

## How Did the 1980s British Political Satire Series “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister” Criticize the Social Democratic Policy in Great Britain?

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### *Abstract*

This study aims to recall the ideas and activities in the field of political satire. A great example in this direction is the British series “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister.” It is considered by many to be the best series of its time in Britain and one of the best satirical series of all time made on British television. The series was made in the years 1985-1987 and is a continuation of the satirical comedy series “Yes, Mr. Minister” which was made between the years 1980-1984. The series shows the silent struggle that was going on in the 1980s between the politicians and civil service officials. The political satire is a complex genre, a field that requires deep knowledge of socio-cultural, economic-political and historical facts so that the satirical conclusions drawn are meaningful and not parodic.

*Keywords:* British, political satire, social democratic policy.

### 1. Introduction – The comedy series “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister”

“Yes, Mr. Prime Minister” is considered by many to be the best series of its time in Britain and one of the best satirical series of all time made on British television. The series was made in the years 1985-1987 and is a continuation of the satirical comedy series “Yes, Mr. Minister” which was made between the years 1980-1984.

The series shows the silent struggle that was going on in the 1980s between the politicians and civil service officials.

The series follows Prime Minister James Hacker who tries to bring organizational order to the clerical system of the British Civil Service while pushing a personal and promotional agenda.

Throughout his career, he faces the head of the British Civil Service, Sir Humphrey Appleby, who is considered a symbol of the wind of the British clerical machine.

Hacker’s policy is expressed in the desire to cut public costs and streamline the bureaucracy. His desires to undermine the skills of the official, Sir Humphrey, who is considered Machiavellian, are often hindered by complicated sentences designed to confuse Hacker. Sir Humphrey is considered a snob, elitist and blind to any move that does not go through Whitehall

(the government building and the Cabinet Offices), which is considered the symbol of the British state.

Hacker’s political path is not clear and dogmatic enough to be considered a Labor or Conservative policy.

The purpose of this lack of clarity is to show the two characters represented by Hacker and Humphrey appear in the worst possible way – Hacker’s corruption and instability in the face of Humphrey’s arrogance and manipulateness. “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister”, is still considered as a series that symbolizes the transition to Thatcherite politics of Britain at the time.

The main characters in the series have become icons in the history of British television. The three stars of the show are: Sir Nigel Hawthorne (regarded as one of the greatest actors of all time on British television) who plays Sir Humphrey, Paul Addington plays James Hacker and Derek Fold who plays the private secretary of Rohm on behalf of the Civil Service – Bernard Wiley.

“Yes, Mr. Prime Minister,” which was the favorite series of the Prime Minister of England Margaret Thatcher, is considered to be a breakthrough in that it was the first to show that a comedy series can deal with serious issues on the agenda and express opinions about them.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Understanding the mood in Britain during the production of the series

During the 1980s in Britain, the legitimacy of the welfare state was contested among the British public. The welfare state was financed through taxes that had to increase following the demographic changes and the increase in the number of workers in government jobs. When growth slowed due to the increase in taxes, the legitimacy of the welfare state was damaged due to the high tax burden.

In the UK, in those years when the series was produced, significant privatization processes were carried out. The term privatization entered the English language during the days of the Thatcher government. The Thatcher and Major governments, which lasted until 1997, privatized most of the services and industries that were under government control, including transportation, gas, electricity, water and communication services. According to estimates, the value of privatizations in Great Britain in the years 1980-2000 is about 153 billion, which is about 15% of the total value of all privatizations in the world during this period.<sup>2, 3</sup>

Until those years, the Keynesian ideology advocated maximum government intervention in the economy. This ideology was created to a large extent due to the economic crisis of 1929 which is considered as an expression of the failure of the free market. But in those years, economists began to challenge Keynesian economics and sought to return to the free market ideology.<sup>4,5</sup>

The most prominent school of thought for this is the Chicago school, from which the thinker Milton Friedman came, who advocated a neoliberal economy that advocates minimal state

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Comedy Guide. Archive: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/yesminister/index.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Hetis-Rolf, Sheila, 2004, The effect of privatization on employees and labor relations, on prices and the level of service – a global overview, Knesset – the research and information database.

