

MAY YOU LIVE IN LESS
INTERESTING TIMES

by

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Introduction

THE TITLE OF MY FIRST ONLINE BOOK OF BLOGS WAS *May You Live In Interesting Times*, the supposedly Chinese curse or Chinese greeting. This second book of blogs, just published on my website, needed the tweak above to cover the hundred or so written as the world became even more troubled, from 2021 to 2024. I do wonder if noting the old headings that have disappeared, and the new ones that have come in, tells a story or just indicates my attention span. Still, a little of what I wrote by way of introduction to the first book, covering 2017 to 2021, may usefully be repeated for the collection just published.

“Blogging is ephemeral. I hope that pulling together these blogs on-line under thematic headings in chronological order will increase their life span. Broaching some of these topics, getting some of the shared frustrations of the day into my website, may even have increased my own life span. Dip in where your interests lie and explore”.

This second book of blogs, as was its predecessor, is divided into four thematic parts with subsections whose subtitles are indicated in this introduction by italics.

Part One: Gone is *Terrorism*. Well not in reality. Europe’s intelligence services have become more adept at pre-empting

major incidents, though lone wolf attacks are manifestly more difficult to see coming.

In has come *Immigration* with topics from the Kindertransport to small boats. Disinformation about illegal immigration, alongside accurate figures for documented arrivals, had given Leave voters victory in the 2016 UK European Union Membership referendum so badly judged by Cameron. I have pointed out government's parallel but contradictory policies: the one keeping up the supply of necessary migrant labour for the British economy, amounting to hundreds of thousands, the other Sunak's prolonged obsession with deporting to Rwanda those arriving on small boats which brought on the Conservative government's bizarre legislation declaring Rwanda safe because they said it was safe. It was a good story, with TV pictures, to tell faithful Brexiteers wanting to 'take back control' of our borders and end freedom of movement. Popular anxiety about immigration could scupper the new Labour government.

Africa remains: Blogs on eradication of malaria and mainly South Africa. There are still mass killings by jihadist religious extremists, those of Christians grossly under-reported. Not to mention the desperate plight of Sudan's people, casually terrorised by two barbaric armies, a particularly dreadful example of the consequences of the arms trade. I should have written about it.

There has been plenty to comment on under the other retained titles. Blogs included within *Democracy and Politics* discuss the decline of both. *Human Rights* features new violations globally that have pushed the importance of international humanitarian law to the fore. Looking back, I'm unhappy not to have written about the terrible plight of women in Afghanistan.

Finally, *Catholicism*: the focus of blogs has remained on Pope Francis, speaking truth to power with creative compassion. Sadly I've also written obituaries for four outstanding Catholics: Sister

Pamela Hussey SHCJ, Bruce Kent, Father Albert Nolan O.P. and Father Gustavo Gutierrez O.P.

Part Two: *Brexit* has gone. Its multiple consequences remain, the economic equivalent of long-COVID. We are all sick of it.

In has come *Culture Wars*, about the degradation of politics, ‘woke’ versus ‘anti-woke’, and the whole question of identity including what it means to be British. In, of course, have also come the *Labour Party*, its plans and the ‘vision thing’.

Government & Policy remains covering issues from disability and cuts in international development aid to the Post Office scandal. *The Conservative Party* including its wrecking-ball to the NHS, Partygate, and the blunders of the 1922 Committee.

Part Three: Gone is the heading *Middle East & North Africa*. In has come *Putin’s Ukraine War* with its own prolonged devastation and death toll. In the last three years, Putin’s invasion has transformed geopolitics and the immediate future of Europe, diverting scarce resources into the demands of modern warfare. It has created a new not-so-Cold War between an authoritarian and democratic bloc of powerful States, with other countries expected to choose sides. A biproduct was the fall of Assad in Syria.

USA remains. Its themes have revolved around the Presidency, Biden, Trump, and the elections, Harris and Walz. I did float the possibility that US male voters might balk at a black female President, but I thought Harris would narrowly win (having got the 2016 election wrong too).

Africa remains. Themes have concentrated on events involving South Africa, their role in taking Israel to the International Court of Justice – see also under the next heading - and the Government of National Unity.

The heading *Israel, Palestine and Iran* stays, dealing most notably in the last few months with the passionate debate about genocide in Gaza. The old threat of an Israeli – or USA - attack on facilities in Iran associated with the potential development of a nuclear weapon has intensified.

Part Four: Nothing gone. But in has come *Climate Change* - which appears elsewhere, for example under *Catholicism*. It seems absurd to be discussing the future of our atmosphere and the planet almost as an afterthought, in four blogs. Everything that could be said and written about global warming and renewables has been said and written. For fear of popular revolt, no-one with political authority seems open to the radical social and economic changes that are needed. Doomed to short-termism, what other hope do we have but some scientific miracle to avert catastrophe? And friends and family have had enough gloomy blogs to be going on with as 2024 turns into 2025.

So, it is a relief to turn again to the old catch-all section *Observations* which ends the book. I particularly enjoyed writing about Dogs, Dunwich Beach and Detectorists. Unconditional love, gentle beauty, hope and perseverance. Not a bad prescription for surviving the rest of the decade. With thanks to Edmund Ross for IT work making this on-line book.

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Part One

DEMOCRACY & POLITICS

POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

13.01.2022

Government Ministers purposely degrade our language and the mass media often aid and abet. It has ever been so. James Madison, fourth President of the USA – you may remember him from *Hamilton* the musical – wrote in 1788: “The use of words is to express ideas. Perspicuity, therefore, requires not only that the ideas should be distinctly formed, but they should be expressed by words distinctly and exclusively appropriate to them”. He had in mind the divisive politics of the Constitutional Convention. His advice has continuing relevance. You may have observed that the word ‘perspicuity’ is almost archaic, judging by responses from most Ministers in radio or television interviews. As the Allegra Stratton video showed, our professional political communicators get on the job training in obfuscation.

George Orwell echoed James Madison in his 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language*, still a guide for writers and punctilious editors. “The great enemy of clear language is

insincerity”, he wrote noting “it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes”. Slovenly thinking leads to slovenly writing and discourse. It follows that “to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration”. He was reflecting on the propaganda of Nazi Germany, and Stalin’s Soviet Union, but his insights apply today.

We await both political regeneration and the regeneration of our language. New misleading terms are constantly invented. ‘Levelling Up’ means the funding of local authorities and towns with Conservative MPs and thus discrimination against Labour controlled ones. “Regulatory reforms” means, having reneged on promises made to gain their support for BREXIT, bankrupting thousands of farmers. ‘Externalisation’ of asylum seekers means deporting and dumping them in distant countries in contravention of refugee conventions. And what Orwell called ‘fly-blown metaphors’ abound. A ‘wake-up call’ means a problem will be ‘kicked into the long-grass’ (hackneyed but sincere - from Opposition Parties) or ‘kept under review’ in governing Party’s words. I wonder what Orwell would make of Johnson’s ‘oven-ready deals’, a nicely chosen metaphor to render a lie and the liar homely, domesticated and just like us.

When did this degrading of our language become commonplace? This is Liam Fox MP, Secretary of Defence 2010-2011, looking for his next ministerial post in 2013. ‘The *great Socialist coup* (my italics) of the last decade was making wealth an embarrassment”. Peter Mandelson? The Blair and Brown governments? A coup? Fox would later call the Northern Ireland protocol ‘a coup against the British people’. Such debasement of the meaning of words, of course, predates the various Conservative governments since 2010 and was gaining

some ground during the Blair years, a period that saw a refinement of ‘spin’.

But Tony Blair had, and retains, the ability to succinctly, clearly and therefore persuasively analyse and present a changing world to the public. In the case of the Iraq war, his analysis was flawed, failed to persuade, and appeared to many as insincere. Being out of power removes constraints, but the difference in clarity between a Blair interview and that of a current government Minister is striking. Deliberately using imprecise language as a tool of government is a thread running through Karen J. Greenberg’s excellent *Subtle Tools: The Dismantling of American Democracy from the War on Terror to Donald Trump*. The book convincingly demonstrates the processes at work undermining democracy since 9/11.

Greenberg points to “the degradation of language, the starting point for political dishonesty and power mongering, and the platform upon which undemocratic and unlawful policies have been fashioned”. Imprecise and confounding language gave rise, she argues, to “confusion and imprecision in the roles and responsibilities of institutions of government” followed by “the abandonment of legal and procedural norms for law making”. Try ‘work event’ instead of ‘party’. She charts in detail how the US reaction to terrorism, the catch-all 18 September 2001 Authorisation for Use of Military Force (AUMF), played out through ‘the Global War on Terror’. As Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State 1997-2001, reputedly said America usually gets into trouble waging war on an abstract noun. Greenberg presents the Patriot Act, the invasion of Iraq, the creation of the multi-institution Department of Homeland Security, leading to ferocious border control and domestic policing notably of *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations, as culminating in the insurrectionary riot and attack on the Capitol of 6 January 2020.

In the UK this trajectory of political disintegration accompanying debasement of language has not closely followed the US example. But we see echoes of growing and misused Executive power in Johnson's proroguing of Parliament, Priti Patel's Nationality and Borders Bill and her Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. In the Policing Bill decisions about protests and demonstrations which, in the vague words of the Bill, threaten "serious disruption to the life of the community" and "the activities of an organisation" may be taken away from the Police with their long practical and operational experience and, when deemed necessary, given to the Home Secretary to delineate by secondary legislation. In other words "what falls within and without lawful protest", as Amnesty International puts it, now assessed by the Police on the basis of potential harm after consultation, or negotiation with interlocutors running the protests, would be at risk of being determined by a politician without reference to Parliament and on the basis of political content. During the Second Reading of the Bill, even past Conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May, herself a former Home Secretary, expressed anxiety about its consequences.

Import and export of ideas and words have not been just one way. The European Court of Human Rights judged that the five techniques used in 'Deep Interrogation' in Northern Ireland during the 1970s were 'inhuman and degrading treatment', but not torture. This judgement was picked up by the Bush administration to counter condemnation of their treatment of Al-Qaeda terrorists. But the US added water-boarding as their sixth technique. Calling them 'enhanced interrogation techniques' was not accepted by President Obama. "I believe it was torture", he admitted in 2009.

Maybe we in the UK have a Wizard of Oz government. Maybe we are too fearful. Follow the yellow brick road. Pull back the sheet, probe the language and all you will find - Orwell again - is

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“a mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence”. Or maybe 2022 will reveal, as Greenberg does for the USA, something more dangerous, a serious, advancing erosion of our own democracy. Whichever awaits us, James Madison still speaks to our condition: “It is a misfortune, inseparable from human affairs, that public measures are rarely investigated with that spirit of moderation which is essential to a just estimate of their real tendency to advance or obstruct the public good; and that this spirit is more apt to be diminished than promoted, by those occasions which require an unusual exercise of it”. *Mea culpa*.

THE IDOL OF THE MARKET WORSHIPPED BY GOVERNMENT

05.10.2022

‘Labour was the first price, the original purchase-money that was paid for all things. It was not by gold or by silver, but by labour, that all wealth of the world was originally purchased.’ Karl Marx? No, Adam Smith setting out his theory of value in *The Wealth of Nations* first published in 1776. It became the core text of classical economics, resetting economic theory as the early Industrial Revolution brought unprecedented change and growth in production. To understand why our national wealth is now endangered, we could all, particularly the Chancellor and Prime Minister, do with a crash course in today’s economic theory.

Nowadays, labour is envisioned as partnering capital in the production of wealth. Capital combines with labour to drive economic growth, increasing prosperity, or even causing the reverse, recession, the measure being rise and fall of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), national output per head. Though GDP itself is an inadequate gauge missing out many forms of productive work such as bringing up children and the cost of its destructive consequences. Today both strikes and loss of market confidence demonstrate that the anarcho-libertarians who control the levers of government in England have no idea how to promote a successful combination of capital and labour and the improvements in productivity it can create. They are, in fact, astonishingly bad at capitalism.

Both Government and Opposition, present growth - accompanied by social justice in the case of the Labour Opposition- as the elixir of stability and prosperity, but at the same time as a natural process, like respiration and locomotion. If it’s not happening it must be because something is stopping it

happening: labour is refusing to modernize and impeding growth, high taxes are blocking investment in Britain, or we are losing productive minds. In one mighty bound Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng and Prime Minister Liz Truss will set free the entrepreneurial spirits too long constrained. Wealth will trickle down onto the poor, cold and hungry. But recent polls indicate the public are more than agnostic about this particular article of misplaced faith. And to avoid losing his job the Chancellor has had to reverse one of his hand-outs for the richest, abolition of the 45p tax rate.

Economic growth, of course, is an important feature of economic policy not an automatic function of the economy. We *choose* to measure and make our living in a particular way and certain consequences follow. Since World War II the part played by natural resources in growth has become increasingly apparent and with it the realization laissez-faire freedom for economic activity both depletes and destroys our world. The Club of Rome's – ac group of business and thought leaders - 1972 *The Limits of Growth*, which sold 30 million copies in 30 languages, gives some indication how long we have been aware of the problem. The climate change crisis with its floods, hurricanes, droughts and out-of-control fires, the quest for rare earths for modern technology, all emphasize the consequences of unregulated growth. When you have emptied a tube of toothpaste you can squeeze as much as you like, nothing comes out; you need to get another one. But when we squeeze the planet there is only the one available and, in the words of the Canadian Jesuit Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect for Promoting Integral Human Development and close to the Pope's thinking behind *Laudato Si*, all that we have experienced in the last few years 'implores us to leave behind the mentality of 'business as usual' and the search for incremental, unidimensional economic growth'. The days of

perpetual growth powered by carbon-based energy, relying on extraction, are numbered.

Amongst those who want urgent action to prevent climate change destroying human civilization and biodiversity there are two schools of thought. There are those who believe growth must gradually be put into reverse and, less radical, those who hope massive and focused development of renewable forms of energy will reinvigorate both productivity and economic growth. Those who advocate reversing growth have no plausible answer to how this could be compatible with social justice and would not prove to be political suicide. Mark Carney, former governor of the Bank of England, now UN Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance, focusing globally on the private sector and Sir Keir Starmer with his proposed £8 billion GB national energy company fall into the second category. Both promise ‘green growth’ which hopes to sustain our standard of living and to a greater or lesser extent avert the mass migration of more than a billion people to the temperate zones as the heat and rising sea levels make life impossible. Realistically both approaches imply larger or smaller falls in our standard of living if they are to cut emissions enough. So both are threatening politically, requiring in Pope Francis’ words that scarce political virtue: ‘courage’ to bring about what he calls the necessary ‘financial paradigm shift’.

You might wonder why this government seems to think that promotion of indiscriminate economic growth is a necessary policy shift rather than a doomsday formula supposing the rest of the world were to follow. Key elements of the banking world, including the IMF and European Central Bank, and the US military, are fully aware of this threat - see Geoff Mann’s ‘Reversing the Freight Train’ in *London Review of Books* 18 August 2022.

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Is our government in denial? Or does it hold privately a libertarian version of eat drink and be merry whilst assuming some technological innovation will spare our children and grandchildren? So more fracking, at all costs more gas, and ‘temporary’ expansion of exploration and production of North Sea oil. You might conclude that the five-year election cycle encourages the idea that the future can take care of itself.

We need to think about what people want out of life. A secure future for their children is top of the list. But it’s now looking as if, in the name of growth, we’ll dump massive debts on future generations in this country whilst increasing the release of carbon dioxide thus helping to make the planet uninhabitable. We just can’t leave economics to Government and blinkered growth-worshipping economists. We all need to become more economically literate and not think of wealth just in terms of what is measured by GDP. The Human Development Index (HDI), intended as a measure of a country’s development and produced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), includes life expectancy, education and distribution of income. It expands the meaning of wealth of nations to include important things people and societies value that are left out of GDP. It is moving in the right direction.

The Truss Government’s obsession with economic growth, given what we know about climate change, is misguided in economic terms and morally wrong. It is a government led by people clinging to an outdated ideology who achieved their ambition to strut upon the stage, confident and arrogant, but not up to the job, the natural nemesis not just of their Party and its ageing membership - who alone voted them into power - but of the little England they fashioned. Please God we don’t have two years to wait before they are gone.

RISHI SUNAK: THE POLITICS OF DIVERSITY

02.11.2022

At PMQs last Wednesday Member of Parliament after Member of Parliament stood up to commend the appointment of the first person of South Asian heritage as our Prime Minister. Conservative MPs rejoiced in Rishi Sunak as a proof of the country's and the Tory Party's commitment to diversity. Meanwhile, they have been reciting a litany of further abstract nouns: continuity, unity, delivery, stability, and even integrity, accountability and legitimacy. These await proof that they are more than just words as well as evidence of Tory compassion and belief in social justice.

Sunak's appointment is symbolically important and in some ways a good sign. But why was the strikingly multi-racial membership of the Tory front bench not equally matched on the Labour side. Was the taunt true? 'Labour talks a lot about diversity but the Conservatives act'.

Compared to the Labour Party, the Conservative Party has been ahead in appointing women as well as minorities to Shadow and Government high office. And they are proud of it. And it is a question for the Labour Party - though Keir Starmer now has a convincingly diverse front bench as far as women are concerned. But if you take a closer look at the current senior Cabinet Ministers from ethnic minorities they share - with the exception of Sajid Javid, a former Chancellor and Health Secretary - a privileged background. Kwasi Kwarteng is the son of wealthy parents and educated at Eton. Nadeem Zahawi's grandfather was a government minister in Iraq, his father a businessman, director of Balshore Investments. Rishi Sunak was educated at Winchester College and is now the wealthiest Prime Minister in modern times.

They join a resurgent Jeremy Hunt who was the richest man in Theresa May's cabinet. The language of class seems to have disappeared from politics though the reality is alive and well in the UK. Identity politics have distracted us from divisions based on class and wealth.

People may simply reject Rishi Sunak out of envy, but they may also admire him and those who manage to get on in the world. Talent for climbing is assumed. Once having gained political power unwritten rules apply to women and ethnic minority politicians. But near the top of the greasy pole you must sound and perform as much like any other successful middle to upper-class Tory politician as possible. Mrs. Thatcher was a master at this. Famously indifferent to women's issues, she chose an all-male cabinet, deepened her voice, and demonstrated military prowess by ruthlessly sinking the Belgrano, yet practised traditional house-wifely virtues by cooking for her favourite colleagues. Poor Theresa May wasn't 'man enough' to counter Brexiteer extremism and the Ulster DUP (Democratic Unionists). And Liz Truss was, well, Liz Truss, trying to sound tough and looking weak. But at least she sacked Suella Braverman.

When it comes to ethnic minorities in top political positions, should we be looking at the significance of class rather than race? Surely both. My own perceptions are influenced by rearing a family in both Central and West Africa and observing awareness of race and class develop in children. When there is nothing minority about being black, and you are one of the few white kids, if you want to describe somebody, skin colour doesn't help you identify who you are talking about. Here is a conversation in Africa that really happened.

"Why are Africans all poor?" that from a very young white child. "Simon's not poor. He's got a sports car" (Simon was a black Zimbabwean) "He's not an African."

It was a class analysis of sorts.

Unless they are avid readers of Marx, today most people perceive class difference as cultural difference, different ways of living, different customs and manners of speaking. Living for two years in the mid-1960s USA in a New York apartment with a Colombian family crammed into the flat one floor above was difficult. The children played indoor football. The noise rarely abated as different shifts came and went to work. Their music was not to my taste. It wasn't easy to accept and accommodate. But being anti-immigrant when you are a recent immigrant yourself is a stretch. Absence of sympathy for immigrants when you are an immigrant yourself, or the child of immigrants, does not come naturally even with the help of misinformation from an irresponsible Press. Yet Sunak, Braverman and Patel are remarkably adept at it.

Remember 65 year-old Gillian Duffy from Rochdale during the 2010 election campaign, and the notorious Gordon Brown outburst calling her a 'bigot', probably contributing to him losing his majority? In an early protest against 'political correctness' she said: "You can't say anything about the immigrants. . . all the eastern Europeans what are coming in where are they flocking from?" She was not talking about immigrants who had been to Eton and/or lived in large detached houses in leafy suburbs, or had a well-paid professional occupation. She also happened to be a Labour Party supporter. You don't have to look much further than this interaction to see the roots of populism and BREXIT along with their contribution to our current economic distress.

In Britain when it comes to opportunity the composite term 'ethnic minorities' hides more than it reveals. There are significant differences in social mobility within and between the different ethnicities. Even for example between different groups of Hindu immigrants. Those who came from East Africa, and that includes

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Sunak's family, being notably successful. Ironically, the most disadvantaged today, those who fare worst at school, are white working class boys. It might be said they are represented on the Labour front bench by the eloquent Shadow Health Secretary, Wes Streeting.

The Labour Party *do* have some ground to make up when it comes to who is available for, and chosen for, the top jobs. Talent is already there as Sadiq Khan, David Lammy, Rachel Reeves, for example - all products of a comprehensive school education - have demonstrated. But as *Black Lives Matter* insists – with good reason - there remain structures of discrimination and institutional racism in British society. The primary task is to remove them creating a society where opportunity is evenly spread between men and women, faiths and ethnicities, and social mobility does not mean climbing up a limited number of ladders out of poverty. A tiny number of those ladders may lead to high political office in each Party but they are no substitute for racial justice and genuine equality of opportunity.

DO DRAMA DOCUMENTARIES FEED A CULTURE OF MISINFORMATION?

15.11.2022

“Complete and utter rubbish” (Tony Blair). “A barrel-load of malicious nonsense”(John Major). These are comments from political heavyweights on the fifth series of *The Crown*, now in the news. Netflix must be laughing all the way to the bank. But I don’t think *we* should laugh. What is called “fictional dramatisation” is feeding a culture of misinformation. Truth is becoming the collateral damage of the communications revolution and the quest for power and profit.

Perhaps we should be grateful to Kellyanne Conway, campaign manager and adviser to President Trump, speaking two days after his inauguration in January 2017. Trump had been claiming that more people turned out in Washington DC to celebrate his victory than they did for President Obama’s. Photographs of the two events left no doubt that this was nonsense — in fact, a straightforward lie. Conway explained in a NBC *Meet the Press* interview that the President was simply providing “alternative facts”.

We all jeered. But she was alerting everyone that the USA was now tuning in to George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the sinister perversion of language he dubbed “Newspeak”. Believing that Trump was cheated out of the last presidential election is an example of today’s “Goodthink”. Nothing to laugh at.

The worrying thing is that the cultural elite who laughed at Kellyanne Conway have now embraced her “alternative facts” under its newly assumed guise of “re-imagining”. In *The Crown*, for instance, Prince Charles sounds out John Major after an opinion poll has shown that the British public favour abdication. Following Tony Blair’s election in May 1997 Prince Charles

meets the new Prime Minister, hoping to find a way to marry Camilla Parker Bowles, then his “secret companion”, now his wife and Queen Consort. Neither of these meetings happened.

It is fine within drama documentaries to imagine conversations between real people, provided these conversations convey a truth. The late Queen loved horses, so imagined conversations with her trainer can convey a truth. When drama-documentaries imagine such private conversations, or present the results of hard-won investigative journalism, rather than audience-thrilling inventions, they stand up to scrutiny.

The Crown, though, deliberately mixes and blurs fact and fiction, using archive footage to reinforce its story-lines. Such “re-imagining” joins the tidal wave of misinformation that characterises our postmodern era. In this post-truth world, disclaimers are overlooked and cultural leaders seem to be parting company with facts in search of ratings.

Another king has recently come into focus: Richard III in Steve Coogan’s *The Lost King*. The film, released in the UK this October, follows a pattern to which audiences are accustomed and which they enjoy, the story of the amateur who gets it right. In *The Dig* (2021) a self-taught archaeologist played by Ralph Fiennes finds the Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon burial ship, resists discouragement and shares in the triumph. In real life he was marginalised by the professionals. *The Lost King* has a similar story – an amateur finds the body of a king, rather than a boat. The screenplay shoehorns the story into the same template, with truth the first casualty.

Sally Hawkins plays the amateur historian Philippa Langley, who gets it right about Richard III’s burial place despite the University of Leicester’s and its Archeological Services’ attempt to sideline her. Richard Taylor, the University’s deputy-registrar, describes his portrayal in the film as derisive, obstructive, manipulative, amused at the king’s disability, and even rather

sexist, bordering on defamation. He has no redress. This raises the question: does misrepresenting a character only matter if he or she is alive to suffer the consequences?

How about two centuries ago? Frances O'Connor's newly-released biopic *Emily* raises a further problem. The Reverend Patrick Brontë's evangelical curate, William Weightman, appears as the film's guilt-stricken, hypocritical sex interest. Emily and Weightman have a passionate affair with sex scenes in the hay. But the lives of the Brontës are exceptionally well-documented and researched; there is no historical evidence that Emily Brontë had an affair with anyone.

The Rev. William Weightman was in reality a pious evangelical who died in 1842 from cholera, which he probably caught while visiting the sick in Haworth parish. Much loved by his parishioners, he is honoured in Haworth church by a plaque that describes him as a man of "orthodox principles, active zeal, moral habits, learning and affability".

Weightman did indeed, as in the movie, send each of the Brontë sisters a Valentine and there is some evidence that there were warmer feelings between him and Emily's younger sister Anne, but he was clearly no clerical sexual predator or hypocrite. Does traducing the long-dead Emily Brontë and Weightman matter? Is Frances O'Connor entitled to "re-imagine" the truth about them for our entertainment?

"Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past," as Winston Smith obediently says in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And as Stalin allegedly once said: "It's difficult to predict the past" — though Putin's Russia is doing its best. Newspeak has clamped down on the people of China. The Democrats are in an electoral struggle to keep crazy conspiracy theories at bay in the USA. Here in the UK we should not be complacent: a high percentage of Tory Party membership is more

than relaxed about a man accused of being an inveterate, compulsive liar holding the highest office of State. There is real danger that fictional dramatisation is the soft power of the contemporary beast devouring the concept of truth.

When the difference between fact and fiction is deliberately blurred, when we can't distinguish between the two, or can't be bothered to, we end up accustomed to and reconciled to "re-imagining", to "alternative facts", and to falsehoods. Drama-docs, biopics and fictional dramatisations certainly provide one of the three Reithian principles for the BBC: they entertain. But we should not forget the other two: it is worth being vigilant to ensure that these art forms also inform and educate, rather than contribute to a culture of misinformation.

ERDOĞAN'S VICTORY: THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY

29.05.2023

Turkey provides a unique example of the interaction between religion and politics. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with his strong-man appeal to Islamic piety, won the Turkish Presidential election run-off at the weekend by 4% of the vote taking 52.1%. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu with his promise of modern social democracy, had won only 44.9% of the vote in the first round, so stood little chance of overtaking Erdoğan with 49.5%. Fateful figures.

Two highly charged contending mindsets define Turkey's national identity. Kemal Atatürk, a revolutionary nationalist who, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, founded the modern Turkish secular State in 1923. He was influenced by French *laïcité*, an ideological commitment to keep religion out of the public domain, and achieve its complete separation from the State. For many, this is expressed as a passionate rejection of Islam in favour of Turkey's 1928 secular constitution traditionally supported by the military. For others there is a no less passionate religious commitment but to a moderate, pious Islamic conservatism.

The US Brookings Institution wrote glowingly in 2002 that the AKP, Erdoğan's Justice & Development Party which had just swept to power, "heralds democracy". It seemed like a "new model" for the Islamic world. A year later, Erdoğan became Prime Minister. His development of a modern transport system, political flair and skillful negotiation of the deep nationalist tensions, while maintaining his espousal of Islamic values in the AKP, have enabled him to increase his power ever since.

Erdoğan's religious appeal owed much to the phenomenal success of the Gulen Islamic revival movement that provided him

with the cultural and religious credentials of Turkish Islamic piety and helped to attract pious voters. Inspired by Fetullah Gulen, a scholar and preacher, the movement prioritized modern education, understanding of science and a commitment to interfaith dialogue as well as traditional Islamic practice.

During the 1980s, starting with popular *dershane*, crammer schools, the Gulenists – calling themselves *Hizmet* meaning service – gained ground in the medium-sized towns of Anatolia. Those with money, the ‘Anatolian tigers’, invested in media and business forming the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists. Nationwide, Gulenist-led universities and schools became a ladder into the civil service, judiciary, police and army. With a flat structure and a reputation for being secretive, *Hizmet* was accused both of ‘infiltration’ of the state structures and of becoming too close to Erdoğan, collaborating in his dismissals of secular opponents of the AKP. At trials, beginning in 2008, Gulenist prosecutors brought charges, some falsified, against some 275 key secularists, high ranking military, government critics and opposition politicians. By 1999, Fethullah Gulen had withdrawn from the fray to a ranch in Pennsylvania after a new Turkish government which aimed to restore the constitution’s secular principles put him in danger of arrest for ‘anti-secular activity’.

By 2012 Erdoğan was powerful enough to dispense with *Hizmet*’s blessing. Influential in the judiciary, the media, universities and schools and with supporters in some 160 countries, *Hizmet* was now a potential rival needing to be curbed. That October Erdoğan obliged *Hizmet* to hand over its cash-cow, the *dershane* schools, to the State. In February 2014 *Hizmet* members hit back by releasing tapes which provided concrete evidence of major corruption involving the President and his son. Erdoğan brazened it out and was elected President that August.

The key to survival as an autocrat is ruthlessness, luck and courage. A military coup got underway on the night of 15 July 2016 while Erdoğan was on holiday in Marmaris, south-west Turkey. He narrowly escaped capture, broadcast to the nation via a mobile phone held to camera in a TV studio, flew back to Istanbul, called his supporters out onto the streets and regained control. Over 250 people were killed and 2,200 injured. Here was his opportunity finally to take control of the army and destroy his old allies, the Gulenists, some of whom had joined the coup.

A disturbing feature of the coup's aftermath, demonstrating the efficiency and depth of surveillance by the National Intelligence Agency was the immediate arrest of thousands of Gulenists alongside the coup's secular military participants. A massive purge of civil service, police, armed forces, judiciary, media, universities and schools followed. Many were guilty of nothing more than a vague connection with Hizmet. 'estoring democracy', Erdoğan had seized the last pieces completing the puzzle of autocratic power.

A sorry story of not much import? No. Now that we perceive geo-politics as a struggle between democracy and autocracy the Turkish experience is a neon sign flashing confirmation that democracy is losing the global struggle.

Look at the post-Cold War record: Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya three tragic failures of intervention; Iran still in the hands of the mullahs; Russia triumphant in a devastated Syria and destroying Ukraine; Putin contemptuous of European democracies, the USA and international law; China with its terrifying surveillance society watching Ukraine as a dry-run for taking Taiwan; Narendra Modi's discriminating against religious minorities; the army in Pakistan unwilling to accept Imran Khan's attempt to reduce its power over the State. Sudan wrecked by two military factions. South Africa

by government corruption. Just one hopeful sign in Brazil with its peaceful democratic transfer of power from Jair Bolsonaro.

There are two main possible reactions to Erdoğan's adding five more years to his twenty in power. Firstly, realpolitik requires continuing efforts to keep Turkey, a NATO member, out of the expanding band of brother autocratic regimes around the world, notably Russia. Another imperative is continuing huge payments to Erdoğan, following a 2016 migration deal which is keeping nearly four million refugees (3.6 million of them Syrians) out of the EU.

Secondly, there is the utopian hope that one last push in the next elections in 2028 will remove Erdoğan, ending the imprisonment of opposition politicians, journalists and dissident voices, as well as removing government control of 98% of press, radio and television. But how realistic is this? Over half the electorate, not only in Erdoğan's Anatolian heartland, feel he represents their values and hopes, and sustains their version of national identity. He represents strength amidst the fragility of their lives and their fear of repeating the chaos across Turkey's southern and eastern borders.

Must foreign policy choose between these two visions of Turkey's future? Between realpolitik and utopian? In a recent slim volume, *The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power* by Robert D. Kaplan, a US journalist who has served on the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, implies we need to embrace both. The tragic mind, he argues, experiences failure not as fatalism or despair but as a goad to greater understanding and as a prompt for the heroism of 'acting bravely in the face of no great result'.

The tragedy of Kemal Kiliçdarğoglu and his defeated Republican People's Party (CHP) is that however much he may understand the nationalism, culture and thinking of Turkey's rural

poor and of the working class in its medium sized towns – his talk of expelling the refugees - he does not speak to them and their condition convincingly. Erdoğan, more street-wise, plays on their heart-strings. No-one can doubt Kiliçdarğoglu's heroism and bravery in facing a ruthless autocrat. There are lessons to be learned about navigating today's multiple threats to democracy from the failure of Turkey's Opposition.

TWILIGHT OF DEMOCRACY?

17.08.2023

What has gone wrong with Democracy and with our democracy here in Britain? Line up Trump and his followers, Putin's Russia, Orbán's Hungary, Poland's Law & Justice Party, the Brothers of Italy as well as Johnson's popularity, rise and fall, and you can detect a certain commonality, a plausible story about the decline of democracy and the spread of authoritarian populism. That's why Anne Applebaum's slim Penguin volume "Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and The Parting of Friends", first published in 2020, received rave reviews and an immediate reprint.

A savvy journalist - liberal in the US sense - Applebaum weaves friends' political choices, and their subsequent changed relationships with her, into a wider analysis of the populist drift in Europe and the USA. And she does it very well. Twilight of Democracy provides an analysis of the fragmentation in the last decade of Centre-Right politics and the rise of right-wing authoritarianism. We have become accustomed to some of the proposed causes: the polarising role of social media, its deliberate manipulation to promote anger and resentment – and so more clicks - the 'cascades of falsehood', the conspiracy theories, 'the desire to belong to a superior community'. Applebaum explores such explanations. But there is a further 'why?' lurking unexplored behind these factors.

Applebaum's focus is inevitably on widespread generic causes given the great differences between the recent history of the different countries featured in her book. There is very little about the role of specific changes in countries' political economy, the impact - both social and personal - of striking inequality giving rise to emotions and a mindset attracted to radical authoritarian change. Sometimes, as in the distinction she makes between

‘reflective’ and ‘restorative’ nostalgia – those who miss the past but don’t really want it back and those whose ‘cultural despair’ drives them to radical action to restore it - there are ideas that demand more consideration. A broad-brush approach can hide more than it reveals.

In Britain where a minority live very well, according to the Joseph Rowntree Association 4.1 million children, one in three in 2022, were living in poverty. Some 17% of households currently say they cannot afford any food at least one day a month whilst others are extraordinarily rich. Many must skip meals. But the coming years promise steady growth in fine dining restaurants. Such inequality generates anger and resentment that can be manipulated. Those so disadvantaged are offered scapegoats: immigrants, the EU, the ‘woke’ elite.

Some nine years ago, Fraser Nelson in the Spectator made telling comparisons between living standards in Britain and in the different US states. We came in at 49th out of 50 just ahead of the poorest state in the Union, Mississippi which has the lowest health, education, development and GDP per capita in the USA. Will Hutton in a sobering opinion piece in the 13 August Observer writes about the consequences of persistent low productivity and low growth having become the norm. “Regions like the West Midlands, particularly economically linked to the EU, have been disproportionately badly hit”. National debt has trebled in the last twenty years with 10% of government tax revenue now going on debt servicing. And Hutton cites John Burn Murdoch (Financial Times 11 August) that if you remove London from average British per capita GDP, it falls by 14-15% to below that of Mississippi. By way of comparison removing the economic hub of Munich from German figures produces only a 1% overall drop. Britain has entrenched poverty, geographical as well as class-based, and

outside London is, according to Will Hutton, “scarcely better off than middle-income developing countries.”

Unlike many accused of gloom-mongering – and I must sometimes include myself – Hutton seeks to tell the truth however gloomy but also to suggest remedies, in this instance enabling government to think beyond balancing the national books. He recommends splitting the Treasury into an Office for the Budget and an Economic Strategy Ministry, strengthening the UK Infrastructure Bank and British Business Bank and pushing our national £3.5 pension pot into supporting enterprise and risk. Net Zero and Levelling Up, he argues should form a central part of a national strategy for ‘leveraging’ new industry and technology. In the past we could ride out financial crises thanks to established trading relationships, first in the Empire and then in the EU. But now, Hutton writes, we do not have an “empire or the EU anchoring our trade. We are alone”.

Our particular “twilight of democracy” has its distinctive shadows. I remember years ago the then Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool, Patrick Kelly, saying to me: “I can’t see how democracy can work with a Press that misinforms. How are people to take informed decisions?” His point is even more pertinent when people are trapped within social media silos.

Applebaum is right to devote several pages to Johnson’s and Cummings’ malign works and poms. We do share aspects of a common political pathology with other countries. But many of our institutions - most notably our legal system, our universities, the BBC and structures of local government - have held up despite attempts to undermine them and turn the public against them. Government erosion of our NHS, threatening now to crumble into a second-rate service for those unable to afford insurance or fees for private care, has not diminished the public’s attachment to the idea of health care and treatment free at the point of delivery.

But we have not dodged the bullet. The wounds to our society and economy, at least to date, are severe but not lethal.

CAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE GOVERNMENT BY OMERTA?

02.04.2024

Conservative politicians attribute our parlous economic situation to the cost of COVID and the inflated price of oil and gas due to the war in Ukraine. The barmy budgeting of Liz Truss and her *malfortuné* Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kwasi Kwarteng, sometimes get a mention, a cautionary tale of self-destruction. As for the third of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the word BREXIT shall never pass the lips of a government minister.

How should we describe this omission? Google to the rescue: an English version of the South Italian word Omerta, a “code of silence and code of honour and conduct that places importance on silence in the face of questioning by authorities or outsiders” - usually associated with the Mafia.

Ministers and MPs know a great deal about the impact of BREXIT - hence Omerta. The UK Department of Trade and the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy like the European Commission are all clients of Cambridge Econometrics. In a report commissioned by the Mayor of London and published in January 2024, Cambridge Econometrics estimates that we lost 2 million jobs due to BREXIT, and that in 2023 the average person was nearly £2,000 worse off (Londoners by £3,400) than had the Referendum gone the other way. Goldman Sachs’ 2024 report “The Structure and Cyclical Costs of Brexit”, puts the economic loss caused by BREXIT at between 4-8% of GDP and concludes that since the Referendum Britain “significantly underperformed other advanced economies”. Both reports, complex calculations, emphasise the impact on trade and investment.

The Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR), an independent public body funded by the Treasury, analyses our public finances

and produces bi-annual economic forecasts intended to guide Government's economic policy - so heeded by Prime Ministers, except of course Liz Truss. It broadly supports the conclusions of Cambridge Econometrics and Goldman Sachs. Rishi Sunak is well aware of the extent of BREXIT damage. In 2016, David Cameron, believing he would win the Referendum, turned a complex issue into a binary choice. No rules were established to govern the conduct of the ensuing campaigns, nor the information provided the electorate. Voters need accurate, relevant information to make informed political choices. Voters making a huge decision by direct democracy were lied to and disinformed in a campaign led by charismatic but unscrupulous men.

The public did not necessarily believe their lies or the battle-bus promise of “£350 million sent per week to the EU” being returned to the NHS, but such disinformation served to dramatically and divisively raise awareness of the Leave campaign. Thanks to the nurturing of division and hostility, any empathy for the thinking and feelings of people on the other side of the argument could not get a look-in.

‘A shared framework for containing conflicting aims’ created by ‘good faith compromise’, ‘positive sum’ agreements and brokered bargains, appear in Brook Manville and Josiah Ober’s *The Civic Bargain: How Democracy Survives*, Princeton & Oxford University Press 2023, as important ingredients in any functioning democracy. They offer a simple definition: the pithy “No boss – except one another”, but there is no discussion of how this is best achieved by direct or representative democracy.

It is a stretch to describe the BREXIT referendum, conducted in a climate of disinformation and lies, the subsequent negotiations and the unlawful proroguing of Parliament, in these terms. Their consequences were the reverse of what Aristotle called ‘civic friendship’, seen by the two authors as sustaining democracy.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

OMERTA about Brexit is part of a wider government Omerta about the damage done to our political culture with its unwritten but well understood values and codes of conduct. It is important, though counter-intuitive, to recognise the erosion of democracy added to by the 2016 Referendum with its compelling slogan 'Take Back Control'. The quantifiable economic consequences of BREXIT are not the only ones to contend with; there is also the absolutist mindset encouraged by the binary referendum choice, in versus out, pervading public attitudes.

The gradual nibbling away of the mainstays of a democratic culture has done nothing to improve voter turn-out. Youth are giving up on their fundamental civil right to vote, to sack the government and install another, to put into practice – Manville and Ober's - "no boss except one another". In addition, many people are responding to continuous grim reports on radio and TV with 'news avoidance' that further encourages a "they're all the same" rejection of political participation.

The 2022 Electoral Reform Act directly affects turn-out and not only in general elections. The Bill abolished the supplementary (second choice) vote and made mayoral elections first past the post, favouring the Conservative Party. Voters not showing photographic voter ID are turned away, an imported form of voter suppression, part of the US Republican electoral playbook known to disadvantage youth, ethnic minorities and poorer voters. In the 2019 general election - before this requirement - 33 alleged impersonations with 9 convictions came to light - amongst 32 million people who voted. A 2023 You-Gov poll found one in four voters were unaware of the new requirement. In last year's local elections, according to the Electoral Commission, some 4% of eligible voters said they didn't vote because of the new regulations. Voters in a democracy need obstacles to voting removed not inserted on spurious grounds.

Electoral campaigning can, and is, used as an opportunity for the destruction of ‘civic friendship’ by gas-lighting and the flagrant untruths of attack ads. In support of the Conservative mayoral candidate, Susan Hall, a video purporting to reveal panic on the London Underground appeared on X (Twitter). It turned out to be filmed in Penn station, New York. “Gripped by the tendrils of rising crime” Londoners were staying at home said the voiceover. Picture of empty street.

The fake ‘evidence’ from the USA was taken down but the fake assertions about citizens’ safety in London stayed in. The Greater London area with 9.75 million people will have more crimes (for example than greater Glasgow, 1.7 million, to which London is sometimes compared), more bins to empty, more air pollution to be cut. As Ministers know, meaningful crime statistics are based on size of population. In the real world, the crime *rate* in London is *below* the national average.

There is danger that such American-style attack ads have infected the Labour Party. Their on-line ad a year ago asked: “Do you think adults convicted of assaulting children should go to prison”, and answered, “Rishi Sunak Doesn’t”. Shocked Shadow Ministers and Party members protested. Sir Keir Starmer had a torrid time on Sky News trying to limit the fall-out. The truth is such ads are widely shared and read by millions creating serious temptation for politicians who find that honesty and truth-telling disadvantage them.

We’ve got several more months campaigning to endure. Omerta, disinformation and voter suppression are poisoning our political culture. Together they preclude acknowledging and learning from experience. This is not how democracy survives. This is not how to heal domestic divisions nor counter the rise of threatening authoritarian regimes opposed to democratic values. You don’t have to read *The Civic Bargain* to figure that out.

FREEDOM OF CHOICE & THE ‘NANNY STATE’

25.04.2024

Rishi Sunak’s Tobacco and Vapes Bill, banning sales to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009, is passing through Parliament. Cake Tsarina Prue Leith proved herself again, on BBC’s Today programme last week, as a popular champion of government intervention to protect – young - consumers from forming bad habits. ‘Government intervention’, though, is a weak substitute for that highly charged slogan ‘the Nanny State’. Words lose or gather power in politics. The Nanny State has become shorthand for Big Government, thus the enemy for all true libertarians.

Libertarians are good at inventing slogans used to ridicule policy or practice especially of active government. Remember ‘Health & Safety gone mad’: ha, ha, ha. That one worked well until the Grenfell Tower tragedy. But combatting morbidity due to unhealthy food has yet to have its seat-belt moment. The Nanny State taunt is now working against the creation of an effective national food strategy.

Former Cabinet Minister, Iain Macleod, coined the term writing in *The Spectator*, 3 December 1965. “In my occasional appearances as a poor man’s Peter Simple I fire salvos in the direction of what I call the Nanny State. Mr. Fraser is, although you wouldn’t think it, the Minister of Transport [in Harold Wilson’s first government]. He has come forward with the perishing nonsense of a plan for a 70 mph speed limit even on motorways [sic]”. This controversy over motorway limits is forgotten but Nanny State is now wheeled out for food regulation. But why does it resonate so well?

The old-fashioned nanny, traditionally a disciplinarian, supervised children’s meals. The understood message is that the

Big State treats us as children. Maybe also a covert swipe at the hated ‘metropolitan elites’, with their modern nannies and leanings towards vegetarianism. But given the libertarian ideology of choice, how much is healthy eating a matter of genuine choice?

The individual is battling against the influence of the food companies who control the food business, led by the Swiss-based Nestle SA - whose 2022 revenue was \$99 billion. Health messages are understood but consumers contend with clever advertising and packaging of food containing too much fat, sugar and salt, all designed by experts to tempt our taste buds. Parents sheep-doggedly try to manoeuvre their offspring past enticing arrays of sweeties and chocolates to reach the supermarket check-out. And responding partly to the changed role of women, the big food companies offer a fast and relatively cheap substitute for home cooking after an exhausting day’s work. How free does that make free choice?

A 2023 study by Cancer Research UK produced some frightening figures. Body Mass Index (BMI) is calculated by weight in kilograms divided by height in metres squared. Using this measure, by 2040, 71% of British people are predicted to be overweight (compared to 64% today). And of these 36% - 21 million people – will suffer from the complex, chronic disease of obesity defined as a BMI over 30. The consequences of this for future prevalence of cancers and diabetes are disturbing. Currently the NHS spends £10 billion, 10% of its budget, on treating diabetes. There is no chance that the National Health Service will be able to cope with millions more diabetics. And in the words of the respected social welfare expert, Baroness Louise Casey, “the less well-off you are the more likely you are to be prey to unhealthy food”.

Healthy politics – healthy in all senses - is about working for the common good. Catholic social teaching has a definition: “the

totality of social conditions allowing persons to achieve their communal and individual fulfilment”. The concept of subsidiarity entered Catholic social thinking in the 19th century as a feature of the common good. As the former EU Commission President Jacques Delors, a devout Catholic, pointed out in a 2009 interview, the term subsidiarity came originally from a Calvinist principle of Church order in the 17th century: the lower Church unit of association took precedence over the higher. Subsidiarity took on new relevance supporting resistance from civil society against the all-controlling totalitarian and military dictatorships of the 20th century.

