



THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION OF  
*OUTRAGEOUS, WEIRD, AND*  
*UNBELIEVABLE* POLITICAL TALES

PHIL MASON

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# DEAD MAN WINS ELECTION

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Published by Sourcebooks, Inc.

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

Fax: (630) 961-2168

www.sourcebooks.com

Originally published in Great Britain in 2010 by JR Books

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mason, Phil, 1958-

Dead man wins election : the ultimate collection of wacky and unbelievable tales from politics / Phil Mason.

“Originally published in Great Britain in 2010 by JR Books”—t.p. verso.

Includes index.

(trade paper : alk. paper) 1. Politics, Practical—Humor. 2. Politics, Practical—Anecdotes. I. Title.

PN6231.P6M37 2012

324.02'07—dc23

2012011801

Printed and bound in United States of America.

VP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*For Ally, but for whose long (and mainly silent) suffering this volume would not have seen the light of day.*

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*In putting up with my persistent flight from domestic life for endless days and nights, she has perhaps approached knowing what it must be like to be a politician's wife—a husband who is never around when needed, who appears to be engaged in a tedium the merits of which she cannot begin to fathom and, worse, one which relies on the wisdom of untold strangers whom we'll never know for its success.*

*So here's to all you strangers, too!*

# ★ INTRODUCTION ★

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In November 2000, voters from Missouri elected a dead man as their senator. Former governor M. Carnahan had died in an air crash three weeks before election day. But he still won by a 2 percent margin. Unusual as Carnahan's achievement may sound, he is by no means unique. You will encounter seven others in these pages who have gained this ultimate accolade just in recent times, including one who won over 90 percent of the vote, and one who won on the toss of a coin. Another, although he lost, amassed over half a million votes.

You will encounter many more strange episodes within these covers, from the candidate for mayor who got his twin brother to stand in for him at a city parade that clashed with his campaign rally to the environment minister who used a stretch limo to ride to a conference to make a speech on excessive car use; from the Canadian province that found all its laws passed in 95 years to be invalid to the Australian state that discovered in 2002 that it was still officially at war with Japan; and from the legislators of West Virginia who engaged in a protracted dispute as to whether the official state musical instrument should be the fiddle or the dulcimer to the local council in Wales that kept "temporary" traffic lights in place for 28 years.

These, and hundreds more, are deeds that may redefine your view of politics, politicians, and the trade they ply on our behalf. *Dead Man Wins Election* collects the best of the worst of politicians' extraordinary antics over the past three decades (and a bit more besides). We will come across incompetence and audacity, egotism and brazenness, largesse and myopia, the mad and the bad, the feckless and the luckless: enough perhaps to make us truly wonder whether we are sane in holding on to the idea that we elect our politicians on the basis of some feeling of trust that our futures lie safe in their hands. The practice recounted here would suggest a very different story.

Politics is a rich terrain for idiosyncrasy and the unexpected. By its nature, it is a risky business. Careers rest uneasily on the periodic judgment of voters. A glittering path can be snuffed out in a single adverse turn of electoral fortune. What certainties can they look to? "All political lives...end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs." So, in 1977, wrote British politician Enoch Powell, who is generally regarded as having crashed his own career with a single ill-judged phrase in a single speech as he summed up another exploded reputation, that of Joseph Chamberlain.

So if that is the prospect, how can we expect more from our entrusted leaders? They might be forgiven their shortcuts and their short-term outlooks. They might be forgiven their duplicities, for the chances of permanently avoiding calamity are virtually nonexistent. A frequently told Westminster story perhaps gives a clue to the essential powerlessness of a politician operating always at the mercy of "events." A cabinet minister, arriving at his new desk on the day of his appointment, finds three brown envelopes left by his predecessor, numbered one to three, with a note: "Open only when in trouble." Nine months into his job, the first crisis hits. The minister opens the first envelope. Inside

a slip that reads: "Blame your predecessor." He does, and the emergency is successfully overcome. A few months later, the next disaster hits. He opens the second envelope. The slip reads: "Reorganize your department." He does so, with a fanfare sufficient to distract attention, and he survives again. When the third calamity strikes, he turns to the third envelope, to be told: "Write out three envelopes..."

This collection will give you a completely fresh perspective on politics and its propensity for the outrageous, the extreme, and the just plain unbelievable. We will explore parliaments, the task of government, elections, the responsibilities of office and diplomacy, as well as the often unfathomable world of local and parish council politics and the mad, modern world of health and safety. We'll also portray the best and funniest political wisdom.

Most of our tales are from the last 30 years. Lest this should lend credence to any impression that political insanity is merely a modern phenomenon, we end each chapter with a selection of the choicest snippets from the pages of history to restore the balance. Politics has been the magnet for the unhinged since the dawn of civilization. That much, if little else, is clear.

What emerges from it all? Perhaps just that anything, literally anything, can be expected from our politicians. As characters they range from out-of-control egotists who excel in repelling those they come into contact with to fish-out-of-water ingenues who simply mystify us all in how or why they got involved in the first place. And there are shades at all points in between, examples of whom you are about to meet.

Two illustrations of these extremes serve to set the scene. For brazenness there can be no better example than the driven, and some would say power-crazy, political machine that was Lyndon Johnson. As newly appointed vice president under John F. Kennedy after an already long career on Capitol Hill, he made his mark on senators in his usual ferocious way. One day he spotted a face in the Congress corridor, shouted, "You, I've been looking for you," and pulled the unfortunate senator into his room to begin an animated pep talk about how important the legislator was to the administration. As he barreled along, he scribbled something on a piece of paper and pressed a buzzer for his secretary, who came in and took it away. Johnson kept up an unremitting torrent of political puff. A few minutes later, the secretary returned and gave the paper back to him. He glanced at it without interrupting his flow, screwed it up and threw it in the bin, and hurtled on. A journalist afterwards discovered what Johnson had written on the paper: "Who is this I'm talking to?"

