

Remembering Sir Bernard Crick

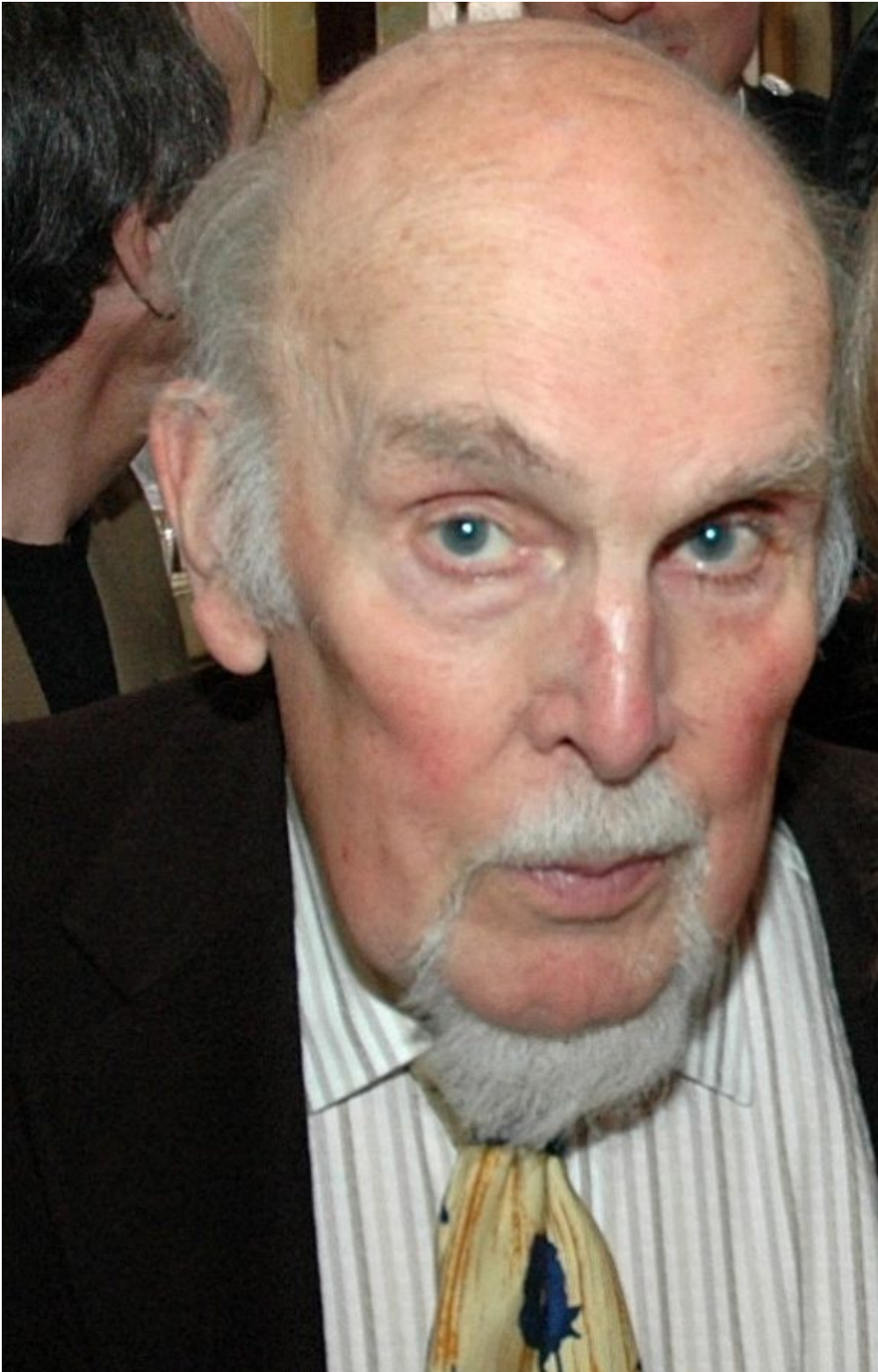
It's now 15 years since the death of the renowned academic and author Professor Sir Bernard Crick, who had a long association with the Scottish capital.

Born in 1929, he died on 19 December 2008, with a memorable funeral held on 6 January 2009.

