A Discussion

Look at the list of policies below. If you were made Prime Minister of Britain, what are the first things you would do? Are there any ideas not on this list that you would add?

- Make the day of your election victory a national holiday
- Give rewards to the people who supported you during your campaign
- Choose the members of your political cabinet
- Hire a cook and housekeeper to do your chores
- Negotiate a big press conference to show off in front of the world
- Completely change your country’s defence policy
- Meet the ambassadors from every country in the world for lunch
- Arbitrarily raise taxes

B Listening for gist

You are going to watch a clip from the BBC comedy, Yes, Prime Minister, a political satire which was shown in Britain during the 80’s and is now considered one of the all-time great British comedies.

In this clip, we see Prime Minister Jim Hacker meeting with his Cabinet Secretary for the first time since being elected Prime Minister. He will be talking about some of his plans for the future, in particular regarding Trident, a nuclear missile programme installed in Britain during the 1980s. At the time it was widely considered to be an extremely expensive waste of money which still went ahead all the same.

Watch the clip and answer the questions below:

- Which four things from the list above does Jim Hacker ask for?
- What reasons does the Cabinet Secretary give for why they cannot be done?
C Listening for detail

Watch the clip again and complete these sentences

1. And a very good PM you are too if I ________!
2. I'm not fishing for ________, though it has been going rather well hasn't it?
3. If it's any ________ Prime Minister, I gather he was awfully pleased.
4. With ________, Prime Minister, we can't send two Lord Ron Jones to the upper house.
5. I think that the Foreign and Commonwealth office ________ have some views on that.
6. They always say that one Prime Minister’s lunch with an ambassador destroys two years of patient diplomacy. I'm ________ how they would react to 158.
7. And that’s the ________ argument?
8. Well let me ________ like this.
9. Now ________ discuss government business, Prime Minister, you were saying that you’d been thinking?
10. ________. Have you considered firm masterly inactivity?

D Politeness

Part of the humour of this scene comes from the fact that all three characters are extremely polite to one another, despite how angry they become. This is part of Middle Class British culture: it is considered extremely important that you always behave properly in all situations.

Look at the phrases above and decide how you would say them in a less polite / more direct way?

1. __________________________
2. __________________________
3. __________________________
4. __________________________
5. __________________________
6. __________________________
7. __________________________
8. __________________________
9. __________________________
10. __________________________

Now look at the sentences below. How could you make these more polite and less direct?

11. “I completely disagree.” __________________________
12. “Pass me the salt.” __________________________
13. “What time is it?” __________________________
14. “I don’t understand.” __________________________
15. “You’re an idiot.” __________________________
HACKER: Humphrey. I've been thinking.

HUMPHREY: Good.

HACKER: I've been Prime Minister for, oh, let me see, three days now.
HUMPHREY: And a very good PM you are too if I may say so.

HACKER: I'm not fishing for compliments, though it has been going rather well hasn't it?

HUMPHREY: Oh indeed!

HACKER: It's nice to be able to reward one's old allies. Was Ron Jones pleased with his peerage?

BERNARD: Oh yes, Prime Minister. He said his members would be delighted.

HACKER: His members?

BERNARD: Yes, the members of his union. The National Federat...

HACKER: If it's any consolation Prime Minister, I gather he was awfully pleased.

BERNARD: I bet he was! What are we going to do about Ron Jones's peerage? Give him one too?

HUMPHREY: With respect, Prime Minister, we can't send two Lord Ron Jones to the upper house. It'll look like a job lot.

HACKER: We've got to give him something, I promised.

HUMPHREY: Well, what's he interested in? Does he watch television?

HACKER: He hasn't even got a set.

HUMPHREY: Fine. Make him a governor of the BBC. Anything else?

HACKER: Yes. One small thing. I need a cook housekeeper for the flat upstairs.

HUMPHREY: Well, I'm sure you can advertise.

HACKER: No, no. I mean a government cook housekeeper.

HUMPHREY: Ah. Now that could be difficult.

HACKER: Why?

HUMPHREY: It's a private home, it just happens to be in a government building.

HACKER: I just happen to live there. I just happen to eat there. I want someone to cook my lunch. It's not unreasonable.

HUMPHREY: No, it's just not possible.

HACKER: You mean I have the power to blow up the world but not to ask for scrambled eggs?

HUMPHREY: You have the power to ask for them.

HACKER: What if I happen to ask the German Ambassador?

HUMPHREY: Well that's all right. Official engagement. Government hospitality will happily provide a seven course meal with three wines and brandy. No problem.

HACKER: You mean the German ambassador's lunch is government business but mine isn't?

HUMPHREY: That is so. Not just the German ambassador’s of course. Any ambassador’s.

HACKER: Fine. Bernard, get the diary. On Monday, I'll have lunch with the German ambassador. On Tuesday I’ll have lunch with the French ambassador. On Wednesday I’ll have lunch with the American ambassador. Oh, we mustn't leave out the Commonwealth. On Thursday I'll have lunch with the New Zealand High Commissioner. How many countries are there in the UN?