At the other end of the scale lie the likes of Ernest Bevin. We see in chapter 7 how this former trade union leader and genial embodiment of the working class, whom Attlee remarkably made foreign secretary in the postwar labor government of 1945–51, defused ambassadorial pomposity with his common touch. Shortly after taking up his post at the Foreign Office, Bevin returned to his office one Friday afternoon to find that his private secretary had left on his desk a huge pile of papers, on top of which was a carefully penned note: "The Secretary of State may care to peruse these at his leisure before Monday." Without looking at his homework, Bevin penned an equally short and obliging note and left for the weekend: "A kindly thought, but erroneous."

He perhaps also epitomizes the gap that oftentimes exists between politics as the personal endeavor and politics as "the system," the machine that controls. It is this gap, and a politician's success or

failure (and desire) in bridging it, that makes politics such a rich territory for oddity, and the terra  
that we explore here.

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*Dead Man Wins Election* ought to sow doubt in your minds about anyone standing for political office. When you reach the end, you too may conclude we Americans, who like to think of ourselves as the world's fullest exponents of the democratic creed, were perhaps saying more than we knew when we chose as our national motto, "In God we trust." For as sure as anything, we have been taking a risk with our earthly rulers ever since.

Phil Mason

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# 1

## THE BEAST WITHIN: OFFICEHOLDERS

*When Harold Macmillan became prime minister in 1957, his appointment took second place on the front page of his local paper in Sussex, beaten by a report of a Brighton and Hove Albion football match. He kept the cutting on his desk at No. 10 in order, he said, to guard against the temptation toward self-importance. Most politicians are not like Macmillan. As they seek to climb the greasy pole, the animal inside is all too often revealed in bizarre ways.*

### QUESTIONABLE CHARACTERS

Julian Castro, campaigning to become mayor of San Antonio, Texas, in 2005, threw away his chance when he dealt with a clash of schedules by getting his identical twin brother to stand in for him at a civic parade while he attended a campaign meeting. Leading in the opinion polls at the time, he had his brother Joaquin, a state legislator, walk in the city's high-profile annual River Parade, waving to the crowds, while he attended his meeting. Claiming afterward that he had never intended to deceive, and blaming a parade announcer for misidentifying his brother as himself, Castro failed to survive the controversy. It did not help that the brothers previously had similar incidents, Julian having been accused of impersonating his brother when Joaquin ran for his state legislator seat.

Julian lost the election 51 percent to 49. "I don't think he was ready to become mayor," said his victorious opponent, diplomatically. He bounced back, however, and eventually won the mayoralty in 2009.

A CANADIAN POLITICIAN FROM the national House of Commons received criticism in January 2001 for his own bizarre attempt to deceive. Rahim Jaffer, MP for Edmonton and chairman of the Opposition Canadian Alliance Party's small business committee, was impersonated by his assistant for nearly an hour for a radio interview after a diary mix-up meant that Jaffer was unavailable for the talk show. The station, tipped off by suspicious listeners, contacted Jaffer afterward to confirm it had been him. He initially maintained that he had done the interview, before later confessing that his aide had fulfilled the commitment. By way of contrition, he told listeners that his assistant had resigned. Although his party suspended him for several months, he hung on to his seat until losing it in the 2004 election.

PAUL REITSMA, A LIBERAL Party member of the British Columbia legislative assembly in Canada

appeared to enjoy wide support among his Vancouver Island constituents if the local papers were anything to go by. They were always carrying letters to the editor from the community praising his performance. Reitsma's world collapsed in 1998 when one of the local organs used handwriting comparisons to show that he had been writing them himself. He confessed to being responsible for penning dozens of self-praising letters over a 10-year period, sending them under fictitious names to laud his own work and cast aspersions on his opponents. He was promptly expelled from the party although he refused to resign his seat. Over 25,000 outraged local voters signed a petition for his dismissal under a new provincial recall procedure. After hanging on for two months, he resigned shortly before he would have become the first Canadian politician to be forcibly removed from office by the procedure.

BOURNEMOUTH LOCAL COUNCILOR BEN Grower was unmasked in 2009 as having submitted Internet postings under a disguised identity to praise his own performance. As he was one of only a handful of Labor members on the 54-seat council, generating publicity evidently required extra help. He turned to leaving laudatory comments on the website of his local newspaper, the *Daily Echo*, under several pseudonyms, extolling the contribution he was making to services. Examples of his comments were published by the paper when it traced the posts back to an address owned by Grower. He left comments like, "At least two councilors seem to be concerned about this mess. Well done Cllrs Ratcliffe and Grower," and "Just shows that the area does have councilors who care about the residents. Well done Ted Taylor, Ben Grower, and Beryl Baxter." Another purported to come from a detached observer: "I have friends who live in the area. They say councilors Ted Taylor and Ben Grower fought hard against the proposals." Initially denying the claims, Grower eventually acknowledged the ruse, saying that other councilors were doing the same to get their names in the media.

GLOUCESTER LIBERAL DEMOCRAT COUNCILOR Jeremy Hilton, trying to whip up support for his campaign to become the local MP, was caught in March 2010 trying to write his own fan mail. He was caught emailing scripts of letters to others, asking them to "cut and paste" them into letters, which they would send to the county's newspaper under their own names. They would proclaim him as the best man for representing the city at the coming general election. The ruse only came to light in a way that questioned his organizational attributes for the role he aspired to—he mistakenly fired off the obsequious email to the newspaper itself. More woe followed at the May election—he came in a distant third.



