

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly worker



A convenient enemy: what lies behind the friction between Russia and the west

- Letters and debate
- Shamima Begum
- Italy's budget
- Jean-Paul Sartre

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Good riddance
to bad rubbish



LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

Confusing

Paul Demarty says that in my reply to his article, 'May's deal is dead as a dodo' (January 17), I misunderstand his positions on the left in relation to Brexit, and also misunderstand matters of substance (Letters, January 31).

This is what Paul says, in relation to the 2016 vote: "Struggling to get an angle on the issue, the left had two competing guiding ideas. The first was historic opposition to the EU, inherited ultimately from cold war-vintage Communist Party politics. (This was quite as true of the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party in England and Wales, which accommodated to the trade union and Labour lefts, who were in turn primarily taking a lead from the 'official' CPGB.) The other was fanatical hostility to the far right."

My reply in that regard was to set out that for the SWP, Militant and others on the left there was nothing "historic" about their opposition to the European Union. Prior to the 1970s, they all held an abstentionist position on membership of the European Economic Community. Paul's account here is confusing, because, on the one hand, he refers to the Socialist Party, as opposed to Militant, which might lead us to think that he is talking about the current situation, and yet his reference to them accommodating to the trades union and Labour lefts, and to the official CPGB, rather than the Communist Party of Britain, suggests that he is referring to the situation in the 1970s. Given that most trades union and Labour lefts today oppose Brexit, the statement makes no sense in relation to the current situation!

Part of the problem in this discourse is that the term 'left' is not defined, and I admit to being guilty of this inadequacy myself. But then I have also made reference, in practice, to who I was referring to in these different conditions. In the 1970s, the far left consisted of maybe 20,000 members of groups such as the SWP, Militant and so on, in addition to which there were several thousand members of the CP - however we might characterise them (including not being part of the left at all). The largest component of left forces, however, consisted of members of the Labour Party, many of them Bennites.

Again, the point of my historical excursus was to highlight the difference between then and now. To be honest, I have little interest in what the position of the various left microsects is in this respect, because, although, even in the 1970s, they were relatively small, today they are less than insignificant. So, when Paul refers me to what caused Social Resistance to go over to 'remain', I can only shrug with indifference. It could just as easily have been something they read on a sticker in the phone box where they were holding their meetings.

What we have today is a situation where the left microsects, in large part, have continued to push their nationalistic position, adopted in the 1970s and after. As I also described, in part that is also due to them adopting in this respect the perspective of Sismondian anti-capitalism - also displayed as idiot anti-imperialism - in their uncritical support for assorted reactionary nationalist regimes and movements, purely on the basis of their supposed 'anti-imperialism'. Today, however, when I talk of the left, I mean the half-million members of the Labour Party, and their opposition to Corbyn on the question of Brexit. As far as I can see, hardly any of their opposition to Brexit is due to an obsession over

the far right, but is due to a healthy and progressive socialist internationalism, and modernism.

Paul berates me for not recognising that "the Tory Party's 'reactionary wing' (as opposed to its progressive wing?) is part of the far right". This seems to me to make an error that the CPGB has warned against in the past, when they criticised the SWP, in relation to their characterisation of the British National Party, for example. It's true, as the CPGB argued some years ago, that the BNP were more characterised by their ultra-nationalism than the street violence more normally associated with fascist organisations. But the fact remains that the BNP and other such outfits have a large overlap with organisations that are engaged in such kinds of activities. It is Ukip, for example, that is being taken over by the English Defence League, not the Tory Party. The reactionary wing of the Tory Party, in the shape of people like Rees-Mogg, is characterised by their Minarchist, libertarian/anarcho-capitalist ideology, more than any attachment to fascism.

And Paul here suggests that there is something unusual about talking about the Tory Party's "reactionary wing", and contrasting it rhetorically with its "progressive wing". Yet he himself says, "It is merely that the grossly undemocratic British electoral system forcibly attaches the far right to the centre-right ..." - thereby admitting that the Tory Party is not some homogeneous bloc. The terms 'reactionary' and 'progressive' are necessarily relative. The centre-right is relatively progressive compared to the far right, for instance.

But it is Paul, here, that does not exhaust the possibilities of description, and this is also where his failure of analysis of underlying material conditions and class interests lets him down. Generally speaking, fascists base themselves on a defence of the existing productive relations, and their dominant form, which is that of large-scale, socialised industrial capital. That is why Hitler, Mussolini *et al* proceeded on the basis of the kind of economic planning, nationalisation of core industries and use of Keynesian demand management that such large-scale capital requires for long-term investment. That is, in fact, in sharp contrast, to the ideology of the Tory right, such as Rees-Mogg, whose Minarchist, anarcho-capitalist ideology, is based upon the ideas of Mises, not Keynes, and represents a longing to turn the clock backwards from the existing set of productive and property relations to one based upon an 18th century vision of small-scale private ownership of capital (the social forces that numerically dominate the Tory Party membership and core vote), and rampant, free-market competition.

Objectively, there is a massive gulf separating the ideology that fascism represents from that which the Tory right represents today. The fascists, as happened in Germany, may also base themselves on the small capitalists, the frightened petty bourgeois, the lumpen workers etc - but only in order to provide themselves with the stormtroopers they require. It is not wholly inaccurate for the Nazis to have described themselves as National Socialists, if your definition of socialism is one that is based upon stashed property, state control and so on, which is why Trotsky could describe the regime of Stalin as differing from that of Hitler only in that the regime of the former was more brutal. It is also why Stalinists can line up with fascists in support of economic nationalism, as with Brexit. A useful example is that of Oswald Mosley, who went from being a Tory to a Fabian socialist inside the Labour Party, whose Keynesian-inspired 'Mosley manifesto' was backed by Aneurin Bevan, and who, when Labour failed to

back it, established the New Party, on his way to creating the British Union of Fascists.

The Tories' reactionary wing are reactionary in the true sense that they objectively want to turn the clock back, in respect of productive relations. Inside the party, they are not confronted by a 'progressive' wing, but by a conservative, social democratic wing. That is, a wing that seeks to conserve rather than overturn the existing productive and social relations. It seeks to conserve the dominant role of large-scale socialised capital within the economy, and recognises that in order to do so not only is a large social democratic state required, but that modern capitalism, and the multinational corporations, have long since burst asunder the constraints of the nation-state, necessitating the creation of larger economic structures, such as the EU.

These forces are conservative, rather than progressive, because they want to conserve the existing productive and social relations, rather than going beyond them. They want to retain the existing role of the owners of fictitious capital (shareholders) in exercising control of real capital, even though that imposes inevitable contradictions and limitations on the accumulation of real capital itself - limitations that could only be overcome, within the confines of capitalism, by the introduction of widespread industrial democracy, and control over the socialised industrial capital, by the associated producers, as Marx puts it in *Capital* volume 3.

To return to the main thrust of the discussion, I think very little of the concern of the half-million Labour members is driven by fear of the far right, and nor does much of it sink into a simple lesser-evilism between backing George Osborne as 'more progressive' than Rees-Mogg. I think those members are quite able to recognise that opposition to Brexit can be combined with the need to go beyond the limitations imposed by the conservative social democracy represented by either Osborne or Blair, which underpins the current ideology of the EU. Indeed, many of those members were also attracted to Labour by the progressive social democratic agenda that Corbyn was putting forward, and which could only be rationally achieved at an EU level.

But I also cannot help thinking that your position is itself determined by the position that the CPGB took during the referendum. The CPGB did not fall into the ludicrous camp of those proposing Lexit, who inevitably found their attempt at a distinctive voice drowned out by the reactionary forces promoting Brexit. But, in fact, the CPGB position, of arguing for an active abstention, was even more ludicrous, because if no-one could hear the Lexiteers certainly no-one could hear the CPGB's plaintive cries for an abstention, in what was probably the most significant political event of the last 30 years!

Arthur Bough
email

AWL scabs

In a pathetic little article on page two of the current issue of *Solidarity*, the absurdly titled paper of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Sacha Ismail complains that John McDonnell avoided the issue of 'left anti-Semitism' at the recent Labour Representation Committee conference, despite having said such accusations were not a smear on LBC radio.

I haven't listened to LBC radio, but I am quite prepared to accept that McDonnell did say this. If so he should be heavily criticised. This is not only wrong, but it is part of the catastrophic approach of Corbyn and his advisors to the whole false anti-Semitism witch-hunt. This acceptance of these bogus

charges has, more than anything else, weakened the Corbyn leadership. If Corbyn and McDonnell had stood up from the beginning and called them out for what they were - an attempt to use the Jewish community as cover for support for Israel - then the fake anti-Semitism attack could have been killed off before it grew legs.

At a time when the main propaganda weapon of the right is 'anti-Semitism', when the Parliamentary Labour Party is obsessed by the apparent lack of action over the issue, when rightwing Labour members are breaking from the Labour Party precisely over this issue and when Frank Field has used 'anti-Semitism' as his reason for resigning the Labour whip, the fact that it still hasn't dawned on the wooden heads of the AWL that these charges of 'anti-Semitism' are a ruling class narrative is proof, if any were needed, that the AWL is not a genuine socialist or leftwing group. Like many before them the AWL has capitulated to imperialism and maintained a fake militancy at home.

Not once has it condemned the vile, racist attacks on Jackie Walker - comments which reflect the mentality of white supremacism and the KKK. Unlike Luciana Berger, who received immediate police action when she received anti-Semitic comments, there has been no police or other action against the Zionist and fascist trolls who have tweeted that Jackie should be burnt alive or lynched. The AWL and Sacha Ismail are fully aware of the vile racism of Jackie's detractors, but they prefer to concentrate their fire on a non-existent 'left anti-Semitism'.

Not only is the AWL acting as the foot soldiers of the right within the Labour left, but they are actively complicit in the right's witch-hunt of Jackie. This began when Jill Mountford of the AWL and fellow traveller Michael Chessum voted in support of Jon Lansman's motion to remove Jackie as vice-chair of Momentum in October 2016. No sooner had the AWL scabbed on Jackie than Lansman put the knife into them!

The AWL's only other criticism of John McDonnell is that he failed to support members of the AWL who have also been expelled. I must confess that this seems to be the least of John's sins!

Tony Greenstein
Brighton

Value

We don't really have to wonder how Marx distinguished between use value, value and exchange value, because he expressed it in his response to Rodbertus and Wagner. Exchange value is merely the form value takes: in fact, as Marx says, it is wrong to speak of exchange value in the singular, because it only has meaning in comparing one commodity with another.

This is why I think Moshé Machover is wrong to assume that for Marx exchange value is particular to capitalism, while value is something that transcends all economic systems and all forms of labour (Letters, February 14). I think what Marx did was to define value as the measure and then define exchange value as the form and, as Marx says, "the 'commodity' is, on the one hand, use-value and, on the other, 'value', not exchange value, since the mere form of appearance is not its own content". So Marx doesn't split up these categories to show value spans all economic systems, but does it because you can't explain exchange value by its mere form. Which, I would say, is the correct scientific procedure.

Machover thinks only of production in his vision of communism and the application of value: he forgets about distribution

and consumption. His proposal is a bourgeois conception of value, in that value is determined purely by quantitative measures, but Engels makes the point that planning is not this crude: it has a qualitative aspect too. So who cares how many hours it takes to make a cruise missile? We simply are not going to make them - at least it would be hoped society arrives at this conclusion! Things will no longer rise and fall in the market place, but humanity will be involved in the plan, rather than being alienated from it. It won't matter how many hours of labour went into a house built by the sea. If there are houses by the sea the people who live in them won't be there because they are wealthy: no, those who live in them might be seamen or people with respiratory disease, etc.

You simply can't transplant bourgeois concepts like value into a communist society, which would be like comparing apples with dolphins. After all, it is a revolution we are fighting for!

Maren Clarke
email

Dialectics

Not an edition of the *Weekly Worker* goes by without a mention of dialectics - sometimes half a dozen times. What is this thing that Marxists are always banging on about, but which no one is able to describe, demonstrate or apply to anything?

If the dialectic is real, as I believe it is - and by 'real' I mean 'material' and knowable - then it should be possible to explain it in relation to that part of material reality where it is said to apply exclusively (society). The non-dialectical laws of nature - conservation of energy, Newton's laws, etc - are all applicable to nature. Natural science has the scientific method; Marxist dialectics so far only has a bag of aphorisms.

All Marxist works on dialectics are either a corrective rehash of Hegel with a few bits of Marx tagged on or are a medley of very abstract notions that don't serve any explanatory purpose. Apart from Marx's *Capital*, and his studies around it, I have yet to see dialectical analysis applied to anything - Engels' *Dialectic of nature* being a travesty of both dialectics and the laws of nature.

