

## To Benefit the People

Louis Peng sipped his morning coffee while reading the news. He became aware of a man standing next to him and looked up.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” the man asked, nodding toward the empty chair on the other side of the table. The coffee shop was crowded, and seats were scarce.

“Please do,” Louis replied. For a few minutes they both read their tablets and sipped coffee in silence. The other man nibbled on a croissant while he read. Finally he closed his tablet with disgust.

“I wish there was some good news once in a while,” he said.

“It doesn’t sell,” Louis said as he closed his tablet. He was getting fed up with the morning news and was ready for some human conversation. “The headlines are all designed to scare you into doing something the writer wants you to do or to buying something the writer is selling. It’s been that way for a long time, although it does seem like it’s getting worse.”

“I think the country’s going to hell in a handbasket,” the man said.

The man appeared to be in his mid-20s. Considerably younger than Louis. He was well dressed in a tailored suit. Lots of businessmen and lawyers frequented this café.

“That’s been happening for a long time, too” Louis chuckled.

“Do you think our Premier’s new push for ‘Government that benefits the people’ will help reverse that?” the young man asked.

The smile disappeared from Louis’s face as he thought about this. He wasn’t composing his thoughts on the matter. He was deciding if it was safe to share his thoughts with a stranger.

“It’s a nice platitude,” he finally replied, “but I don’t think it means anything. Everyone in government thinks they’re benefitting the people. Honest politicians and hardworking government employees have always done what they think will benefit the people. Corrupt politicians convince themselves that passing laws to favor special interests will benefit the people. Bureaucratic ideologues who enact onerous regulations think they’re benefitting the people. And, of course, the worst dictators in history were absolutely convinced they were doing what was best for their people.”

“The Premier said she’ll seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people,” the young man said. “If that’s the guiding principle, won’t that keep things in check?”

“That’s a very disturbing statement,” he replied. “It’s another way of saying ‘the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.’ That means groups matter more than individuals. And, of course, the

biggest group represents the needs of the many. If the needs of the many outweigh the needs of an individual, there are no minority rights. Slavery is justifiable. It sucks for the slaves, but as long as it's benefitting the greatest number of people it's OK."

Louis paused a moment to let this sink in. Then he continued. "People in power, even tyrants and dictators, don't think they're doing evil. They think they're doing what's best for the country. That's how they justify destroying anyone who gets in their way. In fact, 'The Greatest Good' *requires* them to destroy their opponents. And if there are laws against doing what they think needs to be done, they change the laws or break them. The needs of the many require it. You can justify anything as long as you tell yourself it serves the needs of the many."

The young man looked stunned. "Whoa!" he said. "I never dreamed that something that sounded as logical as the 'greater good' could be misused like that. What should we be focusing on?"

"Individuals," Louis replied. "Every human being is born with inherent rights as an individual. Groups are just a way to refer to multiple individuals who share a particular characteristic or interest. Every individual is a member of multiple groups, but groups have no rights. Only individuals have rights. Groups can divide people as well as unite them, and this is particularly true when society focuses on groups. People think of themselves as members of a particular group, rather than as individuals who control their own destinies. If their group is doing well, they think less successful groups just need to do what they're doing. If a group is not succeeding, that group convinces itself the successful group is holding them back. It's much easier to tell yourself someone else is holding you back than to admit you might be doing things that don't lead to success. It's also easier to dehumanize a group than an individual. Discrimination, tribalism, conflict between groups, and in extreme cases slavery or genocide are the end results of focusing on groups instead of individuals. The greatest good for the greatest number of people means the biggest group should receive the most benefits. But if you focus on individuals, and you believe that every individual is born with the same rights as every other individual, your whole perspective changes. Groups don't matter. Individuals do. Benefitting the people doesn't mean benefitting a particular group, it means benefitting all people as individuals. It means creating a level playing field where every individual has an opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of what group they belong to. Slavery and genocide become indefensible because they harm individuals, not because they harm a group that the majority regards as 'inferior.'"

"And how do we reach this Utopia?" the young man asked.

"We can do it through the ballot box," Louis said. "There's no other way to change the government without violence. Individuals need to stand up and elect officials who put the rights of individuals first. That will sweep the others into the dustbin of history."

The young man looked at his watch and hurriedly got up. "You've given me a lot to think about," he said. "I'm late for a meeting, but I hope we can meet again. I'd like to hear more of your thoughts." He rushed out of the café and Louis turned back to his tablet.

