

HACKER'S BACK

DOES ANYTHING EVER CHANGE IN THE WORLD OF POLITICS? THE WRITERS OF THE LONG-RUNNING BRITISH COMEDY SERIES *YES, PRIME MINISTER* DON'T THINK SO.

THE FINAL EPISODE of the acclaimed political comedy series *Yes, Prime Minister* was broadcast on 28 January 1988. Twenty-four years later, Australian audiences will welcome PM Jim Hacker and his cabinet secretary, Sir Humphrey Appleby, onto the stage in a theatrical adaptation of the TV series.

Yes Prime Minister (1986–1988) and its precursor, *Yes, Minister* (1980–1984) remain favourites in TV repeat slots. Actor Paul Eddington ensured the much-derided Hacker became a fixture on any politician's TV viewing schedule, while Nigel Hawthorne owned the part of Appleby, the verbose über civil servant. Writers Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay gave these characters sparkling lines that became memorable quotes. (Hacker: "Humphrey, do you see it as part of your job to help ministers make fools of themselves?" Humphrey: "Well, I've never met one that *needed* any help.")

Reflecting on the series' success, Jay says it had a lot to teach politicians and voters. "You could say that [both series] are training films for government ministers... For many viewers it was an eye-opener to learn about the crucial roles the permanent secretaries and civil servants had in government."

During the series' run, Jay and Lynn were approached with the idea of a stage adaptation. But scheduling problems with Eddington and Hawthorne prevented progress, and the thought of not using the leading men was unimaginable for the writers. In 2010, long after the series had ended and after both Eddington and Hawthorne had died (in 1995 and 2001, respectively), the writers began to consider a fresh approach. Jay says, "We knew that the actual, basic political truths [of the series], were as true as ever."

British politics has seen plenty of satirical treatment since the end of the series. The comedy series *The Thick of It* (on ABC TV), for example, sends up the



managerial speak, strong language and cocky attitudes that have become part of British politics since the 1980s. Jay likes *The Thick of It*, but thinks the changes in politics are largely superficial: "There are many more special advisers, spin doctors, Blackberry phones, global warming and a number of things that weren't around when writing the series originally. But Jim Hacker [was] just as preoccupied with spin as any chap now; he just had fewer assistants to do it with."

Jay's co-writer, Lynn, now based in Los Angeles, agrees that the basic political truths still hold and that contemporary British politics is rife with material for a revival of *Yes, Prime Minister*: "About two years ago, I suddenly thought, 'Maybe this is a good time'. The financial crisis looked to me like it was going to get worse...and there has been so much going on in British politics. We thought it would be interesting to update and write a contemporary play."

So Lynn moved into Jay's house in Somerset, UK, for 10 days. "We got together and it was just as if we had finished two weeks ago doing the last [TV] episode," Jay enthuses. "[We] just carried straight on." The pair drafted the first act during Lynn's stay and the second by email, fax and phone.

For both Jay and Lynn, the transition from screen to stage came reasonably naturally, as both have backgrounds in the theatre. "My parents were both on

the stage and they met on the stage," Jay explains. He grew up thinking he, too, would be an actor, but ended up in writing and broadcasting. He still owns the company Video Arts (together with ex-Monty Python, John Cleese), which produces corporate training videos.

Lynn started out as an actor and was a successful theatre director in the 1970s. He used these skills again when *Yes, Prime Minister* opened at the Chichester Festival Theatre in West Sussex in May 2010, and then for its run in London's West End.

The play is set at Chequers, the PM's country residence. The European Union is in financial meltdown and Hacker can't find his way out of the minefield of a hung parliament. The Foreign Secretary of the fictional oil-rich nation of Kumranistan is willing to throw him a lifeline. In return, he wants a small favour: a suitable teenage sex partner. The protagonists are basically the same as in the TV days, but the introduction of a Special Policy Adviser complicates matters further.

There is no reason why the theatrical version shouldn't work in Australia, (starring Mark Owen-Taylor and Philip Quast). At times, the British production almost broke into pure farce, but the cast pulled it off brilliantly. It never feels like an overstretched TV episode and there are some superb one-liners.

One person who, it can be guessed, could be odds-on to attend the Australian production is former PM Bob Hawke. During a rally in 1989, in a case of art topping life, Hawke dragged the visiting (and totally unprepared) Paul Eddington on to a stage, announcing to his audience: "You don't want to be listening to *me*. You want to be listening to the *real* PM!"

by **Albert Ehrnrooth** (acge.net)

Yes, Prime Minister is touring nationally from 31 Jan (yesprimeminister.com.au).



FROM LEFT *YES, PRIME MINISTER* AUSTRALIAN PRODUCTION: PRINCIPAL PRIVATE SECRETARY BERNARD WOOLLEY (JOHN LLOYD-FILLINGHAM); PRIME MINISTER JIM HACKER (MARK OWEN-TAYLOR); AND CABINET SECRETARY, SIR HUMPHREY APPLEBY (PHILIP QUAST)

OPPOSITE THE CAST OF THE ORIGINAL BBC TV SERIES: DEREK FOWLDS, NIGEL HAWTHORNE AND PAUL EDDINGTON