Susil Gupta
email

Materialism

In his letter of February 14, Ted Hankin misunderstands what I meant when I said: "Notoriously, one interpretation of Marxism is that it is 'historical materialism' or 'dialectical and historical materialism' - whatever these things mean" ('Tory interpretation of history', January 31). I am actually an advocate of a 'dialectical-historical materialism' interpretation of Marxism, though not a Hegelian one.

My point is merely that there is massive debate on the left - and not merely in the 'left' academy - about whether Marxism should be interpreted in this way and about what, if so, the expressions mean. The point of the sentence is also to set the issue of which interpretation is right on one side, because any interpretation which isn't 'post-modernist' or Foucaultian 'post-Marxism' will have to engage with concrete historical work. Any Marxism will hence have to fight against the teaching of Toryism in university and school history departments and the mass media. The big, media-manufactured outrage about John McDonnell calling Winston Churchill a "villain" is an immediate example of the latter.

Mike Macnair
email

OBITUARY

Explorations of inequality

Andrea Levy: March 7 1956 - February 14 2019



Ear for voices

Andrea Levy, who died of cancer on St Valentine's Day, was the chronicler of British-Caribbean diversity. This meant that not only did her novels explore *difference*, but *differences* within groups, including class and ideology. Her stories were not binary accounts of people in Britain and the colonies; nor were they simple celebrations of 'community' or 'multiculturalism'. She was a realist, comic and incisive.

Her parents came to Britain from Jamaica and her ancestry included Jewish and Scottish. Born in 1956, she lived and attended school in Highbury in London. She studied textile design at Middlesex Polytechnic and went on to work as a costume fitter at the BBC - despite being told that actors do not like 'being touched by black people'. While there, she first found herself confronted with choosing between her 'black' and 'white' side. Her novels are the answer to that question in the mixtures and divisions of post-1945 British society.

She took a creative writing course, but had problems getting her works published. In contrast to the attitude taken to US authors like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, publishers seemed to think there was limited market appeal for black British writers.

If the novel form is "polyphonic" (ie, many-voiced), as Mikhail Bakhtin said, Levy had an ear for voices that was acute. She would go on to write about ancestors, but she began by writing fiction about her own life. In *Every light in the house burnin'* (1994), she details the situation of a black family on a London housing estate in the 1960s; while *Fruit of the lemon* (1999) is a self-narrated tale of a young Afro-Caribbean Londoner and her many and varied relationships, including a visit to Jamaica.

Some time ago I presented a portion of the latter text to some writing students and they were rapt. Though all of them were white, it was obvious that it spoke to their young experience.

In the excerpt, Faith Jackson and her brother, Carl, go to buy a second-hand car in an area where the houses "looked like they were made of cream-coloured icing sugar". They find the house they are looking for and there is a car outside. Carl decides to have a look before they go in and Faith waits for him. Her narration continues:

... a man called down from the window of the house opposite. "Excuse me, what are you doing round that car?"

I looked up at the man and smiled: "We've just come to look

at it - it's for sale."

While I was speaking, Carl kept his head pressed firmly on the car window and hissed at me, "Don't tell him - nosy bastard. Let him mind his own business."

"Do you know the person whose car it is?" the man continued.

"We're just going inside," I said, and then I whispered, "Come on, Carl, let's go and ring the bell." Carl moved on to the back of the car and began looking at the exhaust pipe.

"Come on, Carl," I pleaded.

"Does the person who owns the car know what you are doing?" the man called.

"Tell him to mind his own business, nosy git," Carl said from the ground.

"Let's go now - come on. It might not even be this car."

"Excuse me, miss ... Miss ... I asked you a question."

Carl deliberately began to take his time.

There may be more poetic or dramatic passages and even funnier ones about such an encounter, but I doubt if they would be any more precise. Levy wryly pinpoints behaviour with an eye for the tensions and gestures associated with status and class.

By the way, later when the visitors do meet the car's owner inside the house, Carl proves himself a charming negotiator, who achieves a discount on the stated price. No stereotypes here about street-corner guys flying off the handle.

Next Levy went to the past; in fact to that great subject for, it seems, nearly every UK novelist - the 1940s, the war and after. In *Small island* (2004), set during 1948, each chapter is narrated by one of the four principal characters, all connected to one other. Two are new Caribbean arrivals, the married Gilbert and Shortens, while the other couple are their landlady, Queenie, and her husband, Bernard. Again the voices tell you most of what you need to know about this corner of Britain. On meeting Hortense, Queenie assures her: "I'm not like most. It doesn't worry me to be seen out with darkies."

As this is a chapter from Hortense's point of view, we get her unspoken reaction:

Now, why should this woman worry to be seen in the street with me? After all, I was a teacher and she was only a woman whose living was obtained from the letting of rooms. If anyone should be shy it should be I. And

what is a darkie?

The book won the Orange Prize for women's fiction and the Whitbread Book of the Year. In 2009 there was a BBC TV adaptation that turned out to be less brave than the book: Hortense was made a hero of aspiration, a role model - mostly clued-up already and reacting well to people who nudged her off the pavement and prevented her fulfilling her career. While she appeared heroic, the viewer lost much of what Levy had to show about the Britain of 1948.

Levy in her turn has been criticised by other black authors for not being 'representative' or 'feminist' enough. Yet she was never afraid of covering the differences of attitude between black characters, and their differing strategies in the face of racist and class discrimination. She covers 'shadism' too: the differences within black communities, where skin tone is often equated with status - the lighter, the posher.

In *The long song* (2010), which proved to be her last novel, Levy goes all the way back to a particular moment in the British empire - the transition between the slavery and post-slavery eras in Jamaica. This is not just a story about racialism, but the limitations placed on emancipation by a landowner's 'need' to extract rent and the economic coercion of a plantation, which the workers cannot afford to leave. They soon respond though - emancipated enough now to strike.

The principal character, a house servant called Miss July, finds herself having to disown the name her mother gave her and is involved in attractions to servant and master alike. The book won the 2011 Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction and was listed for the Man Booker Prize. It is an affecting narrative that is also a necessary contribution to a fuller sense of British history. It too was adapted by the BBC and was shown in December 2018, with Tamara Lawrance as July, Hayley Atwell as her initial owner and Lenny Henry (at first unrecognisable) in an acting *tour de force* as Godfrey, head of the house slaves. (The three episodes are still available on bbc.iPlayer.)

Andrea Levy developed her art from autobiographical questions of identity to an epic about differences and tensions within the capitalist empire of a sugar plantation. How many further explorations of character and inequality have we lost through her passing? ●

Mike Belbin

ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday February 24, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group: study of August Nimtz's *Lenin's electoral strategy from 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917*. This meeting: chapter 2 (continued): 'The elections begin'. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk and Labour Party Marxists: www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesday February 26, 6.30pm: Series of talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1. This meeting: 'Emerging patriarchy in the mythology of a previously egalitarian society'. Speaker: Cathryn Townsend. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: <http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

Stand Up To Racism

Saturday February 23, 10.30am to 5pm: Trade union conference, NEU, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Discuss, debate and organise against the far right on the streets and institutional racism in the workplace. Tickets £11.25 (£5.92). Organised by Stand Up To Racism: www.facebook.com/events/346086039308173.

No to Tommy Robinson

Saturday February 23, 11am: Counterdemonstration, BBC Studios, MediaCityUK, Salford M50. Oppose Robinson's rally against the BBC. Organised by Stand Up To Racism and Unite Against Fascism: www.facebook.com/events/384440585674753.

No war on Venezuela

Saturday February 23, 1pm: Protest, Bank of England, Threadneedle Street, London EC2. Stop Trump's gold and oil grab. Organised by Venezuela Solidarity Campaign: www.facebook.com/events/2054524831514889.

Our history

Tuesday February 26, 7pm: Meeting, first floor, The Wellington pub, 37 Bennetts Hill, Birmingham B2. 'The National Leftwing Movement: the Labour left in the 1920s'. Speaker: Lawrence Parker. Organised by Birmingham Socialist Discussion Group: ser14@btinternet.com.

Divest for justice

Saturday March 2, 9am to 6.30pm: Student conference, Resource for London, 356 Holloway Road, London N7. Build powerful divestment campaigns to end your university's investments in wrecking the climate, Israeli apartheid and the arms industry. Entrance £9.12 (£4.85). Organised by People & Planet and Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.facebook.com/events/352255422223287.

No Pasaran!

Saturday March 2, 9.30am to 5pm: International conference, Bloomsbury Central, 235 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2. Join activists from across Europe organising to confront the rise of the far right. Speakers include Diane Abbott MP and Tariq Ali. Tickets £5 (£0). Organised by Transform UK: <https://pruk.org/category/events>.

Britain is broken - we can't afford the Tories

Events in the People's Assembly nationwide speaking tour:
Saturday March 2, 2pm: Rally, Castle Square, Haverfordwest SA61. www.facebook.com/events/328809567975727.

Saturday March 2, 1.30pm: Rally, Friends Meeting House, 12 Jesus Lane, Cambridge CB5. www.facebook.com/events/1942011995907270.

Thursday March 14, 7pm: Public meeting, Eric Learie Constantine Centre, 43-47 Dudden Hill Lane, London NW10. www.facebook.com/events/259096488339852.

Blacklisted workers fighting for justice

Wednesday March 6, 5pm: Meeting, Houses of Parliament, London SW1. Marking the 10th anniversary of the blacklist being exposed. Organised by Blacklist Support Group: www.facebook.com/events/1060870900781324.

Campaign for Labour Party Democracy

Saturday March 9, 11.30am: AGM, Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1. To decide the CLPD's tactics and strategy for the forthcoming year. Entrance £3 in advance, £5 on the day (£2). Organised by CLPD: www.clpd.org.uk.

Youth Strike 4 Climate

Friday March 15, 11am: UK-wide (and global) student and school student demonstrations. Take direct action on the climate crisis and ecological catastrophe: System change, not climate change! Organised by UK Student Climate Network: www.facebook.com/events/1169886679841901.

UN Anti-racism Day demonstrations

Saturday March 16: Demonstrations to defeat the rise of racism and the far right, organised by Stand Up To Racism.

London: Route to be confirmed. www.facebook.com/events/2013107605418593.

Cardiff: Route to be confirmed. www.facebook.com/events/935115200024518.

Glasgow: Assemble 11 am, George Square, G2. www.facebook.com/events/2242706462615178.

Zionism Is Racism

Saturday March 16, 10.30am: Counterdemonstration, George Square, Glasgow G2. Protest against participation of Zionists in SUTR march. Organised by Zionism Is Racism: www.tinyurl.com/zirsign.

CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

LABOUR

Good riddance to bad rubbish

The formation of the Independent Group vindicates what the left has long been saying, writes **Peter Manson**. So called 'moderate' Labour MPs belong in another party

As everyone knows, on February 18, seven parliamentarians - Luciana Berger, Chuka Umunna, Chris Leslie, Gavin Shuker, Angela Smith, Ann Coffey and Mike Gapes - announced that they were forming the 'Independent Group' of MPs, and the next day they were followed by Joan Ryan. Then, on February 20, they were joined by three *Conservative* MPs: Anna Soubry, Sarah Wollaston and Heidi Allen.

But let me deal first with the Labour defectors. Typical was Ryan's statement: "I cannot remain a member of the Labour Party, while its leadership allows Jews to be abused with impunity and the victims of such abuse to be ridiculed, have their motives questioned and their integrity called into doubt." The others made similar claims, with Berger stating that since Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader Labour had become "institutionally anti-Semitic". In reality, what we have, of course, is not a situation where Jews are "abused with impunity", but one where rightwing Labour MPs - some of whom happen to be Jewish - are being criticised for their disloyalty.

For example, as far as I know, there is no evidence that any of the Wavertree Labour members supporting a motion of no confidence against Berger had made any anti-Semitic comments. She was targeted not because she is Jewish, but because of her refusal to commit to the party! Just before the original seven quit, a statement was being circulated on social media calling on all Labour MPs to pledge to work for a Labour government "under whatever leadership members elect". Reasonable, you might think. But Gavin Shuker complained that, by being approached in this way, he was being told to "completely obey and not question Great Leader Jeremy Corbyn".

However, while such responses are self-evidently pathetic, the media for the most part is behaving as though they are totally in order. For instance, on February 20, Radio Five Live featured a phone-in, where listeners were asked why they thought that prejudice against Jews was not being countered as rigorously as racism against black people - the assumption being, of course, that this was the attitude of the Labour leadership.

Yet no examples of actual anti-Semitism were given. A representative of the Jewish Labour Movement was asked to relate his own personal experience and he immediately came up with a comment directed against him at a recent Labour Party meeting: someone had responded to what he had said by stating that he was a "well-known Zionist"!