Crick's classic book *In Defence of Politics* (originally 1962, republished multiple times since) and his [major biography of George Orwell](#) are his two best known contributions but he had a much wider involvement in politics. This stemmed from a belief that academics had a duty to [improve the quality of public debate](#) and be *actively* involved; not just commenting from the side-lines. They could, Crick believed, add nuance, veracity and perspective to media discussion. Crick was a great advocate of political writing for the general public, not just the narrower confines of academia. In 1993, he launched the Orwell Prize to help promote good writing on political themes, informed by academic insights but not suffocated by the 'internalised dialogues of the ivory tower'.

In Defence of Politics provides an idea of politics that goes well beyond promoting a particular political ideology or seeking social change. Crick's view is based on the idea that political activity is, following Aristotle, part of what it is to be human. Underlying this was his understanding of

political activity as 'the creative conciliation of differing interests'. Crick believed that a society without politics would be either unstable or totalitarian. Following Hannah Arendt, Crick saw violence as the breakdown of political power, not its extension. Crick was himself directly involved in conflict resolution work in Apartheid South Africa and Northern Ireland in the 1990s. He believed that the key prerequisite for successful peace negotiations was when both sides realised that 'total victory' for their point of view was impossible.



Bernard Crick in 2006, Photo courtesy of Leslie Hills
Crick spent his last decades in Edinburgh, living in a book-lined basement flat in Bellevue Terrace. This gave him an interesting position from which to observe the active constitutional debates in Scotland during the 1980s and 1990s. It revealed to him how anglo-centric much of British political debate can be. As he put in a 1991 essay on 'The English and

the British', 'the ignorant and irresponsible under-reporting of Scotland in the London media' illustrated the sense that 'to be British is simply to be English'. Such had attitudes had, in Crick's view, fuelled the desire to reform the Union or break it up. Crick constantly emphasised that the UK was a 'multi-national state'.

ACADEMIC

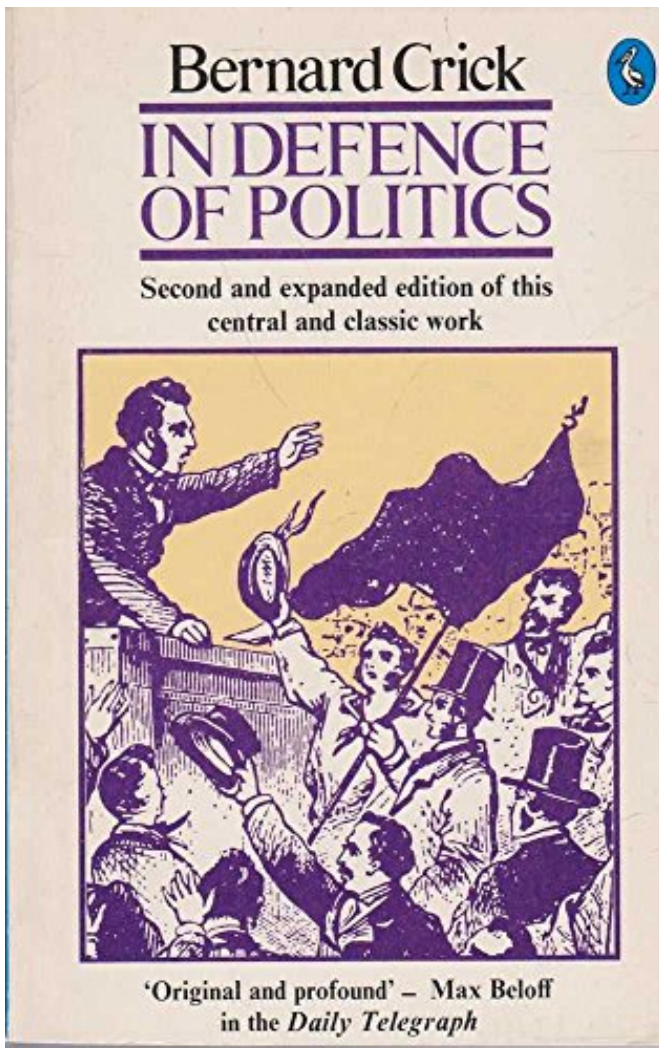
After postgraduate studies in America (including at Harvard), Crick held academic positions at the London School of Economics, Sheffield University and Birkbeck College, London. Rather than sinking into retirement, Crick was a prominent figure on the Scottish political scene, as a regular contributor to the *Scotsman*, *Herald* and multiple other Scottish publications. He held honorary professorships at both Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities Crick was also closely involved in debates over devolution and The Scottish Parliament.