The Minister of Justice welcomed the Premier's senior political advisor to his office. "Have a seat, Rashida," he said as he motioned to a leather couch. The Minister sat in a matching leather chair next to the couch. "I assume you've had a chance to look at the messages and transcripts I sent you."

"Yes, thank you, Jorge. They were very enlightening, and I must say, very disturbing as well. Before we go any further, I need to ask. Did you obtain these through a court-approved wiretap?"

"Didn't need one," Jorge replied. "The 'Defense of the Nation' act gives us the authority to monitor and record all electronic communications, let our computers scan them for dangerous or subversive conversations. We get a sanitized report of these findings to highlight trends and areas of concern. If the computer spots multiple dangerous communications from a particular individual or group, it provides us with those communications, with names and identities redacted. If we determine the threat is significant enough to require additional investigation, we can get unredacted copies. We can't use any of this in court without a court ordered wiretap, but there are procedures in the act to get backdated court orders if the additional investigation reveals a clear and present danger. We're not yet to that point in this case, though."

Rashida nodded in agreement. "Good. I assume you know that Mr. Peng is one of the Premier's top political enemies. He doesn't run for office himself, but he uses his personal fortune to fund opposition candidates and he has considerable influence over the issues they pursue."

"I'm acutely aware of that," Jorge said. "That's why I'm sharing this information with you. I'm a legal expert, but any action we take is bound to have political repercussions. I wanted your thoughts on the matter before we did anything."

"Are you going to bring charges?" Rashida asked. "I found the emails and phone transcripts disturbing because I strongly disagree with his views, but I didn't see that they broke the law."

"You haven't seen the results of our additional investigation," Jorge replied. "We placed Mr. Peng under surveillance and sent an undercover agent to interview him. The voice of our agent is, of course, digitally altered in this video to protect his identity." He pressed a button and a large video screen slid into view.

*"What do you think of our Premier's push for 'Government that benefits the people?'"  
Only the hands of the speaker were visible. The camera was apparently hidden  
somewhere on the speaker's body, and the voice was clearly altered. Louis Peng sat across  
a table from the speaker and his image dominated the screen.*

*"It's a platitude that doesn't mean anything," Mr. Peng answered. "Everyone in this  
government thinks they're benefitting the people. The corrupt politicians who pass laws  
favoring special interests think they're benefiting the people. The bureaucrats who pass  
onerous regulations think they're benefiting the people. So it's not surprising that, like the  
worst dictators in history, our Premier says she's benefitting the people"*

*"Groups matter more than individuals. And, of course, the biggest group represents the needs of the many. There are no minority rights. Slavery is justifiable. It sucks for the slaves, but as long as it's benefitting the greatest number of people it's OK. If there are laws against doing what needs to be done, change the laws or break them. You can justify anything as long as it serves the needs of the many."*

*"You're talking about some pretty drastic changes," the altered voice said. "Do you really think that's ever going to happen?"*

*"We can't do it through the ballot box. There's no way to change the government without violence," Mr. Peng said. "People need to stand up and sweep the Premier and her lackeys into the dustbin of history."*

The video ended. For a moment Rashida sat in stunned silence. Then she spoke. "That's a pretty damning piece of evidence. Do you have anything to corroborate it?"

"We were able to get security camera footage from the coffee shop that clearly shows Mr. Peng and our agent sitting at a table together at the time of the filming," the Minister of Justice said. "That fixes the time and the place. We'd have to blur out the face of our agent to use it in court, but judges accept the need to protect our agents' identities. For his own safety he can't appear in court, of course, but we could produce a sworn statement that this is a true and complete recording of the conversation."

"Do you think you can get a conviction?" the political advisor asked. "That last part certainly sounds like a threat to the Premier's life."

"We can try," the Minister said. "It's not as clearly stated as a threat as I'd like. Mr. Peng can afford to hire top lawyers, and he's also very popular with the opposition party. I've seen cases like this go either way. We'd have to focus on the implied threat. The rest of the video is disgusting, but it doesn't break any laws."

"It breaks the laws of human decency!" the advisor spat back. "No one who sees this video could ever support Mr. Peng. When are you going to release it?"

"I can't release it," the Justice Minister answered. "It was filmed without Mr. Peng's knowledge, based upon information obtained without a warrant. I could go to a judge and try to get a backdated warrant and permission to release potential evidence, but there's no guarantee that would succeed and Mr. Peng's lawyers would fight me every step of the way."

"Could you send a copy to my office?" the political advisor asked. "I think it's important for the Premier to see this. I'll try to safeguard it, although we still haven't found the person who's been leaking tapes and documents to the press."