And what about deputy leader Tom Watson? He has declared that Berger was the "first casualty" of anti-Semitism and he "no longer recognises" his own party. Acting as though the eight were genuinely committed to 'Labour values', he complained that "There are those who are already celebrating the departure of colleagues with whom they disagree". Talk of "betrayal", he said, does nothing to help explain why "good colleagues" might want to leave Labour. He called on Corbyn to bring Labour back into the "mainstream tradition".

In other words, the party's number two is only just stopping short of saying that the eight were right to leave, because, following Corbyn's



Launch of SDP in 1981 allowed right to reassert control. It must not happen with latest split

election, 'Labour is no longer the party I joined'. Watson is clearly unfit to serve as deputy leader. But the real agenda is obvious. It is to prevent by any means possible the election of a Corbyn-led government in the interests of the establishment and British capital.

Just look at the statement promoted by the Independent Group at its launch press conference.¹ It does not take much reading between the lines to see what they are up to. They want to "pursue policies that are evidence-based, *not led by ideology*": we need to "reach across outdated divides". The "ideology" they are particularly opposed to, of course, is Corbyn's. After all, "Britain works best as a diverse, mixed social-market economy, in which well-regulated private enterprise can reward aspiration and drive economic progress." By contrast, Labour is now "hostile to businesses large and small; and threatens to destabilise the British economy in pursuit of ideological objectives". There is no "ideology" behind this blatant pro-capitalism, is there?

As for foreign policy, "We believe in maintaining strong alliances with our closest European and international

allies on trade, regulation, defence, security and counter-terrorism." Yet Labour "now pursues policies that would weaken our national security" and "accepts the narratives of states hostile to our country". In other words, Labour must remain firmly in the imperialist camp.

Centrist party

It was hardly an impressive launch, with each of the seven giving their own separate, often incoherent assessments of the way ahead. For the most part - unlike the Gang of Four, which split to form the Social Democratic Party in 1981 - they are nonentities.

But that does not mean they can just be written off. For example, that is exactly the implication in the *Morning Star* front-page headline - "The insignificant seven" (February 19). But Joan Ryan is only the first of a number of other Labour rightwing MPs likely to join them. Those said to be on the verge of quitting include Margaret Hodge, Louise Ellman, David Lammy and Ian Austin. As for Jess Phillips MP, who has also come under attack for failing to commit fully to the party, she "has had to put nine locks on her door out of fear

for her safety" (*The Daily Telegraph* February 19). Well, what can you say about behaviour that forces you to put nine locks on your door?

And when the Parliamentary Labour Party - meeting in the evening following the Independent Group's initial press conference - heard John Cryer, the PLP chair, "pay tribute" to the defectors, it reacted mostly with applause. But this response has hardly been countered by the leadership, with Corbyn himself saying he was "disappointed" the original seven had left and publicly thanking them for their past service to the party. As for John McDonnell, although he correctly stated that the defectors should now do the "honourable thing" by resigning as MPs and standing for re-election, he also bent over backwards before their accusations (particularly over 'anti-Semitism'), promising a "mammoth listening exercise".

We should not be misled by the relatively low profile of the original defectors. It is not only other Labour MPs who are considering joining them. In addition to Soubry, Wollaston and Allen, an unnamed minister and three other MPs are also said to be considering doing so. Of

course, it is not Corbyn's leadership of Labour that motivates the Tories, but their own government's stance on Brexit. If Theresa May presses ahead with a 'no deal', that will surely trigger a reaction of some kind - no doubt this has already been taken into account by the Independent Group following their prior discussions with such Tories.

The IG statement declares that, in addition to all its other shortcomings, Labour under Corbyn's leadership has "failed to take a lead in addressing the challenge of Brexit and to provide a strong and coherent alternative to the Conservatives' approach". This is a key motive in the thinking of those who want to form a new centrist party - stay in the European Union, possibly after a second referendum. It also no doubt figures prominently in the thinking of the likes of Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable, who is said to be considering stepping down to make way for a new centre party under a different leader after the local elections in May.

We should not underestimate the damage such a party could cause. It is not its electoral impact that should worry us though. Unless we are talking about a national government - far from impossible - a new centrist party will not sweep the board at the next general election. Indeed it would be lucky to retain the MPs it already has. No, it is the chilling effect that a rightwing split might have *within* the Labour Party. The cowardly statements coming from Corbyn and McDonnell do nothing to embolden the leftwing rank and file in the constituencies. But if anyone wants Jeremy Corbyn in No10 and John McDonnell in No11 committed to actually enacting the programme outlined in *For the many, not the few*, then the Parliamentary Labour Party has to be thoroughly renewed.

The careerists, the pro-Nato, pro-capitalist right must be deselected and replaced by candidates who are not only committed to defend Corbyn against the right, but who have a proven record as class fighters and are committed to genuine socialism.

Unless that happens, there are a numbers of dangers. Firstly, Corbyn could be nudged, bullied and forced ever further to the right - we have already seen his collapse over Trident renewal, his now Platonic republicanism, his criminal silence over the 'Anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism' witch-hunt. Secondly, the left in the constituencies could be lent on by the leader's office not to hold trigger ballots in order to avoid adding to the number of defectors. Thirdly, in the event of Corbyn rediscovering his left-reformist past, the present rightwing majority of Labour MPs will not give Corbyn the parliamentary vote of confidence the constitution requires in order to form a government. The monarch will be advised by the privy council to look at another figure in the House of Commons who *can* get a vote of confidence.

So the formation of the Independent Group needs to be turned from a warning that Labour will suffer further splits, if the left presses ahead with trigger ballots, into proof that the majority of sitting Labour MPs are traitors to the working class and ought to go - and go quickly ●

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Notes

1. www.theindependent.group/statement.

ISLAM

From Bethnal Green to Baghuz

Sajid Javid has stripped Shamima Begum of her British citizenship - but there is a steadfast refusal to understand why she left in the first place, writes Paul Demarty

Since Shamima Begum and her two classmates travelled secretly to Syria in 2015 - almost exactly four years ago, in fact - much has changed, in both her country of origin and her destination.

Britain has seen two general elections, the capture of one of its major parties by the anti-war left, the rise of the populist far right and the transfer of the prime minister's job to the woman who was then a hawkish home secretary, Theresa May. Britain, moreover, was successfully cajoled into a few token air strikes on Syria.

In the latter country, things have been far more grisly, of course. The women's abscondment took place at the beginning of a long, gruelling and ambiguous imperialist counter-offensive against Islamic State, after it achieved its greatest gain of territory on either side of the Iraq-Syria border the previous year. IS was choked, inch by bloody inch, into the small districts it continues to hold in south-east Syria, at extraordinary cost in lives, by American-backed Kurdish forces and Russian and Iranian backed government and other fighters, in two non-overlapping and fractious coalitions.

Begum and her friends went to join IS, and in particular to marry one of the 'young lions' fighting for a global caliphate. In her interview with *The Times*, she expressed no regrets about her decision, even as she detailed the horror of the last few years - the loss of two infant children to disease, the imminent birth of her second son (who has now been born) in a squalid refugee camp.

It is there that she was discovered by *Times* journalist Anthony Loyd, whose long interview with her is fascinating.¹ Begum and her two friends, Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase, joined a fourth woman, Sharmeena Begum (no relation), from their neighbourhood, who had already made it out to Syria (narrowly escaping apprehension by the security services). They immediately had marriages arranged to foreign fighters who had arrived from various countries around the world. Shamima Begum married a Dutch convert to Islam, Yago Riedijk.

As noted, the tide was *beginning* to turn against IS, but it would take years for the noose to really tighten, given the United States' bizarrely contradictory strategy in the region (arm Kurdish rebels to fight IS, arm Islamist rebels to fight Syrian president Bashar al-Assad - with the result that the arms ended up with IS; and prop up the Saudi regime, which in turn at least *leaked* material support to the 'caliphate'). Sultana was killed in a drone strike in Raqqa in 2016, while Riedijk found himself on the wrong side of his superiors, and was imprisoned and tortured for six months on suspicion of spying. When he was released, he was discharged from IS's fighting forces. The increasingly desperate situation in the territorial 'caliphate' claimed the lives, through disease and malnutrition, of the couple's two children. Begum states that the IS authorities, with Kurdish forces closing in on IS's last redoubt in the border town of Baghuz, offered all those there the choice to flee or stay. Pregnant again, she left, and ended up in Al-Hawl camp, where she has found a way to make herself known to the world.

Unease

As readers will know, home secretary Sajid Javid has announced that Begum is to be deprived of her British

citizenship despite having lived here all her life, and can thus be prevented from re-entering the UK. His excuse is that, since her parents were born in Bangladesh, she can be granted Bangladeshi citizenship and thus will not be made stateless.

Nevertheless, her story, and her appeal to be allowed to return, has struck a distinct note of unease in the British establishment, which in truth is in a poorer state than ever to receive it in good order. There is an aspect to the whole affair which simply scans as a heart-tugging human-interest story: a British woman, trapped in dangerous conditions overseas with a newborn baby, having lost two children already, begging for rescue. Yet this one is somewhat harder to swallow, due to the circumstances under which she left the country, and her refusal to adhere to the part of the script where she is supposed to say that she was brainwashed by evil fanatics and deeply regrets what she has done.

Her first words to Loyd, apparently, were "I'm not the same silly little 15-year-old schoolgirl who ran away from Bethnal Green four years ago, and I don't regret coming here." She has expressed regret about her sojourn in Syria, but not enough, and not of the right kind, for the professionally employed counter-jihadist types of the British state core. She grieves for her children. She regrets that she *did not have the strength to stay* in Baghuz - the two remaining girls apparently did:

I was weak ... I could not endure the suffering and hardship that staying on the battlefield involved. But I was also frightened that the child I am about to give birth to would die like my other children if I stayed on ... [The others] were strong. I respect their decision. They urged patience and endurance in the caliphate and chose to stay behind in Baghuz. They would be ashamed of me if they survived the bombing and battle to learn that I had left.

So far as her regrets impinge politically on the IS regime, they are equivocal: "There was so much oppression and corruption that I don't think they deserved victory," she told Loyd; *not* that armed Islamism is doomed to such outcomes. (We are reminded of the more grim-faced

prophets of the Hebrew scriptures - Jeremiah, for instance - who attribute military defeats to Israel's infidelity to Yahweh, but promise future glory when obedience to His law is restored ...) The 'silly little girl' has not been disillusioned of her world outlook, in spite of all the hardship. Which is hardly surprising, really: she was perfectly happy to watch videos of beheadings and massacres beforehand. She ran *towards the violence*, not away from it, and can hardly have expected sunshine and lollipops at the other end.

Her instinct was to steel herself against it in the name of a higher cause; but the demands were too great - "I was weak." In another interview, she was asked if she had made a mistake when she travelled to Syria:

In a way yes, but I don't regret it because it's changed me as a person, it's made me stronger, tougher. I married my husband. I wouldn't have found someone like him back in the UK. I had my kids, I did have a good time there, then things got harder and I couldn't take it any more and had to leave.²

The problem, then, is that she is a little too much like us, or like we might be if we had lived through the terrors of war. For all her strident jihadism, there is something bizarrely in keeping with the English self-image of pluckiness in adversity, the spirit of the Blitz - except with the US airforce in place of the Luftwaffe. She is not a damsel in distress, exactly, waiting to be saved by generous-hearted politicians; but she does not quite match up to our demonic stereotype of the Islamist militant, screaming a final curse, as he ploughs into a crowd or detonates a suicide belt.

So the immediate political question is whether she should be allowed to return; and if so, what sort of homecoming it will be. It is politics of the low sort which is determinant here. Begum certainly has the legal right to return - she is a British citizen, and has not taken up citizenship in some other recognised polity (the IS 'caliphate' certainly being nothing of the sort). With the Tories in chaos, however, and home secretary Sajid Javid among many hoping to replace Theresa May *from the right*, the stage is set for a great deal of securocratic scaremongering. He threatened Begum with unspecified "consequences" if she returned, for supporting terrorism, while acknowledging that she and her child were entitled to do so. Wherever a threat remained, he promised, he would

obstruct the return of defeated jihadists.

We wonder idly, also, who was behind the leak of a large amount of police material on another young woman from the same east London circles - who cannot be named - but who was lifted *en route* to Syria (in fact, on the same plane as Sharmeena Begum, who was missed). *The Times* described the sort of thing found at her residence: "plans of a government building among a plethora of extremist material, including Isis propaganda that portrayed killings."³

Motive

By such means we circle back to the initial question that dogged the great and the good back in 2015 - what makes a teenage overachiever throw in her lot with a crew like IS? So far as Loyd is capable of addressing the issue, it is with rather ham-fisted editorialisation:

Her words remained equally harsh when describing the videos she had seen of the beheaded western hostages. "Journalists can be spies too, entering Syria illegally," she said, mouthing Isis propaganda in the manner of an indoctrinated devotee. "They are a security threat for the caliphate."

