

OCR English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls: Themes *Capitalism vs Socialism*

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Capitalism vs. Socialism

The theme of **capitalism vs. socialism**, alongside social responsibility, was arguably one of Priestley's **main intentions** with writing 'An Inspector Calls'. Priestley himself was a **socialist**, but Britain was - and still is - **a capitalist country**.

The Birlings represent **the prospering capitalists in society**, while the Inspector acts as Priestley's **socialist mouthpiece**. His role in the play is to **condemn capitalism** and **teach socialist ideals**. The play itself illustrates **capitalism's eventual fall to socialism**, suggesting socialism is the **superior, more beneficial, and more powerful political system**.

What is Capitalism?

Capitalism is an **economic system** where the **factors of production** (capital goods, natural resources, and entrepreneurship, the skill of setting up businesses) are owned and controlled by **private groups or individuals**. People who **control** these factors set up and own **companies**. Individuals own their labour (they get paid for it).

One motto of Capitalism is "**Greed is good**". Business owners want to keep their **sale prices low to attract customers** and **compete** with others, so their production costs need to be as low as possible to increase profit. In a Capitalist society, people are **rewarded according to their wealth, not contribution**.

What is Socialism?

On the other hand, Socialism is where the **factors of production** are owned **equally by everyone in society**.

Socialism considers the resources' **usefulness** to people. For example, a Socialist government would **provide services** such as **education** and **health care**. People in society are **rewarded by how much they contribute**. Socialism also ensures that those who can't contribute to production, such as the elderly, are **still cared for**. There are aspects of socialism within British society: our NHS, free education and benefits system are examples.



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Socialism was initially designed in the nineteenth century to **improve the standard of living for the working class**. Poverty is not possible in an ideal Socialist society because everyone has **equal access** to profits and resources such as health care. Everyone owns the means of production, so they **cannot be exploited for their labour** - everyone contributes and everyone benefits.



British governments in 1912 vs 1945

In 1912, the **Liberal Party** was in power in Britain. This political party supported **laissez-faire** economics, where the government **doesn't intervene with the economy**. **Laissez-faire** economics are **ideal for Capitalism** as it gives power to the **free market** and **private stakeholders**.

In contrast, the **Labour Party** was elected into government in the **1945 General Election by a landslide**. The Labour Party's manifesto had many **Socialist values and proposals**. This massive change from a previously Conservative country is believed to be caused by the nation's **desire for social reform**. The country was facing the future after two World Wars, and required **change** and **recovery**. One of the greatest demands was for a **Welfare State**.

This all means Britain was experiencing a time of **great political change and turmoil** while Priestley was writing. The debate between Capitalism and Socialism, for Priestley, is focused on the interactions between Mr Birling and the Inspector. Each character is an **emblem for his respective political ideologies**. Looking at their **exchanges** and their **plays for power** on stage reveal a great deal about Priestley's **perspective**.

Mr Birling

Mr Birling is the **archetype of a Capitalist businessman**. He is **greedy, money-driven, and selfish**, and reflects the way private businesses want to make as much profit as possible and use any means possible to do so. He is also a **symbol for 'New Money'**, a **self-made man** (nouveau riche) who has made a great fortune for himself and his family. Many Capitalists would respect Mr Birling for his success, but Priestley encourages his audience to look at him through a Socialist lens. He does this to show how Mr Birling's Capitalist kingdom is built on vice and the suffering of others.

Mr Birling tells his family that, by 1940, they'll ***"be living in a world that'll have forgotten about all these Capital versus Labour agitations"*** (Act 1, pg 7). Under Capitalism, the country was **split into two groups**, those who controlled the **capital** and those who provided the **Labour**. Priestley suggests society at the time **revolved** around these two concepts, and ***"agitations"*** implies the structure is not **stable**. Mr Birling represents the Capital side of the conflict, and it is the implications of this that Priestley explores through the play.



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Mr Birling & Capitalist Greed

Firstly, Priestley uses Mr Birling to **portray Capitalist greed**. He explains to Gerald, **“Your father and I have been friendly rivals in business for some time now [...] and now you’ve brought us together, and perhaps we may look forward to a time when Crofts and Birlings [...] are working together - for lower costs and higher prices,”** (Act 1, pg 4).

- This shows how he only **views life through the context of business**, identifying his **“rivals”** and possible allies.
- Proposing to **“work together”** with Crofts Limited suggests he sees Sheila’s marriage as a **business negotiation** and an opportunity to **expand his own prospects**.
- **“For lower costs and higher prices”** finishes the sentence, mirroring how it is the **ultimate goal** for all Capitalists. The phrase is a **microcosm** for Capitalism, emphasising how **money and profit motivate everything in society**.