<sup>3</sup> Shapira Assaf, 2010, Privatization – a theoretical and historical review, “Parliament” Journal, issue 64, from the website of the Israel Democracy Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Megginson, William L. and Jeffrey M. Netter, 2001. “From State to Market: A Survey of Empirical Studies on Privatization,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 39(2): 321-389.

<sup>5</sup> Shapira Assaf, 2010, Privatization – a theoretical and historical review, “Parliament” Journal, issue 64, from the website of the Israel Democracy Institute.

intervention in the economy while monitoring and regulating to prevent a collapse similar to the crisis in 1929.<sup>6,7</sup>

### 3. “National Education Service” – Season 2 Episode 7

This episode deals with the British education system in the 1980s and its low performances. At the beginning of the episode the prime minister met with the chairman and the leader of the Conservative Party faction in the British parliament (Also known as the “chief whip”). During the conversation, both try to clarify to the Prime Minister the state of the British education system and the public demand to improve the system. To clarify the importance of the issue, both expressed their concern to the Prime Minister that if he does not find a way to improve the education system, the Conservative Party is likely to lose the next elections.

In the second scene of the episode, a conversation takes place between the head of the Civil Service Commission (Sir Humphrey) and the personal secretary of the Prime Minister on behalf of the Civil Service (Bernard Wiley). The topic of the conversation is about the public education system that exists in Britain called the “comprehensive education system.”

*Bernard: But comprehensive education was an experiment, surely it should be validated.*

*Sir Humphrey: Yes, of course, but not invalidated.*

*Bernard: But if it was introduced to improve the educational standards...*

*Sir Humphrey: What ever gave you that idea?*

*Bernard: You mean; it was to get rid of class distinction?*

*Sir Humphrey: Precisely!*

*Bernard: So that all the children...*

*Sir Humphrey: Children? Who mentioned children? The Department of Education never mentioned children! No no no Bernard, it was to get rid of class distinction in the teaching professions! Improve the living standards of teachers not the education standards of children. Bring the NUT teachers in the primary and secondary modems up to salary levels of the rivels in the National Association School Masters in the grammar schools.*

*Bernard: But the department...*

*Sir Humphrey: Bernard, when there is a Labor government the Education Department says that comprehensive abolish the class system, and when there is a Tory government they say that it is the cheapest way to provide mass education. To Labor we explain that selective education is divisive and to the Tories we explain that it is expansive. That way we have a happy relationship with the NUT and we educate our own children privately.*

*Bernard: But if the government wants change...*

*Sir Humphrey: The teachers' unions don't.*

*Bernard: But isn't it our job (the civil service) to persuade the unions to accept government's policy?*

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<sup>6</sup> Friedman, Milton, (1992). Capitalism and Freedom. University of Chicago Press (2002 Edition).

<sup>7</sup> Shapira Assaf, 2010, Privatization – a theoretical and historical review, “Parliament” Journal, issue 64, from the website of the Israel Democracy Institute.

*Sir Humphrey: No Bernard, it is our job is to get the government to accept union's policy. And sense governments change their policy all the time and unions never change their policy at all, in practice common sense requires that it is the government who must be brought in-line with the unions.*<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Analysis of the scene

The purpose of the scene is to point an accusing finger at the labor unions and accuse them of the negligence that characterizes a government system. It can be learned from the script alone that the idea of fair work for everyone and not a process of “natural selection” in workplaces resulting from “supply and demand” and free competition, is the one that creates a low level of learning. This can be seen in Sir Humphrey's statement which claims that government education was built not to improve education but to improve the employment of teachers.

During most of the scene, Sir Humphrey is photographed from below, which enhances his words and his dominance in the conversation and Bernard is photographed at a right angle of 90 degrees and in the opposite angle, which shows his lack of dominance and innocence in the conversation and his opposing opinions.

#### 5. Second scene

During the same episode dealing with education, the prime minister tries to find ways to show the public that he is bringing British education to the top of the government's political agenda. His political advisor suggests that he visit a school in the north of England called St. Margaret that has opened a workshop for creating chairs and tables that he sells in the market. After the visit, the prime minister sits with his wife and political advisor at his home and watches the news broadcast about the visit.

