

## The Policy

By Paul A. Green

Robert Bentley's journey to work took longer than usual for the regular train had been replaced by some drab old olive-green units that juddered slowly between every stop, where impatient grumbling suburbanites struggled with heavy latches as they slammed the doors. At the terminus the automated barriers were out of order and platform staff insisted on scrutinising every ticket as they funnelled commuters through a narrow exit.

Nevertheless he decided he had time to visit the news agent on the concourse and pick up a copy of the new Saul Wolfe novel *Harlots of the Green Flame*. He could read it discretely in his lunch break. Snatching the lurid paperback from the display, he presented his debit card to the young Asian sales assistant.

'Sorry, mate, card readers are down. Cash only today.' Bentley fumbled vainly in his wallet for a note. Dumping the book on the counter he hurried away, peeved.

It was too late to join the enormous queues at the cashpoint.

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Although he was late, there were only two other colleagues at work in the long rectangular maze of the office. Hurrying to his cubicle, he was irked to discover that his computer had been removed, leaving a tangle of cables across his desk. Then annoyance was replaced by a pang of anxiety. Could this signify the termination of his contract? At any moment Security might arrive to escort him off the premises, leaving him only seconds to stuff his paltry mementos into a bin liner.

He peered over the partition to discover that Shaun Dunwell's cubicle had also lost its work station. Cautiously he walked up and down the narrow aisles, noting the empty desks. This must have been a major tech cock-up, a viral epidemic. An odd clicking sound emanated from the far end of the room. The bald head of his manager Ron Harrison bobbed up and down

behind the fabric-covered wall enclosing his work space.

‘What’s up with the PCs, Ron? We had the whole lot replaced only six months ago.’

‘We’re getting a system upgrade. Don’t worry, it’s happening today.’ Harrison stood up, grinning broadly. ‘In fact, here it comes...’

The door was opening. Two tech staff in overalls grunted and cursed as they attempted to manhandle a trolley carrying a huge metal cabinet, the size of a wardrobe.

‘That’s only the first,’ muttered one of the men. ‘The bleeding mainframe. There’s more gear to come. The tape decks. And those punched card gizmos.’ They trundled the machine into the adjoining R&D office, now vacant.

‘But this is crazy. That stuff is dinosaur technology.’ Bentley stared around the room. He vaguely registered that the laser printer had gone.

‘Instructions from senior management, Rob. Part of the National Policy Review. This is the future!’

‘But how the hell can we run a sales department without PCs?’

‘Don’t worry, Robert. You’ll all have one of these by tomorrow. It’s easy, you’ll get used to it. Look...’ He ushered Bentley into his cubicle. Harrison had tacked up a faded picture of a busty blonde starlet next to his calendar. Then Bentley noticed the gleaming typewriter.

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Over the following weeks Bentley became aware of other adjustments to his daily routine. Like his workmates he now had to fumble with carbon paper and carriage-returns as he laboriously typed up memos and estimates while the telephones rang constantly.

Harrison, Dunwell and the other male clerks had taken to smoking at their desks, ignoring the motherly rebukes of Mrs Osborne. Harrison had also started coming to work in a bowler hat, carrying a briefcase and furred umbrella. He frequently admonished Bentley for not wearing a tie, despite the warm weather and told them all he expected to be addressed as Mr Harrison in future.

There were changes to Bentley's lunch-hour habits as well. He made another attempt to purchase *Harlots of the Green Flame* at the nearest news agent, only to find that the best-seller was no longer on display. 'It's been withdrawn,' said the tight-lipped woman behind the counter. 'About time too, if you ask me. Too many people reading that sort of book...' Bentley blushed and made a quick exit.

Similar frustrations faced him in the long evenings back at the flat. As he cooked sausages and mash - the corner shop seemed to have run out of ready meals - he switched on the radio. He hadn't listened much during the long run-up to the Election, growing weary of the incessant punditry and the braying voices of politicians but he was looking forward to the regular seventies rock music feature on BBC Radio 2.

Yet it had somehow been replaced with a sedate dance band led by someone called Victor Sylvester. He thought at first this might be one of Bryan Ferry's ironic choices but the saccharine saxes droned on and on, only interrupted by a bland announcer who informed him he was listening to something called The Light Programme. Exasperated, he turned off the wireless and spent the rest of the evening re-reading one of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot stories.

