

Another view on Yes, Prime Minister

In these rougher times the affable blundering of Jim Hacker has given way to the desperate scheming of Hacker mark II



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Toughening up ... Henry Goodman and David Haig in Yes, Prime Minister. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

It is fitting that this stage version of Yes, Prime Minister starts with the pips of News 24: the play's rhythm, like that of Whitehall, is set by the media's drum.

The plot centres on the need to feed the cameras at a conference the PM is due to chair. Amid wobbling markets and parliamentary instability, all perspective is lost – the government is even asked to supply a visiting foreign secretary with an underage girl. This panic is something Westminster operators will recognise, although it never drove us to dabble in vice.

The original 1980s TV series was relaxing viewing after a stressful day of manoeuvring to get the right papers to the top of the red box. The play is not: in these rougher times, the affable blundering of Jim Hacker has given way to the desperate scheming of Hacker mark II, who is more John Cleese than Paul Eddington. Sir Humphrey remains machiavellian, but more of a straightforward bruiser; and mild private secretary Bernard has been reborn with an unnerving growl.

All this is true to the SW1 I knew, where the gentleman amateurs had to toughen up to compete with the Alastair Campbells. It was easy to sympathise with the 1980s characters, but in this new world, in which The Thick of It has given the foul-mouthed spin doctor dramatic form, it's more difficult. Yes Minister's writers said that the difference with their 80s scripts is that the viewer could sympathise with their characters. That is no longer true in this new world. They are no longer as sympathetic.

Sir Humphrey still pulls the wool over Hacker's eyes, but he also needs to outsmart his political adviser, who is now, as we always were, present at every important discussion. The competition for influence is what makes this new Whitehall feel edgy, and that increasingly cut-throat atmosphere

rings true. If Yes, Prime Minister is less relaxing than before, then we advisers must take our share of the blame.

Tom Clark is a Guardian writer who spent four years as a special adviser. Yes, Prime Minister was at the Chichester Festival theatre.