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“Brief Encounter” aside, seriousness was not Coward’s ozone; even in his humor, he was no thinker. The same can’t be said of Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay, the co-authors of the brilliant nineteen-eighties British TV series “Yes, Minister” and “Yes, Prime Minister,” which, taken together, are the smartest and funniest political-science course anyone has ever attended. Now, in a new stage version of “Yes, Prime Minister” (expertly directed by Lynn, at the Gielgud, in London), the scornful, lazy, loquacious Sir Humphrey (Henry Goodman) and the hapless, cunning, vainglorious Prime Minister Jim Hacker (David Haig) return to the West End just in time to skewer Britain’s Tory-led coalition government and its instinct for turning a crisis into a catastrophe. With a plot that juggles all the current political deliriums—energy, the euro, the European Union, illegal immigration, global warming, the BBC, pedophilia, and more—the play bears exhilarating witness to Mark Twain’s droll observation that honesty *was* the best policy.

The story revolves around a deal being made with the foreign secretary of the oil-rich Kumranistan to run a pipeline through Europe, thus solving Britain’s economic problems and insuring the P.M.’s future. On the eve of signing the deal, however, the foreign secretary asks for a sexual partner for the night; his sweet tooth turns out to be for schoolgirls. This request generates an extravaganza of hilarious pettifogging. When a willing girl is finally found, she turns out to be an illegal immigrant. “Oh, my God! What do we do? We can’t ignore the facts,” Hacker says in abject terror. His assistant answers, “If you can’t ignore the facts, you have no business being

in government.” Like Nixon and Kissinger praying together at the White House, Hacker and his pols get down on their knees to ask for guidance, a moment that gives the line “the secret ambush of a specious prayer” a whole new meaning. “So my question is: which is the greater evil, O Lord? Is it really O.K. for me to authorize procuring some little scrubber for him to have sex with?” Hacker asks, adding, “I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience. Amen.”

In the late eighties, after a tenure as a director at the National Theatre, Lynn left England and built a successful career in Hollywood, where he has made a series of star-driven studio comedies that rarely allow him to show the full range of his sharp intelligence. His return to the West End is something to cheer about. Lynn, who directed the best production of Joe Orton’s “Loot” I’ve ever seen, is a dab hand at Orton’s game of drawing pure water from poisoned wells. Almost every paradoxical line of this vivacious play challenges the audience to think against received opinion. To end with one piquant potshot: “We don’t approve of blackmail as an instrument of government policy,” Sir Humphrey sniffs. “Blackmail is criminal, Prime Minister. We use leverage.” ♦