After the viewing, the prime minister's political advisor tries to convince him that the solution to the education problem in the UK is to transform the education system from a socialist one (in which the state determines which school each child will go to) to a liberal system (in which parents will be allowed to decide where to send their children) similar to the British national health service. According to political advisor, after giving authority to the parents regarding their children's education, the level of education will improve by itself through a process of “supply and demand.”

*The prime minister's wife: Why can't more parents send their children there?*

*The prime minister: No room*

*The political advisor: There is room actually, school numbers are falling.*

*The prime minister: Yes, but that would mean poaching the other schools.*

*The prime minister's wife: What's wrong with that?*

*The prime minister: The other schools wouldn't have enough pupils; they will have to close.*

*The prime minister's wife: Great! so Saint-Margaret can take over their buildings.*

*The prime minister: Darling, they couldn't do that, it wouldn't be fair.*

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<sup>8</sup> The movie site – veoh.com – an episode from the series “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister” titled – “National Education Service,” clips from 04:15 and 14:15.

<http://www.veoh.com/watch/v22901234xA9xT6WY?h1=Yes+Prime+Minister+2.7+-+The+National+Education+Service>.

*The prime minister's wife: Who to?*

*The prime minister: The teachers in the schools that will have to close.*

*The prime minister's wife: But the good teachers will be taking over by the popular schools, they will be needed.*

*The prime minister: But what about the bad teachers? It wouldn't be fair on them!*

*The prime minister's wife: What about being fair on the children? Or the bad teacher's jobs are more important?*

*The prime minister: Who's to say who are the bad teachers? It just wouldn't work.*

*The prime minister's wife: Why not?*

*The prime minister: Well...it wouldn't work*

*The political advisor: Why not?*

*The prime minister: What do you mean?*

*The political advisor: Well, suppose schools would like doctors. I mean after all within the National Health Service, you can choose whatever doctor you would like to go to, can't you?*

*The prime minister: Yes*

*The political advisor: And he gets paid per patient. So why don't we do the same with schools? Have a national education service, the parents can choose the school and the school get paid per pupil.*

*The prime minister's wife: Exactly!<sup>9</sup>*

## 6. Analysis of the scene

The purpose of the scene is to criticize the organized power of the teachers' unions. The clear statement from the scene is that the level of education in Britain stems from the power of the teachers' organizations that do not promote teachers and schools based on abilities and results but based on membership in one or another trade union. This can be seen in the words of the Prime Minister's wife talking about the exaggerated importance of teachers' workplaces.

The original shooting distance was a "long-shot" photographing the body in its entirety, but when the director wanted to emphasize lines from the script, he made sure to move the shooting distance to a "medium-shot" photographing the chest and head. This distance is a reasonable distance for highlighting lines from the script, which does not create too much distance or too close. Shooting at this distance is reflected when the Prime Minister's wife expresses her views against the teachers' organizations and when the political consultant brings her proposals, and both receive exclusiveness in the frame.

In terms of the location of the actors on the set, there is a clear statement, the Prime Minister and the political advisor sit on the couch together and the Prime Minister's wife sits on a separate couch.

This separation in the seats is intended to imply that later in the conversation his wife will be out of the picture and the conversation will focus between the prime minister and the political advisor.

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<sup>9</sup> YouTube – an excerpt from the series "Yes, Mr. Prime Minister", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDIy-C4cQ-M>.

### 7. “The tangle web” – Season 2, Episode 8

During the episode, the head of the British Civil Service Commission, Sir Humphrey, is invited to an interview on a BBC radio program hosted by journalist Ludwick Kennedy. The topic of the interview is reasons for the high level of unemployment in Britain and ways to reduce it.