Stubbornly he clings to the idea that she has been brainwashed, no matter how flagrantly absurd the idea is. (On this particular point - *aren't* journalists sometimes spies? Surely the British paper of record has some *quid pro quo* with the security services - unless standards have truly slipped since its pomp.) Begum grew up in a Muslim family, sure - but in a wider environment (east London) of enormous diversity. She attended a mainstream school. 'Brainwashing' and 'indoctrination' implies isolation from wider society. Instead, the 'silly little 15-year-old girls', considering IS propaganda against the competing doctrines of British patriotism and liberalism, *chose it*.

And so, as always, the hand-wringing of the state and liberal establishment about the spread of extremism paradoxically serves as a source of *comfort*. In descending to the level of a hunt for the Satanic tempter (or, in this case, temptress - the 'indoctrinator' is alleged to be Scottish jihadist Aqsa Mahmood), the worthies of the establishment turn their faces away from the mirror, and the disfigurements thereby revealed. They are absolved from taking seriously Begum's comparison, derided in the peanut galleries of the press, between the terror attack in Manchester and the bombardment of Raqqa, as if she somehow did not know what she was talking about, as if she was not *there* and did not lose Sultana, a close friend and comrade, to the tender mercies of American ordnance. They do not have to consider the effect of decades of ever more intrusive surveillance of young Muslims, of the Prevent strategy; and moreover, that these things - imperialist atrocity and domestic oppression - are the central themes of militant Islamist propaganda. The propaganda-savvy IS knew the great lesson of all demagogues and manipulators: why lie when you can tell the truth?

It is also to miss the *positive* appeal. The assumption is that the solipsistic enjoyment of material comfort in a middle class stratum of a first-world country ought really to be enough

for anyone; that the banal freedom of consumerism offers sufficient satisfaction to the soul. But humans by their nature solidarise with others; that instinct will find a way. Militant Islamism is a perverted form of internationalism - a great struggle for the fate of the world. Even the ultra-constricted gender roles promoted by Islamist ideologues have their appeal (these young women went to Syria to *demand* an arranged marriage!), for they counterpose to *liberal* philistine views of human nature an alternative reaching more deeply into people's lives.

That, of course, is only half the story; and the establishment worthies are equally not lying when they denounce IS as a vile gang of mass murderers, rapists and desecrators of humanity's cultural heritage. There is a vast gulf between the self-consciousness of militant Islamism and its reality. It promises to unite humanity, but it is scarcely imaginable that ostentatiously cruel religious warfare can do such a thing. It cannot even unite more than a tiny fraction of Muslims, great swathes of whom are denounced by the insular Wahhabi doctrines of the likes of IS as dangerous heretics, and the rest of whom have no appetite for an endless, unwinnable war against everyone else. So far as the 'IS brides' go, there is what you would call a performative contradiction, whereby a life of total submission to men is chosen in a way that *only* a person educated beyond the level thought appropriate by IS's patriarchalism could.

By way of a conclusion, communists certainly stand by Begum's right to return to the UK, as we stand for free movement in general, and oppose the chauvinist agitation of Tory demagogues. Should she be charged with serious crimes, of which she may - for all we know - be reasonably suspected, she should face a public trial in front of a jury, not under the ever more opaque instruments imposed on us all by a creeping security state.

If she goes free, she *may* be reabsorbed into the militant Islamist subculture; in that capacity she will be an enemy of the workers' movement in some small way - someone engaged in diverting dissent in the popular classes towards extreme reaction. Her crew, moreover, will not be the only one doing that kind of thing; the white majority has its own 'tempters', like the Gerard Batten-Tommy Robinson incarnation of Ukip and the multiplying sects of the far right, not to say a few *Christian* fundamentalist outfits profiting from general social dislocation.

The left, of course, once had its *own* sense of universal mission and its designs on reshaping everyday life; but the oxygen seems to have been sucked out of us, and narrow economism reigns (with a few shreds of identity politics borrowed from the liberals). With such a meagre armoury, and such a weak cutting edge against the state order, the fight will be punishingly difficult against the blue-sky thinkers of reaction ●

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Notes

1. www.thetimes.co.uk/article/shamima-begum-bring-me-home-says-bethnal-green-girl-who-fled-to-join-isis-hgvqw765d/
2. www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/shamima-begum-you-should-have-sympathy-for-me-bc-fr6q6pq.
3. Ibid.



Shamima Begum: not contrite

RUSSIA

A convenient enemy

Hillel Ticktin delves beneath the propaganda to reveal what is really driving the friction between Russia and the west



To understand the current relations with Russia we have to understand the present global situation. The poisoning of a former Russian spy in Salisbury in March 2018 was attributed, by the government and the media, to Vladimir Putin. From the way the newspapers reported it, you might conclude he ordered it personally. But it is quite clear that nobody in Britain really knows who actually did the ordering.

Putin was shown on TV calling Sergei Skripal, the former KGB officer, a “*padonok*”, which seemed to support the view that he had no regrets. The Russian word implies that he was the lowest of the low, the dregs. Perhaps Putin did order his assassination, but other Russians were killed in the UK

earlier, like former secret service officer Alexander Litvinenko, and there was not the same scandal. Policy had changed in the UK, as well as in Russia.

However, in the Skripal case, although the government could not possibly know exactly who was responsible, it took a very strong anti-Russia stand. So the real issue is: why was Britain driven into a semi-warlike state with Russia at the time? The answer is connected to the global political economy - or, to put it another way, the political economy of the American empire. That is to say, the reason for the semi-warlike state was to establish what amounts to a means of stability within the global American hegemonic form. It did, in part, achieve that stability.

What is clear is that since the end

**Vladimir Putin:
has his own Russian
Orthodox chaplain
living next door to him**

**Russia:
a state with a security
apparatus, or a security
apparatus with a state?**

of the Soviet Union the break-up of its territories left Russia in a state where it has a GDP less than that of Italy. If you look at other figures - numbers in the army, weapons and so forth - it is a fraction of what the Soviet Union was. The one thing that it does have is atomic weapons, and it is worth commenting on their role.

It is possible for a country like the United States, Russia, Britain or China to eliminate an enemy, provided they can actually get to them. But the number of countries with ballistic missiles is limited - the US and Russia have most of them - so it really amounts to those two countries. Russia does not have the economy to support the constant updating and improving of these ballistic missiles, but I do not think that really makes much difference: after all, it can destroy the world

anyway, as things stand.

Of course, the idea of despatching an atomic weapon to another country is not a straightforward one - even for the various nutcases who have been in the White House. Not just because it would not look good, but because once either side starts doing that, they not only destroy their enemy, but very quickly destroy the entire world. Consequently there probably never was a situation in the cold war where either side would actually have launched a nuclear bomb - in spite of the fact that the propaganda always said that they would. If you look at the discussion over Cuba, for instance, Nikita Khrushchev had supposedly given orders to send over an atomic bomb if such and such had happened. But that does not ring very true - the United States could then have dispatched ballistic



missiles which would have wiped out the Soviet Union very quickly, so it does not make much sense. (Unless Khrushchev had decided to give such an order, knowing it would not be carried out. But that is something else.)

The point of all this is that, although America and Russia have most of the ballistic missiles and atomic bombs in the world, they are highly unlikely to use them. The fact that the two sides are now discussing low-key atomic weapons supports this idea. In other words, they are discussing developing atomic weapons which don't destroy too much - a crazy scenario, but that is what is happening. So, although an atomic war is possible, it is very unlikely - even the use of low-level weapons is somewhat unlikely. The fact that Russia has atomic weapons is likely to ensure that no such weapons will be dropped on it, and it is unlikely to drop them on anyone else.

Economy

That is not really the issue. We have to look at what Russia really is, for Russia is not the Soviet Union. Putin, it seems, has a mystical advisor - his chaplain, who lives next door. He is, apparently, a Christian, who also believes in some sort of mad mysticism. But Putin is hardly a great enemy of capitalism. After all, what exists in Russia today is a form of capitalism - Russia is very much part of a transitional world. If you read International Monetary Fund reports, they seem to begin and end with advice to Russia to privatise everything, otherwise it cannot be efficient. You would, of course, expect them to say that.

The state plays a considerable role in the Russian economy, both directly and through state-influenced or state-controlled enterprises and sectors. When Putin was elected he renationalised some sectors. I say all this to give some understanding of why Russia may be an enemy, according to western governments, but it is in fact a very weak enemy (and may not really be an enemy at all). Or it may be that they need to have an enemy - or perhaps Russia itself likes being regarded in that way. But in reality what kind of an enemy is it?

Russia's economy was effectively ruined in the 1990s and has never picked up. That is not just true of Russia, but of eastern Europe too. Privatisation resulted in attempts by various individuals to establish themselves in an environment where they could be as rich as possible. And, of course, there are in Russia various so-called oligarchs. I think it was an IMF report which pointed out that something like half of its GDP comes from outside Russia. In other words, the 'oligarchs', by various devious and what otherwise would be illegal means, have acquired wealth that has been exported to the west and is now in various havens. A very considerable portion of Russian GDP has been exported and continues to be exported. In fact it is easy for people to take their money out of Russia - it is a very peculiar state in that respect.

Britain is a particular haven for Russian wealth. Various governments have decided that is a good idea for the 'prosperity of Britain'. And, of course, it worked: the balance of payments did improve somewhat as a result. But the media have made quite a thing of it and the present government is now 'checking up' on these guys, we are told.

And, of course, the United States is targeting a group of people of this kind on the grounds that they are the people who really run Russia. Now it is true that it is impossible to believe Russia is run just by Putin - which is the way it is put. Whenever you read anything about what is

happening in Russia, it begins with Putin, with something that he says. His biography, written by Masha Gessen,¹ is useful in one respect: it makes it rather clear that Putin is hardly highly educated or skilled and certainly not some kind of genius able to run Russia all by himself.

It looks like he came to power with the aid of a section of the former KGB - that is what is implied in Gessen's book and elsewhere. Apparently they decided that enough was enough, that the mess that had been created by Boris Yeltsin had to be dealt with. So a group of influential figures backed Putin for president.

The point being that Russia is a country very much controlled by the Federal Security Service (FSB), the KGB's successor. *The Economist* has claimed that for the last two years or so all state departments have been run by the FSB - the whole state is run by the secret police. Presumably they are put in charge because they are regarded as less corruptible and more subject to orders than other people.

So this is a very peculiar state. Quite clearly it cannot last very long in its current form. Apart from the various election farces, there is the fact that Russia is ruled by a group of people whom we don't really know. One person who did try to make something of it was Mikhail Khodorkovsky.² He said there was a circle of something like 100 people around Putin who were basically in charge of everything, which is probably true. Obviously the secret police plays a crucial role.

In the 1990s the Russian economy was virtually destroyed. In principle it could have been reconstructed through the oligarchs taking over and then expanding and developing the economy as a capitalist entity in competition with other states. But the United States would not allow it - they did not want Russian businessmen to buy out various firms in the west.

With China there is some accommodation: the US will not allow China to buy up certain firms in certain countries, but elsewhere it has done so: a deal was struck in 2000. In the case of Russia this was not permitted and so Russia could not actually develop. The US was not in favour of helping it develop. It wanted Russia to become a subordinate power: ie, effectively part of the US empire.

Of course, the term 'empire' is not usually used in relation to the United States, but it correctly describes the way the world exists today. It is very clear that if any other country, or firms from any other country, want to break into the world market they effectively have to have permission to do so. If the US does not like it, well, that's the end of it. The world market is dominated by the United States and a small number of associate countries, which Donald Trump is doing his best to destroy - which gives an indication of why Trump will not last very long.

The essential point is that the way the oligarchs made their money was by gaining access to state assets - and then running them down to a point where today the crucial assets are merely raw materials. In terms of industry Russia is not even a second-rate power. It is extremely weak in economic terms. That is what the IMF says - and then goes on to complain that in Russia there is too much state control. But it is not state control that has done the damage. However, without changing the mode of production to full capitalism - or alternatively to a socialist mode - Russia is simply not going to develop.

Repercussions

There remains within the workforce an attitude that lingers on from the Soviet Union. In the USSR no-one wanted to

work, as everybody knows, and the level of productivity was very low. And it is still very low - Russia is totally uncompetitive in the world market. That could be changed if there was a process of integration with the assistance of developed capitalism, but developed capitalism does not want it. It wants Russia to remain part of its market as a subordinate power.