THE 500-ODD RESIDENTS OF the small Maryland community of Friendsville (motto: "the friendliest little town in Maryland") have lived up to their name by reelecting their mayor, Spencer Schlosnagle 13 times in succession from 1986 despite his wayward record in public decorum. He has been

convicted on three separate occasions, in 1992, 1993, and 1995, for exposing himself in public. For the 1993 offense, he had to undertake 30 days' community work, returning to jail each night. Then, in 2004, he was fined \$100 for leading police on a car chase when being apprehended for speeding. His political standing, however, did not seem to suffer. He still went on to win reelection in 2006, and at the time of writing is still mayor, up for election again in February 2012.

ILLINOIS ASSEMBLYMAN ROGER MCAULIFFE, a former policeman, successfully introduced legislation in 1995 that enabled all former police officers who went on to serve in the state assembly to be eligible to draw pensions from both the police and the legislature. At the time of its introduction, the measure benefited precisely one person—himself. There may have been divine justice, however. The following year, McAuliffe drowned in a boating accident. He was a day short of his 58th birthday, and never got to draw on the benefits he had craftily created.

THE NEW ZEALAND PRIME minister Helen Clark was discovered in 2002 to have signed a painting done by an unknown artist as her own work for a charity auction. The piece, described as “a splashy abstract landscape,” had been done three years earlier when Clark was leader of the Opposition for an animal welfare charity who had sought daubings from celebrity figures. A staff member had quietly commissioned an obscure artist, Lauren Fouhey, to do one for her. Clark then signed both the front and the back of the picture, and it successfully earned \$1,000 at the event. “I was trying to be helpful when I didn't have the time,” she explained when the disgruntled businessman who had bought the picture as a potential investment found out the truth. Adding to her embarrassment, Clark was by then also minister for Arts and Culture, a post she had awarded herself days after winning office in 1999, saying that her personal pet project was furthering the arts. Although fraud offenses carried a punishment of up to 10 years in jail, police authorities decided after looking into the case for three months that a prosecution was “not in the public interest.”

## IMAGE PROBLEMS



Former president Bill Clinton, who portrayed his presidency as the watershed period for the modern “Information Age,” was revealed after he left office to have been a little less of a pioneer than he purported to be. In 1998, for example, in a speech to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he lauded how the information technology that had been harnessed and promoted by his administration had been responsible for more than a third of America's economic expansion and confidently gushed how “all students should feel as comfortable with a keyboard as a chalkboard, as comfortable with a laptop as a textbook.” Three years after his departure from the White House, staff at his presidential library archiving the president's records disclosed that of the 40 million or so emails that his office had produced, Clinton himself had sent just...two. One of these did not officially qualify as it was a test message to check that he knew where the “send” button was. In actuality, it appeared that he only

sent one real message—to orbiting astronauts in a publicity stunt. Skip Rutherford, the library president, commented, seemingly unnecessarily, that Clinton was “not a techno-klutz.”

MITT ROMNEY, FORMER MASSACHUSETTS governor, got off to a rocky start on his 2008 presidential campaign as he tried to establish a profile for himself as a man of the common people. Declaring himself in April 2007 to have been a hunter “pretty much all my life,” it later transpired that that amounted to going hunting twice—once when he was 15 years old and not again until the previous year. He dropped out of the race within a month of the first primary votes in early 2008.

AS THE 2000 U.S. presidential election approached, former vice president Al Gore established his future campaign credentials around concern for the environment. Even before the campaign officially opened, observers noted his visits to key states had taken on a suspiciously election-style feel. In June 1999, he went to New Hampshire, which happened to hold the crucial first primary election. His aides suggested he do a press call paddling a canoe on the picturesque waters of the Connecticut River that runs through the state. It later emerged that U.S. Secret Service agents had insisted the local authorities release four billion gallons of water from an upriver dam to ensure that the VP’s canoe did not get stuck on the riverbed. Water was at unprecedented low levels, as the whole of New England was suffering its worst ever drought. By the time Gore performed his sail-past in front of the assembled press corps, the Connecticut was 10 inches higher, ensuring a safe passage. Within minutes of his departure, the water was shut off and the river sank back to a trickle.

ISRAELI NEWSPAPERS HAD A field day in February 2007 when Defense Minister Amir Peretz, who had been widely criticized since his appointment the previous year for his lack of military background, was photographed looking through binoculars with the lens caps still on. Of particular hilarity was the fact that he raised the glasses to his eyes three times, nodding in acknowledgement each time as the chief of staff drew his attention to objects on the horizon, giving no apparent sign he was having difficulty seeing what his guide was pointing out. He quit the post four months later.

DURING A RECORD DROUGHT in Victoria, Australia, in 1982, the state premier hosted a morale-boosting press visit to the worst-affected farms. As the media set up in the middle of a remote, parched field for a press conference to be carried live on early evening news, almost on cue a dramatic rainstorm broke. The premier persevered, and the scene was captured for posterity of 30 politicians and local dignitaries bemoaning the effects of the drought—in the middle of a muddy field huddled under umbrellas and the odd sodden newspaper.

## **MISTAKES THAT REVEAL**

Irked by a political opponent who had called him a liar, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger succumbed to temptation in October 2009 when he wrote back to the lawmaker vetoing his proposed legislation. Encoded in the official-looking response to San Francisco Democrat Tom Ammiano was

an obscene message. Reading vertically downward, the first letter of each line spelled out “fuck you.” Officially, Schwarzenegger’s press spokesperson was “surprised” at the “strange coincidence.”