The following night he was sitting down to eat in front of the TV, hoping to find a movie. The only one on offer was *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, which he had seen as a child. He had tuned in about ten minutes after the title sequence, and was surprised to find the film was being screened in black and white instead of the Technicolour that he remembered. He flipped over to a documentary about the King class 4-6-0 express locomotives on the Great Western Railway. That was also in monochrome, as was the ensuing BBC Nine O'Clock News, where the solemn-faced moustachioed presenter was using a long cardboard pointer on a pie-chart to explain the reformed system of benefits. Bentley fiddled with the buttons on the decoder-box but it kept defaulting automatically to analogue, and even on that setting he could only pick up two stations - which went off the air at eleven.

He called Geraldine. Although she had broken off their engagement and moved up to

Liverpool to take up her post as a trainee journalist, they still kept in touch in a desultory way.

After a struggle with dialling - he had to resort to asking the operator's assistance - he eventually heard her wary Home Counties tones. But he wasn't going to waste time with pleasantries.

'What's going on, Geraldine?'

'What do you mean? You read the news, don't you?' She knew quite well that he rarely opened a newspaper.

'I thought you might have some inside information. About all the changes, the computers and TV and everything.'

'You obviously haven't hear the PM's speech. There's no need to freak out.' She used the expression rather self-consciously, as if it were an alien idiom. 'The National Policy Review is only going to be implemented in stages. But everything will be delivered as in the Election manifesto, you'll see.'

'Geraldine, our GNP, our productivity is going to be shot to hell. It's impossible to know how many units we're shipping at work. Keeping track of supply and demand is like wading through treacle. We can't import components anymore. The paperwork's a bloody nightmare. The computer keeps breaking down. Everything's slowing down.'

'The Party's trying to restore our national identity. A little austerity, reducing our dependence on technology - but freedom from the stresses of media hyper-stimulation and decadent entertainment. It's a programme of cultural regeneration. Frankly, if people want to incinerate pseudo-American records and trashy pornographic novels, all power to them. Have you handed in your Saul Wolfe books yet? The amnesty finishes at the end of the month.'

'You really believe in all this, don't you, Geraldine... It will be rationing next, filling our baths with drinking water and stocking up with candles.'

'It's necessary, Robert. But then you never saw the value of discipline, did you?' She yawned and hung up.

For the first time in his life he felt the need to write something that wasn't a letter or a

routine diary entry. He was logging the end of history, or at least the recycling of it. He found a pen and a notebook - no point in fooling with a dead laptop - and began scrawling by torchlight.

'Tanks will encircle the Town Hall, gun barrels erecting from metallic scrota. All the handbooks and manifestos are out of date, out of print. Our servers are sizzling in the rain, the lines are going down.' Then, unhappy with his venture into literature, he tore out the page and tossed it into the rubbish bin.

That night he slept intermittently, as images of Geraldine's pert profile dissolved into the bosomy outline of Harrison's faded blonde pinup. Then the dreams began.

*He was cutting up his own body. There he was, as some silvery astral being, crouched over an oddly bloodless metal sink which was large enough to contain his already severed head and torso, sawing away at a thigh with an implement like an oversize nail file. The flesh and bone separated quite easily like pre-sliced ham so the main obstacle to progress was cutting through the thick brown worsted of his trousers.*

*Later, in another segment of the dream, he had to make an inventory of his stacked limbs, now wrapped and shelved in an empty aisle of this under-lit supermarket. Management were not happy with his performance, expressing their dissatisfaction with angry bleeps of code over the tannoy. He shouted back, but a gaggle of scrawny female pensioners appeared from behind the freezer cabinet, trying to jab him in the eye with their umbrellas.*

He awoke to grey skies and heavy rain, trying to suppress the dream imagery as he washed, dressed and prepared his porridge. The sudden closure of the Asian-owned corner shop meant that his preferred brand of cereal was no long available. But at least it was a Saturday, so there was no office today - although Mr. Harrison had told him that management would be introducing a new weekend rota system to speed up operations. He needed to go out and buy a tie, to get Harrison off his back.

Despite the rain, the High Street was busy, as women in head-scarves scuttled from green-grocer to butcher's to haberdasher, anxious to complete their weekend purchases. A card in the window of Craddocks, the ironmongers, announced that due to the recent

enforcement of the Lord's Day Observance Act, Sunday trading would cease with immediate effect.

