

Yes, Prime Minister

Festival Theatre, Chichester

★★★★★



[Michael Billington](#)

[The Guardian](#), Friday 21 May 2010



Shores of lunacy ... Henry Goodman as Sir Humphrey Appleby and David Haig as Prime Minister Jim Hacker.
Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

This is not a simple replica of the popular 1980s TV series. Even if writers Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn couldn't be expected to foresee the comic possibilities of coalition, they recognise that the power balance inside politics has radically changed, and that Jim Hacker has become more presidential, while being ever more dependent on others. The result is to push satire, legitimately in my view, into the zany realm of farce.

Farce is about a world spinning out of control; and that is what we see as Hacker, governing with a threadbare majority, faces a crisis weekend at Chequers. He has to cope, in the age of 24-hour news, with a divided cabinet, a sinking pound and the potential collapse of a European Council conference. Rescue seems to come when an oil-rich central Asian state offers a \$10tn loan to build a pipeline that will zigzag through the whole of Europe. The deal, however, is thrown into disarray when the country's foreign secretary asks the government to supply him with an underage girl with whom he can have sex.

The dilemma propels the second half into the wilder shores of lunacy. But, as always, the real strength of Jay and Lynn lies in their command of detail: there's an hilarious section where Bernard, Hacker's parliamentary private secretary, replies to searching questions from the BBC's press office with formulaic clichés, every one of which we recognise. The authors also see that Hacker's old symbiotic relationship with Sir Humphrey is disrupted now that he has his own special policy adviser. The play, under Lynn's direction, becomes a study in Hacker's mounting desperation, which David Haig brilliantly embodies. Haig has a wonderful trick of lunging forward with a decisive cry of "I must do something" and then staring in panic at his team of advisers. He also suggests that

behind his seeming ordinariness lies a genuine mania: at one point, after listing the catalogue of disasters befalling him, Haig sinks to his knees and pummels a chair with his balding bonce.

Even if Sir Humphrey is no longer the puppet-master he once was, Henry Goodman invests him with a Machiavellian smoothness and shows an astonishing capacity to reel off obfuscatory soliloquies on a single breath. Jonathan Slinger also turns the loyal Bernard into a troubled moralist, and Emily Joyce conveys the rising power of the special adviser who, as it happens, always gives bad advice. But then the whole point of this buoyant farce, with its references to everything from politicians' fear of the Daily Mail to the tacky commercialism of the BBC, is that it locates its madness in a world we all recognise.

- Michael Billington praises Jay and Lynn's command of detail, but he is wrong when he describes Bernard in *Yes, Prime Minister* as "Hacker's parliamentary private secretary". Parliamentary private secretaries are MPs who act as unpaid assistants to ministers. Bernard is a civil servant and is a "private secretary". This review was corrected on 21 May 2010.