It is that relationship which is causing the friction. What Russia is trying to do is hold on to what it has. So, if you look at eastern Ukraine, it was based on the industrial structure of the Soviet Union and is closely related to Russia itself. And it remains integrated with Russia today. It is not an accident therefore that there was an uprising in eastern Ukraine (although Ukrainian is the national language, everyone also speaks Russian and a significant minority are primarily Russian-speaking).

So it is hardly surprising that, given the nature of the Russian form of capitalism, Ukraine was seen as being targeted for a takeover by the west. It was even proposing to join the European Union. The Russian hierarchy knew that such a development would leave them in a considerably worse position - and that has turned out to be the case, even though they fought against it as hard as they could.

Although, of course, one has to uphold the independence of Ukraine against Russian intervention, it is very hard to support any government in the Ukraine, given that today it honours Stepan Andriyovych Bandera, who collaborated with Nazi Germany. Of course, it is not surprising that such developments occurred in the former Soviet Union, but the left can hardly support them.

This relates to the chaos we see in all the countries of the former Soviet Union. And, of course, today Russia has various relationships to those other territories. In Tajikistan the Russians fought against the Islamists and still have troops there. There is a close relationship between the two states. Russian space rockets are launched from Tajikistan. It is part of the Russian sphere of influence which the United States is trying to squeeze.

So inevitably there is conflict. If the United States were not a predatory power, it would have incorporated Russia. But it does not attempt to do so. However, the US is in decline and today it is not able to incorporate states in the way that it previously incorporated Germany, Japan and South Korea.

Instead Russia is judged to be an enemy. Yes, the United States is an imperial power and Russia is an inferior state which is regarded as having been defeated. But logically it does not make sense. Here you have the US and Russia, both headed by ostensibly Christian presidents, so why can't they just get together? Why are they fighting?

What we have is a declining American power which does not fully know its own interests and is unable to sort out what it could do in order to succeed in incorporating Russia. But, there again, if the US has an empire, doesn't it actually need an enemy? The cold war was ideal for maintaining and building the American empire, even though the USSR even then was not really the enemy of the United States - a point made by many standard studies on the nature of the Soviet Union.

If you read the works of George Kennan, a US diplomat and historian who wrote extensively on the USSR, although he was writing from the point of view of a supporter of the market and US capitalism, he was well aware of the Soviet Union's weaknesses. He knew it was hardly likely to 'take over the world'. He argued that it was a 'status quo power' and the west should treat it

in that way. Kennan was not in any sense leftwing, and his view became a kind of standard for many scholars in the field.

So, if the Soviet Union was a 'status quo power', why then the cold war? As an empire, the US needed an enemy who was out to destroy it, to frighten its own citizens into giving their support. So the USSR was portrayed in propaganda terms as being of that character.

In the time of Stalin that was perhaps understandable. After all, what Stalin did was so extreme that he will go down as probably the worst killer in history. But what succeeded him was not like that - Khrushchev did not organise massacres. His programme after 1956 was social democratic, so why was the USSR still portrayed as such an enemy?

Why did they need the cold war? The Soviet Union was unlikely to conquer anybody - in fact by this time the USSR was against communist parties taking power. The answer, of course, is that an empire - particularly in the present day - needs an enemy against which it can unite its different components. Therefore we have to build up our own army, we have to build up our defences, we have to maintain a form of censorship ... And, of course, it worked.

Threat

That is one of the main reasons why today the 'Russian threat' is still talked up. It is not that Russia is not ruled by a dictatorial regime, where if anyone steps out of line they risk severe repercussions. When I was in Russia under Putin several years ago, I was made aware of leftwing activists who had been arrested and killed by the secret police.

So there is no question that from our point of view the Russian regime is an opponent which we have to fight. But we should oppose the talk of it being an enemy of the United States. Such a regime is *our* enemy - just as the United States is too.

In other words, to understand why Russia has been turned into an enemy we have to understand the American empire. Firstly, the US needs an enemy and, secondly, the United States itself is in decline. I do not think there is any other way in which you can explain why Trump is promoting this particularly stupid attitude towards Russia.

That attitude is ideological - although that does not necessarily apply to eastern Europe too. Here there has also been

deindustrialisation - which is why so many could not get a job at home and had to come to Britain to pick strawberries. That is the result of this process whereby, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, industry has been liquidated.

However, America is, of course, not the first empire which did not like it when it had competition and which ensured that its own companies remained on top by any means necessary. We have to understand that the world we are in today is one in which the United States is the global superpower. And the most potent global power is financial. When the United States abandoned the gold standard in the early 1970s, its replacement as the global standard was the dollar. Today the Chinese are finding it very difficult to promote their own currency internationally, precisely for that reason: because of their interaction with the United States. True, the IMF has made some sort of concession to them, but in general the world standard in money terms is most certainly the dollar. And that is one of the major features of US global control.

The problem with a gold standard is that gold does not automatically maintain the same value. Over the last 20 years it has increased from a few hundred dollars to \$2,000. However, while speculators might buy gold in the hope it will appreciate, things may go the other way. That is why many regard it as more reliable to stock up in dollars, which is what in fact is happening. This gives the United States enormous power, and, of course, Russia is subject to that as well.

To conclude: the current relationship between the United States and Russia or between Britain and Russia has more to do with the global American empire than with, say, the attempted assassination of a former KGB operative - that is simply an excuse. They have invented an enemy, even though that enemy is against the working class and in favour of capitalism. The essential point is that although it is a seeming paradox, it makes quite a lot of sense in a world where we are given a series of false explanations and the real action is hidden from view ●

Notes

1. M Gessen *The man without a face: the unlikely rise of Vladimir Putin* New York 2012.
2. See *Newsnight* interview: https://youtu.be/EA8x_ozvtqo.

Fighting fund

Now's the time

As I wrote last week, I was a little "apprehensive" about the size of the deficit in our fighting fund, given that we had only raised £470 towards our February target of £1,750, with exactly half the month gone.

What a contrast with this week, when we got almost exactly twice the amount that came our way in the first two. To be precise, we received no less than £930 in just seven days! The main reason for that is - as regular readers will know - that our most generous donors seem to have chosen week three for their monthly standing orders.

Three of those SOs exceed £100 (thanks to KB, PM and SK), while there are also generous contributions from MM (£75), TB (£50) and TR (£40). In fact those standing orders alone accounted for £785 this week. In addition

there were two £50 donations - while RG sent in a cheque for that amount, JC made a bank transfer, which was referenced "The shortest month"! Finally, three comrades clicked on that PayPal button - thanks go to VD (£25), MN and RS (£10 each).

So our running total now stands at exactly £1,400, with one week to go. In other words, the *Weekly Worker* still needs £350 if we're going to make that target. Yes, I know we won't be getting much by way of SOs, but what about all those regular readers who occasionally chip in with a few pounds? Now might be the time! ●

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

ITALY

Recession and xenophobia

Toby Abse reports on the latest shenanigans of the right-populist government - and the stirrings of organised working class opposition



Italy has now entered its third recession in a decade. The first and most dramatic of these came as a direct consequence of the global financial crisis of 2008. The second resulted from the euro zone crisis of 2011, and the hard-line austerity policies pursued by Mario Monti's technocratic government that followed in its wake. Significantly, however, the latest one coincides with the first two full quarters of Giuseppe Conte's M5S/Lega government (July-September and October-December 2018) - a government which came into office on June 1 2018.

Before the second set of negative growth figures - those for the October-December period - were announced on January 31, M5S deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio was making absurd statements about a new Italian boom based on the digital economy, which would parallel the Italian 'Economic Miracle' of 1958-63, and a number of leading M5S and Lega ministers had expressed extreme irritation with economics minister Giovanni Tria for his relatively cautious warning about 'stagnation', rather than contraction, in the Italian economy. Now, the right-populist government seeks to put much of the blame for Italy's recession on external factors; the rest, of course, is placed on its immediate predecessors, the Partito Democratico-led government of Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni.

Since the latter contention has about as much credibility as David Cameron persistently blaming the world economic crisis on reckless overspending by Gordon Brown, I will confine my detailed analysis to the former claim.¹ It is, of course, true that the growth rates of the euro zone as a whole are weakening: the overall

figures for the last two quarters of 2018 were both a miserable 0.2% (compared with 0.7% for the comparable months in 2017). The German economy is slowing down, narrowly escaping recession in the second half of last year, while there is slower growth in China and the beginnings of a US-China trade war are having some negative impact (even if some might argue that as yet this is more to do with widespread worries about the future than the direct effect of tariffs in the present).

However, despite the superficial attraction of this line of argument, emphasising global trends, these claims by Italian governmental apologists are not quite as convincing an explanation as they might seem at first sight. For example, it is noticeable that Italian exports actually increased in the last quarter of 2018, while internal demand contracted. There

**European Commission:
determined not to
compromise the euro**

**Matteo Salvini eager to
rile French government
at every opportunity**

is now a credit crunch in Italy, which is bound to reduce disposable income and impact negatively on production for the domestic market. Whilst the populist demagogues made light of the increase in the 'Spread' - the gap between the interest rates on German and Italian government bonds - during the summer and autumn of 2018, an increase in the interest rates on Italian sovereign debt (much of which is held, in the form of government bonds, by Italian banks) led to a rise in domestic interest rates on both mortgages and loans to businesses. Although the 'Spread' has gone down below the 300 mark, around which it was floating during the months when the populists were at loggerheads with the European Commission over the so-called 'People's Budget', the damage was already being done.²

Moreover, since the euro zone as a whole is not in recession, the European Central Bank - which decided months ago to abandon the quantitative easing that its director, Mario Draghi, had pursued for some years in order to stabilise the euro zone as a whole - is not likely to pursue a renewed expansionary policy purely for the benefit of Italy. That is especially so, given the German bankers' grumbles about Draghi persisting with such a

broadly Keynesian policy for as long as he did.³ In passing, it has to be pointed out that the recent collapse of the Genovese Savings Bank has drawn the ECB into paying more attention to the weaknesses of the Italian banking system - not exactly good news from the Italian government's point of view, particularly if it is forced into a second bail-out of the Monte dei Paschi di Siena Bank.

People's Budget

Italy's return to recession is important, not just because it may eventually erode the current consensus behind the M5S/Lega government⁴, but also because of its relevance to the implementation of the 'People's Budget'. The long-running feud between the Italian populist government and the European Commission over the 'People's Budget'⁵ was eventually resolved in early December, and the budget legislation was finally, and very hastily, passed by both houses of the Italian parliament in the closing days of 2018, reaching president Sergio Mattarella for signature a few hours before the new year's eve deadline.

Whilst Tria, as an academic economist without any strong party allegiance, had long advised his political masters that it would be sensible to reach a compromise - rather than to risk the Commission starting an infraction procedure against Italy that could potentially put the Italian economy under external control for years - Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio derive far too much pleasure from hurling crude insults at the commissioners to pay much attention. Eventually, M5S premier Giuseppe Conte, whose earlier career as an academic lawyer allowed him to see



the merit of negotiation, adopted Tria's line, without giving the economist any credit for it, and belatedly persuaded the two demagogues to calm down.

The Italian government continued to make a fetish of the exact figure of their projected budget deficit, reducing it to 2.04% from the contentious 2.4%, instead of going down to 2% - or ideally 1.9%, as the Commission would have preferred. Given M5S's cavalier approach to figures, which makes UK Brexiters look like pedantic accountants, I have no hesitation in suggesting that the figure of 2.04% was plucked out of thin air. Nonetheless, the end result was effectively a climbdown, knocking billions off the sums available for the Lega's new pension scheme and the M5S 'Citizens' Income' project.

Since the December compromise was based on a projected 2019 growth rate in the Italian economy of at least 1%, and the latest - probably optimistic - Bank of Italy forecast is 0.6% (whilst on February 6 the European Commission lowered its own forecast to a pitiful 0.2%), it is more than likely that by the summer the government will either have to introduce a second, emergency, mini-budget⁶ or risk another showdown with the Commission, since the size of both the budget deficit and the national debt are related in percentage terms to the size of Italy's GDP.⁷ However, Di Maio and Salvini seem totally incapable of thinking beyond the May 26 European elections, and just hope that their pet schemes will yield a rapid electoral dividend, even if they prove financially unsustainable in the longer run. In order to square the circle for the current calendar year, it looks as if the 'Citizens' Income' will only be paid in March at the very earliest, whilst those who already have the requisite qualifications for the improved pension will have to wait some months before actually receiving any money, and - needless to say, given the cost to the government - those in the state sector will have to wait longer than retirees in private-sector employment.

