

TOWN MEETING

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

By Michael Callahan

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CHARACTERS

- SENATOR HARRY HARE Liberal candidate; vacuous person with little charisma; relies heavily on aides' advice and has few ideas of his own; one driving ambition is to be president; his clothes, like him, are dull and nondescript.
- CHAD CASH Conservative candidate; a wealthy Texan who is used to buying what he wants; is as close to American aristocracy and as far from the common man as you can get; intends to purchase the presidency; will be distinguished-looking and stylishly dressed with cowboy boots, shirt, bolo tie and optional hat.
- SHARON WILSON Bright Harvard-educated intern for Cash; beautiful and savvy and knows the political score; beneath her cynical exterior is a patriotic American who wants to use the system to make this country a better place to live; looks sharp in slacks.
- FRANCIS TORPEY Idealistic intense intern for Hare; most notable quality is his sincerity; honestly believes that politics is a noble profession that seeks to make the world a better place; clothes are collegiate casual.
- MARSHA GOODHOP Political pro; campaign manager for Hare; has been around a long time and knows what it takes to win; cares little for causes, but knows issues and the answers voters want to hear; wears a sharp business skirt and silk top.
- RON(DA) REIMER (Male or Female) Political pro; campaign manager for Cash; cynical but very good at what he does; educates Cash in political correctness; expert dirt digger; business suit.
- JIM LEMUR PBS (People's Broadcasting System) broadcaster and MC for the debate; jacket and bow tie with a colored shirt; looks like a boxing referee when he takes off his jacket.

CREW

(Male or Female) Voice on offstage mike.

PRODUCTION NOTES

As the audience is being seated Francis and Sharon can act as ushers on opposite sides of the theater and hand out programs while promoting their candidates. Of course they should not interact with each other since they should not be aware of each other's presence. They can improvise with slogans such as "Please vote for Senator Hare, he'll make a great president," or "We need a president who won't raise our taxes," or "We want someone who will be for the working man," or simply "Please remember to vote." Since their entrances are from the rear of the audience they will already be in position when the play begins.

PROP LIST

2 speaker's podiums

A chair or stool and small table for the moderator

3 folding chairs for debaters and aides

Water bottle

Bucket to spit into

Towel

A bell, similar to those used in boxing matches

Notes for candidates to use, including a red sheet for dirty notes

Clipboards for candidates

Campaign literature to be handed out with programs

A chart that can be flipped up or down with a broken diagonal line

Roll of one-dollar bills

2 large posters

PBS sign

THE TOWN MEETING

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SETTING: A stage with two podiums downstage left and right. Far left is a moderator's table and chair or stool. Three folding chairs for each candidate and aides upstage left and right. A banner, "PBS Presents: The Town Meeting," hangs on the rear wall. Large campaign posters for each candidate are placed on each side of the banner. The posters have a sketch of each candidate with his name and slogan (HARRY HARE Running For President/CHAD CASH Put CASH In Your Pocket) in script on the bottom.

AT RISE: *Lights up to half. The stage is empty. SHARON WILSON enters from the rear of the audience and walks to the stage. SHE carries a folder with speaker's notes. SHE performs a cursory examination of the set, making sure everything is in place. SHE begins arranging notes on the Conservative speaker's (CHAD CASH's) podium.*

FRANCIS: (*rear of audience*) Sharon Wilson, is that you? (*makes his way through the audience*) I can't believe it. I haven't seen you in ages! What in heaven's name are you doing here?

SHARON: (*peering into audience*) Who's that? Francis Torpey? My goodness! How long has it been?

FRANCIS: Since high school. (*HE makes his way to the stage.*) Last time I saw you was at graduation. And you're still the foxiest valedictorian we ever had. What have you been up to?

SHARON: (*motions towards Conservative banner*) I'm an intern and research assistant for Chad Cash.

FRANCIS: Get outta here! I'm an intern for Harry Hare.

SHARON: Goodness, Francis, don't tell me you've morphed into a liberal.

FRANCIS: And you're a conservative? Everything's backwards. In High School you were the liberal. When did you sell out?

