain's strategic relationship with the United States.

Perkins's electoral victory gives him constitutional authority, but his opponents possess extensive institutional knowledge, privileged information and control over administrative processes.

They can therefore undermine his government without necessarily resorting to tanks in the streets or an overt military takeover.

This is the significance of the title *A Very British Coup*: political subversion can be conducted through apparently respectable institutional procedures.

In Secret State

The establishment is less easily identified with a single class or ideological tradition.

Instead, the drama presents overlapping networks of political, corporate, intelligence and financial influence.

Dawkins confronts institutions that possess information he does not control, maintain relationships he cannot fully scrutinize and operate across organizational boundaries that complicate accountability.

This creates a distinctive problem of modern governance: **the elected leader may possess formal authority while lacking effective control over the information and institutional capacities needed to exercise it.**

The political scientist Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz's concept of the second face of power is useful here. Power is exercised not only by winning visible political conflicts, but also by determining which questions reach the political agenda at all.

A government can be constrained before any parliamentary vote occurs, simply because critical alternatives are excluded, information is withheld or certain policies are declared economically or strategically impossible.

The two dramas thus portray different forms of establishment backlash:

Dimension	A Very British Coup	Secret State
Institutional character	Hierarchical national establishment	Interconnected public-private networks
Political objective	Prevent socialist transformation	Protect entrenched economic and institutional interests
Principal advantage	Class solidarity, intelligence and administrative power	Information asymmetry, financial leverage and institutional dependency
Democratic vulnerability	Elected mandate obstructed	Effective governing autonomy constrained

The deeper implication is that an overt coup may no longer be necessary to neutralize a government's capacity for independent action.

3. Surveillance State and Whistleblowers

Central question: What happens when the institutions controlling secret information can also determine political outcomes?

Surveillance is not merely a means of collecting intelligence. It can become a means of distributing power.

Those who possess confidential information about political leaders, businesses, journalists or citizens may gain leverage over those individuals.

This leverage can be exercised through selective disclosure, threats of exposure, manipulation of evidence or withholding of information.

In A Very British Coup

The intelligence establishment plays a central role in attempts to undermine Perkins. The Cold War provides an especially effective environment for political suspicion.

Allegations of communist sympathies, compromised loyalties or security vulnerabilities can be politically devastating, even when the underlying evidence is weak or misleading.

Intelligence therefore becomes an instrument of political legitimacy.

The question is no longer simply whether Perkins has democratic authority, but whether security institutions can portray him as unfit to exercise it.

In Secret State

The focus shifts toward the complex relationship between intelligence, secrecy, corporate misconduct and governmental accountability.

Sensitive information can expose wrongdoing, but the institutions controlling it can also obstruct investigations or protect powerful interests.

Whistleblowers and investigative journalists become important because they can interrupt the institutional monopoly over politically consequential information.

Yet the moral position of whistleblowing is not automatically straightforward.

Disclosures can expose genuine abuses, but they can also be selective, misleading or harmful to legitimate security interests.

The democratic issue is therefore how to establish reliable mechanisms for distinguishing protected public-interest disclosures from unauthorized disclosures that cause unjustified harm.

The historical transition from 1982 to 2012 is particularly revealing.

In the earlier Cold War environment, the central anxiety concerned the security services' ability to classify domestic political dissent as a national security threat.

By 2012, after the expansion of counterterrorism institutions and digital surveillance, the concern increasingly involved the scale of information collection and the difficulty of supervising complex intelligence systems.

Edward Snowden's disclosures occurred in 2013, after Secret State was broadcast. They nevertheless made the wider questions of surveillance and democratic oversight even more prominent.

The common theme is informational inequality: democratic accountability becomes fragile when the institutions being scrutinized also control much of the evidence required to scrutinize them.

4. Media Hegemony and Narrative Control

Central question: Who determines which political interpretations become publicly credible?

The concept of hegemony, associated particularly with Antonio Gramsci, helps explain how political power can be maintained through the shaping of public consent rather than coercion alone.

Media institutions influence not only what citizens know, but also the language and categories through which they interpret political events.

The importance of this mechanism is especially clear in political thrillers, where the

same event can be presented as evidence of government incompetence, corporate misconduct, foreign interference or a national security emergency.

In A Very British Coup

Much of the media establishment is hostile to Perkins's socialist programme.

Its power lies partly in determining the terms of political legitimacy.

Policies supported by voters can be framed as reckless, economically irresponsible or dangerous to national security.

The issue is not necessarily fabrication. It is the selective organization of facts within an interpretive framework that consistently favours established interests.

In Secret State

The media environment is more complex.

Journalism can serve as an instrument of manipulation, but investigative reporting can also expose corporate wrongdoing and governmental deception.

The central conflict therefore concerns the struggle to establish a credible public narrative.

Who caused the industrial disaster? Who knew about the risks? What evidence is being withheld? Which actors benefit from a particular explanation?

These questions illustrate several mechanisms of narrative control:

Mechanism	How it operates
Agenda-setting	Determines which issues receive sustained attention
Framing	Establishes how an event should be interpreted
Source dependency	Privileges officials and powerful organizations as authoritative sources
Selective disclosure	Releases information advantageous to particular actors
Reputational attacks	Shifts attention from allegations to the credibility of their critics

A useful theoretical reference is Manufacturing Consent (1988).

Herman and Chomsky argue that structural economic and institutional pressures can systematically shape news production without requiring a centralized conspiracy.

This framework illuminates both dramas, although it should be treated as a critical theory of media power rather than as proof that all journalism follows a unified political agenda.

The historical shift is from a relatively concentrated national press establishment to a more fragmented media environment in which corporations, political organizations, intelligence agencies and journalists compete to shape public understanding.

The democratic danger is not merely censorship. It is that citizens may retain access to abundant information while lacking reliable means of determining which competing accounts deserve trust.

5. Pretexts for Foreign Intervention

Central question: How can national security arguments be used to justify overriding democratic choices?

Foreign intervention is a recurring concern in political fiction because it exposes a tension between national sovereignty and international power.

A government may be democratically elected yet remain dependent on foreign military alliances, financial institutions, strategic technologies or international markets.

Those dependencies can restrict its freedom of action.

In A Very British Coup

Perkins's opposition to nuclear weapons and his challenge to Britain's established strategic alignment place him in conflict with powerful domestic and international interests.

The Cold War makes it possible to portray radical domestic policy as a threat to Western security.

The crucial mechanism is the transformation of political disagreement into a security question.

A programme that voters have endorsed can be described as dangerous not because it lacks democratic legitimacy, but because it conflicts with the strategic preferences of powerful allies.

The novel's political anxiety is therefore closely related to the possibility of external involvement in domestic political destabilization.

In Secret State

Foreign influence is less closely tied to a single ideological confrontation.

The fictional PetroFex affair highlights how transnational corporate interests, foreign governments and national security institutions may become entangled.

International leverage can arise through financial dependency, diplomatic pressure, corporate influence or strategic relationships.

Here it is useful to distinguish three concepts that political fiction sometimes brings together:

- **Foreign interference:** External attempts to influence another country's domestic political decisions.
- **Foreign intervention:** More direct involvement, potentially including coercive political, economic or military measures.
- **Security pretexts:** The invocation of national security to justify measures whose underlying objectives may be partly political or economic.

Neither drama should be read as documentary proof of a particular covert operation. Both instead explore the possibility that security justifications can conceal political motives.

The transformation is significant: in Mullin's Cold War setting, the external threat is primarily ideological and geopolitical. In Secret State, the perceived threat is increasingly linked to economic interdependence and the internationalization of corporate power.

Part II. The structural and ideological transformation, 1982–2012

The five themes become especially revealing when considered through three larger questions: the nature of the ideological threat, the identity of the antagonists and the methods of political subversion.

1. The Nature of the Ideological Threat

In 1982, Mullin imagined a political conflict in which ideological alternatives remained clearly identifiable.

Harry Perkins represents democratic socialism. His opponents defend a political and economic order organized around private ownership, Western strategic alliances and established class relationships.

The central question is whether a government elected to change that order will actually be permitted to do so.

By 2012, the ideological setting had changed.

The Cold War had ended, financial globalization had intensified, and the 2008 financial crisis had exposed the dependence of governments on institutions whose operations extended beyond national borders.

Tom Dawkins is not another Harry Perkins. He does not represent an equally comprehensive alternative economic system.

Instead, he seeks accountability, transparency and justice within the existing political and economic order.

This difference is fundamental.

Perkins challenges the legitimacy of the system's underlying arrangements. Dawkins challenges the corruption and abuse of power within those arrangements.

The adaptation therefore replaces a revolutionary or transformational political horizon with a more limited struggle to restore institutional integrity.

This was a deliberate modernization. Channel 4's original production notes describe the effort to reinterpret Mullin's Cold War story for contemporary political circumstances.

2. The Primary Antagonists

The antagonists in *A Very British Coup* are comparatively easy to identify.

They occupy positions within the British establishment and share an interest in preventing a socialist government from changing the country's political direction.

Their power derives from institutional authority, social status, intelligence capabilities and established international alliances.

In *Secret State*, power appears more dispersed.

Corporate executives, financial institutions, political insiders and security officials possess different resources, but their interests can converge.

There is no need for every participant to share an ideology or belong to a single organization.

Cooperation may arise because each actor has something to lose from public disclosure or independent investigation.

This suggests a movement from class-based establishment solidarity toward network-based institutional self-protection.

However, this distinction should not be overstated. Mullin's original novel already recognizes financial and corporate power, while Secret State retains traditional conspiratorial elements involving senior officials and the military.