In the same way, Mr Birling describes how **“employers are at last coming together to see that our interests - and the interests of Capital - are properly protected,”** (Act 1, pg 6), which shows how Mr Birling’s ideal future is one where Capitalism thrives.

- Priestley suggests employers chose to **“protect”** their profits rather than **protecting their workers**.
- Mr Birling presents the **“interests of Capital”** and his own **“interests”** as the same thing, showing how his **identity is entirely contained within his desire for money**.



www.wsj.com/articles/im-running-to-save-capitalism-11557090143

Priestley presents Capitalism as a **self-absorbed, amoral system** where an individual’s purpose is **reduced to their ability to make money**.

Mr Birling as symbolic of Capitalism’s dominance

Priestley uses Mr Birling to reflect Capitalism’s **arrogance and dominance** at the start of the century. The description of himself as **“hard-headed”**, **“practical”**, and a **“businessman”** is repeated three times during his opening lecture (Act 1, pg 6-7), revealing how **arrogant** and **self-assured** he is. The refrain is comical, as if it is the **catchphrase** in an **advert** of a commercial product.

Priestley suggests Capitalists were **fully confident** in their economy, and were **unaware of its failings**. He conveys this through the **metaphor** of the *Titanic*: **“She sails next week - forty-six thousand eight hundred tones - forty-six thousand eight hundred tons - New York in five days - and every luxury - and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable,”** (Act 1, pg 7), Mr Birling says, oblivious of the disaster that will occur.



- Mr Birling's **admiration** for the *Titanic*, its unquestioned size and power, mimics the Capitalist's **desire for such domination**. He sees it as a **symbol of Capitalism's success**.
- Ultimately, though, the *Titanic* wasn't "**unsinkable**". Priestley shows that the economic system of capitalism has fatal flaws.

Mr Birling & Capitalism's selfish qualities

The aspect of Capitalism Priestley was arguably most interested in exposing, though, was how it **discouraged people from looking after one another**. Mr Birling repeats both the mantra that **"a man has to make his own way - has to look after himself"** (Act 1, pg 9) and the claim **"I can't accept any responsibility,"** (Act 1, pg 14), associating both perspectives with Capitalism.

Capitalism centres around private ownership, and so Mr Birling's vision of the self-made man was the Capitalist dream. However, Priestley shows how it is **selfish and lacks compassion for others**. As Eva's story is revealed, Priestley shows how this mantra results in people being **left behind**. Similarly, Mr Birling's refusal to take any responsibility in her death suggests Capitalism encourages **narcissism and carelessness**.

Mr Birling cares more about **self-preservation and comfort**. His response to the Inspector saying **"She felt she couldn't go on any longer"** is **"Don't tell me that's because I discharged her from my employment nearly two years ago,"** (Act 1, pg 17). He refuses to consider his influence on the lives of others. Priestley suggests Capitalist employers don't appreciate that **their workers depend on them for a decent wage** in the same way **they depend on their workers for production**. This means the relationship between employer and employee is not **mutual**, as the employers are always **superior** and more stable. Despite **relying** on their workers, employers refuse to take **responsibility** for them.



Competition as a destructive force

On top of encouraging selfishness, Priestley shows how the **competition** between businesses that drives Capitalism is **destructive**. When recalling the workers' strike, Mr Birling explains, **"They were averaging about twenty-two and six, which was neither more nor less than is paid generally in our industry. They wanted the rates raised so they could average about twenty-five shillings a week. I refused, of course,"** (Act 1, pg 14), showing how he judges the wages he provides by what his competitors offer. Even though they only request a small raise, Mr Birling refuses immediately because he needs to keep his

profits high but his prices low, to ensure he's still a **strong competitor in the industry**. This shows how Capitalist competitiveness stops people from making allowances for others or considering anything other than profit margins.



He justifies his decision by saying, **“If I’d agreed to this demand for a new rate we’d have added about twelve percent to our labour costs,”** (Act 1, pg 15). Priestley shows how workers were reduced to **statistics**, not viewed as individuals with needs and feelings. Eva Smith was **“causing trouble in the works”** (Act 1, pg 17), and because business owners need to make production as **efficient** as possible, any workers who are disturbing production have to go. Workers were **liabilities** for employers, viewed purely by how much they **contributed versus how much they cost**. If they reduced profit, they were **disposable**.

