The Prince was written for the seething and precarious world of early sixteenth-century Italian politics, where a knife in the back – or more likely a vial of poison – was never far away. This was the age of the Borgias. It was also the age of fragile and violent city-states like Lucca. But high politics everywhere has its Machiavellian side, even in nice contemporary Denmark. One of the Danish TV programmes that has turned into a successful export is *Borgen*, a drama set in and around the office of the new prime minister, who happens to be a woman (just as, at the time of writing, the real Danish prime minister also happens to be a woman, Helle Thorning-Schmidt). *Borgen* doesn't hit the spot simply by making Danish politics seem nice – no one would watch that. What viewers also enjoy is the intrigue: the scheming, the back-stabbing, the betrayals, the seething resentments. *Borgen* shows civilised and decent Danish politicians doing whatever it takes, first to their enemies and then to their friends, to maintain their power. In this they are egged on by their advisers, whose main job is to ensure that their bosses don't relapse into niceness at moments of weakness. In a key early scene, the new prime minister is taken to the top of the parliament building by her mentor, who shows her Copenhagen spread out before them. This is yours, he says, if you want it. But you have to want it. She is a nice woman. But she is also a politician. Chastened, she goes back down and reconvenes the meeting she had just abandoned in tears. This time she gets her way, with smiling threats and outright lies. It is a Machiavellian moment.

The darker parts of *Borgen* describe a way of doing politics that would be entirely familiar at the court of Assad in Syria, as they would anywhere that people compete for power. Politicians the world over can read *The Prince* and see something of themselves in it. The stakes are not the same everywhere – in some systems politicians are still playing for their lives, whereas in others the losers get to retire on comfortable pensions – but the game is the same. It's a fight to reach the top and stay there. Of course, people play this game outside of politics too: in business, in the arts, in academic life, in sport. But politics is still the definitive version of the game. The Liverpool manager Bill Shankly once joked that football's not a matter of life and death: it's more important than that. Politics *is* a matter of life and death. It's precisely as important as that, even in Denmark, where politicians may not kill each other any more but innocents still die as a result of their grubby deals. A pension cut that helps keep a government in power also guarantees that a few more old people won't survive the winter. The prize for winning in politics is qualitatively different from other spheres of life. If you win in football, you get money and a trophy; if you win in the arts, you get money and kudos; if you win in business, you get money and more money. If you win in politics, you might not get the money but you do get to make the rules for everyone else. That's a prize worth fighting for. It's also a prize that encourages politicians to think that the normal rules don't apply to them.

Machiavellianism is not hard to find in modern politics. But in one crucial respect Machiavelli remains a pre-modern thinker. The first line of *The Prince*, which most readers barely notice, is the giveaway: