

# Politics of Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

by John Norell

## Introduction

In this post I analyze the political system of the wizarding world of Harry Potter after reading the first three books in the saga. We don't know much about the political system in the magical society because it's not explicitly described. But we can from the story, inferring from the behaviour of government agencies and government employed characters, draw conclusions about the political institutions in the magical society. In an earlier post I wrote about wealth and poverty in the wizarding world from an economic perspective titled "Potternomics part one: how do wizards get rich?"<sup>1</sup>. More blog posts about the economics and politics in Harry Potter are to come.

## Background

The Ministry of Magic is the equivalent of a government in magical Britain. The wizarding world is a society existing parallel with the non-magical society, in the Potter-books referred to as the muggle world. There is little interaction between the muggle and magical societies in Britain, in fact, most muggles are completely unaware of the existence of magic and the wizarding society.

In the first two books, we don't get to know much about the Ministry. We know of its existence after Harry is introduced to the magical world; Hagrid then explains that the Ministry's main job is to keep the magical world secret from the muggles<sup>2</sup>. The headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Dumbledore, is highly respected by the people at the Ministry, which is why he is allowed to run the school without much interference. In the second book, it was not until there had been four

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.johnnorell.com/2016/12/31/potternomics-part-one-how-do-wizards-get-rich/>

<sup>2</sup> Rowling, J. K. (1997). page 70. Harry asks Hagrid why, and get the very unsatisfying answer that "everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone". Given the size of the Ministry and the authority it holds, it's surprising that the citizens of the magical society accepts this story so easily.

attacks on students that the Ministry did step in. However, the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge (head of the Ministry), didn't seem too keen on investigating the cause of these attacks. Instead he decides to send the school groundskeeper Hagrid to prison, saying that he is "under a lot of pressure," and he's "[g]ot to be seen to be doing something."<sup>3</sup> Fudge doesn't appear as an evil character, but this event neatly illustrates the not-so-romantic behaviour of the government in magical Britain.

### The story in the third book

In the beginning of the third book, we learn about a person with the name of Sirius Black escaping from the high-security magical prison, "Azkaban." Black is considered a very dangerous criminal, and the news of his escape spreads fear in the magical society. It is reported in the newspaper, the *Daily Prophet*, that Minister Cornelius Fudge goes so far as to even inform the muggle Prime Minister<sup>4</sup> about the crisis, and that the muggle press is used to get people to report any sightings of Black without revealing that he's a wizard<sup>5</sup>.

Throughout the whole book, the Ministry conducts a large-scale search operation to catch Black but without much luck. In addition to the Ministry appealing to the public for tips on Black's whereabouts, Arthur Weasley, working in the 'Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office,' tells us that all Ministry employees were pulled off their regular jobs to help in the search<sup>6</sup>.

The most severe measure taken by the Ministry in the search, however, was the deployment of hundreds of undead creatures called dementors to guard the entrances to the wizarding school Hogwarts, and to patrol its nearby village, Hogsmeade<sup>7</sup>. Dementors are described as the most terrifying creature in the magical

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<sup>3</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1998. page 276.

<sup>4</sup> The events are taking place in 1993, the Prime Minister in the UK at the time was John Major of the conservative party.

<sup>5</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 40.

<sup>6</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 65.

<sup>7</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. pages 97, 210 and 214.

world, feeding by draining the happiness of humans. During his first encounter with a dementor, Harry resultadely collapsed from the draining in a horrid scene<sup>8</sup>. The Dementors are usually employed to guard the magical prison, *Azkaban*. Hagrid describes being held there with constant draining by the dementors as a most horrible experience. “Yeh can’ really remember who yeh are after a while. An’ yeh can’ see the point o’ livin at all. I used ter hope I’d jus’ die in me sleep ...”<sup>9</sup>.

The Ministry does in fact not seem to have full control of the dementors. The dementors approach and enter the Hogwarts train in the beginning of the school year, frightening and draining on the hundreds of students onboard<sup>10</sup>. Later in the school year, over a hundred dementors advanced onto the school quidditch stadium during a match, almost resulting in Harry's death<sup>11</sup>. An event that infuriated the headmaster, Dumbledore, who had resolutely refused to give dementors permission to enter the school grounds.

The Ministry gave the dementors permission to use, as Professor Lubin expresses it, “their last and worst weapon”: *the dementor's kiss*, on Black if they were to find him. When the kiss is performed, the dementor sucks the soul out of their victim and it is described as a fate worse than death<sup>12</sup>.

The Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, says the dementors are there for the people's protection and safety;<sup>13</sup> although one can definitely question if these measures really were proportional to the perceived danger Black posed, or if the Ministry did more harm by their efforts than they did good. In retrospect, we know Black was innocent of the crimes he was imprisoned for and didn't really pose any danger at all. It can also be mentioned that this is not too long after a war within the wizarding community and a lot of criminals failed to be trialed; consequently still

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<sup>8</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 88.

<sup>9</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 233.

<sup>10</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. pages 86-90.

<sup>11</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 188.

<sup>12</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 262.

<sup>13</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 215.

being out there. Why the Ministry focuses so much effort on this one criminal seems like a strange priority.

Not only does it seem that the measures of the Ministry are an overreaction and out of proportion, the Ministry was also very unsuccessful in their search. Not only did Black succeed at hiding from the Ministry, he even managed to sneak into the heavily guarded school at multiple occasions during the school year without getting caught. Of course, Black is an *animagi* meaning he has the ability to transform into an animal (in Black's case into a big black dog). Having developed the ability without reporting it to the Ministry of Magic is a punishable crime; it is reasonable to believe it's a very rare ability, since only 7 wizards have been registered the last century<sup>14</sup>.