At the tailor's he selected a sober blue tie and paid in cash. As he checked his change, the elderly assistant smiled. 'It'll be strange to see the last of the old 50p pieces, sir. When the Imperial money comes back next year, we'll all have to smarten up our mental arithmetic. Pounds, shillings and pence! Still, that's progress.' As he held the door open, his face as wrinkled as an old fig, he touched Bentley's elbow and murmured in his ear. 'By the way, sir, have you considered a visit to the barber's? Short back and sides is quite the thing these days.'

Feeling affronted by this unwarranted advice, Bentley only mumbled a word of thanks as he retreated from the shop. Struggling with his umbrella in the downpour, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window. Perhaps he did look out of place with his dark tousled hair flopping across his brow, 'like an out-of work actor', as Geraldine used to say. Then he dismissed the thought. Let these fogeys think what they liked. He was going to seek refuge from the rain with a coffee and a snack.

Nero's was boarded up so he had no option but to go for Mother Pudsey's Olde Tea-Shoppe, an establishment with fake leaded windows and mock Tudor frontage, which he'd always avoided in the past. At least it was warm and the appearance of a pretty waitress in a white-lace cap and maid's apron raised his spirits slightly, especially as he recognised her.

'It's Polly, isn't it? You were a barista at Starbucks during your last vacation. Doing Politics and Philosophy at uni, right?' Three close-cropped young men at an adjacent table turned and stared. Their muscles bulged in the smart green tunics of the new Land Cadet Force.

Polly shook her head nervously and kept her voice down. 'Starbuck's has closed. And my course has been axed. They offered me Women's Domestic Studies instead. So I quit. And I'm stuck with this.' She picked up her pad and pencil, switching to a brisk impersonality. 'Now can I take your order, please sir?'

She brought his lukewarm coffee and a rubbery bun. While he sipped and chewed the three Land Cadets stood up and ostentatiously put on their peaked caps. They filed out, the

largest one making sure he nudged Bentley's table and spilt his drink before slamming the door. As Bentley tried to mop up the spillage he realised that one of the Cadets had dropped a leaflet by his chair. *YOUR POLICY EXPLAINED - MEET THE MINISTER! 8 pm sharp!*

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The Town Hall was packed and Bentley, who had arrived late, was forced to stand at the back, peering over rows of heads at the proscenium stage that was normally used for public meetings and amateur theatrical competitions. Grey curtains were draped across the back presumably concealing a set from some recent production that was awaiting dismantling.

The citizens - silver-haired pensioners and brawny Land Cadets functioning as stewards - were applauding an ensemble of tartan-clad schoolgirls who'd marched on the spot to the rhythm of their skirling bagpipes. As they strutted off into the wings, Mr Craddock, the Mayor, took the podium at the side of the stage, but the sound system kept cutting out in blurts of buzzing and feedback, making it difficult for Bentley to follow his address. Apparently they were very fortunate to live in such interesting times. They were very privileged to host (*inaudible*) the Minister for (*inaudible*) who had already taken bold steps to implement the National Policy especially in matters of (*inaudible*). Tonight he would explain the latest developments and would welcome questions from the floor. They should give him a rousing welcome.

The Minister strode on, a florid-faced man in his sixties wearing a pin-striped suit. He began speaking in a voice that reminded Bentley of over-ripe plums or gamey venison. Its peculiar timbre allied with the vagaries of the sound system distracted Bentley from the actual content of what was being said. Eventually he understood that the Minister was here to help and reassure. The implementation of the Policy had perhaps caused some temporary anxiety among those who were reluctant at first to embrace the challenge of retroactive change and dynamic stasis.

'And yet my friends the National Review Policy is your vision, is it not? It is your private dream and your collective need - to withdraw from the dangerous seductions of the future and

the moral chaos induced by the fads of floppy-haired intellectuals.’ An elderly couple alongside Bentley gave him stony-faced glances and tightened bony fists on their walking sticks.

When the ripple of applause had died away, the Minister continued. ‘The Policy offers you security, dignity, a strongly defined identity in your world - your world - not the ragbag world of polymorphous perversity that has been forced upon you by shirt-lifting decadents and nannying nonentities...’ Another burst of applause.

Scanning the auditorium, Bentley suddenly realised that one of the nodding heads belonged to Geraldine, who was actually rising in her seat for a second. Even from behind he recognised her elaborate floral hat, for his teasing about her new retro-fashion preferences for pearls, haut couture hats and twin sets had been one of the triggers for their break-up. Why had she travelled down here from Manchester? He was stung by the absurd yet credible thought that she might have become the Minister's mistress and was following him from rally to rally, a cheerleader for the Policy.