A MORALE-BOOSTING COMMUNICATIONS DRIVE by Britain’s Labor Party headquarters to help MPs keep up-to-date with the leadership backfired in early 2005 when some members failed to read the material fully before dispatching thousands of copies of a self-promoting letter around their constituencies. Draft pro forma letters containing a fulsome account of the government’s achievements were sent to all MPs, littered with uplifting sentiments such as “And nowhere can we be more proud than here in [insert constituency name here].” Unfortunately, at least nine MPs simply cut and pasted the text unamended onto their own letterhead and sent them on their way.

## DOING IT MY WAY



Harold Gunn, campaigning as a Republican candidate for the Texas House of Representatives in 2002, lost at the primary stage in March when it emerged that he had written and appeared in a pornographic film featuring naked women jogging through a Houston park and lathering themselves with motor oil. Gunn said this showed him to be “a communicator,” adding, “It’s as tasteful as it can get with naked women in it.” He was trounced by his opponent 78 percent to 22.

IN A SIMILAR VEIN, Teres Kirpikli, a female member of Sweden’s conservative Christian Democratic Party, campaigned in the country’s 2002 parliamentary elections on the platform that pornographic films should be broadcast on national television throughout Saturdays to encourage more people to have sex to help boost the country’s population, “I want erotica and porn on television every Saturday and a Sunday,” she said, adding, “I think most people like porn, even though they don’t want to admit it.” She was quickly dropped by her party leadership.

VICENTE SANZ, A MEMBER of the Spanish center-right Popular Party in the regional assembly of Valencia, was sacked by his party in June 1994 for his honesty. He had said in an interview that he went into politics “to line my pockets.”

THOMAS KRÜGER CAMPAIGNED AS Social Democrat candidate for Berlin in the German federal election in 1994 by plastering the city with posters of himself in the nude, accompanied by the slogan: “A honest politician with nothing to hide.”

THE MAYOR OF GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador’s biggest city, responded to local journalists’ harassing style at press conferences in 2003 by hiring a parrot to speak for him. Jaime Nebot, who had been rankled by the press corps’ criticisms of his policies, introduced the bird saying, “Some people only approach me

with nonsense talk, so the parrot will answer back in the same way. I need to use my time to work.”

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THREE WEEKS AFTER SHE won election to Maidstone Borough Council in May 2003, Annabel Blackmore announced she was leaving Kent to accompany her financial consultant husband, who had been posted to Bermuda for two years. She rejected suggestions that she should resign as councillor, maintaining she could “do an OK job” representing her constituents in the village of Marden just effectively from the island, 3,500 miles away. “If I resigned, I feel I would be relinquishing my responsibility and letting down those who voted for me.” Blackmore survived a complaint to the English Standards Board, which oversees conduct of elected officials. It found that she had not brought her office or council into disrepute, or broken any code of conduct. She appears to have completed the long-distance service adequately enough to continue to be reelected to the council where, by 2009 and back in Marden, she had become chair of the Environment and Leisure Committee. According to the council’s log of meeting attendances, it was September 2007, four and half years after her election, before she actually attended her first meeting.

THE MAYORS OF TWO Paris suburbs engaged in a skirmish on traffic congestion in 2009 by declaring the same stretch of road a one-way street, but in opposite directions. Patrick Balkany, conservative mayor of Levallois-Perret, decided to improve flows in his area by designating a main road as a one-way route. His neighbor, socialist mayor of Clichy-la-Garenne, Gilles Catoire, complained that the decision increased congestion in his area and declared the stretch of the road under his control one way, but in the other direction. The stalemate was referred up the lengthy administrative chain to the prefect of Paris for a ruling. Balkany eventually won out.

## **NO EXCUSES**

Philadelphia city councilor Angel Ortiz was discovered in 2001 to have been driving for the last 20 years without a license, including 17 years when he was a municipal employee or council member, “I kept trying to make time to get a new license,” he claimed, “but it seemed that something pressing always took precedence.” When police delved further, they found he also had 53 outstanding parking tickets.

WHILE CHAIRMAN OF A 1982 New Zealand parliamentary committee examining a toughening of the country’s drunk driving laws, junior minister of Trade and Industry Keith Allen was convicted and fined NZ\$145—for drunk driving.

LIBERAL POLITICIAN BARONESS SEEAR failed to fulfill her engagement as a guest speaker at a British Institute of Management conference in 1979. A spokesperson tactfully put it down to “an unfortunate slip in transport.” The conference was entitled “Can Women Manage?”

DATUK LEO MOGGIE, MALAYSIA’S telecommunications minister, laid on an elaborate publicity event

1986 to herald the country's advances in telephone technology and mark the signing up of the millionth subscriber. In front of the press corps, he dialed the lucky customer—and got a wrong number.

THE LEADER OF THE Swedish Conservative Party, Ulf Adelsohn, was charged with illegally importing cordless telephone in 1985. His claim not to know it was against the law rang a little hollow. The act banning such phones had been passed and signed by him when communications minister.

BRITISH ENVIRONMENT MINISTER ALAN Meale attended a conference in Peterborough in April 1999 to press the government's green credentials and speak about the environmental damage caused by excessive car travel. He turned up at the venue having been driven the two miles from the railway station in a stretch limo that did 17 miles to the gallon. Meale was soon lecturing the audience that “the way we travel is damaging our towns, harming our countryside and already changing the climate of the planet.”