One of Crick's most highly regarded late works was a pamphlet (co-written with David Millar) *To Make the Scottish Parliament a Model for Democracy*. They wanted to see the Scottish Parliament make a 'bold' break from the 'Westminster mould', through procedures and working practices which were 'better suited to and arising from Scotland's more democratic civic traditions'.

Those who knew Crick talk of his eccentric ways and his sometimes disputatious character, though also how arguments would soon be forgotten. Crick described himself as [a moderate](#) but he was a particularly 'truculent' one. I recall seeing him in public debate (at the Edinburgh Book Festival), where his disapproval of what other speakers were saying was clearly expressed through his facial expressions and gestures! It is easy to imagine him being very active and argumentative on Twitter – and his name trending with regularity, particularly

on the themes of multiculturalism, sovereignty and university politics.

However, in his essays and journalism he took the arguments of those he disagreed with seriously – adhering to the principle of “know thy enemy”. Readers were well aware of where Crick stood, but he was surgical in his criticisms and rarely indulged in derisive bombast.



Crick was often critical of the institutions he was involved in (universities, the Labour Party, the media), but he believed that their weaknesses were not inherent. For instance, he was often critical of aspects of the British political system, but believed these could be addressed through thoroughgoing reform. Crick embodied a positive faith that, though powerful and serious, threats to politics could be disarmed and repelled. These threats included populism

which deeply concerned him – this threat has become more evident in the years since his death. The thoroughgoing critique of populism, central to much of Crick’s political writing, has given his work a sharp relevance in the era of Brexit, Trump, Modi, Orban, et al. Some of his themes have been echoed by Ben Ansell in this year’s [BBC Reith Lectures.](#)

In these Ansell has echoed Crick’s theme that politics is not about reaching absolute consensus on matters of public controversy, but ‘agreeable disagreement’ over ‘disagreeable disagreement’. At a fundamental level that, in politics, ‘no one gets what they want’; that compromise was an essential component of politics. Politics is about how to reconcile different ‘groups’ ‘interests’ and ‘traditions’ to living ‘within a territorial unit under a common rule’. As a result, politics tends to be messy and somewhat cumbersome. This insight stimulated Crick’s concerns about narrow, ideological thinking.

POPULISM

One of the ideologies that concerned Crick was populism which Crick considered a threat to democracy, not a version of it. Since Crick’s death, the populist threat has become noticeably stronger, particularly in the wake of the financial crisis. Populism has, in recent years, reaffirmed its status as a highly effective mode of political galvanisation. For Crick, populists offer the public ‘plausible simplicities’ but not genuine solutions; they are good at political campaigning but not at actually governing.

As he put it in *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction*, ‘the populist mode of democracy is a politics of arousal more than of reason, but also a politics of diversion from serious concerns that need settling in either a liberal democratic or a civic republican manner’.

His funeral on 6 January 2009 was memorable. The tone was set

by a jazz band accompanying the hearse to Warriston Crematorium while snow fell. What followed was a moving service, with many senior figures from Scotland's 'media intelligentsia milieu' among those in attendance. Speakers included David Blunkett, Leslie Hills and John Clifford. The folk performers Aly Bain (who worked with Crick on the campaign to save Glenogle Swimming Baths), Phil Cunningham, and Margaret Bennett provided the music.



