

# *This England: A deeply flawed drama on the pandemic in the UK*

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7 November 2022

*Written by Michael Winterbottom and Kieron Quirke*

The COVID-19 pandemic is a social crime of almost unprecedented proportions. The response of the ruling class to a global health crisis was a homicidal policy of deliberate mass infection. The result is more than 200,000 UK deaths so far, and around 2 million people—100,000 of them children—suffering with Long COVID.

There are still very few artistic interpretations of the pandemic, and there has been some suppression of cultural responses. Dramatists who have broken through have produced some powerful work. Jack Thorne's *Help* pointed towards the culpability of policy decisions in the mounting death toll.

It promised much, therefore, when a significant filmmaker, Michael Winterbottom, employed a fine actor, Kenneth Branagh, in a six-part prestige drama series for a leading broadcaster. The Shakespearean title suggests a state-of-the-nation piece by Winterbottom and co-writer Kieron Quirke. But its intellectual, political and artistic complacency make for a deeply compromised and artistically disappointing work.

*This England* [*This Sceptred Isle* in the US] presents seven hours of dramatisations of documented events, intercut with documentary footage, focusing largely on intrigues and disputes within government and its official bodies. Everything is seen superficially, as reactions to an escalating health emergency—"Just to try and show what happened," in Winterbottom's words.

The writers seem overwhelmed, but the problem is deeper, as Winterbottom made clear in some astonishing comments before broadcast: "People make mistakes, but the starting point was we assumed that everyone responded in what they thought was the best way. ... Afterwards, people can think for themselves about whether they feel [they were] right or wrong."

Who could seriously take such an approach of asserting universal good faith? A pose of impartiality means accepting as good coin the very lies the government used to justify policies that have killed hundreds of thousands so far and which continue to allow a devastating disease free rein through the population. It means lending credence to the advocates of a discredited policy of "herd immunity" and to government lies that it was "following the science" rather than safeguarding corporate profits at the direct cost of the health and lives of millions.

This policy of deliberate mass infection was a monstrous social crime. To treat its perpetrators as acting with the best of intentions is to take naiveté to the level of complicity. No intellectual or

artistic good can come from such wilful blindness.

For the government, "following the science" meant the opposite. It meant "herd immunity," rejecting even the idea of eradication. Chief Medical Officer Sir Chris Whitty (Jimmy Livingstone), one of the central mouthpieces of government policy, says here "You can't stop a virus."

The political architects of a policy of mass social murder are all more or less let off the hook in the series. The dramatic content peters out after the exposure of Dominic Cummings's (Simon Paisley Day) breach of lockdown regulations, leading ultimately to his removal. Aside from Cummings's breach, other instances (Health Secretary Matt Hancock's resignation, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's fine) are casually tossed out in the breakneck précis of later events that wraps up the last episode.

The perfunctory summary lends support to Johnson's lie that we are "past the peak of this disease." *This England* concludes by looking forward to the 2023 official public inquiry, as if the British ruling class had never used such inquiries as a way of justifying their criminal actions and diverting any political reckoning with them.

Johnson's reported comment "No more fucking lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands!" and Dominic Cummings's whiteboard question "Who do we not save?" do not appear. Their inclusion would expose an explicit homicidal ideology.

It gets worse. Winterbottom called the pandemic's first wave, "A time when the country came together to battle an invisible enemy," saying the series would be "chronicling the efforts of scientists, doctors, care home workers and policy makers to protect us from the virus."

This is a whitewashing of the criminal actions of the ruling class. There are more than 200,000 arguments that the country did not "come together." This is the dramatic equivalent of the "clap for carers"—a fraudulent gesture covering up the very policies which put them at risk.

Workers in health, food production and transport were deemed "essential" and forced into dangerous workplaces, at the greatest risk, at the behest of "policy makers."

Whatever gestures towards health protection and mitigation the government was forced to make were responses to furious popular anger in the face of the ruling elite's ongoing policy of mass infection. Even when forced into belated restrictive measures, which he opposed, Johnson appealed to the idea the UK could

“take it on the chin.” He was quick to say the worst was over to justify premature reopening of the economy.