LABOR DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER John Prescott got into the same hot water at the party conference in Bournemouth that September by using a three-car convoy to take him and wife Pauline the 300 yards from their hotel to the conference hall. He was due to deliver a speech on increasing the use of public transportation. He initially, and in the media's eyes unchivalrously, blamed the journey on his wife's dislike of having her hair blown around by the sea breeze. He then cited security. The next day, he walked.

FRENCH CAR MAGAZINE *AUTO Plus* in October 2003 caught two French ministers speeding on their way to the official inauguration ceremony of the country's first speed cameras. Transportation minister Gilles de Robien was clocked by a journalist's radar gun going 61 miles per hour in the suburbs of Paris where the limit was 43 miles per hour. Future president Nicolas Sarkozy, then interior minister, sped past at 64 miles per hour. De Robien's office later did not contest the evidence, explaining that the minister was running late and had to be present, as he was presiding at the ceremony. In contrast and perhaps indicative of his future trajectory, Sarkozy yielded no ground, getting his spokesperson to tell the media that they were “verifying the conditions under which the speeds were recorded.”

TWO YEARS AFTER ITS creation, Argentina's Ethics Office, established to set standards for integrity and honesty in government, was voted by a survey of electors as one of the most corrupt institutions in the country. Of 40 public institutions covered in the poll, the graft-busting office was seen as the fourth most corrupt body, after the country's trade unions, customs service, and the judicial system.

## **IGNORANCE IN MOTION**

A satirical magazine in Washington, DC, shed an alarming light on the lack of worldly knowledge of newly elected members of the 1993 Congress. During apparently serious interviews, the reporter threw

in a question about an entirely nonexistent country. To the question, “What should we be doing about the ethnic cleansing in Freedonia?” a large number of politicians rolled out very serious answers. Corrine Brown, a freshly elected Florida member, called the situation “very, very sad,” adding, “We need to take action to assist the people.” James Talent (Missouri) opined, “Anything we can do to use the good offices of the U.S. government to assist stopping the killing over there, we should do.” Judd Dickey from Arkansas took the easy route and blamed then-president Clinton for the debacle. Jay Inslee, a Washington State representative, confessed not to be familiar with Freedonia, but urged action nevertheless as, “It’s coming to the point now that turning a blind eye to it for the next ten years is not the answer.” Steve Buyer (Indiana) acknowledged, “It’s a different situation than the Middle East.” The magazine commented that politicians “are asked a lot of dumb questions, and they are all used to supplying answers.”

IN MARCH 1993, BUCHAREST television conducted a similar survey of Romania’s legislators. Reporters asked several members for their reactions to the high levels of hydrogen being found in drinking water. Most expressed themselves appalled and concerned. An Opposition spokesperson described the “problem” as “yet another proof of the government’s incompetence.”

IN SEPTEMBER 2007, A New Zealand MP fell for a long-running hoax exposing the gullibility of MPs who jump on political bandwagons. She wrote to the country’s health department demanding immediate action to curb use of the drug dihydrogen monoxide. Jacqui Dean, Opposition National Party member for Otago, urged health minister Jim Anderton, in charge of government drug policy, to have his advisory committee on drugs take a view. He wrote back pointing out that the substance was...water.

ITALIAN POLITICIAN TOMMASO COLETTI provoked fury in 2006 when he used the infamous Auschwitz slogan “Work makes you free” to promote local job centers in his area. The president of Chieti province in the south of the country, Coletti wrote, “I don’t remember where I read this phrase but it was one of those quotes that have an instant impact on you because they tell an immense truth.” His regional governor quickly apologized to the local Jewish community.

WHEN THE HOUSE OF Commons editors of *Hansard*, the daily verbatim record of parliamentary debates, analyzed a week’s worth of proceedings in July 1989 to discover what size of dictionary base they needed for new computerized shorthand machines, they discovered that MPs used only 12,000 words. The average vocabulary of an educated native English speaker is estimated to be about 24,000 to 30,000.

## **DESPERATE MEASURES**

In September 1994 Japhet Ekidor, assistant minister for Lands and Settlement in the Kenyan government, bit off the ear of a political rival in a brawl during a public meeting in the rural district

Turkana. The pair was locked in a dispute over who should be the head of a local charity. Ekiemo-Abe severed the ear of Danson Ekuam, the local MP, after Ekuam had bitten him on the arm. Despite calls for the minister's dismissal for embarrassing the government, it was the MP who ended up being charged with assault.

**FRENCH TOURISM MINISTER OLIVIER STIRN** resigned in disgrace in July 1990 after he used a novel way to ensure a high-profile policy summit he was organizing was a successful event in the eyes of the media. The three-day Dialogue 2000, a centerpiece of the socialist government's program, attracted a stream of government ministers on the first morning, but the audience dwindled dramatically in the afternoon. With two days still to go, and thinking to spare blushes, Stirn's aides hastily contacted an employment agency and secured 200 out-of-work actors to fill the seats. For the rest of the conference, the press witnessed a rapturous and intense audience hanging on every word of the party spokesmen. The ruse was only discovered at the end when a departing journalist was mistakenly handed an envelope with the agreed day's fee.

**LORD PALMERSTON HOLDS THE** all-time record in British politics for ministerial service --48 years including war secretary for an unbroken 18 years, three times as foreign secretary (16 years), once as home secretary (2 years) and twice as prime minister (over 9 years). He combined unparalleled energy for work with a fearsome temper that was always on the point of boiling over into a rupture with his cabinet colleagues. He was renowned for regularly threatening to leave the government by firing off a resignation letter to the prime minister of the day. His preferred method of delivery was to employ a lame war veteran as messenger, who would be dispatched across the quadrangle of the Ministry toward Downing Street and the PM's office. Invariably, Palmerston's temper cooled nearly as soon as the messenger had left, so he retained the services of a second (able-bodied) valet, among whose duties it was to head off in pursuit of the first man and overtake the slow-moving letter-bearer before he had chance to leave the precincts.

