

# HOW TO BUY PLANET



"ENTERTAINING  
AND FAST-MOVING"

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# How to Buy a Planet

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Squirrel & Acorn Press



The world's press were wriggling with excitement.

They fidgeted in a big oblong hedgehog of microphones and cameras, pressed around a semi-circle of nervous-looking policemen. Behind the policemen was a semi-circle of temporary steel barriers. Behind the barriers was an empty podium. And behind the podium was the world's most famous doorway.

No.10 Downing Street.

Above Downing Street a thick blanket of cloud had turned the sky black and brooding. The odd camera flash was going off, and a TV lighting crew was hurriedly putting up a rig directed towards the prime-ministerial podium. Still more press were gathered outside on Whitehall, jostling to hold cameras on long booms above the black wrought-iron gates. Anyone looking carefully would have seen them trying to maintain social distance. Elbows were trying to avoid elbows, tummies were squeezing past tummies. But it was no use. They were too excited.

Beyond and around them the black cabs and other traffic had perched on the pavements as drivers tuned into their radios. The bustle of Ludgate Circus had evaporated, the Strand was gridlocked, Trafalgar

Square was motionless. All of London was at a standstill.

In fact the whole world had stopped.

Breakfast TV in North America, the evening news shows on the subcontinent, the late shows in Australia and New Zealand. Every single broadcast channel and internet-streaming service in existence was tuned into Downing Street. Many billions of eyes, and a similar number of ears, were strained in expectation with a growing feeling of both excitement and dread. And all of this achieved with a mere three hours' notice.

And it was just as well that they'd tuned in.

Because today the world would learn that its planet had just been sold.

\*

“One pahnd.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yer bag o' crisps. One pahnd.”

“Oh, of course.” Toby started reaching into his pocket and then remembered why he'd really come to the bar. “Err, can you tell me if there's a Dave here?”

“*Who?*” The landlady was chewing gum with an intensity that unnerved Toby.

“His name's Dave. He said you'd know him? Apparently he always drinks here?”

“Sorry, dahn't knah any Daves,” she replied, immediately resuming her work at the bar, while her jaws intensified their gum-chewing. Toby was mesmerised. It was like watching two boxers slug it out under a blanket.

Toby looked helplessly round the pub and wondered how it was possible, in this day and age, not to know

any Daves. The place was full already and more customers were arriving. There were probably several Daves here. At least four or five. The odds were stacked in favour of Daves.

A couple of customers jostled their way in front of him and Toby asked himself for the first time why the pub was so ridiculously busy. He squeezed back a step, trying to maintain a figment of distance. His eye caught the news channel that was playing on the TV. A large clock was showing 11:55. Beneath it, a kind but stern-looking Government official, of the type that had become rather familiar in recent years, was saying something that was obviously very serious, while beneath him a ticker message played in a loop:

“IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT FROM  
DOWNING STREET AT 12 PM GMT, 1 PM BST ·  
MAKE SURE YOU ARE NEAR A TELEVISION OR  
WIRELESS · DO NOT BE ALARMED ·  
IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT FROM  
DOWNING STREET AT 12 PM GMT, 1 PM BST ·  
MAKE SURE...”

And on and on.

Toby didn't know it, but *everyone* was getting themselves near a TV. They were alarmed by the word 'alarmed' and they were even more alarmed by the word 'wireless', without quite knowing why. The ticker message had been running for three hours. It had created a primitive urge in people to hear whatever was going to be said in the company of others. This primitive urge collided with a more modern urge to remain socially distanced... But the primitive urge won. This time, for this news event, people wanted to come together.

*Strange*, Toby thought, and then re-focussed on his own quest. He had just come here about a flat-share. He

scanned the heaving crowd looking for any obvious Daves. *Why did this Dave have to be the only one without a mobile?* He decided to ask the landlady again, for good form. If that didn't work out, he'd forget all about the flat and look for something else.

"Are you quite sure you don't know any Daves?" he said to the landlady, poking his head between two customers without quite touching them. "He was certain you'd know him. He said, 'it's impossible to hide your identity these days'..."

The landlady stopped chewing for a moment and looked him straight in the eye.

"Yer mean *Paranoid Dave*?"

"Err, maybe?"

"Well, why didn't yer say so then. Over there, near the TV," she said, pointing with her elbow, and resuming her chewing. "Black beard, leather overcoat."

"Thank you," Toby squeaked, just as the sea of customers closed in front of him.

Toby edged his way in the vague direction indicated by the landlady's elbow and there, on a settle against the wall, he saw a chubby, bearded figure. He was wearing a black skull t-shirt beneath a full-length black leather coat and was staring intently at another large TV screen. Still half-minded to walk out and forget the whole flatmate thing, Toby nudged his way towards him.

\*

"Err, hi, I'm here about the flat, are you—"

The bearded figure raised his hand to silence him, while still staring at the screen.