The government delayed lockdowns so as not to disrupt corporate profiteering, including allowing numerous super-spreader sporting events to go ahead, accelerating the circulation of the virus further. It then relaxed or abandoned restrictions as soon as possible, including reopening schools to get parents back to work that led to a deadly second wave of infections.

There are no classes in this view of the nation. Winterbottom’s title comes from Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. It begins as a paean, before the speaker, John of Gaunt, turns critical: “That England, that was wont to conquer others, / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.”

*This England* gets to those lines eventually, but a myth of national unity unriven by class bears no resemblance to reality. Its promotion requires Winterbottom and Quirke to become ever more superficial, and ever more conciliatory to the ruling elite. This is an establishment piece.

For all its scenes of care homes and hospitals, *This England* is more interested in internal government disputes. It is generally sympathetic in its treatment of Johnson and Cummings’s personal COVID experiences.

There is a greater focus on Johnson’s hospitalisation than the horrors experienced by care home residents and their relatives. Johnson was extremely ill, but *This England* finds no place for his subsequent use of this to justify further his eugenicist “herd immunity” policy.

Eugenics is only raised when Cummings’s appointee Andrew Sabisky was forced out amidst popular outrage at his racism. Johnson shouts furiously that eugenics is not a good look. The viewer might believe Johnson opposed the policy, not just its exposure, but this policy underpinned his entire response.

Branagh’s impersonation and prosthetic make-up attracted much of the initial reaction to the series, but this only indicates its general refusal to go deeper. Johnson is a ruthless, right-wing political operator. His cultivated “bumbling” persona is a cynical populist device. Yet it is only challenged once, when we see a brief parade of his vilest journalistic comments in COVID-induced hallucinatory dreams.

Winterbottom and Quirke refer to Shakespeare in titling their piece. But what would Shakespeare have made of Boris Johnson? Unlike Winterbottom’s trust in best intentions, his plays are full of characters whose appearance and agenda differ: “some that smile have in their hearts, I fear, / Millions of mischiefs” (*Julius Caesar*).

He would have no truck with Johnson’s carefully cultivated public image, writing in the voice of *Richard III*, “And thus I clothe my naked villainy / With odd old ends stol’n out of holy writ, / And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.”

Winterbottom and Quirke’s Johnson is merely a shallow victim of his own populism, rather than a political criminal the bereaved families of COVID victims are demanding is prosecuted.

Johnson’s latest wife, Carrie Symonds (Ophelia Lovibond)—a former Tory press office political non-entity—is similarly uncritically presented as a moral common-sense adviser, encouraging distance from the reviled Cummings.

This is farcical. Johnson brought Cummings on board as the ideologue of a shared right-wing agenda. Winterbottom treats Cummings as the driving force, with his determination to dismantle government. He suggests political differences between the two, with Johnson at one point asking if the fault really is all big government’s: “Not us? We’ve failed. We fucked up.”

This fallout was not initially based on any serious political disagreement. Johnson threw Cummings under a bus to save himself. It was a messy divorce row, not an ideological split.

One factor in Winterbottom’s disorientation is undoubtedly the role played by the Labour Party, which has been in loyal lockstep with government policy on COVID throughout. Previous Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn admitted keeping silent that government advisers had “lectured” him on “herd immunity.” His Blairite successor, Sir Keir Starmer, demanded schools remain open in the second lockdown, “No ifs, or buts.” Both proclaimed a policy of national unity and an end to “opposition for its own sake.”

Yet one of the few occasions *This England* shows us Johnson genuinely angry follows a parliamentary grilling by Starmer on lockdown breaches!

If Winterbottom and Quirke have any single villain, it is Brexit. The government’s decision to shelve contingency recommendations from an earlier pandemic modelling exercise is treated as the result of Brexit chaos rather than deliberate, brutal policy. Despite mentioning the death tolls in Italy and Spain, Winterbottom cannot look honestly at the situation across Europe. The same policies had the same effect, and the ruling class worldwide has been guided by a common policy which has resulted in the deaths of millions.

What would it take for Winterbottom to register that? A bombardment of detail on its own will in any case shed little light. Any attempt to address the pandemic or any major social crises artistically is doomed to failure if it fails to explore the opposed class interests that shape them and which will ultimately determine their outcome.



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