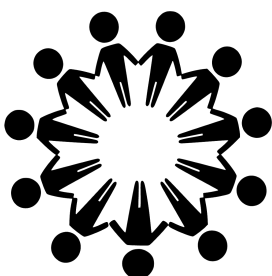
Avoiding scrutiny

Mr Birling is a representative for how Capitalism makes people **defensive, secretive, and hostile**. When the Inspector asks **“why”** he refused his workers’ demand, he is **“surprised”** (Act 1, pg 14), and tells him, **“I don’t see that it’s any concern of yours how I choose to run my business,”** (Act 1, pg 15). Moreover, he finds the Inspector’s questions **“unnecessary”** (Act 1, pg 15) and **“officious”** (Act 1, pg 18). This shows that he doesn’t like being questioned or criticised.

- The **adjective “officious”** in particular implies he doesn’t want the Inspector questioning him because he sees it as a **challenge to his authority and intelligence**.
- Mr Birling doesn’t want anyone **interfering** with how he runs his business, which may link to the concept of **laissez-faire economics**. In 1912, the **Liberal Party** would have allowed Mr Birling to run his business however he wanted.
- The Socialist Inspector, however, is **opposed** to the freedom **laissez-faire** economics brings. Priestley suggests this **culture of personal freedom and privacy within business allowed people to be exploitative, fraudulent or deceptive without consequence**.

The Inspector

The Inspector is a **personification** of **Socialist ideology**. He acts for **the good of others**, not himself, has a clear **moral code** and champions **social responsibility**. He also holds the Birlings **accountable** for their actions, confronting them and challenging them, showing how Priestley wanted **Capitalism itself to be held accountable for the destruction it had caused**.



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Priestley could have chosen to just demonstrate the disadvantages of Capitalism by showing how the Birlings treated Eva Smith directly to his audience. The anti-Capitalism message would still have come across without the Inspector. However, the Birlings would have gone **unpunished**. Priestley uses the Inspector to **communicate his own ideals** to his audience, and to **provide** his audience with an **alternative**: Socialism. The way the Inspector quickly takes over and keeps hold of the



power throughout his visit is **symbolic** of the way Priestley hoped Socialism would **usurp** Capitalism.

The Inspector's societal message

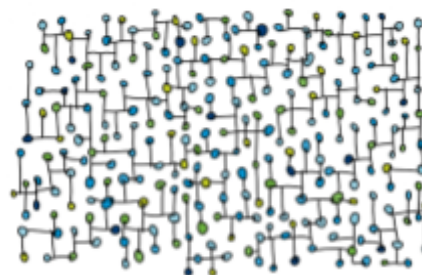
The Inspector's main message is that in society **everyone and everything is connected**. Compared to the Birlings' beliefs about every man making his own way and never being responsible for anyone else, this is a **revelatory concept**.

Connected

He has to explain to Mr Birling why firing Eva from his factory two years ago may be linked to her suicide: **"Because what happened to her then may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events," (Act 1, pg 14)**. This suggests the Birlings were previously **oblivious** of how society is joined by a **"chain"**. It also demonstrates how **easy** it is for people, **especially the upper classes**, to **ruin the lives of others**, and how easy it is to do so **without noticing**.

- The **"chain"** **conjures** a visual image of how, in Socialism, the means of production are **shared equally** with everyone.
- The **metaphor**, furthermore, implies **people are linked by more than just property or money**.
- Priestley shows how life itself is a **"chain"** that links everyone, meaning Socialism is **not just an economic system**. He suggests the **concepts** behind it can be applied to **morality and everyday life**.

This idea of **connection** continues throughout the play, as Priestley tries to encourage his audience to **come together as a strong community**. The Inspector explains, **"We have to share something. If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt," (Act 2, pg 29)**, acknowledging both how responsibility is **split** between people and how human beings have a **desire to belong in a community**. The longing to **"share"** and the reference to **"guilt"** may be an **allusion** to the divided, bleak **state of the country after the war**. Priestley is proposing a way to move past the horrors of war and come together as a country to combat them. Therefore, the ideals of Socialism are presented as a **solution to conflict**.



make a connection

#gapingvoid

<https://www.gapingvoid.com/blog/2016/04/12/make-a-connection/>

Connection and community

Priestley constructs the Inspector's parting monologue around the **Socialist ideals of community and provision of greater social needs**. He tells the Birlings that the **"lives"** of others are **"intertwined"** with their own, meaning, **"We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other," (Act 3, pg 56)**. The **semantic field of connection** advocates for community and equality, both aspects of Socialism.