Now the Minister was heading for his grand finale, an oration about law and order. He raised a trembling hand. ‘I make a solemn oath to each one of you in this room tonight that under our Policy, the politics of terror will not control our streets. We shall police all those who attempt to subvert our security, whether in the school room or the lecture-room, in the factory or in the office, with the full force of the Law. Life shall be life for life is a sacred trust, not to be dissipated in neurotic debate and cultural self-doubt. For the Policy is the Life and the Life-Force of our nation is the *polis*, our forum of righteousness, the righteousness of our enlightened might!’

They stood and applauded for at least five minutes. Bentley decided that he had heard enough and in any case he couldn't face a messy encounter with Geraldine when the followers of the Policy finally surged towards the exit. He turned to go, but his path was blocked by one of the sturdy Land Cadets from the tea shop. ‘Got to stay for the questions, mate! Show a little respect, eh?’ Bentley made a token attempt to push past, then realised that more stewards were clustering around him. When he made an incoherent sound of protest, a kind of strangled



grunt, a large woman in front of him swung round and hushed him. The Minister was taking questions from the floor.

Bentley couldn't hear the first question, a faint nasal drone from a man in the front row, but the Minister replied that the sanctity of life was under constant review and that everything would be done to deepen public awareness of its significance. There was a timid complaint from somebody about the increase in the radio licence fee, a comment that the Minister only acknowledged briefly, as an enthusiastic self-proclaimed grandmother rose to praise the Minister's department for outlawing 'the satanic cavortings and fornications' which had sullied cinema screens for far too long. While a red-faced Ron Harrison clapped assiduously, the Mayor took the microphone.

'Just one more question for the Minister. He has a busy schedule...'

The words escaped Bentley's mouth before he could stop them. They floated in the musty air of the hall as the entire audience swivelled round to stare at him.

'Why have you taken us back ? Why we are going to live in your fucking scrap book for 1957? What's the bloody sanctity in all that?'

Mayor Craddock looked uneasy. 'Minister, I must apologise for this uncouth display. Perhaps the stewards...'

'No, no...' The Minister smiled. 'Let the impetuous young man have his say.'

'You're trying to stuff us into your virtual time machine, we're not evolving, we're devolving. It's absurd...This Policy...' He stumbled, the words were fading now.

'I think we need some honest-to-goodness man-to-man talk, do we not? Bring him up here so we can all get a good look at him.' Two Land Cadets began hustling him up the aisle past the staring faces. Only Geraldine averted her gaze as he was dragged on to the stage.

The Minister was glancing at a crumpled piece of paper, notebook size, which had just been handed to him by a steward. 'So - our Policy is absurd, you say. Well, we prefer to think that by restoring the absolute values that we had lost, we are recovering an ancient logic, that through sacrifice we find renewal.'

Bentley felt numb in the spotlight. He had a dim memory of a primary school nativity play, when he couldn't remember his lines.

The Minister winked at the audience and snapped his fingers. Two men in black uniforms emerged from the wings. He gestured at the bulky object concealed by curtains at the back of the stage. They tugged hard at the drapes, which fell away to reveal two tall posts at least nine feet high made of thick square oak. Bentley could smell the fresh varnish.

The structure was positioned over a trap door, outlined by a white square. A white coiled rope hung from a massive cross-beam. The men in black produced a tape measure, leather straps, and a small bathroom weighing machine. They began by checking his height.

The End

**Paul A. Green bio:** Paul Green's work includes 'The Gestaltbunker - Selected Poems' (Shearsman Books 2012), two novels 'The Qliphoth' (Libros Libertad 2007) and 'Beneath the Pleasure Zones' (Mandrake 2014). He has had plays performed by BBC Radio 3, CBC Radio Canada, Capital Radio, Resonance FM, RTE Eire, Travesty Theatre and New Theatre Works, which have been collected in 'Babalon and Other Plays' (Scarlet Imprint 2015). Short fiction has appeared in Canadian Fiction Magazine, New Worlds, Small Worlds (University of Brighton), Brand (University of Greenwich), Unthology 2 and numerous on-line magazines. As Saul Wolfe he has also written the erotic thriller 'Space Virgins of the Third Reich'. Born in London, he studied at Oxford and the University of British Columbia. He's worked in teaching, freelance media and book selling. He now lives in Hastings on the UK's south coast, where he writes full-time.