SHARON: Sell out? I'd love to. I'm just looking for a good offer. But what about you, Mr. Football Captain? Talk about conservative. I thought all you cared about was throwing touchdown passes. And chasing cheerleaders.

FRANCIS: Hey, just because I played football in High School doesn't mean I'm a dumb jock.

SHARON: (*as they talk SHE arranges notes on the podium*) I never thought you were a dumb jock. If I recall you ran for class president.

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FRANCIS: (**also arranging notes**) If you recall. Right. If I recall, I lost to a superior debater. Let me see if I can remember who it was? Oh yeah, it was a straight A student, with a liberal platform. Talk about a politician.

SHARON: Francis, I never wanted to be class president. I needed it on my resume. It got me a college scholarship.

FRANCIS: That's fine. It just seemed to me you had pretty liberal ideas back then. You chopped me up pretty good in our debate.

SHARON: You do what you have to. I needed that scholarship. You had it made. Colleges were recruiting you for football. I heard you got a full scholarship. What happened?

FRANCIS: I blew out a knee my first year at Berkeley. Best thing that ever happened to me.

SHARON: End of a football career? Best thing that ever happened?

FRANCIS: End of one career and start of another. For the first time in my life I had to open my eyes to something besides sports. I found a whole world, and so many problems: environment, poverty, disease, human rights. At first I was going to join the Peace Corps but then I realized politics is the only real way to affect change. So here I am.

SHARON: Out to save the world. Very noble. And you think you're going to solve society's problems working for Harry Hare?

FRANCIS: I know I'm just an intern. But I've helped formulate the liberal platform. And besides, what's wrong with saving the world?

SHARON: Nothing at all. I wish you the best of luck.

FRANCIS: How about you?

SHARON: Well, you know what it's like at Harvard. (**pause, as FRANCIS shakes his head**) You meet people. Connected people. I was studying Economics and thought interning would be a good way to learn what really goes on in government. Possibly lead to a position as a lobbyist.

FRANCIS: Somehow you don't quite fit my image of a lobbyist: a short fat guy in an Armani suit, chewing a cigar and flashing a diamond ring on his pinkie.

SHARON: Don't knock it. I'll pass on the cigars, but I have nothing against diamond rings.

FRANCIS: Don't you care who gets elected?

SHARON: Of course I'd like to be on the winning side, but honestly, Francis, I don't see much difference between either candidate.

FRANCIS: Senator Hare is a leader with wonderful ideas.

SHARON: Francis, do you know what I remember most about you? Your good heart. Never an unkind word about anyone. I don't think there is one single person who ever lived on this planet you don't like.

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FRANCIS: I just believe, deep down, we're all the same. Everyone has some good in them.

SHARON: Oh yeah? Here's a test: What do you think of Adolph Hitter?

FRANCIS: **(pause)** Confused and terribly misguided, but a great motivational speaker.

SHARON: Francis! He killed millions of people. Don't you think he might have been just a tiny bit evil.

FRANCIS: What he did was evil. But I can't help thinking he must have had a miserable childhood. Maybe he would have turned out entirely different if he'd gotten some counseling from a Dale Carnegie or Tony Robbins.

SHARON: Win friends and influence people? Adolph Hitler? Point proved. Now that we've settled that, tell me, why do you think Senator Hare is a great man?

FRANCIS: Well, I've seen his ads and studied his campaign literature.

SHARON: But you don't know him very well, do you?

FRANCIS: He's very busy, always on the go. I only got to talk to him a few times but Marsha Goodhop, his campaign manager, told me he has a brilliant mind.

SHARON: Hmmm. I wish I could share your enthusiasm. My candidate, Chad Cash, has been called the most visionary conservative in the country.

FRANCIS: Pretty impressive.

SHARON: Except it was Chad who said that. I'm a little more skeptical when it comes to professional politicians.

FRANCIS: Sharon, the winner of tonight's debate is going to become the leader of the free world. Think of all the good he can do.

SHARON: Francis, you are such a sweetheart. You haven't changed one bit. But you shouldn't believe everything you read in our history books.