"BST?" the bearded figure asked.

"Err, yes?"

“What does it mean?”

“British Summer Time?”

“Exactly! *British Summer Time.*” He stabbed a single, pudgy finger into the table. “Why bother telling us that? *Why?*”

The bearded figure turned to Toby for the first time. His eyes were small and suspicious, sitting in his pudgy white cheeks like a couple of button studs in an overstuffed sofa.

“It can only mean one thing.”

“Which is?” Toby asked.

“I dunno. I’m still thinking about it.” He turned back to the TV.

“Great,” said Toby. “Well, I guess you must be Dave?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Err, I do? Look, I’m just here about the ad. I was wondering if you could tell me what the flat looks like?”

“The *what?* Oh, the flat? Is that what you’re here about?” Paranoid Dave patted the bench next to him. “Take a seat. You should’ve said.”

“Well, I did actually,” Toby replied sitting down.

“Did you? Oh right.” A thought seem to pass through Paranoid Dave’s head and he suddenly looked cowed. “I dunno, man. Not sure how much I’m allowed to tell you. It better wait ‘til Charlie gets here from work.”

*Who’s Charlie?*

Toby pictured a grizzled creature of startling rudeness. He sank back into his seat with his bag of crisps, only then realising that he hadn’t actually paid for them. He looked at the bag, and shook it. It was large, but with disappointingly few crisps in it. *One pound for that?* He pulled some loose coins from his other jacket pocket. They totalled one pound exactly.

*Surely a sign?* Toby had just resolved to return to the bar, pay for the crisps, and quietly slip out of Paranoid Dave's life, when the TV started to crackle.

After an awkward transition, the drinkers of the Squirrel & Acorn found themselves staring at a rather familiar doorway.

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12 noon struck in Downing Street.

Nothing happened.

The press fidgeted a little more. Many billions of people watching at home fidgeted with them, and wondered – fleetingly – if there might just be time to pop the kettle on.

Then at 12:03 p.m., a small and rather unremarkable man appeared on the pavement to the left. He was wearing an old-fashioned brown janitor's coat and pushing a large black plastic container on four small wheels. The press and their cameras turned towards him, a little uncertain. A few sniggers broke out. *Had Downing Street forgotten to put their rubbish out?*

Unhurried, and apparently oblivious to the attention, the janitor-like figure pushed his strange contraption past the door of No.11, then up to the door of No.10. Here he attempted to execute a right turn – and struggled for a moment with the wheels, in a way that anyone who's ever pushed an ageing airport trolley would understand – managed to correct the direction, and came to a rest next to the Prime Minister's podium. The janitor took up position between the podium and his contraption and folded his hands meekly in front of him. His bulging eyes blinked in the glare of the world's media.



A few more sniggers. A few camera flashes went off, making a disarmingly old-fashioned clicking sound as they did so.

And then at 12:05 p.m. precisely, the door of No.10 opened, and the Prime Minister strode up to the podium, confident and calm.

The media erupted in a frenzy of flashes and camera clicks, like a flock of wading birds startled by a predator. They watched the Prime Minister plant a few pieces of paper on the podium – he straightened them in a dignified and business-like manner – he paused – he looked around – he sucked in the sheer enormity of the audience watching him and briefly contemplated the even more sheer enormity of the news he was about to deliver. Then he smiled and brushed his famously floppy brown hair from his brow with one hand.

\*

“Sssh!”

“Sorry, he was just trying to—”

“SSSH – it’s about to start!”

The Squirrel & Acorn was bursting. The ones at the bar were being shushed by the ones near the bar, who were being shushed by the ones in front of the TV. Soon a shushing sound was passing round the pub like a Mexican wave.

Toby and Paranoid Dave’s view of the TV was completely blocked. Paranoid Dave stood up on the bench and Toby did likewise. *What the Hell was going on?*

“Oops!” said a lanky, ridiculously tall ginger bloke, as he biffed his head on one of the beams.

“SSSSHH!”

The ridiculously tall ginger bloke froze in front of the TV, panicked. He rubbed his head and looked round at the pub-full of people staring angrily back at him. He couldn't see where to sit; he couldn't see where to stand.

"Come on, Seamus, you can't be standing there," said a short, dark-haired bloke, who pulled him off to one side by the hand. "You're bang in the way."

"SSSSSSSSSSHHHHH!"

\*

"Thank you all for coming. And on behalf of the G7 group of nations, I'd like to apologise for the slightly abrupt nature of this press conference."

The Prime Minister was brisk. *Professional.*

"I don't want to waste your time this morning. I shall get straight to the point.

"The world is in crisis. Politicians are rightly criticised for not always telling it straight. So let me say it straight." He paused, looked up from his notes, and several hundred cameras flashed at him.

