

Yes Minister (Free Trade)

CHARACTERS

Bernard (B)

Humphrey (H)

Minister (M)

(M comes on stage, shuffles some papers on his desk as though searching for something. B Enters)

M: Ah Bernard.

B: Yes Minister?

M: Where did you put my press cutti ... *(almost accusatory)* you look different Bernard.

B: Yes Minister

M: Ah, changed your hair?

B: Indeed Minister. The press cuttings are on your in tray Minister, but you might want to look at this letter first.

M: A letter? For me?

(Takes letter and opens it, starts to read)

M: *(Pleased)* Oh, it's from one of my constituents. *(Not so pleased)*. Oh.

B: Something wrong Minister?

M: *(Quoting)* Economic oppression of the poor ... no justice in trade rules ... Oh dear. Fetch Humphrey.

B: Yes Minister.

(B leaves, returns with H)

H: Good morning Minister; something troubling you?

(M holds letter out to H)

M: What's this Humphrey?

H: A letter Minister.

M: Thank you Humphrey, but is it true?

H: That rather depends what it says Minister.

M: It says that free trade isn't any good.

H: Why, Minister, it's one of the best ideas the Western world has ever had.

M: That's what I thought; big part of economic theory, and I should know after all. So why does this person have a problem with it? It benefits the poor, doesn't it?

H: Well... *(fumbles uncertainly)* could do, could do.

M: You don't seem very sure Humphrey.

H: Well Minister, it benefits us.

M: That's not what the letter is about Humphrey, does it benefit the poor.

H: Theoretically, yes.

M: Theoretically? What about in practice?

H: Well the difference between theory and practice is that we theorize but don't practice.

M: Meaning?

H: Free trade means we have the freedom to choose who we want to trade with. And on what terms.

M: I thought free trade meant people could trade freely. Isn't that what the World Trade Organisation is for?

H: (*Condescendingly*) Minister! The World Trade Organisation doesn't exist to promote free trade, it exists to promote western interests, why do you think we went into it? No, you just can't let developing nations trade wily-nily, they've no experience, no perspective. They need guidance Minister.

M: This letter says that 'free trade' keeps poor people, well, poor! Is that true, Humphrey?

H: Of course, Minister. Why do you think we're so fond of it?

M: But surely that's not right. Surely free trade means that they can sell their produce all across the world, gaining more money and more (*misty distant look, patriotic voice, one hand on jacket*) opportunities?

H: That's what we tell them, yes.

B: Mostly we sell our produce to them, Minister. It gives us what's called a 'captive market' - like the Empire, only less hassle to administrate.

M: But surely they have some advantage - I mean, we can't beat them on farming, not with our transport and labour costs.

H: That's why we have farming subsidies Minister.

M: But can't they subsidise their farmers as well?

H: Subsidise their own farmers Minister? Certainly not!

M: Why?

B: Well they're not allowed to Minister, that wouldn't be free trade.

M: I see; that's in order to encourage efficiency in their developing industries, is it?

H: Well that's one way of looking at it.

M: and the other way?

H: It might mean they could produce their own food, and then where would we be?

B: Oh, you mean like those people in Ghana who tried to grow their own rice? I thought the Americans took most of that market, though.

H: In that particular case perhaps. Anyway, that means we can sell abroad all the surplus food we produce.

M: Don't we send aid the same countries, though? Shouldn't we just give them the food instead?

H: Oh, we do that, too. Makes us look very good, feeding starving children, never miss a trick like that.

M: Well, that's all good isn't it? No point having it sit around in those massive stockpiles.

B: Unfortunately their farmers go broke when no one buys their food, because western goods are so much cheaper.

M: Let me get this straight. We don't let them subsidise their farmers, because that wouldn't be free trade, but we do heavily subsidise our farmers. And if that doesn't work we push some food onto the market for free, as aid?

H: Masterfully put Minister!

M: Why?

H: Why?

M: Yes Humphrey why? Why do we do it? Do we just enjoy destroying their livelihood? Did they anger us in a past life?

H: Well for our farmers of course Minister! They couldn't compete without government subsidies.

M: Why not?

H: Well because their farmers have set their prices to try and cope with subsidised imports.

M: It sounds like a lose-lose scenario.

B: Well, the supermarkets seem very pleased with it.

M: I like it less and less every minute. But if we let those governments subsidise their own farmers, couldn't they could sell their own produce sustainably? Maybe even build up their own industries?

H: Possibly. But then they might buy those goods, instead of ours, and that would never do.

M: I'm sorry, but this really isn't good enough. My constituents won't stand for it; this letter is proof.

B: It's not as if the poor countries really disagree with it, though, Minister; I mean, I was working at the WTO once upon a time, and all the countries had an equal vote on everything.

M: When you worked there, that was in Geneva, yes?

B: Yes Minister.

M: How many of these poor countries would actually manage to get representatives there?

B: Oh, there was always one or two, Minister. For the important votes, anyway.

H: (*takes letter*) I'm sorry, Minister, this letter was never meant to get this far. Let me deal with...

M: Give that back here! (*takes letter*) Honestly, Humphrey, I know that I don't like getting too much mail, but censoring something like this - how come I haven't heard about it before, anyway?

H: You never asked, Minister.

M: It's just as well I have constituents that write to me, then, isn't it? Although I'm not entirely sure what I can do about it, I'm only one MP, after all.

H: True Minister. And it's hardly Britain's fault. It's western nations in general. Very little you can do about that.

M: Yes. Yes, I suppose you're right.

(nods and agreement all round)

M: Alright, well what am I doing today Bernard?

B: Well, Minister, there's a briefing for the G8 summit next week – and then a Cabinet meeting to discuss our agenda for the upcoming presidency of the European Union.

M: G8? And the European Union eh?

B: Yes Minister.

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