The fundamental lack of seriousness behind the 'People's Budget' became glaringly obvious during the panic-stricken parliamentary proceedings in late December. Every now and then, there had to be an unexpected break in the sittings, so that a new text could literally be pasted and rapidly photocopied on parliamentary premises, in a bid to correct blatant grammatical and arithmetical errors. Even more farcically, some errors had to be corrected verbally, as some portions of the text had been read out to the parliamentarians, since time constraints prevented the speedy creation of hard copies. Needless to say, there was no proper debate, no time to take amendments and many parliamentarians subsequently admitted they had not even been able to read, let alone understand, what they were voting on.

Unlike Westminster, with its extremely laid-back approach to Brexit, the Italian parliament's 2018 Christmas break was reduced to December 25-26, and sittings took place on both Saturdays and Sundays, sometimes into the early hours - which gave rise to widely publicised photographs of legislators fast asleep. The centre-left PD senators attempted to bring a legal action against the government for not allowing a proper debate, but the judiciary was not inclined to annul the budget. Roberto Fico, the M5S speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, was slightly embarrassed, given his acute awareness of the very numerous occasions on which M5S

deputies had vociferously complained about the PD using parliamentary guillotines or votes of confidence to push through bills without much discussion. He was, if anything, even more authoritarian than his Forza Italia counterpart in the upper house.

Social spending

In view of the tendency of some commentators on the 'People's Budget' (eg, *The Guardian's* Larry Elliott) to take the side of the populists and demonise the European Commission,⁸ and of others (eg, most journalists writing for *Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* in Italy, and the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* in the UK) to take an orthodox, neoliberal, pro-austerity line on social spending, something needs to be said about the substance of the 'People's Budget' - in so far as we have detail on the main measures proposed. It should go without saying that certain measures - like the so-called 'fiscal peace' (ie, tax amnesty), and the flat tax, the latter of which so far only applies to self-employed professionals (eg, lawyers and dentists) - are thoroughly regressive and reactionary, reducing state revenue and increasing the gap between rich and poor.⁹

The new pension scheme - the so-called Quota 100 - is good as far as it goes and partially (I would emphasise, *extremely* partially) reverses the appalling Fornero law of 2012, with its ever-increasing retirement age (currently 67, but linked to the average expectation of life). Quota 100 is automatically reached by anybody aged 62 who has paid 38 years of pension contributions. However, those of the relevant age but without the requisite years of contribution will not benefit. On the whole the beneficiaries will be male northerners with a record of continuous legal employment in large workplaces, whereas women are more likely to have had their careers interrupted by childcare and other family responsibilities, and will thus fail to clock up the required 38 years.

Obviously anybody, male or female, who has suffered long periods of unemployment will not qualify. Unemployment is more prevalent in the south, as is the tendency of small employers to dodge pension contributions by paying workers cash in hand.¹⁰ To take a classic example, it is unlikely that a 62-year-old building worker will have 38 years' worth of contributions, given the probability both of periods of unemployment and of periods working for unscrupulous employers in the black economy, which is particularly prevalent in the construction industry.

The 'Citizens' Income' scheme is even more complicated. The one thing it certainly ought not to be described as is the universal basic income (UBI) - so beloved of both autonomists and some sectors of the 'libertarian' right. Whilst one variant of the scheme is directed at those past official retirement age in the form of a 'Citizens' Pension', which arguably could be seen as a type of UBI, for the majority of recipients the 'Citizens' Income' is really a form of jobseeker's allowance. Anybody who turns down three offers of allegedly suitable work will lose the benefit. The first job offer has to be within 100 kilometres of the recipient's official place of residence, the second can be anywhere within 250 kilometres, but the third can be anywhere in Italy!¹¹ If the recipient has not gained employment within 18 months, the benefit lapses for a month, during which time a detailed assessment will be made to determine whether the person still qualifies under the rules.

Whilst M5S propaganda originally, and very misleadingly, spoke of a 'Citizens' Income' of €780 per month, it has become clear in the course of time that the basic payment

is €500 per month, with a maximum of €280 being allocated for rent if the recipient is a tenant. M5S leader Di Maio proclaimed in September 2018 that the 'Citizens' Income' was designed to eliminate 'absolute poverty'. The Ufficio Parlamentare di Bilancio (roughly equivalent to the UK Office for Budget Responsibility) has calculated that 6.9% of all Italian households are in 'absolute poverty', yet only 5% would qualify for 'Citizens' Income'!

And there is a systematic discrimination against foreigners, who are required to prove 10 years' residence in Italy, the last two of which must be continuous.¹² The residence qualification also discriminates against Italian-born homeless people in 'absolute poverty' - presumably this is considered a small price to pay to try and get around EU rules about overt discrimination on the basis of nationality or ethnicity. The marked similarity with long-standing proposals of the French Front National to confine welfare benefits to 'real' French people should be obvious, as should the similarity with various expedients adopted by individual Lega mayors to deprive the children of immigrants of the right to free school meals or free transport on school buses.

The injustices of the budget proposals discussed above gave rise to a 200,000-strong trade union demonstration in Rome's Piazza San Giovanni on February 9. This was the largest such mobilisation for some years, and was the product of renewed unity between the more 'moderate' CISL and UIL federations and the more militant, leftwing CGIL - the latter having often been left isolated in opposition to anti-working class policies pursued by the PD-led government. It is also worth noting that Susanna Camusso (CGIL general secretary) has been succeeded by Maurizio Landini, the more leftwing of the two contenders for the post, and, although he had been previously criticised for allegedly favouring M5S over the PD, it is now quite clear that he is at least equally opposed to the new government.

Failings

Economic problems have most certainly contributed to the increase in the degree of xenophobia expressed by M5S and the Lega. Although the populist government had been far from friendly towards the French in general, and president Emmanuel Macron in particular, ever since taking office, the recent rapid deterioration in relations between the two states seems to have coincided with Italy's plunge into recession - in other words, xenophobia seems to have been used as a deliberate distraction from the domestic failings of M5S and the Lega.

For months, Salvini had taken the lead in attacking the French over issues that were broadly related to his role as minister of the interior - particularly over immigration policy and the continuing presence on French soil of Italians who had been involved in the Red Brigades or other 1970s terrorist groups.¹³ But in early February Di Maio decided to outbid him. M5S leaders Di Maio and Di Battista travelled to France to meet some representatives of the *gilets jaunes*, to whom Di Maio had already given some verbal support a few weeks earlier. Whilst Di Maio has attempted to justify himself by claiming he was acting as M5S leader rather than as deputy prime minister of Italy during this visit to French soil, and that he is merely seeking to build a transnational alliance for the European elections,¹⁴ his choice of interlocutors was highly provocative. This applied in particular to the prioritisation of Christophe Chalençon, who has advocated a military coup against Macron, as well as making more general comments in

favour of 'civil war'.

Given the involvement of the *gilets jaunes* in serious street violence in the heart of Paris, any meeting of an Italian deputy premier with their self-proclaimed leaders would have been bound to annoy the French president, but Di Maio seems to have gone out of his way to pick one of the most extreme hard-liners that this confused and amorphous movement has produced. Macron's immediate response was to recall the French ambassador from Rome on February 7 - the first time this has happened since June 1940, when Italy declared war on France. The French foreign office explained the recall of the ambassador by saying:

France has been the target of repeated, baseless attacks and outrageous statements. Having disagreements is one thing, but manipulating the relationship is another. All of these actions are creating a serious situation, which is raising questions about the Italian government's intentions towards France.¹⁵

Creating the worst crisis between the two neighbouring countries since 1945 was not a rational course of action on Di Maio's part, given that Italy does an enormous amount of trade with France and runs a considerable surplus in such transactions - in marked contrast to the balance of its trade with Germany, in which the stronger northern economy is very clearly the dominant partner.

M5S's determination to cancel the building of the TAV (the high-speed train link between Turin and Lyon) is bound to further aggravate the French, and it looks as if it could lead to infraction proceedings by the European Commission, which has already given Italy some of the funds for this international infrastructure project. Moreover, in the long dispute with the EU commission over the budget, the French Socialist Party commissioner, Pierre Moscovici, had been far more sympathetic to the Italians than his hard-line Latvian neoliberal colleague Valdis Dombrovskis. So national self-interest should have suggested that annoying the French was not the best way to avoid a future infraction procedure if Italy's stagnant or falling GDP creates more problems with the budget later this year.

The hostile reception given to prime minister Giuseppe Conte in the European parliament on February 12 is an indication of Italy's increasing isolation in the European context, since the European People's Party, the European Socialists and the European Liberals were united in their attacks on the Italian premier, who only gained non-Italian applause from the extreme Europhobic, rightwing factions in the Assembly. The most cutting remark was made by the president of the European Liberals, Guy Verhofstadt, who called Conte - to his face - "a puppet moved by Di Maio and Salvini", which, of course, is a pretty accurate assessment of the premier's relationship with his two nominal deputies.¹⁶ It is widely believed that Verhofstadt was acting as a direct surrogate for Macron, who has agreed that the contingent of *En Marche* MEPs expected to be elected in May 2019 will join the European Liberal Group - an addition which is likely to increase the relative weight of the Liberals in the European parliament at a time when the Socialists and the People's Party are both forecast to lose seats.

By the time Conte addressed the European parliament, Macron had given up expecting a formal apology from him¹⁷ on behalf of Di Maio and Salvini - Macron's initial condition for the resumption of normal diplomatic relations, as the French had explained to Italian foreign minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi. Both Mattarella

and Moavero were extremely anxious to end the diplomatic spat with France as quickly as possible, but could not persuade the obstinate populist to express any regret, however hypocritically.¹⁸

Eventually, on February 15, the French ambassador was sent back to Rome, and almost as soon as he arrived in the Italian capital went to talk to Mattarella in the Quirinale presidential palace, assuring him that the French president wanted him to make a state visit to Paris in the near future - in effect indicating that Mattarella was now the only Italian leader with whom Macron felt he could have a rational discussion ●

Notes

1. Whilst Italy's GDP never regained the level it had reached before the 2008 recession, the period between January 2014 and June 2018 - roughly corresponding to the period of the governments of Renzi and Gentiloni - was one of sustained recovery with continuous growth. Obviously the expansionary policy pursued by Mario Draghi at the European Central Bank may well have played an important role, but the PD-led governments were successful in raising GDP - however negative they may have been in further tilting the balance against labour and towards capital.
2. Whilst the 'Spread' had been reduced to more manageable levels in December 2018-January 2019, it remains consistently higher than it was during the period of Renzi and Gentiloni's premierships.
3. Draghi's famous 'whatever it takes' comment in reaction to the euro zone crisis spreading beyond Greece towards Italy did not go down well with German *ordo-liberals*. Such conflicts indicate the degree of exaggeration and oversimplification that marks Costas Lapavistas's polemical account of the euro zone's mechanisms in his *The Left Case against the EU*.
4. A Demos poll, carried out on January 28-29 gave the Lega 33.7% support (up from 17.4% in the March 2018 general election) and M5S 24.9% (down from 32.7%). Although the Lega now appears much stronger than M5S, the combined total of the two parties, at 58.6%, is more than 8% up on the general election.
5. See my article, 'Italy's government provoking a clash with EU' (*Weekly Worker* October 25 2018), for further details.
6. This would involve finally implementing the frozen increases in VAT - which successive Italian governments have understandably delayed for years, despite promises made to fulfil the notorious neoliberal 'fiscal compact' embedded in the Italian constitution during the Monti era, or cutting expenditure either on their new pet projects or on normal state expenditure on health, education, etc.
7. It is the size of the national debt - generally considered the third largest in the world - that makes the Commission take a harsher view of Italy's budget deficit than those of a country like France.
8. Elliott's assessment is rather distorted by his ardent support for Lexit.
9. Both these measures were devised by the Lega, whose social base includes many tax-dodging petty bourgeois groups. But M5S, despite its ostensible concern about poverty, is willingly complicit in them.
10. It is worth pointing out that the small businessmen fathers of both Luigi Di Maio and Alessandro Di Battista have been accused of this, with a wealth of evidence.
11. Older readers will be put in mind of Norman Tebbit's notorious 'My father did not complain ... he got on his bike and looked for work'.
12. The Lega has tabled various amendments imposing additional restrictive conditions on foreigners that are clearly designed to make it more or less impossible for them to claim the benefit at all.
13. This is not a recent development, but the product of French policy under François Mitterand. By and large, Italian governments have ignored this issue in recent years, but Salvini was not content to let sleeping dogs lie, and seized on the issue to attack the French on another front.
14. There are various, rather confused schemes to present electoral lists based on the *gilets jaunes* for the forthcoming elections. But there are at least three rival factions claiming to represent the movement, and it is far from clear whether any of them will eventually be in a position to stand.
15. Translation from *The Guardian* February 8.
16. The synthetic indignation about this remark that came from M5S and the Lega was hypocritical, given that Salvini had called Renzi "a puppet in the hands of Merkel", and Gentiloni "a puppet of Soros" - in the latter case borrowing an anti-Semitic trope from his Hungarian ally, Viktor Orbán.
17. Eventually, Di Maio was forced into a grudging, retrospective apology as a result of an off-camera conversation that Chalençon had with a reporter on a political talk-show broadcast in Italy: "We have paramilitary forces ready to intervene because they too want to bring down the government ... If they put a bullet in my head ... Macron will end up on the guillotine. The people will storm the Elysée Palace and take it apart: him, his wife and the whole clique" (translation taken from *The Times* February 16).
18. The conciliatory independent, Moavero, got very little help from his populist assistant in his own ministry, M5S undersecretary for foreign affairs Manlio Di Stefano. He recently said that Macron is suffering from "small penis syndrome" (*Repubblica* February 14), exceeding even Boris Johnson in charm and subtlety.

