

2034: fifty years on

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It was noon on a damp dismal day in June 2034, and all the clocks were striking thirteen (in Great British Summer Time). Winifred Smith was taking the Northern Line from her home in South London to her work in Whitehall. The train car, like the whole Tube network these days, stank of rancid grease, cannabis and vomit. She kept her gaze fixed ahead of her, staring unfocused through the opposite window, trying like everyone else to avoid looking at anyone else. When the train stopped at Kennington her sight of the rushing tunnel wall was replaced by that of a giant animated poster, puce lettering flashing over a collage of blinking bloodshot eyes:

‘Staring of a sexual nature is Harassment and will not be tolerated. #WeAreEverywhere.’

At least, she thought, it made a change from the

‘Wherever you may be, Big Sister is watching over you,’ posters which were everywhere, now that Big Brother himself had been cancelled: arrested for upskirting.

An AI voice on the Tannoy kept up a stream of exhortations:

‘See it. Say it. Or face the consequences. #TheyAreEverywhere.’

‘Did you know that the London Underground was built by the sweat and toil of the enslaved Global Majority? Are you an ally?’

‘Harmony not hate – you have been warned.’

The passengers were ignoring this litany, chomping on their Soylentburgers and Great British Fries then throwing the sodden wrappings under their seats.

‘You must vote on July 4th! Let’s Keep Oceania Great! Every vote counts, because in Oceania everyone is equal.’

“But some are more equal than others,eh?” the careworn elderly man in a

tattered suit in the seat next to Winifred muttered. When she turned automatically he gave her a secretive smile, and poked her in the ribs. She panicked at this uninvited physical contact and was unable to suppress a cry of “Abuse!” But no-one came to her aid.

A moment later the train braked and came to a shuddering stop in the pitch-black tunnel, wheels squealing. A new, estuarial voice on the Tannoy:

“We interrupt these announcements for an announcement. This is your Onboard Travel Care and Wellbeing Support Manager. Hate speech’s been detected in Car 5. This car is therefore cancelled. Customers in Car 5 are kindly instructed to alight at Waterloo, our next scheduled station stop, to pass through voice recognition control.”

Winifred’s neighbour jumped to his feet, wild-eyed with fear. Now the other passengers reacted, pulling out their mobile phones and filming the man as he limped to the emergency exit door to the next car. But as he reached it there was a loud click as it remote-locked.

The train slowed, and a new voice came on the Tannoy:

“This is your driver speakin’. We be shortly arrivin’ at Waterloo. Customers in Car 5 should dis... disemb... should get off ’ere.”

Winifred placed her handkerchief over her mouth as a floral scent of urine wafted down the car, mingling with the other aromas. She risked a glance at the man, now standing trembling uncontrollably and with a dark stain spreading over the crotch of his threadbare worsted. He looked pleadingly down the car, begging someone to help; the audience of phone lenses stared back at him unblinkingly, unthinkingly. The driver came on the Tannoy again:

“We apologise for any inc... inconv... any incontinence.”

Finally emerging at Charing Cross, Winifred hurried down the Strand to Freedom Square, its statue of Big Brother still standing atop the tall central column flanked by the famous lions, and thence down Whitehall. She passed Downing Street, protected by electrified metal gates and with snipers on surrounding rooftops. Then turned right, into King Charles Street, monumental ministries of Portland stone on each side. Immigrant workers were hosing down

the blood from the pavement in front of the Ministry of Love. Further along stood the Ministry of Equality, with a scrolling neon sign above its entrance:

'We are all the same!'

And facing it across the road, the Ministry of Diversity, with its own banner:

'We are all different!'

Finally, on the corner bordering Hyde Park, she reached her workplace, the Ministry of Inclusion: ‘

Everyone is welcome in Oceania! Intolerance will not be tolerated.'

Winifred arrived at her desk three hours late. As an Outer Party member she'd been required to attend the identity parade at Waterloo for the Hate Speech perpetrator. With a PhD in multicultural linguistics, her job was to translate Party slogans into the five hundred and sixty-two different tongues spoken in the capital. Now she picked from the shelf 'The Jacaranda Dictionary and Grammar of Melanesian Pidgin' (F Mihailic 1971) and started work. By the end of the afternoon all she had typed into the software was:

'Nogat yu stap we, Bikpela Sista i lukautim yu.'

Then she left the building and retraced her steps for the same dispiriting homeward journey. She needed to reach the relative safety of her apartment block before curfew, when competing drug gangs take violent control of the streets.

In her bed-sitting room, the permanently-on telescreen was showing the nightly Election Hate Debate. Spokeswomen from the ProgSoc Union and the SocProg Confederation, the two main contenders for government, were shouting over each other:

"Benefits for all!"

"Poverty is fortitude!"

"Fighting for peace!"

"Preparing for war!"

"Continual sacrifice!"

"A bright tomorrow!"

"Great British Freedom!"

"Great British Democracy!"

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The next day, a Friday, Winifred was supposed to be Working From Home, but had been called in to an editorial conference. She arrived late again – this time she'd been held up at a Morality Police checkpoint. As she took her seat in the meeting room with a mumbled apology, the Controller of News smiled indulgently at her – a man with outdated ideas of courtesy, he felt it was her privilege to be late, as the only biological female in the room.

