

VENABLES AND CAMPBELL

ACT I*

SCENE 1

The Prime Minister's study at Number Ten Downing Street. Early afternoon. The room is filled with sunlight. The Prime Minister's desk is in the centre of the room, upstage. Behind it are windows on to the garden. On each side are two doors: those on one side lead to the library, and to the passage to Number Eleven, the residence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer; those on the other side lead to an ante-room, and to the hall.

When the CURTAIN rises, the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon. George Venables, M.P., is seated at his desk, fixing the audience with a frank and sincere look. He is in his fifties, and suitably classless: outwardly stern, strong and impressive; inwardly a vulnerable human being. He wears a sober, dark grey suit.

Venables (*briskly*) Good evening. I am speaking to you tonight from Ten Downing Street. I'd like to talk to you about the great changes in our national life which I, as your Prime Minister, have this week set in motion: changes which we believe will improve the health and happiness of us all, and enhance our country's standing among the leading nations of the world. I know that many of you feel, as I do, that the dubious moral standards of recent years have brought with them a decline in the quality of life, in our self-respect, and in our ability to compete with other world powers. As you have heard, we are now taking firm steps to arrest this decline, to sweep away slackness and self-indulgence and to restore our national morality. You know already of our measures to stamp out pornography, gambling, drunkenness and other public symptoms of the so-called permissive society. But government action alone is not enough. It is up to all of us as individuals—to me—and to you—(*He gestures at the Audience with the stem of his pipe*)—to put our shoulders to the wheel and turn back the tide. If we are to succeed in the battle against depravity, then of one thing I am sure—very sure—very, very sure indeed . . . Oh, sod it, I've forgotten again!

At this point, a previously unseen figure, sitting downstage in a high-backed chair with its back to the audience, speaks. This is Rodney Campbell, the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary. He is in his early thirties, well-spoken, good-looking, elegant and smooth, always showing the right amount of cuff, and appropriately deferential to the Prime Minister. He is dressed in a light grey suit.

Campbell (*prompting*) "Our private lives must be above reproach."
Venables Thank you, Campbell, I keep forgetting that bit.

*N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

Campbell (*rising*) Don't worry, Prime Minister, I've had the first line of every paragraph printed on cue cards. (*He holds up some large white cards. He picks out one on which the recent prompt is boldly printed*) I'll be behind the camera ready to hold them up if you do dry.

Venables Thank you, Campbell.

Campbell Mind you, these telly chaps do have auto-cue machines. You could read the whole speech if you wanted to.

Venables I should regard that as dishonest.

Campbell As you wish, Prime Minister. While you've paused, may I suggest a wag of the finger on "slackness and self-indulgence"? It went awfully well when you wagged a finger in Wolverhampton.

Venables Wolverhampton isn't the nation. The feeling of the country is against flamboyance of that sort. I'm not even sure about having this pipe.

Campbell Oh, the Image People are adamant about that. Recent research makes pipe-smoking the top stability symbol—even ahead of dogs.

Venables Hm. How far had I got?

Campbell You'd finished the opening broadside and fluffed on "private lives".

Venables (*resuming the speech*) "Our private lives must be above reproach. Only by shunning the slippery slopes of selfish—" that's a terrible phrase to have to say! Who wrote that?

Campbell You did, sir. It was one of your alterations.

Venables Oh. (*He resumes*) "I needn't remind you of the government's achievements." Er—what's next?

Campbell You remind them of the government's achievements.

Venables I don't have to rehearse that. As it's to do with facts and figures, I'll consult the notes on my desk. I'll just rehearse the closing of my speech now.

Campbell Perhaps from where you say you "realize there'll be criticism"?

Venables (*launching himself again*) "I realize, of course, that there will be criticism. But I appeal to short-sighted people to take a longer view."

(*A thought strikes him*) How long do I have on the air, Campbell?

Campbell Ten minutes. You've got just under ten minutes' material, leaving five seconds at the end for a steadfast look.

Venables Hm. Where was I?

Campbell You'd just said you appeal to short-sighted people.

Venables (*launching himself again*) "I appeal to short-sighted people to take a longer view. Let us build a world which we can savour with lungs untainted by cigarettes, with eyes no longer blurred by alcohol, and with hearts and minds no longer polluted by excess." (*He stares fixedly ahead of him*)

Campbell What's the matter, sir? Is it your indigestion again?

Venables Of course it isn't! I'm rehearsing my steadfast look. "Goodnight to you all." Right, Campbell, get me a cigar and a good stiff whisky.

Campbell (*rising to obey, but sounding a cautionary note as he goes*) Is that wise sir? The Chancellor of the Exchequer's popping in. He can smell drink on the breath at twenty paces.