BERNARD: 158.

HACKER: Good, that'll take up about six months, then we'll start round again.

BERNARD: You aren't free to have lunch with ambassadors every day. Sometimes there will be other official lunches.
HACKER: Even better. We'll fill up the odd gap.
HUMPHREY: I think that the Foreign and Commonwealth office might have some views on that.
HACKER: Why?
HUMPHREY: They always say that one Prime Minister's lunch with an ambassador destroys two years of patient diplomacy. I'm not quite sure how they would react to 158.
HACKER: It's absurd that we haven't got somebody here to cater for me!
HUMPHREY: It's the way things have been done for two and a half centuries.
HACKER: And that's the clinching argument?
HUMPHREY: It has been for two and a half centuries.
BERNARD: With respect Sir Humphrey, it can't have been the clinching argument for two and a half centuries because half a century ago it had only been the clinching argument for two centuries and a century ago it had only been the clinching argument for... Sorry.
HACKER: Humphrey, I'm not convinced. I want a cook housekeeper and I want you to see that she's paid for.
HUMPHREY: Well let me put it like this. Do you really want the press to announce that your first act as Prime Minister was to give yourself an effective salary increase of £8-10,000 a year?
HACKER: We wouldn't tell them!
HUMPHREY: We have no alternative! Prime Minister's salaries and expenses must be published.
HACKER: You mean there's really that we can't not tell them? Open government, Prime Minister. Freedom of information! We should always tell the press freely and frankly anything that they could easily find out some other way.
HACKER: There must be some solution.
HUMPHREY: There hasn't been for two and a half centuries. Now may we perhaps discuss government business, Prime Minister, you were saying that you'd been thinking?
HACKER: Ah, yes! You do agree that so far my premiership has been a great success.
HUMPHREY: Oh, indeed!
HACKER: Yes. And I've been asking myself what can I do to continue this run of success?
HUMPHREY: Have you considered masterly inactivity?
HACKER: No, Humphrey. The Prime Minister must be firm!
HUMPHREY: Indeed. How about firm masterly inactivity?
HACKER: I shall be firm. I've decided to cancel Trident, channel £15 billion into conventional forces and reintroduce conscription. At one stroke, we shall solve our defence, balance of payments, unemployment and educational problems all at once. What do you say Humphrey?
HUMPHREY: (Horrified) You can't just reorganise the entire defence of the realm just like that!
HACKER: I am the Prime Minister.
HUMPHREY: Yes but...
HACKER: I have the power.
HUMPHREY: Yes, within the law and the constitution and the constraints of administrative precedent, budgetary feasibility and cabinet government... so you plan to buy cruise instead?
HACKER: No, we shall buy no more nuclear weapons.
HUMPHREY: But Prime Minister! You're not a secret unilateralist?
HACKER: No, no, we still have Polaris.
HUMPHREY: Polaris is a ramshackle old system! The Soviets might easily develop a multi-layered ballistic missile defence system which could intercept Polaris.
HACKER: By when?
HUMPHREY: In strategic terms? Any day now.
HACKER: By what year, precisely?
HUMPHREY: 2020. But that’s sooner than you think!
HACKER: Are you saying that this nuclear defence system would stop all 192 Polaris missiles?
HUMPHREY: Not all, no. Virtually all. 97%.
HACKER: Well that would still leave... about 5 bombs that would get through?
HUMPHREY: Precisely! A mere five!
HACKER: Enough to obliterate Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk...
HUMPHREY: Yes, but that’s about all!
HACKER: One would have thought it’s enough to make the Russians stop and think?
HUMPHREY: But it’s not fair! With Trident we could obliterate the whole of Eastern Europe!
HACKER: I don’t want to obliterate the whole of Eastern Europe.
HUMPHREY: But it’s a deterrent.
HACKER: It’s a bluff! I probably wouldn’t use it.
HUMPHREY: Yes, but they don’t know that you probably wouldn’t.
HACKER: They probably do.
HUMPHREY: Yes, they probably know that you probably wouldn’t, but they can’t certainly know.
HACKER: They probably certainly know that I probably wouldn’t.
HUMPHREY: Yes, but even though they probably certainly know that you probably wouldn’t, they don’t certainly know that, although you probably wouldn’t, there’s no probability that you certainly would!
HACKER: What?
HUMPHREY: It all boils down to one simple issue. You are the Prime Minister – the Prime Minister of Great Britain. Don’t you believe that Great Britain should have the best?
HACKER: Yes, of course.
HUMPHREY: Very well. If you walked into a nuclear missile showroom, you would buy Trident! It’s lovely, it’s elegant, it’s beautiful! It is quite simply the best and Britain should have the best! In the world of the nuclear missile it is the Savile Row Suit, the Rolls-Royce Corniche, the Chateau Lafite 1945. It is the nuclear missile Harrods would sell you. What more can I say?
HACKER: Only that it costs £15 billion and we don’t need it.
HUMPHREY: Well you can say that about anything at Harrods!