The Nanny State slogan might garner some support from a crude understanding of ‘subsidiarity’ championed by the UK in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty which established the EU. During the internal debates of the EU, the principle of subsidiarity became used to define the - contested - roles of member states in relation to the EU ‘central government’, the European Commission. Today it best expresses support for the life of local communities, particularly ‘in case of need’, implying approval of ‘enabling government’.

The higher units of subsidiarity now include not just governments but multi-national corporations and supermarket chains. The creation of a strategy prioritising health and the environment must consider the interacting dynamics of all. In a situation of intense competition, lest their competitors undercut them, none of the food giants can risk unilaterally eliminating or radically reducing unhealthy ingredients. Government taxation of the content of unhealthy foods and drinks provides an - enforced - level playing field open to change. A sugar tax on soft drinks introduced in 2018, called the Soft Drinks Industrial Levy (SDIL), has reduced children’s sugar intake but not enough.

Commissioned by the Department of Education, in 2013, restaurateurs Henry Dimpleby and John Vincent produced a pioneering School Food Plan. Initially its vision of ‘flavourful, fresh food served by friendly fulfilled cooks in financially sound school kitchens’ caused widespread excitement. The vision faded under government austerity. Dimpleby’s 2021 National Food Strategy: The Plan, also commissioned by government, sets out a reasoned and well-researched way forward for food and farming. He proposes, for example, a ‘Sugar and Salt Reformulation Tax’, £3 per kilogram of sugar and £6 per kilogram of salt ‘for use in processed foods or in restaurants and businesses’. But taxation remains a toxic word even within the context of preventative action acceptable to food companies. Sir Keir Starmer has promised not to introduce further sugar or salt taxes while saying he would ban junk food advertising before the watershed.

Government promised to respond to The Plan with a White Paper. Instead, they produced a 13 June 2022 policy paper widely criticised not least by Dimpleby himself. The paper gives the impression of providing a comprehensive national strategy while largely avoiding significant interventions - such as taxing offending ingredients. An advertising watershed for children will only be implemented after 1 October 2025 and non-removal of sweetie chicanes in supermarkets is disregarded without penalty.

Often when confronting contemporary problems, the defensive political response to criticism is what’s the alternative? But there is an alternative. Implement more of Dimpleby’s strategy. In the words of Prue Leith in 2022: "There is so much to celebrate about our food, but we do need to act urgently to protect our health and that of the environment. The Plan is compelling and overdue. If the Government adopts it, we will, at last, be putting our food system on the right path to health and prosperity” - and saving our NHS. We are still waiting.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

Can today's right-wing back benchers really imagine that government interventions to help people stop harming themselves and their children lead us towards Xi Jinping's dystopian State? From their entrenched opposition to banning advertising unhealthy food and drinks directed at children, you might think so.

The libertarian Right using their clever slogans and ideology are endangering our health and environment. They should be seen for what they are: dangerous ideologues.

GROWTH: A SUITABLE CASE FOR TREATMENT?

28.06.2024

The word “Growth”, endlessly repeated by politicians during the present election campaign, is doing a lot of heavy lifting. Faith, Growth, but rarely Charity, are the cardinal virtues displayed for the mass media. When all the promises are ‘fully costed’ but fall short of balancing, Growth is the shared panacea.

The trouble is growth post-BREXIT, Covid and Putin’s war looks feeble. No politician is reckless enough to explain exactly what they mean by Growth – though there are clues in the “Kick-start Economic Growth” section of the Labour Party Manifesto. Obviously, something organic and getting bigger - not to be mistaken for the magical money tree.

Economists created a value they could express as a single figure or how would we all know if the economy, more precisely GDP, (Gross Domestic Product) was getting bigger, smaller or remaining unchanged? Not that there has ever been a clear consensus on what should be included in GDP.

We still hang onto something of Margaret Thatcher’s homely simile that the national economy is like a huge domestic budget and managed in the same way. It isn’t. And, incidentally, domestic labour is one of the productive activities that economists leave out of GDP measurements. Were it to be included, the ILO, International Labour Organisation, estimate unpaid domestic work and caring to amount to be 9% of global GDP (\$11 trillion) of which women’s domestic labour makes up more than two-thirds or 6.6%.

Surprisingly, despite their prominence today, Growth and GDP are a relatively recent concern of economists. The history of Growth as a concept is set out in the opening chapters of Daniel

Susskind's brilliantly accessible *Growth: The Reckoning* Allen-Lane 2024. It was the economic crisis of the Great Depression (1929-1939) that triggered the search for some simple measurement of economies. During the Second World War the question of what proportion of the overall economy could safely be devoted to war production became pressing. "The American people have learned during the war the measure of their productive capacity', President Roosevelt triumphantly declared to Congress in January 1945". And it was not long before measures of Growth expressed as GDP were regarded as important indicators of who was winning the Cold War. Now, as the current election campaign nears the end, Growth has been established as the panacea for national decline.

So today we have figures for GDP per capita over time telling us whether there is growth or 'degrowth'. And because economics dominate our political thinking about what matters, while economists keep at arms' length other things that matter, which they label as 'externalities', public political debate does not engage with questions about the price paid for Growth.

Since the industrial revolution, whose origins lie at the end of the 18th century, what is now described as Growth brought unprecedented prosperity to much of the world, Africa is an exception, reducing poverty, dramatically improving education, enabling leaps forward in public health, feeding vastly increased numbers of people. But, looking at the UK – and not only the UK – nearly all these advances are now either stalled or going into reverse.

The damage arising from blinkered, ungoverned Growth includes the fast-approaching climate catastrophe caused by carbon emissions, the degradation of our natural environment, the possibility of nuclear holocaust narrowly averted at least twice in the last century, ill-health caused by industrialised food, and

growing inequality. The Growth dilemma is never “fully costed” nor raised in the barrage of interviewers’ questions about the economy on radio and TV. Growth as economic panacea remains a deceptive proposition unless its hidden trade-offs are acknowledged, shared with citizens for deliberation, and mitigated by government action. This is not the only message of Susskind’s revealing book, but it is certainly the most important one.

Susskind sets Growth within the context of the common good, rather than in short-term party-political la-la-land. He poses fundamental questions about what kind of society in what kind of the world do, we, our children and grandchildren want to live in? Something you might have expected political leaders to talk about. And expected the electorate to want to hear about.

Where *Growth: The Reckoning* is doubly helpful it is in resetting Growth within a discussion of trade-offs, rather than a simple binary argument, more growth or degrowth, and in proposing a direction of travel for social and economic development. Perhaps it is most insightful in its vision of Growth as meaning more than increasing the production of material *things* - and *money*- by adding *ideas* and *innovation* to the mix and proposing other ends to pursue. Susskind wants to redirect and redefine Growth not get rid of it. He distinguishes this approach from the temptation to insert socially desirable activities into the old, tired model which is yielding diminishing returns.

What is considered socially desirable poses moral questions liable to be treated in a technocratic manner or left to market forces. This is not as theoretical as it sounds. As an example, Susskind uses the pool of networked ideas existing at the time of the COVID outbreak in early 2020 in the world of medical research which, with government funding, created COVID vaccines in an extraordinarily short time. And here the moral dimension of this innovation was evident in the failure to supply

the global South adequately. Susskind delves more deeply into this terrain with an interesting discussion of intellectual property – the ownership of ideas - “the most important toolbox that societies have to shape the creation and distribution of ideas”. Balancing the costs of Growth, sacrificing one benefit for another, requires the widest possible deliberation and consultation.

To achieve Growth Government must provide incentives the necessary means - such as a healthy educated workforce - and an enabling atmosphere. Yes, the other most repetitious campaign word “a plan”. It must include investment in research and development, and in public-private partnerships – which has some positive references in the Labour Manifesto and in James Naughtie’s exceptional exploration of Growth and innovation in *The World at One* on 23 June. Susskind also calls for citizen involvement in the form of civic assemblies to generate and evaluate new ideas but also to nurture comprehension of what is at stake, as well as support for progressive forms of government intervention.

Susskind’s believes in “the innovative genius of humankind”. His book sustains a refreshing balance of ideas, academic analysis and down-to-earth realism drawn from his work in the policy unit at No. 10. The gulf between his book’s clarity, understanding, and vision and the mind-numbing repetition of the word Growth that political leaders, right now, feel obliged to utter under questioning is shocking.

Have these six weeks locked in party-political-media inanity been democracy at work? If you don’t think so send this book to whoever gets elected in your constituency.

HUMAN RIGHTS

IS BOSNIA NEXT ON PUTIN'S LIST?

19.11.2021

Bosnia is heading for conflict that could draw in NATO, the EU and the UK. Two weeks ago Christian Schmidt, the specially appointed High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina (B-i-H) who has very considerable powers, described the small Balkans country as facing the biggest existential threat since the 'ethnic cleansing' and the genocidal massacre at Srebrenica during the early 1990s. "The prospects of further division and conflict are very real", Schmidt reported to the UN Security Council.

The US-brokered peace accords, the 1995 Dayton Agreement, created the present State known for short as Bosnia or B-i-H. Its constitutional arrangements are complex. The Dayton negotiators brokered a power-sharing arrangement. The State has three presidents representing its three principal ethnic groups, (Orthodox) Serbs, (Catholic) Croats and the (Muslim) Bosniak majority, and is made up of two semi-autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Serbian *Republika Srpska*. Not surprisingly the convoluted governance has been unable to resolve tensions between Bosnia's constituent parts.

The *Republika Srpska* and Bosnia's chimaera of a presidency were designed to counter Serbian separatism - and failed. The Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, supported by the West and twice President of *Republika Srpska*, rose to prominence as a moderating counter-weight to Bosnian Serb nationalists who were seeking complete independence. Once in power Dodik soon adopted their populist, nationalist stance even threatening secession. His most recent démarche is to announce his intention to pass 'divorce' legislation to create – in order of gravity – a

separate armed force and judiciary, and direct *Republika Srpska* taxation.

These threats seems to have been a riposte to the departing High Representative, Valentin Inzko, who in July 2021 pushed through a new law criminalising genocide denial in the face of adamant Serbian assertions that Srebrenica amounted to no such thing. Inzko's departing shot resulted in a temporary Serbian withdrawal from the Presidency, Government and Parliament. The once moderate Dodik called the new law 'a nail in Bosnia's coffin'.

The past remains a dead weight on Bosnia's future. Whether or not Dodik's threat of what amounted to secession was a bluff simply directed at Bosnian Serb voters, it produced a flurry of international activity including a visit, on 6 November, by the hard-Right nationalist Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orban, and, a day later, US Assistant Secretary of State, Gabriel Escobar. A 'leak' had Dodik telling Escobar that he couldn't care less if his actions resulted in US sanctions. Dodik was apparently 'open to discussing' his separatist legislation but was not about to stop preparing it. No sooner had Escobar departed than on 9 November Dodik went off to meet with the Turkey's authoritarian President Erdogan in Ankara. Bosnia's future, an important element in the stability and peace of the Balkans, was only briefly a news item.

My own first introduction to Bosnia in 2016 left me in no doubt that the 1992-1995 war cast a long shadow over the country. I was there to collaborate with the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM). We were working with 18-25 year olds in a programme directed at increasing social integration amongst youth, the first post-war generation. First thing, straight off the plane, was a programme in Prijedor in *Republika Srpska* close to where a mass grave of Bosnian Muslims had recently been discovered. Would we like to visit the site? I explained that

while we would, of course, wish to pay our respects, we could not risk being perceived as partisan of any ethnic group if our work was to be credible. Visiting the site of an atrocity by Serb military would not have been a good start.

Once we began the programme, we discovered that the ethnically diverse young people in our programme did not want to talk about the past. Their anger was directed against all of the ethnic political elites whose corruption and self-interest were served by sustaining the ethnic divisions and which they saw as taking away their future and prospects. This was not because the past had had no impact on them personally. One young man told me about his father, still suffering from post-traumatic symptoms, waking up screaming at night. We discovered that hostility to politicians and their clients was just as common in other parts of the country. For the young emigration was the key issue: should they stay or should they leave?

After Prijedor, Sarajevo - where we stayed in remarkably cheap but excellent university accommodation and worked with a new group of young people at the IOM offices. Sarajevo like an elongate City of Bath sits in a valley between mountains. You follow the river and main road into the centre to find the actual corner of a non-descript little street near the Latin Bridge where Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914 by a Bosnian Serb nationalist. The route inevitably evoked memories of old 1990s TV footage. I tried not to imagine women out buying bread shot down by snipers positioned in the mountain beyond the river above the city. Tourist souvenirs included biros made from rifle shells, a hopeful Bosnian variation of the biblical swords into plough shares.

600 troops in EUFOR, a small European multinational force, still provide a token peace-keeping force. In 2016 Bosnia applied to become a member of the EU but disagreements within the EU

itself about future membership of Balkans States have meant negligible progress towards accession and a growing reciprocal lack of interest, despite the stability and prosperity derived from Croatia's Accession in 2013. The UK has pledged to work for peace in Bosnia but where is Bosnia heading and what will be its significance for the UK?

The danger is that an emboldened Putin ever probing, seeking opportunities and assessing the resolve of his opponents, will see Bosnia as his next stress-test for the West. Time has elapsed since Russian military interventions in Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine improved his ratings and popular appeal. For Putin the attraction of Bosnia is that his KGB State can create mischief there through an established intermediary, Serbia. An outbreak of hostilities would, by humiliating EUFOR, be mud kicked in the eye of the European Union. Russian covert support for BREXIT clearly revealed that weakening the EU is one of Putin's goals. And Bosnia is one of NATO's *Partners for Peace*. A violent political implosion in Bosnia would also be a move against NATO which has a military headquarters in Sarajevo, showing it up as a paper tiger. The pot is bubbling. It would need little stirring by Moscow.

A feint away from Ukraine would come naturally to Russia with its sense of grievance that its proprietary rights in the Balkans - and Eastern Europe - have been abused. The British Foreign Office has recently warned of Putin's hidden hand in the current crisis. The question is what are they and the EU going to do about it? Putin may well be calculating – nothing.

TRIAL & ERROR: PROSECUTING WAR
CRIMES IN UKRAINE

09.06.2022

Is it wise for Ukrainian civil courts to try Russian soldiers for war crimes? In mid-May, a sergeant from a tank division, Vadim Shishimarin, admitted killing a retired tractor driver, 62-year old Oleksandr Shelipov, outside his house in the small village of Chupakhivka. In his defence Shishimarin alleged that he was obeying an order to shoot Shelipov who was using a mobile phone and assumed to be transmitting to Ukrainian forces the location of the car in which the Russians were fleeing. If true, some might feel that his defence had some strength. The judge sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Television footage of the convicted Russian sergeant in a glass cage and confronted by his victim's widow, left little doubt that the purpose of this trial was to serve as a warning that the invading Russian troops could not act with impunity. More recently, Aleksandr Ivanov and Alekandr Bobykin were given an eleven years six months sentence for shelling with a Grad multiple-launcher system 'civilian infrastructure', hitting notably residential tower blocks and a secondary school, near Ukraine's second city, Kharkiv. The first rape trial of a Russian soldier is pending.

Prosecution of enemy military crimes in civilian courts *during hostilities* is unusual though not illegal. Guilty verdicts were not in doubt but the location, timing and impartiality of the Ukrainian court's judgements all are. Another serious problem is that such trials offer Putin an excuse for show-trials of Ukrainian prisoners, including foreign volunteers, in Russian courts. The Ukrainians themselves are systematically gathering evidence of war crimes. At the time of writing, the office of the Ukrainian

Prosecutor-General has over 14,000 instances of alleged war crimes on its books. But, under the circumstances, wouldn't it be better if an independent international body were to be the prosecutor? In fact, there is one at hand, the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Ukraine, though, has had complex legal wrangles in its Constitutional Court over ratifying the Statute of Rome, the 1998 treaty that brought the ICC into being. President Zelensky claims that he intends to ratify the Statute but this has yet to happen.

From 2014, in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the first - covert - Russian invasion of the Donbas region, Ukraine recognised the *ad hoc* jurisdiction of the ICC for "identifying, prosecuting and judging the authors and accomplices of acts committed on the territory of Ukraine". In December 2017, State Parties to the ICC – members with obligations to arrest and transfer or provide access to evidence, witnesses and legal support for prosecutions - activated its jurisdiction over the crime of aggression, "the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State". This would be the only possible approach to prosecuting Putin himself likely to gain traction. By April 2022, 41 State Parties led by Lithuania had referred the situation after the massive Russian second invasion of Ukraine to the ICC. Currently there is an exceptionally large ICC team in the country coordinating investigations with the Ukrainian government. Britain is supporting their work financially and with legal advice.

But there are longstanding problems with ICC jurisdiction. Both the US and Russia signed the July 1998 Rome Statute in 2000 but neither became a member of the court thereby adopting its moral and legal obligations and providing it political and technical support. Russia pulled out in 2016 shortly after the ICC published a "damning verdict" on Russia's 2014 occupation of

Crimea and Sevastopol. The USA is one of seven countries that initially refused to sign alongside such uncomfortable bedfellows as China and Iraq. President Bill Clinton having signed did not allow the treaty to be ratified in the Senate. Obama made some supportive moves and sent observers to the annual meeting of the governing Assembly of States Parties in The Hague. But the Trump administration told the ICC that it would revoke visas for any ICC staff seeking to investigate Americans for war crimes. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo added that the same would apply to any staff involved in investigating war crimes committed by Israel or other allied nations.

The ICC currently has 123 Members. Britain is one. No thanks to the USA. I remember a fraught moment in Autumn 1998 when, at a Foreign Office reception, I found myself amongst a small group clustered deferentially around a senior civil servant. In rushed a white-faced - lowlier – official. In the heat of the moment he blurted out that Bill Clinton had just been on the line to Tony Blair trying to talk him out of signing the Rome Statute. Special relationship or not, the Prime Minister held his ground.

The exceptionalism manifested in this US position has damaging implications for future prosecution of war crimes which Fintan O’Toole, discusses with his usual caustic panache in ‘Our Hypocrisy on War Crimes’, 26 May 2022 *New York Review of Books*. He considers the political background to US conduct during the Vietnam War comparing it with that of the Russian Federation in Ukraine whilst acknowledging the lack of equivalence. But this doesn’t soften his conclusion. “The brutal truth is that the US abandoned its commitment to the ICC not for reasons of legal principle but from the same motive that animated Putin”. In short, neither State wanted to have its military or political leaders prosecuted for war crimes by an international institution. There is a “yawning gap”, he writes, between “Biden’s

grandiloquent rhetoric about Putin’s criminality” and US reluctance to give its support to the ICC, the body created by the international community to deal with such criminality.

The Shishimarin trial’s real importance is as testimony that Oleksandr Shepilov matters as an individual and that his right to life shall not be violated with impunity. Prosecuting his killer is not Victor’s Justice, the criticism leveled against the Nuremberg Tribunals: the war in Ukraine continues with no victors. But the trial is open to the challenge that this is not impartial justice. It would have carried greater weight had it been undertaken by the ICC or by another international tribunal such as those created after the Rwandan genocide and the Balkan wars. Future trials of war crimes committed in Ukraine should not be simply exercises in exposing Putin’s brutality or part of the propaganda war fought alongside the bloody armed conflict. They need to show, despite the horror and destruction of war, that the law stands firm as the scaffolding around collapsing civilization.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION: TOUCHSTONE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

22.11.2022

All rights are equal but some rights are more equal than others. FIFA and the Qatar authorities are justly under fire for restrictions on LGBT rights and their treatment of migrant labourers. But nothing is said about the abuse of rights to religious freedom, a world-wide problem as well as one local to Qatar and other gulf states where many migrant workers, especially those in domestic service, are Christians from the Philippines.

Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights spells out what the right to religious freedom - violated around the world - means in detail. "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance". This means little in practice today, neither globally nor in Qatar which hosts big interfaith gatherings but where, even at Easter, Christian servants are refused time off to attend religious services.

Worldwide harassment and persecution of people because of their faith, from verbal abuse and hate speech, to arson and murder, is rising steadily. Only eight of 198 countries monitored by the Evangelical Christian organisation *Open Doors* get a clean bill of health. *Aid to the Church in Need*, a Catholic organisation which works in over 140 countries, is currently running a 'Break the Silence' campaign to raise awareness of the persecution of Christians *and all faiths* [my italics] with a day of special events this Wednesday in London's Ukrainian Catholic Church. *Aid to the Church in Need* has also renewed focus on Nigeria, where

attacks on Christian churches have risen from 18 in 2019 to 31 in 2020 and 23 in just the first six months of this year.

Religious freedom, a touchstone of human rights around the world, is not ignored in Britain but tends to be mainly a Conservative Party concern. The UK has a special envoy for Freedom of Religious Belief (FoRB), Fiona Bruce MP, an evangelical Christian. Both the Commons and Lords, the latter with 26 Church of England bishops, the Lords Spiritual, do lobby and speak out on FoRB issues. But with the exception of the Uighers and Rohingya, the cases they raise rarely are deemed newsworthy, can be complex, and seldom evoke large-scale sympathy.

Take the case of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian. When she offered water to a Muslim co-worker it was refused; her ‘Christian hands’ rendered it *haram*, forbidden. She was told to convert to Islam to cleanse her impurity. An altercation ensued in which she allegedly blasphemed against the Prophet and the Qur’ān. Eventually Asia Bibi was convicted under Pakistan’s blasphemy laws and spent eight years on death row before being acquitted in a High Court judgement in October 2018. Here was a named individual, a fruit-picker, a working woman with whom we could empathise. Public opinion was aroused.

According to *Open Doors*, of the three Abrahamic faiths, Christians suffer from some degree of harassment and persecution in 145 of the world’s 198 States, Muslims in 139, and Jews in 88. But is discrimination always based on faith alone? In India the Modi government for its own purposes is promoting Hindu-based cultural nationalism against Muslims. Are the Hazara in Afghanistan persecuted because they are not Pashtun or because they are Shi’a or both?

Particularly in Africa some ethnicities, minority and occupational groups are identified by their religious beliefs.

Bloody clashes over land-use in parts of northern Nigeria between pastoralists, who are broadly-speaking Muslim, and farmers, broadly speaking Christian, are perceived as religious conflict. From one perspective these aren't important distinctions. In all cases human rights are grievously violated. And as my old Nigerian friend Matthew Kukah, Bishop of Sokoto, once said: 'What do you call these people? I call them criminals'.

In 1971 a Synod of the world's Catholic bishops declared: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." A wordy way of saying that for Catholics working for justice is a religious obligation, an integral part of Christian practice and observance – so politics and religion can't neatly be separated. In the repressive states of Southern Africa and Latin America where I worked resistance by Christians qualified them for persecution, imprisonment, torture and death. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, gunned down at the altar in 1980, made a saint of the Catholic Church, became an icon of this kind of martyrdom.

A little discussed feature of the Cold War is the way the global political and ideological division penetrated the Catholic Church itself. In Moscow I had the unnerving experience of listening to devout Catholics whose little church opposite the KGB's Lubyanka headquarters had cameras trained on the door, dismiss the late Cardinal Paolo Arns as a communist. Arns, a Cardinal committed to the poor, was a tireless campaigner against human rights violations by Brazil's brutal military dictatorship.

From 1960-1990, in Latin America, Philippines and South Africa, opposition to military dictatorships, oligarchies and apartheid, produced martyrs killed for following the simple demands of justice. Opposition to Communist Party repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had the similar

consequences. But because of the ideological barrier of the Cold War, never did these victims of tyranny engage with each other in serious dialogue. Religious Orders with members from both parts of the world experienced this same division within their own ranks. Catholic charities worked on different sides of the divide, *Aid to the Church in Need* in the Communist world, the *Catholic Institute for International Relations* in Latin America, Philippines, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), South Africa, Namibia, and Mozambique. There was no coming together around the shared experience of persecution and the terrifying ordeals of those who resisted tyranny.

Today there are new violations of religious freedom. Christians pursuing environmental causes are experiencing martyrdom in Latin America. The question arises who is responsible for such persecution? The actions of the State or the inaction of the State? A former governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, reared a Christian and a leading opponent of the blasphemy laws, was assassinated by his bodyguard for supporting Asia Bibi. An unholy amalgam of State and Society at work.

There is no lack of information. The *US Commission on International Religious Freedom* publishes a factual annual global report. The Mormons in Utah have a comprehensive archive of FoRB legal cases. In 2019 the Anglican Bishop Philip Mounstephen of Truro produced for the Foreign Secretary, an independent review entitled *Support for the Persecuted Church*. It contains a fine summary of the plight of Christians around the world and suggests what might be done about it. But nothing much changes for the better.

We in the UK have no right to be complacent. Antisemitism alongside Islamophobia remains a rallying theme of extreme Right organisations. I have listened to black Pentecostals who believed Muslims worship the devil. Ahmadis experience the

disdain, and sometimes worse, of their Muslim neighbours. Anti-Catholicism bubbles up from the depths of social media. The Labour Party was investigated and castigated for its failure to deal adequately with antisemitism by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and a question mark hangs over the level of anti-Muslim prejudice in the Conservative Party. Muslim-Hindu tensions have surfaced in Leicester.

Do not expect such symptoms of hostility and prejudice to improve as poverty and social dislocation, the recruiting sergeants for intolerance and discrimination, increase in Britain, and in the rest of the world.

‘LEFTY LAWYERS’ & ‘LEFTY POPES’ ?

14.03.2023

The rule of law is the cornerstone of democracy. In Israel, the authoritarianism of Prime Minister Netanyahu and his extremist coalition partners seeking to appoint and curb the Israeli judiciary has brought more than 250,000 protestors onto the streets. In Britain, we seem less concerned about attacks on custodians of the law.

Last week it was Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s turn to call Keir Starmer, the leader of the Opposition, ‘a lefty lawyer’. It has become standard Conservative Party fare.

Between 2008-2013, prior to entering politics, Keir Starmer was Head of the Crown Prosecution Service and Director of Public Prosecutions. From 2010 to 2013 he was the main legal adviser to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. He was knighted in 2014. When in early 2020 he was competing to be leader of the Labour Party, Corbynistas worried that his politics were far from ‘leftist’. ‘Lefty lawyer’ may be a handy alliteration but Sunak’s language is further indication of the Conservative Party’s continuing populist mindset.

Starmer is known in the legal world for his record on human rights. The ‘McLibel’ case, a challenge to freedom of speech over a leaflet denouncing different aspects of McDonald’s corporate practice, is famous. After the case progressed through the British courts, Starmer in 2005 represented pro bono two environmental activists against the might of McDonald’s in the European Court of Human Rights. He was human rights adviser to the Policing Board of Northern Ireland and noted for his work – also pro bono – opposing capital punishment in several Caribbean and African countries. Is the promotion and executive enforcement of human rights law still being branded as ‘lefty’ repeating Boris Johnson’s

‘lefty human rights lawyers’ attacks? By that token John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis qualify for abuse as ‘lefty Popes’.

Presumably the Conservative Party is in the business of conserving. But it has become hard to believe that conservatism aims to conserve the key institutions of UK governance and our – unwritten - constitution. In an unusual moment of anger, the historian of government and broadcaster Peter Hennessy, less well known as the cross-bench peer Baron Hennessy of Nympsfield, described Boris Johnson in a BBC interview as “the great debaser in modern times of decency and public and political life, and of our constitutional conventions – our very system of government”. Yet Johnson remains popular with the grassroots of the Conservative Party.

No Government likes the constraints imposed upon it by law but dismissing with taunts of ‘fat-cat lawyers’ (yes – once used by Tony Blair), or more dangerously ‘lefty lawyers’, subverts one of the institutions by which we are all protected. It is not so much that Sunak’s playground jibes should be beneath his dignity as Prime Minister diminishing the respect he has gained for his diplomacy in Northern Ireland and Paris, but that such demeaning name-calling subtly undermines the law itself.

From where did we get the binary division of ‘left’ and ‘right’ now so entrenched in the language of politics? It dates from 1789 when the French King’s supporters began sitting to the right of the President of the National Assembly with the revolutionaries to the left, though the occupants of the House of Commons benches can hardly be described in terms of royalists versus revolutionaries. Political Parties love binaries. The national argument about EU membership gave us Remainer/Remoaner v Brexiteer as well as ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’. More appropriately on a global scale we now speak of democracy versus authoritarianism.

Political Parties have problems putting ‘clear blue water’ between them. Johnson-style bluster, obliterating any nuance in different political visions within the Opposition plays to the back-benches and is amplified in social media and Sun, Express, Mail and Telegraph. The Opposition are then turned into a monolithic enemy. But today’s political divisions are not adequately expressed by terms such as left versus right.

Right and left labels are even less appropriate when they are applied to religious believers. Catholics, for example, are held to be ‘right-wing’ if they hold pro-life, anti-abortion, views. Worldwide there are c. 1.3 billion Catholics, many of them may hold such views; this is a large number of people to designate as politically ‘right wing’. They may, as well as being protective of life in the womb, also have a strong commitment to peace, elimination of capital punishment, trade unionism, the environment, and ‘the preferential option for the poor’ - including refugees and economic migrants. These views are hardly right wing.

Just one individual example. Amnesty International was founded in 1961 and in its early years campaigned exclusively in support of prisoners of conscience. It later broadened its mandate to promote all the human rights enshrined in the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights. Between 2007 and 2008, under pressure mainly from their US section, a woman’s right to choose was proposed as an addition to their UN ‘s list. The movement was split pretty evenly on the issue.

In response, the late Bruce Kent, an internationally known peace-campaigner, went to see Amnesty UK to ask them not to go down the road of adopting access to abortion as a human right (which Amnesty did unequivocally in 2018). He pointed out that two of the key founders of the organisation, Sean McBride and Peter Berenson, were Catholics, and the result would probably be

the loss of Catholic members. Bruce as General-Secretary of CND in the 1980s had been a great supporter of the Women's Peace Camp resisting the placement of cruise missiles at Greenham Common. But, while very sympathetic to the concern for pregnant women's health and safety, he did not view abortion as a fundamental human right.

The 1980s were the last decade of the Cold War and CND was both under surveillance by British Security Services and infiltrated by them at Board level. So not right-wing but a dangerously popular 'lefty' then? Up to a point Lord Copper. There are few as courageous and honest as Bruce Kent but there are many others who do not fit into the crude political stereotypes that they are alleged to inhabit. You wouldn't guess that from the parliamentary Punch and Judy of Prime Minister's Questions.

Instead of answering questions with bluster and aggression, in a poor imitation of Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak would do well to douse what Lord Hennessy called the 'Bonfire of the Decencies'. He described respecting those decencies as the 'good chaps' theory of governing. It needs to be revived if we are to conserve the best of Britain.

Rishi Sunak is promising that the Home Office's - in his words - 'Stop the Boats Bill' (the Illegal Migration Bill) will be unveiled within weeks and placed on the government legislative timetable. It is destined for the courts. This year, aspects of Suella Braverman plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda go before the Court of Appeal. We already have a sample of the Home Secretary's preferred language, a foretaste of how she hopes to deal with legal challenges. An email sent to Conservative Party members in her name blames "an activist blob of leftwing lawyers, civil servants and the Labour Party" for the failure to stop the growing number of little boats heading for Britain. We are yet to hear that her

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denial of any knowledge of the email being sent has resulted in anyone being disciplined or sacked for failing to get clearance.

We may be on the brink of a slippery slope. The Prime Minister should resolve now to respect our own Judges - along with solicitors and barristers - and to acknowledge their important role in a democracy, not least one whose constitution is unwritten.

WALLED IN: WHAT WAS EAST GERMANY REALLY LIKE?

05.11.2023

Fifty years of Cold War gave us the Soviet Union and communist States as our enemy. We learned all about repression, the horrors of one Party rule. What else did we need to know about the German Democratic Republic (GDR), indelibly imprinted as ‘Stasiland’ by Le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*? The question ‘what was it like living in a communist society?’ seemed redundant. Katja Hoyer’s *Beyond the Wall: East Germany 1949-1990*, published this year, gives us a full and different cultural and political history, a revealing and compelling picture of daily life on the other side of the iron curtain.

Anyone looking at today’s world from an historical perspective is drawn to asking ‘who’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions. That is part of the fun for historians, to some degree similar to the pleasures of outguessing a police procedural on TV. More taxing is exploring the past as ‘another country’, trying to get inside the heads of the natives, asking ‘what was it like living then’ and ‘how did people think’? Hilary Mantel’s portrayal of Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII’s court in the early 16th century is a masterclass in doing just that.

It was more than a decade after the disintegration of the Soviet Empire in 1990-1991 that film-makers began to portray life in East Germany as like - even if not quite like - life anywhere else. Wolfgang Becker’s 2003 bitter-sweet comedy *Good Bye Lenin!* is a mother- and-son story. The mother, Christiane Kerner, spends eight months in a coma after a heart attack. Meanwhile the Berlin wall comes down and Chancellor Helmut Köhl steers Germany towards re-unification. To avoid a sudden shock, her family goes to any length to keep from her the new political and social reality.

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The humour is gentle with an underlying sadness. It's political satire - by a West German director - but you get a feel for East German society.

Beyond the Wall addresses the social and political life of the GDR, a State that lasted barely forty years, providing a fascinating response to the 'what was it like' question. Katja Hoyer, born in East Germany and a graduate of the University of Jena, visiting research fellow at Kings College, London, writes with journalistic flair and an historian's skills. Alongside the rewards of painstaking archival research, the book offers an attractive mix of interviews so that most chapters grow out of brief biographies of named individuals and their family life. You come away feeling you've learned something that you should have known before. Hoyer's first thesis is that the post-war division of Germany was far from inevitable. It was Walter Ulbricht, an uninspiring but determined communist ideologue, who was the main architect of the GDR. After 1945, he worked his way up to the position of Chair of its State Council which he held from 1960 until his death in 1973, though he wielded considerable power as Deputy Chair of the Council of Ministers from 1950.

Stalin was opposed to the creation of two Germanies. Hoyer writes that he had a genuine respect for German culture, literature and art, believed that the German people had become entranced by Hitler and were not 'inherently warlike'. At the end of World War II in talks with Ulbricht in 1945, Stalin sought German unity: a unified, neutral, defanged Germany with its borders defined by the allies at Potsdam, a buffer between the Soviet Union and NATO. Ulbricht wanted a sovereign State with himself as President. Stalin reluctantly accepted a *fait accompli* in 1949 when representatives from the eleven Parliamentary Councils of the three Western Occupied Zones approved a State constitution for West Germany

and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was born. The German Democratic Republic was created from the Soviet zone.

West Germany's Hallstein Doctrine, cutting off all diplomatic and economic relations with countries that recognised East Germany, forced the GDR into economic dependence on the Soviet Union (which of course had initially extracted huge reparations). Ulbricht's regime's survival of an early, often forgotten, uprising in 1953 was also dependent on brutal suppression by Soviet military power.

Rebuilding East Germany after the War was a colossal physical and human task. It took ten years to clear all the rubble from Dresden after blanket bombing by the Allies. In the mid-1950s there was a permanent shortage of people to fill professional jobs. From 1955-1957, years of economic crisis, an average of 300,000 left for the FRG each year; such was the reaction to the pressures created by Ulbricht's push to build socialism. By November 1989 the GDR had a population of 16 million against the FRG's 62 million.

Ulbricht was ideologically committed to, and invested in, equality between male and female workers. Average incomes doubled in the 1950s. By 1955 half the workforce were women. A third were women in the FRG and, by 1970, the gap had grown to 66% in the GDR against 27.5% in the FRG. Hoyer insists that upward mobility for workers, especially women, should not be dismissed as a cynical move: "this is not only to underestimate the drive towards gender equality...but also insulting to the women concerned". But by 1961 three million East Germans, 7,500 doctors, 1,200 dentists, 33% of its academics and hundreds of thousands of skilled workers, had "turned their back on Ulbricht's 'workers and peasants state'. 80% of them via Berlin". The brain drain had to be stopped – by force.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

Construction of the Berlin Wall began on 13 August 1961. Most of the deaths in No-Man's land came in the first few months after its completion. Hoyer describes the daily life of the border guards and the phenomenal growth of the Ministry of State Security, the Stasi, from 1,100 staff in 1950 to 43,000 by 1970 with its own burgeoning paramilitary force, the Dzerzhinsky Guards Regiment.

In 1971, Erich Honeker - who had spent many years in Nazi prisons - took over from Ulbricht, continuing his attempt to plough a communist furrow outside Soviet control.

The GDR came out top of the communist world for consumer goods though with typically poor housing. Like a smelly old dog, the East Germans fell in love with the 'Trabi', the only car they could buy; the Trabant was a two cylinder, 26 horse-power ULEZ nightmare, slow and noisy. Even with a waiting list of many years, by 1988 half the GDR population had a car, making the percentage of car ownership much the same on both sides of the wall.

In *Beyond the Wall*, Hoyer provides many more revealing statistics, telling vignettes and unexpected snapshots of daily life. But she risks being condemned as a 'leftie historian' rather than a worthy apprentice to Hilary Mantel's brilliant storytelling. Dwelling on what is usually omitted makes for balance, for good history. Today, in a polarised world, we badly need her kind of historical consciousness when considering our enemies, and friends.

I visited Honeker's East Berlin in 1980. Out of the bright lights and vibrant life of the FRG into drab, empty streets, lunch in a dark wood-paneled restaurant, a surfeit of surly waiters arrayed around the walls. At her retirement ceremony in 2021, Angela Merkel asked the Bundeswehr band to play a 1970's song by the East German singer Nina Hagen: "Du Hast den Farbfilm Vergessen (You have forgotten the colour - film), a gentle poke at

the drabness of the GDR. The song ends: “You forgot to bring the colour film, good grief. All the blue and white and green will later not be true”. It brought tears to her eyes as she recalled her youth in East Germany. History is best written in technicolour, not grey, and not in black and white.

ASSASSINATION & THE RULE OF LAW

11.09.2024

We associate assassinations by one State on another's territory - 'targeted killings' is the softer sounding word - with autocratic States. But such killings are also undertaken by a variety of different States, and for diverse reasons. Since the end of the Cold War, the most unacceptable have been to humiliate another State considered a threat, purely to wreak vengeance, to silence opposition or to undermine peace negotiations.

Since 1945 the UN founding Charter has made national sovereignty the fundamental, near inviolable, organising principle of international relations. Yet in the last two decades, in flagrant disregard for the UK's national sovereignty and international law, Russian agents have killed prominent Russian exiles on British soil. Alexander Litvinenko, a former KGB agent, was poisoned in 2006 using radioactive polonium administered by two FSB agents who also contaminated several venues in London. Then there were the 'unexplained' deaths: for example, in 2013 by a seemingly staged 'suicide', the hanging of Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch and vocal critic of Putin. Yet an unequivocal reaction from the UK government had to wait until March 2018.

Acting after a spectacular, reckless infringement of national sovereignty, Prime Minister Theresa May expelled 23 Russian diplomats following belatedly the attempted assassination at home in Salisbury with military grade nerve agent, Novichok, of former Russian FSB spy, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia. Other European nations and the US followed suit.

Contamination was widespread. An investigating policeman, Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, became seriously ill after contact with the poison. That July Dawn Sturgess died from Novichok poisoning after spraying her wrists with polonium from the

cast-off perfume bottle used by the assassins, another victim of Russian actions on British soil. Putin, openly taunting the UK government, had the two GRU military intelligence agents, Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov, give an outrageous RT (State Television) interview in which they claimed to have been tourists with a particular interest in Salisbury cathedral.

There is nothing new about autocratic States eliminating opponents on the territory of other States. Famously, in 1940 Leon Trotsky was brutally killed at his home in Mexico City on Stalin's orders, the archetype for Putin's actions: punishment for disloyalty, a warning against treachery.

Apartheid South Africa used car, letter and parcel bombs in African countries against the ANC, Pan African Congress, and SWAPO (Namibian nationalist) exiles, but avoided alienating the UK by similar tactics. Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, who instituted substantial funding for the ANC, was shot dead on the street in Stockholm in 1986; nobody was charged with the murder. Ten years later Colonel Eugene de Kock claimed – plausibly - this was a South African special unit 'hit'. The cynically named Civil Co-operation Bureau, and special units under Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok, planned and executed the assassinations. The general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Frank Chikane, was poisoned in 1989 with Paraoxon on Vlok's instructions. He survived through treatment in an American hospital.

Modern drones have increased the opportunity for assassinations by decreasing the cost in manpower and money. Drones also reduced the risk and stress on perpetrators. The Predator drone came into use in 1995 allowing long distance elimination of jihadists and their leaders. However, the killing of Osama bin Laden in his Pakistan hideout required a full Special Forces' operation with helicopters, watched in real time by

President Obama. The impact of 9/11 made drone killings in the Middle East routine. As they responded to, or tried to pre-empt, militia and terrorist attacks, Israel and the USA were drawn even closer together. The words of the Talmud: “If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first” fitted the bill.

Israel has a long and known history of assassinations in other countries - in Israel’s view, a weapon in its armoury of self-defence or as an arm of justice. After the capture and murder of eleven Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, from just a few weeks after the massacre in 1972 until 1988, MOSSAD hunted down and killed the Black September and PLO perpetrators living in different countries. Ehud Barak, Prime Minister from 1999-2001, a former member of the elite unit involved in finding and killing remaining perpetrators resident in Beirut, was open about the wider Operation Wrath of God. Steven Spielberg’s 2005 film Munich tells the tale omitting the killing in Norway of a Moroccan waiter, Ahmed Bouchiki, mistaken for Ali Hassan Salameh, the Black September leader. The film evoked sympathy for the MOSSAD agents, their bravery and the consequences in their private lives.

Assassination is liable to drift out of hand. Massively armed Israel, surrounded by a threatening and belligerent Muslim world, has stretched the justification of self-defence to its limits and beyond. A major escalation was the targeted killing of civilians in Iran during 2010-2012. The deaths of particle physicist Professor Masoud Ali-Mohammedi in 2010 and Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, 2012, expert in uranium enrichment, and other scientists, were attributed to MOSSAD assets in Tehran. Years away from being able to assemble a nuclear warhead, were these Iranians an *immediate* threat to the security of Israel, a nuclear power? In 2015 Iran signed an international treaty intended to limit the

enrichment of uranium needed to develop a nuclear weapon. Israel – and Saudi Arabia - opposed the treaty.

After the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October, in April 2024, a car was bombed in Gaza killing three sons and four grandchildren of Ismail Haniyeh, Chairman of Hamas' Political Bureau. In July 2024 whilst in Tehran attending the inauguration of the new Iranian President Mahmoud Pezeshkian, Haniyeh himself was assassinated. Haniyeh, not by any normal understanding of the words 'a moderate' was considered a potentially pragmatic negotiator during prolonged ceasefire negotiations with Israel - unlike Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' hardline military leader, who planned and executed the 7 October massacres and who is now its uncontested dominant voice. Many observers believe the massacres were, in part, Sinwar's deliberate provocation to thwart any normalisation of relations between Israel and key Arab States. And many in Israel have come to believe Netanyahu's order to assassinate Haniyeh as, in part, aimed at aborting negotiations and prolonging the war allowing him to continue as Prime Minister and avoid an Israeli court room.

There are many difficulties in attempting to outlaw or even govern assassinations in an agreed, effective ethical regulatory framework, not least that killing by drones, guided by a hand-held device, seems remarkably like playing a computer game. The ethics of 'targeted killing', how broadly to define criteria by which such actions might be judged legitimate or illegitimate, such as 'in military settings' or 'for self-defence' have been widely and eruditely discussed. Do sporadic terrorist attacks create a 'military setting' or are they a policing matter? The rise of asymmetric warfare involving extremist groups made such judgements even more difficult. How immediate must the threat evoking self-defensive lethal action be? No agreed answers.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

Proliferation of assassinations is a symptom of a progressive decline in respect for both international law and national sovereignty on which the UN was built. We need our international legal bodies whether the European Court of Human Rights, the International Court of Justice or the International Criminal Court, to slow or halt the dangerous erosion.

CATHOLICISM

BIDEN, BISHOPS & AMERICAN CATHOLICS

04.09.2021

Some 70 million US citizens are Roman Catholics, about 22% of the total population. In the 2020 elections the Catholic vote split half and half between Trump and Biden but only 44% of white Catholics voted for Biden. Some 20 million Americans identify as Latino Catholics (about 55% of the overall Hispanic population) and of these Hispanic Catholics the vote was 67% for Biden, 26% for Trump. Thanks to voter registration activists such as Stacey Abrams and Black Lives Matter, the black vote, especially in states like Georgia came out in force. It was even more pro-Biden than the Hispanic (polls indicated that in some states 90% of black female votes were going to Biden). American voters are racially split and the Biden presidency relies on minority voter turn-out.

These figures alone illustrate the problem for a white Catholic President who asserts his Catholic identity. Ethnicity and origins play an important role in determining voting behaviour, but three other features of the contemporary USA give Biden cause for concern. The first is that as a Catholic President he must position himself in relation to national politics riven by ‘culture wars’ turbo-charged by the Republican Party. The Tea-Party movement with its mixture of right-wing populism, shrink-the-federal state anti-Washington activism plus anti-immigrant policies, emerged in 2009. Trump’s drive for white supremacy, support for racist voter suppression, and rhetorical championing of favourite evangelical Christian themes, particularly opposition to abortion laws and same-sex marriage, made these goals seem politically achievable, but only by the Republican Party.

The second concern for a Catholic President is that the culture wars have seeped into the US Catholic Conference of Bishops. The American Church was already polarised - between a strict traditionalist social conservatism with an in-built bias towards Republican politics, even in its Trump extremes, and a liberalism committed to social justice at ease in the Democratic Party. Biden faces, and has faced, strictures from a minority of conservative bishops about his political position on abortion and to a lesser degree his attitude towards gay and divorced people receiving the Eucharist. “The President doesn’t believe what we believe about the sacredness of human life” Archbishop Joseph Naumann, head of the Catholic bishops’ Pro-Life Committee told the prestigious US magazine, *The Atlantic*. He was not referring to Trump’s accelerating the use of the death penalty during his last days in office.