During the interview, Sir Humphrey avoids directly answering Ludwick Kennedy’s questions and tries throughout the interview to give answers related to other topics. After the interview is over,

*Sir Humphrey and Ludwick Kennedy have a personal conversation that is considered “off the record” about unemployment in Great Britain.*

*Sir Humphrey: Was I all right?*

*Ludwick Kennedy: Couldn’t you said a bit more, especially about unemployment?*

*Sir Humphrey: Such as?*

*Ludwick Kennedy: The truth.*

*Sir Humphrey: Ha ha ha*

*Ludwick Kennedy: Why do you laugh?*

*Sir Humphrey: My dear Ludo, nobody tells the truth about unemployment.*

*Ludwick Kennedy: Oh? Why not?*

*Sir Humphrey: Because everyone knows it can be halved in a few weeks.*

*Ludwick Kennedy: But how?*

*Sir Humphrey: Cut off all social security to any claimers who refuse two job offers. There is genuine unemployment in the north but the south is a wash of layabouts, many of them graduates living from the housing benefits, plus allot of cash they pick-up without telling anybody.*

*Sir Humphrey: frankly this country can have as much unemployment as it would prepare to pay in social security and no politician has got the guts to do anything about it!<sup>10</sup>*

### 8. Scene analysis

The purpose of the scene is to criticize the phenomenon of unemployment benefits in the UK. Although not about the phenomenon itself, but about the fact that receiving allowances without strict conditions does not encourage going to work places, especially by young people.

An expression of this can mainly be found in Humphrey's statement when he stated that in his opinion the state can receive an amount of unemployment in relation to the amount of unemployment insurance benefits it is willing to pay.

Most of the dialogue is shot at a “medium shot” distance (chest and face) and at an angle of 30 degrees. The camera angle is normative for a dialogue scene in order to feel close to the conversation but not to feel part of it (if they would like the viewers to think part of the reason

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<sup>10</sup> The movie site – veoh.com – an episode from the series “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister” titled – “The tangle web” segment from 4:30 p.m.

<http://www.veoh.com/watch/v22901235RdNHTxY8?h1=Yes+Prime+Minister+2.8+-+The+Tangled+Web>.

was the director was there the camera would be pointed directly at the interlocutors and they would talk to the camera).

The purpose of the shooting distance is to emphasize the content of the conversation, but also not to create an emotional close-up (which would come through a “close-up” photographing only the head) and not to create distance from the words of the conversation (which would come through a “long-shot” photographing the entire body of the interlocutors)

## 9. Conclusions

It is important to note that the series was filmed in the mid-1980s during the tenure of Margaret Thatcher, which was characterized by many controversial economic reforms that aimed to reduce the power of the trade unions that expressed socialist policies and increase the power of the private sector in Britain that expresses capitalist policies.

After the time of Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the USA, a consensus was formed in the West regarding the free market economy (in Israel after July 1985). This consensus claims that even when the government wants to encourage a welfare policy, it still needs to adhere to a neoliberal economy and a free market, and this on. In order to maintain an adequate level of economic growth, an expression of this could be seen during the reign of Tony Blair.

In my opinion, the analysis of these scenes shows a critical expression of the creators of the series against elements of a long-standing socialist policy that was conducted in England by the public service until the mid-1980s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while proposing capitalist economic solutions.

In the series, you can see an expression of opposition to welfare policy by saying that the worst education in Britain in those years was due to the power of the teachers’ unions, which, according to the creators of the series, created a system that is not based on achievements and efficiency in teaching and education, but on an equal number of jobs for all workers in the teaching professions through centralized management by the state. Meaning, that the policy in Britain preferred the benefit of the working class in the field of teaching over the effectiveness of results and the will of the students’ parents within the entire educational system.

Another objection to the British welfare policy was expressed in an interview given by the head of the British Civil Service Commission to the BBC radio program in which he says that the high unemployment figures in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s were mainly due to high social security payments and the lack of strict standards for receiving them, and they were a substitute for young academics in southern Britain for regular jobs.

In my opinion, the series definitely criticizes social democracy as a method that is not based on efficiency. This can be clearly seen in the chapter on the English education system.

The creators of the series tried to convey a message to viewers that an economy that is not based on efficiency and the will of the citizens cannot grow productively. Therefore, they will have to use the very sharp criticism of this series (which was very successful in the UK) to understand how to create a balance between the basic rights of workers and the effectiveness and efficiency of the mechanism in which they work and between the rights of citizens to receive unemployment benefits and the application of strict criteria for receiving them.

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