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## RUNNER-UP

# Employment prospects

by GRANT HUTCHISON

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**I**T was some time between my initial determination to do something about my situation and the final action upon that decision. This was for a variety of reasons.

The first day I set out from my modest eight-family flat was, I recall, a Tuesday. The sun shone in a delicate yellow sky, and the street was unusually deserted. This latter phenomenon allowed me to actually squeeze between those pedestrians more slow-moving than myself, rather than, as was usually the case, to be carried wherever the crowd dictated. I had travelled more than three blocks in the first half-hour, when I ran into a people-jam at the fourth intersection, which detained me for some time.

Food was dropped to us by emergency helicopters, which was fortunate, since the police robots took three days to clear the jam, such was the pressure of the compact citizenry.

On Friday, I rested, since the continuous

noise of the sirens and loud-speakers, along with the groaning of the injured and asphyxiating, had allowed me no sleep for some seventy hours.

On Saturday, the radio gave warning of an unseasonable smog which had settled on the city. An interesting nerve toxin, active through the skin, had been isolated from this smog, and all those without whole-body gas-suits were advised to remain indoors for the duration.

The following Saturday, the air cleared, only two days after the food ran out. However, the radio informed us, high concentrations of fluorocarbons had been detected, building up under the inversion conditions. At that very moment, they were boiling up towards the ozonosphere, to wreak havoc therein, and to allow a flood of ultra-violet radiation to leak through to the Earth below. We were advised to go outside only when protected by a reflective umbrella.

Chancing to glance out of the window at that instant, I beheld my wife stalking a pigeon for the pot, totally *sans* umbrella.

I was forced to stay in until Wednesday, until the UV levels returned to normal. I occupied my time salving my wife's sunburn. We hope her hair may regrow, in time.

On Thursday, I set out again, only to run into a riot after two blocks. A band of militant vegetarians had ambushed a group of scavengers, who were returning home with the UV-sterilised corpses of several small birds and mammals. Attempting to traverse the resultant *fracas*, I was bitten in the leg by an incensed vegetarian, much to our mutual disgust. Pausing to remonstrate one with the other, we found ourselves anaesthetised by the riot-control robots.

Some time later, I recovered awareness in the police station, to find that local snoopers had identified me as an innocent victim of police action, and, as such, I was entitled to free helicopter transportation to my place of residence. In a flash of quick-witted brilliance, I gave the address of the Employment Bureau as being my own. The idiot automaton which ran the station took me at my word, and I was deposited on the steps of the very building towards which I had been striving for the past fortnight.

Unfortunately, I had not established at what time I had awakened. I therefore found myself obliged to spend six hours of the early part of Friday sitting on the steps, waiting for the Bureau to open.

But at last the sun rose in brown and grey glory, and I was able to enter the building.

He was a pleasant chap, the Employment Officer, attired in a conservative red and gold business suit, the merest touch of flamboyance being added by his matching hair-dye and contact-lenses. I was uncomfortably aware of my own tatty day-suit, already beginning to bio-degrade as its twenty-four hour atmospheric contact guarantee ran out.

"I am," I said, "looking for unemployment."

"Hmmp," he riposted. "So am I. I can't get shot of this lousy job for love nor credit. Present position?"

"Prime Minister," I replied, with, I ad-

mit, a certain smugness.

"Jeez. Come on, gimme a break. How about you settle for a lower-status job first, sorta work your way down to the whole unemployment bit slowly. I mean, that's some social handicap you got there—you got no hope of losing it all at once."

I was somewhat taken aback at this. "Why so? I am a well-adjusted citizen, perfectly capable of bearing the burden of unlimited leisure. Why, I believe that 98 per cent of the population survive under that self-same burden at this moment."

"Huh?" he said. Then, "Never mind. I got your drift. You're wrong, you know. Look, people like you and me, we got a problem, see? We're what they call 'work orientated'. We gotta work, or we lose our self-respect. Something wrong inside our heads—makes us poorly adjusted to modern technological living, unable to take a relaxed place in society. We..."

"But," I interrupted, with a note of triumph, "I no longer wish to work. Therefore, I am no longer work orientated."

"Uh-uh. I wanna pack it in, too, didn't I just say? But if we did, we'd be even more miserable. I *know* that isn't logical, but that's just our funny minds, you know? And..." (At this point, he cast a pious eye heavenwards, in the direction of the giant world-control computer, in orbit overhead.) "... the Great Orbital Determinator, in its Infinite Wisdom, has created a niche in society even for malcontents like you and me."

"But..."

"I thought I had it bad. *Prime Minister*. Sheesh!"

"But what can I do? There must be night classes, self-help organisations, something..." I cried, somewhat more pitifully than I had intended.

"Oh, sure. Look, leaflets, the whole works." He handed me a sheaf of gaudy literature.

Titles like *101 Ways to Lower Your IQ*, *Learn to Enjoy "It's a Knockout"* and *Forget a Foreign Language in Just Three Weeks* swam before my eyes.

"Not much cop, though," said my advisor. "I tried 'em all. I figure it's just to give hope to the desperate, you know?"

(I could not help but feel that such a philosophy, at least when expressed to all and sundry, was not a desirable attribute in an Employment Officer.)

"Then, of course, there's the old pre-frontal lobotomy. Never fancied that, myself. Messy, by all accounts, and you can wind up without bladder control, no memory, stuff like that. Expensive, too."

"Ah, no, I rather think not..."

"Mind you, you can get one of those back-street lobotomies cheap. One swipe with a fourteen-pound brick hammer, placed just right, you pay your money, and off you go, a contented idiot, ideally suited to today's progressive world."

"But I want to stay as I *am*, for G.O.D.'s sake," I said, in anguished indecision.

"Well, there's only one thing for it... Do as I do."

"What?"

"Cultivate serenity."

I thanked him kindly for his assistance.