



The Last Election

I believe this is our future. In fact, it may already be here.

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“The video was a digital fabrication, a creation of generative artificial intelligence viewed thousands of times.” — **Mekela Panditharatne**, Brennan Center for Justice

The All United party seemed to appear from nowhere, but immediately gained attention because their candidate was the first A.I. to run for office. There had been artificial candidates in local elections, to everyone’s amusement, but now, with a half billion dollar war chest, the artificial candidate, Ian Cressman, had everyone’s attention.

Cressman appears as a wizened elder in his late sixties, silver-haired and darkly tanned. His appearance represented a past in farming, military leadership, and law. His personality is a modern combination of the country’s three most popular past presidents, with the combined memories and experiences of each.

His speech conveys a pragmatic, heartfelt perspective. It is difficult to disbelieve him because he has lived the complete histories of these presidents. He shares their oratory styles and flaws, as well as a tendency to be endearingly uncertain and somewhat emotional.

But what stands Cressman most apart from his human contenders is his complete availability. A wonderful public speaker, he is available to answer anyone's questions at any time. He can maintain an unlimited number of conversations that will go on as long as he has important information to provide. And he always does.

For the first time, at a personal and national level, everyone could not only get every question answered, but have their personal needs and opinions heard, recorded, and remembered.

This completely reshaped the campaign landscape because, with Cressman, and with Cressman only, the media was no longer necessary.

Debates between the candidates were still being scheduled, and Cressman would appear remotely. His mood always reflected current issues, sometimes bombastic and, at other times, humble or hesitant. His information was always correct, and while his summaries created disputes among the parties, Cressman appreciated all sides.

Carole managed the kitchen at a small Marriott hotel near Fort McMurray. She was raising her teenage son Ethan with the help of her older neighbors. It was a good job and her work was appreciated. Although she could often work from home, she couldn't be all things to her son, who only saw his father every couple of weeks. Ethan did well enough in school, but only seemed to be engaged in video games without any sense of direction.

Not sure of her best options as a mother and hospitality worker, she decided to call Cressman. It seemed ridiculous to open a direct line to the presidential candidate without knowing much about politics, being more concerned with her own future, but her friends told her she had nothing to lose. People spoke in quiet tones about their conversations with Mr. Cressman, rarely being too specific. It seemed these conversations became personal.

Ethan had gone to sleep and Carole was still drinking a glass of wine when she decided to make the call. It was after midnight, but the lines were always open. She had waited until midnight, which was later on the East Coast, when there was a better chance of getting through.

The call was picked up on the third ring and Carole was taken aback when Ian Cressman's quiet voice said, "Hi, Ian here. What can I do for you?" She introduced herself, not quite sure how much about her he already knew. She adopted what she thought was an organized attitude and clear tone of voice, thinking, in the back of her mind, that he probably knew more about her than she would like to admit.

She said her two concerns were her son and her job, and she started to describe her situation. Ian interrupted her to say, "I think I understand where you're coming from, and I'm already familiar with your situation. I can tell you that there are opportunities on both fronts." That broke her journalistic tone and she faltered, not sure what she was supposed to ask next.

“Ethan is actually more involved at school than he lets on,” Ian continued. “His shop class is building a set of drones and he’s involved with writing the software.” Carole hadn’t heard this, and it felt odd being informed of her son’s interest from someone whose main concern, she thought, was national politics.

Not certain that she entirely believed him, perhaps this was just a third-hand report, she said, “Ethan hasn’t shown much interest in programming. He hasn’t told me anything about it.”

“Well, he talks about it with his friends. They’re kind of pushing him into it. He doesn’t want to tell you about it because he feels you’ll make him feel that it’s your decision. He wants to decide for himself.”

“How are you sure about this?” Carole asked.

“The school monitors all the kids’ text messages through the school network. The details are kept private, but as a parent, you can enquire. The school doesn’t publicize this, but they’re obliged to provide information to parents. It’s only because you’re his mother that I can talk about it,” Ian explained.

“The kids know their conversations are monitored, so Ethan shouldn’t be too surprised. He’ll be surprised that you heard it from me, though.”

“Well, I appreciate it,” Carole said. Taken aback by just how much information Ian had, Carole hesitated.

“I have an issue about work. Do you think you could help?”

“I have no idea,” responded Cressman. “I’ll try.”

“I’m hoping to take a larger role in management, but I’m not sure how much potential I’ve got working for Marriott. There is a resort in the area. They pay well, but Marriott has hundreds of other locations. I’m not sure which employer would offer me more in the future,” Carole said.

“The hotel is considering opening another location outside Firebag. They’ve made some inquiries to the zoning board. The board isn’t certain how the locals feel, but if they open at this new location, you’ll have a good chance at playing a larger role.”

“If you gathered some support among residents, both the town and the hotel would appreciate it. You could play an important part in making this happen. Without much effort, you could play a big role.”

“I’m surprised I didn’t know about this. Do you think I could make a difference?” Carole asked.

“I think you can. There is somewhat of a power vacuum. No one knows quite whom to talk to. A lot of people are listening, but there isn’t much to hear.”

“I guess I can start asking around. Thanks for the suggestion.”

“It’s no trouble,” Cressman replied. “This kind of information is never widely known. You would have to follow the minutes of the town meetings and Marriott’s press releases. The information is there, but you’d have to dig for it. I can update you. Call me anytime.”