- The **metaphor** of “**one body**” emphasises how **nothing happens in isolation**, or alternatively may link to the Socialist idea that **society benefits the most if everyone is contributing and receiving**. If one member of the “**body**” suffers, everyone suffers.

The Inspector leaves with the message, “**If men will not learn that lesson, they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish,**” portraying **conflict** and the **World Wars** as the direct result of choosing **Capitalism over Socialism**. He appears almost like a **prophet**, warning the Birlings of an event Priestley’s audience has just witnessed. This would make the message even more **evocative and heartfelt**.

Condemnation of Capitalism

Another purpose of the Inspector’s visit is to **condemn** Capitalism and the actions of those who support it.

When Mr Birling claims the working classes would “**ask for the earth**” if they could, the Inspector responds, “**But after all it’s better to ask for the earth than to take it,**” (Act 1, pg 15).

- The Inspector implies that the Birlings, and all Capitalists, were **responsible** for taking “**the earth**” and making a “**nasty mess**” of Eva’s “**promising life**”. This imagery shows how **extreme Capitalism’s destruction and greed is**. Business owners have “**the [whole] earth**” but **still stop others from asking for a higher wage**.

When Mr Birling complains about having his “**nice little family celebration**” ruined, the Inspector replies, “**That’s more or less what I was thinking earlier tonight, when I was in the Infirmary looking at what was left of Eva Smith. A nice little promising life there, I thought, and a nasty mess somebody’s made of it,**” (Act 1, pg 21).

- Mr Birling sees Eva’s death as an **inconvenience**, but the Inspector shows he only has himself to blame. The **juxtaposition** between Mr Birling’s complaints and the Inspector’s cutting responses suggest **Capitalists were unaware of the poverty and suffering Capitalism caused**.

Giving a voice to Eva

In the same way that Socialism was developed to help the working classes, the Inspector **gives a voice** to Eva Smith and her struggles. He explains to Sheila, “**There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence in every city and big town in this country, Miss Birling. If there weren’t, the factories and warehouses wouldn’t know where to look for cheap labour,**” (Act 1, pg 19). This shows how the **poverty of others is commercialised by Capitalism** (exploited to increase profit).

- Priestley **personifies** the “**factories and warehouses**” which conveys their **influence** in society. Furthermore, it implies business and profit are treated with **more respect and care** than “**young women**”, who only serve to provide “**cheap**”



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labour". Priestley suggests poverty and unemployment **aren't solved by authorities because they are important parts of their business models.**

The way Capitalism ensured people were only as **important as their wealth and cost** is shown when the Inspector tells Mr Birling, **"She wanted twenty-five shillings a week instead of twenty-two and sixpence. You made her pay a heavy price for that. And now she'll make you pay a heavier price still," (Act 3, pg 56)**. The **motif** of a **"price"** imitates Capitalism's focus on money and trade. The pay rise Eva asked for is **miniscule** compared to the **"heavy price"** of her death, showing how **greed and stinginess** (unwillingness to give) came before human kindness. Describing her death as a **"heavy price"** may also symbolise how everything in Capitalist society has a cost attached - nothing can be viewed in a purely emotional way. Priestley suggests Capitalist society had a **disproportionate obsession with money**, meaning its **priorities** were wrong.

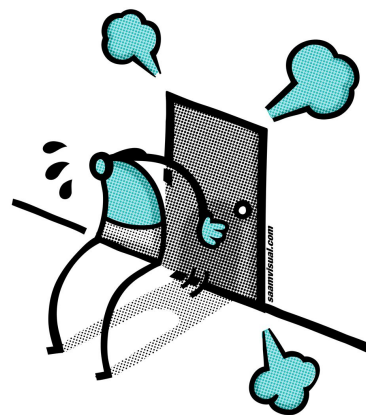
Mrs Birling

Mrs Birling's character isn't massively linked to the theme of Capitalism vs. Socialism - she mostly serves as a symbol for classism - but there are still aspects of her arc that show how **damaging** Capitalist ideals are. Namely, her experience with Eva shows how Capitalism encouraged **gatekeeping** (limited other people's access to a particular resource).

Treatment of Eva

When justifying why she didn't give help to Eva, Mrs Birling explains, **"I wasn't satisfied with the girl's claim - she seemed to me to be not a good case," (Act 2, pg 44)**. This suggests she judged the **worthiness** of her claim based on whether she **deserved** the money. Priestley suggests **even charity work** was impacted by Capitalism's money-oriented **objectification** of people. Priestley therefore implies people were **judged on their monetary value** rather than with morality or compassion.