The Democratic Party does not pick radicals for their Presidential candidates, that is why they rejected Bernie Sanders and chose the centrist Biden. Anyone who read Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* would see, that the Pope is politically a prophetic radical thinker who has more in common with Bernie Sanders than the President. But the Republicans perceive Biden as an ally of Pope Francis, who is himself under fire, and they have succeeded in placing the President firmly on the ‘enemy’ side of the culture wars in a Church divided nationally and racially as well as globally.

As Massimo Faggioli points out in his recent *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States*, Biden’s own Catholicism, pious, un-intellectual, and compassionate reflects the openness to the world of Pope John XXIII and the second Vatican Council. The Council document *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy & Hope), issued on 7 December 1965, the day the Council ended, begins with: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this

age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” The problem for Biden, who would endorse these words, is that since the 1970s the Council and its documents have been subtly, and not so subtly, undermined by neo-conservatives, re-interpreted and politicized. When the social conservatives in the American Church looked outwards they saw Obama as the leader of a militant secular modernization and an overweening federal State, with Biden as his misguided Catholic apprentice. And for many their enemies’ enemy, Trump became, at least electorally, their friend.

The third concern for Biden is that this polarization within the American Church has contributed significantly to division within the global Church that came of age with the appointment of an Argentinian, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, as Pope Francis. The cardinals chose a Pope from the global South further shifting the centre-periphery model of a Eurocentric Church towards a more networked, less command and control Church, a process described in my *Global Catholicism: towards a networked Church*, Hurst 2012. Rome remained pre-eminent but the Curial bureaucracy surrounding the Pope found itself downgraded and under serious pressure to reform. The large American Church, traditionally punching well below its weight, assumed more significance, especially when Archbishop Carlo Mario Viganò, Vatican ambassador to the USA from 2011 to 2016, led a virulent attack in 2018 on Pope Francis alleging homosexual conspiracies and Vatican cover-ups of sexual abuse. Viganò, a former chief of Vatican Curial personnel, was able to draw on his wide range of personal contacts in his attempts to create a movement to marginalize and smear the Pope. He failed but the tension within the divided American Church remains.

Biden can expect more moral support from the current Pope than from his two papal predecessors but it is support that may come with a political cost. The President finds himself at the intersection of an unholy set of inter-related and interlocking pressures: notably the tens of millions of Catholics who voted for Trump ignoring his four years of attempted destruction of democracy. He and the Pope are singing from the same hymn sheet over the climate crisis, sharing a compassionate openness towards gay sexuality, and a commitment to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, notably to Mass in the vernacular. In America the Latin Mass had become something of a right-wing cause supported by several bishops, Cardinal Raymond Burke, formerly archbishop of St. Louis the most prominent. These divisions within Catholicism mirror the divisions within the nation which President Biden has the enormous task of healing. He cannot look to the American Church to be part of the solution.

Biden's leadership as Commander in Chief during the tragedies of defeat and hasty evacuation in Afghanistan has done nothing to heal divisions in a shamed nation. Even though his new thinking about US military intervention will have found approval in Rome he has received no accolades and derived little inspiration from the American Catholic hierarchy. It is high time they ended censorious and curmudgeonly criticism and show more concern for the future of democracy and the task of national healing that awaits America's second Catholic President.

See *The Article* 02/09/2021

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY: SISTER PAMELA
HUSSEY

18.12.2021

All my children and many others loved Sister Pamela Hussey. Pamela would have been 100 on 7 January 2022. She died peacefully on 13 December in Cornelia House, in the Harrogate care home of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. She made up for missing the traditional letter from the Queen by receiving one from each of two Popes, Benedict XVI and Francis, congratulating her on her Diamond Jubilee as a nun. An Anglo-Argentinian, Pamela grew up in Buenos Aires which makes the occasion being noticed for a second time, and by Pope Francis, seem more fitting.

Pamela wanted to join the war effort and sailed in 1942 from Argentina on one of the perilous Atlantic crossings to the Bay of Biscay and, hugging the French coast, northwards to wartime Britain. She joined the Women's Royal Naval Services (WRNS). For three years she worked in Scarborough as a wireless telegraphist in an offshoot of GCHQ Bletchley – where she is on the Roll of honour - and returned in 2014 to open a new centre through the good offices of Prince Charles. In 2018 she was awarded the Légion d'Honneur for her service during the Second World War presented in person at her care home by a representative of the French Government. As a special operator she learnt Morse Code spending hours on end waiting for German U-boats to break cover and surface to communicate with their base revealing their location. It was hardly the most effective use of a woman who was a fluent Spanish speaker, who would take a degree in modern languages at St. Anne's Oxford and, having joined the SHCJs in 1950, teach languages for ten years.

The first time I met Pamela was in 1981 when she became a volunteer administrative assistant in the Latin America department

of the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) where I had also just started working. It was a critical and intense period in the Cold War. Dictatorships and oligarchies, backed by the CIA, ruled many of the Latin American States with appalling human rights violations as a consequence. Pamela gravitated to the El Salvador desk at CIIR, making several field trips, sharing the department's admiration for the Archbishop of San Salvador, St. Oscar Romero, his courage, work for justice and his theology and after his assassination publicising his life. Pamela had the advantage of looking frail and conservative when she wasn't. She was the scourge of US Foreign Service personnel who were entirely unprepared for the passion and anger of this diminutive and well-spoken woman when they tried to defend the indefensible. To her great pleasure her work was first recognised in 2000. She was awarded an MBE for her tireless defence of human rights.

The last time we met I asked Pamela what training as a Woman Religious was like in the strict self-effacing convent discipline of the 1950s for someone like her. "Well", she said, "I complained to the novice mistress that my personality was being crushed. She replied: 'Pamela, your personality is oozing out of every pore'". And anyone who knew Pamela would agree. In a quiet sort of a way Pamela had style. Decidedly not the dressy kind but more her old fashioned politeness which set her at ease with a huge spectrum of people whom she would address as 'dearest'. One of my happiest memories of Pamela was her 70th birthday party in 1992. We had a lovely meal in the upper room of the now defunct Gay Hussar. Jon Snow and George Foulkes MP, later Baron Foulkes of Cumnock, were there. She was in her element. So was everyone else though sadly the number of empty bottles arrayed on the table in front of the group meant a photographic record of the event for the CIIR Annual Review had to be censored. Even at

Apley Grange she would take a daily walk to the local hotel for morning coffee with her copy of *Le Monde* or *La Croix* to keep up with international and Church affairs. The last time I saw her she confided that she had Alzheimer's then promptly recited a long poem word perfect from memory.

Pamela was a feminist. Books she wrote, *Freedom From Fear: Women in El Salvador's Church* and, with Marigold Best, *Life Out of Death, the Feminine Spirit in El Salvador* and *Women Making a Difference* bear witness to that. She felt deeply the betrayal of women who had fought against the Latin American dictatorships and who were expected after victory to return to traditional roles. Her life offered yet another example of the extraordinary range of Women Religious' gifts to the Church. Her death brings down the curtain on a period when the witness of many Women Religious was within the struggle for liberation against tyranny, justice against repression, life against death. There will never be another Pamela.

She leaves a younger brother, now aged 96. May She Rest in Peace.

POPE FRANCIS & JUST WAR: BRITAIN'S
ROLE IN UKRAINE

02.06.2022

The first casualty of war is truth. Running a good second comes reasoned discussion about a war's legitimacy, whether it is a just war. Over the years the scale and horror of modern warfare has increasingly called into question the traditional concept of a just war. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has begun to re-surface these doubts. As yet there has been little critical discussion of Britain's role in it.

Beginning in the 5th century Christian thinkers developed criteria for a war to be just: it must be a last resort, called by a legitimate authority, have a just cause and intention with benefits outweighing the costs (the principle of proportionality), and have a reasonable chance of success. War should be conducted so as to avoid the killing of non-combatants and any actions causing more harm than the injustice combatted. Just war considerations inform the Geneva Conventions and the need for UN approval for military interventions, and apply in practice to the rules governing military targeting. They are the positive products of centuries old attempts to limit the barbarity of war.

In 2020 Pope Francis published his wide-ranging encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* addressed to 'brothers and sisters all' - that's not just Catholics. Its six paragraphs on war feed into the long just war tradition developed since the time of St. Augustine (354-430). One sentence in Francis' reflections seems particularly, but not exclusively, applicable to Russia. "War can easily be chosen by invoking all sorts of alleged humanitarian, defensive or precautionary excuses, and even resorting to manipulation of information'. Even though European secular governments are accustomed to ignoring, or deploring, the advice and statements of

Church leaders, the Pope's thinking may still be of interest to secular readers. Just one caveat, internal debate in wartime can, and does, result in national Bishops' Conferences taking a different position from that of Rome.

“We do not uphold Augustine's theory in our own day” writes the Pope in a teasing, unelaborated footnote to his conviction expressed in *Fratelli Tutti* that the risks of war “will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits”. Weapons of mass destruction, notably tactical nuclear weapons with the threat of a nuclear war, create “evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated” This is the principle of proportionality, a constraint on military action emphasised by the US Catholic bishops in their 1983 pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace”. Both follow John XXIII who almost 60 years ago in *Pacem in Terris* wrote that war may no longer be regarded as a “fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice”.

Question NATO's role in the Ukraine war and you will be given short shrift as a left- wing, or right-wing, fanatic. But was the Pope so wrong when he told *Corriere della Sera* earlier this month that it would be going too far to say that NATO's expansion eastwards provoked Putin's lurch into war but that it perhaps facilitated it? Remember that Francis' primary concern is peace-making. In a mid-March video conference with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, a supporter of Putin's invasion, Francis, trying to reach out to Kirill while implicitly condemning Putin's ‘special military operation’, said: “There was a time, even in our Churches, when people spoke of a holy or a just war. Today we cannot speak in this manner. Wars are always unjust since it is the people of God who pay. Our hearts cannot but weep before the children and women killed, along with all the victims of war”.

Is this all just a utopian vision divorced from reality? The Catholic catechism itself acknowledges the right to self-defence

encompassing a country's resistance against an oppressor once "the rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy have been met". *Fratelli Tutti* spells out the Christian position in terms I first heard in South Africa during the apartheid struggle of the early 1980s. "True love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make him cease his oppression; stripping him of a power that he does not know how to use that diminishes his own humanity and that of others". But how? This, as Mahatma Gandhi demonstrated, the Pope implies and the Christian peace movement advocates, could, and should, be active non-violent resistance. And it calls into question even the courageous self-sacrifice of Ukrainian security forces fighting for their homeland and national identity with imported NATO artillery and anti-tank weapons.

The just war principle that there must be reasonable chance of success should give us, NATO, and our Press, pause. If success means multiple Mariupols, very heavy troop losses and civilian mass graves all over the country, Ukraine destroyed, the question of proportionality becomes decisive and difficult. But can anyone predict what Putin will do – a seemingly sick man conducting a perverse legacy-war – or what the outcome of one highly motivated military force's fight on home ground against an invading force with superior destructive power will be? Without military supplies from the West, Ukraine would be overwhelmed. Getting questions about our role right is not some abstract moral calculus but a matter of hundreds of thousands of lives potentially lost or saved, and some would argue, a stable world international order.

The only path to follow - other than into relentless destruction and loss of life - is to persevere with diplomacy. President Macron led the way on this. It will mean at some point putting into play with Putin wider and innovative concessions that do not project weakness, nor the dismemberment of Ukraine. And that in turn

requires sieving scraps of truth from Putin's and Russia's perennial paranoia and nostalgia. If we believe with the Pope that war can no longer be a remedy, then, as Georgetown University's Eli McCarthy and some other US academics propose, we need to begin now to use a different set of tools to build a just peace long term – not simply react to wars with further militarization.

Advocating such a parallel pathway sounds naïve, defeatist, even a national security risk. But in a world in which national security is also about climate change, famines and pandemics, it is realistic. War divides and holds back common action on such vital issues. However seductive the comparison, and though Putin's Russia shows many features of fascist rule, this is not 1939 come round again.

As things stand, the most probable outcome of Putin's invasion is prolonged military conflict drifting eventually into a guerrilla war, Ukrainian partisans against a brutal Russian invader, the only victors arms manufacturers, the wheat fields and cities of Ukraine the latest testing ground for new weapons systems. And these could be the very weapons of mass destruction, chemical or nuclear, whose existence calls in question the possibility of a just war.

BRUCE KENT: A PRIEST FOR ALL SEASONS

17.06.2022

There are clerical lives that at first follow the beaten track: Hampstead Garden Suburb to Stonyhurst, two years a second lieutenant in the 6th Royal Tank Regiment, seminary training at St. Edmunds College Ware, Brasenose College Oxford for a law degree, ordination in 1958, curacy at Our Lady of Victories, Kensington and just five years later personal secretary to the new Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, John Heenan. Then the unexpected, a path less trodden, not a sudden leap into the unknown, more a developing vocation within a vocation: a priestly life of work for peace and justice including a decade as leader of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, CND. Such was the extraordinary life of Bruce Kent who has died a few weeks short of his 93rd. birthday.

Both Bruce Kent's parents were Canadians, his mother a pious Catholic, his father, a Presbyterian with Montreal sectarian views, working in London for the Pennsylvania Armstrong Cork Company. Bruce's warm look of approval when a cork was pulled may not have been entirely filial respect. His father had been opposed to his becoming a priest. When a Pax Christi member knocked on his door in 1958 and invited him to become its chaplain Bruce happily accepted, the first small step into his lifetime's work.

Cardinal Heenan, easily irritated by minor lapses in protocol, moved him on to chair the Westminster Diocese Schools Commission, the beginning of Bruce's lifelong interest in peace education. Generations of school children will remember the charming, amusing and avuncular figure who talked about peace and peace-making, the arms trade and nuclear weapons. In one prolonged burst of activity for a one-year peace education project

he spoke to 150 schools. He was a great raconteur and had a gift for communicating with all age-groups addressing causes of problems not just symptoms.

From 1966 –1974, Bruce was chaplain to London University. Like other priests engaging with students during this time of heightened student activism – think of Albert Nolan at Stellenbosch in South Africa and Gustavo Gutierrez in Peru’s National University in Lima – this was a liberating and radicalising experience. Still known as Monsignor Kent, in 1967 he began a long letter-writing career denouncing the naval chaplain in *The Times* for blessing the new Polaris submarine at its launch on the Clyde. He later conducted an exorcism at the Faslane nuclear submarine base and called on naval personnel to disobey immoral orders. “From the willingness to murder, Good Lord, deliver us.” And he quietly practised the traditional corporal acts of mercy, visiting the sick and the imprisoned. Among the items on his desk at the time he died lay the list of prisoners to whom he was writing regularly. He never gave up.

For Bruce, visiting war-torn and starving Biafra in 1969 and in 1971, the India-Pakistan war zones during a War on Want relief initiative, was an emotional turning point. He became profoundly aware of the horror of war and the hypocrisy of governments permitting the selling of arms to belligerents on both sides. In 1974 he became chairman of War on Want and helped to found the Campaign against the Arms Trade. Cardinal Heenan’s successor, Archbishop Basil Hume, later Cardinal, took a typically softer line on his peace and justice work, while Bishop Victor Guazzelli, auxiliary bishop of East London, was an understanding supporter during Bruce’s time in St. Aloysius parish in Euston.

During the intensification of the Cold War under Thatcher and Reagan the peace movement gained in strength. In 1980 Bruce Kent began taking on leadership roles in the peace movement and,

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as General Secretary of CND became a national figure, demonstrating his great talent for communication on radio and television. CND under his direction experienced a renaissance, supporting the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common campaigning against the siting of Cruise Missiles at the American airbase. Following ratification of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty by Reagan and Gorbachev in June 1988, the last Ground Launched Cruise Missiles at RAF Greenham Common were removed in March 1991.

Under Bruce's ten years of leadership CND grew its national membership from 2,000 to 100,000 and increased its 30 active local groups to nearly 1,000. In 1982 he organised lobbying of the UN Second Special Session on Disarmament in New York. From 1985 to 1992 he was President of the International Peace Bureau, one of the oldest international peace organizations founded in 1891. Foreign visits included the Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the USA and USSR. In 1988 he undertook a 1,000 mile walk for peace from Warsaw to Brussels. His prodigious energy sustained him through innumerable journeys by sleeper and endless travels for talks.

In the early 1980s Julian Lewis, later MP and from 2020 chairman of the House of Commons Select Intelligence and Security Committee, at that time research Director of the *Coalition for Peace Through Security*, an organization promoting government defence policy and opposed to CND, challenged Cardinal Hume to do something about his troublesome priest. Like the anti-apartheid movement, the peace movement did have strong Communist backing. Michael Heseltine once declared *all* CND members were communists or fellow-travelers warning he had their names. Bruce experienced his share of this kind of calumny even from within the Church. Though, at least superficially, it didn't seem to bother him. More disturbing was

having phones tapped and the shocking revelation that an undercover agent had been planted in the CND office.

On 11 February 1987, Monsignor Kent amicably ended his diocesan employment and, in his own words, retired. He made it clear that he hadn't stopped being a priest, in other words that he would not seek laicization. Fourteen months later he married Valerie Flessati, a fellow Catholic peace activist whom he had known for many years through Pax Christi. It was a marriage whose happiness was born of love and shared vision, a genuine partnership which brought hope and inspiration to many. He remained an active Mass going catholic for the rest of his life.

Describing this period in an autobiography he summed up his basic difficulty – frequently misinterpreted - with the Church hierarchy:

“If there was a problem for the Church it lay in the contrast between the official idea of what a priest ought to be and what a priest actually was in many parts of the world. Support for Solidarnosc in Poland was priestly. Support for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua was not. To be Bishop of HM Forces was not political. To be CND Chairman was. My position was an impossible one. Many of my fellow Catholics, and other Christians, told me that what I was doing as a priest gave them hope, though I knew that most of my bishops did not think my work *was* priestly”.

Throughout his long life Bruce Kent responded to fresh challenges and opportunities speaking out against resort to military force and promoting the United Nations, international law, and other non-violent avenues for conflict resolution. He campaigned unsuccessfully as Labour candidate for Oxford West and Abingdon in 1992. In debate he could more than hold his own - memorably against Sir Michael Quinlan, Permanent Secretary of State for Defence 1988-1992 and former chairman of The Tablet Trust.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

Never afraid to innovate Bruce more recently began bringing environmental concerns into peace and justice issues. He accepted invitations from Muslim organisations, and, notably in the wake of the 7/7 bombings in London, supported multi-faith initiatives against Islamophobia or religious intolerance of any kind. He often pointed out parallels between the experience of Catholics persecuted in past centuries and the fomenting of suspicion about Muslims.

Much less known is his work with prisoners, visiting them, writing to them in lock-down, helping them. He co-founded and worked in *Progressing Prisoners Maintaining Innocence* helping prisoners claiming miscarriage of justice. His deep ingrained human sympathy is reflected in the avalanche of tributes on social media after his death – from individual Hiroshima and Nagasaki *Hibukusha* (atomic bomb survivors) to the *Friends of Finsbury Park*. Ironically he was IT-phobic and never came to terms with social media himself.

Despite the peace movement's extensive international links Bruce was essentially a Londoner. His and Valerie's little flat near Finsbury Park had just enough space between the books, newsletters and pamphlets for their two desks and for entertaining. Valerie, between her writing, her research into local conscientious objectors, planning the next public event or campaign, provided delicious meals from an equally small kitchen.

In 2019 Bruce Kent was awarded the Sean MacBride Peace Prize by the International Peace Bureau. In 2021 the Archbishop of Canterbury awarded him, jointly with Valerie Flessati, the Lambeth Cross for Ecumenism. He lived to see the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons enter in force the same year.

I shall think of Bruce every time a newsletter from the Movement for Abolition of War, which he founded at the turn of the century, comes through the letter box. Blessed are the

peacemakers. But it is sad that that such a beautiful Catholic life should end at the beginning of a terrible European war. In the words of Archbishop Malcolm McMahon of Liverpool speaking on the *Sunday* programme: “Bruce was a great gift to the Church and, indeed, to Society”.

**Bruce Kent, priest, peace campaigner and friend born
London 22 June 1929; died London 8 June 2022**

See The Tablet 18/06/2022

STELLA MARIS: THE MEN WHO GO DOWN
TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

10.07.2022

At 16.30 on 3 August 2021 the massive ship *Ever Given* weighed anchor at the port of Felixstowe. 200,000 gross tonnage and the length of four football fields, she is one of the world's thirteen largest container ships owned by a subsidiary of a Japanese shipbuilding company and chartered by Evergreen Maritime shipping based in Taiwan. *Ever Given*'s voyage had been eventful and became internationally renowned after running aground and blocking the Suez Canal.

She had stubbornly refused to budge and clear the ship-jam: as a result over 300 vessels, including five other container ships, 41 bulk carriers and 24 crude oil tankers, got stuck at both ends of the canal for the over six days it took to re-float her. Once refloated, she was impounded by the Egyptian government and held for three months in Ismailia until compensation was sorted out and paid.

As the *Ever Given* drew into Felixstowe onlookers came out to see the maritime prodigy. One man though, Julian Wong, was more interested in seeing the crew on board. The Port Chaplain for East Anglia and Haven Ports, who worked for *Stella Maris UK*, the British branch of an international charity caring for seafarers and those on fishing boats around the world, he had seen plenty of giant container ships. His concern was the crew - who were not permitted to go ashore. Early in the morning after the *Ever Given* had docked, he went to offer support and brought chocolates for all on board. The captain and first officer sent back a thank-you message with a selfie. The ship was gone the next day, an average turn-around time.

Spending months at sea without setting foot on land is a common experience for the seafarers who come to Britain, many

from Asian countries. Bigger ships, smaller crews, more exhausting work. Though some of the most acute welfare needs are found in more modest fishing vessels. The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) 2006 Maritime Labour Convention, ratified by 97 States by 2021, "aims to provide minimum living and working conditions for seafarers that are globally applicable and uniformly enforced, including granting seafarers shore leave". 'Aims' is the operative word. Shore-leave, a critical matter for health and wellbeing, depends on ships' Masters who have complete control over who can come on board and whether crew can disembark but are themselves under pressure from the shipping companies focussed on profitability and ever faster turn-around times. During the global COVID pandemic hundreds of thousands of seafarers were not allowed to leave their ships at all. Much mental illness resulted. Vital medical needs were more than usually difficult to obtain.

Nine big shipping lines joined in three alliances dominate global container traffic. In 2021 the profits of these shipping lines amounted to £157 billion. Prior to COVID, according to Nick Glynne on Radio 4, managing director of the retail company *Buy It Direct*, shipping companies were charging c. £2,000 to transport a standard 40 foot container from China. At the peak of COVID infections the charge was anything between £16,000 and £20,000. Shipping a fridge from China pre-COVID, for example, cost the retailer £10. This rose to £100 during COVID whilst the shipping companies' costs rose c. 15%. Negotiations by the International Transport Workers Federation on the minimum wage for seafarers resulted in an increase: from £6,114 to £6,316 per annum taking effect from January 2023.

Yet, it took P&O ferries' callous dismissal of its largely British workforce, in order to substitute cheap and non-unionised foreign labour, for the plight of seafarers to gain public attention. The 'M'

in RMT stands for Maritime but a Filipino seaman is unlikely to be able to join a union during a two day stop in a British port even if he is allowed to disembark within the port precincts.

Stella Maris has 1,000 chaplains and volunteer ship visitors in over 300 ports in 54 countries. Reporting on the last three years work, they list their top three priorities: responding to the impact of COVID, supporting victims of abuse at work, and responding to ‘ship abandonment’, that is the practice of dumping seafarers thousands of miles from home when things go wrong. (Leaving an abandoned ship can be breach of contract - if stranded crew can get home, they may lose their pay). The problems for seafarers caused by the war in Ukraine have been little reported. *Stella Maris* provides very tangible emergency help irrespective of nationality. In Odessa, with the help of the Stella Maris Crisis Support Fund, Father Alex Smerechynsky and his assistant Rostik Inzhestoikov care for families of seafarers fleeing Ukraine. Father Edward Pracz, *Stella Maris* chaplain for the Polish Baltic Sea port of Gdynia located on the western coast of Gdańsk Bay, has converted a retreat centre into a home for some 50 women and children, families of Ukrainian seafarers.

Breaking the isolation of shipboard life is a routine element in *Stella Maris*’ work. Every year they provide internet access to seafarers and thousands of free sim-cards to contact their families after long periods at sea. There is also a more intangible aspect of their work, making visible the invisible work force of sea-borne international trade – four billion tons of goods transported by sea at the turn of the century increasing to 11 billion today. These are the men and women who literally keep the global economy moving.

In the last couple of weeks, anyone enjoying the sunshine on the Suffolk beach of Dunwich, perhaps thinking it should win the *Today Programme* favourite beach competition, could see on the

horizon two bulky container ships stacking to go into Felixstowe. Giant vessels piled high with the typical 40 foot containers like a floating Lego housing estate. No romance of the restless sea there, just a couple of dozen crew members confined, isolated and separated for months from their families, seemingly close, definitely essential, invisible.

GOD'S DIPLOMATS: PUTIN'S WAR & THE PURSUIT OF PEACE

26.08.2022

The Vatican is the world's smallest sovereign State. It would fit easily into Hyde Park. Unlike all other States it has no military, economic or territorial interests to defend; but it does have the safety and wellbeing of 1.36 billion Roman Catholics to consider. The Vatican describes its foreign policy as 'positive neutrality'.

As the largest non-governmental provider of health care and education around the world, despite being based in Rome, the Catholic Church's vision today is global rather than a religious version of Western policies. As a journalist and contributor to *Foreign Affairs*, a respected analytical magazine on US foreign policy, Victor Gaetan describes in *God's Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy and America's Armageddon* (the Middle East) how unwanted tension with the USA comes with the Pope's job.

The Pontifical Academy of Ecclesiastical Nobles – it sounds even grander in Italian – now called the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, was founded in 1701. It trains Vatican diplomats and is, of course, international. Priests in training have to become proficient in two languages other than their own and, thanks to the present Pope, must serve as a missionary for at least a year. From its alumni are drawn the staff of the Vatican Secretariat of State currently led by Cardinal Pietro Parolin with Liverpool-born Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with other States, having a hands-on role as interlocutor and trouble-shooter.

Peace-building is a longstanding priority for Catholic diplomacy and there have been important interventions and successes. Thanks to the Sant'Egidio community based in Trastevere, Catholic leaders played a key role mediating an end to the civil war in Mozambique in 1992. Pope John Paul II himself

was directly involved when Argentina nearly went to war with Chile in December 1978 over contested islands in the Beagle Channel. The papal envoy successfully urged restraint on the Argentine military junta. In his efforts to end the civil war in the Central African Republic, Francis himself has made numerous efforts to bring peace, not always successfully, and has taken considerable security risks even visiting in solidarity a mosque besieged by a Christian militia. He is personally involved in an ecumenical effort to mediate peace in South Sudan. In 2019, he invited South Sudan's rival leaders for an Easter summit in the Vatican, kissing their feet in an extraordinary and dramatic plea for peace.

But the pursuit of positive neutrality has brought Pope Francis some bad Press over Ukraine. The Vatican as an important moral voice is expected to denounce Putin's brutal aggression. Its diplomats, the papal nuncios (envoys) in different countries are perceived as no different from any other diplomats. But they are different. For a start their priorities, apart importantly from the welfare of local Churches, are focused on peace-making, human rights and more recently climate change. The language of their public pronouncements, framed to serve these longer term goals, is often cautious, sometimes opaque.

Criticisms of Pope Francis over Ukraine often omit inconvenient contradictory evidence or show ignorance of the communications culture of the Vatican. The Pope, for example hasn't named Putin as the aggressor because the Vatican doesn't name and shame. Nor has he condemned Russia but here is Archbishop Gallagher speaking in the name of the Holy See in Kyiv on 20 May this year: "My visit is intended to demonstrate the closeness of the Holy See and Pope Francis to the Ukrainian people, particularly in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine".

The Vatican's approach to Russia is entangled with its long term goal of reconciliation with Orthodoxy, and an ending of the 'Great Schism' of 1054. This has resulted in an abortive attempt to influence the thoroughly compromised Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia, Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Francis met Kirill for the first time on 12 February 2016, a meeting which had taken two years to set up. In the unusual venue of Havana International Airport, they co-signed a bland declaration covering a range of topics. But by March 2022, exasperated at Kirill's long justification for Russia's actions on a Zoom call, the tone changed; Francis warned against becoming 'state clerics'. A month and a half later in an interview with *Corriere della Sera*, off-guard he forgot protocol saying 'the Patriarch cannot transform himself into Putin's altar-boy'. In a 2 April speech in Valetta, Malta he returned to Vatican ways: "Once again" he said, "some potentate sadly caught up in anachronistic claims of nationalist interests is provoking and fomenting conflicts". Back in Rome on 6 April Francis kissed a worn Ukrainian flag from Bucha – site of multiple Russian war crimes. Certainly stretching to its limits his Secretary of State's, Cardinal Pietro Parolin's, policy of positive neutrality in wars, put before the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015.

Rome has no leverage in Moscow where catholicism appears as an intruder in the land of Orthodoxy. By way of comparison, the success of António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, in opening Odessa to grain ships is attributed in part to the considerable number of African and other countries whose support for Russia at the UN was at risk as Putin seemed set on starving their populations.

For diplomacy to work there has to be some leverage other than moral, some confluence of interests between the belligerents. Popes and God's diplomats have faith but they have no formula for moving mountains. They can and do make mistakes in balancing

hope with realism, a radical ‘prophetic voice’ with care for local Churches. And there is always the shadow of Pius XII’s gravely inadequate public response to the Holocaust. When it finally comes, mediation bringing an end to Putin’s war will most likely be in secular hands and, perhaps, led by the Secretary-General of the UN. Meanwhile Press coverage of the Vatican and Putin’s war could do with a little rebalancing and greater understanding.

FATHER ALBERT NOLAN (1934-17
OCTOBER 2022)

19.10.2022

This week in South Africa Albert Nolan OP died peacefully in his sleep. Many will remember him as a hero of the struggle against apartheid, a humble Dominican priest and theologian awarded the national Order of Luthuli by President Thabo Mbeki in 2003. Many more will know his name and have read his 1976 best-seller *Jesus Before Christianity* about the historical Jesus. I will remember him as an inspiration and spiritual guide when I was Southern Africa Desk Officer at the Catholic Institute of International Relations (CIIR) during the 1980s when both civic resistance and state repression peaked in South Africa.

Albert, despite a traditional academic training in the Angelicum, the Dominican Pontifical University in Rome, believed that theology should be open to everyone, that it should come from the grassroots and be about discovering where and how to find God in an unjust world. He was later to put his religious journalism into practice as the editor of *Challenge*, a popular Catholic paper in South Africa. When Albert was Provincial for Southern Africa, the Johannesburg Dominicans abandoned their priory in a posh part of town, so the where of theology was a decrepit building in the ill-named Mayfair, home to down-and-out whites and surprisingly multi-racial. The estate agent couldn't believe his luck when he was given a description of the building the Dominicans were looking for and got rid of an unsaleable property. And the how was by integrating faith with political commitment.

Albert Nolan chose the right religious name (he was baptised Dennis); like St. Albert the Great, teacher of St. Thomas Aquinas, he was an inspiring teacher and mentor. The Catholic Student

Society chaplain at the largely Afrikaans University of Stellenbosch, he became National Chaplain of the Catholic Federation of Students in 1973. As well as listening and responding to youth seeking how to live in an unjust and divided society – ‘you have to take sides’ was his advice - he was able to compare notes with his counterpart in Peru, fellow priest Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of Liberation Theology and later a Dominican.

Leading up to and into the State of Emergency in South Africa (1985-1990), a time of massive repression and of mass resistance by the United Democratic Front drawing together African National Congress (ANC) front-organisations, church institutions and independent civic bodies, Albert nurtured a group of young Catholics committed to the liberation struggle. By listening to their difficulties, their fears of imminent arrest, their doubts about having children, their problems in handling the violence both of the state and anarchic youth, he was able to encourage a spirituality that both discerned the signs of the times and helped them develop a moral framework within which they could actively resist apartheid. At the Mayfair Priory praying the Magnificat was almost a bidding prayer as each in their different ways was in the business of ‘pulling down the mighty from their thrones’.

For Albert apartheid was ‘sin made visible’. I can hear him saying it now in his strong Cape Town accent. I can also hear his gentle humour coming through hair-raising stories of things nearly going wrong. He was a wonderful companion and pastor. In 1983 he was elected Master-General of the Dominican Order by his confrères. His response was to request that he be allowed to decline so that he could remain in South Africa and fulfil his commitment there. This was put to the vote and agreed so that he had the shortest time in office of any Dominican Master-General.

At the time of his election Albert was working in the Johannesburg Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) begun in 1981, a small ecumenical group that included Rev. Frank Chikane, later the general-secretary of the South African Council of Churches who became President Mbeki's *Chef de Cabinet*. The name Contextual Theology did little to protect it from the repression which was certain had it been called the Institute for Liberation Theology. In June 1985 ICT published and distributed the *Kairos* document, a radical biblical and theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa and a challenge to the Churches to take sides, signed initially by over 150 mainly black Christians. The South African National Security State was taken completely unawares. Many more signatures followed publication and as the document was read out in township churches there was a palpable sense that congregations felt 'this is what we believe'.

Sweden concluded that leaving support for the ANC solely in the hands of the Communist Party of Soviet Union and the East German Stasi bode ill for the future and was secretly getting money into South Africa to boost non-violent forms of resistance. Much the same group as the ICT, including Albert and the great Dutch Reformed Church dissident pastor, Rev. Beyers Naudé, performed the invaluable and unusual role within South Africa of guiding this funding of the internal movement of the ANC whose base was outside South Africa in Lusaka, Zambia and to a lesser degree in Maputo, Mozambique. For example one of the major requests of the 'Christian ANC' group was funding to strengthen leadership amongst black youth. At the time arrests of youths for 'necklacing', that is killing suspected collaborators with flaming tyres around the neck, was decapitating the youth movement and creating anarchy in the townships.

Albert saw the movement against apartheid bringing together the different races and Christian denominations as a glimpse of the

‘kingdom of heaven’. He saw no conflict between faith and political commitment and there was something beautiful about the way he and those around him lived out that integrated vision. We should learn from him. May he rest in peace.

A TALE OF TWO POPES

16.01.2023

In *The Two Popes* Anthony Hopkins as Pope Benedict XVI and Jonathan Pryce as Pope Francis - then Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio - portray two very different personalities but also a touching, indeed charming, relationship between the two. The Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles's film is taken up with their - obviously imagined - conversations and discussions. Who might know to what degree screenplay and reality coincide? Archbishop Georg Gänswein, Benedict's private secretary, for one.

After Francis became Pope in February 2013, Gänswein retained his role as prefect to the papal household but moved to the monastery in the Vatican gardens where he cared for the Pope Emeritus for the next ten years. On 12 January, with Benedict interred in the crypt of St. Peter's, and with the help of an Italian journalist, Archbishop Gänswein published *Nothing but the Truth: My Life Beside Pope Benedict XVI*.

His story is of Benedict's exemplary papacy. He clearly has a filial love for Benedict. But this is no feel-good story. Not quite as contentious as *Spare*, the Duke of Sussex, Harry's tell-all, but a detailed memoir revealing a lot more than Vatican decorum would normally permit, some of it petty.

Previews of Gänswein's book revealed written exchanges which showed important unresolved disagreements and tensions between the two Popes. There was, it seems, disagreement over Pope Francis curbing the growing celebration of the Latin Mass, his opening up of debate on the question of priestly celibacy in the context of the 2019 Synod on the Church in the Amazon, and his openness to considering the plight of couples divorced but in a civil marriage and not allowed to receive communion. Add to that Francis' *Synodale Weg* (Synodal Path), his innovative rolling

global consultation on the future of the Church focused on mission, participation and communion. During 2022 the consultation surfaced more neuralgic issues: the ordination of women – entirely off piste for John Paul II - and the blessing of same-sex marriages. The message from his opponents: Pope Francis was capitulating to the ‘modern zeitgeist’.

Publishing *Nothing but the Truth*, with the moderating and restraining presence of Benedict gone, Gänswein is expressing the views of a minority of bishops. When Pope John Paul II died in 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger, the intellectual German Professor who became Pope Benedict XVI was the ‘continuity’ candidate. But Cardinal Bergoglio, the ‘Italian’ Argentine who personified a global Church and reflected the Latin American origins of ‘the preferential option for the poor’ offered a different compass bearing. He won the second largest number of votes from the assembled cardinals in 2005 and a majority in 2013.

The two Popes shared common concerns and commitments but embodied two different and apparently incompatible visions of the needs and future of the Church, as well as having two different personalities and priorities. Popes don’t just live in an ecclesiastical or theological world. The context in which they grow up, the historical moment, their experience of life differs and matters.

As an adolescent during the Second World War Joseph Ratzinger, forced into membership of Hitler Youth and conscripted into the army, was forming his views of the world. He saw National Socialism, a rag-bag of fascist and racist ideas, reduce his country to an unimaginable nightmare of destruction and genocide. In 1968 as a theology professor in Tübingen he witnessed another rag-bag of political ideas, this time from the student Left, and supported by lecturers, disrupting the university’s intellectual life. He was deeply, perhaps disproportionately, upset. I once asked his

fellow German Cardinal Walter Kasper if accounts of the impact of this experience hadn't been exaggerated. But he confirmed their accuracy. The events at Tübingen had a lasting effect.

After 1968, Rev. Professor Ratzinger turned from contributing to and championing the aggiornamento of the Second Vatican Council to worrying about to what extremes its ideas might lead. Whilst serving as Pope John Paul II's head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he censored and silenced theologians, notably proponents of the theology of liberation. Was it for fear of what their ideas might develop into and where they might end up? Is it too much to suggest such anxieties might have had their origins in 1940s Germany?

On the other hand, many would say that it was during the Guerra Sucia, Argentina's Dirty War, that the future Pope Francis went through his most critical experiences. Between 1974 and 1983 when he was Jesuit Superior, the military regime murdered and tortured at least ten thousand of its opponents. Two of his Jesuits who refused to leave their work amongst the poor were taken and tortured by the military. Reflecting on these events – and others agreed - Francis concluded that he had let his brethren down by failing to confront the regime and by overestimating the effect of quiet influence.

Different formative experiences at different stages of their lives undoubtedly influenced the different leadership styles, personal behaviour, teaching and ecclesiastical priorities of the two Popes. We all have our comfort zones. To all appearances Pope Benedict's natural environment was a theological seminar, faith seeking knowledge. Pope Francis is naturally at home meeting people, modelling respect for the individual and the simple demands of justice. In 2017 I was amazed to see him, after a grueling day and a long conference, shaking hands with, and

being photographed with, each person emerging from the packed aula. His theology is as much about ‘show’ as ‘tell’.

Cardinal Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and loyal servant to John Paul II, nurtured and enforced unity in the Church. German and Polish experience had taught them that unity based on strength and solidarity was the necessary bulwark against first fascism then bureaucratic communism. Divisive questioning was not to be tolerated. Pope Francis believes in resolving questions that beset the universal Church by opening them up even when they are creating divisions. He is treated with disdain and disloyalty by those who disagree with him.

For the last decade, the whole of Francis’ papacy, there have been not just two sources of authority in the Vatican, but two narratives mapped onto their personalities, mind-sets and teaching. This is not about to stop. The absence of Pope Emeritus Benedict’s restraining influence will, most likely, sharpen the disagreements and intensify disloyalty to Francis. The divisive issues are real and important, but as *The Two Popes* shows, dialogue in friendship with mutual respect and a shared sense of responsibility is always possible.

Already battle lines are being drawn up over the election of the next Pope. It is time passionate partisans find the words “I am right but you’re not wrong”, and for all to acknowledge that the principle “to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” may apply to the papacy as well as to physics.

See *The Article* 16/01/2023

THE GREEN POPE: FRANCIS & THE ETHIC
OF RESPONSIBILITY

25.10.2023

We have become accustomed to warnings that TV news reports from war zones may be disturbing. They usually are distressing. But so are reports on the consequences of climate change. And they come without such warnings despite the dire implications of further global warming.

On 4 October, St. Francis of Assisi's feast day, Pope Francis published *Laudato Deum* "Praise God.... for all his creatures" - words taken from the song St. Francis composed in 1224 celebrating the unity of creation and his place in it. Eight years had passed since Pope Francis published his encyclical *Laudato Si*, (Praise Be) addressed to 'every person living on this planet' about "care for our common home". *Laudato Deum* is addressed to "all the people of Good Will". It is brief and, avoiding Vaticanese, employs relatively accessible language about the climate crisis. It is itself a warning and, unlike a formal encyclical, explicitly a call to action.

"I have realised that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing breaking point", the Pope writes, citing the irreversible nature of changes such as the melting of polar ice which could not be reversed for hundreds of years. "Regrettably, the climate crisis is not exactly a matter that interests the great economic powers, whose concern is with the greatest profit possible at minimal cost and in the shortest amount of time". This is the Pope's forthright verdict. He pointedly mentions that the USA has double the amount of carbon emissions per head of China.

Francis establishes the link between fires, droughts, floods and hurricanes and the accelerating increase in greenhouse gas

emissions, refuting the evidence-deniers. Unusually for a papal document he draws on authoritative scientific sources, notably the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to prove that their increased incidence and severity is caused by human actions.

But he also takes his analysis much deeper. The Pope sees our current predicament growing out of what he calls the 'technocratic paradigm', doubling-down on his critique of this mindset in *Laudato Si*. "Deep down it consists in thinking as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such". When human beings behave as if they are "autonomous, omnipotent and limitless" and "claim to take God's place, they become their own worst enemies".

Hugely increased power, enabled by technological developments, lies in hands which 'cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint'. The 'ethical decadence of real power', Francis believes, disguises itself by clever marketing and fake information. The world has become "an object of exploitation, unbridled use and unlimited ambition".

Instead, he explains, "we are part of nature, included in it, and thus in constant interaction with it", a perception he acknowledges still cherished by many indigenous peoples. Francis shares the traditional Judaeo-Christian belief in the unique and central value of the human being; but he recognises the need today for what he calls a "situated anthropocentrism" in an "integral ecology" (*Laudato Si*) meaning that "human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures".

All well and good the liberal secular world might say but what is the practical application of these ideas and insights? How might they be brought down to earth and take shape in Governments' plans? These questions, which are also often strictures, to a great degree misunderstand the nature of religious discourse. The Pope

is using his position and authority as head of a global Church with 1.3 billion members to sound an alarm, to arouse people to expect, to demand, effective action from governments, and to change themselves. We are a very long way from the world of Rishi Sunak's seven bins for sorting rubbish - though Francis is not squeamish about condemning the way our rubbish is dumped in the developing world.

His discussion of obstacles in the way of coordinated international action, like his intention to attend COP28 in Dubai this November, just announced this week, demonstrates his goal of provoking urgent action in the world of practical politics. For a papal communication *Laudato Deum* is detailed and crystal clear. There are sections on the progress and failures arising from the COP series and even what to expect from COP28. The Pope also writes about the need for some means of enforcing multilateral agreements to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the general weakness of international politics in problem-solving. He will certainly be promoting a Loss and Damage Fund to mitigate the ravages of climate change on the vulnerable countries of the global South.

Francis' vision, shaped by his experience in Latin America of effective change coming from below upwards, may seem utopian. He holds up the international treaty on antipersonnel mines as one example of effective NGO advocacy. But this is much honoured in the breach. Today a global civil society as an equal, benign and responsible player in international relations, curbing the prevarication and corruption of governments, seems like an ever-receding mirage. Governments' - tragic - nationalism and short-sighted version of national interest, their de facto rejection of the global common good – which Francis has written about elsewhere - is no less damaging than the 'technocratic paradigm' which accompanies it.

A few days ago, Greta Thunberg was dragged away from a peaceful demonstration in London outside a meeting between fossil-fuel executives and government ministers. Her arrest highlights both the power, cynicism and irresponsibility of governments and the responsibility, idealism and weakness of young people's peaceful protest. They are deeply anxious about their future - anxiety caused, at least, in part by the pusillanimity and inaction of governments.

Religious bodies and organisations are doing their best to broadcast Francis' writings on social media, and their best has got better in recent years. But we want to be diverted from frightening news. In the face of the horrific massacre in Israel of more than 1,400 Jews and the abduction of some 200 hostages, precipitating a grave crisis in the Middle East, anger was directed at the BBC. What word should have been used to describe the perpetrators of these horrors? We seem unable to hold the big picture in mind for long, whether the causes of violent extremism and war, and how to counter them, or the causes of climate change and how to mitigate them. And if in pain and anger we give up on universal values, justice and human dignity, what ethical resources remain to solve our greatest problems of global scope?

When a much-loved religious leader in Rome, with an old man's sense of time running out, made his alarm call on 4 October, we most probably didn't hear his message either from the pulpit or from the mass media. So neither were we likely to be disturbed by it. We were free to concentrate instead on how to get home during the railway drivers' strike.

JUST WAR: IS THERE SUCH A THING?

06.03.2024

“Taking preparatory steps to enable placing our societies on a war footing when needed are now not merely desirable but essential”. That was General Sir Patrick Sanders, Chief of General Staff since 2022, speaking at a military conference just a month ago. The British government hastened to deny any intention of introducing conscription. A week before, and only a little less disturbing, the Secretary of State for Defense, Grant Shapps, declared that we had moved “from a post-war world to a pre-war world”. Societies preparing to put themselves on a war footing need to consider carefully what justifies both going to war (*jus ad bellum*) and the conduct of war (*jus in bello*) to limit war’s barbarity, questions addressed for over five millennia, a quest first found in the ancient Sanskrit *Mahabharata*.

General Sanders was educated at the Benedictine school attached to Worth Abbey and is certainly familiar with the evolving Catholic just war tradition dating from St. Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century. Here is the relevant text from the 1992 Catholic catechism: “The strict conditions for *legitimate defense by military force* (sic) require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time: the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain; all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition”. Heavily enough for Pope Francis to

abandon the possibility of a just war in favour of Christian non-violence.

Within the just war tradition self-defense, restoration of justice and resistance to an invader, are considered legitimate reasons to fight. In addition, war must be declared by a legitimate ruler. And during war, proportionality – the relative degree of harm caused by military intervention particularly, but not exclusively, to innocent civilians being a primary consideration. Correspondingly, without reasonable chance of success, a futile defense, while honourable, would not traditionally be considered just.