PHILOSOPHY



Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in Lithuania (photo by Antanus Sutkus, 1965)

Individualism or class struggle?

René Gimpel examines the philosophical and political development of Jean-Paul Sartre, and his fraught relationship with the French Communist Party

Last year the North American Sartre Society held its annual meeting in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The conference theme was 'Existentialism and Resistance', motivated perhaps by the resurgence of rightwing politics around the world. Over three days, 60 papers were delivered dealing with World War II, ethics, racism, sexism and current American politics. The thread linking each presentation was the writings and political engagement of Jean-Paul Sartre and of his companion and intellectual peer: philosopher, feminist and author Simone de Beauvoir.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1906-80) was a French philosopher, author, playwright, script writer, literary critic, magazine and newspaper editor, and commentator. From World War II until the end of his life, he was a political agitator for multiple radical causes, a public intellectual. Having grown up in a conventional middle class family, Sartre became interested in philosophy as a student at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, attending the weekly seminars offered by Alexandre Kojève.¹ Following a posting to the French Institute in Berlin in 1933, Sartre studied Edmund Husserl, a leading exponent of phenomenology. Husserl and his student, Martin Heidegger, became significant influences over Sartre's

development.

Existentialism

Phenomenology was a branch of philosophy whose adherents considered it to be the foundation of all philosophies - a precursor to ethics, metaphysics or epistemology. It aimed to invert the tradition that philosophy looked to explain the world 'out there'; instead, it cast all investigation in the living subject, who experiences the existing world as an intentional project pertaining to the self. Jean-Paul Sartre's contribution was to frame phenomenology as existentialism - a philosophy for which he became the byword.

For Sartre, consciousness is neither a separate state of mind nor a part of the mind/body duality, which Descartes had championed. Being accompanies all phenomena as their existential dimension. Consciousness is 'consciousness of' - a plenitude in which the self is in an 'always already thinking' mode, enacting itself in the world. In Sartre, it is not the 'I' that is engaged with my body in an interaction with a 'there' out in the world, as these are considered loose and inaccurate explanations of what really occurs: instead, the self is glued to the existent as an ever-present reality. It (the self) is the existent in various modes of living it. Consciousness is embodied (in the world), and equally body is infused with consciousness (with cognition of the world).

A first principle is that existence

precedes essence. Humans exist without any essence (or meaning) attached to them, because there is no god to provide such essence. Instead, humans must forge their own identity, their own destiny. They become the sum total of their acts, their decisions, their behaviour. This, precisely, is what characterises the human. In religion, a deity replaces humans as the holder of what it is to be human, because, for most monotheistic religions, God created the human, such that each person is the particular concept of a universal concept. The 'essence', human, precedes their existence, each individual being a representation of this universal essence.²

For existentialism, there is no meaningful description of humans as an abstract entity: they are no more than their projects, defined by their choice of action, by the decisions they make to realise themselves in the world. To the challenge that an individual did not succeed in their project to find the love of their life/the job of their dreams because circumstances were against them, the existentialist replies that such a person cannot define themselves through their lack of opportunities, say, but solely through what they *did* achieve. Whatever that was, that is what defines them. The genius of Einstein is not that he was the distillation of genius: instead it is measured in the totality of the theorems he left behind. In other words, Einstein is the sum total of his achievements, whatever they may be;

and so are all humans. In realising themselves, humans realise the 'who' of their existence, which otherwise appears to them as meaningless.

The basis of Sartrean freedom is ontological: we are free because we are not a self (an 'in itself') but a 'presence to self' (the transcendence or 'nihilation' of our self). We are responsible for our world as the horizon of meaning in which we operate and thus for everything in it, insofar as their meaning and value are assigned by virtue of our life-orienting fundamental choice. Existentialism, as expounded by Sartre, was also perceived to be a pessimistic philosophy, because, in reducing the human being to an intentional 'for itself', permanently set against an 'in itself' of the material world, the Other, or other person, was always in the position of being also categorised as an 'in itself': that is, subject to each person's attempt to reduce the other to the fixity of an 'in itself', while escaping a reciprocal attempt by the other to do likewise.³ Sartre was driven to give a talk, 'Existentialism is a humanism', to attempt a refutation of this charge of negativity.

Occupation

Sartre was serving in the French army at the outbreak of World War II and was imprisoned, along with hundreds of thousands of others, after France's defeat. He was released in 1941 and returned to occupied Paris, where he set about forming a resistance cell,

along with Simone de Beauvoir and a handful of other intellectuals and academics. The group was grandly titled *Socialisme et Liberté*, but, apart from some hazardous distribution of leaflets on the Parisian metro, it achieved little and was soon wound up. Sartre approached the French Communist Party, wishing to join its network, but was rebuffed. For a while he took up a teaching post in a *lycée* and this appointment led to post-war controversy, when it was discovered, long after his death, that Sartre had replaced a teacher dismissed under Vichy laws for being Jewish.

European countries that suffered German occupation have had to wrestle with an historical problem, which the UK avoided: which citizens collaborated with the occupant, which ones resisted, and in each case, by how much? Given that there are still protagonists alive in both camps, the subject is a delicate one and not just for the small number of remaining participants. With the war ending, in country after country legal and extra-legal executions of known collaborators rose dramatically, though plenty managed to evade punishment: for example, Coco Chanel was heavily involved in collaboration and fled to Switzerland until the furor died down.

As might be expected, high-profile or public figures who had chosen the wrong camp, paid for their choice when the Nazis were defeated,

What we fight for

whereas the real culprits - owners of capitalist enterprises which furnished the German war effort with their material needs - mostly managed to escape with little more than censure or confiscation of their assets. Louis Renault, the car manufacturer, had his firm nationalised as punishment for his war work for the German armed forces.

The vast majority of nationals in occupied Europe neither resisted nor collaborated. They adopted a 'wait-and-see' attitude, kept their heads down and worked, as their country's economies - bled white by German expropriations and increasing war-related violence - made lives miserable. In Holland and for a time in France, the populations began to starve, while in war-torn Italy an epidemic of typhus threatened until treated by the Allies after Italy was liberated.

The question posed by the Sartre symposium was, did he or did he not collaborate? The consensus is that, despite producing a couple of plays and his first important philosophical work, all of which passed the German censor, Sartre could not be considered a collaborator. He published in *Comaedia*, a cultural journal authorised by the Germans; but he also wrote for clandestine resistance publications. During the occupation, all printing facilities of any kind, plus ink and paper, were severely restricted, if not forbidden; and permission to use them in any capacity depended on the authorities. Even to get their leaflets and tracts printed, Socialisme et Liberté had to beg sympathetic print workers. Such workers worried that gimlet-eyed German overseers and French collaborators would scrutinise the tracts looking for tell-tale typeset anomalies and compare them to the authorised newspapers and magazines emerging from those same presses. Getting caught printing such tracts or distributing them on the metro resulted in dispatch to a concentration camp or execution.

Radicalisation

After the war, Sartre and de Beauvoir set up *Les Temps Modernes* - a journal of cultural and political critique, which is still published today. They and others wrote prolifically. Unlike his contemporaries at the journal, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus, Sartre was steadily moving to the radical left. He became embroiled in a series of political and cultural disputes. The most important concerned his relationship to the Parti Communiste Français (PCF).

The communists had emerged heroes of the resistance, even though the recognised head of the unified French resistance groups was general Charles de Gaulle, who operated from London throughout most of the war. French communists had borne the brunt of reprisals and executions exacted by the Nazis, but they finished the war with a solid cadre of highly trained fighters. This worried Churchill, Eisenhower and de Gaulle, because at the Tehran conference in 1943 Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin had agreed on their post-war spheres of influence. France and Italy, where communist partisans were particularly strong, were to be included in the Anglo-American sphere and not the Soviet one. De Gaulle understood that, unless he quickly established a government in liberated France, communists might be in a position to set one up themselves.

Sartre's wartime experiences had radicalised him, but his outlook as the leading exponent of the new philosophy of existentialism, put him at odds with the communists.⁴ He attempted to set up a rival political party to theirs, without success. In part this was because Sartre held an ambiguous position - in favour of

the working class and its historical representative, the PCF, while developing his own philosophy. French communists mistrusted existentialism not only for its reliance on individualism rather than class struggle, but also for its success among the young, including the young working class. During the war, the clandestine PCF had not had time to prepare many of its young recruits for the disciplined obedience it had come to expect. There was alarm at the attractions of a philosophy of freedom and Sartre was branded a counterrevolutionary.

The PCF, the most Stalinist in western Europe, denounced Heidegger because of his erstwhile allegiance to the Nazi Party. Sartre's belief that people were condemned to a realm of total freedom, a necessary contingency, in which choices had to be constantly reviewed and assessed, led the PCF's daily *L'Humanité* to pose the question, 'What sort of person makes a decision each morning between communism and fascism?'

If the tenets of existentialism rested largely on the behaviour of the individual rather than the group and, though Sartre defended his views in *Les Temps Modernes*, in reality his politics were shifting. Sartre underscores the harsh facts of oppression and exploitation that were not erased by the upheaval of world war. Ours remains 'a society based on violence.' Accordingly, the author is responsible for addressing that violence with a counter-violence (for example, by a choice of topics to discuss) or sharing in it by remaining silent.

The France of Sartre and de Beauvoir was a violent place. For 23 years, from 1939 to 1962, France was almost permanently at war - the German occupation was followed by long colonial wars in Indochina, then Algeria and other Maghreb countries. Sartre was concerned to try to explain the roots of this violence. His preface to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* argues that the violence of the colonised is 'our' violence turned back against us.

Sartre now began to outflank the PCF in his defence of liberation movements - those against colonial France as well as other imperial nations. In November 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent, which posed a quandary for the PCF. It had elected members in the restored national assembly in Paris, as well as ministers in the first post-war government. While the PCF and *L'Humanité* had lauded Vietnamese resistance to Japanese occupation and to the pro-Axis collusion of the Vichy regime, the party considered that Vietnam should now re-enter the natural order of French colonies. By the spring of 1947, PCF members had quit their ministerial posts and this allowed them to shift position, though only to the extent of calling on the French to support 'peace' in Vietnam.

Sartre and other intellectuals had joined the peace movement, leading by example in their denunciation of France's neo-colonial project. Docker members of the CGT, the largest and communist-controlled trade union federation, refused to load or unload weapons destined for Indochina. In 1954, French armed forces suffered a catastrophic defeat in Vietnam at Dien Ben Phu,⁵ which brought down the government. In the same year, the neophyte Algerian National Liberation Front (FNL) staged its first uprising against French colonial occupation.

From now on and for the most part, Sartre's political engagement ran in parallel to those of the PCF, with important exceptions. Both backed the Cuban revolution, as well as other wars of national liberation. Sartre denounced the Soviet invasion

of Hungary in 1956, which saw a slew of PCF members resign from the party - a not uncommon experience in European pro-Soviet parties of the period. The next crisis and political divergence between Sartre and the PCF arose over the question of Algeria. This period also marked an important shift in Sartre's philosophical reassessment of his existentialism. Perhaps because he could not envisage any historical movement of liberation outside Marxism and because he considered a communist party to be the essential vehicle for political change, Sartre remained umbilically tied to the PCF, even if he never became a member.

Sartre and de Beauvoir travelled extensively in the Soviet Union, to the Soviet bloc countries and to the emerging nations of the 'third world'. Sartre now rejected the existentialism he had developed in *Being and nothingness* and never completed the planned second volume.⁶ Where he had expounded his thesis that humans act out in a contingent world, consciously and therefore in either good or bad faith, Sartre now realised that political engagement would have to transcend individual commitment and recognise that the 'group in action', or 'group in fusion' was a more important concept to understand the reality of class struggle and revolution. He also wrote that the choice of action demanded of a French citizen could not be compared to the choices facing an oppressed, exploited peasant in a colonial country. Though Sartre had, by 1957, decisively broken with the Soviet Union and its official Marxism, he nonetheless declared Marxism "the philosophy of our time" and declared the need to resuscitate it from the moribund state that Soviet dogma had left it in - a need he attempted to answer in *Critique of dialectical reason*, published in 1960.

