

# Spin Doctor

From genocide to Thatcherism, Whovian politics is not as simple as you think

By Andrew Harrison

Under conditions of war, a British prime minister learns that a heavily armed warship belonging to the hostile power has been detected. Though it is travelling away from the theatre of conflict and poses no immediate threat, she orders it to be destroyed – an action that ultimately ends her premiership.

In another time, a western liberal democracy that has been conquered and colonised many times in the past discovers a previously hidden enclave of its territory's original occupants, an entirely different culture that has a credible prior claim to the country's land and resources. The response of the democracy's military is to wipe them out in a deliberate act of genocide. The figure who embodies the democracy's most liberal instincts is briefly outraged but his anger fades and he is soon friends with the military leader again.

Many years later, that liberal conscience figure is twice faced with the same problem. In one instance, he brokers talks between the two parties that eventually result in a new era of peace. In another, apparently forgetting himself, he incites the newcomers to rise up and massacre their previously hidden neighbours and gleefully joins in.

If you spotted that those examples concerned Prime Minister Harriet Jones doing a *Belgrano* on the fleeing Sycorax spaceship in "The Christmas Invasion" (2005), the Brigadier blowing up a population of subterranean humanoid dinosaurs in "The Silurians" (1970) and the 11th Doctor, played by Matt Smith, being inconsistent in his response to *Homo reptilia* and to the Edvard Munch-inspired mind-wipers the Silence in "Cold Blood" (2011) and "Day of the Moon" (2012), respectively, well done and have a jelly baby. You are an observant Whovian and you are not oblivious to the political side of the world's most successful sci-fi programme, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this month.

Sydney Newman, the driving force behind the creation of *Doctor Who* in 1963, once described sci-fi as "a marvellous way – and a safe way, I might add – of saying nasty things about our own society". *Doctor Who* has had plenty of nasty things to say about our society over the years but the politics and ethics of its hero have proved as malleable as its core cast.

When faced with intergalactic imperialism, be it on the planets Deva Loka, Dulkis or Delta Magna, the Doctor is usually against it. When it comes to the moral acid test of liberal democracies – genocide – he's more capricious. In "Genesis of the Daleks" (1975), Tom Baker's Doctor can't bring himself to destroy the metal rotters. A few years later, in "Remembrance of the Daleks" (1988), the seventh Doctor (Sylvester McCoy) happily tosses a planet-killing weapon at their home world, Skaro, and obliterates the lot of them.

---

He wiped out his own people. Is a hero who has killed billions still a hero?

---

An odd piece in the *New Yorker* recently cited the extinction of the Doctor's people, the Time Lords, to posit the idea that the modern *Who* is some sort of parable about our refusal to engage with the Holocaust. The writer didn't seem to notice that it was the Doctor who had wiped out his own people, along with the Daleks. Is a hero who has killed billions still a hero? "Fear me, Doctor, I've killed hundreds of Time Lords," says a disembodied creature called House in "The Doctor's Wife" (2011). "Fear me," Matt Smith's Doctor replies. "I've killed all of them."

This moral and political waywardness is a function of *Doctor Who*'s unique development over the past 50 years. Unlike *Harry*

*Potter* or the *Star Wars* franchise, *Who* has never had a single, consistent governing mind behind it. With a new creative team every few years and only a handful of recurring elements – police box, science hero, time travel, Daleks – the show reinvents itself on a regular basis. It is open-source fiction, endlessly renewable, which is the secret of its longevity. No wonder its politics can be random.