Today the principles of *jus in bello* are expressed within the tradition of humanitarian law and in terms derived from the concept of human rights. The crime of aggression, war crimes, crimes against humanity, the fate of innocent civilian casualties (the notorious ‘collateral damage’ which has immediate consequences for military targeting) all have their origins in the idea of inviolable human rights.

Modern warfare has not precluded consideration of just war criteria. If anything, the wars in the 20th century stimulated their development, if not their application. After the Hamas attack of 7 October, the Israeli government appealed - plausibly - to its right to self-defense. (Mention of the longstanding conflictive quest for land, peace and freedom, out of which the atrocities committed against Israeli communities and the Nova music festival, became anathema.) Ukrainians sheltering from drones launched by the Russian invader, or investigating the murder of civilians in Bucha, or watching the destruction of Mariupol with all its people, didn’t feel any need to debate just cause.

The legal category of war crimes, endorsed by the Catholic Church, has become highly relevant to the war in Ukraine and to the asymmetric Hamas-Israel war. For example, the starvation and killing of thousands of children in Gaza, the capture and killing of

all ages in the Be'eri kibbutz and the youth at the Nova music festival, with civilians over 2/3rds of the total 1,169 killed, brings the wider question of proportionality into sharp focus and raises the question of war crimes. And popular perception of just cause (*jus ad bellum*) instinctively changes in the face of destruction of whole areas of human occupation and intolerably high numbers of civilian casualties (*jus in bello*).

The problem in applying just war principles, with or without today's weapons of mass destruction and reliance on air power, is that war of its very nature generates fear, anger and hatred which sweep away all considerations of proportionality. As Pope Benedict XV said presciently in 1915 "Nations do not die; humbled and oppressed, they chafe under the yoke imposed upon them, preparing a renewal of the combat, and passing down from generation to generation a mournful heritage of hatred and revenge." Nor has the development of 'precision guided' weapons meant that, in densely populated areas, civilian lives are spared, least of all when drones hover, missiles rain down and bombs drop day and night for months. The development of advanced technology for killing the enemy and destroying their wherewithal to wage war has not made 'collateral damage' a thing of the past.

Events in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza call into question whether the application of the principles of the just war has made any major advance since the Second World War. In its culmination, blanket bombing of German and Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Allied air power was deployed with no distinction between critical infrastructure, civilians and soldiers. Today, more than ever, distance protects bomber pilots and those who fire missiles remotely from seeing their victims' pain and grief. We watch it in our living rooms.

In recent conflicts civilians have been the actual targets. I remember in 2017 walking into central Sarajevo long after the war

in Bosnia (1992-1995) had ended. I saw the bullet holes made by Serbian snipers shooting from the hills above the Miljacka river, picking off Bosnian women as they went out to buy bread. In July 1995 Serbian troops in Srebrenica massacred non-combatant Bosnian men and boys. In 1994 genocide was repeated in Rwanda. Between 1998-2003 in the eastern Congo millions of civilians were killed and raped. And the continuing slaughter of innocents in war in Syria and Sudan must be added. In a democratic society peaceful protest against war crimes should not be treated as a threat. Years of research into conflict resolution such as that at Bradford University's Department of Peace Studies, led by Professor Paul Rogers, should not be treated as an ivory-tower academic pastime.

International efforts to contain the cruelty of war have met opposition. In 1998, I overheard inside the Foreign Office a conversation between a frantic official and his Head of Department. President Bill Clinton had just phoned Prime Minister Tony Blair to press him not to sign the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the International Criminal Court (ICC). Blair signed and ratified. America and Israel (along with China, Iraq, Yemen and Qatar) were amongst seven countries unwilling to submit their forces to its jurisdiction and to the international legal constraints it sought to impose. If there are to be any constraints on the waging and conduct of war, whatever the weakness of the ICC in practice, legal redress must be tried. Impartial prosecution of war crimes is one answer to the impasse of contending claims to just cause, for example, self-determination and self-defense, the clashing claims in the "two righteous victims" syndrome. The ICC is necessary but seems only able to enforce selective - victors' - justice. A limited track record but better than nothing.

General Sanders may not have just war theory on his mind, but he has much to think about not least national security. Given

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

future threats, he clearly considers our national contribution of \$67 billion on military spending as inadequate – against the staggering global expenditure of \$2.25 trillion (2022-2023). Our politicians consider £28 billion each year for climate-friendly renewable energy as exorbitant, an economic and electoral hazard. This is frankly a recipe for national insecurity. Climate change is a profound national security threat. Following Biden, it is government investment in renewables as a priority that is “now not merely desirable but essential”.

GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ 8 JUNE 1928-22
OCTOBER 2024: FATHER OF LIBERATION
THEOLOGY

23.10.2024

Locating turning points in history is strangely attractive. We like to account for them by the actions of great men (rarely women). Before it was like this, after it was like that, the story goes. Though in reality many slow changes and complex dynamics come between before and after.

Peruvian Dominican priest Gustavo Gutiérrez who died on 22 October 2024 aged 96, for many in the Catholic Church, was such a man. Born in the heart of Lima, wheelchair bound for much of his six teenage years, half Quechuan half Hispanic, he became known as the father of Liberation Theology. His theology is the key to understanding the most important current in Catholicism worldwide since the 1960s. To celebrate Gustavo's life is to celebrate a key contributor to a gradual but vitally important change in the life of a global Church and its 1.36 billion members in the last half century.

From the circumstances of Latin America when he was writing, and Catholic tradition, came his vision of theology's task, '*el quehacer teologica*'. He posed two foundational questions that lay behind the re-discovery of the Church's "preferential option for the poor" understood as its principal pastoral concern: "How do we convey to the poor that God loves them?" and "How to speak out of the suffering of the innocent about God?" '*Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente*', a task that has, to put it mildly, not become redundant with time.

When it comes to acknowledging great men, a Peruvian theologian may sound a surprising choice. Many of the world's Catholics, at least the older ones, would understandably pick

instead Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, John XXIII, born into a sharecropper family of thirteen children from a small village in Lombardy, the Pope who called the second Vatican Council (1962-1965). This would be the turning point that – often forgotten - he opened with a speech underlining the Church’s concern for the poor and suffering. A gathering that brought together bishops, leaders and theologians from around the world, largely from Western Europe, which sought to update and renew the life of the Church.

The great man story of historical change holds up quite well for the vision behind the Council. But for – what was becoming – a truly global Church, the story neglects the long process of change that had been going on not only in Europe but notably in Latin America. And the impact of the Council in many countries was muted and blocked by cautious bishops, the UK would be a good example, dashing many hopes. Latin America proved more fertile soil. Gutiérrez’s *Theology of Liberation: Perspectives* published in Spanish in 1971 by the Lima *Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones*, and in English by the Maryknoll Fathers’ *Orbis* in 1973, became the core inspirational text driving this process.

Latin America had a head-start in addressing the challenge of poverty. In the 1950s, 60% of the population in Peru lived in poverty with 82% of these living in extreme poverty. CELAM, the Bishops’ Conference of Latin America, held its first meeting in 1955, so ideas for action responding to such acute poverty on the continent, such as radio schools, could be shared.

Catholic Action officially defined as “the participation of the laity in the apostleship of the hierarchy” drew on the simple formula of see-judge-and-act in movements such as Young Christian Workers and Young Christian Students. Gutiérrez’s recognition of the importance of the economic, social and political in a Christian understanding of the world around him, like that of

several other priests, came through student life in Catholic Action, in his case at the National University of San Marcos in Lima. “The poor are the by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible”, he wrote later. His vocation to the priesthood seems to have been in part a response to this responsibility.

Gutiérrez’s clerical training brought him to Louvain where he studied psychology and philosophy and, to Lyon, where he was introduced to *‘la nouvelle théologie’* and the European theologians who were later to influence the bishops in the Vatican Council. Central to the thinking in Lyon were writings from the early Christian centuries, the ‘Church Fathers’, a time when the appointment of a bishop could be challenged if he were not ‘a lover of the poor’. That, as Gustavo later put it, the Church must be “on the side of the oppressed classes and dominated peoples clearly and without qualification” was not some leftist novelty but rooted in Church history.

On his return to Peru, after ordination in 1959, he served in the small Church of the Holy Redeemer in Rimac, a working-class area to the north of downtown Lima. This was the period when the Cuban revolution was putting Latin America into ferment. Two major forces, Marxism and Catholicism, contended for hearts and minds. In his exploration of a Christian account of liberation Gutiérrez along with other liberation theologians rejected a binary conflict and borrowed some elements of Marxist analysis for description of the reality experienced by the poor.

The year 1968 for Latin America, as elsewhere, was something of a turning point. Father Pedro Arrupe, the Superior-General of the Society of Jesus, called on his fellow Jesuits in Latin America to inform their ministry by ‘an option for the poor’. In late July Gutiérrez presented a paper, ‘Towards a Theology of Liberation’ at a second continentwide meeting of priests and laity in the

Peruvian coastal town of Chimbote. It was one month before a major meeting of CELAM in Medellin, Colombia, which adopted the language of a preferential option for the poor.

Liberation theology saw liberation as a dimension of salvation, ‘a demand that we go and build a different social order’, part of building the kingdom of God of the Lord’s Prayer rather than an entirely separate *secular* project. Gutiérrez understood full well that this could not be accomplished without conflict - deadly for many - after the succession of coups bringing to power the murderous US-supported military dictatorships and oligarchies of 1960s Latin America. The National Security States branded pastoral workers amongst the poor as “communist infiltration of the Church”, and the military and death squads killed them with virtual impunity. The martyr archbishop, Oscar Romero, came to personify their sacrifice. Despite this, in the 1980s, the Vatican sought to censure liberation theology, though through dialogue conflict was to some degree resolved.

The pastoral concern and spirituality that Gutiérrez embodied had already entered the bloodstream of the global Church. Features of it are seen in Pope Francis’ teaching and approach to the papacy. It has motivated the work of countless Catholics finding their vocation in working with the poor and marginalised of their societies.

I’ve listened to Gustavo speaking on far too few occasions. One anecdote has stayed with me. To paraphrase what he said: “I have realised how different my life is from that of the poor. I have enough money and not enough time. They have time and not enough money”. Perhaps less true in frantic 2024 Britain. Amongst years of teaching and pioneering writing, finding time for the poor may have been his greatest gift.

May he rest in peace.

DOWN TO EARTH AFTER CHRISTMAS

26.12.2024

A down to earth liturgical battering awaits us after Christmas. No more “Away in the Manger”. Nor sweet, and posh, little voices from King’s College Chapel. The wrapping paper in the bin, we hear about a stoning (St. Stephen on 26th December) and more killings, on the Feast of the Holy Innocents (28th December). Both have resonances today.

In the Acts of the Apostles St. Luke describes how Stephen, a Greek-speaking deacon, is stoned to death for delivering a long and highly critical sermon attacking his “stiff-necked” fellow Jews for rejecting Christ. Today it might be censured as antisemitism.

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, the only Gospel to tell this story, Herod is portrayed as wanting to kill the Christ child. But all Herod has to go on is location, Bethlehem, a small village, not far from Jerusalem. So the order goes out to kill all boys in Bethlehem under two years old. Perhaps 20 would have been killed. Collateral damage in today’s terms. These days the ‘acceptable’ number can be calculated by algorithm.

The scale of the Bethlehem atrocity is, of course, not the main point for Matthew who is placing Jesus within the scriptural theme of Moses’ escape as a baby from the Egyptian Pharaoh. Like today’s authoritarian rulers Herod did in fact murder potential rivals. The Gospel tells a plausible story even if scripture scholars doubt its historical accuracy.

Well, you might say, such biblical stories are nothing compared with our own pre-Christmas diet of mass killings in Syria, the individual torture of Sarah Sharif, the rape, sexual abuse, and all manner of perversity offered up on Radio 4 News breakfast, lunch, tea and supper. In short, Radio 4, our premier news service, seems determined to convince us its audience of what the Catholic

Catechism calls Original Sin. And how strange that the BBC campaign to protect children from harmful content on social media doesn't appear to recognise the prevalence of harmful content on its own radio and TV channels.

Should we be wondering whether round the world both individuals and groups of people are very little safer from murderous brutality today than they were two thousand years ago? Has humanity at heart not changed? Even asking the question draws a secular society close to some theological insights.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), described evil as “the loss” or “absence of good” following St. Augustine nearly eight centuries earlier who wrote that evil is the “privation of good” (the loss of something normally present). Evil has no positive existence and is the product of the “will deficient” of human beings. So far clear enough. Though this takes some absorbing. But Aquinas in Part One of his *Summa Theologiae*, his training manual for peripatetic Dominican preachers, lands us amongst some tricky syllogisms and the issue gets a lot more complicated. But then the idea of evil itself is complex.

In a general sense, Aquinas says, goodness is God's gift to creation, and so to us, integral to our humanity; we are each endowed with the goodness proper to our nature. Animals, each with their specific disposition, are also endowed with their particular goodness. But ours is conditioned by the additional gift of reason and the ability to act purposefully for what we understand to be our good. In other words, there is a moral law written into human nature. Evil in human beings is the absence of that goodness, an absence that causes us to be drawn away from our proper disposition and into inhumanity.

It is difficult to find the right words to describe why and how we are drawn away from the good. The word traditionally used was Concupiscence. Thanks to some degree to St. Augustine's

pre-occupations, concupiscence unfortunately has tended to become a synonym of lust. St. Anselm of Canterbury's (1033-1109) description is the "privation of the righteousness that any man (*person*) ought to possess". It suggests more widely the all-important social dimension to human goodness and evil. And for Anselm the privation is mitigated by Grace which, Catholics would say, is seen working in exemplary fashion in the lives of the saints.

Hannah Arendt captures another characteristic of evil in her controversial 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Classics 2006. She portrayed Eichmann as a man whose horrendous crimes sprang from his not thinking. "It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity" that drew him into the Nazi project of the Holocaust. Eichmann had no special personal traits except "an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement". For Arendt, it was his apparent ordinariness, his banality, the absence of anything that would separate him from the Nazi herd, that led him into crimes against humanity and into a Jerusalem court room in 1962.

In her second Reith lecture this year, Dr Gwen Adshead, a distinguished forensic psychiatrist and psychotherapist who at Broadmoor treats perpetrators of extreme violence, addresses the common question "Aren't They All Evil?". That word 'Evil', she argued, should only be used as an adjective, never a noun. In some ways similar to Arendt, she spoke about how 'cognitive distortions' and 'dysregulated emotions' can create an 'evil state of mind' in otherwise ordinary people. In a profoundly Christian analysis she identifies the seven deadly sins as conditions conducive to an evil mind, placing her analysis within Aquinas' conceptual framework, the absence or loss of the good.

The perpetrators of monstrously evil deeds may be otherwise quite ordinary people. We should not be sheltered from that reality by easy accusations and easy answers. Once we blamed Adam and Eve now it is dodgy DNA. It's hard for secular-minded people to discuss the issue because so much of the available vocabulary is religious: temptation, sin, weakness, guilt, wrong, Grace. The tabloids feel free to use evil as a headline noun. The Today programme has to make do with 'inappropriate' and 'unacceptable'.

Christmas inevitably reminds us of the plight of children and refugees in conflict zones and in our own society, the sixth richest country in the world, but with 4.2 million children living below the poverty line and 117,000 homeless households in temporary accommodation. Not asleep on the hay but no way for children to be living.

War does not simply kill and maim children but damages psychologically those who survive. I encounter this damage working in a charity trying to help children in Maronite schools in a poor neighbourhood of Beirut, Lebanon's capital city. We see the consequences of poverty and trauma, from speech defects to severe behaviour problems.

Some of the Syrians in Lebanon are taking their children back to an uncertain future in Syria. What must Christmas be like in the uncertainties of Ukraine? I remember a mural in an old Serbian Orthodox church showing two women sitting around a large cooking pot preparing a meal for the family in the manger. It had survived fire-damage from the 1990s Balkans war.

My own carved wooden Malawian nativity set is as down to earth as that Serbian mural though short on sheep now. The Christmas octave reminds us that Jesus's parents had to flee Herod's violence with their refugee child, the child who came home to reveal the meaning of holiness.

SPIES IN THE VATICAN

24.01.2025

Clandestine priests smuggled into England hunted by spies from the royal court and martyred are prominent within English Catholic memory of the 16th and early 17th century. Priest-holes, the pejorative term 'Jesuitical', and the exclusion of Catholics from succession to the throne, remain a minor remnant of that time. In the 20th century, Nazi Rule, Communism, and the military dictatorships of Latin America, evoke a similar memory of spies, clandestine missionaries and martyrdom. *Plus ça change.*

Yvonnick Denoël's *Vatican Spies: From the Second World War to Pope Francis* (Hurst £25), covers the period from 1940 to 2023. The author is a French journalist who has written books about Intelligence Services including the CIA, MOSSAD and MI6. But this new book is not just about Vatican spies as the title suggests, but also covers other newsworthy elements of recent Church history - a discreditable litany of scandals.

As a historian of the Church, Denoël leaves much to be desired. We get, for example, three pages on Rwandan history and the 1994 genocide. But no mention of Pope John Paul's repeated passionate appeals, just three days after the massacres began: "Everywhere hatred, revenge, fratricidal killing. In the name of Christ we beg you, lay down your arms". Nothing either about the Nuncio for Rwanda in Kigali, Monsignor Giuseppe Bertello, who supported Rwandan human rights organisations and had alerted the Pope to the danger. Plenty of detail about the complicity of the local Church. But what has this got to do with the Vatican and spies?

Denoël does provide many vignettes and longer, indigestible accounts of agents of Intelligence Services trying to extract information from the Vatican, Cardinals and Curial officials, bishops, priests, lay Catholics and Catholic organisations. Many

of his clerical *dramatis personae* have dodgy friends and vulnerabilities to manipulation: ambition, sometimes homosexuality and, in certain instances, strong ideological or political sentiments. Several show considerable courage or, at least, tolerance of high levels of risk. At 434 pages, you 'd need a spy's training to remember all the names.

Denoël expands the definition of spies to mean not only handlers and agents, and their spying, for example, bugs in the office of Cardinal Luigi Maglione, Vatican Secretary of State during the War, (phones tapped also). Spying is treated in the generic sense of activities involving collection of sensitive information through cultivation of personal relationships, or picked up in the course of their work by Curial officials and Nuncios. And there is no doubt that Church officials did pass on information to Governments and, inadvertently or deliberately, to people who were Intelligence agents.

Vatican Spies has no strong overarching themes beyond fear of, and reaction to, communism and money the root of all evil. Denoël justifiably points the finger at the Vatican's management of its bank the IOR, *Instituto per le Opere di Religione* (the works of religion - for which, too often, read money-laundering). Alongside good works, over the years the IOR has served the Mafia, the sinister P2 Italian Masonic Lodge, and the CIA . Chronic incompetence, naivete or illicit financial benefit? All of the above.

The larger than life American Monsignor, later Archbishop, Paul Marcinkus, who was IOR President from 1971-1989, weathering several scandals, owed his career to the then Archbishop Montini, later Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), whose pastoral work in Milan he assisted financially. Marcinkus was also director of the Nassau, Bahamas, Banco Ambrosiano Overseas of which the IOR was the main shareholder. Its chairman was Roberto Calvi who was found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge

(definitely not suicide) when the bank collapsed in 1982. Enough to make St. Ambrose turn in his grave.

In 1969 Pope Paul VI asked the Sicilian tax lawyer and banker, Michele Sindona, another benefactor from his Milan days, to liaise with Marcinkus in investing Vatican money offshore to avoid Italian tax. Unfortunately, New York Mafia boss Gambino's heroin profits were also handled by Sindona who died in prison of cyanide in his coffee. Only under Pope Francis have serious inroads into cleaning up this inglorious Augean stable made much progress.

The glory days for undercover work in the Vatican were the nine months of Nazi occupation of Rome October 1943 to June 1944. Escaped Allied troops were found sanctuary. A former Irish boxer from Cork, Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, confined in the Vatican to avoid arrest, organised an extensive rescue network supported by the British Ambassador, Francis D'Arcy Osborne. The American Cardinal Eugene Spellman acted almost openly as a CIA asset, funneling in money to help. When deportation of 1,259 Jews from Rome to Auschwitz began on 15 October 1943, Secretary of State, Cardinal Luigi Maglione, protested to the German Ambassador. The Vatican ordered Rome's 100 convents and 45 monasteries to provide sanctuary; they hid 6,000 out of the capital's 8,000 Jews, some in churches and some in the Vatican itself. Meanwhile, the Gestapo worked to infiltrate these Catholic networks.

There were, of course, exceptions to this risky support for Allied forces and Jews. Some in leadership positions were pro-German. At the end of the war, Pius XII (Pope 1939-1958) appointed the rector of Santa Maria dell'Anima in Rome, pro-Nazi Bishop Alois Hudal of Graz, to ensure pastoral care of Germans interned in Italy. But the care included organizing 'ratlines', escape routes for Nazi war criminals to Argentina. Like

those O'Flaherty saved from Nazi capture, most were hidden in Church properties. The Americans weren't bothered. By late 1944, their mistrust of the Soviet Union was becoming dominant.

The key is the Vatican's fear of, and enmity towards, Communism, a theological dimension of the Cold War. In Poland from 1945-1953, some 2,200 priests were deported, imprisoned, and some executed. (Over 1,800 had already died in Nazi concentration camps). As the Communist government established itself in China, out of the 3,000 priests in 1949 some 500 were expelled, 500 imprisoned and 200 were executed. These experiences weighed heavily on successive Popes and directed ongoing diplomatic priorities.

During the Cold War, the CIA - fearing that the Italian Communist Party would win the 1948 elections and supporting Pius XII's perennial attempts to infiltrate priests into Soviet-controlled eastern Europe - were close collaborators with the Vatican, if not acknowledged allies. James Angleton, CIA station chief in Rome during the war, brought \$10 million in sacks partly for Monsignor Montini (later Paul VI) to deposit in the IOR, financing the Vatican's contribution to a massive political campaign for the Christian Democrats organized by the Italian Church.

Pope St. John XXIII's *Ostpolitik* of detente, his warmth towards Khrushchev's family, was a new approach to an old problem. It worried the Americans. JFK avoided emphasizing his Catholic identity. But a Polish Pope, St. John Paul II (1958-2005), who embodied the struggle between Catholicism and Communism, offered exceptional opportunities. John Paul II did not cause the collapse of the Soviet Union but he contributed towards it bravely and skillfully. In the 1980s, according to Tomas Turowski, Polish Ambassador to the Vatican: "There were more spies in the Vatican than in the James Bond films".

The Catholic Church is a global communications network. Information flows through it to journalists, NGOs and Governments, sometimes for the common good. So, in Denoël's sense, many Catholics are spies. . . . and a few are spies in the usual sense. While working undercover for Swedish Government against the apartheid regime in the 1980s, I had smuggled into South Africa a debugging device for the non-violent political coalition, the *United Democratic Front*. It featured as 'agricultural equipment'. Well, it equipped them to get rid of bugs.

Vatican Spies puts Church leadership in a discreditable light. The book is a potential arsenal for anti-Catholicism. In the words of the Mass: "Look not on our sins but on the Faith of Your Church".

IMMIGRATION

WHY RISHI SUNAK SHOULD TAKE A TRIP TO MALI

05.11.2021

The Budget has come and gone. The British government is still determined to plunder our international aid budget to demonstrate their financial probity. At least until 2024. Ever ready for a U-turn when public opinion swings, the Cabinet must have calculated there are few voters who will desert them as a result of these cuts and, indeed, some who may be won over.

But what do the public really think about aid? The damage caused by the nationalist and popular binary opposition between ‘home’ or ‘domestic’ and ‘overseas’ or ‘foreign’ intensifies as the threats from COVID mutants and carbon emissions grow. But polls suggest a majority support the cuts. ‘Charity begins at home’ – and ends there - is strengthened as default position at times of uncertainty. There are bigger things to worry about. It’s money down the drain thanks to the corruption of recipients or, straight out of the *Daily Mail* playbook, taxpayers’ money wasted on ‘nonsensical programmes’.

There is another explanation why the argument that it is a bad idea to reduce international aid by more than 0.2% of GDP fails to win the day. Most people have little idea what a good developmental project or programme looks like beyond what they might see watching Comic Relief’s *Red Nose Day*. How could they? Nor do they hear any explanations why ‘odd’ sounding FCDO (old DfID) programmes make a difference.

Public generosity is impressive in emergencies and for humanitarian aid. But people are distrustful of spending on abstract nouns such as ‘international development’. What exactly

does it mean? They are sceptical about things they cannot see or verify themselves. Corruption causes distrust particularly of government to government aid. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), of course, provides an alternative. Yes, NGOs can have their blind-spots failings and flaws. I should know having worked in them for thirty years. But despite recent sex scandals they retain public confidence.

In 2009 when I was working on malaria prevention in West Africa, I met a young American Orthodox Jewish medical student who had been living on the outskirts of Mali's capital, Bamako, amongst impoverished migrants from the rural areas. He had spent time with families whose children had died because the mother had no money to pay for medical treatment. As a pious Jew, soon to be a doctor, he found himself thinking of collapsed health systems in Africa in the light of passages in the Babylonian Talmud discussing to whom the moral imperative to rescue people from under a collapsed building should apply. He began to see the responsibility to rescue the many deprived of health care as a question of justice. The glaring injustice of thousands dying from treatable disease for lack of money, inspired a small group of Malians and Americans to devise a pro-active, community-led, but scalable and data-driven, primary health care programme which they called Project Muso (Muso means 'woman' in Bambara, and true to the name 80% of the workers in it today are women). This took them on a path that led to a partnership with the Ministry of Health and international aid from a variety of sources.

The scalability of the programme depended on its simplicity. The mortality rate in Mali amongst children under five was more than one in ten because parents were not able to get their children to a health centre for medical treatment. So the key feature of the programme would be to bring health care to the patient. Community health workers (CHWs) who visited homes in their

local area, would be trained to diagnose some dozen prevalent and potentially lethal diseases. They would be paid for each patient they got to a clinic by whatever transport available.

A single CHW can now be responsible for 1,000 of her own neighbours. They make home visits carrying basic medical equipment in backpacks, often with their own baby bound to their front. These women are known and trusted. 97% of project staff are Malians. By 2016, 82% of sick children covered by MUSO reached a clinic within 24 hours. The drop in under-five mortality was spectacular. The additional cost – beyond what the Ministry of Health was spending - from getting each patient into treatment at a health centre was estimated at \$6-13 dollars.

The beauty of the training – which I was allowed to observe – is the demanding and sensitive supervision by a nurse and doctor, the respect for the women, some of whom were illiterate.

Drawings are used to illustrate a range of common symptoms. Role plays allow experienced CHWs to correct *faux pas* such as sitting down on the mat with the training doll without asking permission, or errors like prodding the wrong side of the abdomen to detect appendicitis. The nurse and doctor only intervene if the peer review CHWs can't answer a question.

By 2019 Project Muso had forged a strong partnership with a dynamic Malian Minister of Health who was rebooting the health care system with a focus on pregnant women, under-fives and the elderly and providing more public money to enable free treatment. The rate of child death was now lower than in any country in sub-Saharan Africa. By this time, true to its aim of scalability, the Project was also supplying technical assistance to the Health Ministries in Togo and Côte d'Ivoire, and from its Bamako programme had budded off eight centres in rural areas and serving 350,000 patients. Despite military coups, an outbreak of Ebola, terrorist attacks murdering Muso's patients and a refugee crisis,

expansion continues. As COVID infections increased Project Muso designed, trained and supported the Health Ministry's contact tracing programme, promoted vaccination, produced COVID teaching material and marshalled PPE for its CHWs as well as oxygen cylinders for hospitals. As Nelson Mandela said: "It always seems impossible until it's done".

Because of Mali's desert-edge poverty, life-saving measures will continue to depend on external money, money which the UK is removing from its budget. The Project has a number of donors - fortunately not the UK government - and recently landed an unprecedented \$15 million three year grant from a single donor, some indication of its effectiveness.

Project Muso as it evolved demonstrated many features of good development not least the importance of women's agency, effective partnerships, government-NGO cooperation, scalability, sharing expertise in a well thought out strategy. When I hear international aid being dismissed as some kind of foible of soft-headed liberal internationalists I think of healthy Muslim Malian children rushing out, calling 'Ari, Ari', to embrace my Orthodox Jewish friend, *kippah* in place, doing one of his rounds. Perhaps he should invite Mr. Sunak to spend a few days with him in peri-urban Bamako.

PRITI PATEL'S OUTING TO RWANDA

01.05.2022

Why did Priti Patel, claiming her aim is to destroy the cross-channel traffickers' "business model", choose Rwanda for her recent £120 million *Migration and Economic Development Partnership*? And from what budget does the funding come? Asylum seekers and migrants seeking a safe or better life in the UK are to be treated like toxic waste to be dumped in foreign lands, a striking illustration of the Johnson Cabinet's moral bankruptcy. But quite likely here is a Minister playing to the Tory gallery unconcerned that their announcement can't be implemented. Legal challenges are already being prepared. If this were just another half-baked initiative that will never happen, a Johnson specialty, there wouldn't be much more to say. But why Rwanda and what's in it for the Home Secretary? The announcement provoked widespread and powerful reactions. "We pray that those who seek solutions do so with compassion, and with regard for the dignity which is innate to every human being. This week's policy announcement simply lacks these qualities" Cardinal Vincent Nichols responded. The Archbishop of Canterbury described this "subcontracting" of responsibilities as "the opposite of the nature of God" – more theological but less clear - while the civil servants union called it 'inhuman'. Matthew Rycroft CBE, Permanent Secretary in the Home Office with a distinguished diplomatic career behind him, wrote to Priti Patel that he was not in a position to conclude there was "a deterrent effect significant enough to make the policy value for money" and therefore needing a Ministerial directive to proceed. In short, the deal was immoral, unworkable, probably illegal, and would likely cost a fortune. Protest was strong but the choice of Rwanda and its geopolitical implications have aroused negligible

in-depth comment. They should have. There is much to be learnt from Rwanda's tragic history. My *Church and Revolution in Rwanda* (Manchester University Press 1977) examines the roots of the bitter political and ethnic conflict already happening 45 years ago. Following the 1994 genocide, I wrote about the failure of the international community, the complicity of the French, and the aftermath of the take-over by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Rwanda is much more than the 'Switzerland of Africa'. Rwanda today is economically a remarkable success story for which its President Paul Kagame is justly credited. A former military commander, in his mid-60s, trained at Fort Leavenworth, USA, he directed the RPF take-over after the genocide and today leads a tiny, poor, mountainous, densely populated country not much bigger than Wales whose population is 3.17 million. According to the World Bank, 60% of the 13 million Rwandans still survive in extreme poverty on \$1.25 a day, but many of the usual poverty indicators are moving in the right direction. The Kagame government has achieved impressive economic and social progress. 30% of Rwanda's budget is spent on health and education. There is almost universal primary education along with innovative health measures, though malaria remains prevalent. Life expectancy increased from 49 years to 67 between 2001-2017. Significant efforts have been made to overcome the ethnic divides that lay behind the genocide. In 2008 a law against gender based violence was passed and some 62% of parliamentarians are now women. Inequality in Rwanda as measured by the Gini coefficient (Sweden 0.3, South Africa 0.63) is 0.44. According to Transparency International, Rwanda is the least corrupt country on the African continent. An extraordinary example of national regeneration after the genocide. Foreign aid accounts for from 30-40% of Rwanda's annual budget but, poor though the country remains, the government hopes to leap-frog

into the cyber-age and make the country a regional ICT hub; 4,000 kilometres of fibre optics have been rolled out and 600,000 laptops distributed. The national university has a course on Artificial Intelligence. Rwanda – formerly Francophone now in the Commonwealth with an English language policy - has become a darling of British Development Aid. What's not to admire? The maggot in the apple is Kagame's violation of individual human rights. Years ago, I was threatened by the head of Rwanda's official human rights organization for taking too much interest in human rights violations. Opposing Kagame is dangerous. *Deutsche Welle's* Global Media Forum (the German equivalent of the BBC World Service) reports 'enforced disappearances' (the official legal name used in a 2006 human rights UN International Convention) of journalists and opponents of the Rwandan government as well as mysterious deaths in South Africa and Mozambique of Rwandan exiles. You have to be a very courageous to criticize the government. The country is ranked 155 out of 180 for Press Freedom and, placed between Angola at 122 and Zimbabwe at 133, is 128th out of 167 on the Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index. In the 2017 elections, after 22 years in power as President, Paul Kagame allegedly received 99% of the votes achieving a constitutional change that would allow him to stay in power until 2034. Rwanda is now amongst the world's authoritarian one-party States. Western governments making decisions about relations with Rwanda face a dilemma. Its work for social and economic rights inspires support and engagement. Its violations of individual rights, rights by which the West officially sets such store, call in question the fundamental opposition the West asserts between democratic governments and the growing number of authoritarian States around the world. The contemporary China-Russia alliance has made the West's defense of democracy an overriding geopolitical priority. The Cold War

between Communist States and Western democracies is resumed with once again the (false) choice between the personal freedoms of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights and the economic and social benefits of the 1966 UN International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights. Does achieving the social and economic rights laid out in the 1966 UN International Covenant really depend on suppression of political opposition? Hardly. It's a counter-factual argument but a democratic Rwanda could have done just as well. The West sees itself championing democracy and a culture of democracy underpinned by respect for human rights, especially those violated by authoritarian regimes. So what is the UK doing planning to deport asylum seekers for 'processing', many of whom will be fleeing one authoritarian regime only to end up in another? This is no-one's idea of 'constructive engagement'. Priti Patel in her choice of Rwanda is de facto prioritizing economic rights over individual rights, reversing the West's longstanding geopolitical position. Perhaps she simply doesn't notice that there might be a wider problem here in the message she is giving to the world in her migrants for money partnership.

PRITI AND THE PEOPLE SMUGGLERS

09.05.2022

Priti Patel's announcement that Rwanda was to be given £120 million for accepting deported migrants - and refugees - has not gone down well. But undeterred the Prime Minister has said he will get it done. For a moment let's take at face value the Government's response to the widespread outcry.

Patel's defense of her money-for-migrants scheme contains at least three claims. The first is that Britain has a problem: an unacceptable number of migrants and asylum seekers are crossing the channel to Britain in small boats. The second is that criminal gangs of people smugglers make a great deal of money out of organizing these crossings and that deportation to Rwanda of young male 'illegal migrants' who adopt this way of entering Britain is the only means of destroying the smugglers' business model and so to prevent drownings. The third is that the passengers on these unsafe dinghies are mostly economic migrants not genuine refugees. Each of these claims sounds plausible, the second even a form of 'tough love'. Transnational organized crime and the suffering and tragic deaths it entails are obviously a serious problem. But each claim is based on false assumptions, misinformation or simply ignores what is known from research on migration.

Compared with other European countries, Britain does not have a severe migrant problem. Some two-thirds of those making the Channel crossing turn out to be genuine asylum seekers rather than economic migrants though war, persecution and poverty do go together. If you take the number of asylum claims per 100,000 of population as a measure, Britain ranks 14th in Europe with Germany, Spain, France, Belgium and Switzerland receiving applications at double the rate of Britain's. Between 2015 and

2016, Angela Merkel's Germany admitted 1.25 million Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees. By 2018, according to the US Center for Global Development, 72% had gained permission to work. From 1% on arrival 44% had learnt German. By 2021 some 50% had jobs, were in training or had internships. Britain with a similarly ageing population and labour shortage might profitably study how a country can successfully turn migrants into an asset. The real problem is dog-whistling by the political Right and its supportive Press creating fear of 'swamping'.

People smuggling, sometimes overlapping with sexual trafficking, is now firmly established as large scale transnational crime. The global estimate for 2016 was that c. 2.5 million people paid smugglers between \$5.5 and \$7 billion to get them across borders. The big transnational criminal gangs and smaller networks operate on the dark web in encrypted sites. Payment often is made through the traditional *hawala* system (in Arab countries and South Asia, money is paid to an agent who instructs a trusted associate in the relevant country or area to pay the final recipient). Like other profits from international crime, the money can then be laundered through banks. Laundering is an obvious target if the government's aim is to undermine the business model.

The France to UK sea-crossing lies at the end of a very long and dangerous journey which involves negotiations with ruthless gangs and their collaborators often working on commission within transnational networks from hubs such as Agadez in Niger. In such poor countries the gangs provide employment for a penumbra of independent guides, drivers, recruiters and middle-men, forgers of travel documents, providers of boats and accommodation.

The smuggler's 'business model' is simple: lowest risk with highest profits. The total cost per traveler with the UK as a destination is now 6,000 Euros. The more difficult it gets the higher the price. But demand is not necessarily flattened. Because

they have become accustomed to taking life-threatening risks on their journey, and because the Eurotunnel route is now more or less successfully blocked along with lorry traffic being more diligently checked, on the final leg of their journey asylum seekers and migrants are prepared to risk drowning. In good weather, dinghies trucked into France from Germany, and now larger boats, set off together and, given the current maximum available deployment of 800 French police and border control staff on the long French beaches, a percentage will make it across. A year ago, the French were making some 1,500 arrests of people involved in organizing the Channel crossings - but they are soon replaced.

The young men who are most at risk from the Patel plan also have a business model. They are often 'crowdfunded' by their village or by relatives, becoming a cross between a human lottery ticket and a living investment made in the expectation of returns through regular remittances home. Many are burdened by the moral responsibility to reach the UK and pay back their investors. They are the product of the corruption and incompetence of their own governments, inadequate debt relief and cuts in development aid. Deportation to Rwanda addresses none of this.

Government talks in terms of supply and demand. But limiting demand for the services of smugglers, if that is the true aim, could be achieved by measures directly under our control such as increasing and broadening the channels for regular migration, simpler checking procedures, making it easier to obtain legitimate travel documents. Opportunities for authorised migration need to increase and be made more accessible in countries of origin as well as from refugee camps. The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme for Syrian refugees which ended in March 2021 should be continued with increased annual target numbers. Better staffed migration and asylum bureaux in Europe are also necessary. The shambles of the Ukrainian humanitarian visas application system

is an example of how to create an incentive to pay people smugglers and risk the Channel crossing. Ratchet up government investment in authorised routes and fewer people would want to pay smugglers.

Finally, if government policy is indeed intended to interdict people smugglers, the £120 million going to Rwanda, plus other attendant transportation and accommodation costs, would be better spent on increasing the staffing of the UK's National Crime Agency INVIGOR programme which deals with criminally organized immigration. Better liaison and cooperation with France's OCRIEST, (*L'Office central pour la répression de l'immigration irrégulière et de l'emploi d'étrangers sans titre*), the French immigration and border police, and with Interpol's Integrated Border Management Task Force (IBMTF) would also help. With the Home Office prediction of only 300 deportations to Rwanda annually and with forthcoming legal challenges, Priti Patel's money-for-migrants partnership seems unlikely to be implemented. The judges and 'left-wing lawyers' will be blamed when it is stopped. And Government headline-grabbing will continue, irresponsible, deceptive and shameless.

THE ILLEGAL ILLEGAL MIGRATION ACT

17.07.2023

The Court of Appeal ruled on 29 June that Rwanda was not a ‘safe third country’ and deporting asylum seekers there was unlawful. Given this judgement the drafters of the Illegal Migration Act might be complimented on their foresight in the wording of the bill’s title. The Act has been called unworkable, ‘morally unacceptable’ (Bishop Paul McAleenan) and ‘amounting to an asylum ban’ (the UNHCR). Its contents in their lack of human empathy could have been generated by AI. In the words of the Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service, Sarah Teather, to “deny sanctuary to people who need it based on their mode of arrival is grotesquely cruel”.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has declared he will achieve what he calls his five ‘people’s priorities’. The fifth reads: “We will pass new laws to stop small boats, making sure that if you come to this country illegally, you are detained and swiftly removed”. Last year some 90% of the boat people who reached the UK sought asylum. By the beginning of this year only 3% of them have received an initial decision from the Home Office. More than 135,000 asylum applicants were awaiting a decision, many of them in hotels paid for out of the UK aid budget; 89,000 of them had been waiting for more than six months. This is the context within which the Prime Minister has chosen to back this bad bill. Is he serious?

Sunak excuses the draconian contents of the Illegal Migration Act on grounds of compassion. 56 people, 11 of them children, are known to have drowned trying to cross the Channel since 2018. He argues that the people smugglers’ business model will collapse if would-be migrants believe they will be sent to Rwanda. If there were a well-funded special unit in the National Criminal Agency (NCA) dedicated to the arrest of these criminal gangs, if there

were adequate accessible safe and legal routes for asylum seekers to get here, his compassion argument might carry conviction. If migration policy is compassion driven, why has the Conservative Party in the Commons voted down Lords amendments to the bill containing such provisions?

The Conservatives believe that their bill is a direct response to the democratic will, or, at least, the will of voters in the Red Wall constituencies who want to see an end to small boat crossings. And Kent County Council as well as Dover genuinely are overwhelmed because so few councils around the country are willing to ‘burden-share’ (and most of these are Labour Councils) - a microcosm of the European Union’s predicament.

But just how popular is the Illegal Migration Act? How many people are thinking this harsh action is not our idea of British values? In the House of Lords we were hearing voices speaking for another, kinder Britain: Lord Dubs, who before the Second World War was brought to Britain on the *kindertransport*, concerned for the needs and protection of unaccompanied children. Then there was Baroness Mobarik, who aged six accompanied her family from Pakistan to Glasgow, speaking alongside David Walker, the Anglican Bishop of Manchester against government attempts to weaken limits on the detention of immigrant children and pregnant women. Isn’t the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees, in which we take pride, more in keeping with what we want Britain to be?

The under-appreciated Upper House of Parliament - without veto power - is doing its job, holding government to account, scrutinising its legislation and trying to make the bill less bad. Between 27 April and 10 July, peers worked on 20 pertinent, important and compassionate amendments. A large cross-Party group outvoted the Conservative peers on each of the amendments and sent the bill back to the Commons. (There had also been also 16 Conservatives in the Commons who denounced aspects of the

bill and abstained during its initial readings – including former Home Secretary and Prime Minister, Theresa May).

In the Commons, the Government rejected the Lords' amendments but did make small concessions agreeing not to weaken limits on the length of detention and removing retrospective provisions which would have made the bill operative from its introduction by the Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, on 7 March 2023. The bill was sent back to the House of Lords, and on July 12 they accepted the rejection of their amendments. After deliberations the Lords returned the bill to the Commons with nine revised amendments - including two proposed by Tory peers. These sophisticated strokes in the Palace of Westminster 'ping-pong' were immediately and casually dismissed by the Immigration Minister, Robert Jenrick, who said the Government did not plan to make any further concessions.

The Government, with only a few days left, badly wants to get its legislation through Parliament before the summer recess. For this reason, the House of Lords has a small amount of leverage though it is improbable the Government will change the Act in any meaningful way. Parliamentary Acts of 1911 and 1949, together with unwritten constitutional convention, dictate that the unelected House of Lords should not block legislation by the elected House of Commons – especially measures promised in an Election Manifesto. No such pledge on migration was in the 2019 Tory manifesto. Sunak persists in alleging that he is fulfilling a 'people's pledge' responding to public opinion. The peers have done all they are entitled to do within constitutional convention to make this bill humane.

The Conservative majority in the Commons means we will be saddled with this deeply unpleasant legislation. The Act enables the Government to interpret international human rights treaties and refugee conventions in ways not consistent with the UK's

obligations. The Government's excuse for this shabby populism is a variation on Margaret Thatcher's 'there is no alternative', alleging that the Act's many critics do not offer any alternative. Consistent with our current politics of empty promises and brazen untruths, this is a lie.

There is a broad consensus amongst Churches and religious communities, NGOs, refugee organisations, as well as in the House of Lords on what needs to be done, starting with the creation of new safe and legal routes and serious investment in putting the criminal gangs behind bars. One of the Lords' amendments - proposed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and garnering not a single Tory vote - was a call for a UK-led strategic ten-year multi-lateral plan for handling immigration compassionately whilst countering the impact of conflict and climate change on sender countries. The Labour Party acting as a government-in-waiting has produced a strategic package of proposals consonant with the Archbishop's call. His amendment was amongst those voted down in the Commons.

The boat people who pay the people smugglers are desperate and aware of the risks. Nothing is quickly going to stop the small boats. Nor will the Rwanda threat, least of all if the Supreme Court agrees with the Court of Appeal's judgement. Opinion polls suggest many voters now believe only a new Government, a new and competent Home Secretary and a reformed Home Office can reduce the number of small boats and deal humanely with refugees entitled to this country's protection.

IS CHRISTIANITY A ‘LUXURY BELIEF’?

06.10.2023

Sometimes a seemingly minor story speaks reams about this Government. Last week, *The House*, Parliament’s in-house magazine, reported ‘a former senior adviser to the [Church of England’s] bishops in the House of Lords’ as saying that bishops were coming away from encounters with junior Home Office staff ‘feeling like lepers’. Relations with the Home Office had become ‘toxic’ and ‘unfixable’. Might then Christianity be one of those ‘luxury beliefs’ shared with the ‘woke elite’ which Home Secretary Suella Braverman, during her 3 October Conservative Party Conference speech, positioned herself as opposing?

During the Lords debates on the Illegal Migration Act of July 2023, the Archbishop of Canterbury described its key measures as ‘morally unacceptable and politically impractical’. His forthright condemnation seems to be the reason why, when he ‘reached out’ to the Home Secretary – Americanisms seem to have reached into Lambeth Palace – he was rebuffed. Radio 4’s 1st October Sunday Programme ran the story with comment from Dominic Grieve, a practising Anglican and former Conservative Attorney General purged from the Party for incorrect views on BREXIT. Grieve’s view was that Suella Braverman’s refusal to discuss immigration with the head of the established Church flew in the face of constitutional conventions and was ‘inexcusable’ and ‘extraordinarily rude’.

Chris Loder, an Anglican and Conservative MP for West Dorset responded that the Lords Spiritual, all 26 of them, were politically biased: they took a left-wing approach, acted as ‘campaigners and commentators’, and 96% of their votes - where are you More or Less when we need you? - had been cast against the Government. If Loder’s voting figures for the bishops were to

stand up to examination, they would be open to interpretation as a reflection on the tenor of government legislation as well as the bishops' 'luxury belief' that strangers should be welcomed and the needs of the poor prioritised. Not just a storm in a tea-cup. More revealing and important.

