

British Theatre Guide

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Yes, Prime Minister

Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn
Chichester Festival Theatre
The Lowry, Salford, and touring
(2011)

Yes, Prime Minister is the latest in a growing line of old TV sitcoms to be given a new stage incarnation by at least some of the original writers; unlike most, this production is fronted by some well-known actors and trails in its wake some reasonably positive reviews.

Whilst the character names and job titles haven't changed, the play is set firmly in a fictional British government of the current time with mentions of coalition, climate change, world recession and Blackberries. The situation, however, is vintage *Yes, Minister*, as are the attitudes of the politicians and civil servants (although the original programmes never seem to be repeated, the same tired old illogical lines sent up thirty years ago are still regularly trotted out by politicians today, often word-for-word).

Set in a wood-panelled room at Chequers, the Prime Minister's official country residence, PM Jim Hacker is charged with finalising an agreement for a huge loan from the newly-oil-rich country of Kumranistan, but the visiting minister makes a request that is not only immoral and illegal in Britain but, more importantly, would not go down well with the voters if the PM granted it and news got out. Hacker sets about plotting to get around the problem with the help of cabinet secretary Sir Humphrey Appleby, principal private secretary Bernard Woolley and special policy advisor Claire Sutton, with some advice from Sir Humphrey's old school chum the Kumranistan ambassador.

The characters are bound to change to some extent if they are played by actors interpreting a role rather than mimicking the original performers as has been done in other sitcom stage transfers but there are also changes that reflect a different time and government. Simon Williams, despite apparently struggling with his voice, is still the smooth-talking Sir Humphrey that we knew before, and deservedly gets a round of applause for some of his lengthy speeches of deliberately obscure civil service language that were such a memorable feature of the TV character.

Richard McCabe's Jim Hacker, however, is not the bumbling idiot he used to be but is much more confident and decisive if no more intelligent, and even gets on top of the scheming, superior Sir Humphrey from quite early on which changes their relationship quite a bit. Bernard, as played by Chris Larkin, is physically more stooped and fawning than his TV equivalent, more like Alan B'Stard's snivelling sidekick Piers in the Marks and Gran political sitcom *The New Statesman*, but he brings the same moral qualms to the character that got him into so much trouble before.

Charlotte Lucas is the confident, modern female political advisor Claire Sutton, and Kevork Malikyan gives a superb performance as the Kumranistan ambassador, really bringing the play to life whenever he comes on stage. Perhaps reflecting the writers' background in TV, there are some very brief appearances from some other characters, including Jonathan Coote as the director

general of the BBC, Michael Fenton Stevens as a BBC current affairs presenter and a whole TV crew.

Simon Higlett's design looks beautiful and is extremely detailed, and Andrea J Cox's sound design, in association with sound consultant John Leonard, gives subtle vocal reinforcement and produces a thunder sound that sounds genuine enough to make everyone jump, something that is rarely achieved through speakers.

There is plenty here to enjoy, laugh at and recognise from the world of politics that is as well-observed and as well-written as the original series, but there are times when it feels as though giving the writers the freedom to go outside the time boundaries of TV has allowed them to let the plot get rather baggy. The first scene with the ambassador sets up the real sticky dilemma that the characters find themselves in brilliantly, but while the programme was never about resolving problems so much as saving their own skins, it still feels a little disappointing when the end is tied up so quickly and matter-of-factly.

The central relationship between Sir Humphrey and Hacker also suffers here: in the TV series, the pompous Sir Humphrey was so controlling and arrogant that it was great to see Hacker's rare victories over him, but here it's more a Jeeves and Wooster relationship where the incompetent is given so much freedom to mess things up that we pray for the intelligent servant to come in and sort it all out.

As it stands, it is an entertaining and amusing couple of hours (plus an interval), but it's difficult to shake off the feeling that it would be much tighter and more effective if cut down to 90 minutes or less.

Velda Harris [reviewed](#) this production at The Lyceum, Sheffield

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)