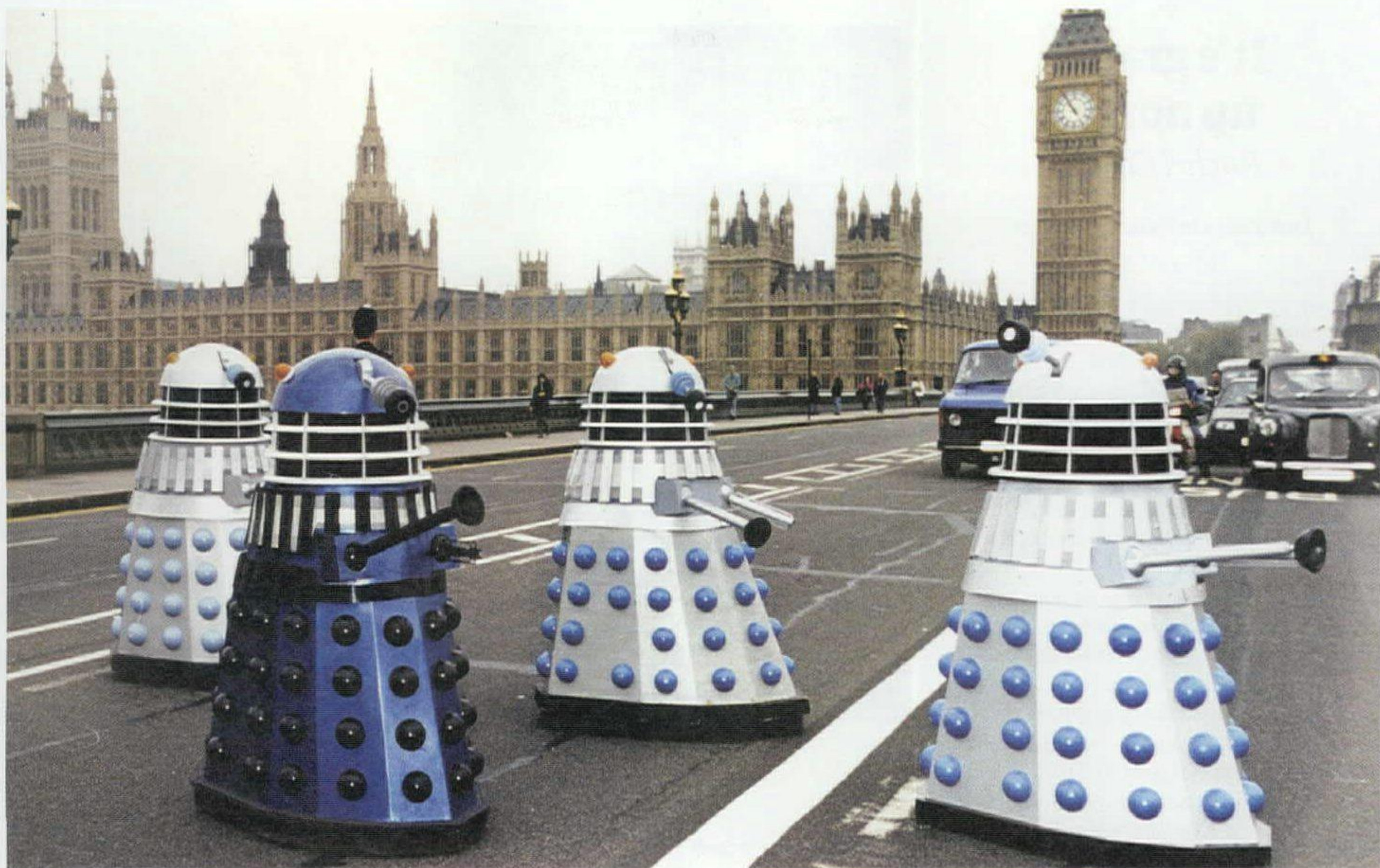
Many of today's journalists are of the right age to have seen Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker in the role, so it's typical to hear *Doctor Who* portrayed as the Bolshevik Broadcasting Corporation's lefty parables about the evils of big business, imperialism, militarism and general downerism. There are certainly plenty of examples from the classic pre-revival series that show everything that conservatives hold dear in a poor light.

"The Mutants" (1972) lambasted apartheid on an alien world at a time when South Africa's racial separatism was far from anathema to the right. Every other Jon Pertwee adventure seemed to concern struggling miners or malevolent businesses. The wonderful story "The Green Death" (1973) could have been subtitled "Joe Gormley v the Giant Maggots" and features a megalomaniacal computer, BOSS (do you see?), that controls the perfidious petrochemical venture Global Chemicals.

