

Master of the absurd



By Jim Denham

PETER COOK MADE his early reputation as a satirist with a remarkable impersonation of Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (1957-63). He had the old poseur off to a tee: the patrician drawl, the mis-timed gestures and the mind-boggling complacency. Defending Britain's nuclear policy and the "four-minute warning" civilians would have once the missiles had been launched, Cook's Macmillan declared "I would remind them there are some people in this great country of ours who can run a mile in four minutes."

This was probably the first time a British prime minister had been held up for public ridicule by a comedian, and it gained Cook the 'political' reputation that stayed with him for the rest of his life. In fact, Cook was not especially political, either as a person or as a performer. His Macmillan was notable more for its characterisation than for any political content: an eccentric, over-confident buffoon straight out of an Ealing comedy.

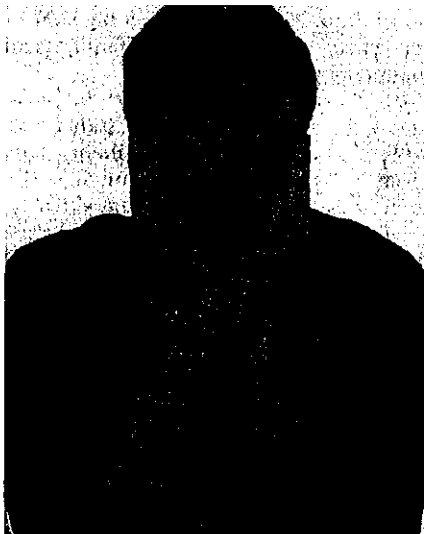
Cook was the first to acknowledge the political limitations of satire. When, on the back of the success of *Beyond the Fringe*, he founded the 'Establishment Club' in 1961, he described it as "a satirical venue" to be modelled on "those wonderful Berlin cabarets which did so much to stop the rise of Hitler and prevent the outbreak of the Second World War." Cook was a surrealist, a connoisseur of the absurd. His Harold Macmillan was merely one of a series of bizarre characterisations like the police commissioner investigating the Great Train Robbery, proudly announcing his discovery that "This is the work of thieves — the tell-tale loss of property, the snatching away of money-substances: it all points to thieves."

His association with *Private Eye*, which he saved from bankruptcy in 1962, further bolstered the mistaken perception of Cook

as "political." In fact, the *Eye* was (and remains) an essentially nihilist, apolitical, publication, despite the participation of token lefties like Paul Foot and (for a while) the right-wing eccentric Auberon Waugh. And, by all accounts, Cook's main contribution to the magazine was to suggest jokes — usually of a surreal and/or scatological nature.

The first editor, Richard Ingrams, considered Cook "too sex-orientated: he sees wage restraint in terms of masturbation." Nevertheless, Cook bankrolled the *Eye* through a series of expensive lawsuits and often found himself in court against such figures as James Goldsmith and Robert Maxwell. During Maxwell's attempt to bankrupt the magazine Cook led a drunken raiding-party on the *Mirror* offices and occupied the Cap'n's office, from where he taunted the monster over the phone.

What little political content there had been in Cook's own work virtually disappeared after Wilson's election in 1964, presumably because whatever was wrong with the Wilson regime, it didn't strike him as particularly absurd. And when Thatcherism gave rise to a new generation of political comedians, Cook was noticeably absent. Not because he liked Mrs T (he



Rory Bremner: in the tradition of the best satire

hated and despised her) but because she wasn't intrinsically funny. Cook couldn't summon up the appropriate moral indignation of a Ben Elton or a Steve Bell.

By this time Cook's public appearances were limited to guest appearances (usually



Peter Cook

drunk but often very funny) on chat shows and *Whose Line It Anyway?* and an embarrassing attempt to break into American TV (if you missed his sad role as Joan Rivers' stooge, you're lucky). Some of his films — notably the Faustian *Bedazzled* (which he also wrote) — were reasonably good but did not fulfil the glorious promise of his early years. His funniest latter-day performances were on Clive Anderson's show, where politics was also notable for its absence.

He was a hugely talented, lazy and by all accounts very likeable man. But a satirist? Not really, and certainly not by the end.

That baton has passed to the brilliant Rory Bremner, whose Channel Four series has now, sadly, ended. Here was the true satirist at its most perceptive and telling. Bremner's Tony Blair, capturing all the Boy Wonder's vacuous inanity ("tea for two.. or two for tea... or coffee if you prefer") is the result of close study at Labour Party Conference. Let's hope we see more of it after the next election. One of the best spots on Bremner's show was the regular John Bird/John Fortune dialogue lampooning the evasions and banality of (obviously) Tory politicians. Bird and Fortune are contemporaries of Cook who kept satire alive through the Wilson years. They are absurdist, but also fundamentally political (unlike Cook, Bird did see the funny side of Harold Wilson and specialised in a masterful Gannex-and-pipe impersonation, using the catch-phrase "to be quite frank, honest and reasonable". It caught Wilson's down-home phinness perfectly).

Satire does not topple governments and probably doesn't change anything very much at all. But it keep us sane and, as Bremner has said, he sometimes feels as though he's a better leader of the opposition than Tony Blair. He's certainly more radical, though maybe not quite so funny. ☐