## **ODD IDEAS**

Instead of concentrating on his constituents' more worldly concerns, maverick Nebraska state senator Ernie Chambers embarked on a quixotic mission in September 2007 to sue God. Claiming he was doing so to reinforce the right under the U.S. Constitution to bring any issue to court, however frivolous, Chambers lodged a claim in the state courts seeking an injunction preventing God—who he cited as causing “calamitous catastrophes resulting in the widespread death, destruction, and terrorization of millions upon millions of Earth's inhabitants”—from inflicting further “grave harm” to his constituents. He lost the first hearing in the district court and his appeal was thrown out a year later on a technicality—that God, not having an address, could not be served papers to be notified of the proceedings as required by the Constitution. Chambers announced that he disagreed with the ruling on the grounds that since the court acknowledged God's existence, and hence His omniscience, “God knows everything, God has notice of this lawsuit.” However, by the time the verdict came

Chambers had had to retire from the Senate in compliance with term-limits laws Nebraskans had introduced a few years earlier.

## THE ULTIMATE INSULT

It is one thing not to be recognized by the common people; another when it is one's own staff. Hungary's new defense minister, Janos Szabo, suffered that indignity in 1998 when he arrived to preside over an officers' inauguration ceremony. Guards on the gate of the army base refused to allow him in, as no one recognized him. Szabo later issued photographs of himself to every military base in the country, with orders to put them up at gates and in duty officers' rooms.

A SURVEY BY *PARIS MATCH* magazine in 1991 discovered that more than 8 of out 10 French people could not spell the name of their leader, François Mitterrand, almost 10 years into his presidency.



PERHAPS THE MOST HUMBLING discovery for the egocentric politician is the realization that people do not take much notice of them. A 1982 experiment by West Germany's reputable Emnid Institute tested the knowledge of the electorate with spectacular results. Asking respondents to rank the popularity of a list of current cabinet ministers, an entirely fictitious minister whom the survey had invented for the exercise came in sixth. "Minister Meyers" beat a number of German heavyweights, including the ministers of both defense and the interior.

## FROM THE HISTORY BOOKS

The most durable elected politician of all time is believed to be József Madarász, who has the longest span of service, spanning 83 years. He was a member of the Hungarian Parliament, initially between 1832 and 1836 and again between 1848 and 1850, but then continuously after 1861 until his death in 1915.

THE LONGEST CONTINUOUSLY SERVING elected national politician is believed to be Charles Pelham Villiers, who sat in the British House of Commons for 63 years and 6 days until his death in January 1898, aged 96.

CONSERVATIVE MEMBER CHRISTOPHER SYKES represented three Yorkshire constituencies in his 27-year parliamentary career dating from 1865 to 1892. In all that time, he spoke only 6 times and asked 6 questions.

GEORGES CLEMENCEAU, ONE OF France's greatest politicians, who had a 40-year career in Parliament and served twice as prime minister—between 1906 and 1909 and again during the crisis of the First

World War—was paranoid about being caught unprepared. He took to the habit over decades of sleeping fully dressed, replete with shoes and sometimes even gloves. On waking each morning, he would promptly change.

THE MARQUESS OF SALISBURY was so unconcerned about his appearance that when he was in Monaco recovering from illness in the summer of 1886, he was turned away from the casino at Monte Carlo for being too scruffy. He had just ceased being prime minister at the time.

WITH SHADES OF MODERN PR concerns, Italian dictator Mussolini compensated for his short stature by standing on hidden stools to make speeches and sitting in a specially created higher chair at meetings to bring him up to the same level as others. Photographers were strictly forbidden from disclosing the aids. When first in power, he had taken to wearing a bowler hat, until his advisors told him that the Anglo-Saxon press was remarking on the image's similarities with “the fat one” of the comic duo Laurel and Hardy.

IN SEPTEMBER 1942, AS the tide of the Second World War turned against the Fascist powers in Europe with Italian troops facing acute shortages of ammunition, uniforms, and supplies, and the country 18 months away from being invaded by the Allies, Mussolini approved the expenditure of several million pounds to improve the winter sports facilities at Cortina, in the hope that he might win the right to host the first postwar Winter Olympics.

BEING THE VANGUARD OF the Marxist revolution, champion of workers' power and proponent of social equality did not stop Lenin from accumulating nine Rolls-Royces. According to the company, Lenin ordered and received a unique model—one fitted with tank-like tracks at the rear and skis at the front which allowed him to get about in the frozen Russian winters. The explanation given at the time, that he was simply using vehicles that had been requisitioned from the czar, was entirely untrue. Lenin employed a buyer in London to purchase all his cars new.



## TRIALS AND ERRORS: ELECTIONS

*The democratic process requires regular elections. Attention usually focuses on judging the extent to which they are free and fair. Our interest here lies a step or two beyond the norm. Even in free and fair contests, the startlingly unusual is more common than you would think. An election is the warlike moment when the human ambition for elected office is forced to place itself at the mercy of the vagaries of the common people, all armed with their fragment of the decision—their vote. How those two forces play off each other is the subject of this chapter. We must begin, however, where any review of electoral oddity must start—with the bizarre lengths to which autocrats have gone to mangle the process in order to show outwardly that they are playing the democratic game.*

### **FREE AND FAIR?**

As the West mobilized itself for invasion in the autumn of 2002, Iraq's Saddam Hussein held referendum on his leadership. On October 15, in an atmosphere of hysteria across the country, 1 million voters were encouraged to exceed the vote of support they had given him in the last plebiscite seven years earlier when 99.96 percent approved of him continuing in office.