The preceding Patrick Troughton years (1966-69) had a fair crack at the evil businessman meme, too. The villain Tobias Vaughn, a sort of 1960s Alan Sugar, was a one-man fifth column for the Cyberman invasion of 1968. In "The Enemy of the World", a recently rediscovered story from the same year, Troughton played the Doctor's double, a sinister agribusiness oligarch with an admittedly unfortunate comedy Mexican accent.

Decades later, during the show's late-1980s Indian summer, a new, left-leaning script team including Ben Aaronovitch – brother





**Space invaders: Daleks on Westminster Bridge in 1993, celebrating *Doctor Who*'s 30th anniversary**

of the newspaper columnist David – smuggled a few anti-Thatcherite themes into the dwindling series. These included an overbearingly upbeat leader called Helen A, who demanded continual happiness from her subjects on pain of death.

Looking back on *Who* for the *Telegraph*, Damian Thompson decried the “cringe-making... left-liberal subtext of many of the storylines, in which benevolent internationalism was pitted against the rancid jingoism of the British establishment... *Doctor Who* in the early 1970s reached the height of absurdist fantasy,” he noted. Well, it is a fantasy programme – and, as “scientific adviser” to the United Nations Intelligence Task Force (and best chums with the Brigadier), the Doctor was a paid-up member of the military-industrial complex, anyway.

However, if you look hard enough, you can find the ghost of other political traditions in the original *Who*. Though born in the Wilsonian white heat of technology, the Cybermen were a warning about depersonalisation. They were faceless new men, Leninist monsters to mirror the fascist Daleks, the iron men from behind the Iron Curtain. (When they were revived in 2006, the Cybermen were the product of another deranged businessman.)

Beset by tax worries in the pip-squeezing Jim Callaghan years, *Doctor Who*'s greatest scriptwriter, Robert Holmes, produced a

story called “The Sun Makers” (1977), about an overtaxed and oppressed population on Pluto. It featured a villain with Dennis Healey eyebrows, a security force called the Inner Retinue and a corridor called P45. This was *Doctor Who*'s equivalent of the Beatles' “Taxman”.

In 1968, as the show's patrician mission to explain history to youngsters was slowly replaced by a parade of increasingly rapacious monsters, Troughton's Doctor even made a short but impassioned case for what we would now call liberal interventionism. “There are some corners of the universe which have bred the most terrible things,” he tells the crew of a moon base menaced by Cybermen, “things which act against everything that we believe in. They must be fought.”

Everyone who saw it remembers it – it was *Doctor Who*'s Agincourt speech, delivered by an actor we're now reappraising as possibly the best Doctor ever. This was the point at which *Doctor Who* ceased to be a random wander through time and space and became the story of humanoid good against alien evil that continues, with tweaks, today.

In its revived form, *Doctor Who* is more personal, less didactic but alive to the notion that the personal is political. The bisexual Captain Jack Harkness – who was so much more likeable when he was a roving-eyed space rascal and not the angst-ridden bore

of *Torchwood* – and the human-Silurian lesbian couple Jenny and Madame Vastra have done their small bit for equality. Christopher Eccleston's working-class Doctor was a melancholy war survivor brought back to life by an ordinary shop girl, Rose (moral: we want to live like common people). David Tennant's incarnation only made things worse with his interventions in time and space, ending up alone and learning that sometimes the solution is worse than the problem – a very Noughties fate.

With its fairy-tale tropes and the poly-dimensional affair between the Doctor and River Song, Matt Smith's world is harder to parse politically, although we have learned that there is a Dalek parliament. (How does one get elected? Tough on humans, tough on the causes of humans?) Perhaps clarity will come with his finale at Christmas.

As for Peter Capaldi, who knows? The only safe prediction is that the Doctor will remain the last great Enlightenment figure: egalitarian, ever curious and dedicated to reason and the principle that the sonic screwdriver is mightier than the sword. These are embattled qualities. We may need them even more in 2063 than we do now. ●

*Andrew Harrison is a writer and magazine editor*