The transformation is therefore a shift in emphasis, not an absolute historical rupture.

3. The Methods of Subversion

Two models of political subversion

1982: Establishment resistance

Elected government

Challenges established ideology and alliances

Institutional backlash

Smears, intelligence manipulation, political pressure

Threat to elected mandate

2012: Networked capture

Public-private networks

Control resources, information and dependencies

Concealed leverage

Secrecy, financial pressure, compromised oversight

Threat to governing autonomy

Interpretive models of the two works, rather than literal reconstructions of every plot event.

In the earlier story, subversion is primarily directed against a particular government because of what it intends to accomplish.

In the later drama, the problem is more systemic: the institutions governing political and economic life are so intertwined that exposing wrongdoing threatens multiple centers of power simultaneously.

One important qualification concerns the endings. Mullin's 1982 novel and the 1988 television adaptation have materially different conclusions. The television version gives Perkins a more defiant final confrontation and ends with an ominous suggestion of military intervention. The novel's resolution is less triumphant. It is therefore important not to attribute the 1988 adaptation's final imagery directly to the novel.

Part III. What changed in the conception of democracy?

The most interesting implication of the comparison is that the meaning of democratic sovereignty changes.

In the earlier work, democracy is primarily understood as the right of the electorate to choose between fundamentally different political programmes.

The central fear is that powerful unelected institutions will refuse to accept the consequences of that choice.

In the later work, democracy also means the practical ability of elected institutions to investigate wrongdoing, regulate economic activity and hold powerful organizations accountable.

The fear is that governments may formally possess these powers while being unable to exercise them independently.

Analytical question	1982: A Very British Coup	2012: Secret State
What is being defended?	The existing ideological and strategic order	Entrenched corporate and institutional interests
What threatens the powerful?	A democratically elected socialist programme	Exposure of misconduct and demands for accountability
Where does power reside?	Primarily in national elite institutions	In interconnected national and transnational networks
How is political resistance organized?	Coordinated establishment opposition	Overlapping institutional and economic interests
What is the central democratic problem?	Can voters change the system?	Can elected government control the system?
What kind of democracy is endangered?	Electoral and programmatic sovereignty	Effective accountability and governing autonomy

Part IV. A deeper political interpretation

The transformation can be illuminated through three political thinkers.

Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony

Gramsci helps explain why political domination need not rely on direct coercion. Established interests can maintain their position by shaping what society regards as reasonable, legitimate and possible.

This is especially relevant to the media and institutional pressures depicted in Mullin's novel.

Michel Foucault: Dispersed power

Foucault's conception of power as operating through institutions, knowledge,

practices and social relationships helps illuminate Secret State.

Political power need not be concentrated in a single commanding authority. It can be exercised through interdependent institutions whose normal operations shape and restrict the conduct of others.

This is a useful interpretive framework, although Foucault's theory should not be reduced to the idea of a hidden conspiracy.

Colin Crouch: Post-democracy

Perhaps the most directly relevant concept is Post-Democracy (2004).

Crouch describes a condition in which democratic institutions continue to function, elections remain competitive and constitutional procedures survive, but the effective substance of political decision-making increasingly shifts toward professional political elites and powerful economic interests.

This provides a conceptual bridge between the two dramas.

- Mullin asks whether democratic institutions can survive an organized attack from the establishment.
- Secret State asks whether those institutions can remain genuinely accountable when public and private power have become deeply interdependent.

There is nevertheless an important analytical distinction: the presence of corporate influence, intelligence secrecy or bureaucratic independence does not by itself establish democratic capture. That conclusion requires evidence of particular mechanisms, decisions and failures of accountability.

Conclusion: From the Coup d'État to the Hollowing-Out of Democracy

The movement from *A Very British Coup* to *Secret State* can be understood as a transformation in the imagined relationship between democracy and power.

In 1982, the nightmare is that a government elected to change society will be overthrown or forced to abandon its programme by institutions unwilling to accept democratic change.

In 2012, the nightmare is that a government may continue to govern, Parliament may continue to meet and elections may continue to take place, while consequential decisions are increasingly constrained by powerful actors operating beyond effective public scrutiny.

The earlier work dramatizes the possibility of democracy being defeated by its enemies within the establishment.

The later work dramatizes the possibility of democracy being weakened by the institutional arrangements through which it ordinarily operates.

This is not necessarily evidence that one form of domination historically replaced the other. Both forms can coexist, and the two works are fictional interpretations of their respective periods rather than comprehensive descriptions of Western political systems.

Nevertheless, the comparison reveals a profound change in political imagination.

The decisive question is no longer only whether elected leaders can withstand a coup.

It is also whether democratic institutions retain the information, independence and practical capacity to make consequential decisions in the public interest.

In that sense, the transition from Harry Perkins to Tom Dawkins represents a movement from the fear that democracy might be overthrown to the fear that democracy might remain formally intact while losing much of its effective power.

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