In the *Critique* another ontological form appears: the 'mediating' third that denotes the group member as such and yields a collective subject without reducing the respective agents to mere ciphers of some collective consciousness. In other words, Sartre accords an ontological primacy to individual praxis, while recognising its enrichment in group participation. He acknowledges that scarcity and existing social and historical conditions are preponderant factors in shaping action.

Inventing neologisms, Sartre repeatedly uses terms such as the 'group in fusion' for conscious class action; 'totalisation' for the activity of people maintaining a common practice without which, to use Sartre's term, it would "erode" and fragment. Endlessly circling Marxism without being willing or able to abandon existentialism, what we have here is not alienation as the condition of an oppressed class, but an alienated human being and an alienated human species. Sartre sees the Stalinist apotheosis of the Russian Revolution as a Thermidorean moment - the moment that fails revolutionary movements, because the 'group in fusion' has evolved into an institutional 'pratico-inert', ossified human activity. It is sedimented in the form of routine, hierarchical, rule-governed, bureaucratic patterns of social activity.

After 835 pages, again Sartre ends his second *magnum opus* with a claim that the next volume would carry the argument further.

Algerian crisis

The 1954-62 Algerian conflict with France was to make of Sartre a prominent figure battling for Algeria. Unlike his contemporary, Albert Camus - a *pied noir* (Algerian-born French, as were Althusser and Derrida), who wanted reconciliation between Algerian Arabs and French

settlers - Sartre gave unequivocal support to the Front de Libération National (FLN).

Henri Alleg, a French Algerian and member of the Algerian Communist Party, was arrested and tortured by the French army. Alleg wrote a book about that experience - *La question*, for which Sartre wrote the preface. After its publication in February 1958, the government banned it and seized it from bookstores. Sartre wrote about the incident in the weekly *L'Express*: that magazine too was seized. The publisher, Jérôme Lindon, mounted a petition to protest the censorship of the book, which Camus refused to sign.

Sartre ultimately paid a price for his involvement in the movement: his apartment was bombed twice by French paramilitaries in 1961 and 1962, as was the office of his magazine, *Les Temps Modernes*. As for the PCF, in 1955 it had complained against charges of disloyalty to the Algerians. In *L'Humanité*, it declared: "Have we not already shown that we support a policy of negotiation with the peoples of north Africa for the creation of a true 'union française'?"

It would take years for the PCF to come round and offer unconditional support for Algerian Independence. Years in which 280,000 military and civilian deaths occurred, in which de Gaulle returned to power in 1958 with the help of the army, after a threatened military takeover - a return in which de Gaulle engineered a new, fifth republic with greatly enhanced presidential powers.⁷ De Gaulle had beguiled the army and French Algerians by proclaiming, "I understand you", but they soon realised he intended something different: he was ready to negotiate with the FLN. When the military realised their error, a large number of them began plotting anew and created a 'secret army', the OAS, which attempted to assassinate the president and to rally French troops to a military dictatorship which would attempt to seize power in Paris.⁸

Throughout this tense and threatening period, the PCF remained unable to capitalise on what should have been considered a crisis of capitalism and its institutions. Instead of agitating for a radical, even revolutionary, overthrow of these institutions, it remained paralysed, trying to rally the masses to a defence of the spent fourth republic.

In a future article, I will discuss Sartre's later political evolution, with special reference to the events of May 1968 and its fallout ●

Notes

1. Graduates from the 'Ecole Sup', as it was known, include Louis Pasteur, Henri Bergson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone Weil, Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Aimé Césaire, Emile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu and Thomas Picketty. Though not a graduate, the Irish Nobel laureate (and French wartime resistance hero), Samuel Beckett, taught at the school.
2. See D Alderson and R Spencer (eds) *For humanism: explorations in theory and politics* London 2017.
3. *Ibid*.
4. Even if, later on, Deleuze wrote: "In the disorder of the liberation, everything was rediscovered and everything was filtered through Sartre."
5. Many of the soldiers in the regular French army and Foreign Legion on Vietnamese soil were volunteers and not conscripts. They exchanged prison, where they had been incarcerated for violent forms of collaboration with the Nazis, for the chance to fight against colonial populations, whom they were only too happy to see subjugated once again to French rule.
6. At the end of 600 pages, Sartre's last sentence announces his intention to carry on the argument in a further volume, which never appeared.
7. These powers are being used to the full by Emmanuel Macron and, had Jean-Luc Mélanchon won the 2017 presidential election instead, he had vowed to abrogate presidential powers in a new, sixth republic.
8. The present writer's father had been decorated personally by de Gaulle for wartime resistance activities, but had turned against the general when he assumed the presidency in 1958. However, after the OAS threatened its seizure of power in 1961, he informed my family that if need be he would rejoin de Gaulle in uniform.

■ Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question—ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism—a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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weekly Worker

Banking on cliff edges is a dangerous strategy

Learning all the wrong lessons

With less than a week to go before the next Brexit vote, Theresa May has brought nothing meaningful back from Brussels. So what next? asks **Eddie Ford**

Predictably Theresa May did not get the breakthrough she was banking on in talks with European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker. Following their Brussels meeting, officials issued the usual bland press release reiterating the commitment of both sides to “an open border in Ireland” and respecting the “integrity of the single market and the United Kingdom”.

So, the prime minister is still going round and round in circles and getting nowhere, as she tries to square the Brexit circle, attempting to conjure up a deal that pleases the hard Brexiteers of the European Research Group, the Democratic Unionist Party and the majority of MPs - not to mention the European Union negotiators. Her chances of securing an 11th hour success are not great, to put it mildly.

However, fantasies do seem to be dissolving fast under the pressure of reality - which will not be to the liking of ERGers and most on the Eurosceptic wing of the Tory Party. The prime minister has junked both the search for “alternative arrangements” regarding the Irish border, as supposedly ‘mandated’ by the vaguely worded Brady amendment, and also the so-called ‘Malthouse compromise’, championed by some cross-factional Tory MPs - which essentially sought a free-trade agreement, thanks to as-yet-unknown technology to avoid customs checks on the Irish border. These proposals were clearly for the unicorns, epitomising for EU negotiators the “madhouse” atmosphere of Westminster, as Brexit day nears.

Of course, the only reason that the Brady amendment was passed in the first place is because MPs had different interpretations of what it actually meant - therefore was bound to have a very short shelf life once exposed to the political realities of EU negotiations. A thought echoed by Phillip Hammond speaking on February 19. He argued that the plan was a “valuable effort” that should be looked at again during the transition period. But it was not a viable solution right now, as it is “clear” that the EU would never consider replacing or removing the backstop with such an arrangement, because that would require “significant changes” to EU legislation and customs practices. There is neither the political will in the EU nor the time to make such changes.

With the clock running down, the cabinet was updated on February 19 about the option of a no-deal Brexit - a cabinet source saying the general mood in the room had “noticeably” turned against using ‘no deal’ as a negotiating tactic, with apparently only Liz Truss, the treasury secretary, speaking up enthusiastically in favour. *The Daily Telegraph* further reports that Theresa May was warned by cabinet ministers Amber Rudd, David Gauke, Greg Clark and David Mundell that she faces the resignation of 22 government ministers over a no-deal Brexit - urging her to “publicly commit” to extending article 50



Theresa May and Jean-Claude Juncker: we must stop meeting like this

in the event that a deal cannot be reached by the end of March. Even if by some minor miracle May did secure parliamentary approval for her deal, senior EU officials expect a ‘technical’ extension (probably signed off at the European Council summit on March 21) of around three months to give the UK time to ratify the agreement and pass the associated legislation.

Further complicating matters, Jean-Claude Juncker stressed on February 19 that there would be “conditions” placed on any extension requests - possibly including the need for Britain to participate in the May European elections. How that would actually work, both politically and practically, is hard to imagine - but it would create a storm - and an opportunity for Nigel Farage’s new Brexit Party to denounce the treachery of the British government and the unpatriotic metropolitan elite.

Misreading

All of this follows on, of course, from Theresa May’s second big parliamentary defeat on February 14 - this time with the ERG abstaining on the main government motion, so that the prime minister was defeated by a majority of 45 votes - with a small number of pro-EU MPs also refusing to back the motion. The ERG was unhappy that the government appeared to rule out a no-deal Brexit, the strong suspicion being that many in the group *positively* prefer such an outcome - with their fantasies about a truly ‘independent’ Britain striking

buccaneering free-trade deals in every corner of the globe. Reacting to the defeat, Downing Street hypocritically pointed the finger at Jeremy Corbyn, who had “put partisan considerations ahead of the national interest” - which the Tory Party would never do, of course - and voted to “make ‘no deal’ more likely”. So it had nothing to do with May’s obviously deliberate strategy to run the clock and scare MPs into backing her deal at the very last minute.

In turn, ‘remain’-inclined Tory MPs warned May that she cannot rely on the likes of the ERG - nor should she be held hostage by them. Showing the tension building within the Conservative Party, three Tory MPs, Anna Soubry, Sarah Wollaston and Heidi Allen - the usual pro-EU suspects - defected to the newly formed Independent Group of eight former Labour MPs. They issued a joint statement saying they can no longer remain in a party “whose policies and priorities are so firmly in the grip of the ERG and DUP” - Brexit having “re-defined the Conservative Party, undoing all the efforts to modernise it”. There has been a “dismal failure” to stand up to the ERG, the statement continues, “which operates openly as a party within a party, with its own leader, whip and policy”.

Expressing the same sentiments, or frustration, Nick Boles - a former government minister adamantly opposed to ‘no deal’ - said the February 14 vote should be a “wake-up call” to

the prime minister. Maybe “the penny will now drop”, he commented, that the ERG “will stop at nothing” to get a hard Brexit - therefore “responsible MPs of all parties must come together” to stop them. Using even stronger language, Richard Harrington, a business minister, even suggested that the ERGers were guilty of “treachery” and should seriously consider joining Farage’s Brexit Party - which, after all, “seems designed for them”. I very much doubt that Jacob Rees-Mogg and his colleagues will follow Harrington’s advice, but the point is taken.

May’s latest defeat does not bode well for her prospects of wrangling some concessions or “reassurances” from the EU over the backstop, it almost goes without saying - even if the vote was, in theory, purely symbolic. She has shown herself incapable of uniting her own party behind her, let alone parliament as a whole - so what is the incentive for the EU to change course? Immediately after the vote, diplomats in Brussels said the result confirmed that the British prime minister could not command the support of her party on key votes, and that she needed to start working on cross-party solutions. Another ominous sign for Theresa May are the reports that the Irish foreign minister, Simon Coveney, has flatly ruled out any “keyhole surgery” to the withdrawal agreement, while also insisting yet again that Ireland will not accept any unilateral exit clause to the Irish backstop or an expiry date.

So what is the next move for the

prime minister? Her strategy, insofar as you can call it that, appears to be more of the same: keep on trying what has not worked before in the hope that it will eventually work - a less than inspiring approach. But events might be taken completely out of her hands come the big crunch vote on February 27 when MPs get another shot at wrestling control over the Brexit process away from the government - if they back the binding Yvette Cooper amendment that would *force* the prime minister to apply for an article 50 extension if she had failed to get a withdrawal agreement through parliament by the middle of March. Once again, it is not absolutely guaranteed that the EU will consent to such an extension as the decision needs to be a unanimous one by all the member states - but the probability is very high.

On the other hand, there is now much speculation that Theresa May might be planning to bring forward the second ‘meaningful’ vote to early next week, before MPs get a chance to vote on the Cooper amendment. In this way she is hoping to see off the threat of mass ministerial resignations, which would be extremely damaging politically for the prime minister and provide yet more proof to the EU that she is not in charge of her own party or parliament.

Meanwhile, May continues to run the clock down, with both senior EU officials and British cabinet ministers privately voicing concerns that the prime minister is still misreading the extent of what is possible at the March 21 summit. They fear that she is walking into the same trap she set for herself at the humiliating Salzburg meeting in September last year, having learned all the wrong lessons from the euro crisis and the EU’s treatment of Greece. It is true that just about every single Brexiteer says the same thing - the EU bailed out the Greeks after initially saying they would not and will move again at the very last second to midnight to offer concessions or compromises on the Irish backstop. So nothing to worry about then. But, as one Tory MP confidentially told Politico, “... they fucking didn’t move for the Greeks. The Greeks got an even worse deal. There’s a real danger here that we are going to walk into the room with the same demands and get the same result” ●

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