**Don’t Call Us** by Kevin Milne

*from* Grumpy Old Men

*Kevin Milne, born 1949, is a broadcaster and columnist. For 27 years he was an investigative journalist for consumer show* **Fair Go***. He is regularly at or near the top of polls naming New Zealand’s most trusted people.*

Like everything bad, it started In America. Some indolent fatso, whose bank-manager wouldn’t lend him cash to build a proper movie-theatre, thought it easier to rent a paddock and charge movie-goers to bring their own theatres. He called it a ‘drive-in’. Thus began the consumer scourge we still live with today. Slavery to the self-serve. Except it’s far worse now than then. Fortunately, drive-ins didn’t catch on here in New Zealand. So it probably wasn’t until the petroleum giants fired forecourt attendants from their gas stations that most of us were affronted by the self-serve. Self-serve gas stations were where the previously obnoxious line, ‘Get it yourself, mate’, first became an acceptable sales strategy.

Forecourt attendants still exist, It’s just that they’re employed through a deal with The Foundation for the Blind. They never see you. They pretend to be doing something behind the counter in their bright—yellow , rubberised, all-weather gear, until you enter the shop to pay.

‘You all right, mate?” they ask.

Showing no interest in an answer, they stride out, survey the forecourt for a secod, and return again to the warmth.

Our new ‘mates’ the cashiers show marginally more interest. “Got a Fly-Buys card, mate?”

“Yep.”

“Choice, mate. How’s ya day bin?”

“Pretty average, actually.”

“Wicked! Can I interest you in a Perkynana, mate? Two for one today.”

Why do Perkynanas have to be pushed so hard, and am I the only one who loathes being called ‘mate’?

Self-serve is now the norm. Interaction with people has become more and more irrelevant. We book our own air-fares and do our own banking on-line. We’ve been sold the idea that if we do it ourselves we’ll do a better job and get exactly what we want.

But the way I see it, we’re doing more and more of the work and they’re getting more and more of our money.

Take on-line airline bookings, for example. They’re worse than supermarkets. Nobody from the airline even talks to you. You do everything. And if you make a mistake, it’s all on you. Get a travel date wrong and you carry the cost.

And how about the latest little rort? They ask you what seat you want. You tell them. Then up on screen: “That’s an extra ten bucks.”

“Why?”  
“Because you chose your own seat.”

“I chose my own seat because you asked me. Besides, I’m going to have to sit somewhere.”

“If you don’t pay extra, we choose your seat.”

“Well choose my seat then. What seat do you want me in?”

“We can’t choose your seat yet in case someone else wants it.”

I give up.

But the airlines’ self-service touch that still grates the most is when the plane lands. Then over the speaker. “You can assist us help save the planet by taking with you any newspapers and placing them in the special recycling bins located on the air-bridge.”

Save the planet, bollocks. Save them having to do it themselves.

Give it a year or two and we’ll be hearing this: “You can play your part in keeping costs down by using the mini-vac under your seats to clean up around you. We’d also appreciate your spraying the area around you with the plant-based, non-aerosol air freshener which you’ll find in the pocket in front of you. Once again, thank-you for helping us save money and planet.”

I urge you – don’t take your newspaper and shove it in the “special recycling bins”. It only encourages them. When I get on planes now, I grab newspapers out of the air-bridge “special recycling bin” and leave them in the cabin when I get off. My wife says that’s being obstinate. She’s right.

Call me a bit sad, but since I left television, I’ve come to love time spent in my supermarket. The check-out ‘girls’ are my best friends whom I send cards to on holiday. They know everything about my life and I know a few interesting things about them. (No need to tell you that the few interesting things about them are far more interesting than everything about me. Check-out ‘girls’ of whatever age are like that.)

I go to a flash supermarket in order to also get the ‘packing girls’ or, sometimes, blokes. It’s more people to chat to and they tick everything in bags for me while I talk. These wonderful people are what I pay top supermarket dollar to access.

So what the hell is my supermarket trying to do now? Divert me into their new self-serve check-outs. In effect, what the owner’s saying to me is, “Kevin, we’d like to lay off some of your friends on the check-out. It would save us some serious dosh. We can teach you to check out your own stuff. We’ll even give you lessons for the first week or two. Oh… and when you check out your own stuff, you pack your own stuff too.”