The strong Church-State disagreement about migrancy reveals a fundamental, possibly irresolvable, conflict between values. And there lies the question for Government about both domestic and foreign policy which cannot be resolved even by the best legal minds in the Supreme Court. Put simply should policy contribute to a global common good and to the common life of domestic Society? Or should policy enhance freedom of individuals and support the aspirations of individual citizens?

In the rosy glow of Tony Blair's landslide victory, pre-millennials may remember the late Robin Cook's inaugural speech as Foreign Secretary in May 1997 and Cook's careful branding of future policy, as having an 'ethical dimension'. Despite avoiding promising an 'ethical foreign policy', nevertheless he was treated with derision. Nor did the policy last the course under Blair's leadership. Cook himself resigned in March 2003 over the Iraq war. The promotion of peace, human rights, environmentalism, democracy and prosperity were the key values lying behind Cook's goals: security for nations, arms control and disarmament, abolition of landmines, protection of the environment, promotion of exports, diplomacy seeking peace and democracy globally. They still add up to a desirable programme embodying ethical values even if difficult to implement.

So what might foreign and domestic policy with an ethical dimension look like today? Is such an aspiration naïve utopianism? At home, the Prime Minister's policy decisions presented in his Conference speech appear to be based on hopes of clawing back votes lost in the BREXIT/Johnson/Truss debacle

rather than a clear set of values. The Uxbridge by-election is won by opposing Mayor Sadiq Khan's attempt to clean up Greater London's air. The Conservative Party discovers it is pro-car. Voters don't like windfarms on their doorstep. License new drilling for oil and politicise measures to combat climate change. The "growing role of parental wealth transfers in driving differences in life outcomes..." widens inequality (Will Hutton Observer 1 October). Float the possibility of abolishing inheritance tax. Fears of cultural 'swamping' and the increasing pressure on public services debilitated by 13 years of Tory rule, certainly some votes there. Attack and override the human rights of migrants and asylum seekers.

A negligible number of votes in foreign policy apart, perhaps, from Ukraine? So, no electoral harm in Foreign Minister, James Cleverly, raising human rights issues abroad, for example, with China, or Saudi Arabia - whilst courting them for access to their lucrative markets. But how concerned about promoting human rights is a government that floats the possibility of leaving the European Convention of Human Rights, a Convention which a former British Government played a significant part in creating? Or how committed to human rights is a Home Secretary who derides the 1998 UK Human Rights Act as 'The Criminals Rights Act', and in New York calls in question the UN 1951 Refugee Convention?

Church leaders make choices different from governments. Both Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury share a 'luxury belief' in a just society and its values derived from a two thousand year-old tradition rooted in the Gospels. They wish to see the common good flourish. Some of their beliefs and the demands of the common good will be costly and inconvenient to implement. Some will be contentious. But what is most contentious is a government that promotes the views and values of an

extreme-right wing minority at worst like Suella Braverman who dismisses compassion as squeamishness. This is a government that rejects dialogue over matters of national importance, including Britain's global standing.

"RWANDA IS SAFE": RISHI'S END-OF-PIER SHOW

17.11.2023

"A completely extraordinary thing to do, to effectively overrule a decision on the facts, on the evidence, by the highest court in the land." That is Lord Sumption who served on the Supreme Court from 2012-2018 describing the Prime Minister's proposed emergency legislation on offshoring asylum processing to Rwanda.

"With our new treaty Rwanda is safe", Rishi Sunak declared responding to the Supreme Court's unanimous judgement that Rwanda is unsafe and the government policy of deporting refugees to Rwanda is therefore unlawful. Sunak's reaction to a judgement that does not please him is a demonstration of how to create Trumpian alternative facts - turn 'magical thinking' (Suella Braverman) into legislation.

The rest of the Government's response has been gaslighting as usual. Sunak took the lead prefacing Prime Minister's Question Time on 15 November by declaring "the principle of removing asylum seekers to a safe third country is lawful. There are further elements that they [the Supreme Court] want additional certainty on". So things are not what they seem: everything is under control.

But the Supreme Court was not deciding whether the general principle of moving asylum seekers to third countries was legal. The judges were hearing an appeal from Government against an existing decision of the Court of Appeal which had found outsourcing asylum processing to Rwanda unlawful. And the Prime Minister's reference to mysterious 'further elements' relates presumably to facts about the past record of the Rwandan government including their treatment of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers offshored to Rwanda by Israel between 2013 and

2018, as well as the question of past compliance with the 1951 Refugee Convention. Rwanda's asylum procedures are clearly inadequate and require a substantial transformation to ensure compliance with the Refugee Convention and other international norms.

To seek and enjoy asylum from mistreatment and persecution in another country is a human right, Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A great safeguard for refugees is the prohibition of forced return to countries where they may be subject to ill-treatment or persecution, the principle of non-refoulement. The decision taken by the Supreme Court rested on applying this principle in the light of the Rwandan government's rudimentary systems for the processing of refugees and its past record on asylum and other human rights.

The Supreme Court judges were not going to be satisfied with assurances given by the Rwandan government as had the divisional court in the UK in which legal proceedings had begun with a preliminary finding in favour of the Government. Its ruling relied on a realistic and thoroughly researched assessment of the risk of breaches of non-refoulement involving asylum seekers sent from the UK to Rwanda. In short, the Supreme Court painstakingly undertook the due diligence we might have expected from the Government before they began herding asylum seekers onto an airplane to Kigali.

The Government could have avoided lengthy and expensive legal challenges. Early in 2022, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office had advised Downing Street, on the advice of the UK High Commissioner to Burundi and Rwanda, Omar Daair OBE, not to select Rwanda as a third country. The UNHCR, with what the Supreme Court called their 'unique and unrivalled expertise', had aired their strong opposition. The killing by Rwandan police of 12 refugees from the Democratic Republic of

the Congo during a protest against poor food in 2018 should have raised serious doubts. Rishi Sunak was probably too busy in California in May 2011 to notice reports of British police warning two Rwandan dissidents of a credible threat to their lives.

President Kagame's way with political opponents was hardly a secret when the 'Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership' was launched by Priti Patel in April 2022 in the face of objections not just from the political Opposition but also from her Home Office civil servants, the Churches and NGOs.

The Government's reaction to this debacle foretold, and of their own making, is disturbing. There was the usual claim that only a 'vocal minority' were rejoicing. And the worn out refrain that the Prime Minister would courageously realise 'the will of the British people' against the naysayers. And where have we heard that before? According to James Cleverly, the new Home Secretary, this is "an incredible priority for the British people". Recently Home Secretaries have changed at least once a year. The post is now so precarious poor Mr. Cleverly, sitting next to the Prime Minister last Wednesday, showed the nervous signs of nodding-dog syndrome. In interviews he was reduced to sounding like an old-fashioned colonial officer assuring the home audience that the natives will be trained in good government double-quick, an unenviable task he shares with newly ennobled David Cameron.

What are we to make of all this? And of the waste of £140 million on a Rwanda Partnership known to be doomed to failure plus the £8 million a day spent on hotel accommodation for asylum seekers during the wait for a failed policy to be adjudicated. The kindest interpretation is incompetence with a touch of arrogance. But when most reasonable and compassionate people who believe in policymaking based on evidence and facts tell you the Rwanda Partnership isn't going to fly, why keep trying to make it get off the ground? A less kind conclusion is that the

Prime Minister's determination to send a few refugees to Rwanda has more to do with votes than lives. Perhaps he believes getting his message across, standing in front of a microphone saying what he thinks people in key marginal seats want to hear, is leadership.

If the Government goes ahead with concluding a previously prepared treaty with Rwanda, 'revisiting' "our domestic legal framework", and introducing "emergency legislation" - a seasonal mix of *Götterdämmerung* and *Pirates of Penzance* - we are in trouble. It sounds like a grave step in the long decline of Britain, driven by the extreme Right and led first by Boris Johnson. This move away from both a human rights culture and respect for the rule of law is what in any other country we would describe as undermining the foundations of democracy. We are indeed in an emergency - one needing a General Election not emergency legislation.

IMMIGRATION OR INEQUALITY?

30.11.2023

The manipulation of public anxiety about immigration has become an important element in Party politics here in Britain. With the economy flat-lining, against a background of a million job vacancies, debilitating understaffing in the NHS and social care, hostility to immigration seems odd. But at a time of economic distress, an appeal to xenophobia, subtle or open, and the stoking of anger against urban elites, (sometimes merited) brings approval and votes - as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands has recently demonstrated.

Anti-immigration rhetoric offers a scapegoat for a plethora of ills including the failure of governments to provide hope, justice and a sense of wellbeing for their citizens. From an America further divided by Trump to Orban's authoritarian Hungary democracy looks in bad shape. The reasons are varied, the problems seemingly intractable but, as Donald Tusk's electoral victory in Poland over the Law & Justice Party (PiS) showed, the direction of travel is not always towards far-right extremism ((Denis McShane 'Geert Wilders: far-Right bogeyman or old Dutch cheese' 25 November 2023). And, yes, the far-Right can soften its position once in power.

Worldwide, political Parties believe that if they are to have a reasonable hope of electoral success they must promise to control immigration. In Britain the fear of 'them' taking our jobs, our housing, places in our schools, is an understandable consequence of growing impoverishment and the accelerating erosion of the welfare state with its universal public services. Voters' number one priority according to UK opinion polls is the cost of living. For growing numbers in the lowest income decile in the UK, the sixth largest economy in the world, this means the lack of basic

material necessities, not being able to make ends meet. Some 4.2 million British children are growing up in poverty.

Peter Mandelson, Gordon Brown's Business Secretary, speaking in 1998, was "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich - as long as they paid their taxes". By 2012 he had retracted these sentiments and was worried about rising inequality and failure to increase middle class disposable incomes. By 2021, the top decile in the UK owned almost half our national wealth. The bottom decile received c. 3%. Or put even more starkly, the richest 1% of the population were worth £2.8 trillion, more than the £2.4 trillion owned by 70%, some 48 million people.

Mandelson warned against "business and bank bashing" yet banks make themselves targets. Money tucked away in tax havens is measured in billions while investment in the UK continues to stagnate and investment bankers get richer alongside the CEOs of public companies. The EU cap on bankers' bonuses has been scrapped by the Government. The salaries of CEOs in energy companies, and their shareholder dividends, are eye-watering while their customers struggle with bills.

You will not find the word 'inequality' in Chancellor Jeremy Hunt's recent Autumn Statement. Nor did he quote the words of King Lear "So distribution should undo excess, and each man have enough". Hunt's 'levelling up' measures mean an aspiration to equalise growth around the country; our geographical inequality is the worst in the OECD. His updating of benefits by 10% leaves them at the lowest level since 1990. He does mention 'poverty' but close to the end of his speech and then only in the context of measures 'to get people back to work'.

Britain has become one of the most unequal societies in Europe, more unequal than Romania and Latvia according to the EU inequality index. Does it matter? Yes. In a new Cost of Inequality Report, the Equality Trust, a public policy think-tank,

asserts that such a level of inequality “has made the UK more unhealthy, unhappy and unsafe than our more equal peers” and puts its economic cost at over £100 billion.

The sense of injustice, of being ignored and looked down upon, can result in voters directing the contempt to which they feel subjected towards a political entity variously described as ‘the swamp’ ‘the blob’ ‘the chattering classes’ ‘the metropolitan elite’, and voting for the Party that best seems to express their anger.

How else to explain voters’ enthusiasm for clever and dangerous, sometimes libertarian, clowns unsuited for high office who play the populist cards of immigration, Islamophobia, wresting control from the contemptuous elites: Wilders in Netherlands, Trump in the USA, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Milei in Argentina, Duterte in Philippines, Meloni in Italy, Braverman in UK. All march onto the political stage to the drumbeat of a dangerous form of nationalism.

The Indian academic Pankaj Mishra traces these developments back to the Enlightenment which he sees as creating the myth and expectation of progress. His *Age of Anger: A history of the Present*, Penguin 2017, tracks what he terms resentment, an amalgam of anger and resentment created by socio-economic structures experienced by people treated as ‘superfluous’. The invention of the microchip in 1971 opened a new era in the history of resentment. The revolution in communications technology and social media, its virtual solidarities, have enabled both the spread and intensification of resentment, contributing to retrograde and tribalist forms of nationalism and generating violence – see the recent anti-foreigner riots in Dublin.

There can be no doubt that poverty, wars, and climate change will increase international migration. One of the great failures of Western leadership is the lack of any ‘strategic plan’ (the words used by the Archbishop of Canterbury during the debates on the

Government's illegal Rwanda policy) to stabilise vulnerable economies in Africa and Asia enabling their populations to stay at home and make a living. This requires the provision of a level of aid commensurate to the financial flows into Europe after World War II, and means debt relief, a generous Loss and Compensation Fund and more. Just as Austerity in Britain since 2010 and indifference to inequality and poverty are a national economic choice, with consequences we can see, so is refusal to face the magnitude of the problems confronting vulnerable countries around the world.

This failure of vision and courage has deep roots. Mishra, a secular socialist, describes the Pope - remarkably - as the "most convincing and influential public intellectual today". He believes that Francis' moral stature rests on his critique of the "ostensibly autonomous and self-interested individual", a figure emerging during the Enlightenment and now confronting "an impasse". In the current phase of globalisation, Mishra writes, this figure has descended into 'either angry tribalism or equally bellicose forms of antinomian individualism', the denial of shared moral values. His is a provocative but compelling portrait of populist politics.

If we are to survive the 21st century as civilised, diverse, and democratic societies recognising our obligations under international law and preserving humanitarian values, voters must keep the clowns and extremists, the libertarians and newly minted 'anarcho-capitalists' and recycled fascists, out of high office. It is a political imperative in this age of anger to seek leaders with a moral core of honesty, empathy, solidarity and responsibility, capable of reducing inequality. This quest must not remain a form of utopian eccentricity.

See TheArticle 29/11/2023

THE IMMIGRATION GAME

04.01.2024

Immigration, like a high-scoring Scrabble letter, has become the ‘Q’ stuck in the Prime Minister’s hand as his opponents play their last letters to end the game. Sunak’s promises to control immigration, made ever more forcefully but never kept, have become a liability, a pledge too far. His government’s anti-immigration policies don’t acknowledge the realities of international migration. This is the conclusion to be drawn from Professor Hein de Haas’ article in the 29th December Guardian, itself a potted summary of his informative recent book *How Migration Really Works: A Factual Guide to the Most Divisive Issue in Politics*, Penguin/Viking 2023.

De Haas is Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and Professor of Migration and Development at the University of Maastricht. Drawing on three decades of scholarly research into immigration and integration around the world, his book is a sobering myth-buster. We have been conducting the wrong arguments. Much of what is popularly believed about immigration – I confess to a measure of gullibility myself – is just plain wrong, misguided or exaggerated. The world is not facing an unprecedented refugee crisis, South-North migration is more a rational economic decision than ‘a desperate flight from poverty, hunger and conflict’. Immigration’s impact on the wages of indigenous workers is negligible. We need migrant labour. We don’t have enough UK-born trained staff in the NHS, social care and a range of vital occupations. Neither development nor border restrictions will stop migration.

De Haas’ starting point is to view the movement of people as an integral part of global economies. The great dynamo of migrancy is the demand for labour. Most migrants abide by the

requirements set for their entry. Governments and businesses in prosperous countries attract migrant labour, unostentatiously for the most part, and for a variety of reasons: aging populations, a workforce unwilling to undertake the more unpleasant and onerous jobs and citizens unable or unwilling to do their own domestic work.

When you think about who is capable of responding to labour demand in Europe, USA and the Gulf States, the answer is obvious: not the poorest unable to save enough for the journey or pay recruitment agents rather people from middle-income countries such as Mexico, Philippines, Pakistan and many Indian states. Threaten to tighten control of borders and the numbers increase as migrants fear it will be their last chance to cross them. Those who might have returned home after a period of work remain because they are worried about getting back again (much migrancy is of course cyclical and temporary but who counts those returning home?).

The wealth generated and sent home by migrants is prodigious. In 2020 it came to 2.6 times overseas aid from governments, \$193 billion, to their countries of origin. Unlike official aid, remittances go straight into the pockets of recipients who use it to build sturdy houses, educate children, pay for health care and improve their diet. And the amount of cash moving this way is increasing. Between 1990 –2020 total estimated remittances grew from \$29 billion to \$502 billion. The impact on economic development in the global South should not be underestimated.

De Haas argues that we imagine the numbers of economic migrants today are at an unprecedented crisis level. But, according to the United Nations Population Division, the rate of migrancy has remained stable at around 3% of the world's population. In 1960 the global population of 3 billion generated 93 million international migrants; in 2000, 6.1 billion produced 170 million

migrants and, in 2017, 247 million came from a population of 7.6 billion. Even the number of undocumented immigrants in the UK estimated at between 674,000 and 800,000 amounts to only 1% of the country's population. In the USA the figure is 3.2%. 97% of humanity have always lived and still do live in their country of birth.

Why the panic and resentment now? The numbers don't warrant it. Britain – usually at first grumpily - has hosted and integrated wave after wave of immigrants in the past and could do so now. Though localised pressures are real, the present sense of widespread crisis is manufactured, aided by pictures of small boats crossing the Channel and their tragic victims. Successfully counter one means of transportation, and sadly the people smugglers will open up another.

And what about refugees? They compose only a small fraction of people crossing international borders. Between 1985-2021 only 7-12% of migrants were refugees, estimated as between 9 and 21 million, about 0.3% of the world's population. The numbers fluctuate according to levels of conflict. The Russian intervention in the war in Syria in 2015 caused a notable spike with Angela Merkel famously admitting one million to Germany where they are now mostly settled and productively employed (what Germans call one of her decisions of the heart not the head). But most refugees move to neighbouring countries, or become 'displaced people' within their own. In 2018 there were 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 4.4% of the population, a million in Lebanon in a population of 6 million. African countries hosted 5.5 million refugees almost all from other African countries, with Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia the main hosts. Such numbers might lead us to question our attitudes and assumptions.

Once immigration is framed as an aspect of economic life, as De Haas does, it should be game-over for governments whose

rhetoric plants immigrants at the heart of a divisive problem. It becomes obvious that it is government policies leading to inequality, low wages, job insecurity, and failing public services, which are the real problem. The next to no checks on 'illegal' workers in hospitality, food processing and other low-paid employment taken by migrants is a tacit admission of economic reality. Underpay childcare or care of the elderly and large numbers of foreign workers will be drawn in. Likewise, underfund universities and they will have to rely on high-fee paying foreign students who - guess what - sometimes want to settle here and bring their families.

De Haan at times pushes the conclusions from his data too far but he is to be thanked for reminding us that a few facts and evidence-based policy-making might be a good idea. And, it should be added, would free us to tackle the social, economic and political problems that have become ever more pressing. The debate should not be anti-versus- pro-immigration but a discussion about what kind of society we want to live in, the values required to sustain it, and how migrants can be successfully integrated in such a society. We should be focusing on what needs to be done, the economic reforms needed to reduce inequality removing social divisions and resentment at reduced life opportunities.

REFUGEE CHILDREN: THE
KINDERTRANSPORT & TODAY

07.02.2024

Lord (Alf) Dubs fought back tears as he spoke in the House of Lords on 2 February during the Holocaust Remembrance debate. He had been referring to *One Life*, the film recently in cinemas, and starring Anthony Hopkins, about the 1939 evacuation of children from the Nazi threat in Czechoslovakia. Aged six, Alf Dubs had been on one of those Kindertransport trains from Prague.

Lord Dubs had other reasons for emotion. In 2016 he had struggled to get a commitment to allow 3,000 child refugees from Europe to enter the UK. Section 67 of the 2016 Immigration Bill, known as the Dubs amendment, makes the commitment “to relocate to the United Kingdom and support a specified number of unaccompanied refugee children from other countries in Europe’. Only 350 children were allowed to enter before, in February 2017, the British government without adequate reason, unlawfully abandoned this aspect of the Bill. At the time, Local Authorities denied that there were no longer places for children available and some further 150 children were later allowed entry.

Today, it is the right to family reunification, contained in the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and guaranteed by the European Court of Human Rights ECHR, that requires pressure if it is to be honoured. Lord Dubs worked with some success to get government agreement that these family reunification provisions would be respected post-Brexit.

In 2023 opposition to the - well-named - Illegal Immigration Bill was led by the Churches who championed the rights of refugee children, in opposition to a government hostile to migrants and asylum seekers. The then Minister of State for Immigration,

Robert Jenrick, demonstrated this hostility – for the benefit of the Tory right-wing - by ordering the painting out of cartoon figures, intended to welcome children, on the walls of Manston refugee reception centre in Kent.

Against this background of growing government legal pressure on migrants and refugees it was serendipity, rather than foresight, that brought *One Life* to cinema screens just as the government's 'stop the boats' campaign reached obsession level generating, as Lord (Ken) Clarke (a former Conservative Home Secretary) observed, deranged forms of legislation. Directed by James Hawes, known for his television films, *One Life* is a co-production with BBC Films. It is a well-told unpretentious, morality story. If you were watching at home, you would feel good as you switched off the TV.

So, no blockbuster this. Nor suitable for young children who would be distressed by the heartbreaking suffering of the, mainly Jewish, children being parted from their families in Prague, though the film mainly suggests, rather than shows, Nazi brutality, through the visible fear of its victims. By focusing on a few families and their children – the children's photographs and their names play a prominent role throughout - refugees become individuals like our own children, but vulnerable, confused and in peril; they are not just numbers.

Anthony Hopkins plays Nicholas Winton, a stockbroker who initiated and organised the evacuation of children from Prague. During the opening sequences viewers easily identify with Winton in his old age as his wife nags him to clear out all the old documents cluttering up his study. Papers which, of course, contain the film's story. Hopkins remembering to camera, even if a little too lengthy, and starring in *That's Life* reunited with those he had saved, gives a masterful performance portraying Winton's humility. The cut-backs to the young Nicholas Winton – Johnny

Flynn looking remarkably like the old footage of the character he portrays – come naturally.

The screenplay based on daughter, Barbara Winton's *If It's Not Impossible...: The Life of Sir Nicholas Winton*, published in 2014, sticks closely to what is known. Through his children's section' of the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC) Winton managed to transport eight train-loads, 669 children, from Prague to London and to settle them in foster families. There are contemporary resonances, initial opposition from the UK government followed by the overwhelming documentation required for each child to obtain a visa plus an indemnity charge of £50 (£2,800 today) to cover possible future costs of repatriation.

The *Kindertransport: What Really Happened*, Andrea Hammel, Polity Books, 2023, paints the wider picture of the fate of child refugees from Nazi rule. Here is a more critical account of what happened to the 10,000 children fleeing to Britain from Germany and Poland, between 1933-1939. (Many initially fled to the closer but soon unsafe Belgium, France and Netherlands). Hammel highlights how the long-term consequences of traumatic separation from parents remained unacknowledged and how the religious, Jewish, upbringing of the children in Christian or secular foster families was neglected. In *One Life*, a conversation between a Rabbi and Winton does touch on this religious and cultural problem, though at the time it was Orthodox Jews in the UK who objected most to the point of taking a group of children into their care. At the outbreak of war some children who had reached sixteen were even interned. What was treated as temporary separation, of course, proved permanent as parents died in the Holocaust.

Alf Dubs was in some ways exceptionally fortunate. His father met him at Liverpool Street Station and his mother later managed to join them. But, when all is said and done, the alternative to the

Kindertransport is shown in the fate of the 250 children on the ninth and last train, raided by the Nazis before it left Prague, one of the few violent and deeply upsetting scenes in *One Life*.

Where is the moral in the Kindertransport story, a footnote to the Holocaust? What virtues did Nicholas Winton deploy to save those lives? Unusually for a banker and a stockbroker, he was on the left of the Labour Party. He decided, rather than taking a skiing holiday, to go and join a friend in the Prague BCRC. In Prague he was moved by compassion. Baptised a Christian, Winton was the middle child of a German Jewish immigrant family. He saw first-hand the plight of the Jewish and other families and did something about it revealing exceptional – often underrated – organisational abilities. Winton, his mother (played by Helena Bonham Carter) and the BCRC demonstrated not just empathy but extraordinary perseverance, hope and tenacity. “If something is not impossible, there must be a way to do it” was Winton’s motto.

One Life and the story of the Czech Kindertransport have a déjà vu feeling. As I left Liverpool Street Station last week, I looked with new eyes at the familiar statue of the Kindertransport children in the half light of an early winter evening. The British government in the late 1930s, for some of the same reasons as today’s, sought to limit the number of refugees entering the UK, though it did have the excuse of being threatened by a coming World War. Then it was civil society, refugee organisations plus a strong Quaker element, who asserted and put into practice the duty to admit refugees. Today it is still the Churches with refugee NGOs who practice compassion and solidarity challenging government hostility. Then Nicholas Winton embodied these national values. Today it is Alf Dubs.

Part Two

GOVERNMENT & POLICY

COUNTERING A FIRST-ORDER THREAT

27.09.2021

We had almost forgotten the terrorist threat midst our other troubles: COVID, Climate Change and BREXIT. The twentieth anniversary of 9/11 and a sobering BBC broadcast by Ken McCallum, Director-General of MI5, was the reminder we needed: 31 significant terrorist plots had been disrupted in the last four years. Just because we hadn't heard of these threats – eight of the plots incidentally were by right wing extremists – didn't mean the threat had gone away. Indeed a future attack was 'highly likely' not least because of the encouragement given to jihadists by NATO's defeat in Afghanistan.

The MI5 chief's message was refreshingly clear. Our problem is how to identify and counter real threats of violence such as jihadism. With all eyes on the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the massacre of civilians and thirteen American soldiers at Kabul airport tragically illustrated the point he was making.

McCallum's presentation avoided using the usual vague terms to identify what forces we ought to consider, to quote Tony Blair, 'a first-order threat to security'. He avoided terms such as radical Islam, violent religious extremism, Islamism and Islamists. Tony Blair who is deeply concerned uses the words 'radical Islam' and 'Islamism' interchangeably to mean religion turned into a political ideology. And 'the ideology' is, in his view, 'in inevitable conflict with open, modern, culturally tolerant societies' though the exact nature of the threat is left open to a variety of interpretations.

Muslims are not alone in wanting to see religious principles carried into, or expressed within society and politics. See Christian Democracy and see the role of different forms of Judaism in Israeli politics. And 'radical' means getting to the roots of a faith not some perversion of it. Monks and nuns practise radical religion and no-one is much bothered when they adhere to their principles and vows, though, of course, they do not wish to impose their views on others. In its current usage ideology seems to mean nothing more than a set of ideas that we in the West don't like or consider bad.

'Is Islamism a problem or only in its expression as violent extremism?' Blair asked in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) earlier this month, admitting that there are plenty of people who buy into parts of 'the ideology' but who eschew violence. He answers his own question by saying Islamism – a manufactured term - is 'a first order threat to security' both as an ideology and as violence. The template for this assertion seems to be the other old hostile ism, communism. This is a problematic assertion.

Firstly it implies that our intelligence services, like all organs of the British state with limited resources, should be expected to perform two highly labour intensive jobs, to detect and nip in the bud jihadist terrorist attacks, and to wean thousands of people

from religious ideas with which we don't agree and even find repugnant. Ideas about culture, society and politics, some of which they share with jihadists. Secondly it ignores the fact that Muslims from a Salafi and Wahabi tradition who reject violence can, and do, act as highly effective practitioners of what is usually called de-radicalisation. For that reason they were, for example, amongst the first to be murdered by *Boko Haram* in NE Nigeria.

At the heart of Blair's approach to the problem of identifying and dealing with the causes of jihadist violence is his overestimation of the influence of religious ideology in the aetiology of today's violent extremism. This leads him to focus on issues like the textual misuse of Qur'ānic verses, which he believes to be motivating behaviour, rather than focussing on the personality, the mind-set, the binary thinking behind the social perceptions that lead to violence. This approach treats as irrelevant the startling statistic that 40% of those who get caught up in extremist violence have suffered from some form of mental illness, and, amongst whom in addition, there is a high incidence of petty criminality. The focus on ideology over-intellectualises the motivations of most jihadists at the expense of the emotions. As a Muslim police officer once said to me "think of them as angry young men who have got lost".

Except for the leaders and manipulative recruiters, jihadists often seem to be young people prone to violence who have found a justification for their inclinations, and a 'solution' to their problems, in a perverse interpretation of Islam, not the other way round. The question which their fellow Muslims ask and they cannot answer is: 'Have you ever thought Allah might have another purpose for you in life other than jihad?' Investment in our scandalously understaffed mental health services might reasonably be described as a key plank of counter-terrorism. Intelligence services do not have the resources to promote the set

of values which we hopefully dub as ‘Western’ to counter religious ideas with which they conflict. But these values should inform the conduct of governments. Schools are consciously promoting these values and can, as in Birmingham, evoke Muslim protests. Something like the *Prevent* programme which ultimately depends on one-to-one mentoring is a last step. Meanwhile responsibility falls on Muslim leadership both to notice young people heading down the wrong path and with the skills and wisdom to help them turn back.

If your task is to keep Britain safe from jihadist attack then lumping together movements as diverse as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Boko Haram* in Nigeria under headings such as radical Islam, Islamism and violent religious extremism, obscures more than it reveals and leaves you with no satisfactory solutions to local problems. These catch-all labels risk catching ordinary mainstream Muslims. Thanks to the internet there really is an international threat and the Taliban’s national success will encourage it. But the problem with Tony Blair’s expansive definition of our current ‘first order threat to security’ is that many ordinary Muslims, and most notably those able to change minds, may feel he is targeting them.

See also *The Article* 27/09/2021

G P S CAUGHT IN THE B L A M E - G A M E

02.10.2021

When a lot of things go wrong at the same time the result is often a high stakes blame game involving three players: the general public, the mass media and the government. If any two concur on a suitable target the third will not be long in coming on-side. After over eleven years in power, a Tory government might be expected to get some blame for a National Health Service starved of adequate funding and staffing. A cherished national institution staggering under the weight of rhetoric, re-organisation, high expectations and prolonged pressures, serving an overweight, aging and unhealthy population without an integrated health and social care system for the frail and vulnerable, but with a door marked ‘private’ available for those with the money so they won’t need to wait their turn, has for the last two years been overwhelmed by the needs of COVID sufferers and the responsibility for curbing the spread of the virus. We do not hear a *mea culpa* from government nor are we likely to.

But someone must be to blame. Enter, telephone in one hand, stethoscope in the other, your local GP.

When it comes to government incompetence there is always recourse to deflecting attention elsewhere, ideally to some group deemed blameworthy. In Britain this tactic leans heavily on the dark arts of the right-wing press. The *Daily Mail* detects pockets of popular anger and resentment like a well-trained police sniffer dog. The paper’s campaign to reverse the decrease in face-to-face appointments with ‘the family doctor’ is a study in misrepresentation. We learned from the *Mail* on-line of 16 September that it may have led to “an 88% spike in stillbirths during the pandemic” - despite the article showing no connection whatsoever between GP appointments and stillbirths. There is no

connection. An editorial error apparently occurred.

Understandable as the *Mail* was having to compete with the *The Telegraph's* headline "Vets serve pets better than GPs do the Public" of 26 August.

The *Mail* followed up by intimating that GPs had fewer consultations on Fridays because they were taking long weekends off. I looked at the analysis of phone calls for a week in May this year *before* the COVID infection rate began climbing and when vaccinations were in full swing to a northern England practice with – below average - 5,500 patients. There were over 1,350 incoming calls on the Monday but only 451 on the Friday. Could there be some correlation between lower demand at the end of the week and the lower level of consultations on Fridays compared with other days?

But what of the main beneficiary of the press campaign against GPs, the government? Our new Minister of Health, Sajid Javid, entered the blame-game on 14 September. "It is high time", he said, "GPs started operating in the way they did before the pandemic and offering face-to-face appointments to anyone who wants one". Well, he was relatively new in the job. He knew there weren't overall enough GPs but he might have wondered if extending the average GP working day – which would be needed if GPs were to comply- from ten hours to 24 hours was a feasible idea.

And what of the general public and their perceptions? The work that GPs do when they are not face to face with patients is rarely taken into account by people anxious to see a doctor. For example, apart from phone consultations, there is routine management of the practice, keeping patient data up-to-date, checking test results, liaising with clinicians in hospitals, acting as a substitute for unavailable clinicians, visits to care homes, and so on. And then there is the additional demand, 3.2 million more

patients since 2015, and at a time of falling GP numbers. Because COVID dissuaded patients from checking on medical symptoms, many more are now contacting their GP with serious conditions requiring immediate attention – doctors describe themselves as ‘holding more risk’. And the risks are rising.

By dog-whistle and more blatant means, the government and right-wing press have been encouraging the public, who have no way of observing the daily work-load of a GP, to think that they (who pay for the NHS through their taxes) are being short-changed by fat-cat doctors. As long ago as 2017 the *Mail* was working on creating resentment at GPs’ income asserting that they were earning £200,000 per annum. In reality such earnings were achieved by only 270 out of the country’s 28,000 fully-qualified and full-time equivalent GPs, those who managed a group of practices counting many thousands of patients. The average GP’s income is about £98,000 comparable to that of other professionals in senior and responsible positions who expect to work at least a 10 hour day.

Doctors aren’t saints. They do seek to maximise their incomes. A GP practice is an unusual form of business, with partners and salaried employees providing services to the public and relying most often exclusively on public funds. Increasing the number of employees deployed to answer phones or interact face-to-face with the public would increase the practice’s costs. Hanging on the line for ages irritates healthy people let alone someone feeling ill and anxious. But things have gone beyond understandable irritation to verbal abuse of practice staff and in one mid-September incident in Manchester a serious physical attack on four staff members leaving two hospitalised with head injuries.

Undermining this country’s front-line of health care, its 28,000 GPs – yes there are not enough - might sound a smart political tactic but is utterly irresponsible. GPs are the gateway to hospitals

and further treatment. They ensure that unnecessary demand for specialist treatment, tests and medication is controlled. For this system to work it is essential to maintain the bond of trust between doctor and patient at its heart. That trust is now under threat at a time when it is most needed. Trust is easy to destroy and so difficult to re-establish.

Of course General Practice can always be improved. Government should encourage innovative ways to meet the extraordinary demands now being made on it. But it is time to stop targeting GPs in the blame-game before it is too late and the sour conflict generated by a divisive political culture infects and grievously damages one of our national treasures.

HOW MICHEL BARNIER WON AT BREXIT

03.12.2021

Michel Barnier stares out from the cover of *My Secret Brexit Diary: A Glorious Illusion*. Distinguished, suave, reassuring, every inch the international civil servant. Not exactly the Professor Moriarty of the right-wing Press, nor the crumpled joker, Boris Johnson who rode to power on BREXIT.

The book's sub-title is inadvertently accurate: it contains no spicy insider secrets or major revelations. This is the EU chief negotiator's carefully calibrated historical record of 1,600 days of BREXIT negotiations – a long intermission in a political career. But not all entries, doubtless carefully edited with a politician's eye on the future, are put through the blander.

This is a chronicle of a hard BREXIT foretold. Theresa May's January 2017 Lancaster House speech ruled out future membership of the Common Market and the Customs Union. This eliminated almost all EU models previously negotiated with countries such as Norway, Iceland or Switzerland. It left Britain, like South Korea and Canada, with a free trade agreement option. "Can we be sure", an astonished Barnier asks, "that the referendum vote gave the British government *carte blanche* for such a total break?"

Britain's 'red lines', announced before negotiations had begun, defined the UK's negotiating positions and precluded the most mutually advantageous partnership models. British negotiators were stuck with seeking special privileges for a third party country, playing for time in the process, engaging in what the EU saw as 'cherry picking'. May's appointment of David Davis as Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union opposite Barnier while she herself worked through an experienced, knowledgeable and competent civil servant Olly (now Sir Oliver) Robins, didn't help.

On the British side there was misinterpretation, even denial, of the nature of Barnier's, the EU's own, red lines. The misunderstanding went deeper. As the *BREXIT diary* repeatedly reveals, the way of thinking on both sides was different. Barnier, for instance, insisted on logically sequencing British withdrawal with 'divorce arrangements' first, including UK financial obligations, rights of EU citizens in Britain and British citizens in the EU, peace and stability in Ireland. Barnier worked from basic principles. The Single Market, as the foundation of the EU, an 'eco-system' involving much more than economics, was inviolable, so between the Single Market and third party economies such as post-BREXIT Britain there had to be a 'level playing-field'. Unity amongst the 27 member states, sustaining unanimous support for the EU's negotiating position was essential, 'everyone for all' in short.

The positions of all individual EU negotiating teams on specific topics were derived from these principles – 'everyone for all' applied particularly to Gibraltar (Spain), Cyprus (UK military bases) and, of course, Ireland, (the Good Friday agreement). Throughout negotiations the EU position remained coherent. Barnier prioritised transparency towards all interested bodies, from the EU Council to Danish fishermen. In contrast, British tactics appeared more like the interplay between a weak trades-union and a powerful employer: bluff and piecemeal pursuit of concessions.

The UK had one overarching principle: 'sovereignty', sometimes just a matter of being seen to 'Take Back Control'. Barnier had the advantage of representing the EU, an international organisation based on the closest possible mutually beneficial co-operation between national sovereignties in a globalised world. He found the British concept of sovereignty, frequently deployed as a trump card at critical moments, irrational.

The EU Commission task-force had other advantages over the British. Barnier was a team player leading a talented international team which he respected, drawn over the four years of negotiations from 22 different nationalities. He worked tirelessly to keep the different leaderships in Brussels, the Commission President and the different Commissioners, the Council and Parliament, plus member states' Ministers and political leaders, business leaders, academics and trades unions, fully up to date - and was rewarded with broad solidarity and a lack of dissent from his approach and strategy.

In contrast Prime Minister Theresa May was negotiating on three fronts: with Barnier's team, with BREXIT extremists on her back benches and with Northern Ireland's DUP, who during her second term 2017-2019, brazenly took advantage of her slim majority to her detriment. Meanwhile Boris Johnson, a fifth column, was using his role as Foreign Secretary, after resigning as *Daily Telegraph* journalist, to position himself for a Conservative Party leadership bid championing the hard-line Brexiteers, prepared if necessary for 'No-Deal'.

Barnier kept himself well-informed about the political shenanigans in Whitehall. When Johnson won the decisive second round of the Conservative Party leadership election on 23 July 2019, Barnier was reflecting on his 'deliver BREXIT' promise ('get BREXIT done'). Two days later Johnson declared his determination to leave the EU by 31 October and make further discussions dependent on rethinking the Withdrawal Agreement, notably by removing the back-stop designed to prevent any 'physical border' within the island of Ireland.

To thwart EU strategy, Britain repeatedly made attempts to bypass Barnier's negotiating team by directly contacting EU heads of state and Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the Commission, in the hope of gaining support and weakening the Commission's

position. The old imperial ‘divide and rule’ was never going to work. At one point two key heads of state were refusing to take Boris Johnson’s calls. The UK underestimated the degree to which Britain’s withdrawal and behaviour was counterproductive, uniting a fractious EU divided over immigration policy and threatened by populism in Hungary and Poland.

Reading between Barnier’s carefully crafted lines, at the political level, from David Davis to Boris Johnson, there was a deplorable lack of preparedness for meetings and grasp of key detail. Following Theresa May, for whom there was some sympathy in Brussels - she knew her brief - there was a growing loss of trust. But Barnier kept a ‘stiff upper lip’. He writes of his commitment to avoiding anger, aggression and vengeance. The tone of the diary entries suggests that he succeeded. But the consistent denigration of malign ‘Brussels intransigence’ in Britain coupled with a readiness to tear up international treaties and attempts to re-negotiate hard won agreements clearly tried the most experienced of negotiators on the EU side.

Because the Withdrawal Agreement had come into force, Johnson’s threat of an Internal Market Bill in September 2020, enabling the reversal of the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland and a clear-cut threat to breach international law, shocked Brussels. This, Barnier writes, ‘from a country that, for centuries, has built its reputation on the trustworthiness of its signature’. Despite such signs of bad-faith, negotiations moved forward, shoals of fish in British waters to the left, French fishing boats to the right. An ‘ambitious and fair free trade agreement’ was reached on Christmas Eve 2020. 47 years of EU membership had ended. Here the book ends – though BREXIT problems do not.

The British government seems to have learned nothing from the negotiations. Barnier has. His valedictory last chapter nods rightwards towards the Gaullist Party, ‘Les Républicains’, which

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

may or may not select him as their candidate in the coming French Presidential elections. Whether Boris Johnson fights the next general election as the Prime Minister who got BREXIT done will depend – excuse the anachronism - on the men in grey suits. They may be having them dry-cleaned in preparation, or perhaps pre-crumpled as I write.

REFUGEES, FOOD-BANKS & THE LITTLE PLATOONS

15.02.2022

In 2008, the world's financial and banking systems, vividly portrayed in the 2015 movie *The Big Short*, narrowly avoided destroying the global economy. Gordon Brown, our then Prime Minister, assured his place in history by leading a rescue operation. Conservatism under David Cameron was drawn into an ideological reset that would never work. His *Big Society* required and expected the little platoons – different voluntary associations, ‘families, individuals, charities and communities’ – incidentally not those Edmund Burke meant - to ‘come together to solve problems’. At the same time drastic austerity measures were creating new socio-economic problems and intensifying inequality. Big crises, not surprisingly, require big governments.

The Big Society, and a corresponding commitment to the local, were intended by Cameron to be a defining antidote to Margaret Thatcher's ‘there is no such thing’ as society while maintaining a belief in the Small State. In practice, the 2011 Localism Act proved to be dysfunctional and incoherent. It gave Local Authorities and local political leaders minimal financial flexibility and control, and therefore minimum room for manoeuvre. By default, the little platoons were drawn into the space opened up by declining public services.

Fast forward to the current global crisis and we again find the little platoons once more battling with the consequences of government policies. The BBC programme *More or Less* found that it is true that there are more food-banks than McDonalds in Britain, over 2,000, double the number of McDonalds. Many more according to the Anglican Church taking the figure of those they support of nearly 8,000. For some, led by the campaigning

Trussell Trust that supports 1,200 centres, the need for food-banks is a national scandal, to others simply a charitable opportunity for active volunteering, to those in need a last resort.

Most Catholic churchgoers will have been given the details of their nearest local food-bank to support, what work they do, information about collection days and what to donate. Few will have heard from their bishops any questioning of *how and why* an economically developed and wealthy Western European country has thousands of its citizens too poor to buy sufficient food for their families even if they are in work.

Huge sums of money were spent shoring up the British economy during the pandemic, much of it wasted in buying over-priced goods and services or lost by downright fraud. We have ended up with not a small State but with a big State reluctantly addressing problems so pressing it cannot avoid them. Johnson's precipitate lifting of all COVID regulations signals his sympathy with the small-State faction of Conservative parliamentarians whose support he badly needs.

In contrast to the subdued reaction to food-banks, yet other secular little platoons and faith communities are often openly in conflict with government about national policy towards refugees and migrants. "Welcome, protect, promote, and integrate." Pope Francis' four points of guidance go unheeded by the Home Office. But as Angela Merkel discovered, admitting over a million refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq between 2015 and 2017, carries significant political penalties. The UK government dealing, or not dealing, with numbers of asylum seekers and migrants that would barely be noticed in Lebanon or Turkey, continues to treat their arrival as a threatening crisis... and to earn an electoral reward.

The past is another country, and after BREXIT so is Europe. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Europe was awash with

displaced people and refugees. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) through which came the UN Refugee Convention, which today has 149 State signatories, was set up on 14 December 1950. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), began work in 1951. Initially both were Europe focussed and grew into large global bodies. The British Refugee Council emerged from organisations set up in the UK at the same time. Lord - Alf - Dubs, its director from 1988-1995, who came to Britain from Czechoslovakia on the *Kindertransport* which rescued 10,000 mostly Jewish child refugees from the Nazis between 1938-1940, is a living link with this past.

But, accompanying the growth of the big refugee agencies and before them, what is truly remarkable is the plethora of small local organisations and innovative individuals helping refugees. Not least the contribution of Christians.

Two examples can stand for thousands: *The Amazing Story of Alexander Glasberg* (Brown Dog Books), written by his great-nephew Nick Lampert, tells one such story. When the UNHCR and IOM were just getting started, Glasberg was already setting up homes in France for asylum seekers, the elderly and disabled. His Paris-based *Centre d'orientation sociale des étrangers* (Centre for Social Integration of foreigners) came out of his work in the Second World War with both Jewish, Catholic and secular organisations, rescuing and housing Jewish, Polish, Spanish Republican, and anti-Nazi German refugees he had succeeded in getting out of Vichy internment camps.

Glasberg, alias Father Elie, stares out from the book cover, posed for the camera with beret and soutane, round pebble-lens spectacles, cigarette in hand. Fathe Elie turns out to be a Zionist Russian-speaking Jewish Ukrainian, fluent in several languages, a great fixer, social pioneer and, for the last years of the war an

active member of the French resistance sought by the Gestapo, hence his cover name. He had converted to Catholicism before the war, was seminary trained, ordained as a priest and dedicated his life to the care of vulnerable refugees. *The Amazing Story* is biography as a charming textual collage of different verbatim sources including every colleague of Glasberg plus their photograph, and the names of many he helped. Many voices, not just the biographer's, tell his story.

At the other end of the scale, some of the Church's mainstream organisations have had a major impact on refugees' welfare. Fast forward again to 1978-1979 as the Vietnamese boat people come into the headlines. The Superior-General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe, asks his local Jesuit leaders to respond to the crisis. A year later he commissions a study of the growing refugee crisis in Africa and sets up the Jesuit Refugee Service. Today it operates from Rome with ten regional offices serving more than 800,000 people in over 50 countries providing everything from advocacy to health-care and education for refugee children.

Social media have opened up new opportunities for organisations and networks to form, find members and expand organisationally. Not all of them are benign. We are developing some ugly associations along the lines of those leading the insurrection in the US Capitol on 6 January 2020, active citizens as threat.