Even if it's a rare ability to have, shouldn't it at least have struck someone at the Ministry as a possibility that Black was an animagi? In the fourth book of the series, Hermione works out that the reason why paparazzi reporter Rita Skeeter was able to spy and eavesdrop on private conversations to dig up gossip is that she was an unregistered animagi, possessing the ability to transform into a beetle<sup>15</sup>. If a fourteen year old girl can figure out that Skeeter could move around undetected thanks to being an animagi, how come no one at the Ministry even thought of the possibility the same could be the case about Black?

In the fourth book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry has no problem communicating by owl post to Sirius (who still is on the run from the Ministry), even though Sirius is in hiding in another country and Harry has no idea where he is. If owls don't have any difficulty delivering mail to people anywhere on earth even if the sender doesn't know where they're sending it to, finding people shouldn't be too hard for the Ministry.

Some possible reasons for their failure is basically that the Ministry is a terribly inefficient organisation or that the people working there simply are incompetent. Or

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<sup>14</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1999. page 373.

<sup>15</sup> J.K. Rowling, 2000. page 611-612.

what if they didn't really intend on catching Black? Perhaps the purpose of these large scale operations were something else than what was stated? Government agencies might not always be truthful, especially in countries that don't have democratically elected officials. In a democracy, we can at least hope that politicians will try and enact the policies they believe is good for the country, because they otherwise would be voted out of office by the citizens. When leaders don't need the support of the public to stay in office, things tend not to go too well historically.

The problem is not really that the wrong people become leaders. Henceforth the answer is not getting "the right people" in political power. Even the most well-meaning, selfless and virtuous person must, in order to use a position of political power to do good, first get in a position of power. A person with political ambitions must have the pursuit for power (or when in a position of power, to maintain that position) as their first priority. Because if that's not the case, someone else less virtuous and more elastic in their morals will take their place in office.

So, how does one get in a position of power in the magical world? We don't know much about how Ministry officials are appointed, but we know enough to conclude that magical Britain is not a democracy. In the first Harry Potter book, we find out that the head of the Ministry, *the Minister for Magic*, is chosen, not elected.<sup>16</sup> The answer is instead gaining the support of some key political players<sup>17</sup>. Loyalty is the currency of political power in the same way that money is the currency of economic power. Losing the support of these unknown yet influential key players means you're kicked out of office<sup>18</sup>. This is what happens later in the series when Cornelius Fudge in his own words is "sacked" as Minister for Magic and replaced by the more ruthless Rufus Scrimgeour without the mentioning of an election or any campaigning for the office.

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<sup>16</sup> J.K. Rowling, 1997. page 70. Hagrid says *they* wanted Dumbledore to be Minister, but because Dumbledore declined to take the job, Cornelius Fudge got the job instead.

<sup>17</sup> Whom these key players are is not mentioned, but from how the Ministry is run, from what we know about the oligarchic concern of race/blood purity in the wizarding world and about other people who have a lot of influence in the magical society such as the malicious and corrupt Lucius Malfoy, we can get an idea.

<sup>18</sup> These ideas about how some key political players influence the behaviour of leaders come from the political science theory called "the selectorate theory", detailed by De Mesquita, B. B. (2005).

It is reasonable to assume that the interest of these key players influences the behaviour of the Ministry. The fact that we don't see a change of leadership in the Ministry after such a fiasco of catching Black indicated that the key players in fact might not have been too disappointed with Fudge's actions. The hunt after Black spread fear and panic in the magical community, normalised intrusive and controlling measures and created acceptance for evasive government intervening in people's lives. When people feel unsafe, they will more easily accept or perhaps even demand greater government control and security services.

It is not at all unlikely that this would be in the best interest for the political elite, whom can then use this opportunity to increase the size and authority of the government; in the process increasing their own influence and power. We know that a lot of former death eaters are in positions of power in the magical society, such as Lucius Malfoy. These people would of course know Sirius Black was no ally of theirs, and they would probably know he was innocent. His escape, however, created an opportunity they could take advantage of.

(Spoiler warning ahead)

Towards the end of the book the story takes a twist and we find out that Sirius Black in fact is innocent of the alleged crimes he was sent to Azkaban for<sup>19</sup>, and that he escaped to take his revenge on Peter Pettigrew who had betrayed him and the Potter family, resulting in the death of Harry Potter's parents. Black gets caught, but with the help of headmaster Dumbledore, Harry and Hermione, he escapes yet again.

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<sup>19</sup> In Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (J.K. Rowling, 2000. page 443.) we find out that Sirius was sentenced to Azkaban without a trial.

## Conclusions

There are a lot of subjects linked to the topics of politics and power in the Harry Potter books. For example, in the third book, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, we observe the power struggle between the corrupt Lucius Malfoy and the good and honest Dumbledore, the disobedience and distrust towards the legal process when Dumbledore, Harry and Hermione liberate Black from captivity, and how the desire for power brings Peter Pettigrew to betray his friends. In this post I have focused on analyzing the political system in the wizarding world in the third book.

The Ministry of Magic gives an appearance of incompetence or malice by being incapable of, or unwilling to, conduct the search operation for a dangerous criminal to which they claim to be so devoted. This is not a result of an accidental appointment of bad political leaders but a natural consequence of the design of the political system in the wizarding world. It is obvious that the Ministry does not have the interest of the public in mind, even if they claim so, and we should not assume so when analyzing the behaviour of the government in Harry Potter. What we see is the slow progression of the Ministry of Magic into a more authoritarian state regime, disguised as a concern for the safety and security for the citizens. This transition will be even more visible (and darker) in the books following.

## References

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