

## **Picturing Politics: Disraeli on the big screen**

**Steven Fielding**

It might seem odd, even bizarre, that in 1930 the actor George Arliss won an Academy Award for playing the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. But he did.

The film, in which the 61 year old British thespian played his award winning role was based on a 1910 play produced especially for him by the London based writer Louis Napoleon Parker.

It was not exactly an accurate account of the Prime Minister's life. It showed him personally thwarting a German spy ring based in and around 10 Downing Street whose members wanted to stop him purchasing shares in the Suez Canal Company. Disraeli needed these shares to secure the canal for Britain and so guarantee a quick and secure sea route to India, then the jewel of the empire.

Despite the hokum, the play was extremely popular on both sides of the Atlantic and led to two silent movies, until the 1929 version, which had the benefit of sound.

To our modern eyes it is a striking film in as much as it represented a Prime Minister in heroic terms. But it was just one of a number of such depictions in movies made in the 1930s and 1940s, for this was a time when it was possible to show British politicians as selfless servants of the imperial state, devoted to their monarch and keen to protect the interests of the people.

Such depictions did not exactly capture the whole truth, of course, but whilst censorship meant other views could not be shown, few clambered to challenge this uncritical perspective on those who exerted power.

It says a lot about our changed attitude to political leadership that when Anthony Sher played Disraeli in the 1997 movie 'Mrs Brown', in an era in which politicians were associated with sleaze and spin, he was not as heroic as the Arliss version. Instead, Disraeli was presented as a self-interested figure, willing to sell out his queen if popular opinion moved against her.

Disraeli the real historical figure had of course not changed, but popular attitudes to politicians, at least as measured in their cinematic depictions, most certainly had.