Glasberg's story is of a man of courage who, both during Nazi occupation and after, worked with the grain of French majority public opinion. For the little platoons and larger organisations supporting today's asylum seekers and migrants in the UK, it is a different matter.

THE GOOD SPYING GUIDE: STALIN TO PUTIN

12.03.2022

Good Intelligence helps prevent wars and also helps win wars. Intelligence failures quickly get into the public domain but successes are usually slow to emerge. We are unlikely to learn soon how Western Intelligence agencies came to an astonishingly accurate assessment of Russia's intentions towards Ukraine.

It looks as if there must have been leaks from within the Kremlin about Putin's plans but why did his coterie of kleptocrats not realise that Russia couldn't behave in Europe as it did in Chechnya and Syria without a massive reaction? Or were Putin's advisers simply too frightened to tell him? What was the Intelligence agencies' understanding of Putin's psychology? And what was President Biden's thinking behind his remarkable, detailed revelation of Putin's intentions?

Analysing the intentions of paranoid autocratic leaders, dictators, is notoriously difficult. It requires HUMINT, agents in place close to the head of State, privy to his thinking. In November 2021, the US Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, visited NATO headquarters to share growing suspicions that Russia was planning to attack Ukraine. After the Iraq WMD (weapons of mass destruction) fiasco in 2003, and the failure to predict how quickly Kabul would fall, there was a degree of scepticism.

By February this year the US, and to a lesser degree British Intelligence agencies, must have had telling IMINT (Imagery Intelligence), clear satellite photographs of troop build-ups and SIGINT, decrypted communications between military and diplomatic personnel, as confirmation of their worst suspicions. A week before the invasion, President Biden took the unprecedented

step of revealing - to the day - when Russian troops would move in as well as Putin's plans for a 'false-flag' operation designed as justification for invasion. Jake Sullivan, Biden's National Security Adviser, had earlier described Putin's intentions as 'catastrophic'. It seems likely that this assessment was the reason for several contacts with Beijing seeking Chinese pressure and mediation to avert the Russian attack.

Biden's tactics must have taken most Intelligence agencies, built on secrecy, outside of their comfort zone. But modern hybrid conflicts include the important element of 'information war', a Russian speciality, and Putin was clearly pushed off balance. He began talking ridiculous and counter-productive nonsense about Ukraine being led by drug-dealers and neo-Nazis, and putting the Russian Federation on high nuclear alert. Meanwhile good spying had given the USA time to develop a strong package of sanctions and to unite NATO member countries around it.

Cambridge Professor and MI5's official historian, Christopher Andrew's *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence* is a doorstop of a book covering everything from advice to rulers in the third century BCE Sanskrit *Arthashastra*, to US Enquiries into 9/11 and the 2004/2005 Reports into the Iraq WMD intelligence failures. But it is not just an Intelligence encyclopaedia. It has recurrent themes as well as the overarching recommendation to learn from the past and have a long-term perspective on the future.

The Secret World's first lesson is that the critical issue determining whether Intelligence, once gathered, is used intelligently is the attitude of the Head of State or Prime Minister on whose desk Intelligence briefings land. At the beginning of the Second World War, Stalin, for example, was more preoccupied with the Trotskyite threat than that of the Nazis with whom he'd formed the German-Soviet Pact of August 1939. Before the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Stalin was more

suspicious of Churchill than of Hitler. He dismissed repeated warnings from different agents and sources that a German attack was imminent.

But Churchill was an Intelligence addict. He had good reason to be and supported Britain's predilection for deception, cryptanalysis (code-breaking) and counter-intelligence. ULTRA, the product of wartime cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park who cracked Axis 'ultra-secret' coded communications, exposed German agents sent into Britain and replaced them with agents of their own. In the words of J. C. Masterman, the MI5 chairman of a committee running deception operations, 'we actively ran and controlled the German espionage system in this country'.

A second lesson is the danger of group-think and with it unconscious neglect of cultural difference. The West's enemy in the 1970s was Communism. There was a blank within US National Intelligence Estimates when it came to religion. The danger posed by unrest in Iran was therefore attributed to communist subversion. The USA feared a Lenin might emerge, not a 78 year-old Ayatollah living in exile in Paris. A 1983 report on the Iranian Revolution from senior advisers to the CIA Director is worth quoting at length despite its tortured institutional prose: the basic problem was "to recognize qualitative change and to deal with situations in which trend, continuity and precedent were of marginal, if not counterproductive, value".

A third insight is that rivalry between different Intelligence agencies causes serious problems. Khaled Sheikh Mohammed's and his nephew Ramzi Yousef's 1993 truck bomb in the basement of one of the twin towers of the New York Trade Centre, meant that the Al-Qaida 'file' went to the – domestic - New York FBI and their particularly skilful Arab-American interrogator, Ali Soufan. But competition between the CIA and FBI after the Al-Qaida attack on USS Cole in October 2000 had disastrous

consequences. The CIA, took over interrogation of Al-Qaida suspects from the FBI, and tortured them with the result that they clammed up. The different clues pointing to 9/11 held by the two agencies were never brought together. Potential leads to the highjack bombers were missed.

Professor Christopher Andrew was taught by the history don and Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University in the 1980s, Sir Harry Hinsley. Hinsley had been a cryptanalyst at Bletchley Park and Andrew's book doubles as a history of cryptanalysis through the ages. *The Secret World*, a world history, contains so much more than the last century of espionage. Sometimes the amount of detail is overwhelming but the effusive laudatory cover blurbs are deserved. It is a book to be taken slowly, one chapter a day, and especially illuminating given the Ukraine tragedy and our pressing current need to assess the geopolitical intentions of today's totalitarian States.

GOVERNMENT'S DUTY OF CARE: NUL POINTS

17.03.2022

Delia Smith's football team, Norwich City, may not win many matches but she has won my heart. Asked about what she thought of the Home Office demanding visas for Ukrainian asylum seekers on the Radio 4 *Today* programme (12/03/2022), she compared it to "coldly slamming the door in their face". The government's response had been "dreadful" and "unforgiveable". Delia's conclusion was we "need leaders who want to care for people". We should "rid ourselves of dictators and inept leaders".

In more measured words but with a similar basic critique, on 9 March a group of London leaders of Churches in UK, including Archbishop Nikitas, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Great Britain, the Coptic Orthodox Archbishop Angaelos, Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, United Reformed, Salvation Army and others wrote to the Prime Minister: "Surely, we feel compassion today for Ukrainian mothers with young children, the elderly and those with disabilities, who have undertaken dangerous and arduous travel, and look to the United Kingdom with hope and are now reaching out to us in Ukraine's greatest hour of need. How can mothers with young children, the elderly and the disabled, who have travelled a thousand miles be expected to complete online application forms in a language foreign to them? Times of war require swift action and flexibility, the easing of normal procedures and the removal of complex bureaucratic obstacles that can easily turn hope into despair and resignation".

The government response to such widespread criticism was to hoist the moth-eaten flag of National Security. The Home Office couldn't possibly allow Ukrainian grannies, or mothers with

babies, beyond the White Cliffs of Dover without visas and proper checks. The FSB and GRU (former KGB and Russian military Intelligence) would be infiltrating agents disguised as traumatized women. Really? Are we in a lie-of-the-month competition with Putin? Nobody seemed to wonder why 27 other countries, the EU, didn't block entry in this way and, by inference, didn't care about their own national security.

We are watching the unsavoury instincts of Priti Patel at work endorsing the Home Office bureaucracy and its ability, by intent or chronic mismanagement, to create a hostile environment for those without a multi-million dollar account in an off-shore bank. Government Ministers have had weeks to make contingency plans for managing refugees from Ukraine and only bestirred themselves under public pressure. Three quarters when polled wanted government to be hospitable to the Ukrainians. As Delia said, commenting on Government's behavior, "That's not what Britain is".

I wanted to believe Delia and turned to one of the most prolific, informed - and kindest - of writers about what Britain once was, Peter Hennessy. His new book, *A Duty of Care: Britain Before and After COVID* sounded as if it might help. It did. In short, a factual account with plentiful tables and statistics of the rise and fall, impediments and accelerators of our national commitment to the common good. Hennessy takes the October 1942 Beveridge report with its five giants to be slain, Want, Ignorance, Disease, Squalor and Idleness, and tracks the struggle to slay them, its reverses and successes, the slings and arrows of outrageous politics, up to September 2021.

"A ready-reckoner way of capturing the statutory paving of the 1940s version of the duty of care" Hennessy says, "is to chart the legislative flow". He lists two wartime coalition government Bills, the 1944 Education Act and the 1945 Family Allowance Act

followed by Atlee's 1946 National Insurance Act (to give security from 'cradle to the grave' to use Churchill's 1943 phrase), the National Health Service Act, Housing Act, and New Towns Act. Town and Country Planning came in 1947 and, in 1949, the Legal Aid and Legal Advice Act, providing greater access to justice for all. The achievements of the Atlee government were prodigious. Nye Bevan believed the indirect benefit of the NHS providing "the best that medical skill can provide" was that Britain would become "more wholesome, more serene and spiritually healthy". It became a talisman national for national identity and wellbeing.

A duty of care informed social policy in subsequent Conservative as well as Labour governments. Hennessy has a soft spot for Harold MacMillan (Prime Minister 1957-1963), more housing, more schools, the welfare state safe in his Conservative hands. It was the economic crisis of the 1970s and the Thatcher years, 1979 – 1990, that brought in a new political culture in which a duty of care began to disappear from policy. From 2010 its absence was palpable.

From 2010, and part of the Coalition Government's austerity measures, a 21% Ministry of Justice reduction in funding for Court and Tribunal Services, as well as legislation reducing the scope of civil and family legal aid meant that access to justice was undermined. The backlog in the Crown courts was c. 40,000 cases pre-pandemic and is now 50,000. Whilst living conditions have improved impressively since the Second World War, amongst Beveridge's giants, Disease, Want and Squalor still show signs of life. From 2020-2018, the number of people in temporary accommodation rose by 74% (for children 69%). According to Professor Michael Marmot, life expectancy outside London fell for women. Thanks mainly to austerity and COVID, with 5.8 million people (the population of Denmark) now on a huge waiting list for treatment and elective surgery, we are more

anxious today than serene about the future of the NHS and of our country. Nor did BREXIT bring much serenity and spiritual health. Rather, in Hennessy's words it "contributed powerfully to a general coarsening of our politics and our national conversation, leaving us in a diminished and psychologically poor state by the time the virus struck".

What is to be done? Hennessy warns that his manifesto for the 2020s needs a new consensual politics that would 'run with the grain of our better past'. He speaks of five shared 'tasks' for a new Beveridge plan that he hopes could be adopted 'after COVID': social care, social housing, technical education, preparation of the economy and society for Artificial Intelligence, combating and mitigating climate change plus a sixth, 'refreshing the UK constitution'. I would add a seventh: extending government's duty of care beyond British citizens to refugees.

Putin's war looks like adding at least four million to the total of Europe's refugees needing care. Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine as the book was published. If anything it makes Hennessy's social market prescription for a united, spiritually healthy UK, a kinder Britain, more urgent but demanding even more financial backing to realise it. I think he would agree. For he starts his first chapter by quoting Beveridge: "a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching". And as R.H. Tawney, whom Hennessy also cites, said in 1917, we need to think in terms 'not of the least that is essential but the most that can be achieved'.

THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF WAR IN UKRAINE

24.03.2022

The security threats of the 21st. century, not least the war in Ukraine, have revealed how naïve we were to think that the interlocking and interdependence of economies was an unqualified good thing. Countries sharing complex economic relationships with each other, we supposed, would not go to war with each other. The global market would be the infrastructure of a peaceable, prosperous world. And if that were true then Fukuyama might have been right about the triumph of liberal capitalism. Images of bombs smashing into Ukrainian supermarkets, hospitals and homes shattered such hopes and the illusion of Fukuyama's dream.

The triple threat of the pandemic, of accelerating climate change, and of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, have peeled away protective layers of naiveté, short-sightedness and ignorance to reveal the abiding cruelties, inequalities and moral indifference of a fractured world. Russian barbarism has caused a geopolitical earthquake with its resultant economic tsunami. The West found no difficulty in occupying the moral high ground but then had to run for help to the oil rich Middle East. Suddenly all sorts of deals with former pariah State, Iran, became possible. And also time to pay Mohammad al-Salman al-Saud a call, coinciding with the execution of 81 Saudi citizens most of whom had the misfortune to belong to the wrong branch of Islam. These days it takes a strong dose of *realpolitik* to keep the lights on.

In Britain the poor will be worst hit. This is a political choice. But what happens when the tsunami reaches the shores of the Mediterranean? Lebanon for instance. Lebanon buys 80% of its wheat imports (Egypt 85%) from Russia and Ukraine. According to IFAD, the United Nations Fund for Agricultural Development, recent spikes in the cost of fertiliser have added 30% to food

prices. Lebanon is deemed 22% 'food insecure', meaning almost a quarter of the population already don't get enough to eat. Hunger is about to increase and add to existing problems. Already children from poorer families are on one meal a day, often depending on being fed at school.

I am involved with Caritas Lebanon, one of the country's biggest NGOs, working with the poor and in education and so aware of the country's accelerating descent into poverty after the end of its civil war in 1990. Peace was achieved by creating a complex political system that shared power between the different religious and ethnic elites, a form of confessionalism. This arrangement turned out to be a formula for government entropy leading to State failure.

The disarray got worse in the wake of a banking crisis in 2019 followed by the pandemic. The Lebanese pound and thus wages lost 90% of their value. Within a few months professionals such as teachers and doctors, suddenly pauperised, began to leave the country in droves. Meanwhile Lebanon remained home to thousands of refugees from Palestine and other countries as well as receiving over a million people fleeing Assad's Syria.

As if Lebanon's problems weren't great enough, in the early evening of 4th August 2020 a warehouse containing an estimated 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded in Beirut's main harbour. Ammonium nitrate is used in fertiliser as well as in explosives. A second and massive explosion which registered as far away as Cyprus immediately followed. A quarter of a million people were displaced, thousands wounded and hundreds killed as the blast spread over two miles from its epicentre in the harbour to the northern part of town. 85% of Lebanon's grain silos were blown to bits and not replaced. Now the nearest port for storing imported grain – and sunflower seed for cooking oil - is Tripoli in the north. Lebanon has only about three weeks of wheat reserves.

A Lebanese Carmelite priest told me that on a visit to a Beirut school at lunch time he heard one boy ask another what his mum had put in his sandwich. The boy opened it to show him. There was nothing in it. As prices soar, for many there won't even be bread.

Rapidly deteriorating living conditions in other countries are likely to spark civil unrest. Egypt and Somalia immediately come to mind. The impact of sanctions on Russia will affect the Central Asian Republics. For example, 31% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP comes from remittances sent by migrants working in Russia, the collapse of the rouble will have dire consequences for their families. In Africa where food makes up the bulk of expenditure for vast numbers, people will be hit three ways: pandemic, climate change, and the knock-on effects from conflict in Ukraine.

Globalisation has obviously not done away with nationalism, its beliefs in a mythical past, and accompanying ideological blinkers. Look at our forthcoming Nationality and Borders Bill and the mind-set behind it. Look at the P&O's ruthless substitution of foreign labour on pitiful wages for British labour with tolerable pay, a snapshot of global corporate practice. We seem unable to deal with the debilitating inequalities that globalisation has failed to remedy, many would say increased. Worse, economic connectedness has failed to create international solidarity in the face of the greatest of the 21st. century threats, climate change. For governments as for individuals the immediate seems inevitably to banish the demands of the long term. Given the urgency of reducing carbon emissions, when is our response to Russia's threat to oil and gas energy supplies going to take into account the impact on climate change targets set in Glasgow?

Putin may posture with his finger on the nuclear button, our finger has to be on the domestic and global reset button. World

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

leaders are in denial about the magnitude of the change now essential. Quite literally it can't go on like this.

BRITAIN'S WASTED TALENT

01.04.2022

What does the reaction to Rishi Sunak's Spring Statement indicate? Much stronger national feeling than expected about the poor and disadvantaged being made poorer and more disadvantaged allegedly because of the national debt and its financial pressures. Every Sunak genuflection in the direction of concern beyond a Thatcherite version of fiscal responsibility - and potential support from the Conservative Party for his future bid for the leadership - turns out to offer too little money for those on poverty level incomes. The Treasury's priorities were duly noted.

Divide the promised millions of tax cuts by several years and by the number of beneficiaries, subtract inflation and energy bills, you end up with derisory amounts allocated to helping those living in poverty, in short their growing impoverishment by default. Too little spread between too many for too long. Yet the Chancellor spends taxpayers' money that you might suppose would be spent in keeping with the values of the majority of taxpayers.

Since 2010 the relationship of government departments, and cash-strapped local authorities, to needy citizens has increasingly become that of begrudging benefactor to struggling supplicant. The NHS, Education, Justice, and Local Government Services have all been squeezed to the point of breakdown. In each instance the impact of this decline affects people with disability more severely than the rest of the public. Britain's population is ageing and suffers from a very high level of diabetes. For this reason, a startling figure of some 15 million people are counted as disabled or suffer from long term illness.

Those seeking their due in benefits from different government departments encounter lengthy form-filling, ill-informed assessments down a telephone and general bureaucratic delays

reminiscent of the Home Office's hostile environment aimed at repelling migrants. Too often to get what is their – anyway inadequate - due people with disability have to rely on recourse to the courts. For instance, in 2017 alone some 4,600 claimants with disability were found to have had their Personal Independence Payments (PIPs) incorrectly stopped by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).

Government presents employment as the way out of poverty. More than 2 million people in the UK are living with sight loss. The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) estimate that 27% of people of working age with visual disability live in poverty. Their monthly cost of living is higher than that of the general population. Despite public sympathy, finding employment commensurate with their skills represents one of the biggest barriers to equal participation of the blind and visually impaired in society. According to research commissioned by the RNIB only 1 in 4 blind and partially sighted people of working age are in employment, a figure that has worsened in the last decade.

See My Skills, a Vision Foundation (originally the 1921 greater London Fund for the Blind) report published last year, proposes ways to increase employment among the blind and visually impaired. "I'm staggered by the information in the *See My Skills* report," Lord Blunkett, the Vision Foundation's vice president, added. "Just over 25% of blind and partially sighted people of working age have a job. That's the exact reverse of the population as a whole. It's a question of perception: understanding what people can and can't do and then the practicalities of giving them the tools so they can do the job. Not every job is possible, but the vast majority are. I accept I won't be on the pitch at Wembley tonight, but I know what I can and can't do!"

Funding for the support and equipment required by the sight-impaired at work depends on dealing successfully with the

DWP – which since September 2021 has a Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Chloe Smith MP. The 2010 Equality Act requires employers to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to mitigate disability in the workplace. In theory the partially sighted worker can expect DWP funding for these adjustments including an assistant support worker. In reality applying for this assistance can seem like negotiating a deliberately created obstacle course.

A cost benefit analysis by the former Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, a small NGO much cited in the press, concludes that the benefits of government funding enabling the blind and visually impaired to find work and supporting them in the workplace “clearly outweigh costs”. Not a Keynesian argument but simply pointing out the fact that welfare spending would be reduced and tax revenue increased were the visually impaired in work, as they wish to be, rather than claiming benefits. Paying a support worker, if needed, would even create extra employment opportunities for others whilst the need for mental health services would very likely be reduced. The experience of disability and its consequences for the economy could be transformed by a change in priorities and attitude by the DWP and Treasury.

But we must not forget employers, they can also be an obstacle for the visually impaired. Those who do not offer jobs to people with disabilities may be using inaccessible recruitment processes and may well be ignorant of the provisions in Prime Minister John Major’s 1994 *Access to Work* legislation which provides support for moving the disabled into work. Such employers probably and wrongly assume that the partially sighted can’t operate laptops and are in danger in the workplace. They miss out on a pool of potentially loyal and skilled staff. “Thousands of blind and partially sighted people are being excluded from the workplace because employers see their disability and not their skills”, the *See My Skills* report concludes.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

For a variety of reasons, not least BREXIT and the pandemic, we are suffering from a serious labour shortage. Yet a reservoir of unemployed people with disabilities who want to work is considered a drain on government spending. This does not make sense. By putting economic good sense and well-being above narrow political interest, government has the opportunity to go with the grain of national feeling and respond to what is still today a shocking waste of talent.

See also [TheArticle 01/04/202](#)

HOW ‘GLOBAL BRITAIN’ IS LETTING DOWN THE WORLD’S POOR

07.02.2023

From Friday 27 January a Yemeni family tuning in to the BBC World Service Arabic broadcasts would be disappointed. To save £28 million towards a shortfall caused by inflation and freezing of the license fee, BBC radio’s ten language services are being shut down and several hundred staff made redundant. It’s digital or TV now for those who can afford it.

Yemen is a destitute, hungry, war-torn country. Few will have the money to buy a mobile phone to catch the only independent news on-line. This unseen discrimination against the poorest in the world may seem a minor, distant matter. But it is small part of a bigger picture. And we should be concerned.

For the last few years, the UK has been behaving as if it didn’t have enough money to pursue a coherent Foreign, Commonwealth and Development policy (FCDO). Yet we were one of the 19 founder signatories of the OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development) in 1960. It numbers 38 democracies today. Its mandate is to promote ‘a collaboration in policy standards to promote sustainable growth’. It describes development assistance as directed at “economic development and welfare of developing countries”. Do we really share these goals? There is growing evidence we don’t.

In 2021 the aid budget was ‘temporarily’ (weasel words – it is likely to stay that way until the end of the decade) reduced from the UN target of 0.7% of GNP (Gross National Product) to 0.5%. This amounted to a cut of 21% from £14.5 billion to c.£11.4 billion of which c.£7.14 billion (62.6%) was in the form of direct bilateral aid to individual countries, some of it via the World Food Programme, for example feeding the starving in Yemen. The

overall budget for Yemen was halved in 2021 from £221 million to £114 million. Yet need continued to grow.

Cuts in spending for Lebanon are another egregious example. In July 2021, a year after a huge explosion in a port warehouse caused extensive devastation in Beirut, and on top of Lebanon's economic collapse, the incoming British ambassador, Ian Collard, inherited an aid budget of £140 million cut from £260 million for the period 2019-2020. According to the newspaper L'Orient Today a further 2021-2022 cut was scheduled to reduce the budget to c. £32 million. Lebanon hosts 2.2 million Syrian refugees and over 200,000 Palestinians. Its total population is 5.6 million, 40% of whom now require humanitarian assistance. It doesn't take much imagination to predict the impact of across-the-board cuts of this magnitude on British embassies' capacity to promote 'economic development and welfare'. You might have thought that Lebanon, a failed State, tucked perilously between Israel and Syria, would fall within the Foreign and Development Office priority category, alongside Syria and Afghanistan. Not so.

In June 2020 Boris Johnson described the aid budget as a "giant cashpoint in the sky" and amalgamated our development ministry with the Foreign Office. But who is making the withdrawals and for what purpose? The Home Office for one. A more accurate description is the budget for plugging holes - of which there are many such as the rising cost of housing and feeding refugees in this country.

We have an aid ceiling in the UK. So payment of hotels, for food and other burgeoning refugee expenses cannot be covered by adding to the overall budget which is fixed. An interesting set of submissions to a December 2022 Parliamentary Select Committee on International Aid on the funding of asylum seekers and economic migrants arriving in UK, (on-line thanks to the Washington and London based Global Center for Development),

provides detailed evidence. 12% of the UK aid budget is being used to meet some of the current Treasury shortfall. And the sum could double. Just as the effects of climate change are being felt, this means drastic cuts in life-saving humanitarian aid let alone development aid. £700 million went to East Africa to mitigate the consequences of the 2016-2018 droughts. £156 million was budgeted for last year's continuing and no less severe drought.

Over 150,000 thousand applicants for asylum in Britain are waiting for a decision on their status, tens of thousands have been waiting for over three years. In Germany, using a UNHCR triage system, the wait is on average 6-7 months. We are dealing with far fewer Ukrainian refugees than Germany which has issued six times the number of UK visas, or neighbouring Poland which has accepted 1.26 million. Yet, here in the UK the arrival of 45,750 people in small boats in 2022 is treated as a national crisis while the inefficiency and waste of the Home Office is covered by money taken from the world's hungry.

The Home Office under Priti Patel and Suella Braverman appears incapable of managing, timely processing and integrating any arrivals. Part of the problem is the plethora of un-coordinated special programmes for select categories of refugees from Ukraine, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Syria. Home Office staff don't even have an adequate data-base and rely on spreadsheets. But at the root is a dysfunctional Home Office led since July 2018, the date of Priti Patel's appointment, by Ministers simply not up to the job. They have played to the Conservative back benches while expenditure and backlog soared, rhetoric rather than action. Pre-Covid, 2018, the government was spending £370 million on refugee costs in the UK. Today it is projected to be c. £2.7 billion. And this will come out of the aid budget.

The OECD does acknowledge that members may want to fund refugees from their aid budgets for the first year after their arrival

[my italics]. But none of the G7 countries are funding most of what are called ‘in-donor costs’ from aid in the way Britain does. This expedient is not illegal, simply unethical. It is condemned by a wide range of British NGOs concerned with human rights, the plight of refugees and international development aid.

Dipping into the aid budget began in a small way in 2009 under Gordon Brown and expanded under David Cameron. It reached unacceptable proportions under Johnson, Truss and Sunak. Priti Patel’s more than £120 million Migration and Economic Development Partnership, a deportation scheme in collaboration with an authoritarian African State, Rwanda, further championed by Suella Braverman, is the embodiment of the way our former vision of development assistance, and that of the OECD, has been deliberately degraded.

So no surprise. ‘Global Britain’ is an empty slogan put about in 2016 to provide Brexit with the illusion of grand purpose. “The whole idea of having a coherent, consistent portfolio of development action has disappeared”, in the words of Geography Professor Michael Collyer of Sussex University. By 2030 it is reckoned conflict and fragile States will be home to 85% of the world’s poor. We neglect them at our peril.

Britain does not need empty slogans. We need to nurture clear foreign and development policy objectives, to pursue them and to hold out for an ethical dimension within a coherent FCDO strategy. We should not be making the poor of the world pay for the failures of incompetent Ministers.

RELIGION & POLITICS: MUST KATE FORBES CHOOSE BETWEEN GOD & THE SNP?

07.03.2023

How has it come about that, when it comes to choosing a leader of a political party, a politician's views on same-sex marriage seem to be a deal-breaker? The controversy caused by Kate Forbes, once front runner for leadership of the Scottish National Party (SNP), saying she believed that "marriage is between a man and a woman" did not come out of a clear blue sky. It has deep roots and prompts an important discussion about religious belief and politics.

It is worth recalling the initial slow change in social attitudes after July 1967 when the bill decriminalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults over 21 was given royal assent. The bill at the time excluded Scotland, Northern Ireland and the armed forces. And there were setbacks such as Margaret Thatcher's Section 28 banning in 1987 'the promotion of homosexuality' in schools.

Government provision of civil partnerships in 2004 and the 2010 Equalities Act summarising and simplifying previous anti-discrimination law were major landmarks in achieving equal right for people in same sex relationships. The compatibility of religious belief and practice with the Equalities Act is normally established in the calm and clarity of a courtroom. But since Nicola Sturgeon's resignation and the instant withdrawal of prominent Forbes supporters, sexuality issues have been manipulated politically in the media by partisan contestants for her position as leader of the SNP. As a result, the ensuing debate has been reduced to clashes on the frontline of the culture war

between ‘woke’ and ‘reactionary’ belligerents. Calm and clarity are not the first words that come to mind.

Sexual ethics have played a significant role in religious education in the past and still do. People with religious beliefs can hardly complain that issues of sexuality are newsworthy, it is a perennial interest and people of goodwill passionately disagree about it. But does that mean holding socially conservative views based on religious belief should automatically exclude people from high political office? The Equalities Act was intended to protect the rights of minorities whose sexual identities differ from the majority but also to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Here are some observations which try to put the problem in historical context. We now inhabit an ethical terrain in which the terms human rights and civil rights have proliferated unhelpfully in popular usage. They have come to trump other ways of talking about and legislating what is the right thing to do. Not everything we might reasonably hope for in a democratic society is a human right or even a civil right.

Campaigning for gay rights was about the removal of discrimination. A success was Tony Blair’s 2004 legislation creating civil partnerships in the UK affording same-sex partnerships the civil rights equal to those of heterosexual marriage. In later legal tidying up, the provisions of the 2004 Act became available to those in heterosexual relationships who, for one reason or another, (because of the patriarchal connotations of traditional marriage) did not wish to be married.

Peter Tatchell’s successful campaign for same-sex marriage used the brilliant slogan “Equal Love” and was rewarded by the 2013 Same-Sex Couples Act that did away with State prohibition of same-sex civil marriage. The 2013 Act gave recognition to the equal value of same-sex love and thus to the human dignity of the couples in same-sex relationships felt to have been inadequately

expressed by the initially special minority provision called civil partnership. But religious organisations were not obliged to religiously marry same sex partners. It was not a human right.

The 2004 and then 2013 Acts, subject to the permission of Local Authorities, enabled religious organisations to register marital relationships and perform same-sex marriages as well as civil partnerships. The latter was a major change in the concept of marriage. No longer an exclusively heterosexual institution it became a challenge to traditional Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinking and scripture on marriage, a change in both definition and meaning. It inevitably was, and is, profoundly divisive.

The concept of ‘equal love’ is a mainstay of Christian theology and in February 2023 the Church of England General Synod voted to allow priests to bless same sex marriage and civil partnerships. The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA), though, described it as “schismatic and unbiblical behaviour”. Alongside the no less conservative leaders of GAFCON (Global Anglican Future Conference) the GSFA represents over 70% of the Anglican Communion round the world, mainly provinces in the southern hemisphere. Heaven above knows what they would call approval of the Scottish Gender Recognition Reform Bill.

So we come to the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the undeniably courageous Kate Forbes speaking openly about what her Christian - ‘Wee Free’ Presbyterian – beliefs demand. In interviews she has described how she would vote according to her conscience but honour the present and future democratic will even if she personally disagreed with it. A window into her soul best kept closed? Refreshing openness and truthfulness in a politician or foolish candour? Forbes does not have the good fortune to be a German politician. In 2017 the then Chancellor Angela Merkel allowed a free vote on the same-sex marriage Act, voted against it herself, and when resigning four years later enjoyed 80% approval.

Throw in a little misogyny and Forbes may have forfeited the role of first Minister to Humza Yousaf who has contrived to miss voting on such issues.

Can Scotland trust Kate Forbes to honour the democratic will? The most compelling argument made against her is that whatever she now says no-one can be sure that as First Minister her strong Christian principles wouldn't later unacceptably influence her policy judgements. Acceptance depends on trusting her word. Strange then that her truth-telling should be distrusted but a serial offender against truth, the untrustworthy Boris Johnson, was elected leader of the Conservative Party and remained popular even when the threat of a Corbyn government receded.

We live in a democracy. Those who are unwilling to set aside a candidate's religious views are free not to vote for them. But the question remains do views on sexuality influence political judgement more strongly than other views? After all, socially conservative views on sexuality do not imply or mean conservative views on all other social and political issues. For example, views on climate change, inequality, defence, health and social care need probing before a candidate is judged either way. Again, why is this minority position on sexuality a deal-breaker? Is this about making faith a private matter, excluding religion from public debate?

Forget woke and not woke. It is time to step back, reject the social media lynch mob, and start listening to each other. Writing in *The Observer* 26 February Kenan Malik's proposes that in a secular democracy strong religious views can be safely compatible with the top job in, say, the Treasury and Foreign Office but problematic for a Party leader responsible for the totality of policy. Pure conjecture of course but interesting. Yet when we reach a point where someone convicted of raping two women, described as a 'transgender woman', is sent to an all-female prison for

assessment, it is arguable that Scotland needs someone running the SNP with some old-fashioned ideas, or at least some common sense.

The first leadership debate on STV on 7 March will have been an opportunity for participants to listen to religious views and treat them with respect. In the words of the Scottish Catholic Bishops “religion is not a problem for legislators to solve but instead makes its own vital contribution to the national conversation”.

DO SANCTIONS WORK?

18.04.2023

We think of sanctions as an alternative to war. They are also a projection of power. States, corporations, and recently, individual citizens, are punished economically. The aim is to stop or curtail actions which are inimical to the interests or values of the sanctioning State or contrary to international law, or to both. In the long term the economic impact of sanctions may erode a belligerent State's will or ability to wage war. So far so theoretical.

But after reading Agathe Demarais' recent *Backfire: How Sanctions Reshape the World Against US Interests*, Columbia University Press, 2022, you might be surprised how little practice fits theory. Demarais recounts how sanctions have evolved since the 1950s including the variety of things that can go wrong and backfire on those who have imposed them.

President Eisenhower, with the creation in 1950 of the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), instituted the use of trade sanctions as a way of achieving foreign policy goals. The first target was North Korea, a legacy of the Korean war. North Korea's economic links with the USA were tenuous. The approach had to be multilateral: a UN embargo on oil imports and coal exports.

After the revolution in 1959, Cuba was always a particularly American concern. 73% of Cuba's exports went to the USA and 70% of its imports came from the USA. Yet Eisenhower's embargo imposed in 1960 failed to achieve its goals. Despite an estimated loss over \$130 billion in income, Castro died with his regime intact and was succeeded by his brother Raul. The Kim dynasty in North Korea survives. There are always ways of getting round trade embargoes.

Fast forward thirty years to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the lessons of Cuba and North Korea hadn't been learned or were just ignored. Only a few days after Operation Desert Shield destroyed Saddam Hussein's retreating army, comprehensive international sanctions were imposed on Iraq. They lasted from 1990 to 1995 cutting off medical supplies and food imports. Estimates of Iraqi children dying of preventable diseases and malnutrition vary from tens to hundreds of thousands. An 'oil for goods' provision in 1995 permitted some humanitarian aid to enter the country. But Saddam Hussein was hanged in December 2006 as consequence of *military* defeat.

Inflation is the most immediate result of even partial enforced economic isolation. It powerfully affects the poorest. According to Demarais writing in *Backfire*, American OFAC sanctions on Venezuela in 2018 caused the price of a roll of toilet paper to jump "to nearly 3 million bolivars, requiring a three-kilogram stack of 1,000 bank notes to pay for it". Mass emigration followed. The regime survived.

American companies shared a lot of the resultant pain from US sanctions while non-American companies were able to profit by filling the gaps created. Congress dealt with growing complaints from US business by legislation subjecting foreign companies to the same penalties for trading with Cuba. In a second 1996 Act, sanctions on Iran's - and Libya's - energy sectors were extended to include and enforce compliance by all international companies. This was the beginning of highly contentious 'extraterritorial' 'secondary' sanctions. The European Union, coerced by the Americans, had enough clout to stand up to them. It warned that they would initiate a dispute procedure in the WTO (World Trade Organisation) which most believed the EU would win. Clinton backed down.

By the turn of the century, OFAC, without abandoning the blunt weapon of embargoes, was moving on to sectoral sanctions, focusing on technology and finance, applied now to Iran. The US was playing to its strengths, in particular the dominant role of the dollar in global financial services. Companies and individuals in pariah countries were put on a Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list barring them from doing business - in dollars - with the USA. Information on banks' customers and networks became critical. In 2012, under strong US pressure, SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications), the over 11,000 strong cooperative network for international payments with its – today's - \$5 trillion worth of transactions daily, 40% conducted in dollars, cut off Iranian banks.

But come the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 and China's increasingly autocratic behaviour both nationally and internationally, the USA - and European Union – squared up to two significantly more formidable targets. A second phase in the sanctions saga opened up. The Peoples' Bank of China immediately began developing its own financial service, CIPS (Cross-Border Interbank Payment System), for international payments in renminbi. After its launch in 2015, CIPS attracted not only HSBC and Standard Chartered but also Deutsche Bank, Citi and BNP Paribas, the French investment banking group. In January 2023 Russia and Iran joined up to create their own payments network after SWIFT excluded some important Russian banks. The sanctioned targets were hitting back.

Agathe Demarais indicates in *Backfire* that the growth of cryptocurrencies is providing sanctions-proof banking. China issued its own state-backed cryptocurrency in 2019, the digital renminbi. Today some 300 million Chinese citizens use mobile phones for such accounts, thus creating another doorway to comprehensive government surveillance. The Communist Party

leadership now appear to be aiming at total control of the country's financial system by displacing its two big tech firms, Alibaba and WePay, in the field of digital payments.

So the not-so hidden logic of sanctions is the 'decoupling' of the world's major economies, the fracturing of the global economy into competing economic blocs. China's Belt and Road Initiative, its extensive investment in trade and infrastructure in Africa, its role in the global South's association of big economies, BRICS, leaves little doubt which bloc will eventually incorporate the most States. One brake on such 'decoupling' is the crucial role of semiconductors and microchips in all economies and in military-industrial complexes. Put crudely 'it's the supply-chain stupid'.

A key feature of decoupling is a policy of beggar - your-economic- neighbour (and rival) in microchip production. China controls 80% of the production/refining of the world's vital rare earths used in semi-conductors present in a vast array of modern appliances. A F-35 fighter requires 417 kilos of these metals. But the USA predominates in the equipment, software and design of semi-conductors. A handful of such high-tech firms are collectively worth over \$1 trillion. The bulk of mass microchip manufacture takes place in Taiwan and South Korea. In 2020 Chinese legislation restricted the export of 17 rare earths and Trump banned all microchip sales to Huawei and other Chinese companies. Skirmishes in a future economic war?

Geopolitics are changing. A multipolar world is emerging. Sanctions have helped shape the present contours of international economic relations. Yet on the whole sanctions don't achieve their goals, often harming those they are not aimed at and bringing about unintended consequences. States with a powerful coercive apparatus and a cohesive military show considerable durability. Even weak States like Cuba and Venezuela resist successfully. The

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

most that can be said is that war, the alternative to sanctions, is far worse.

Backfire is a fascinating must-read for those who contribute to making foreign policy, for those who suffer from it, and for us baffled onlookers who fear for our grandchildren's future.

GOVERNANCE & THE POST OFFICE SCANDAL

22.01.2024

“An excoriating picture of a shamefully dysfunctional political culture”. Not a comment on the recent ITV series *Mr. Bates vs. The Post Office*. This is Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, on the back cover of Rory Stewart’s *Politics on the Edge: A Memoir from Within* Jonathan Cape 2023. Yet the book exposes the profound weaknesses in governance that enabled the Post Office scandal.

Stewart’s book focuses on the story of his decade in Tory politics and government from 2009-2019. Peter Hennessy, crossbench peer and constitutional historian, described it as ‘a study in pain and disillusionment.’ Michael Ignatieff, former Liberal Party leader of the Opposition in Canada and distinguished academic, spoke of its portrayal of ‘lying, incompetence and treachery’.

These three reviewers are all accomplished authors. Two bring exceptional political experience to their writing. Stewart’s account carries conviction with those who ought to know.

The book provides an explanation for how government can speak of appointing 150 additional judges to speed up the deportation of asylum seekers and migrants to Rwanda, judged an unsafe country by our Courts, whilst, allegedly through lack of staff, taking many years to process compensation for unsafe convictions of sub postmasters and mistresses, pillars of the community.

Rory Stewart shares many of his reviewers’ writing skills keeping the reader turning the pages as he talks about his epic walks in Asia and the Middle East and his professional life as a soldier before entering politics. There are insights from his

different roles in Afghanistan, the group think and disastrous levels of conviction bias that ended in the bungled evacuation from Kabul in August 2021.

Maybe he is one of those “unpatriotic, Britain-belittling doom-mongers”. This is from a recent Lancaster House speech by our Secretary of State for Defense, Grant Shapps, rated as one of the government’s best communicators, who in the past communicated using four different names and whose political career recently included, within two years, four different Ministries. Or put in another way, Stewart tries to tell the truth about politicians like Shapps and knows what he’s talking about.

Politics on the Edge is not just a litany of lying and dysfunction. There are witty descriptions of the humiliations involved in getting selected for a parliamentary constituency while failing to present always the Party line. Then follows the main story of the rocky road he walked as a Member of Parliament. His first boss, David Cameron, gets few praise-notes. Despite practical steps to increase diversity in the Party, the members of Cameron’s inner circle were Etonians (like Stewart himself), so policy was decided by ‘an unimaginably narrow social group’. Stewart shows considerable self-awareness acknowledging the greasy pole Cameron had to climb to become Prime Minister. But he and Cameron were chalk and cheese.

A common criticism of Rory Stewart is that he was, and remains, ‘naive’. At first, he lacked knowledge and experience of the snakes and ladders of political life, but he brought to the job the wisdom and judgement he had developed in different contexts. At times acting out of conscience without being, Corbyn-style, a professionally disloyal parliamentarian he risks defying the Tory Whips. By the time Boris Johnson pushed him out of Conservative politics in 2019 he had become a national figure.

In contrast to Yes Minister's portrayal some may even find his treatment of top civil servants to be too understanding and benign. They keep things going while Ministers come and go but they can be stubborn and evasive – at times successfully resisting policy change. Stewart found the power relations in the Department for International Development, as both Minister and as Secretary of State, particularly trying. While acknowledging the important role of aid in the global projection of the UK and giving Cameron credit for his commitment to 0.7% GDP, he encourages the suspicion that the department with an annual budget of “£13 billion more than ten times the core budget of the British Foreign Office” was a little too big for its boots. Yes, but the Foreign Office is not a Ministry funding projects globally. And DFID and FCO were of course later amalgamated by Johnson with hostile intent

Stewart got on well with Theresa May who made him a rather reluctant Minister of State for prisons in the Ministry of Justice. This is where his passion for practical action best shines out. Prisoners are grabbing drugs delivered by drones hovering outside broken windows – mend the broken windows, do a few simple reforms. Reading Stewart's account of prison conditions and their neglect by government is deeply shaming. It raises questions about our claim to be a civilised society. And in parenthesis, the absence of any mention of conversations with prison chaplains by such an advocate of 'listening' is some measure of his – admitted - general distaste for religion.

The least interesting chapters of *Politics on the Edge* are those about the quagmire of Brexit negotiations though, as did many others, Stewart soon spots Boris Johnson for the charlatan he is. After the resignation of Theresa May, his blow-by-blow account of the live TV debate in June 2019 trying to come through an experienced field of four other Tory leadership contenders -

Johnson didn't take part – and detailing his own miserable performance, is a painful study in hubris.

What, as Lenin said, is to be done? Stewart doesn't offer any coherent plan for reforming politics. Nor is there an obvious solution to offer. But he is clearly right that Ministers need time to understand the complexities of the issues they face, even what issues they must face. Successive Ministers responsible for the Post Office failed or were unable to challenge the Post Office's entrenched hierarchy. Appointing Secretaries of State for a three-year term, barring incompetence, would be helpful.

Party leaderships also perhaps need to allow more unwhipped votes. Differences can be creative. All Parties need to join in countering manufactured public opinion that disagreement always indicates a divided Party not fit for government. Politics as a conscience-free, value-free zone of human endeavour isn't desirable, hasn't worked and doesn't work. It lies behind our worst national scandals. Fortunately not all politicians practice it.

Does Rory Stewart provide a necessary prophetic voice or an irritatingly arrogant one? It hardly matters how he comes across as a person. Our politics is on the edge. Not yet teetering over it as in the USA. There are two ways to travel when approaching the edge: away from it or over it. And not moving, paralysed by disillusion, or providing ever new descriptions and analyses of the problems rather than doing something about them, as Tony Blair once put it, leaves you dangerously near the edge.

I hope *Politics on the Edge* is not Stewart's political swansong. We need alternative voices. Having shed his illusions, perhaps he should try again, this time in the Labour Party.

BRITAIN & GERMANY: KINDRED SPIRITS IN PERILOUS TIMES

28.05.2024

You can tell a lot about a country by spending time on its trains. Or, given the frequency of strikes, weekend ‘planned work on the line’, points failure and overhead lines becoming less overhead, by not spending time on its trains.

If you complete the IT assault course devised by *Interrail* and buy a rail pass and reservations, *Deutsche Bahn* is a good case study. And you may conclude Britain’s rail network is not so bad after all. Germans will tell you they manage travel on their train services by having only two expectations: delays or cancellations. That might tell you that Germany is far from booming, with implications for Europe.

Though Germany with a GDP of over \$4 trillion remains amongst the four to five largest economies in the world, the ‘German economic miracle’ of the 1950s is history. In the first quarter of 2024, German economic growth (GDP) was only 0.3% above its pre-pre-pandemic level – compared with UK, 1.7%, the Eurozone 3.4% and the USA, 8.7%. Though the jolly crowds in Berlin along the Spree on a Saturday night around *Friedrichstrasse* station show no sign of a decline in the ‘hospitality industry’. But almost half of German GDP comes from exports while the figure for the UK is only 29%. In both economies services are dominant making up 70% of German export revenue and 80% of British export revenue.

Germany has characteristic economic problems. After the 2008 global banking crisis, Germany and China found that their economies were complementary. From 2009 China became a major trading partner for Germany - accounting for 40% of Volkswagen’s sales. With its competitive exchange rate, German

exports to China rose from £44 billion to a peak of £105 billion in 2021, double that of British, French and Italian exports to China combined. Meanwhile China had progressively become more an economic competitor to Germany than a partner. Today, with China carrying a debt to GDP ratio of 287%, and with growth flagging, economic crisis looms. While investing in China, German business at home is making redundancies in those productive areas where it is outcompeted by China.

In 2015, Chancellor Angela Merkel – brought up in a strongly Lutheran East German family - took the decision to accept some half a million Syrian refugees, creating a total of one million asylum seekers and economic migrants admitted that year. This morally laudable but politically risky decision became a contributory factor to the doubling of membership, since its April 2013 founding, of the right-wing populist Party, the AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*.

AfD supports anti-immigration, anti-Muslim, anti-EU policies, and climate change denial. Unlike Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy Party, it does a poor job of countering accusations of harbouring fascist sympathisers and ideologues. Its leading candidate in the imminent EU elections, the MEP Maximilian Krah, was forced to end his campaign last week after telling an Italian newspaper that the Nazi SS were not all criminals. "I won't say that [someone] was automatically a criminal because he wore the wrong uniform", he told the *Financial Times*.

