



## **'Why Did You Organise the Protest?' by Theo Burman | Orwell Youth Prize Winner 2019**

### **(Senior Prize)**

Secretary Milton, feeling like he hadn't slept in a week, strode through the corridor of the police station. Dealing with the protest had taken up so much of his valuable time, and he still had one more interrogation to undertake for the Department of Law and Order before his work for the day was over. All he needed was a nice clean confession from the organiser of the demonstrations.

Milton honestly didn't understand why the protestors were so worked up. He was vaguely aware that the new electoral system had faced a decent amount of opposition, which was fair enough; deciding to assign the number of votes people could cast based on intelligence was always going to ruffle a few feathers, especially when it was reinforced with a law that forced everyone to publicly display their vote total, or "votal", on their wrist, but these protestors had clearly failed to understand the purpose of the votal system: to create a fair society! It wasn't as if they were taking votes away; everyone was guaranteed at least one, and from what Milton remembered, the exam that judged how many votes you could be given was rather easy to complete. If you didn't do well, then that was simply your own fault!

As he approached the door at the end of the hallway, an aide ran alongside him, stumbling under the weight of a mountain of files. Without looking back or slowing his pace, Milton held out his hand and the aide scrambled to place a folder into it, trying to balance the other files in her free hand as she did so. However, she was put off balance by the action and tripped forward, falling to the floor in a flurry of documents. Milton sighed and continued towards the door. It was so difficult to find decent staff these days. One would think that his employees would be a tad more capable, considering he demanded a minimum votal of fifteen for everyone in his department. Then again, Stewartson over at the Department of Education had his minimum employment votal at twenty, and Milton was sure his aides never fell over whilst on the job. Maybe it was time to raise the bar again...

As he mulled this over, Milton reached the cell door, showing the number tattooed on his wrist to the policeman on guard. He knew giving identification was unnecessary; every officer in the country knew Milton's face from the campaign leaflets, but he had just had his votal re-inked before this whole blasted riot had kicked off, and he wanted to show off the new style he had gone for. As the policeman opened the door, Milton indulged himself by glancing at the tattoo, the word "ThirtySeven" written in an extravagant ornate font. He had chosen navy ink to go with his favourite suit, and was rather proud of the design, as well as the number it displayed.

The policeman stood aside, and Milton stepped into the interrogation room. It was the standard layout: one table in the middle, with two chairs on either side. The table had a latch to attach handcuffs, just in case the occupant had a few violent tendencies, but it seemed completely redundant to restrain this one. He was sitting in a relaxed position, arms resting on the table, allowing the handcuffs' chains to go slack. He didn't match Milton's mental image of protestor: he was no older than 18, with short neat hair and a well-shaved face. If you swapped the standard-issue orange prison clothes for a suit and tie, he might have passed as a young professional. Milton took a seat opposite him and placed the folder on the table.



“Good evening.”

The prisoner didn’t respond.

Milton groaned inwardly. It looked like getting a solid confession would take quite a while. Still, at least they had some information on him. Milton opened the file and glanced through the details.

“Mark Webb, correct?”

The prisoner looked up at Milton for the first time. His eyes were slightly narrowed and seemed out of place among his calmer features.

“Yeah. That’s me.”

“And why did you feel the need to throw together a needless protest?”

Mark didn’t reply. He only maintained steady eye contact with his interrogator. Milton clenched his jaw. The silent treatment always infuriated him.

“I’ll repeat the question. Why did you start such a violent and destructive riot, Mark?”

Once again there was no answer, just the same determined stare, coupled with an antagonising smirk. Milton was close to losing it.

“Mark, it’s been a long day. I’ve spent the last twelve hours dealing with the clean-up of your little demonstration. Could you please answer the question?”

No answer. Milton had had enough.

“Listen to me, young man, it would be pathetically easy for me to twist a few arms and have you in cuffs for your entire life! Do you really want to spend the rest of your days in prison?!” he roared, pounding his fists on the table. Milton had been itching to stick it to one of these arrogant ruffians for the whole day, and he wasn’t about to hold any punches now that he finally had the excuse to let go. “I could make one phone call and you’d never look out a window that doesn’t have bars on it ever again! So, I advise you to cooperate!”

He stopped for breath, and suddenly realised that he had stood up his outburst. He sat back down, slightly taken aback to see that his display of power hadn’t broken Webb’s calm exterior. He took a deep breath in and out, and when he next spoke, it was far quieter.

“I’ll ask one more time. Why did you organise the protest?”

Webb said nothing, but just as Milton was about to let loose again, he noticed that the prisoner was moving his arms. He raised his hands as far as the handcuffs would permit, holding out his left wrist to reveal the number “One” tattooed in haphazard red scratches.

“As you can see, I don’t really like the policies you guys introduced.”

Milton looked back at Webb’s face.

“Well, I hardly think you’re in a position to-”

“It’s not fair.”



Milton blinked.

“Pardon?”

“This whole votal system. It isn’t fair.”

Milton had not been expecting such an audacious response and could only splutter out an incoherent response.

“I don’t... How could you...?”

Mark shrugged. “I suppose from where you sit the whole system looks fine. When you’re sitting at the top with a huge number of votes on your wrist, I’m sure assigning votes based on how well you do in some stupid exam seems perfectly fair.”

Milton’s hand moved to protect his votal tattoo.

“Are you suggesting that the votal system isn’t fit for purpose?” He could barely keep the contempt out of his voice. Mark nodded earnestly.

“Of course. You’re worth thirty-seven of me. How is that fair?”

Milton didn’t know how to answer. Webb sighed and leant back.

“This is what happens when you lot try to do what you think is right. You tried to create a fair society, but you turned it into a perverted form of meritocracy.”

Webb made to get up from the table, but he had forgotten the handcuffs which bound him down and he was unable to fully rise into a standing position. He stared at Milton for a moment, then sat back down.

“So, when you sit there, worth more votes than my entire block combined, and tell me that this is all for the benefit of “a fair society”, you’ll have to forgive me if I have a hard time believing it.”

A long silence passed between the prisoner and the secretary, while they stared at each other. Both faces were a mask of fear and resentment. Milton was the first to break eye contact when he looked back down at the file.

“Mark Webb, you can expect to be charged within two days for vandalism and illegal protest.” He said in a quiet voice. He got up from the table and left the room, not looking at Mark again.

Back in the corridor, Milton headed for the exit, meeting his aide on the way. She began babbling some profuse apology, but he wasn’t paying attention. Webb had given him too much to think about. Surely he was wrong, surely that whole episode had just been the ramblings of a desperate young offender. Milton gripped that thought like a lifeline. Yes! He had no need to listen to a onevotal prisoner as if his opinion mattered to a man as qualified as himself!

But the things he had said about fairness...



No. Milton shook those thoughts out of his head, determined to remove the last vestiges of doubt from his mind. Every member of government, the best and most well-educated minds of the country, agreed that the votals were the fairest system they could have created...

Wasn't it?