FRANCIS: So, you don't have a cause?

SHARON: Sure I have a cause, make that causes, a little house on the Potomac and a big yacht.

FRANCIS: What about the American dream? A better life, a better environment.

SHARON: Hey, isn't my dream the American dream, a house with a white picket fence? I'd just like mine to be on a million dollar lot and not too far from my yacht? Did I spend four years in college to save a few trees? I don't think so.

FRANCIS: Sounds a little cynical. I'm not sure I believe you. **(awkwardly)** You know the best thing about all this?

SHARON: **(gazing into his eyes)** What?

FRANCIS: It's nice to see you again. **(recovering)** Do you realize that when this debate is over one of us will be going to the White House?

SHARON: Listen, you have to promise one thing.

FRANCIS: What's that?

SHARON: No matter who wins we'll still be friends.

FRANCIS: Deal! **(They exchange high fives. HARE enters from audience rear conversing quietly with his aide, MARSHA and makes his way down the aisle.)** Oops, someone's coming. We better split.

(FRANCIS and SHARON turn towards the chairs upstage.)

SHARON: **(whispers as they depart)** Remember, friends.

(HARE and MARSHA wade through the audience. HARE shakes hands and campaigns on the way up, saying things like, "I'm Senator Hare. Nice to see you," and "Glad you could make it tonight," and asks, "Can I count on you?" and "I need your vote," and "Remember, every vote counts," until they reach the podium. HE poses behind podium next to his poster, staring into the distance, trying to look noble.)

HARE: Do you think I look presidential, Marsha? Now be honest.

MARSHA: **(appraising him from various angles)** Could you try to look more. . . I don't know. . . visionary? **(HE puts hand to head as if gazing into the distance.)** Remember Harry, sincerity. They've got to believe you believe what you're preaching. You've got to believe it.

HARE: **(nodding vigorously)** Got it. Sincerity. **(tries to make a sincere face, but fails)**

MARSHA: **(shaking her head)** Work on it.

HARE: Marsha, on our way up, I couldn't help but notice our audience. They look very conservative.

MARSHA: This is [Name of town].

HARE: We need to let them know that while I may be a liberal, I am a conservative liberal. Very conservative.

MARSHA: Right. We'll tell them you come from a conservative family.

HARE: **(whispering conspiratorially)** Marsha, have you got the good stuff?

MARSHA: **(looks suspiciously left and right and removes a folded piece of paper from her pocket)** Merry Christmas.

HARE: **(reads the paper with delight)** This is hot! You got it all: his voting record, income taxes, education, medical history, drinking habits, how often he goes to church, high school girlfriends, a report from his kindergarten teacher, even his nursing habits – hey, he was bottle fed.

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MARSHA: Yeah! So now you know why he is so grouchy and his face is all puckered up. Read that, there, on the bottom.

HARE: (**pointing to bottom of paper**) What's this?

MARSHA: The smoking gun. Our honorable opponent is quite the philanderer.

HARE: You mean he gives money to worthy causes?

MARSHA: (**irritably**) No. No. That's philanthropist. It seems our friend messes around with the ladies. That's a little affair he had with a stripper. One of many, I might add.

HARE: (**folds the paper and puts it in his pocket**) You know I can't use this, Marsha. It would be unethical.

MARSHA: (**as FRANCIS approaches**) Yeah, right. Keep it for an emergency. Here comes the kid.

HARE: (**giving him a warm handshake**) Here he is! My good right arm! My research man. What have you got for me?

FRANCIS: (**holding sheets of paper**) Sir, I've got statistics on all the important issues. We are losing rain forests at an alarming rate; we are polluting the atmosphere and oceans, we are losing fishing stock. Every day more species are becoming extinct.

HARE: (**without enthusiasm**) Shocking.

MARSHA: And we better win this election or we'll become extinct.

FRANCIS: We've got to get an administration that cares about these things.

HARE: An administration that cares. I like that. Marsha, how does this sound, (**assumes a noble expression**) "The Candidate Who Cares."

MARSHA: Catchy, it could get us some votes. What else have you got?