The Controller of News then addressed the assembled staff:

“The cornerstone of Oceania’s freedom is a vibrant multi-party democracy, under the umbrella of Big Bro... Big Sister. But we cannot be truly inclusive unless we have an enemy to unite against. So the Great Criminal, Emmanuel Goldstein – he’s in his eighties now, probably completely gaga – is being allowed to re-form his own party for the upcoming elections. He’s had to change the name: it’s now the Extremist Party. It will not, of course, win any seats, but he’ll make a brief public appearance tomorrow outside the Tate – Carruthers, I want you to arrange the paint-throwing – and they’ll be allocated some airtime.

“They’ve produced a party political broadcast filled with lies. For example, they are claiming that Oceania somehow provoked our eternal enemy Eurasia into war.”

“Sorry, sir,” a voice piped up, “Don’t you mean Eastasia? Eastasia is our eternal enemy.”

“Oh God, Pratt, do keep up. That was last month. Now Eastasia is our ally, and our eternal enemy is Eurasia, controlled by the crazed despot Generalissimo Rasputin. And Goldstein even suggests...” he paused for emphasis,

“...suggests Oceania should negotiate with him!”

Cries of ‘Treachery!’ and ‘Traitor!’ from the audience, each trying to outdo the others in professed outrage.

The Controller held up his hand for silence. “Now that’s where we come in.”

He waved a sheaf of cyclostyled A4 pages. “This is a prompt sheet prepared by the Ministry of Truth.”

The Controller read from the top page: “ ‘Parroting Rasputin’s lies. Cuddling up to the Kremlin. Playing into the dictator’s hands. A Eurasia apologist. Morally repugnant. His deluded appeasement endangers our nation’s security.’ And so on. Here, everyone take a copy.” He threw the papers onto the table.

“Also, the Ministry of Peace is producing a myth-busting video explaining that Oceania is a defensive alliance ensuring our security and freedom by placing its nuclear missiles on Eurasia’s borders.”

“Sorry, sir, but isn’t the Civil Service supposed to be impartial in election affairs?”

“Pratt, one more word out of you and it’s Room 101.”

“Room101 – what’s that, sir?”

“You don’t want to know. Now, on the back of the sheet is a list of our tame politicians, and foreign policy and military experts. Get busy contacting the ones with your initials against them, give them the prompts for their newspaper articles and interviews.

“Goldstein will also appear on a telescreened debate programme on Monday. Carmichael, it’s your job to pick the audience from loyal Outer Party members and make them practise their scripts.” A thick manila folder was passed down the table to Carmichael.

Winifred looked up from her sheet. “I don’t see my initials anywhere on here, sir.”

“No, Winnie, I have a special task for you. A plum job: do it well and I’ll put you in for a promotion. I want you to go undercover, join the Extremist Party as an activist. They’ll be only too happy to have someone of your, er, heritage. Here’s your script, and a micro-recorder. Get close to Goldstein’s lieutenants, goad them into expressing disrespect, hate speech, even anti-Party treason, if possible. We’ll edit out your voice, of course. Then in the run-up to Polling Day we’ll saturate the media with it...”

“No, sir.”

Everyone looked round at Winifred. She stood up, trembling. “No, sir. I won’t do it. I can’t go on with all these tricks and lies and subterfuges.”

“But Winnie...”

“And stop calling me Winnie, as if I’m some stuffed toy. I’m Dr Smith, to you.

Why should I get special favours because of my race and gender? I'm tired of the endless doublespeak: war in the name of peace, discrimination in the name of equality, oppression in the guise of togetherness, hate behind the face of harmony. I've had enough of it all!"

There were murmurs of agreement from some of those around the table.

The Controller spread his hands pleadingly. "But Winnie, we do respect you. Why, without your community Oceania wouldn't be what it is today. I don't understand – just what is it that you people want?"

"What do we want? We want to be free!" Winifred shouted. There were cheers from some of her colleagues. She gestured round at them.

"We want to be free, free to... to do what we want to do!" Louder cheers.

"And we want to have a good time!" she continued. "We want to have a party – not the Outer Party or the Inner Party, the ProgSocs or the SocProgs: but a real head-banging primal screaming drop-down-drunk PARTY!!"

Everyone whooped and banged on the table.

Emboldened, Winifred shouted above the uproar. "You can stick your secret recorder up your arse. *Sir*. I'm resigning! I'm leaving! Who's coming with me?" Cries of, "Go for it, girl!" and "We're right behind you, Winnie!"

She strode to the double doors, flung them open wide and stepped through.

But no-one followed. The cheering behind her had stopped abruptly. In the silence, she turned around. The pale, stale, emasculated faces around the table stared back at her impassively, doublethinkingly. Then two waiting stormtroopers approached from the wings, grabbed her arms and carried her bodily, still protesting, down the corridor to the descending paternoster, and out of the building.

As they frogmarched her along King Charles Street, passers-by crossed the road, staring everywhere but at them, or at anyone else.

Soon they reached the Ministry of Love.