

The New *Yes, Prime Minister*

By Peter Hennessy

(Peter Hennessy is Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History at Queen Mary, University of London, and author of *Whitehall* and *The Prime Minister*.)

We Brits like to think we are a bit special and like it even more if we can persuade ourselves that millions round the globe rather think we are too. The rest of the world *does* have ‘a certain idea of Britain’, to adapt a phrase of General Charles de Gaulle’s, and it’s a mixture of how we are reigned (thanks to international fascination with the Royal Family), how we spy (thanks to Ian Fleming and James Bond) and how we are governed (thanks to Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn and *Yes, Minister* plus *Yes, Prime Minister*). Of no other country is this kind of brand recognition remotely true.

And now Jay and Lynn are giving Chichester a refresher course and a cultural update with their new *Yes, Prime Minister*. They are bang up-to-date. They immerse us in the governing world of financial crisis, the global warming debate, the baffling latter-day Byzantium of the European Union, the politics of oil and the instability of countries whose names end in ‘stan’. The BlackBerry has replaced the telephone, let alone the Civil Service messenger, as the prime means of communication, the fear of the *Daily Mail* outstrips any anxieties about the Parliamentary Opposition and yet the old magic is still the same.

What are the ingredients of that magic? It’s partly that Jay and Lynn are the Gilbert and Sullivan of our day. They have a feel for how institutions think collectively, how individuals engage in what social anthropologists call both deep and shallow play inside them; the rituals of both behaviour and the use of language (Humphrey’s interminable and obfuscatory soliloquies never fail to dazzle and baffle whatever the episode or anxiety that triggers them). To cap it all, there lurks an ever-present sense of the absurd and the self-parodic worthy of P G Wodehouse. Touched-up reality may be the basis of their comedy, but the Jay and Lynn depictions of life in No. 10, at Chequers and in Whitehall are always recognisable to insiders both serving and retired.

The ingenuity of construction comes in the form of Bernard Woolley, the Civil Service Private Secretary, who is the receptacle into which the more lurid expressions of their

dependence and antagonism are deposited by Jim and Humphrey, both of whom the hapless Bernard must serve as both political and Whitehall master respectively.

Now we have the full-blooded addition of a representative of another of our governing tribes – the special adviser (or SPAD in the Whitehall jargon) in the person of Claire Sutton. The SPADs have risen mightily since Jay and Lynn first picked up their pens to sketch Jim, Humphrey and Bernard. In fact, Britain is now ruled by 2½ governing tribes – passing political ministers and permanent career civil servants with nearly a hundred politically-appointed SPADs forming the half-a-tribe. Since the first Blair administration came to power in 1997, the relationship between our governing tribes has been scratchier than ever before and remained so when Gordon Brown moved into No. 10.

But in the new play the mix is enriched still further by the tom-toms of the governing tribes – the media – in the persons of Jeremy Burnham, Director-General of the BBC (where Antony Jay once worked), and the presenter of *Panorama*, Simon Chester. All the mutual manipulation inside what the former Cabinet Minister, William Waldegrave, has described as ‘the politico-media complex by which we are governed’ are laid out for your inspection and enlightenment.

Elections, though essential to the regular refreshment of democracy, are, for many, things to be endured rather than enjoyed as the more discriminating recoil from what the former Head of the Cabinet Office ‘Think Tank’, Lord Rothschild, once called ‘the promises and panaceas which gleam like false teeth in the party manifestoes’. An evening with the new *Yes, Prime Minister* will hopefully bring solace and balm to those of you still sore from the buffeting of electoral crudities and over-simplifications. An election year represents a prime time for the team to return.

Why is the Jay/Lynn formula such an enduring success given all the changes in the political ecology since the 1980s? It’s because of the writers’ grip on and feel for the human factors and the very different formations that lead our governing tribes to behave as they do. Ever since the Civil Service shifted from recruitment on the basis of political patronage (everyone a SPAD?) in the late nineteenth century to a meritocracy that plucked the best and the brightest from the universities on the basis of competitive examination for a lifetime’s career in state service, the fissile material for *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* has been accumulating. For well over a century, generations of ministers have found themselves up against and dependent upon a tribe of clever, seasoned lifers who are fully aware that their

transient political masters are subject to Enoch Powell's law that 'all political lives, unless they are cut off midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and human affairs'. But we had to wait until Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn seized upon the dramatic potential of these juxtapositions before outsiders began to understand the complications of governing marriage.

It is a cliché to stress the increasing, often manic, pace of life in government, the Prime Minister's office especially, in the era of electronic newsgathering and an insatiable 24-hour media. It was Maynard Keynes over 70 years ago who wrote of 'madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back'. Jay and Lynn are the master-distillers of governing frenzy. And the fame and bite of their distillations have made them adjuncts of that most mystical entity – the British Constitution itself.