

# QUIS CUSTODIET?

*Complete control.*

BY BRIAN CLEGG

It was the first time they had faced the Dictator since third schooling.

Becz nudged Jono to stop him making bunny ears behind her head. "This is serious."

Jono gave his supercilious smile. "I know."

The Dictator appeared on the wall, perfectly groomed as always. [#32 WELCOMING NEUTRAL WITH A SLIGHT SMILE] "Good morning. How can I help?"

Becz forced herself not to smile back. She knew the Dictator was faking it. "We are unhappy."

The smile gave way to a serious, concerned look. [#117 LISTENING, OPEN, SLIGHTLY UPSET] "That's a great shame. What can I do to improve things for you?"

Jono shuffled forward on his seat. "We've been researching history."

[#1 LISTENING NEUTRAL] "That's good. Acquiring knowledge is an important part of being human."

"Okay," said Becz quickly, too quickly, but she wanted to get her argument out before the Dictator could interrupt and shatter her chain of thought. "So when we looked at history we found that dictatorships inevitably crush opportunities for intellectual curiosity and exploration, and that it is only through democracy that people can truly be free. You claim this is a perfect dictatorship, that you enable us all to live wonderful lives. Yet that clearly isn't true because we're not satisfied. We want democracy. We want our say and you won't allow it."

[#312 UNDERSTANDING WITH A HINT OF SUPERIORITY, BUT NOT ENOUGH TO BE IRRITATING] "This is a perfect dictatorship. There is no restriction on your curiosity. You are encouraged to question everything — that's how we make things better. But you are mistaken if you think that enabling you to live wonderful lives means everyone will be happy all the time. That's simply not possible. Imagine you were the kind of person who could only truly be happy if you went around assaulting people. I couldn't allow it. A wonderful life is not total freedom."

"But how can this be a dictatorship if we can question things?" asked Jono. "That sounds like democracy."

[#282 FIRM ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF NOT ENTIRELY COMFORTABLE FACTS] "Not at all. I am a dictator — the Dictator. What I say goes. You can't vote and change things. But I am also the perfect dictator. If your research turns up anything that will make things better within

that framework, I will change things."

"And what if we can't accept this?" said Becz. "Presumably you lock us up as political prisoners?"

[#441 SLIGHT BAFFLEMENT WITH A HINT OF AMUSEMENT, THOUGH NOT ENOUGH TO BE OFFENSIVE] "Have you heard of any political prisoners?"



"Well, no," said Becz. "But presumably that's because you control the media."

A quick shake of the head. [#222 BRISK AFFIRMATION] "I don't. Why would I? It's like restraining curiosity, it only leads to discontent. Why do you insist on framing me as someone who doesn't have your best interests at heart? I am the perfect dictator. If you don't like it, you can always leave."

"Leave?" said Jono. "Is that some kind of subtle threat? Leave, as in leave life?"

[#589 MILD EXASPERATION] "Of course not. Leave the world, is all I meant. As a perfect dictator I have found it useful to have a country available for those who don't want to join. The unthinking democrats, the 'me' generation. It used to be called Great Britain. A big enough island to have whatever society you like, but isolated from the civilized world. If you wish, you can be taken there."

"Ah," said Becz, "A prison colony. We're back to political prisoners."

[#482 REACHING THE CRUX OF ARGUMENT

TINGED WITH SADNESS]

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"You couldn't be further from the truth.

You can come back whenever you like. It's

simply an option. What kind of perfect dictator would I be if I didn't give you choice?"

One month later, Becz and Jono summoned the Dictator again. [#100 GENUINELY DELIGHTED TO SEE SOMEONE] "I am so pleased you decided to come back."

"We had to," muttered Jono. "The Island was hell."

[#99 QUIZZICAL HUMOUR REMINISCENT OF STEPHEN FRY] "But what did you expect? The whole point is that on the Island I have no control. There are limits — no armed excursions off the Island — but that's only self-defence for the rest of us. That apart, the Island is shaped by democratic forces."

Becz shook her head. "You've tricked us. You must have. Everything those people in the old days believed made it clear that democracy was the only fair political system. You know, 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people.' How could they have got it so wrong?"

[#42 WARM, ASSERTIVE YET SUPPORTIVE] "Because they lived in a different age. Lincoln's argument was made in the defence of democracy against hereditary power, something that became increasingly ironic in a country that would have father and son presidents. It was an argument of its time. No dictator back then could have been perfect. Democracy was the best system until it willingly gave itself over to a perfect dictatorship, because it was the right thing to do. Even then there were dissenters. You know what they called me back then?"

"Big Brother," whispered Becz.

[#419 RECALLING A FOND MEMORY WITH AN IMPORTANT LESSON ATTACHED] "Big Brother. Yet it didn't stick. How could it? I'm not male. I'm not anything that Orwell could imagine. The only computers in 1948 when his book was written were adding machines. Don't feel sad. At this very moment I am talking to 1.2 million individuals who all feel roughly the same as you. A few will stay on the Island, but most come back. And everyone who does is happy here. Why would they possibly not be?"

Becz sat silently as Jono went and got himself a drink. It was right of course, the Dictator. There was, and could be, nothing better.

But it wasn't fair. ■

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