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EXPERT COMMENT: Why Ed Balls deserved the Strictly glitterball

[Mary Irwin](#), Senior Lecturer in Media at Northumbria University, writes about one of Britain's most loved TV shows 'Strictly Come Dancing' climax.

This year has been a shocker. The memory of 2016 will be, after all, skewered in perpetuity by the image of Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, standing [grinning in a golden lift](#). Above all, it is a year in which all the wrong people kept winning for all the wrong reasons. From an internecine power struggle among the Tory party leading to an exit from Europe, the consequences of which no one has the faintest idea, to a brash, belligerent reality TV star being elected US president, I wake up every morning to the horrible realisation that it really wasn't all a dream.

In a world where everything seems to be falling butter side down, the cosy escapism offered by the BBC in its two ratings juggernauts [The Great British Bake Off](#) and [Strictly Come Dancing](#) is at its most welcome. One could argue that their respective focus on home baking and ballroom dancing offers more than a subliminal nod to the longing for a return to a fantasy Britain of jam, Jerusalem and military two-steps that drove the vote of many a Brexiter itching to take back control. But both shows also offer a view into another, more hopeful world – one in which winning isn't actually everything, one where people can make fun of themselves.

Sure, this year's Strictly has delivered a climax that no one could argue with. The final will see the very cream of this year's contestants compete for the Strictly trophy. Nineties pop starlet [Louise Redknapp](#) will dance it out with Hollyoaks' heartthrob [Danny Mac](#) and TV sports presenter [Ore Oduba](#). All are brilliant dancers who have delivered some spectacular routines with their partners over the past 12 weeks.

Yet, honestly, shamefully, I'm bored with them all. I'm bored of their predictable, identikit excellence and almost professional levels of ability, and I don't care who wins Strictly's [Grand Final](#). Strictly in 2016 has for me – and going by social media, [many, many others](#) – been all about the wrong man. This year's oldest, squarest male contestant, someone who traditionally would have had to have packed up his dancing shoes and got his coat by around week two, is in fact 2016's breakout star.

Scourge of the judges and provider of some of the most memorably joyous performances, former Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer Ed Balls has owned 2016. While by the end of the series, Danny Mac and Louise Redknapp will have racked up any number of nines and tens with their sizzling sambas and elegant quicksteps, it is Ed and his partner Katya Jones's recreation of the K Pop smash hit [Gangnam Style](#) which will sit forever in the Strictly hall of fame.

Despite the judging panel's constant refrain that Strictly is a dancing competition, Balls personifies what it is that makes the series such an engaging and absorbing experience. While the likely winners of this year were already evident from week one, who could have predicted the nimble footwork, pitch perfect comic timing and cheeky, laddish bravado that Balls would bring to his wittily ingenious routines? Before his performances, there was always a genuine buzz of anticipation. No one knew what he was about to do next. While he did not technically win the competition, leaving in week ten, Strictly 2016 was Ed Balls's show.

In the light entertainment, shiny-floor show world of Strictly, sometimes we don't always want the best man (or woman) to win. Strictly after all has always thrived on results that go against the predicted grain. In 2005 and 2006, for example, there were two thrillingly unlikely winners in the shape of cricketers [Darren Gough](#) and [Mark Ramprakash](#).

First, bluff, matter-of-fact Gough transformed into an elegant, assured ballroom dancer, and then shy, self-effacing Ramprakash revealed an undiscovered talent for sultry, sexy Latin routines. While neither man was necessarily the best or most natural dancer of their respective series, the draw for the audience was the unexpected pleasure of what they achieved in a few months, set against the experienced, stage school-trained contestant who of course hits the ground running on week one.

Ed Balls's hand-knitted, homespun amateur charms also had other rather more significant implications in a 2016 when not an only exit from Europe but also questions of British identity itself have been continually under the spotlight. Set against the angry troubled images of conflicted nationhood that the year has confronted us with, Balls, with his endearingly imperfect dancing, serves as a reminder of some of the positive qualities which have long been associated with Britishness. His popularity drew fundamentally upon his ability to laugh at himself and to take a weekly slating from the judges in good heart.

At the same time, in the best tradition of the gentleman amateur, he genuinely gave it his very best shot every week. And who could miss the spirited twinkle in his eye that showed he was enjoying the pop-culture joke along with everyone else? For a few minutes on Saturday nights, Balls banished 2016's Brexit Britain gloom with a long forgotten sprinkle of 1990s Cool Britannia insouciance. What a pity that the year that took a TV star to the top of the political tree couldn't also send a politician the other way.

Oh well, that was 2016 it seems.

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