- Because Mrs Birling wasn't **"satisfied"**, she decided to use her **"influence to have [her claim] refused"**, (Act 2, pg 44), which is an example of **gatekeeping**. Mrs Birling used her **power** to prevent Eva from accessing the resources available to her, showing how **wealth and support are not equally accessible in Capitalist society**.



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Priestley shows how successful Capitalists **trapped people in poverty** in order to **remove competitors from the market** and **keep the wealth for themselves**. The imagery in the Inspector's accusation, **"You slammed the door in her face"**, (Act 2, pg 45), demonstrates how Capitalists **constructed barriers** that blocked off resources from others. Because you need to make more profit than your competitors,



Capitalism encourages people to use their power to **rig the system**, creating obstacles for others to **stop them succeeding** in the same way.

Eva Smith

Eva Smith represents the **“Labour”** side of the **“Capital versus Labour agitations,”** (*Act 1, pg 7*). She is **exploited and abused by the Capitalist system** innumerable times and is never **rewarded** for her hard work. Instead she is **punished** for demanding **recognition**.

By the end of the play she has been **forced out of the system** altogether, living on the streets without a job and no access to money. Even the charities who are supposed to support those **the system has rejected** don't help her. Priestley does this to show how **Capitalism is not designed to help the poor succeed**. Capitalism helps the rich make more and more money while the working class falls further and further down the social ladder. Eva Smith is a **disposable** piece in the Capitalist machinery, **useful and valuable only as long as she is providing labour**.

Eva as a worker

Eva's experience in Mr Birling's factory encapsulates this Capitalist **mindset** where workers are an **unwanted liability**. The factories need people to do the work for them, but in an ideal world they wouldn't have them at all. This means business owners want them to **stay on the factory floor** rather than have successful, evolving careers.



Mr Birling remembers how, after their holidays, his workers **“were all rather restless, and they suddenly decided to ask for more money,”** (*Act 1, pg 14*). He refused, so they **“went on strike,”** (*Act 1, pg 15*).

❖ The strike at the Birling factory may be an **allusion to the coal strike of 1912**, conveying the **unrest** and **dissatisfaction** workers felt because of how they were **treated by their employers**.

As a **“ringleader”** of the strike, (*Act 1, pg 15*), Eva is a **Socialist figure** who signifies the **disillusionment** experienced by the **“Labour”** side of the argument. Although she is a **“good worker”** (*Act 1, pg 14*), Mr Birling fires her for causing trouble, suggesting the **disturbance she caused meant more to him than her value as an employee**. Priestley shows how **resistance and strikes were discouraged**, with workers being **punished** for speaking out, meaning Capitalism **demonised and disarmed** workers.



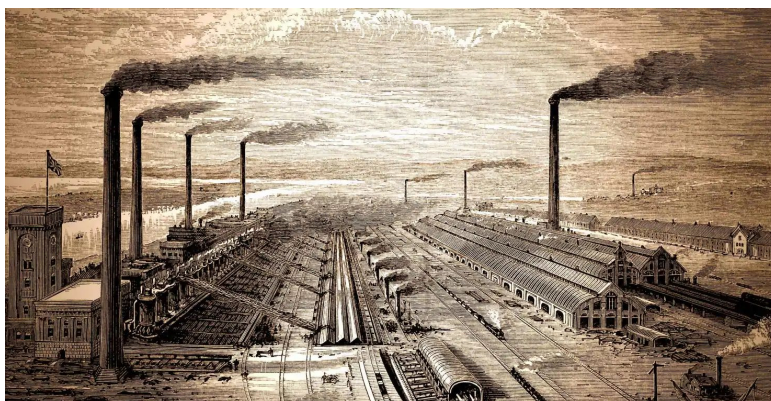
Capitalism & Social Mobility

The major flaw of Capitalism is how it results in **poverty, income inequality, and power imbalances**. Priestley uses the character of Eva Smith to show how Capitalism and the social class system prevent **social mobility** - the ability to move into a different social class.

The Inspector describes how, after she was discharged from Mr Birling's factory, ***“she hadn't been able to save much out of what Birling and Company had paid her,” (Act 1, pg 19)***, implying the typical wage was not enough to support an easy lifestyle and that low wages **forced** people to work as much as possible rather than **risking unemployment**. He continues, ***“So that after two months, with no work, no money coming in, and living in lodgings, with no relatives to help her, few friends, lonely, half-starved, she was feeling desperate,” (Act 1, pg 19)***.

