

## Yes Prime Minister: Chichester Festival Theatre, review

Henry Goodman delivers Sir Humphrey Appleby's impenetrable speeches with panache. Rating: \* \* \* \*

By [Charles Spencer](#)

Published: 12:21PM BST 21 May 2010

[Comment](#)



Wonderfully funny: Henry Goodman stars in *Yes Prime Minister*  
**Yes Prime Minister**

### Chichester Festival Theatre

How wonderful it is to have them back. More than twenty years on from the acclaimed television series, Jim Hacker, that most embattled and craven of prime ministers, and Sir Humphrey Appleby, the most devious and obscurantist of senior civil servants, are back, and in truly vintage form in a new stage play.

It is at first a shock to see them being played by actors other than the late and much missed Paul Eddington and Nigel Hawthorne, but David Haig and Henry Goodman step magnificently into the breach.

There is no attempt at slavish imitation of the originals. There is more steel and less silk in Goodman's Appleby, even more craven panic and farcical desperation in Haig's Hacker. The comedy however remains as politically sharp, and as blissfully funny, as ever.

The old writing team of Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, the latter also directing with verve, has lost none of its satirical edge, and delivers an up-to-the minute script combining great jokes with classic farce that puts one in mind of the relationship between Jeeves and Bertie Wooster.

Wonderfully funny speeches on such subjects as the pieties of global warming and the grandiosity of the BBC were greeted with rounds of applause by the first night audience in Chichester, for this is a play that speaks powerfully to middle England. But the plot is also constructed with great precision, and there is no sense of a TV sitcom being extended beyond its natural length.

The action is set in Chequers, where Hacker, who is leading a minority government, is staring disaster in the face. The economy is on the rocks, and the European leaders assembled for a

conference at Lancaster House are getting nowhere. There is just one grain of hope. The government of a dodgy, oil-rich country called Kumranistan is prepared to offer a \$10 trillion loan if it is allowed to build a pipeline through Europe.

It is an offer that would save Hacker's bacon. There is a major snag however. Kumranistan's foreign minister will cancel the deal unless the PM arranges for an underage teenage prostitute to be flown to Chequers for his gratification.

The scene in which Haig's desperate PM persuades his colleagues to get on their knees and pray for divine guidance on this agonising moral dilemma left me crying with laughter, and so too did his live TV appearance with an interviewer closely modelled on Jeremy Paxman. The way Haig moves in an instant from sweaty terror to pompous self aggrandisement with an echo of Winston Churchill in his voice is pure comic bliss.

Henry Goodman, that master of high-definition acting, is outstanding too, delivering those famously impenetrable speeches with superb panache, while Jonathan Slinger is a nerdish delight as the endlessly harassed, cruelly put upon private secretary Bernard.

It's a wonderful show that taps into all our current scepticism about those who presume to lead us, and a smash hit if I ever saw one.