

Clarkson

This month, Comrade Jeremy longs for the good old days under Stalin

I'VE SPENT THE LAST WEEK OR SO hammering around in a new BMW M5 and I have many things to say on the subject, starting with this: was Communism such a bad idea?

Obviously the citizens of Soviet Russia were not allowed to vote, but they were allowed to do pretty well everything else; smoke in bars, drink a very great deal of vodka, hunt bears and walk their dogs.

Best of all, though, they didn't have to worry about choosing the wrong sort of trousers or the wrong home-cinema equipment. Which brings me neatly on to the perils of living in Mr Blair's Britain.

This is a country where we're so content and so happy with our lot that the government is bored. You'd imagine they would have many important things to do, but somehow they find the time to draw up precise rules about when and where you are allowed to take your dog for a walk. And how you can kill a fox. And how many wheels should be driven on a school-run car. It's pathetic.

They're even bored with the concept of democracy, so now a focus group tells Mr Blair it might be a good idea to worry about dog walking, the prime minister's office approves it, the cabinet rubber stamps it and then it goes before the 650 MPs who moo a lot and do what the whips tell them. Honestly, I'd rather have Stalin.

Meanwhile, out on the streets, we've taken to worrying about the most ludicrous things. Like what sort of coffee we should have, for instance. When I was growing up, coffee was powdered, made by Maxwell House and delicious... because we knew no better. Now, there are people making a very good living from selling two million different varieties.

And then there's the question of music. I wrote last month about the iPod and, already, it's yesterday's news. Now you need a billion songs stored on your mobile telephone, and it had better be the right phone or you'll be ostracised by your friends, shut out from society.

How has this happened? How, in 30 years, have we gone from a society where everyone had a bog in the garden, and Dad had a diseased lung, to a society that worries about its choice of mobile phone? I stayed in a hotel recently where guests were offered a choice of two types of bog roll.

Someone had a meeting about that. Someone said, "Have we thought of everything?" and someone else piped up with a forehead-slapping "Christ. What if someone doesn't want to wipe their arse on embossed paper. We had better get some plain in too."

If your life's that empty, it's time to take up fishing or embroidery or hair styling. Because

next thing you know, you'll be worried about global warming and your next-door neighbour's Land Cruiser. Or whether people should be allowed to walk their dogs on the common. Or the plight of that urban rat known as the fox.

Plainly, there are similar problems over in Germany too, because BMW fitted the new M5 with a gearbox and then someone said, "Hang on, is five ratios enough? Wouldn't we be better off offering six?" And then someone else chimed in with, "Nah. Let's give it seven".

This opened the floodgates because on the new M5, you're able to choose how much ferocity you want from the gear changes. There are, in fact, a whopping five settings for this, as well as three settings for the electronic diff. You're even asked, before you set off, how much horsepower you'd like from the V10 engine: 400 or the full 507.

There's even one sub-menu in a sub-sub-menu on the iDrive computer which allows the owner to select how long their headlamps should stay on after the engine has been switched off. Now that's bonkers enough, but to make it window-lickingly mad, the choice is infinite. Anything from one second, to one light year.

Why? How can it make a difference whether they stay on for 33 seconds or 34? How empty is your life to have thought of such a thing? And how empty do they think mine is, that I will have enough time to make the choice?

There is only one feature in the M5's electronic armoury that's good; it's a little button marked with an M on the steering wheel. Quite what M might stand for, I have no idea. Motorsport? Mohawk? Mombasa? I like to think it might be M***** because that's the effect it has.

Naturally, you can programme what effect you would like this button to have, but I'm delighted to report that someone far cleverer than I am had already set it up to loosen the diff, unleash all the horsepowers, savagise the gear change, firm up the suspension, and change the head-up display to show a rev counter. In other words, turn the boring, ugly and annoying 400bhp 5-Series into what you thought you'd bought. An M5.

In M***** mode, this car is pretty hard to describe. But 'perfect' will do for the moment.

The engine, which sounds like a diesel when you start it up, is transformed to a machine of unparalleled brilliance, churning out such a prodigious amount of power that there is simply no let up in the speedo's rate of climb. Even as it gets close to the 155mph limiter, there's no slow-down and then, it just surges past. I saw 168 before the nanny stepped in. Apparently, if you have her disconnected altogether, 204 is achievable.

Then there's the handling and, again, I just don't know where to start. On one run, I found myself in convoy with a rather well-driven M3 and, eventually, I had to let him go by because we were reaching the sort of speeds you read about in the *News of the World*. And he was beginning to look edgy. I wasn't, though. The M5 can go round any corner at any speed that takes your fancy.

I wish it had fewer badges. I wish there were fewer spoiler add-ons, too, and I wish the four exhausts were better hidden. The whole point of an M5 is that no one knows about the power. But this one shouts a bit too loudly. It's a bit too Beckham for my liking.

Mind you, this pales into insignificance alongside my gripes with all the electronic brouhaha. I mean, why could they not just sell the damn thing already set-up, for all of time, in M***** mode? And with lights that stay on for 40 seconds. Why make it all so bloody complicated?

Only a month ago, I stepped out of the Ferrari 430 and thought that maybe in 200 years, someone, somewhere, using materials that don't currently exist, will make something better. But in fact, I only had to wait four weeks. The M5 is that good.

Except when it's being a complicated pain in the arse. What this car needs, badly, is a dose of Stalinism. A bit of dictatorship. It needs to be less of a village fête with something for everyone and more of a fait accompli. A car that does only one thing, very well, for those in the know.

The M5, I think, may very well be my next car. I absolutely love it.

BMW
TWO

Jeremy Clarkson presents Top Gear on Sunday at 8pm

'How, in 30 years, have we gone from a society where everyone had a bog in the garden, and Dad had a diseased lung, to a society that worries about its choice of mobile phone?'