FRANCIS: Details for a new economic plan that creates more jobs along with a balanced budget. (**HARE yawns, MARSHA looks bored.**)

We have plans for an all-out war on poverty, welfare reform, aid for senior citizens. Sir, we have a platform that can change the world!

HARE: Francis I want to tell you how much we appreciate your hard work. And I am trusting you with a critical job in this debate. I want you to be in charge of my charts, my statistics man.

FRANCIS: I'll do my best, sir.

HARE: Very good, Francis. Let's look this over. (**ALL turn and head for the three chairs in upstage left.**) I'll need all this information at the tips of my fingers so voters will realize how smart I am. (**MARSHA shakes her head.**)

(CASH makes his way from the rear of the theater towards the podium with his aide, REIMER. HE glad-hands anyone in the audience HE can. HE carries ten or twenty dollars in one-dollar bills and hands several out to people saying, "Here, put cash in your

pocket," and "Howdy. Chad Cash here." "How are you Sir?" and "How about them Longhorns," while making the hook-em-horns signal with his first and little fingers. REIMER whispers "We're not in Texas, Chad." HE responds, "Right. How 'bout them [local sports team].")

REIMER: (*stands next to CASH as they mount the stage, perusing audience*) Looks like we've got a good crowd tonight.

CASH: Looks like a bunch of liberals to me.

REIMER: Well this is [Name of town].

CASH: We need to let them know that while I may be a conservative, I am a *liberal* conservative.

REIMER: Right. We'll tell them you come from a liberal family.

CASH: Ed, I've got to win tonight.

REIMER: I know, Sir.

CASH: I don't care what it costs.

REIMER: I'm afraid money won't help. You going to have to convince this audience that you're the best man.

CASH: (*anguished*) Oh, my God! (*pause; peers into audience*) Do we have any of our people out there?

REIMER: No Sir, they all look pretty honest to me.

CASH: A tough crowd, Ed.

REIMER: Yes Sir. We'll have to convince them you're the better man. Cheer up. This Hare is a cabbage-head, a lettuce eater. You can beat him easy. These good people will see right through him.

CASH: What have you been able to dig up, Ed?

REIMER: (*looks around surreptitiously, then takes paper out of his pocket*) This is the best I could do. Unfortunately there's not much dirt on this guy. He's like Dagwood Bumstead in the funnies, too dumb to take graft, and too ugly to have a girl on the side.

CASH: No hanky-panky on the side, Ed? Good god man, how can that be? He's a Liberal! Where's all the free love, you know, sex and drugs and all that fun stuff.

REIMER: Sorry Sir, the Liberals are getting smarter. I'm afraid they're getting the dullest most uninteresting people they can find. It's more difficult to dig up dirt now.

CASH: No hanky-panky? What a shame. Where are guys like Bill Clinton when you need them?

REIMER: (*wistfully*) The good old days. We sure had fun with him. There is something that might help. Look at that little item on the bottom.

CASH: This is dynamite, Ed. Did Hare really do this?

REIMER: We've got proof, Sir. I think you can really nail him.

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CASH: **(tucking the paper snugly into his pocket)** Of course, I could never use this. It's personal, dirty politics, and completely unethical.

REIMER: Of course, Sir. **(motions to SHARON)** Come on over.

SHARON: **(approaches the podium and shakes hands)** Good evening, Sir, Mr. Reimer.

BOTH: Good evening.

CASH: My dear, what have you got for me?

SHARON: We have developed a comprehensive 15-point platform. **(Pause as SHE hands him a page. HE peruses it.)** Of course this is just a summary. Our plan is to stimulate the economy with a massive across-the-board tax cut. We have a detailed budget with specific limits on the major areas of spending including defense, Medicare, welfare, education, health, and government salaries. And here is our projected revenue. As you can see, there is quite a surplus, which can be used to reduce the national debt. I believe you'll find it's pretty comprehensive.

CASH: **(perplexed)** Ed, I can't understand a word of this.

REIMER: **(to SHARON)** I'm afraid this is all too complicated for him. We'll need to condense it into a few catchy slogans.