Amid the nationalist fervor being whipped up by the impending hostilities with the West, there were few observances of normal electoral niceties. The absence of polling booths—voters marking their ballots openly in front of the watchful eyes of the security forces—was portrayed by state media as symbolic of the transparency of the vote. Other regulations appeared relaxed. A British journalist witnessed a six-year-old boy cast his vote in Saddam's home town of Tikrit "amid much acclaim."

When the government announced the result later the next day, Vice President Izzat Ibrahim declared that every single one of the 11,445,638 Iraqis on the electoral roll had cast their vote, and every single one had voted in favor of Saddam Hussein's continued rule.

Observers noted that the victory was the first unanimous vote in electoral history. North Korea's Kim Il-sung had claimed a 100 percent vote in 1962, but even he had not claimed a 100 percent turnout. Ibrahim told Western reporters the referendum "was a unique manifestation of democracy, superior to all other forms of democracy, even [that of] countries which are besieging Iraq and trying to suffocate it."

SIMILAR PROBLEMS AFFLICTED PHILIPPINES President Ferdinand Marcos's last election in February 1988

Reports before polling day indicated massive fraud in the registration of voters. One small suburban house in the capital, Manila, was recorded as having 204 people living in it. Observers mused on the apparent overcrowding, suggesting that some ought to move next door where only 147 appeared to live. A remote jungle town returned a voting list that was two and a half times the size of its known population. Not surprisingly, Marcos officially won the election, but the corruption was so transparent that even he was forced to admit “irregularities.” He left the country within a week of the results for exile in the United States.

THE GREATEST EFFORT TO try to look proper was made by communist Albania. In its 1982 general election, official results claimed that every one of the country’s 1,627,968 eligible voters had cast their ballots. Support for the ruling regime was not universal, however. A spokesperson told news agencies that eight ballots were found invalid and one elector voted against.

Things had clearly improved five years later. The official returns for the February 1987 election showed that only one invalid vote had been counted out of more than 1.8 million ballots. There were no negative votes.

EXAGGERATING THE LEVEL OF support at political rallies during election campaigns is a tried-and-true tactic. When the Mexican National Action Party claimed a turnout of 100,000 for a rally in the national elections in 1988, an opposition newspaper contested the estimate, reporting that barely 20,000 had taken part. To prove his point, the editor of *El Norte* blew up a photograph of the rally and, under the watchful eye of a lawyer, got his staff to stick a pin into the head of every attendee. At the end of the exercise, the issue was resolved with 11,153 pins. The paper published its result the following day—adding to the effect by sarcastically presenting the findings as being a correction to its own original overestimate.

## THE DEAD ARE RETURNED

State senator John Wilson was reelected in Austin, Texas, in 1982 despite having died 44 days before polling day. He won 66 percent of the vote.

POPULAR PATSY MINK WON her seat for the 14th consecutive time in the House of Representatives in Hawaii in 2002, even though she had died five weeks before the election. She won an impressive 51 percent of the vote against three other candidates.



THE PRESTIGIOUS *NEW YORK Times* urged voters in primary elections for Congress in 1992 to vote for a dead candidate. Ted Weiss, a long-serving Democratic politician in Manhattan’s West Side, had died the day before the poll. The paper urged the electorate not to allow that to let in his only opponent, a right-wing extremist. The locals dutifully and overwhelmingly did so, giving the dead man 54,160

votes to his rival's measly 7,560.

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HARRY STONEBRAKER WAS REELECTED for his fourth term as mayor of the small community Winfield, Missouri, in April 2009, having died a month before polling day. Astonishingly, he won by landslide with 90 percent of the vote.

CARL GEARY WAS ELECTED mayor of Tracy City, a community of 1,600 near Chattanooga, Tennessee in April 2010, having died of a heart attack at the start of the campaign. He trounced his only rival winning over three-quarters of the vote. Barbara Brock, who had campaigned on a platform beautifying the city, showed less than fulsome grace in defeat, bemoaning the fact that the council would be run by someone "pushing up the daisies instead of planting them." A local restaurateur offered a confirmatory insight into the electorate's view of her: "I knew he was deceased, but I wanted someone other than her."

SUCH EVENTS DO NOT just happen for minor office in out-of-the-way places. Even at a national level dead candidates can succeed. In the 2000 national election, former Missouri governor Mel Carnahan won his campaign to sit in the U.S. Senate for his state despite having been killed in an air crash three weeks before election day. He won by a 2 percent margin. His wife temporarily took the seat, before losing a year later.

SHERMAN BLOCK SECURED MORE than a third of the vote in the election for Los Angeles County sheriff in 1998 even though he had died five days before polling day. He had held the post for 17 years and had been expected to win again comfortably, despite his chronic illness that required him to undergo dialysis three times a week. He even managed to vote for himself by sending in a postal ballot before his death. Block supporters continued his campaign despite his death in the closing days of the election, reasoning that if the dead man was elected the Sheriff Office's Board of Supervisors would have to choose the new sheriff rather than the post going to his opponent. An incredible 629,289 Los Angeles residents turned out to vote for the dead candidate, Block winning 39 percent of the poll.

## **I WANT TO BE ELECTED**



Ilona Staller, a 35-year-old Hungarian-born porn actress, made headlines in Italy's 1987 general election when she was elected as a Radical Party MP. She became notorious for stripping in public, once leading a demonstration topless to persuade sailors about to be dispatched on a controversial NATO mission to the Arabian Gulf to mutiny and make love instead. One account sonorously described her election campaign: "Her main argument has been to take off her clothes and occasionally to let voters fondle her breasts. This seems to have restored the Italian faith in politics."

and gained her a respectable number of votes.”