I want to say to the supermarket owner, “And what’s in this for me? If I use self-serve do you take 10 percent off my bill? Tell you what, I’ll do my own check-out and packing if you change the name of your store to Pak ‘New World. And charge the same prices as that dingy den down the road.

But I don’t because I hate conflict. Instead, I flat refuse to use the self-serve check-outs. Nor will I eat any food my wife checks out through them. She says I’m just being stubborn. She’s right. Some nights I’m bloody hungry, too.

Remember when you used to call up a business and someone would answer the phone? That was when there were telephonists. They prided themselves on answering all calls within the first three rings. They’d find out who or what you wanted, put you on hold while they found out who you should deal with, and stay with you, listening, till it was clear you had the right person.

Telephonists knew everything. They were the unheralded backbone of every large organisation. So we got rid of them. Some idiot, probably related to the genius who invented supermarket self-serve check-outs, came up with the call-centre. These were huge operations based off-shore, and taking calls for several businesses at the same time. They knew nothing about any of them, of course. But they hoped you wouldn’t notice this because of their impenetrable foreign accents. But at least they were human. Another Einstein, probably related to the bloke who invented self-serve gas stations, realised you still had to pay people in India and the Philippines. So they started laying-off call-centre workers telephonists too, and along came one of telecommunications’ most irritating breakthroughs … the recorded message.

It took a few decades to refine itself, but the recorded message now allows nobody to answer their phone. I recently rang the offices of a semi-government outfit in Wellington. I imagine its afairly large organisation but I’ve never been there. Maybe there are lots of departments but only one employee. When I called, a recorded message invited me to select one of four or five further dialling options. ‘If you have a real estate complaint, press 501. If you have an account query, press 502. If you want to speak to Henry Gribbens in the legal office, press 503, for media enquiries press 504 …’ etc.

So I pressed 504 for media enquiries. ‘I’m sorry, all our operators are on other calls at the moment. Please leave your name and number and we’ll get back to you.’

I needed the information urgently, so I called 501. ‘I’m sorry all our operators are on other calls at the moment…’

So I called 502. ‘I’m sorry, all our operators…’ Well, you know the rest. All their operators on every extension in the building were on other calls. Every one of them. Yeah, right! Either this organisation had cut off all contact with the outside world so it could get on with its work or, far more likely, no-one was there. It was twenty to four on a lovely warm Friday afternoon, after all.

The man who invented the recorded message made so much money that he had the investment capital to take this depressingly further. He developed computerised voice recognition. The idea was excellent. You tell a computer that talks like a 50s space-man what you require and it replies, ‘No-sweat-buddy. I-am-all-over-this-issue. Here’s-the-solution.’

But that never happens. To experience voice recognition at its eloquent best, call up the Inland Revenue’s self-service help-line. A disembodied voice will greet you like this…

‘Hello-I-can-understand-what-you-are-saying. Say-in-less-than-ten-words-what-you-want-to-talk-about.’

‘I want to ask about my son’s student loan.’

‘So-you-want-to-talk-about-Fringe-Benefit-Tax.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Hello-I-can-understand-what-you-are-saying. Say-in-less-than-ten-words-what-you-want-to-talk-about.’

‘How does my son in London pay his student loan?’

‘I-didn’t-get-that. Key-in-your-IRD-number-or-say-you-don’t-have-it.’

‘I don’t have it.’

‘Please-key-in-your-IRD-number-then-push-the-hash-key.’

‘I don’t have it.’

‘Sorry-we-only-accept-three-attempts-to-talk-to-us. You-need-to-schedule-a-call-with-us. When-would-you-like-to-call-us?’

‘I am calling you now.’

‘Good-bye.’

I call up the IRD in the morning, carefully avoiding the self-service ‘help-line’. I want to speak to a real person. What I get is a recorded-message.

‘Welcome to Inland Revenue. All our perators are busy at the moment. You are currently 27th in our queue. Hold on and we will ensure you keep your place in the queue. We estimate your waiting time is…’ and the space man returns for a cameo performance: ‘forty minutes’. ‘If you do not wish to wait, leave us your name and telephone number and we promise to get back to you as soon as possible.’

The humour in that final promise makes up for some of the frustration.

As I said at the start, self-service – doing the work yourself and paying someone for the privilege – has only just begun. You must fight it. Take part and you’re simply digging a hole for yourself.

I mean that literally. Funeral directors are working on self-service burials as we speak.