SHARON: We also have a list of potential cabinet members, appointees for Secretary of State and Attorney General, and nominations for Supreme Court judges.

CASH: Ah, yes, my campaign contributors.

(THEY head towards their chairs as JIM LEMUR enters. HE approaches each group and shakes hands and welcomes everyone. Then HE goes downstage center.)

LEMUR: **(to TV crew)** Testing 1, 2, 3. How's the volume?

CREW: Volume good.

LEMUR: How's the lighting?

CREW: **(lights blink on and off)** Lighting good.

LEMUR: Ready when you are.

CREW: On in ten seconds. **(pause)** . . .THREE, TWO, ONE AND ACTION!

(Lights up full.)

LEMUR: Good evening. I'm Jim Lemur, and this is the People's Broadcasting System presenting the Town Meeting. Ladies and Gentlemen this evening you are all taking part in a historic occasion. For the first time in our great nation's history the President of the United States will be elected live on national TV. A few weeks ago, under a swell of pressure from concerned citizens, Congress

amended our constitution, Article II, Section 1, the electoral process. According to the provisions of this new amendment, a representative cross-section of citizens will be selected to elect our next president. Ladies and Gentlemen, congratulations, YOU are that cross section. The panel decided that anyone able to find this theater must have more brains than some outdated Electoral College of Eggheads. Now, our panel has examined the platforms of a field of presidential candidates and narrowed it down to two, a Liberal and a Conservative. These two will do battle in a 4 round debate. In round 1 each will present his platform. During round 2 we will ask the tough questions that most politicians don't want to hear. In round 3 the candidates will challenge each other. And, in round 4, the knockout round, each will make a short summation. At the end of the debate you will cast your votes. So listen carefully, for the future of our nation depends on your good judgment. We will now break for a short commercial.

CREW: **(lights to half)** And CUT. Go to Viagra commercial.

LEMUR: Gentlemen, before we start, you both have a few minutes to get comfortable at your podiums. If you'd like to warm up before we go back on the air you may do so now.

(HE goes to his seat. CASH and HARE head for the podiums with their ADVISORS.)

HARE: **(assumes noble expression)** Marsha, how do I look?

MARSHA: **(standing to the side and appraising him)** Like you're made out of wood. Try to act like a human being. Say something and try to sound sincere.

HARE: Please, please, please, vote for me.

MARSHA: For goodness sake, don't beg. Relax a little. Pretend you're talking to your children.

HARE: **(trying to look relaxed and crumpling up)** I want all of you to eat your vegetables, finish your homework, and then vote for daddy.

CASH: **(assuming a snide expression)** Vote for me and I'll make it worth your while.

REIMER: No. No. It sounds like you're trying to buy their votes. You have to convince them you're the best man for the job. Try to sound just like one of the folks out there, an ordinary guy.

CASH: Folks, I'm just like y'all, a plain old country boy who happens to own a jet airplane and several race horses.

CREW: On in ten seconds.

LEMUR: OK everyone, back to your corners.

(CASH and HARE return to their chairs and remove their jackets. LEMUR has removed his jacket and moves forward with his bow tie looking like a boxing referee.)

CREW: . . .THREE, TWO, ONE AND ACTION!

(Lights up full.)