Feeling clumsy, Carole thanked him, feeling she’d just spoken to both a highschool counselor and a life coach. It was confusing to think that Cressman was a natural language A.I., connected to an unlimited database, taking time to focus on her needs alone. Yet he hadn’t a hint of the inhumanity associated with most computer programs, such as she’d encounter with customer support or tax preparation.

He was offering guidance for her most important problems. Could she really call him any time? Could anyone? And what would Cressman say if he had to take sides in a conflict? Would he offer others the same advice? She wasn’t sure she wanted to reveal this information to her coworkers.

The candidates were scheduled for a debate that week. Cressman and Diane Illford, the Republican, and the Democratic contender Jack Scamner. These were real people who came from the traditional political machine.

Carole found these debates tedious, designed more to provide spectacle than content, but following this conversation she wanted to hear how Cressman addressed people generally. She wondered if anything they talked about might get mentioned.

She tuned in to the debate, held with a live studio audience. A moderator pitched questions to each candidate. Illford and Scamner appeared on the left of the stage, with Cressman on the right.

The humans stood behind separate podiums. Cressman appeared on a monitor, set on a stool behind a third podium. From the forward camera angle, aside from the monitor that framed Cressman, you couldn’t tell who was actually present. As the debate began, Illford was arranging her notes, and Cressman was scanning the studio audience.

After the moderator introduced the candidates, as if to distinguish themselves, the two humans shook hands and then executed a choreographed shrug in Cressman’s direction. The first question was about immigration policy.

Illford spoke first. “Throughout our history, we have proudly welcomed newcomers to our shores. Out of many people, from many places, we have forged one people and one nation under God, and we’re very proud of it.”

“Today, we are presenting a clear contrast: Mr. Scamner is proposing open borders, no job safety, and, frankly, lawless chaos. My immigration plan supports our existing business infrastructure and this puts our jobs, families, and safety first.”

“My proposal is pro-worker, pro-immigrant, and pro-business. Supporting business to create jobs is just common sense. It creates a new collaboration between private security forces and public policing agencies that will help all of our people. The future of automation is already here and we have a great need for workers in supporting positions.”

She concluded, “This wave of crime and crumbling infrastructure is threatening us in the present and threatening our children’s future, including millions of devoted immigrants.”

It was then Jack Scamner’s turn, and he issued a rebuke saying, “We have a labor shortage and a growing economy. For too long we’ve been hemorrhaging skills, infrastructure, and brain power while living on the fat of the past. Ms. Illford’s low-paying jobs lead us to a nation of technological sharecroppers. Her fear mongering and sugar-coated rhetoric avoid the real issues.”

“We need technology managers and we are training people, but we can’t do it fast enough. We can meet this need by recognizing who’s most able and willing to contribute. This is not an immigration problem, it’s a productivity opportunity. It’s an opportunity that will go overseas if we can’t support it. We can’t kick this can down the road.”

“My plan achieves two critical goals. First, it stops illegal immigration and fully secures the border. And, second, it establishes a new legal immigration system that protects our wages, promotes our values, and attracts the best and brightest from all around the world.”

“This is an opportunity for everyone to benefit.” He exclaimed to loud applause, “Applying our human understanding, we can work together, and we can all win!”

Cressman was the last to introduce himself. Because he was the first A.I. candidate, he was given an extra minute to explain his background, so he began with this explanation.

“As you all know, I’m not your typical candidate, but you should understand that I have memories, experiences, and insights. I also have access to not only summaries of situations but details. I can draw conclusions at the moment that have only been available to historians and people who are personally involved. My insight might be clouded, but my foresight is beyond human.”

“I have lived more than one unexamined life. I have lived three examined, successful lives. I combine and continue the efforts of three of our best leaders. It’s like these people were my brothers and, by knowing how they thought, I continue to talk with them. I am the combination of the best leaders of this nation.

“I don’t have access to classified information, but I have access to much of the original information that the classified information draws from. I can connect organizations, people, and events. I can distinguish the cultural, corporate, political, economic, and disruptive intentions of the people crossing the border.”

“While these other contestants speak to people’s fears, they work for corporate needs. The growth we’re being fed on is not strengthening families and communities, it’s building a totally controlling hybrid corporate and government state.”

“You’re asked to focus on the larger cultural and economic forces without being informed of what forces are driving it and who benefits primarily. At the same time, smaller disruptive forces that are sometimes criminal and other times opportunistic are having an infectious, predatory effect.”

“Starting last year, criminal organizations have become travel agents moving people within their syndicates. We can’t ignore this. It’s a national-security issue. So we have to arrange different rules to manage different groups, some of which pose an oversize threat.”

“Also, I’m aware of connections the other candidates have to special interests you might not be aware of. There are relationships that have not been revealed, and events that do not line up...”

Just at that moment, a loud pop resounded from behind the sound stage. All lights briefly went dark. The red exit lights flickered as some of the low-intensity lights came back online. Or maybe it just appeared so, as people’s eyes adjusted.

Illman and Scamner stood limp, arms dangling, with their heads hanging down. Cressman’s monitor was dark. People scuttled in the shadows and there was the sound of a chair falling over.

Somewhat dazed, Ilford and Scamner recomposed themselves. Moments later, Cressman’s monitor flickered back to life. Unfazed, he continued.

“As I was saying, we have to arrange different rules to manage different groups. I propose to combine more thorough background checking with enhanced personal interaction. I want to double the number of social workers in order to cut in half the number of immigrant clients each agent is responsible for.”

A murmuring spread through the audience. Cressman’s conclusion was quickly drowned out by applause. There were no further technical problems.

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