"The world is in crisis, and it's a crisis of many colours.

"Let's start with the debt crisis. Across the planet, individuals and corporations are mired in debt to banks, whom they can never hope to repay. Banks are mired in debt to each other. The governments of the world are sunk even deeper in debt, while trying to prop everyone else up. Even countries, which you might not think are running on debt, are running on debt."

The Prime Minister paused. He had plunged straight in, no point in sugaring the pill. He looked up and saw the press corps was transfixed. *Yep*, he said to himself, *I thought so.*

“What is the simplest way to think of this predicament? Even before *you-know-what*, ah-hm...” the Prime Minister faltered involuntarily, “...even before the virus crisis, debt was being passed around the global financial system like traffic on an overcrowded network. It only needed one accident for that network to become gridlocked. It could’ve been anything. A stock market crisis, a bond market crisis, a currency war, a trade war – an *actual* war. Anything that knocks confidence.

“It turned out to be... It turned out to be a virus.

“To keep money circulating round the economy – to deal with the debt crisis – we created a currency crisis. The governments of the world were forced to print money they didn’t have and to issue bonds they could never repay. We muddled through, but the simple truth is, no-one has any idea where this experiment will end. If the major economies of the world continue towards deflation, we face a future in which these debts *might actually grow*, not shrink. And that’s the lucky outcome.

“The alternative is inflation, probably rampant. If that happens, interest rates will rocket and a large proportion of the debt will simply become unaffordable. *Mortgages* will become unaffordable. Businesses will collapse, governments will default. Inflation will ultimately reduce the value of the debt, but not until the global economy has been trashed, re-trashed and trashed again.

“Inflation, deflation – either way we are damned.

“And so we’ve reached the biggest crisis of all. A crisis of confidence. The system was built on confidence, the system will collapse without it. When no-one trusts anyone, no-one lends. The world faces economic ruin. *Or worse.*”

The Prime Minister paused, swished his hair again, and looked up. As he stared into the pale and startled faces of the journalists in front of him, just for a moment he felt this astonishing sense of clarity and elation. It was like floating one foot above the ground, like he could somehow see through the camera lenses into the homes of all the people watching him.

*Is this what it feels like to speak truth to billions?* he wondered fleetingly. *How wonderful.*

\*

“Shit,” said Paranoid Dave under his breath. “He’s telling the truth.”

In an unconscious motion, Paranoid Dave pulled a bag of toffees from his pocket and started unwrapping one, his eyes fixed on the TV.

“But that’s a good thing, right? Telling the truth?” Toby whispered back.

“You kidding? This is bad news. He must need something really big from us.” Paranoid Dave popped the toffee in his mouth and took a gulp of ale. “And by the way, you see that plastic contraption, the one next to the Prime Minister?”

“Err yes.”

“I’m sure I can see a brand name on it – look at the bottom.”

“Oh yes, so there is.”

“Biffa?”

“Biffa.”

“My God, it’s *a wheelie bin*,” Paranoid Dave observed. “Why the Hell have they brought a black wheelie bin to the world’s most important press conference?”

“SSSSH!”

\*

The Prime Minister looked down at the rest of his statement. His truth-to-billions moment had passed. He blanched slightly and pressed on.

“I put it to you that this situation is intolerable. We deserve better. The human race has amazing ingenuity. Our planet has amazing resources. It has sustained us as we developed our civilisation to the highest degree. Why should we be shackled with so much debt and so much doubt when so much abundance lies around us and within us?

“The answer is: we shouldn’t be. We all have a *share* in this planet and we all deserve better.”

He took a sip of water.

“What if there was a way we could make the most out of our planet *and* eliminate global debt at the same time?

“You may say that this is madness – a dream, a fantasy. But I’m here today to tell you about more than just a dream. I’m here to tell you about *an opportunity*. A chance to eliminate debt *and* take full advantage of our cherished planet. It is an opportunity of dazzling dimensions, and one that will not wait. Which is why we, the leaders of the G7, on behalf of the entire planet, have collectively taken the decision that was needed.”

The Prime Minister paused pregnantly. He looked up.

“We have sold planet Earth!”

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Silence.

Looking up from his podium, the Prime Minister saw a row of mouths falling open. For the first time in their professional lives, the cameramen of the press were forgetting to take pictures. Lenses were lowered, and pale faces appeared from behind them. The sound guys forgot their microphones, the journalists stopped scribbling in their notebooks.

You *what?*

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In the Squirrel & Acorn, jaws slackened and faces blanched. A pint glass slipped from someone's hand and smashed on the floor.

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On every phone call, every face call, every conversation around the world – on every TV channel and every radio station – heck, even on the internet – nothing.

Pure, bewildered silence.

The broadcast media went so quiet that for the first time in a century the entire planet was emitting the same uncluttered, unbroken signal into outer space.

Silence

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