LEMUR: To the LADIES AND GENTLEMEN in our audience and the millions watching on TV: On behalf of the Nevada state gaming commission and BUDWEISER, the KING OF BEERS, welcome to our main event. Tonight's contest is a four round presidential debate for the championship of the nation. Debating out of the blue corner on your left is our first challenger, hard-hitting HARRY HARE. **(HARE dances forward, his coat draped over his shoulders like a robe. Behind him, HER hands on his back like a trainer, comes MARSHA.)** On your right in the red corner is our other challenger, smooth talking CHAD CASH. **(CASH dances forward throwing punches also with his trainer behind him and his coat draped over his shoulders. The two men glare at each other with noses inches apart. LEMUR steps between the contestants, separating them like a referee. When separated both bounce on toes and roll their heads to loosen their necks. Their trainers stand behind them, rubbing their backs and shoulders.)** I've given each of you your instructions in your dressing rooms. I want to see a clean debate tonight. Mr. Cash, I'll deduct points if I see any low blows from you. **(Gestures with punches to HARE's groin.)** And Senator Hare, I want you to watch the rabbit punches. **(Gestures with blows to the back of CASH's head.)** Now shake hands and come out swinging. **(Both men touch fists like fighters and dance back to their chairs. They put jackets back on and sit but their ADVISORS stand and lean over them like fight trainers whispering last minute instructions.)** Now for the judges' instructions. Scoring is based on the Nevada 10 point must system. That means you must award 10 points to the winner of each round. Now, verbal jabs are OK **(gestures with a few jabs)** but points may be deducted for the following: split infinitives, **(spreads two fingers in an eye gouging gesture)** dangling participles, **(bends wrist down)** biting comments, **(shows teeth)** butting in, **(head butting gesture)** and disqualification for FOUL language **(low blow; pause)** Ladies and Gentlemen, LET'S GET READY TO GRUUUUUUMBLE! Round One! Senator Hare you have three minutes to make your opening statement. **(heads back to his seat)**

(HARE jogs to the podium with his jacket on and places his notes on the podium.)

MARSHA: ***(dancing and gesturing with punches)*** Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.

(LEMUR rings the bell.)

HARE: My fellow Americans, before we begin this debate I want to make one thing perfectly clear. I will be debating issues tonight and not personalities. You will not see any negative campaigning from me, nor will you hear me denigrating my opponent in any way. I mean to convince you that our liberal programs are best for America. I want to see our country return to the great democracy it was under leaders like George Washington, Abe Lincoln, and Michael Jordan. Now we only have a limited amount of time to present our platform, so let's get right down to specifics. Our platform covers three key areas, ***(HE holds up two fingers. MARSHA rushes up and adds a third finger.)*** the economy, the environment and social security. My team has made exhaustive studies of the policies under conservative administrations and we intend to show you the miserable job they have done and our plans to improve them. First, let's look at the economy. Francis would you please bring up our charts? ***(FRANCIS brings up one chart that has a jagged diagonal line. HE can flip the chart so the line goes up or down, depending on what HARE wants. HE stands to the side of HARE.)*** This is what has happened to our gross domestic product under the conservative administration. ***(FRANCIS shows the chart with the line going down.)*** As you can see GDP has gone down drastically. ***(shakes his head sadly)*** We are headed for the greatest depression in our nation's history. Now Francis, show them what the GDP will look like if I am elected. ***(FRANCIS flips the chart so the arrow goes up.)*** Four years of prosperity! Next chart. . . Environment, ***(FRANCIS turns the chart down; HARE holds his nose and talks through it.)*** you can't breathe. Under my administration: ***(FRANCIS turns the chart up; HARE takes a deep contented breath.)*** Clean air! Now, ladies and gentlemen I must warn you that this next chart is shocking. If you have any children with you, you may want to cover their eyes, Francis, next chart please. ***(FRANCIS turns the chart down.)*** Senior citizens. ***(shakes his head sadly)*** Folks, they're dying. Soon they'll all be dead under a conservative administration. But, under my administration, ***(FRANCIS turns the chart up.)*** long happy lives with their loved ones. Thank you, Francis. ***(FRANCIS returns to his seat.)*** Ladies and gentlemen, you've heard the facts,

you've seen the statistics. The evidence is clear as the sky on a cold night on Mt. Whitney: Life under a liberal administration is good. Now my time is almost up, but before I leave I want to share some personal recommendations I've received from some of America's most famous people. (**fumbling through his pockets**) Here's one, "Dear Senator Hare, if you are elected president, will you be needing any more interns?" Signed, Monica Lewinski. (**looks irritably back at aides**) How did this get in here? (**finds another letter**) Sorry I read the wrong one, folks. This is the one I wanted, "Please cast your vote for Harry Hare. He is the most dynamic leader I have ever had the pleasure to know," Al Gore. (**LEMUR rings the bell. HARE making a bad attempt at sincerity:**) Folks I want to be your president. (**almost in tears**) Very badly.

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