

The Numbered Men: A Prescient Poem Written 50 Years Ago by Viv Forbes

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sourced from [Patrick Wood's The Quickening Report](#)

April 4, 2024

One day while I was driving down the highway in the sun
I sat behind a milk truck just returning from his run.
His sign said "Licensed Vendor" and it made me feel secure
That only numbered milkmen could come knocking on my door.

Then I saw a licensed builder with his number on the door
And a plumber with a permit which was issued by the law.
Then a hawker and publican each with his licence plate
And a licensed money lender with his number on the gate.

I pulled into a café, which was licensed to sell beer
And struck up conversation with a licensed auctioneer.
He'd just been selling forfeit goods to pay the fines imposed
On a maverick hardware dealer whose late trading he'd exposed.

A warm glow spread inside me as I drank a licensed beer
And I pictured the inspectors who called in every year
To check upon the numbered men and safeguard fools like me
Who'd waste their money buying things from men who paid no fee.

I thought of all the union men whose cards protect their job
And dairy men whose quota scheme defends them from the mob.
The teachers who are registered, the chemists with their
guilds
And lawyers with their closed cartel which keeps their coffers
filled.

As I sat among the numbered men it suddenly occurred
That I was just a cleanskin in a tamed and numbered herd.
Somehow I'd missed the muster when the planner combed the land
And now I was a maverick, a man without a brand.

The numbered men live sheltered lives, their keeper is the
State,
Their job depends less on their skills than on their licence
plate.
Their future is determined and their charges are prescribed,
And the standards of their conduct are in rules and acts
described.

But thank the Lord for mavericks, who don't fit in the mould,
They help distract the licence-men from getting far too bold.
Without the help of mavericks, the planners would persist
Till we all need applications for a licence to exist.

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