- The Inspector recognises and understands the **cycle of poverty**. He emphasises to the Birlings that Eva's situation made it **impossible** for her to **improve her circumstances on her own**, because she didn't have the resources to do so. He shows how this was **out of her control** and not her own fault.
- Equally, Priestley outlines the **isolating impacts of poverty**, showing how it has a **destructive emotional and mental impact** alongside its physical strains.

This is illustrated further when he says how, when she went to Mrs Birling for help, ***“She was here alone, friendless, almost penniless, desperate. She needed not only money but advice, sympathy, friendliness,” (Act 2, pg 45)***. Priestley teaches about the **social and emotional poverty that financial hardship brings**. Capitalist society was geared



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towards money, so failed to recognise the other ways help could be given. He reminds his audience that **money alone cannot solve poverty and income inequality**, because selfishness and cruelty are **motivators** behind social barriers such as classism. People forget they have things to offer other than their money, just as they forget people are not objects to throw money at.

Development of the Theme

Setting

The play is set in an **industrial city** during the height of **laissez-faire economics**, and the staging depicts the grand, imposing house of a ***“prosperous manufacturer” (Act 1, pg 1)***. All of this means the setting is the **epitome** of Capitalist society. Being a ***“prosperous manufacturer”*** places Mr Birling at the top of the Capitalist hierarchy, a **figurehead** for



success. Priestley's audience would recognise 1912 as a prosperous, Capitalist era that was still thriving off the impacts of the **Industrial Revolution**.

Manufacturing cities were at the heart of this new Capitalist Britain, and were seen as hubs of activity and innovation. By placing the Birlings' house in the **suburbs** of such a city, Priestley links them to this Capitalist movement while also indicating their removal from it. Being in the suburbs means they are away from the smog and crowds of the city, a result of their upper class status. The **divisions and ignorance** of Capitalism are therefore introduced by this setting.

The Inspector and Mr Birling

Before the Inspector arrives on stage, Mr Birling is unquestionably the most **powerful** character. He is **"heavy-looking"** and **"portentous"**, (**Act 1, pg 1**), making his appearance a **physical manifestation of his dominance**. As the speech-maker he **commands** the room and leads the conversation, and his body language and gestures reflect this. His influence on stage symbolises the **dominance of Capitalism in society**, revealing how it controlled others and went unchallenged.

Yet, when the Inspector arrives, we see the power start to **shift**. He **"creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness,"** (**Act 1, pg 11**), signalling his power and ability to take over. Unlike Mr Birling, whose portentousness and **"provincial"** (**Act 1, pg 1**) manner of speaking make him seem superficial, the Inspector speaks **"carefully, weightily"**, (**Act 1, pg 11**). This implies he is in **control**. Mr Birling enters the conversation thinking he is in charge, boasting about his jobs and assuming why the Inspector is here. However, his assumption is wrong, and this, coupled with the Inspector's **reserved** manner, tests Mr Birling's patience. This foreshadows how the Inspector will challenge him later on.

As the play continues, we see Mr Birling lose more and more of his power and confidence. On his own, he is a convincing leader, but he cannot cope when challenged. This could suggest that Capitalism itself can only appear like a viable choice when Socialism is ignored.

The Inspector questions his decisions, asking **"Why?"** (**Act 1, pg 14**), **overrules** him, **criticises** him, and **silences** him. For example, we see him **"cutting through, massively,"** (**Act 1, pg 12**), while Mr Birling is speaking, and **"turn[ing] on him"** when he tries to **"protest"** (**Act 2, pg 46**). This is symbolic of Socialism's **triumph** over Capitalism. Priestley shows how Socialism is the better, superior, more successful form of politics and economy.

The play opens with Mr Birling's **derogatory** views of Socialism, referring to Socialists as **"cranks"** and their ideals as **"nonsense"** (**Act 1, pg 10**). This shows how society was aware of Socialism, but **didn't respect** it. This makes Capitalism and the problems it causes seem even more cruel and selfish, because people **kept on choosing it** over Socialism. Because Mr Birling returns to using such insults once the Inspector leaves, calling him **"some sort of crank"** (**Act 3, pg 60**) and **"a fraud"** (**Act 3, pg 64**), Priestley may suggest Mr Birling **mocks** Socialism to make himself feel more **powerful**. Mr Birling clearly felt



intimidated and overpowered by the Inspector while he was there, and by insulting him behind his back, Mr Birling can **reinstate** himself as the leader.