After her election success, she became an active member of the Defense Committee, but missed a crucial debate on the Gulf deployment because she was making a pornographic film. She also offered to have sex with Saddam Hussein in 1991 if he agreed to release Western hostages he was holding as Allied forces readied for the Gulf War. “I would do it holding my nose and closing my eyes,” she said, “but I would do it for peace.” She completed a full term and retired from politics in 1992. She attempted a revival in 2002 when she stood for mayor in the northern town of Monza, but won only 1.5 percent of the vote.

SILVIO BERLUSCONI, ITALY’S PRIME minister from 2001 to 2006 and 2008 to 2011, became a byword for scandal and sexual sleaze. The long-standing national passion for turning elections into beauty contests reached its apogee under the septuagenarian leader. Forming his government on retaking power in 2008, he attracted publicity for appointing Mara Carfagna, a former topless model, as his minister for equal opportunities. She quickly became dubbed “the world’s sexiest minister.” For the 2009 elections to the European Parliament, he nominated a bevy of attractive young women as candidates for his center-right People of Freedom Party. They included a TV meteorologist and nightclub hostess and an actress, but his plans were scotched when Berlusconi’s long-suffering wife publicly derided them as “shameless trash for the entertainment of the emperor.”

A year later, with Berlusconi separated and facing divorce proceedings amid a prostitute scandal, the showgirls resurfaced as candidates for the party’s regional election campaign in March 2010. He then he had added Nicole Minetti, a 25-year-old dental hygienist whom he had met when having his teeth repaired after an assault during a rally, Graziana Capone, a sultry model nicknamed the “Angelina Jolie of Puglia,” and Francesca Provetti, a Miss Italy finalist. Despite the controversies, Berlusconi’s party surprised pundits by improving its standings on polling day.

FINNISH MP JYRKI KASVI, campaigning for reelection for the Green League in 2007, translated his website into Klingon, the fictional *Star Trek* language, apparently as a means of showing his connections to the interests of young people. He successfully retained his seat.

WHEN A CONTROVERSIAL HYPNOTIST and faith healer, Anatoly Kashpirovsky, who had become a national sensation for his televised mass-healing events, stood in Russia’s December 1993 election, he was forbidden by officials from canvassing in his constituency for fear he would use his powers to unduly influence electors. He had to run his campaign entirely from abroad. He based himself in the United States and, astonishingly, won. He sat in Parliament for two years until leaving permanently for America in 1995.

TAIWANESE ELECTIONS HAVE ACQUIRED a reputation for wackiness and unorthodox campaign methods since repressive one-party government ended on the island in 1987. Chen Shui-bian, the opposition victor in the 2000 presidential election, used his nationwide chain of clothes stores to promote his

image during the campaign. Every item he sold bore his nickname. He also sold small plastic dolls himself dressed in a range of characters. The most popular were said to be Chen dressed as a long-haired, bandana-wearing Rambo muscleman and as a punk rocker with spiky green hair.

The trend had been set by the ruling party, which in local polls the previous year had dressed 71-year-old President Lee Teng-hui in various outfits as he campaigned around the country. At one rally he appeared in a *Star Trek* uniform; at others as King Arthur, a tribal chieftain, and a farmer, complete with live water buffaloes.

In 1992, the newly founded Labor Party tried to win hearts and minds by employing the talents of Hsu Hsiao-tan, a 30-year-old nude model, for the seat in the southern city of Kaoshiung. Her talents were bountifully expressed. Cited in an academic review of political development in Taiwan as “a rather unorthodox strategy,” Hsu spent most of her campaign baring her breasts, jumping naked in polluted rivers, and streaking through municipal rubbish dumps. “My body is a political weapon. My breasts are nuclear warheads,” she declared. She amassed over 32,000 votes and fell only 108 short of getting elected.

THE BEER LOVERS’ PARTY won nearly 3 percent of the vote in the Polish general election of 1991, and captured 16 seats in the 460-seat national Parliament. They remained there until the 1993 election, when they all lost their seats.

IN 1994, DANES ELECTED Jacob Haugaard, a comedian styling himself the head of the Union of Conscientiously Work-Shy Elements. Although his campaign pledges included promises of better weather, shorter lines in supermarkets, and increased tailwind for bicycle lanes, he garnered over 23,000 votes, enough for a seat in the national Parliament. He served his full four-year term.

TO COUNTER PERCEIVED RIGHT-WING, male chauvinism in Polish politics, a group of liberal women formed the Women’s Party to fight the October 2007 general election. As part of their campaign to confront typical male attitudes to women, they chose the curious tactic of announcing their formation by having seven of their members pose naked behind a placard reading, “Everything for the future, and nothing to hide” that also covered their private parts. Not only did the poster cause outrage among the deeply conservative Catholic establishment, but also most observers concluded that it only reinforced Polish men’s attitudes to the position of women. The party won just 0.28 percent of the vote and failed to secure a single seat.

MUSIKARI KOMBO, A KENYAN opposition MP, was unseated by the country’s high court in November 1994 for having used witchcraft to win votes in his victory in the 1992 general election. Kombo, who won the Webuye constituency in the west of the country, had paid 70,000 shillings (about \$830) to a local witch doctor to conduct a ceremony four days before the election, involving the killing of a ram and the aspiring candidate sitting in its intestines dressed only in underpants.

The ejection turned out to be only a temporary setback. He was back in the seat in 1997 and

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