AfD is polling at 17% in forthcoming EU elections and, in 2017, gained a maximum 12.6% of the vote in Federal elections, dropping to 10.3% in 2021 (*Reform*, to the right of the Conservative Party in the UK, is currently polling at 11%). AfD has significant support in only 5 of Germany's 16 *Länder* (federal states) all within the former communist East Germany, the DDR: Thuringia, Saxony, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg and the eastern

side of Berlin. But a complex electoral arrangement gives it 77 out of the 734 seats in the *Bundestag* (Federal Parliament).

Try, as the *Bundesrepublik* might, and at great cost, after forty years of communism to “level up” the former DDR in a unified Germany post-1990, social tensions and the drabness of the many blocks of flats in the east of the city centre remain. To really feel the abiding legacy of the DDR, visit its sinister, cruel and slightly mad heart: Haus 1, 20 *Normannenstrasse*, the Stasi Museum, sitting in the Stasi’s original, extensive campus. Its files on 5.6 million people spied on, it was calculated, would stretch 69 miles end to end. In the last Federal elections, on the east side of the city, the old ‘Stasiland’, the AfD won 20.5% of the vote while on the west side the percentage was 8.5%.

Yet Angela Merkel had followed up her 2015 decision on immigration with a remarkably successful integration policy. And an aging Germany needed more workers. I was surprised to find a full congregation at an English mass in the St. Thomas Aquinas Centre, Germany’s Roman Catholic HQ in Berlin: predominantly under 40, nearly half of African origin and apparently, if a few conversations were indicative, working in a range of different - some professional - jobs.

As Timothy Garton Ash suggests in “Big Germany, What Now?” 23 May 2024 New York of Books, Angela Merkel’s decision with the most serious lasting consequences was her precipitous decommissioning of Germany’s nuclear power stations after the Japanese disaster at Fukushima in 2011. In consequence, Germany became dependent on Russia’s fossil fuels for energy; “by 2020, a staggering 55% of its gas, 34% of its oil and 57% of its hard coal came from Russia”. This did not mean that the current Chancellor Olaf Scholz is trapped into supporting Putin. Germany is second only to the USA in support for Ukraine, some £23 billion in economic and military aid provided, but closely

following the US, gradually less reluctant to send President Zelensky the sophisticated and powerful weaponry he seeks.

Germany is arguably, and will remain, the most important member of the European Union- though in the light of Putin's imperialist threat to Europe, Margaret Thatcher's fears of German dominance of the European Union seem in retrospect particularly misguided.

Socialist student peace activist, dubbed a peace Chancellor (*Friedenskanzler*) in the German press, cautious Social Democrat performing a balancing act nationally between clashing values, Olaf Scholz may prove to be a transitional leader. But like Sir Keir Starmer who looks to be facing even worse economic pressures, Scholz, a former lawyer specialising in labour law, shows a similar lawyer's caution needed in perilous times.

Britain and Germany both share the recent experience of economic crisis. There is a real possibility that Starmer, as a future Prime Minister, and Scholz, if re-elected in next year's Federal elections, will prove effective allies.

Meanwhile, we need to re-appraise Germany, its problems, dilemmas and role in the EU, sympathetically. The old trope that like Mussolini 'the Germans make the trains run on time' just isn't true. But the British and the Germans are kindred spirits who have much in common and need one another more than either nation realises.

MORE DEVOLUTION: A "BRITAIN BUILT TO LAST" ?

29.09.2024

When the verbs disappear from a political speech it's crowd-rousing time. At the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool last week, the Prime Minister went verbless early. He was describing work begun and "only just getting started": "more teachers, more neighbourhood police, more operations". Tucked into the to-do list was "devolution to our nations, regions and cities". More devolution? In all of these?

Between 1997 and 1999 Tony Blair's first government passed, after successful referenda, three devolution Acts. Two created devolved legislatures for Scotland and Wales. Within the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998, a third established a power sharing assembly and executive at Stormont replacing direct rule from Westminster. To describe these various configurations of executive power as asymmetric is something of an understatement. England, with by far the largest population, lacks almost any devolved government - unless you count the patchwork of Metro Mayors who have proved rather popular- and is governed by MPs serving in the national Parliament at Westminster. The "English question" did bob up between 2015 and 2020 but subsided. The name United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is not a strict reflection of reality but Starmer's intimation of more powers for different parts of the Kingdom is important.

And what of our "regions and cities"? Past attempts at creating English regional middle-level political authorities, have struggled with two problems: hostility to the notion of another layer of politicians and central government's inadequate financing of local government. In November 2004, Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott tried and failed: a postal ballot for a new authority in the

North-East was negative. Metro mayors, though, have some regional responsibilities.

Devolution has traditionally been seen by the Conservative Party as the proverbial ‘don’t go there’ minefield. Apart from David Cameron whose arrogant self-confidence in calling a badly framed, ill-judged referendum in 2014 narrowly missed Scottish secession, Conservatives tend towards limiting devolution and maintaining centralised government in keeping with the party’s name: the Conservative and Unionist Party. Lib Dems on the other hand champion local government. Labour promotes devolution though opinions vary. But by far the strongest argument for greater devolution is that decisions made in Downing Street and Whitehall do not accurately address the needs of “our nations, regions and cities”.

Professor of Public Policy at Cambridge, Michael Kenny’s *Fractured Union: Politics, Sovereignty and the Fight to Save the UK*, Hurst 2024, provides a comprehensive history of devolution in the UK. Professor Kenny makes comparisons with the experiences of Canada with Quebec, Spain with Catalonia and even Czechoslovakia, a lesson in how to lose a chunk of your territory (Slovakia) peacefully.

The book’s title suggests crisis and high drama, but the text is scholarly with the moderate tone and attention to detail of a civil servant – which Kenny isn’t. He is non-judgemental about the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) of Northern Ireland) who contributed to us ending up with the most radical option for BREXIT. The DUP subsequently complained about the terms of Sunak’s Northern Ireland Protocol which dealt with the intractable border issues, a direct consequence of the radical BREXIT to which they had contributed. He does emphasise how Boris Johnson further aroused Scots nationalism over BREXIT, a rejection of Scotland’s significant Remain vote. Unhelpful

differences in approach also emerged over COVID strategy. There is a particularly helpful chapter for politicians on future proofing the Union, how to prepare for the undermining of devolved authorities by events, how to increase cooperation between different layers of authority on key topics such as health, housing, transport, and employment.

Kenny's book went to press before the General Election and the dramatic change of political fortunes in Scotland, the implosion of the SNP and Labour's electoral victory. Luckily for the Labour Party, pressure for a Scottish referendum on independence looks as if it has gone away for at least a decade. But this is not the case for Northern Ireland where Irish nationalist demands are becoming more prominent.

It will not have escaped the Prime Minister's attention that the President of Sinn Féin, Mary Lou McDonald, attended the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool and spoke at a fringe meeting on Monday 23 September. Her message was that the UK government needed to make clear its intention "to trigger a referendum on Irish unity" before 2030. This sally was one consequence of the restoration of a power-sharing government in Stormont with a Sinn Féin majority. Michelle O'Neill, now First Minister of Northern Ireland, has been making the same demand. But in the Republic of Ireland which needs to agree to reunification Sinn Féin received only 12% of the vote.

Sir Keir Starmer has said that an Irish unity referendum is "not even on the horizon". But that horizon is specified in the Good Friday Agreement, an international treaty. It is binding on the Prime Minister of the UK to call a border poll under certain – somewhat subjective – conditions: "if at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a United Ireland". Polling suggests that 40% of

Northern Ireland voters currently want unification with the Republic against 50% opposed. But the government of the Republic isn't keen to take over the UK's c. £10 billion subvention for Northern Ireland. Nor to face raising the salaries there to levels in the Republic where they are on average 10% higher. Nor to incorporate a hostile Protestant minority. Who could blame them?

True to his word, within four days of entering 10, Downing Street, the Prime Minister was meeting with the UK's Metro Mayors and out visiting the leaders of the UK devolved authorities. During the March local elections, he had spoken of seeking "full-fat devolution" and wanting to "push power and resources out of Whitehall". Nestling in the to-do list in a speech where every word will have been pored over "devolution to our nations, regions and cities" should get a little more attention. It suggests a significant transformation of governance in the UK. It may also forestall the growth of popular demand in Northern Ireland for unification with the Irish Republic.

CONSERVATIVE PARTY

‘GLOBAL BRITAIN’: TRAGEDY OR FARCE?

21.10.2021

We live in a sloganocracy. ‘Global Britain’, our foreign policy slogan is emerging as the saddest and most deceptive of them all. A piece of bombast directed at a domestic audience suggesting a big vision and concealing the decline of Britain’s international influence.

We had just a taste of our actual conduct of international relations last week. Britain is receiving a windfall of \$27.4 billion (nearly £20 billion) in Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) from the IMF. This is our share of \$650 billion given for distribution globally to support poorer nations through the COVID pandemic. Other richer countries, honouring the spirit of this emergency fund, will be adding the money to their current planned Aid expenditure. Our Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, staying within his reduced ceiling of 0.5% of national income (GDP) for international Aid, will now be injecting a large part of the IMF windfall income into our Aid budget instead of adding it to the total. Despite claiming that the reduction in Aid from 0.7% of GDP would, in time, be reversed, Sunak’s actions are going in the opposite direction. In order to ease our national debt the erosion of our global commitment to the world’s poor continues and with it Britain’s soft power declines, as well as our reputation as a country which meets its obligations and keeps its promises.

Last week in Portugal Lord David Frost, Chief Negotiator of Task Force Europe, announced another foreign policy *démarche*. In negotiations with the EU aimed at solving problems arising from the post-BREXIT Irish Sea trade border he is now proposing that the Northern Ireland Protocol (integral to the Withdrawal

Agreement, negotiated by him, signed and promoted by Boris Johnson and supported by Parliament in July 2021) be scrapped. By most informed accounts, the EU negotiating team led by Maroš Šefčovič, EU Commissioner for BREXIT, concerned at the impact of current regulations on movement of goods across the border, was offering a helpful package of mitigating measures to the potential benefit of the UK, including Northern Ireland as well as to the Republic of Ireland and the EU. With advance knowledge of this significant, concrete expression of goodwill and concern, Lord Frost has suddenly introduced the issue of dispute arbitration and the question of the UK's relationship with the European Court of Justice (ECJ), the EU's highest court. Global Britain is now presenting itself as a country that either didn't understand what it was signing, or has no qualms about renegeing on an international agreement with 27 other countries, not least its neighbour, Ireland.

There are two things worryingly wrong with this sudden swerve away from problem-solving within the terms of the Protocol towards Britain requiring discussion of immutable Principles such as sovereignty and presenting unilaterally a new Protocol altogether. The first is that, having spent months negotiating it, ten months ago the UK signed a Protocol which we are now repudiating as some kind of alien imposition, 'EU overreach'. Who now is going to trust the UK under its present management, or indeed any future management, to honour its commitments?

Secondly there is anecdotal evidence that Boris Johnson, in his entrenched the-rules-don't-apply-to-me exceptionalism, never intended to comply with the Protocol in the first place. Anyone who has taken part in any serious negotiations between, say, management, staff or trades union, will recognise this last minute introduction of a weighty but marginal bone of contention as the wrecking-ball swinging in the air, not the 'tough negotiating

position' applauded by some of the Press. Again, Britain's standing in the world is sacrificed for a possible few percentage points in the opinion polls. Foreign policy as a Punch and Judy show for a domestic audience.

Boris Johnson was swept to power on a wave of Brexiteer sentiment casting himself as the tough guy who, on behalf of the British people (or about half of them), stood up to a bunch of unreasonable, intransigent foreigners across the Channel and 'got it done'. Perhaps he now calculates this role remains the best formula for arresting a threatening fall in popularity as the British public begin to wonder if a mixture of jokes and jolliness is all that is needed in hard and uncertain times. Unfortunately it is a formula that brings damaging discredit on the UK from beyond the white cliffs of Dover. The Queen is not the only one who is worrying about who will come to Glasgow next month. It is difficult not to think the global reputation of our Prime Minister may be relevant as Heads of State assess their relations with the UK and decide whether to turn up at COP26.

When it comes to foreign policy there is a further serious danger represented by the Johnson rules-don't-apply stance. It is not just that when autocracies such as Russia also break the rules we can end up with polonium in the tea and neurotoxin on the door-handle. We signal in our own foreign policy the values we hold dear and which should form the texture of our own governance and civil society. The undermining of our values abroad doesn't stay abroad.

Democracy is based on an implicit social contract and amidst overlapping crises trust in its implementation is easily eroded. With no firm reliable hand on the tiller trust in government and politics is lost. Just as the international order and avoidance of violent conflict require a scaffolding of rules, conventions and mutual trust, so does our own society.

It is a sign of how unprepared we are for a future dominated by contending power blocs that our government is hell-bent on distancing itself from both the EU's European Court of Justice in Luxembourg and the Council of Europe's European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg - and is correspondingly allergic to judicial review at home. The two European courts' internationally agreed rules have served European democracies well. If democracies are to stand firm in the face of vast concentrations of unaccountable power in China and Russia, the rule of law and an abiding commitment to human rights are two necessary foundations. And to accompany cooperation on security, political coordination of foreign policy and diplomacy with our international partners. Neither the EU nor the UK, for different reasons, currently offer outstanding examples of such policy collaboration.

Meanwhile Global Britain awaits 800 European butchers, marching off the ferries cleavers at the ready, and a great new trade deal with Vanuatu.

OUR FREEDOMS AREN'T SAFE IN TORY HANDS

04.01.2022

Last year we heard far too much from the Tory back-benches. They present themselves as custodians of our freedoms. Masks compulsory on public transport, closing venues, limiting numbers at social gatherings to reduce transmission of Omicron infection, requiring COVID passes for entry to others, are comparable, not to widely accepted speed limits, mandatory seat belts or to banning smoking in public places, but to an assault on human rights. “I personally didn’t come into Parliament to restrict people’s freedom”, Health Minister Sajid Javid felt obliged to say on 19 December as the epidemiologists advised caution. And our Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, our leading political chameleon, tries to brand herself as a ‘freedom warrior’ seeking ‘control over our own lives and destiny’ in her pursuit of leadership of the Conservative Party.

Future historians may look back in bewilderment on the one-sided understanding of human freedom flourishing during the last decade, an understanding which has become a decisive measure of political credibility within a part of the Conservative Party. After the Cold War ended, the persistence of threatening authoritarian regimes - more accurately described as increasingly brutal dictatorships - encouraged a narrow definition of freedom: immunity from the coercive power of the State.

But is that the nature of human freedom done and dusted? Advocacy of ‘freedom from’ has been pushing aside ‘freedom for’ and in consequence essential political questions arising from the other core dimension of human freedom: how to create freedom for the good, for excellence, for authentic self-realisation as social beings, for the Global Common Good. The push comes from the

top led by a feckless Prime Minister who should never have been made leader of the Conservative Party, for whom ethical norms, rules and high standards of behaviour in public office become barriers to ‘getting the job done’ and restraints on raw ambition and power.

The Johnson clique are either blind to the contradictions in the policies they promote or just duplicitous. The principal advantage of democracy is freedom to sack a government for whatever reason through regular free and fair elections and thus to protect the fundamental freedoms which democracy upholds. The Conservative Party, learning from US Republican Party voter suppression techniques, is proposing ‘electoral reforms’ demanding the presentation of photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper will be issued. At the same time, they are rejecting similar checks to regulate social media because, according to *their* estimates, 3.5 million people will fail to provide photo ID and thus be excluded. Some 3.5 million would also be excluded from voting by the photo ID requirement; they are more likely not to have passports and drivers’ licenses and more likely to be Labour voters. The over 60s will be allowed to use their travel passes though not younger voters - who are far less likely to be Conservative voters.

According to the Electoral Reform Society and a recent report from PACAC, the Cross-Party House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee: “PACAC found that the introduction of mandatory photo ID at the polling station risks ‘upsetting the balance of our current electoral system, making it more difficult to vote and removing an element of the trust inherent in the current system’. PACAC also found that “the research and evidence adduced by the government to support this proposal ‘has simply not been good enough.’” Voter identity fraud at polling booths in Britain is, of course, nearly non-existent.

The European Convention on Human Rights which the UK signed in 1950 and to whose drafting the UK made a major contribution has for years been a target of the Conservative Right wing. Human Rights, of course, include freedoms for something as well as freedoms from something. Since the days of BREXIT campaigning, the Johnson clique has clung to the hope, on grounds of national sovereignty, that they can tamper with the European Convention and avoid the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. The ECHR offers citizens of all signatories, including British citizens, the safeguards of justiciable fundamental freedoms and a body of human rights case law. Since its incorporation in our 1998 Human Rights Act, the Convention and the Court have directly informed the judgements of our legal system. The Act was considered at the time a major achievement of the Blair years.

Since the 1998 Act, Parliament imposes on all UK courts, including the Supreme Court, the obligation to interpret relevant law so it is compatible with the ECHR. In cases where a British court rules a piece of British legislation incompatible with the interpretation of the ECHR, the government can benefit from ‘margin of appreciation’, meaning that significant cultural differences between States are recognized and allow a small degree of divergence from the ECHR’s legal obligations. However, the margin of appreciation afforded to participating States is not intended to prevent or inhibit individuals or groups from taking part in the political life of their country, especially through the election of members of their legislature.

It remains a longstanding Conservative Party policy to repeal and replace the 1998 Human Rights Act. Between 1999-2010, 12,000 applications on human rights grounds from the UK were made to the court in Strasbourg – a court which includes a British judge. Of the mere 390 applications deemed admissible, the court

found against the UK government in 215. An unacceptable infringement on Britain's national sovereignty? No, a judicial system, incorporated into UK law by our Parliament which can prevent an autocratic government doing whatever it wants to the detriment of its citizens. Human rights legislation provides protection for human freedom which the Tory Party claims to defend.

Most people are aware of the hullabaloo from the Conservative side of the House aroused by measures to reduce the spread of Omicron, representing a division in the Party inhibiting government action to control the COVID pandemic, but few are equally alert to the planned and proposed erosion of civil liberties and the weakening of restraints on our overbearing Executive. Judicial Review, for instance, is on the agenda for curtailment.

How to describe the present situation ? Not simply a Prime Minister and Cabinet responding to emergencies and, under pressure from overlapping crises, making mistakes. There is more to it than that. We are also seeing a faction within the ruling British Political party, untethered from national norms of governance, performing a confidence trick on the public. They behave like a group of con-men solicitous about the welfare of an old lady - read our aging Parliamentary democracy - intent on getting control of her wealth but at great risk to her well-being and health. Our New Year resolution should be to make sure they fail.

PARTYGATE, PROFITEERING & THE PANDEMIC

28.01.2022

Irrespective of political affiliation commentators see Partygate as a *'breakthrough'* moment. The word has taken on a particular meaning: that moment when political events causes a seismic reaction from the public instead of being absorbed or dismissed as only to be expected of politicians. The Westminster bubble has burst sending a toxic spray over people who don't normally follow politics closely.

A 'political breakthrough' departs from the despairing refrain 'all politicians are the same'. Focussed attention is given to a particular group of politicians and their Party and refuses to go away. And the nation's moral compass – followed by the opinion polls - suddenly starts swinging.

But why Partygate not any other scandal? After all the message from Government is that what went on in the premises of 10 and 11 Downing Street was - implicitly (a new load-bearing adverb) - just a few tired office workers sharing refreshments with a kindly boss. A mistake, of course, given what was required of everyone else in the country, but we all make mistakes, don't we? Well, no. Not mistakes with such resonances and consequences.

Most people's mistakes don't indicate cavalier disrespect, contempt for the feelings, sacrifices and suffering of thousands of their fellow citizens, their grief, confinement and compliance with rules meant to reduce the spread of a potentially lethal virus. Partygate upset and angered the public because it went against the most primal ethical principle, one held even by young children: fairness. The people imposing rules were flagrantly breaking them. One rule for them and another for us.

We live in an age of potent images. Besides being unfair Partygate was lavishly illustrated. We all saw Allegra Stratton laughing. The video from Downing Street's newsroom showed the joy of entitlement, a celebration of in-group cleverness easily seen as us being laughed at by them, the ones who didn't keep the rules. Similarly the picture of a solitary, mourning Queen evoked the shared griefs and losses of a nation persevering through the pandemic whilst a supercilious political elite partied. A single image can sum up a huge story just as an icon expresses a religious culture. The breakthrough was the public becoming painfully aware of a rotten political culture. And the one Chinese proverb we all know is "a fish rots from the head".

Evidence of that political culture has become increasingly abundant over the last few years. But only now do the public seem to be becoming aware of the administrative incompetence it fosters. We have the resignation of Lord Agnew of Oulton, Minister of State for Efficiency and Transformation to thank for highlighting by his resignation the £5.8 billion of tax-payers' money written off owing to fraudulent applications for COVID loans made under the Treasury's Bounce Back Scheme. Add on furlough fraud and error and the sum lost is £10 billion. Agnew explained that the lack of control which let the fraudsters get away with it was "a combination of arrogance, indolence and ignorance". Almost nobody bounced back from their fraudulent applications into jail.

Private Eye called the Profiteering from procurement of protective equipment, PPE, presided over by government the "COVID Klondike". It's a story, less accessible, less easy to illustrate, often complex in detail. With only cartoons as visual aids, *Private Eye*, described government procurement as more like "a ruse that Dad's Army spiv Private Walker might have run'. Existing safeguards to avoid conflict of interests were not properly

followed, what due diligence there was on suppliers was cursory and transparency rules were ignored. When in 2021 the *Good Law Project* took the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care 2018-2021, Matt Hancock, to court for failure to disclose contracts within 30 days as required by law, this practice was declared unlawful. That's not going to dominate conversation in the pub.

Nor did the 2020 PPE procurement through special VIPs' and MPs' channels in the foggy hinterland between suspected corruption, sleaze, and government expediency - like the porous border between tax avoidance and tax evasion - fully seize the public's attention. *Private Eye's* Special Report "Profits of Doom" (Issue 1560 of November 2021) digs out the carefully buried, massive windfall profits and bonuses of companies that won government COVID-related contracts along with the commissions of middle-men. For one investment company's PPE contract a total of £64 million was paid to three men in commissions for brokering the £252 million deals for masks. For the ineffectual *Track and Trace* system Deloitte consultants charged on average £1,000 a day to plan the roll-out.

Transparency was not accidentally ignored, the recipients of many contracts strove to keep their profits hidden from scrutiny. For example, of the 47 PPE suppliers awarded contracts through the government's high priority channels up to December 2021, investigated by *Private Eye*, 18 were referred by Tory MPs and in only 7 was "a meaningful assessment made of the company's returns on its contracts". One trick was to start a small new company which would therefore not show an income statement making it impossible for an outsider to calculate profits. In other cases, the owners, often overseas, included several Russian-doll companies, barely traceable to the people who actually supplied the goods. The prodigious waste of taxpayer money continued into procurement for *Track and Trace* extending into tens of

billions, in the words of *Private Eye* “one of the greatest wastes of public money... in modern British history”.

The public recognised the heroic sacrifices of front-line medical staff in hospitals. Government cleverly encouraged the weekly public applause for NHS staff. We knew the low salaries of essential workers like bus drivers who gave their lives. The profiteers laughed all the way to the bank. They knew how to hide their profits. Their financial advisers brought years of practice in the art of concealment. But there were none of the pictures which aroused public indignation in Partygate, no leaked photographs of corruption and profiteering, no evidence which touched the public nerve, nothing they felt they could verify for themselves.

Incompetence is joining sleaze and Partygate as a major concern amongst voters and destroying the Conservatives claim to be the Party of economic competence. A Government which came to power on the slogan ‘take back control’ couldn’t keep control over the spending of tax-payer’s money and stop fraud and profiteering. And couldn’t stop holding parties.

BORIS JOHNSON: THE TROUBLE WITH APOLOGIES

08.02.2022

“Sorry seems to be the hardest word”. The public could sing along with Elton John during the rolling Partygate scandal right until the Prime Minister’s statement to the House of Commons about Sue Gray’s cut-back Report. Last Monday, Johnson finally, said it: “I want to say sorry and I’m sorry for the things we simply didn’t get right and the way this has been handled. It isn’t enough to say sorry. . . .” and so on.

As Nick Robinson pointed out on the next day’s *Today* programme, after this solemn introduction an apologetic “I” became a collective “we”. Or is the Prime Minister now using the royal “we”? He was probably trying to diffuse responsibility. The public have to wait for the Met’s Day of Judgement and the full Report to find out, or not, who the “we” are. Meanwhile, “. . . *we* must look at ourselves in the mirror and *we* must learn”, Johnson told the Commons. I am not sure exactly what Mr. Johnson wants them to learn, what all those civil servants and young Special Advisers, the No 10 spads, are going to see in the mirror, other than someone with an imminent career change.

What does Johnson expect to find when he himself looks in the mirror? He had baptismal water poured on him as a baby and married in a Catholic Church. Who knows, he might see a Catholic. Or at least he might wonder if Catholicism could give any guidance on escaping his troubles.

When it comes to apologies, the Church has significant things to say and some useful guidance to give. For example, that an apology to be meaningful requires what used to be called “a firm purpose of amendment”, in other words stopping doing damage and remedying the damage done. Or as bishop and theologian St.

Augustine put it (writing in the 5th century in Latin): “The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works. You do the truth and come to the light”. Not easy advice to follow most Christians would agree, there are all too many reasons for not reforming. It would require the Prime Minister to take full personal, individual - as well as institutional or organisational - responsibility for the dire straits his government now finds itself in as well as for specifically Partygate. It would require his grasping the moral values that should inform and inspire politics encapsulated in the Nolan principles. This would require a heroic degree of personal transformation.

Perhaps because it has become increasingly difficult to put the future right, with its pandemics, Climate change, inequality and poverty, we have recently been getting apologies from all sorts of people about all sorts of past wrongs, almost as if they are trying to put the past right. Most of these apologies come across as honest, heartfelt and valuable. A small number of them form part of a negotiation of self-interest.

Johnson’s Commons statement will have gone through several drafts. The opening with its switch from “I” to “we” deserves attentive parsing after all the hard work that went into it. It purports to be an apology bringing closure, time to move on. Though, as reported in the *Daily Mail*, telling MPs outside the Chamber “they (the Met) won’t find fault with what I’ve done” immediately puts its sincerity into question. What made Tory apologies for Partygate particularly striking is that they came in the wake of the public, and a significant number of MPs not all on the other side of the House, asserting traditional moral values, fairness, integrity, truthfulness, and solidarity. That is why Boris Johnson, a promoter and shaper of that political culture from which they have fast disappeared, doesn’t “get it” and so won’t be able to “fix it”.

When interrogated by Nick Robinson, Dominic Raab, Deputy Prime Minister, Justice Secretary, and Lord Chancellor, taking his place in the demeaning procession of Cabinet Ministers defending the Prime Minister, used the word ‘contrition’ to describe Johnson’s apology. Looking at the public record, it is hard to imagine contrition being part of Boris Johnson’s repertoire of feelings or an accurate description of the motivation for his Commons statement.

Contrition still retains much of its Christian meaning: feeling remorse, regret, repentance and penitence. Catholics – and Johnson at least nominally is one – have the prayer of contrition at the end of Confession, an apology to God would be one description, knowing that they are only absolved from their sins if the contrition is sincere. The prayer has three main elements: recognition of the wrong done and the failure to do good, sorrow and regret for both, plus commitment to actions of self-denial done out of repentance for the wrong committed. In Johnson’s case the last would entail the restoration of a healthy political culture for which his resignation would be a first step.

So, apologies to Elton John but sorry is not the hardest word. Genuine contrition is harder - particularly for a personality such as Boris Johnson. The hiatus while the Met’s investigation runs its course is an opportunity for the Prime Minister. He now has a clear choice: he can resign with dignity taking personal responsibility for his own failings as well as what he sees as his successes and this might alter how his political legacy is seen. Or he can brazen it out and suffer the humiliation of being forced from office.

The House of Commons is not a confessional but there is a message for the “we” with which Johnson peppered his Commons statement. Contrition for the damage done to this country, its people and its politics should now also motivate the “we” who are defending the indefensible and who believe lying, gas-lighting and

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

misplaced loyalty are more important than truth, integrity and the Common Good. Rediscovering such a moral stance would be in their own self-interest and, long-term, in the interests of the Prime Minister but, above all, in the interests of the country.

HOW THE NHS FELL APART UNDER THE TORIES

20.07.2022

Is the NHS still lifting “the shadow from millions of homes?” The quote comes from Aneurin Bevan, Minister of Health in the post war Attlee government, speaking during the second reading of the NHS Bill, April 1946, against strong opposition from the Conservative Party – which under Churchill voted against the formation of the NHS on 21 occasions during the Bill’s passage through Parliament. Times change.

“The NHS is safe in our hands”: Margaret Thatcher claimed in 1982, as would any Prime Ministerial candidate today. The evidence suggests otherwise. Unless *safe* describes the experience of elderly people at the onset of the COVID pandemic in care homes, or stroke and heart-attack victims waiting hours for an ambulance. The shadow has returned.

A wait of over a year for a major ‘elective’ operation? “Well, perhaps you would like to go private?” Or you can sign up for one of those offers of private insurance that come through the letter-box - about 13% of UK adult population have private health insurance, c. 8 million people, a significant increase since COVID. Need some routine dental work? “I’m afraid you are no longer on our list... but we can take you on as a private patient”. Is there anything more revealing about the nature of our society and politics than where the Conservative Party has taken the NHS in the last twelve years?

During the two televised Tory leadership debates the main contenders had hardly mentioned the NHS until audience questions drew out the customary, vague assertions that the NHS is a great national institution and a top priority. No mention at all in the second debate. Given the age distribution of Tory Party

members, and their habit of voting, this omission was a little puzzling. It shouldn't have been. That phrase "the NHS is safe in our hands" died on contenders' lips because it was obvious to the studio and TV audience that the NHS had been anything but safe in their hands. It had been in their hands for over a decade; it was falling apart.

Amongst David Cameron's more disastrous misjudgements on forming a coalition government with the Lib.Dems. in 2010 was to make his Shadow Secretary of State for Health, Andrew Lansley, Minister of Health then pay minimal attention as Lansley made his mark by strengthening the magic genie of competition in the health system through his 2011 and 2012 Health and Social Care Bills.

Lansley also, and not unreasonably, wanted GPs to take control of NHS budgets for 'hospital services' and community health programmes. This could have been done relatively easily by enhancing the role of doctors within the existing Primary Health Care Trusts (PCTs), giving them control over finances and commissioning decisions. Instead Lansley dismantled the PCTs, creating huge numbers of expensive redundancies – many redundant staff were later re-employed under different job descriptions - and building new structures with confusing lines of authority, including consortia of GPs, at a cost of c. £5 billion to the taxpayer.

Implementing the Lansley plan was a massive distraction for NHS staff at a moment when they should have been focussed on modernising services; a huge opportunity cost, that accelerated the decline of our health service. By April 2012, only two years into the Cameron government, 96% of the 497 delegates at a Royal College of Nursing conference were voting no confidence in the Health Minister. There had already been a 3,000 drop in the number of nurses. In June, the doctors in the British Medical

Association called for Lansley's resignation. In September Cameron realised what a mess Lansley was making and moved him to become Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons.

Jeremy Hunt took over and between 2012 and 2018 failed to tackle staff shortages or to resolve the urgent problems in social care. The Nurses Bursary Scheme was scrapped to save the government £800 million, resulting, it is estimated, in a 40% drop in applications and a long term shortage of nurses. Despite health and social care being perennially linked on paper, they remained 'siloes' in reality. Local Health and Social Care Committees met but their budgets remained separate with Local Authorities in charge of the vital social care services which were, and are, mostly in private hands. (It took until this July for 42 huge Integrated Care Systems to be put on a full statutory footing after the 2022 Health and Care Act was passed in April). Beds are still being occupied by patients fit to go home awaiting provision of social care. Ambulances stack for hours outside hospitals. Hunt left Britain unprepared for the pandemic in more ways than one.

But has the Opposition better ideas? It seems obvious that 'bed-blocking', with all its knock-on effects, can only be resolved when care workers are paid a decent living wage. In an under-reported speech in a January 2022 speech, Sir Keir Starmer presented what he called the Labour Health Contract, breaking the mould in two senses. First he pledged a New Deal for social care workers and a five point plan for the sector. Second, in an attempt to counter the perennial distorting emphasis on hospitals, (the 40 imaginary, often promised new ones is a perfect example), Starmer spoke extensively about prevention, stopping people getting sick in the first place and moving beyond a 'National Sick Service' towards a National Health Service with an emphasis on health and well-being.

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No-one pretends prevention is easy. Behavioural change never is. But it can be achieved. From the Hollywood movies of the 1950s and 60s with everyone puffing away merrily we are down to 14% of adults smoking in the UK today. Government can make significant interventions in improving air quality, more effectively controlling the great corporate pedlars of cholesterol, alcohol and sugar – as Mr. Kellogg has noted - and providing the public with an accurate diagnosis of the real basic problems. For example, it is not that we have an aging population but an aging population bringing to old age a cluster of often preventable disease and disorders. Nor is it families eating cheap, processed, rubbish food; it is widespread poverty and inequality.

One thing is sure: we need a new set of hands to restore the safety of our health service and to lift the shadow over millions of homes that again hangs over us.

SUMMER OF THE ZOMBIES: THE 1922 COMMITTEE'S BIG MISTAKE

19.08.2022

Economic slump, strikes, corruption and sale of honours, trouble in Northern Ireland, Government in a mess, big political changes in the offing. Britain in election year 1922. In April 1923 newly elected Tory MPs, members of a dining group, formed an association – the Conservative Private Members Committee - soon known as the 1922 Committee. It was open to all Tory backbenchers, its purpose to convey rank and file views to the (short-lived) Prime Minister, Bonar Law.

The 1922 Committee organise the ‘men in grey suits’ who visit Tory Prime Ministers signalling that their end is nigh. It is in charge of the Conservative Party’s process for selecting the Party leader and therefore, when in power, Prime Minister. The amiable Salford-born Sir Graham Brady, its chairman, appears from the shadows, reminiscent of a kindly old-fashioned Grammar school headmaster announcing the exam results. Possibly the comparison is deceptive. Here is a man holding a treasure trove of Tory secrets, with authority over a body with unspecified powers.

According to a House of Commons Library briefing paper, there are two stages in the process of selecting a Conservative Party leader. First the 1922 Committee specifies the number of nominations required of candidates, sets the overall timetable, and the Parliamentary Labour Party votes to determine the two finalists. Then a period in which candidates battle it out for votes and lastly a ballot of Conservative Party members who choose between the two.

Boris Johnson resigned on 7 July. Nominations for his successor closed at 18:00 on Tuesday 12 July with candidates needing support from 20 fellow MPs. Eight made the first ballot.

The Parliamentary Party finally placed Liz Truss, the Foreign Secretary and Rishi Sunak, formerly Chancellor of the Exchequer on the shortlist. The choice now rests with Party members and will be announced on 5 September in time for the new Prime Minister to prepare for Party Conference.

Given the overlapping crises and catastrophic shambles Johnson was bequeathing to his successor, why didn't the Committee appoint a competent caretaker and institute a selection procedure that got a new Prime Minister in place as fast as possible? We were, and are, facing a cost of living national emergency. These are experienced politicians who should have had the country's interest at heart.

The potential effect this winter of soaring energy costs on the poor is such that the Minister of State for Work and Pensions (DWP), Thérèse Coffey, is preventing publication of research on the impact of the benefit cap (£13,400 outside London) and other DWP measures which affect the poorest including 1.3 million children in families already unable to afford basic necessities. Protests from the Labour MP Sir Stephen Timms who chairs the Parliamentary Select Committee on Work and Pensions are ignored. As Gordon Brown pointed out in *The Guardian* on August 11th, universal credit and benefits have to be reprogrammed on the DWP's computers in the next few days (an 80% increase in energy bills is expected to be announced on 26 August) if help is to reach all who need it when energy prices shoot up again in October.

Thanks to decisions taken by the 1922 Committee, or lack of them, we have what the *New York Times* calls a 'power vacuum' and the Labour Party a 'Zombie Government'. Cameron, who in his arrogance could not believe he would lose the BREXIT vote, resigned on 24 June 2016 and stepped down on 13 July. Theresa May at a BREXIT impasse, sabotaged by the Ulster Unionists and

undermined by disappointing election results as well as Boris Johnson himself, resigned on 7 June 2019 and stepped down on 24 July after a scheduled visit from Donald Trump. Both Cameron and May continued briefly and responsibly in office until a new Prime Minister was appointed.

Boris Johnson agreed to resign after a two day avalanche of resignations by his ministers set off by his repeated lying to Parliament. Now on his second holiday, thanks to the 1922 Committee's timetable he is taking almost two leisurely months to step down. It took him a month after resigning to focus on the energy crisis and talk to leaders of the sector. Several prominent MPs and former Conservative Ministers called for him to go immediately. And they were quite right.

My suspicion is that the only way the men in grey suits got him to resign at all was by agreeing to his swanning around for a further eight weeks and not suffering the ignominy of being thrown out overnight. It is not hard to imagine the kind of damage he could cause if they had insisted on an immediate departure. Johnson clearly still had a parliamentary following and significant residual support in the Party and the country that could be activated (and is now rearing its head). But a tough stance was the lesser of two evils. Sir Graham Brady, whether considering consequences for Party or country, made a big mistake.

Quite apart from the damage to the nation of eight weeks' time-out from urgent decisions while crises became worse, the long march through the hustings by Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak was, and is, politically an own goal. Candidates believe they have to say what they think their members want to hear regardless of what even Conservative voters may think. Polls suggest the Tory membership is worried about the little dinghies crossing the Channel so each contestant wants a flight full of migrants to get off the ground soonest to Rwanda. Thank heavens the shires don't

want to bring back hanging. Truss will say anything. From her past record she can blithely reverse a policy or position even if very little time has passed since she announced it. Sunak, beginning to regret his theme song of fiscal responsibility, seems frantic as key Tory backers decide their best chance of a front-bench job lies with Truss. The Labour Party and Sir Keir Starmer finally got lucky after twelve years in the wilderness as a degrading and revealing piece of political theatre tours Britain courtesy of the 1922 Committee.

Poor Sir Graham. It could have been different. Headteachers need to be tough and decisive as well as discreet and kindly. He might have noticed that Johnson's misdemeanours were a little more serious than smoking behind the bicycle sheds and decided that the gravity of the situation, the damage Johnson had done to this country called for prompt as well as drastic action: immediate and permanent exclusion.

WHY WE NEED A GENERAL ELECTION

28.04.2023

The national emergency alert on 23 April was well timed. Many poor families with sick members have “a life-threatening emergency nearby”. We have reached a point where our public services are on the verge of collapse. We have become accustomed to the employed needing foodbanks. More widely, more insidiously, our political culture has become debased.

In the last five years, the Conservative Party has made two frightful choices of leader: Johnson and Truss. One after the other, they took forward the impoverishment of several million people placing the UK below other European countries by most economic indicators. Stark inequalities prevail, from health to housing to educational achievement.

We now have a Prime Minister who lacks a personal electoral mandate. Polls suggest that most people in the UK have no confidence in their Government. Or more worryingly, their lack of confidence extends to politics itself and to all politicians as agents of social harmony, justice and wellbeing. If Sunak has any concern for democracy and Britain’s future, he must call a general election no later than this Autumn. Here is a short list of the reasons why.

We are getting sicker and poorer. Our National Health Service is in intended decline. Speaking on a recent Andrew Marr show Sir Michael Marmot declared forthrightly: “If you had the hypothesis that the government was seeking to destroy the National Health Service....all the data that we’re seeing are consistent with that hypothesis” (a hypothesis he also described as “a sort of malicious undermining” of the NHS). Marmot is a distinguished Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London. He has been an adviser to the Director-General of the World Health Organisation and this year

was made Companion of Honour by King Charles. What might be the motivation for undermining Britain's flagship institution?

Well space is being created for a developing market in healthcare. As the publicly funded service deteriorates, as waiting lists lengthen, as staff vacancies grow, those with money can, and do, 'go private'. Current evidence suggests that we are heading for a second-rate NHS for the majority and private practice for those with the money to buy it. Private good, public poor, as the ideology goes. Look at dental treatment and social care to see where this takes us. As Sir John Major said in June 2016: "the NHS is as safe with them as a pet hamster is with a hungry python".

Conservative governments have failed to take adequate action to curb rising levels of obesity, ignoring both the link between poverty and ill health and the crushing demand diabetes alone will make on the NHS. Implementation of legislation that would ban the advertising of food with high sugar, salt and fat content before the 9pm watershed, and two for the price of one offers, has repeatedly been delayed. The food processing industry and supermarkets are free to encourage increased consumption and thus profit. Such delays placate the Conservative Party's libertarian faction favouring the private sector whilst rejecting government responsibility for the public good.

The government is refusing to address the crisis in our schools. Primary school class sizes are the largest in forty years. Schools are in budgetary crisis and in several fields of study unable to recruit teachers, not least in mathematics. It is typical of the Conservative practice of governing by unfulfilled announcement that in the continuing lack of maths teachers and of the salaries which might attract maths graduates into teaching, Rishi Sunak should now be sharing his daydream of maths for everyone up to the age of 18. But for parents if you have the money, there are

always the public schools, or private schools or tutoring, to make up for any inadequacies in the underfunded State sector.

Democracy itself is being weakened. Major institutions that balance and inform legislative power, the judiciary and the law, the civil service, and the Churches, with the support of the right-wing Press are either ignored or directly attacked. The first steps towards US-style voter suppression are being taken. On the spurious grounds of voter identity fraud, for which there is no evidence, at the local elections this May voters will be required to produce a visual identity document. A travel pass will permit an old person to vote but not a young one. The old are more likely to vote Tory than the young.

Respect for human rights, a pillar of democracy, is diminishing. The civil right of citizens to vote is an expression of inalienable human rights defined in the European Convention of Human Rights - which the parliamentary Conservative Party wants the ability to contravene. There is also an assault on human rights and human dignity in the treatment of asylum seekers and economic migrants. Having made a shambles of our immigration procedures - we do not provide adequate channels for asylum seekers to enter the country legally - contrary to refugee conventions we criminalise those who arrive by non-regulated means of entry. The backlog in assessing asylum applications is as much the result of intention as incompetence. This hostile environment intended as a vote-winning policy in marginal seats is another step towards populist authoritarianism.

Government has a cavalier attitude towards food security. British farmers currently provide about half our food needs. Here is Liz Webster, chair of Save British Farming: "The Conservatives with their BREXIT messed up our trade. This also impacted our labour supply because it ended freedom of movement. It also removed the cap and food subsidies". Informed comment from a

sector that on the whole foolishly supported BREXIT. The Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Thérèse Coffey, was booed at this February's NFU (National Farmers Union) conference. Minette Batters, NFU President, attributed food supply-chain problems to BREXIT. It was refreshing to hear the truth. British farming has been blighted.

Finally, we come to the genuinely existential crisis which threatens everyone and to which farming contributes: climate change. The Government has given itself permission to defy COP agreements including the spirit of COP26 held under British chairmanship. It has repeatedly caved in to lobbying by the fossil fuel companies including granting new licenses for oil and gas exploration in the North Sea. As a result internationally agreed targets for reducing carbon emissions in the UK, Net-Zero by 2050, will be impossible to achieve.

The Government is generating flurries of announcements to hide that it is treading water. After 13 years, Tory rule has run its course. It is tired. It lacks talent. The Prime Minister's judgement of who should be appointed to his Cabinet looks increasingly questionable. Scandal follows scandal. Senior Government Ministers follow each other onto the back benches. The vocabulary of politics, increasingly influenced by social media, swings from schoolboy jibes to dog-whistles to misinformation that fact-checkers can reveal as such in minutes.

As a university lecturer in Nigeria, I learned a lot about corruption and heard many pithy expressions. Commenting on their own politicians Nigerians often said: "they no savvy shame". Words that perfectly fit 13 years of Tory rule. The May local elections will give some indication of whether the public agrees. But most likely, despite predictable losses it will remain Party first, country second. We may well have to wait until the last moment,

in the autumn or winter of next year, before the Tories finally savvy shame.

OPEN LETTER TO MR. SUNAK

04.08.2023

Dear Mr. Sunak, Now you are taking a well-earned holiday in California I hope you will use the time and space to think about your legacy. Legacy thoughts normally come at the end of a Prime Minister's period in office but, to be realistic, the polls consistently point to your exit next year. The unfolding debacle since the BREXIT vote is unprecedented – much exacerbated by the pandemic and Putin's war - and most voters have suffered.

Less than a year after being elected as an MP you wrote in February 2016 to your Richmond, Yorkshire, constituents: "It has been by the far [sic] the toughest decision I have had to make since becoming an MP, but on June 23 I will vote to leave the European Union". In the game of political snakes and ladders over the last seven plus years, it proved a good career decision. From Parliamentary Private Secretary in 2017 to junior minister in 2018, you began a rapid climb up the political ladder that led to 10 Downing Street. You were one step away in 2020 as Boris Johnson's Chancellor. And in 2022 you got there. But your BREXIT gamble no longer seems quite so rewarding.

The voices that preceded and promoted BREXIT, abandoning any attempt at truthful communication with the public about what really faced us on leaving, set the trend for politics. Now, with the greatest crisis ever facing the world, uncontrolled climate change, threatening human civilization, neither Conservative nor Labour leader dares describe the gravity of the situation, its consequences, and tell us what must urgently be done.

The nub of the problem is the way our interconnected challenges are presented. The diverse channels of information, notably the right-wing Press and social media, and our complex demographic divisions, the unsaid 'well, we'll not be alive to see

it' versus 'why are you sacrificing our future for electoral gain?' lie behind today's gas-lighting and irrationality. What better example than the 28 July Daily Mail editorial framing political conflict as "the concerns of ordinary people" versus "the virtue signalling obsessions and orthodoxies of the woke elite". According to Britain's most read newspaper this inglorious binary is the way we should interpret the dilemmas we face.

Are the forty or so backbench Tory extremist MPs, notably the anti-Net Zero group led by Craig Williams MP who breathe down your neck, 'ordinary'? OK, perhaps more 'ordinary' than you, a multi-millionaire - that of course is a vulnerability for you. Is worrying aloud by grandparents about the world they and governments are bequeathing to their children and grandchildren a 'virtue signaling obsession'? Or is it a rational and moral human response to an avoidable global catastrophe, an awareness that Government must wake up and act urgently?