The Justice Minister's face lit up in feigned surprise. "I do think it's important for the Premier to see this. But please do your best to protect it. It would be terrible if this got out. Mr. Peng would have a

hard time finding a lawyer willing to represent him if the public found out he wanted to bring back slavery.”

“And no one in the opposition party would dare to speak a word in his defense,” the political advisor added.

“I’ll get a copy to your office this afternoon,” the Minister promised. “But you do understand that if it leaks, there will have to be an inquiry.”

“Oh, of course. Damned tricky things, though, these leak inquiries. The press never confirms anything other than ‘informed sources,’ and where do you go from there?”

They shook hands and the political advisor left. The Minister of Justice sat down at his desk, called his secretary, and asked him to send in the Director of Artificial Intelligence.

Jiang Patel, the Director of AI, stepped nervously into the Minister’s office. Just a few years out of grad school, Jiang was young to be a Director, but the Minister was famous for appointing young Directors. He began the practice because he thought high-tech departments should have directors with up-to-date technical skills. He soon realized that as a bonus, they were idealistic, strongly supportive of lofty goals, and loyal to the leader who promoted them.

The Minister motioned Jiang to a chair in front of his desk.

“That last version of the video was perfect, Jiang. Exactly what I wanted.”

Jiang beamed with pride. “Thank you, Minister. You provided many videos and phone conversations to build the database, so we had the resources we needed.”

“The Premier’s chief political advisor was very impressed with that video. Please send a copy to her office. I assume it has all the digital signatures and, uh metadata as you call it, needed to pass as original?”

“Yes, Minister. Everything is in order.”

“Then you can destroy the original.” The Minister turned to some paperwork on his desk.

Jiang sat uncomfortably in the chair. Normally he would leave when the Minister did paperwork.

“Is there something else?” the Minister asked.

“Well, sir, I was wondering if it might be better to save the original, just in case we ever need to prove that the new video is an accurate summation of the conversation.”

The Minister was perceptive enough to realize this question went deeper than it sounded. Jiang was having self-doubts, wondering if he was doing the right thing. The problem with idealistic assistants was that their idealism sometimes distorted their judgment and caused them to question pragmatic solutions. He realized he would have to handle this delicately.

“That’s a good point, Jiang. I can see how the original might prove useful, but it could prove to be a liability instead. Do you remember when I first showed you that video? How surprised you were that he could twist social truths like ‘the greatest good for the greatest number of people’ and make it sound like something bad?”

“Yes,” Jaing’s voice sounded hesitant.

“And you found it disturbing that his arguments sounded logical, but they contradicted many of your fundamental beliefs?”

Jiang nodded his head in agreement.

“You’re a very intelligent man.” The Minister continued. “You graduated top in your class, right? And I imagine you’ve always been surrounded by intelligent people. You may not realize how many people there are in this country who aren’t as smart as you are. If you found his arguments disturbing, can you imagine how people who aren’t as smart as you are might find them convincing?”

The Minister paused to let this idea sink in.

“Mr. Peng thrives on people who aren’t as smart as you. He twists the truth with statements that sound good if you don’t think deeply about them, the way you and I do. That’s why when we watched this video we said it would have been much better if he hadn’t hidden his views behind lofty sounding statements. We thought if he had clearly stated his views, people would see the flaws in his argument.”

Jiang nodded his head in agreement. “I remember that,” he said.

“Well that’s what you’ve done,” the Minister said. “You’ve condensed his rambling monologue into something people can understand. You’ve clarified his twisted logic so anyone can see where it leads. I think you’ve done a wonderful job.”

“Thank you, sir. You helped a lot.” Jiang replied.

“The new video is an accurate record of what Mr. Peng said in that meeting, stripped of its ambiguity. People can understand it. If the old video were to leak out, it would just confuse people. Some might even take Mr. Peng’s side. No good would come of it. It would only embarrass this department and cast doubts upon your work.”

“I guess that’s true,” Jiang said hesitantly.

“Sometimes people like you and me have to do what’s best for the people, even if it’s distasteful. You do believe the government should benefit the people, don’t you?” the Minister asked.

“Yes, sir!” There was no hesitation in Jiang’s voice this time. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Premier’s new policy, but he also knew that any other answer would cost him his job and place him under suspicion.

“Very well,” the Minister said with a kindly smile. What you’re doing is of great benefit to the people.”

“Thank you, sir. The needs of the many. . .”

“Outweigh the needs of the few,” the Minister said.

“Or in this case, the one” Jiang said with a grin. He left the office to carry out his tasks.