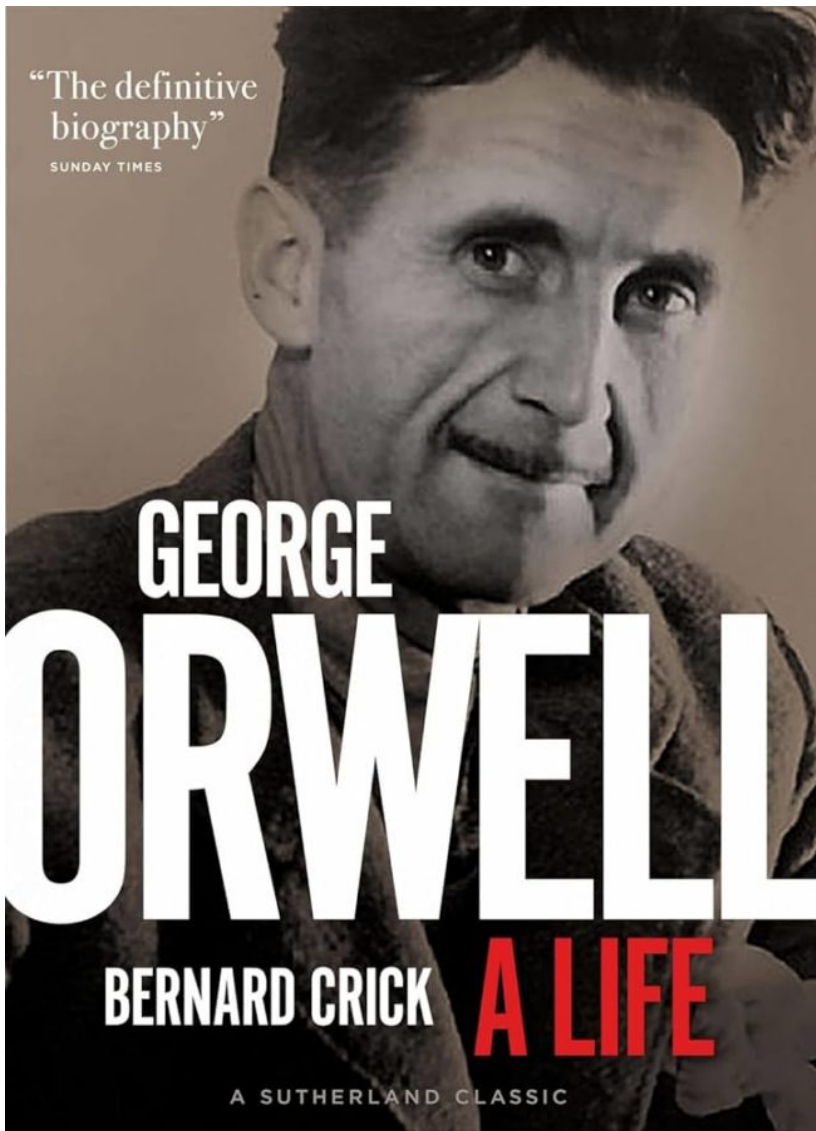
The Gus Ferguson Jazz Band leads Crick's funeral procession. Photo courtesy of Leslie Hills.

My article on Crick, '[The Meddling Professor: Bernard Crick's Active Defence of Politics](#)', appears in the latest issue of *Scottish Affairs*, Scotland's longest running journal on contemporary political and social issues.

The article incorporates comments by some of those who knew him well and worked with him. These include prominent local resident and author Leslie Hills. She talked of Crick cycling along the ex-railway paths in 'floppy linen hat and jacket',

including for cancer treatment appointments at the Western General. Crick lived with prostate cancer for many years.

Also featured are comments by Jean Seaton (the official historian of the BBC, who worked with Crick at the *Political Quarterly*), Professor Andrew Gamble (one of a number of leading figures in British political studies who has continued to promote [Crick's conception of politics](#)), and Lord (David) Blunkett, to whom Crick was a mentor. As Blunkett has put it, 'I didn't just respect Bernard, I loved the old guy, including his various eccentricities'. Crick was Blunkett's tutor at Sheffield University – where Crick helped form the politics department; still one of the leading ones in the UK. Through Blunkett, Crick spent a large portion of his final years involved in designing the Home Office's citizenship programme. In 2002 he was knighted for services to citizenship in schools and to political studies.



His two most famous books were his major biography of George Orwell and his much cited *In Defence of Politics*. This classic work (originally published in 1962) was recently described by Labour Peer and academic Maurice Glasman as 'the most enduring and significant essay on politics to come out of England in the past 100 years'.

Crick's wider contribution includes his involvement in conflict resolution work in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Palestine. These 'trouble spots' feature heavily in Crick's journalism and essays. Indeed, for a time, he was working on a book on these 'Three Insoluble Problems'. His view that, *ultimately*, politics offers the only way to resolve such conflicts, has ongoing relevance to Israel/ Palestine.

It was in the context of his role in Northern Ireland that the

Rev. Ian Paisley dubbed him 'the meddling Professor'. Crick wore this as a badge of honour believing that anyone with a true faith in politics must play an active role. His truculent moderation is just the sort of voice we need at this time of hyper-partisanship and often shallow political commentary. Crick would have chuntered about the state of political debate but he would not have despaired.

Crick's many articles, essays ('one of the great political essayists and reviewers of his generation', according to Andrew Gamble) and books retain great relevance, while the model he offers remains an inspiring one to academics (such as Professor Matthew Flinders, Founding Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre).

Maurice Glasman contrasts Crick's truculence with others in politics and academia with the way he treated students and younger academics. To these he was renowned to be encouraging and generous with his time, keen to spur on those with a serious interest in politics.

Warm memories of Crick are also still held by many in Edinburgh, 15 years on from his passing.