



Grace Dent on TV: Imagine – Who's Afraid of Machiavelli?

Mr Memory, who was brought on Monday's Newsnight to memorise the title sequence and couldn't even remember that Jeremy bloke with the beard's name. Gosh I love telly.

Grace Dent

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While watching this week's Imagine on The Prince by Machiavelli – a self-help book for potential leaders, dictators, bosses and head honchos – I was reminded of when Channel 4 showed Big Brother, when one of the very worst things one could be seen to be as a housemate was Machiavellian. Well, sort of Machiavellian. "He can be proper Mockyavianian" housemates would say to each other. Or, "I am nominating Terry as he is well Mackyfulhamian", well-meaning numpties would say in the diary room. This was always amusing. Not merely because the author of the infamous Italian 16th-century "ultimate power for dummies" manual was sounding increasingly like a novelty double-whipped skinny Starbucks coffee of the month, but because housemates all believed that arriving in the Big Brother house with a gameplan to win was morally wrong.

Here was a gameshow about a group of people pitting their wits against each other in a bid to win a life-changing amount of money. The game gave contestants the option of visiting a secret "diary room" to petition the public about their greatness and trumpet pithy observations about their rivals. Still, the natural default for housemates was to find the concept of a "gameplan" distasteful. Obviously they may have been feigning distate, as pretending to distance oneself from the personal urge for power is a Machiavellian tactic. But in Big Brother, I'm fairly certain old Mockywockyvolly was thought to be pretty bad.

This has been precisely the case for Machiavelli and his writings from the 16th century until now. Vast, vast swathes of the human race believe it is better to be wholesome, honest and upfront rather than quietly power-hungry, ruthlessly pragmatic or socially strategic. Meanwhile, rulers such as Napoleoeon, Mussolini, Kissinger and Nixon loved Machiavelli's The Prince. Mussolini did his dissertation on it. Now there's an image: Mussolini holed up in his room which, I like to think, smelled of toast and slightly mildewed socks, flicking through pages which suggest that being feared is far more useful than being loved. Fear is in your control, people can decide to stop loving you, but they cannot decide to stop fearing you, Machiavelli suggested. Actually I'm not sure Machiavelli was "suggesting" anything. He wrote the whole bloody thing as a massive willy-waving "You Need Me" exercise while under house arrest. As Alan Yentob mooched around Machiavelli's farmhouse explaining how the author had been cast out of Florence as a troublemaker, one got the feeling Machiavelli's The Prince was one long wine-fuelled "OK, the gloves are off, here's the truth; this is how you run a bloody city state."

This was a rather wonderful Imagine referencing the BBC's House of Cards and Hilary Devey's role on Dragon's Den, Thatcher's approach to ruling her cabinet and Blair's Machiavellian traits. Devey read The Prince when she was 15 years old. She said that her first six weeks as a dragon were a massive lesson in how Machiavellian her co-stars were, but once she learnt the game she was as good at being bad as them. Blair, we were told, would stare at his notes furiously during the more boring parts of his televised speeches so they would not make the TV cut, raising his eyelid for the triumphant one-liners which would make good News at Ten.