'Woke' was originally African-American slang to describe waking up to the need to do something about racial prejudice and discrimination. It now extends to virtually any view that discomforts the comfortable. Combating climate change is very discomfoting. The changes required to mitigate its consequences are even more discomfoting. So, hey, how about politicising the whole thing and perhaps saving some Conservative seats.

A Labour Mayor is doing something effective about improving air quality? Time to speak out on behalf of polluting vehicle-owners. Or should that be 'ordinary' polluters? It worked in Uxbridge. The Labour Party is committed to a serious level of investment in solar, wind and wave renewable energy. So let's sign off on a hundred or so licenses for coal and gas drilling in and around Britain, but not let on that we currently export 80% of our production. Tell the public it's about avoiding costly imports in the future, though keep quiet that wherever the source – and that

includes the remaining North Sea oil and gas – the energy companies will be selling on international markets at an internationally determined price. And boosting their prodigious profits. Clear blue water between the Parties.

As the Tories in Uxbridge kept saying the least well off will suffer the most from measures to protect the environment, not adding that only if such measures are accompanied by effective poverty alleviation will necessary changes in the way we live become acceptable to the ‘ordinary’ voter. The truth is that transition to net zero could be made far less painful if an unprecedented priority were given to renewables; we see this beginning to happen in the USA where significant state spending and focused scientific endeavour to stop global warming are supported by government. Your modest beginnings funding carbon capture have been applauded but they do not fit into a vision of necessary and beneficial economic change, rather a fantasy vision in which the need for radical change is eliminated.

When BBC News leads on Nigel Farage’s Coutts bank account with apocalyptic warnings from leading climate scientists and the UN secretary-general coming second, something has gone very wrong with our national priorities. We had intimations with Michael Gove’s dismissing experts who foretold tears before bedtime if voters chose BREXIT: “I think the people in this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms saying they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong”. Then came the Covid anti-vaxxers peddling conspiracy theories about the medical profession. Now we have climate scientists dropped into the ‘woke elite’ bag.

Is it too difficult for you, Mr Sunak, to tell the public we face a global and therefore a national emergency, and then talk to the other Party leaders with the aim of agreeing a joint position on the way forward? Your legacy, as a Prime Minister without a personal

electoral mandate, could be that of a man who read the signs of the times, rose to the occasion, and by acting decisively on climate change defeated the current national helplessness. Get rid of those advisors who, given their head, would turn you into Trump-lite. Or history will see you as the man who frittered away the vital, fast-vanishing time left to rescue the planet, leaving you a trivial footnote to thirteen deplorable years of Tory rule.

GOVERNMENT BY DUPLICITY

18.03.2024

It is difficult to find the right word to describe the current practice of our national government. Grand announcements of virtuous intentions fall far short of expectations or are just not carried out. Much saying and promising one thing and doing another. Google's definition of duplicity: "the belying of one's true intentions by deceptive words or actions" fits best. Here are just two examples of our duplicitous government at work.

When David Cameron was Prime Minister, he made a commitment in 2013, a time of austerity, to annual spending of 0.7% of GDI (Gross Domestic Income) on International Development. Aid which enhanced Britain's position in the world and brought vital help to the poorest. In November 2020 Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak reneged on that promise reducing spending "temporarily" to 0.5% of GDI. Now, within the amalgamated Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office presided over by the same David Cameron, now a peer, more than a third of that reduced international aid budget is spent inside the UK. In 2022-2023, Britain spent £3.6 billion on asylum seekers, 29% of the international aid budget, mainly the cost of hotel accommodation – currently running at £8 million a day. And, of course, there is the estimated £600 million earmarked for the crowd-pleasing plan to send some 300 people who arrived here in small boats to Rwanda.

"We have seen a shocking increase in disruption and criminality...the world's most successful multi-ethnic multi-faith democracy is being deliberately undermined". Anyone listening to Rishi Sunak's 1st March podium address to the nation might have imagined the Prime Minister was reacting to something comparable to the devastating terrorist attacks of 2017. But no.

Sunak was alarmed by the largely peaceful demonstrations in support of a ceasefire in Gaza and the rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents since October 7th. Of course they should be taken seriously. Terrorist threats have risen. But Britain remains at the ‘substantial’ (likely) rather than severe (very likely) threat level determined by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) and MI5.

On 14 March Communities Secretary, Michael Gove, appeared in Parliament in the improbable role of an Old Testament prophet preaching healing of divisions in society and warning against ‘Islamism’ as a ‘totalitarian ideology’. He offered a new definition of extremism: “the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance” which aimed to “negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others” or “undermine, overturn or replace the UK’s system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights” and to “intentionally create a permissive environment” for others to achieve the above aims.

Gove went on to suggest a short-list of organisations of concern which would henceforth be shunned by the Home Office and receive no public funding. Organisations can change over time. Gove’s list will require regular reassessment. None on his present list had ever received public funds from Government and all had been shunned by the Home Office for many years. A brazen performance. Business as usual dressed up as change, inaction sounding like a dramatic demarche. Except that we have a new definition of extremism which Church leaders and others worry could disproportionately affect Muslims and curtail freedom of speech.

Whilst ‘Islamism’ was named as a threatening ideology Gove made do with Neo-Nazi for his example of right-wing extremism. So let us pass over the inconvenient thought that some of the less

poisonous though more influential right-wing extremism has emerged from within the Tory Party.

Just as ISIS was reaching the height of its power in 2014-2015, and we were learning about the horrors of Jihadi John and his team of executioners, I was working on the dynamics of religious extremism. Shamima Begum, aged only 15, running away with her two school friends to join the self-declared Caliphate, embodied a far greater and more mystifying threat to society than today's largely political divisions. What on earth did these children think they were doing? What were the psychological and ideological causes? And how do you change a permissive environment which allows perverse ideas to inspire irrevocable action? In the case of the girls leading to marriage to jihadists and some degree of complicity in their brutality?

Safeguarding vulnerable people, challenging the ideas behind, and countering, terrorism, reversing radicalisation are the aims of the national Prevent programme initiated some twenty years ago. The behaviour to be combatted was then defined as “vocal or active opposition to British fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs”. The seven dead of the 2017 London Bridge attack and the 26 who died at the hands of a suicide bomber in the Manchester Arena the same year, showed how such a mindset could – not inevitably would- trigger actual murderous jihadist violence and underlined the importance of Prevent.

Prevent issues, and updates, extensive guidelines intended to help public bodies, Local Authorities, teachers and parents understand their statutory duty to be alert to and report people showing indications of extremism, and when to make a referral for further investigation which might be followed up by mentoring. Prevent has been overwhelmed by the number of referrals, only a

fraction of which go forward. By 2021 more than half of referrals involved extremist right-wing behaviour and attitudes. Views about Prevent are highly politicised; it is caught between fire from both the right and from Muslim communities.

In January 2021 the Government commissioned a review of Prevent headed by the former head of the Charity Commission, William Shawcross. The review was boycotted by many Muslim organisations and rejected by Amnesty International on grounds of Shawcross's alleged bias and remarks he had made which were considered anti-Muslim. Some of the report's 34 recommendations such as expanding the Prevent duty to immigration and job centres, and questioning the consistency between the treatment of Islamic and right-wing extremist referrals, proved contentious.

Islamic values do need to be disentangled from what is called Islamist ideology. But in general, the label Islamism is far too catch-all and left undefined or refers simply to seeking an 'Islamic state with shari'a law'. So, it can include everything from ISIS executioners to the peaceful and pious Muslim Brotherhood supporters, protesting after General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's July 2013 coup toppled an elected Egyptian government, gunned down amongst the 900 massacred by police. Is the wish to have a government imbued with Islamic values, even if it is the result of a non-violent, incremental, democratic process, to be labelled Islamism? Currently, in a predominantly secular society, probably the answer is yes.

All the recent talk about Islamism, though, was intended to cast Sunak and Gove as statesmen, responsible custodians of law and order, protectors against an extremist threat, unifying the nation, rousing the Red Wall constituencies. But it came across as a carefully contrived contribution to the culture wars. Meanwhile behind the scenes – at least until Mayor Sadiq Khan pointed it out

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

– the Home Office was cutting the annual funding for Prevent in London by two-thirds from £6.1 million in December 2019 to £2 million after April 2025.

Words do not trump reality. And what you hear is not what you get. Call it duplicity, call it deceit. It is no way to govern.

LABOUR PARTY

NO EASY ROAD FOR STARMER

17.12.2021

A bad month for Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party is in the nature of things a good month for Sir Keir Starmer and the Labour Party. And after the massive 34% swing in the North Shropshire byelection a good month for the Liberal Democrats. That said there is no easy path to government opening up for the Leader of the Opposition. He still faces the seemingly impossible task of winning back 125 seats to achieve an overall majority at the next election.

Despite his devastating public questioning of the Prime Minister last Wednesday, the Labour leader got complaints that he had not called for the Prime Minister's resignation. No killer instinct and all that. In fact Starmer used Prime Minister's Questions to good effect saying it was up to the Conservative Party to deal with their failed leader, aiming to pin the blame on the Party he will still have to defeat whenever Johnson goes.

In the context of a new and frightening pandemic wave, a prudent reticence shown by the Leader of the Opposition serves the Common Good. Neither does the Labour Party want a new and possibly competent leader of the Conservative Party to have time to win back the voters' trust before the next election. In any case Conservative MPs themselves will only write the requisite number of letters to the 1922 Committee when they finally conclude Johnson has become a clear-cut electoral liability. For the time being it is Johnson whom Starmer must defeat.

There is a tendency to underestimate Sir Keir Starmer. His legal background has been derided by the Prime Minister. But the diverse skills of a successful, radical QC and a Director of Public

Prosecutions heading the 6,000 strong Crown Prosecution Service in England and Wales, skills so cavalierly dismissed by Jonson, are transferable to politics: strategic thinking, good judgement, shrewd tactics, self-discipline, getting timing right, projecting integrity and competence, conviction that crime is a Labour Party issue. A certain caution is no bad thing - at the right time.

Under the present First Past The Post system (FPTP) a candidate whom the majority of voters in a constituency reject can still win. Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1983 winning 13 million votes which elected 397 Conservative seats. Labour plus Liberal/SDP alliance won a total of 16 million votes and ended up with 232 seats. FPTP exaggerates the lead of the largest party, a kind of 'winner's bonus', and can hobble third Parties. Or as Professor Curtice puts it: "The problem with first past the post is there is no post". Any negotiations between the Lib Dems and Labour to address this bias would be affected by the memory of Tony Blair's pulling back from discussions with Paddy Ashdown on electoral reform once in power. Some form of electoral pact with minority Parties is sometimes discussed but is not the straightforward, common-sense, solution it seems.

Peter Kellner, former president of YouGov, for example, estimates that 'intelligent tactical voting' could increase Liberal Democrat seats to c. 50 but could not jointly produce an overall majority for the combined Parties in opposition because of the regional geographical concentrations of their supporters piling up votes in their strongholds. The problem with our present electoral system, according to John Curtice, Professor of Politics at Strathclyde University and go-to expert on elections is that out of the 650 seats in the House of Commons there are only 88 marginal seats – a marginal being defined as neither of the two biggest British Parties having a lead of more than 10% over the other. That means an awful lot of votes unlikely to make any difference.

In 1955 there were 166 marginals. Deciding who should be given a clear run in marginal constituencies is the obvious occasion for bitter and protracted local as well as national disputes. And, given the failure of Cameron's 2011 referendum on voting reform, the Liberal Democrats might be insisting on an actual manifesto pledge to introduce some form of proportional representation.

Though it is often defended on the grounds it produces majority government, under FPTP there is no systematic relationship between votes cast for a Party and the number of seats they obtain. Providing a second choice, the Alternative Voting system (AV) is designed to solve this problem. But as the 2010 election demonstrated, as well as Theresa May's second term between 2017-2019, when the DUP and SNP gained considerable leverage after her disastrous 2017 election, neither can FPTP be guaranteed to create a functioning majority in Parliament.

Electoral reform has had little appeal to voters though they seem unfazed by the abandonment of FPTP in elections for the Assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as Metro-Mayors. In 2011 David Cameron's Coalition Government paid the price the Liberal Democrats had extracted in exchange for their entry into coalition: a national referendum on the adoption of AV. The Conservative Party were opposed and a majority of the Labour Party too. The result was 68% against and 32% in favour on a 42% voter turn-out. So our current system remains with 98/100 rural constituencies returning a Tory Member of Parliament whilst 41% of those voting in these constituencies support another Party. Not a very promising outcome for advocates of electoral reform decided by referendum.

Given the magnitude of our overlapping crises and the need for national unity and solidarity, there are arguments for at least exploring the possibility of electoral reform or of coalition government. Yes, the mishandled Liberal Democrat dalliance with

Cameron's Conservatives was a disaster for the former. On the other hand, during the Second World War, holding positions in a coalition government did the Labour Party ably represented in the War Cabinet by Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, Stafford Cripps, no harm at all. Indeed Labour's presence in government, coupled with their adoption of the Beveridge Report and the aspirations of the British public for a new start, produced an unexpected Labour landslide and an overall majority of 146 seats on 5 July 1945.

In 1945 the Labour Party was led by a clever, competent but modest man of the political Left with personal integrity, trained as a barrister, whose colleagues grumbled about him. Clement Attlee won 393 seats against an eccentric, charismatic, and ruthless opponent whose exaggerated English persona, despite an American mother, had gained him widespread popularity in the national crisis of war. Post-war, the mood changed dramatically. Winston Churchill won only 213 seats.

We should not, of course, draw the wrong lessons from history. The past is another country. We are in a life and death struggle with a virus and with carbon emissions not with the Third Reich. Though Mr. Johnson might enjoy some elements of the comparison. Starmer has a tough road ahead but we shouldn't discount the possibility of surprises in politics. Sometimes an absence of charisma can come as a blessed relief.

AFTER TIVERTON: KEIR STARMER & ‘THE VISION THING’

25.06.2022

Like a refugee dinghy in the Channel with a broken engine and the wind getting up, we are in a perilous political situation. The destabilising Conservative by-election loss of Tiverton to the Liberal Democrats signals a move towards tactical voting and is an indicator of Tory supporters’ disenchantment with Boris Johnson and his government. Trust in the Conservative Party is evaporating to a point where it is not unreasonable for voters to discount the flurries of government announcements. So often what is announced does not happen or, when it does, provides no solution to our current multiple crises, or chips away at national values and institutions.

After twelve years of Conservative government, how many people know elderly relatives stuck in hospital while a social care package is put together? How many are waiting in pain for routine surgery, or can’t find a dentist to take them as an NHS patient, or live with the stress of waiting for a criminal case to come to trial, or have to face the indignity of foodbanks, or have lost hope of owning their own house?

All of these are features of pre-pandemic Britain and some were made worse by the pandemic. “I warn you not to be ordinary, I warn you not to be young, I warn you not to fall ill, and I warn you not to grow old”. Neil Kinnock’s words, warning against voting for Margaret Thatcher in the June 1983 election, echo down the years. He might have added “and don’t be leader of the Opposition”.

Effective opposition, setting the agenda, getting policy across to a public that has lost hope in positive political change, is an obstacle race. Opposition Parties struggle to get a fair hearing for

their policies and know the cost of lacking caution in their presentations. Social Democracy, even genuine One Nation Toryism, gets scant coverage, drowned out by Johnson's empty promises and posturing. On cue comes the *vox pop* response "we don't know what he stands for" commenting not on Boris Johnson but on Keir Starmer. And the Wakefield result on a turnout of only 39%, although a Labour win, tends to bear this out. Labour proposals for practical measures to deal with Britain's growing inequality and acute economic problems qualify for cries of fiscal irresponsibility and profligacy. These get repeated in the Mail and Sun, often the Daily Telegraph, ventriloquized by a government that has wasted billions during the pandemic and during a labour shortage is prepared to spend more than £120 million on sending asylum seekers and migrants to Rwanda. Alternatively, when strong popular support emerges for a Labour idea (Blair's 'windfall levy' from 1997), the Chancellor adopts it and a windfall tax becomes "a temporary, targeted, energy profits levy".

In Britain we have a distinctive government-media complex characterised by leaking, briefing, instant rebuttals, spinning, gas-lighting and lobbying. But the major problem is a 24-hour news cycle that reduces and fragments political discussion to the latest – transient - single issue whether real, confected or trivial. If the downright lies and routine manipulation of statistics – thank heavens for Radio 4's *More or Less* – are effectively countered, the fall-back is interestingly, and often, a technique used by perpetrators of domestic abuse. DARVO is an acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender based on research by Jennifer Freyd a psychologist at the University of Oregon. The dramatic finger pointing and shouting by Boris Johnson at the dispatch box during Parliamentary Question Time demonstrates how DARVO works. It distorts reality and forces the intended

audience, us in this instance, to question our judgement and intuition.

When a form of gas-lighting becomes a dominant mode of political discourse, a number of things follow. Firstly a sense of helplessness. Nothing can be done. Once you have been labelled as the problem, the ‘leftie’ lawyer’, the ‘remoaner’, the ‘scrounger’, the metropolitan elite and ‘woke brigade’, you are on the back foot trying to defend yourself rather than discussing the issue. Secondly the big picture, in which the particular problem needs to be situated, disappears. Under these conditions lessons cannot be learned and incoherent policy initiatives flourish.

Climate change has immense implications for economic social and foreign policy. But, whilst contemporary problems are complex and overlap, climate change is not one in a list of problems. It is self-evidently a pending catastrophe, ‘the big picture’ itself, a picture in which large parts of planet become uninhabitable. Unlike Rishi Sunak, Rachel Reeves, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, has presented - in September 2021 - the outline of a coherent plan for Britain’s essential transition to a Green Economy. When the media noticed, the headlines focussed on cost, £28 billion. Government response to Putin’s war, pandemics and the economic damage of BREXIT should all be fitted into, and made compatible with, the urgent demands of countering climate change. But the immediate invariably trumps the longer term and the electoral cycle doesn’t help. Any political Party wishing to rebuild public trust has to find some way of taking voters into their confidence and telling the truth about the magnitude of change needed if we are to transition to a Green Economy and a Green Society. If mishandled, a step dangerously close to electoral suicide, well done, an defining act of respect for the public that should be reciprocated.

We need the best scientific brains internationally working together to crack energy storage, carbon capture, how to make transport and agriculture climate friendly. We need at the very least the level of co-operation of the existing scientific network in *Horizon Europe* from which we may have excluded ourselves by BREXIT. And we need to collaborate at the political level with other States. Disregard for international law, treaties and conventions is an effective way to make our exclusion widespread and permanent.

Andrew Rawnsley wrote last Sunday in the *Observer* that for Sir Keir Starmer to make a cut through would require more than integrity and competence, he would need an inspiring plan. It was a variation on the need to communicate ‘the vision thing’ and it carried weight. There can be no more important plan or vision than countering climate change and charting the economic road map to transform our economy to do so. That would get the ship of State moving again. But whether Starmer can forge a new consensus, and find a new political settlement, depends on whether a significant number of voters rate good governance and leadership above politics as entertainment.

A CUNNING PLAN FOR THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT

25.07.2024

During the recent election campaign, eligibility to govern became reduced in Tory political rhetoric to ‘having a plan’. But isn’t central planning a feature of the big, interventionist State, anathema to true blue Conservatives? And what ‘the plan’ was to achieve varied from stopping the boats to defeating Putin to growing the economy, all requiring well planned government action.

The accusation of not having a plan was mainly directed at Sir Keir Starmer, bearer of the ‘Ming vase’ full of policy positions vulnerable to ambush. He had good reason not to, as the French say, ‘*vider son sac*’ (speak his mind), confide in the public detailed policy priorities and how they would be implemented. Not an ideal exercise of democracy but one necessary for any Party wishing to win a general election. Faced with a right-wing Press and predatory social media, much of it supporting a collapsing ruling Party reduced to false claims and misrepresentation, hardly blameworthy. And perhaps there was an unrevealed plan behind the reticence.

We are now half-way through a political dance of the seven veils. We’ve had the debates and interviews, a substantial Manifesto and Kings Speech, some elaboration of the new PM’s headline priorities, Rachel Reeves’ first speech to business leaders as Chancellor of the Exchequer with, shortly, her first speech in office to Parliament. The new government is determined - and has been so for some time - to establish its credibility both nationally and internationally. Something more than pragmatism, the makings of a plan, is appearing. But the big picture and the economic and political philosophy that shapes it, what we arrive at

when the 40 pieces of legislation in the King' speech are put together, and implemented, remains still out of focus.

When I turned over Will Hutton's *This Time No Mistakes: How to Remake Britain*, Bloomsbury, 2024, to find Sir Keir Starmer's bonanza of a blurb on the back cover, "a brilliant book.... read it if you haven't already", it seemed to promise a sharper focus. And indeed Will Hutton - former Principal of Oxford College, journalist and political economist, a former editor-in-chief of *The Observer* for which he writes a column - provides both a big picture and a detailed policy analysis. The book gives a coherent intellectual and historical account of the mess we are in, how we got here, and how we might emerge. It looked like a strong contender for what New Labour Mark 2 is all about.

The headline formula Hutton applies is "an ethic of socialism with the best of progressive liberalism". By this he means 'blending' the dynamism of the market and the restless energy of capitalism with the values of "fellowship, solidarity, fairness and mutuality", informing a social contract to protect citizens from the risks of uncontrolled capitalism. Not a bad definition of social democracy or, come to that much of Catholic Social Teaching - though *This Time No Mistakes* never refers to this body of social thinking. Probably wise in these secular times.

Not surprisingly Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1908-1915) in the Liberal "great reforming government" that fought the Tory-dominated House of Lords to create national insurance and an old-age pension prior to the First World War, is an early example of what Hutton calls the politics of balancing the We with the I. Then comes the Christian socialist, Richard Henry Tawney, who influenced much more than Anglican social thinking after the War. Tawney's friend from Toynbee Hall days (1903), and Liberal hero, was William Beveridge, whose expertise in social insurance was taken up by Atlee's 1945 Labour government.

The other big name amongst the founding fathers of Hutton's political economy is John Maynard Keynes who bequeathed Keynesian economics and the core belief that government intervention can stabilise economies. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal (1933-1938) which sought to remedy the Great Depression, economic recovery, reform of the financial system and help for the unemployed and impoverished, was profoundly influenced by Keynesian thinking.

Hutton describes how Harold Macmillan's one-nation conservatism, support for the welfare state, his Keynesian approach, mixed economy with some nationalised industries and strong trades unions, represented a retention of a post-war consensus dominated by the thinking of his three heroes. The Conservative belief that the free market, individual freedom and a minimal state is the correct formula for growth stands out in stark contrast Macmillan's approach which was finally dropped by Margaret Thatcher who wished to counter a 'culture of dependency', denounced the idea that people should turn to Government to solve their problems, and for whom there was no such thing as society. "There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first". Take away Thatcher's pragmatism, add the last 14 years of government, and we end up with an extreme right-wing version of Toryism and its discontents that almost destroyed the Conservative Party.

The second half of *This Time No Mistakes*, detailing policy prescriptions for reform and how we might escape from the present economic and social crisis, shows an extraordinarily deep grasp of our multiple problems, both financial and social, and the policy work of different Ministries. The wide sweep of Hutton's proposed reforms and institutional innovations, from restructuring pension funds to incentivising socially purposeful businesses

committed to more than benefitting shareholders, makes them impossible to cover within a brief review like this. Just read them. They may well have influenced the thinking of the Chancellor and the Prime Minister and should be the subject of a national conversation.

The rub is that most of Hutton's proposals require funding either from government or private investors perhaps with the former leveraging the latter. The UK's current debts are eating up government revenue and Starmer is self-limited by tight fiscal restraints to funding small-scale initiatives with maximum impact. Rachel Reeve is already having to find some wriggle-room.

Credibility and Stability are the necessary first aims in the Labour plan. Hutton's comprehensive analysis and prescriptions possibly foreshadow much of what is to come. It looks like being a long haul.

BRITISH DEMOCRACY: NO TIME FOR COMPLACENCY

03.08.2024

After the general election, in the House of Commons, the former and present Prime Minister laughed together and said nice things about each other. This occasioned a note of self-congratulation in the media about the state of British democracy. Peaceful change of government. No-one disputing the vote count. A gold medal for GB in electoral conduct.

Well, up to a point Lord Copper. There is evidence of what seemed organised intimidation during campaigning: death threats requiring police protection, canvassers photographed while talking to voters, masked men disrupting a community meeting, fake Labour Party leaflets, yelling and vitriolic abuse directed at Labour candidates. All serious enough for the Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, to call relevant ministers and civil servants together to discuss what might be done.

The grievance behind such worrying levels of intimidation is, of course, Gaza and the Labour Leader's initial response to what became horrifying civilian casualties. It all began just four days after Hamas' massacres inside Israel. Sir Keir Starmer was interviewed by Nick Ferrari on LBC just after the Labour Party conference ended. Asked about 'proportionate response', whether a siege, "cutting off power and water" was appropriate, Starmer, endorsing Israel's "right to defend herself", replied that it did "have that right, it's an ongoing situation, obviously everything must be within international law".

A siege of enemy forces is not prohibited by international humanitarian law but besieging civilian populations is. Starmer's words had conflated his insistence on the right to defence and his

answer to the illegal besieging of a civilian population. It was a costly mistake.

Refusing to call for a ceasefire made things worse. Starmer, expecting to become Prime Minister and determined to gain credibility in the international arena, chose not to break step with the USA which opposed an immediate ceasefire until destruction and death of civilians in Gaza became intolerable. His stance compounded anger, discomfort and criticism inside and outside the Labour Party and highlighted the growing gap between politicians and the public. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby responding to the King's Speech in the House of Lords acknowledged these divisions. "Interfaith dialogue in this country has almost collapsed since October 7 last year and tensions are high and that is entirely as a result of overseas matters. That is seen with Israel and Gaza. Conflict overseas has a profound impact on our own society and our own domestic policies, because of the multicultural nature of our communities".

Systematic electoral punishment of the Labour Party, in the opinion of many for taking the Muslim vote "for granted", needed organisation. TMV, *The Muslim Vote*, is a collective of Muslim organisations, led by Anas Altikriti - himself a contentious figure - which supported some 30 candidates, including 9 Independents, 9 from Galloway's Workers' Party, but also Greens, Lib Dems and Scottish and Welsh Nationalists standing against a Labour candidate. Several of the groups in the TMV network are mistrusted by government. Four pro-Gaza candidates supported by TMV were elected, wiping out thumping Labour majorities, several others came close to winning, in seats like Bethnal Green and Bow, Birmingham Ladywood, and Ilford North.

Some polling shows that in constituencies with over 30% Muslim population the share of Labour votes had dropped since 2019 from 65% to 36%. TMV was certainly not the only reason

Labour lost key seats such as that of the Shadow Paymaster General Jonathan Ashworth's Leicester South. Muslims who like other British voters were concerned about the NHS, housing, cost of living and, also, like other less affluent voters, felt neglected. Part of the general malaise with politics. Gaza energised voting particularly amongst Muslims.

But it is difficult to deny that the Israeli Defence Forces' (IDF) Gaza massacres and destruction in response to civilian slaughter of October 7 was so profoundly shocking – not only for Muslims – that it became the passionate focus of single-issue voting this July. And undeniable that the characterisation of the Arab-Jewish conflict in the Middle East as religious is still hardening Palestinian and Israeli positions, exported into a British election encouraging intimidation and bullying. Fury directed at Muslim women candidates who remained loyal to the Labour leadership revealed a misogyny we have come to know in Afghanistan that should by now be in the dustbin of history.

Gaza has become a religious dispute to the degree that Hamas and the right-wing religious fanatics in the Knesset have forced it into this mould. At the heart of the conflict lies rival nationalisms and a battle for control of territory. To be Palestinian is not identical with being a Muslim nor ever has been. There are Christian and secular Palestinians. Christians were amongst some of the earliest Palestinian nationalist leaders. There are also plenty of Jews in Israel and around the world appalled by what the IDF is doing in Gaza. The TMV's approach amongst Muslims reinforced the perception that protest about Gaza was a religious single-issue.

Christians are not immune to the lure of sectarianism and single-issue voting as the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland showed, and the issue of abortion in the USA is now showing. The United States Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2019 gave an example that seems to me excellent counsel to voters of all faiths. "As Catholics,

we are not single-issue voters. A candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support". In the past, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales have said much the same.

The events after the horrifying murders and stabbings of young girls in Southport have put the intimidation of electoral candidates into a wider perspective. Violent and planned public disorder in Hartlepool, Westminster, Manchester, Aldershot and Sunderland, as well as Southport, has revealed a major national issue. Re-emergent EDL, English Defence League, followers plus other small extremist groups, and their incitement of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant hatred, adds to the Home Secretary's in-box and that of the Prime Minister. There is more to come. It is striking a chord amongst certain – male- sections of the population.

EDL-type thuggery and disinformation in social media - needing decisive government intervention - are yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's problem. As far as British democracy is concerned, sadly, everything in the garden isn't lovely.

CULTURE WARS

CULTURE WARS & MODERNITY

16.04.2022

Why are the main fights in today's culture wars about sex, sexuality, gender and the beginning of life? Each, particularly the latter, admittedly weighty moral issues in their own right. And how have the British managed to push BREXIT, something that has nothing to do with sex, into our culture wars making it a marker of identity? Conflicts of opinion about how to reduce climate change, pandemics and respond to Putin's war - life-threatening both before and after birth - get prolonged public airing but, with the exception of face coverings, which have been politicised, and the anti-vaxxers, appear much less divisive, less about identity. It's puzzling.

I bumped into these questions whilst thinking about how and why the different Abrahamic faith traditions share views that find their way into the arsenals of the culture wars. The conservative Evangelical from Montana who hates the Washington elite agrees with the traditional views about sex, sexuality and gender held by the Russian Orthodox from Moscow. Both consider that contemporary morality amounts to nothing short of culpable 'decadence' and identify their enemies accordingly. Both, deliberately or inadvertently, spend time undermining democracy and both promote a politics of 'back to the future'. Ultraconservative American evangelicals seem even unwilling to denounce the violent 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol.

By far the best known and most shocking attempted return to an imaginary past is, of course, that of ISIS and the Da'esh Caliphate. But it is telling that Patriarch Kirill of Moscow imagines a former Holy Mother Russia encompassing Ukraine

and Belarus, and singles out gay pride marches as evidence of ‘Western decadence’. The war in Ukraine has revealed how far Russian Orthodoxy, in part, has been co-opted, even militarised, by the Russian State. Putin, ostensibly a Russian Orthodox believer, and Patriarch Kirill, almost certainly a KGB asset, inherited a mutually beneficial relationship formed during the post-Brezhnev Soviet era. It seems no accident that extreme forms of ‘back to the future’ religion can spawn violence.

Why is yearning for a fantasy past displacing hope in the future? As in the *jihadist* imagining of the early Caliphates, there has to be some factual or scriptural basis for the resurgence of these nostalgic dreams. Phrases and stories from sacred writings have to be torn from their context. Text without context becomes pretext. And the pretext can easily be for coercion and violence in a binary world. Those with whom we do not agree, who reject our fantasy, are *deliberately* culpable, the culpable are enemies, and enemies have to be destroyed before they destroy all we believe in.

Belligerence is not all on one side. ‘Woke’ has become something of a synonym for modernity or, at least, shorthand for a major belligerent in our culture wars. In the West, vocabulary, words in themselves, have become crucial indicators of right beliefs and attitudes. But does a word, maybe an outdated word, betray reprehensible views? Much blame is attached to using or not using the right words, an absence of the required vocabulary supposedly indicating an absence of virtue and sensitivity. But does the wrong word always, or even frequently, indicate an unacceptable ‘ism’ to justify the accusation of thought-crimes? An older generation struggles to ‘curate’ a fast changing vocabulary. I’ve had a good education but it took a grandchild to tell me gently that people with disabilities want to be called just that, not ‘the disabled’. Does calling someone ‘coloured’ rather than ‘black’ really unmask the speaker as racist? Words do matter, they can

anger and wound, but intention and behaviour matter more. People of good will can find it hard to keep up with what is the right word to use and can feel coerced into silence because of it.

If you are old the past is that other country where you were young, healthy, energetic and probably optimistic, and inevitably things were different. It is a place where you and people like you belonged. The imagined past is a place where you are free from present fears, fear that you are being laughed at by a modern, supercilious elite, treated with contempt, and free of the fear that much you hold dear is being swept away.

Such anxiety is the bread and butter of populism - and a key sentiment of those who violently attacked the US Capitol on 6 January 2021. The 'Proud Boys', 'The Oath Keepers', all self-revealing titles which reveal the frightening level of conflict and division in American society.

The West – and the world - badly need a cease-fire in the culture wars. Much of them feel like distractions from the potentially catastrophic problems we are now facing. We need respectful dialogue about sex, sexuality, beginning and end of life and gender, not censorious diatribes. A multi-cultural society needs some clear red lines, but it also badly needs to accommodate dissent, agreement to disagree, not coercion forcing people to change their vocabulary or lose any public voice. Above all we need to replace fantasies of the past, or unrealistic optimism, with hope for the future.

THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY: FROM IVORY
TOWER TO EXCEL CENTRE

23.04.2022

The commercialisation of higher education in Britain is, in part, a by-product of its success. “The proportion of young people in England going to university has passed the symbolic 50% mark for the first time”, the BBC reported in September 2019. “It comes almost exactly 20 years after then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, called for half of young people to go into higher education”. He recently called for the level to be pushed up to 70%.

In 1959, less than 4% of university age youth received a university education. In 1963, the Robbins Report on Higher Education recommended that university places should be available to all who were qualified by ability and attainment. During the 1960s the number of UK universities doubled, from 22 to 45. Today 130 are receiving funding from government – plus a few private universities - each competing to attract the brightest students. The cost to the tax payer has risen proportionately. The introduction of tuition fees in 1998, £1,000 then £9,250 now, to help with funding, was a crucial stage in attaching monetary value to a university education.

British universities are now large institutions serving on average 18 thousand students. But Government does not give them enough money. UK students’ tuition fees do not cover the cost of their education. For the last two years, as they switched on lap-tops in their rooms for the day’s lectures, students themselves have been clocking up debt. Students from abroad, paying £31,000 per annum, barely keeping the good ship academia afloat, are sought out by academic marketing departments. Universities little by little are turning into businesses to survive, a few of them tottering on the brink.

Universities of course differ in campus position, the ‘old civic red brick’ and Oxbridge versus those situated outside or on the edge of towns, in endowments, in ethos and reputation for a particular academic expertise, as well as their entry standards and research quality. In addition ‘student satisfaction’ is measured and graduate prospects that both feature in their - much criticised – annually published ranking. Many universities are facing significant deficits in pension funds and offering salaries that academic staff do not see as commensurate with their training and workload. Lecturers chafe at demands to shine both in teaching, in student satisfaction ratings, and research increasingly for the income it brings.

Asking what universities are for is an interesting question and the answer has changed over time. By the end of the 19th century the idea that moral and religious education should be an inseparable part of university teaching had weakened. By the end of the 20th century ‘cultivation of the intellect’ as the prime purpose of universities’ was also eclipsed. Far too ‘ivory tower’. Encouraged by government, the main purpose of the British university now is to meet the needs of an advanced economy. Universities cultivate ‘graduate prospects’, meaning the promise, or at least the expectation, of a good job after graduation – defined as a starting salary of at least £30,000-£35,000 - so easy for students to measure the return on their investment . Even the subjects taught in universities are evaluated by students and university management alike as developing, or not, future useful and lucrative professional skills. The mind-set and language of economics has infiltrated many aspects of life and the universities weren’t spared.

During and since the pandemic, much attention has rightly been given to the disruption of school life, the impact on school and pre-school children. Much less attention is given to the

current state of Britain's universities, their staff and their students. The pandemic deprived all students, whatever their age, of the social experience which being in higher education traditionally gives. But this impact on university life came on top of changes transforming the size, ethos and very idea of a university.

Size seems to matter. St. Andrew's in Scotland and Aberystwyth in Wales have around 10,000 students each. They top the student satisfaction league. Manchester with over 40,000 and University College London (UCL) with over 45,000 – half from overseas - have opted for gigantism in response to demand and in the hope of economies of scale. Both come 104th out of 128 (no figures for Oxbridge) in student satisfaction ranking despite getting good results. Both have experienced strikes by university about pay, pay gaps, pensions, workload and casualization. But so have many others. The University and College Union (UCU) negotiate staff pay. This year they have been campaigning against zero-hours contracts. According to UCU research, an astonishing 6,500 lecturers working in 46% of universities and 60% of colleges are on zero hours contracts. A further 68,845, many working in research programmes, are on fixed term contracts.

Graduation ceremonies have always been rites of passage. A symbolic event closing ceremonially three years of new – and lasting - friendships and rewarding study, marking entry into the adult world. This year the pandemic back-log meant that double the numbers graduated. At UCL, with its huge numbers, this meant a week of three sets of students a day graduating conveyor belt style in the drab barn-like ExCel Exhibition Centre in London's docklands. Tickets sold at £35 each and gown hire was £47 - if you got the discounted price. A pre-recorded message from UCL's provost appeared on a large screen. At the same time the ExCel Centre was hosting a business conference and a marine biology conference. A less than grand finale for students who

missed a great deal working their passage through a disrupted university system increasingly commercialized and all at sea.

John Henry Newman, Anglican theologian who became a Catholic Cardinal, published his *The Idea of a University* in 1858, a compilation of nine lectures based upon his experience and thinking as Rector of a new Catholic University in Dublin. It is frankly hard-going. He wanted the university to be a place where “intellect [was] disciplined for its own sake” where ‘*inutility*’, as he called it, was to be cherished. But he did concede that if the utility of university education *was* to be considered, it should be to prepare students “to fill their respective posts in life better. . . . making them more intelligent, capable, active members of society”. Newman also had a prescient word on the dangers of demanding both good teaching and research from lecturers. “He, too, who spends his day in dispensing his existing knowledge to all comers is unlikely to have either leisure or energy to acquire new”. Many of today’s lecturers would agree.

Learning is not a commercial transaction. Education should not embody the ethics of a business enterprise. The task of universities in national life should not be promoting only the kind of research that makes money, nor make filling the top end of the Labour Market their limited vision. They are being driven in this direction. I like to think of the small university I am associated with, St. Mary’s Twickenham, 30th in the student satisfaction tables and with distinctive Catholic values, as part of the resistance.

BEING BRITISH: QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

21.06.2023

One reason for writing history is the hope it will help answer contemporary questions. It rarely does. In the much-quoted words of the then US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson in 1962: “Great Britain has lost an Empire but not yet found a role”. Acheson’s question of post-imperial identity was addressed to the ‘British in Britain’. But he was not directly asking what being British then meant.

Stuart Ward in his recent *Untied Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain* (Cambridge University Press) clarifies such questions in a scholarly book equipped with enough footnotes for several Ph.D theses. Ward’s almost five hundred pages of text focus in detail on shifting identities in the 1960s and 1970s. He writes in a thoroughly readable style making stimulating and unexpected connections, meriting Fintan O’Toole’s blurb on the cover: “essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the long slow waning of Britishness”.

Those living in Britain at the height of imperial outreach assumed that the inhabitants of that swathe of pink in my old school atlas, Victorian “Greater Britain”, shared, willingly or unwillingly, in their own imperial version of Britishness. But the peoples of the Empire were already at work making their own history and forging new national identities.

Identities are created by relationships, by cultural and material interaction and sometimes by appropriations. So how did the historical fate of ‘overseas’ Britishness - which we often forget - influence the different expressions of being British over the years and bring us today to this post-imperial island kingdom with its four less than cohesive nations? And is the government’s post-EU aspiration to adopt a world role, ‘Global Britain’, a fig-leaf barely

hiding a 'Little England' wrecked by populism but hoping for the best?

Never losing its central focus, Ward's book highlights two other features that accompanied Britishness in the 20th century. First is the persistence of what he calls 'patrimonial racism', cultural and inherited, shaping White relationships with different peoples fostering social exclusion, behind immigration bills. Second, addressing the wave of de-colonisation in the 1960s, he discusses the telling transition from appeals by the colonised to values perceived as British to appeals based on universal human rights and directed at the UN as a world forum.

But the diverse patterns of change encountered in the then Dominions, West Indies, India, Africa and Asia defy any simplistic analysis of changing allegiances. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru remained passionately committed to Indian national identity after the huge inter-religious massacres attendant on Independence – strangely not mentioned anywhere in the text – and, of course Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa was ruthless. By way of contrast, advocacy of a strong British identity by Australians and New Zealanders persisted into the 1970s, only partly related to threats to trade triggered by Britain's entry into the Common Market in 1973. Another revelation – at least to me – was how much Prime Minister Anthony Eden's catastrophic Suez adventure may be attributable not just to his ill-health but also to pressures at the time from a significant right-wing faction of the Tory Party. The populist nationalism of Tory Brexiteers comes to mind.

Ward is adept at providing detailed examples illustrating his main themes particularly the racism beneath the asserted British values. In Vancouver in May 1914 there were mass protests when the Komagata Maru carrying 200 Sikhs, fellow subjects of the Empire intending to settle in Canada, attempted to dock. The ship,

chartered by the enterprising Gurdit Singh, after several months at anchor was forced to return to Calcutta. In June 1948 the aptly named Empire Windrush brought 492 West Indians to Tilbury docks on the Thames. Trusting in British values they had expected to be treated as fellow Britons. Some 70 years later, hundreds drawn from what became known as the ‘Windrush generation’ - arrivals from the Caribbean 1948-1973 – were detained and 83 deported to the West Indies, their legal rights denied.

Ward also makes much of the sad story of Sagana Lodge in the Nyeri district of the Kenyan Central Highlands, to illustrate the mystique of royalty in delusions of fading imperialism. When Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip married in 1947, the Colonial Government of Kenya built them a rustic lodge as a wedding present. If royalty could have several residences in Britain why not one in Greater Britain as an expression of the throne’s supranational character? The answer was that the Mau-Mau soon became active in the area. The Lodge was only occupied once by royalty - at the handover during the couple’s visit to Kenya in February 1952.

The transition from Empire to Commonwealth got underway with Commonwealth Prime Ministers meeting in London in 1944. India refused to join a body called the ‘British Commonwealth’ so the Queen came to preside over ‘the Commonwealth’, a de facto loose association of disparate but notionally equal countries including at that time Dominions with Governors-General appointed by the Crown.

Britain’s formal name, the UK is an abbreviation of the clunky ‘the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’. It used to be ‘and Ireland’ before the Irish Free State became a self-governing Dominion in 1922 and then in 1949 an independent Republic outside the Commonwealth. UK has turned out to be a

useful name as it gives British diplomats a seat near the USA in international gatherings.

If you hold a UK passport, you have ‘British nationality’. Though Scotland’s nationalist Independence movement has scarcely been dented by the SNP’s financial shenanigans, and Wales has a strong national identity expressed in the Welsh language. There is no doubt you are ‘English’ while watching the Ashes, or, listening to John Major in 1993 quoting George Orwell while struggling with his Tory Eurosceptic rebels and evoking a fantasy unchanging England: a ‘solid breakfast and gloomy Sundays...old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist’. The changing add-on ‘and Northern Ireland’ across the Irish Sea has given British governments an almighty identity problem both pre and post BREXIT.

Ward tackles the ‘Troubles’, the resurgence of the IRA in the 1960s, within the wider context of human and civil rights, de-colonisation globally, and protest against different forms of exclusion and discrimination. He describes the way the police force of Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) repeatedly treated peaceful Catholic, nationalist, civil rights protests with excess force. And how protests were dogged by Ian Paisley’s followers, opening the door initially in 1970 to retaliatory IRA violence followed by 3,500 deaths in years of sectarian violence and terrorism.

Today the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), founded and led by Ian Paisley in 1971, shares Gibraltar’s unbending stance from 1964, ‘British we are, and British we stay’ (the caption on one of those stirring old British Pathé news items). But as the history of waning Britishness charted in Ward’s book indicates, it is not easy to describe what being British means in 2023. It remains an important contemporary question. Cambridge University Press ought to send the DUP’s current leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, a copy

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

of Untied Kingdom to review. And perhaps we might find out the answer.

A WREATH FOR REITH

15.12.2023

The BBC Reith lectures began under Atlee's Labour Government in 1948 - alongside incidentally the National Health Service. It was a time of proud and creative post-war nationalism when the idea of public services that aimed to enrich the intellectual and cultural life of the nation, and its health, had traction. Public sentiment was much influenced by the recent solidarity of wartime and shared expectations of a better, less class-ridden life.

This year's Reith lectures, given by Professor Ben Ansell, a political scientist based at Nuffield College and Oxford University, takes place in a very different climate; the notion of 'treason of the intellectuals', for example, puts academics in the tumbrils alongside experts and urban elites. Ansell is looking at goals for future government and society: democracy, security, prosperity, and this week, 'solidarity'.

So, even if not broadcast in prime time, the series has all the ingredients for evoking current outrage at the supposed left-wing take-over of the BBC, as well as being a fitting annual tribute to Lord Reith. Especially as Ansell after several years of study in the USA has all the admirable, sometimes irritating, fluency and jargon-free presentation - give or take some flat jokes - of the American academic.

But how pleasing to find the word 'solidarity', and the values it carries, making a comeback beyond its use by Polish trades unionists, Popes and veterans of the 1960s. Even more encouraging is listening to someone who not only diagnoses the pathology of our contemporary them-and-us nationalism and divisive politics but is making a good fist of exploring a remedial strategy.

Despite plenty of evidence-based policy making – he presents surveys of attitudes and opinions of different categories and geographical populations – there is an underlying flaw. He almost touched on it with his reference to people’s feelings. He’s an academic. His arguments are based on facts not feelings. What he is hoping to remedy is based on emotions cultivated, as he clearly analyses, by powerful and manipulative forces in unaccountable social media and by canny populist politicians. The many who share those feelings will not be won over by facts.

This point is made compellingly by Ash Amin in his impressive 2023 *After Nativism: Belonging in an Age of Intolerance* Polity Press. Since populism points to a particularly potent form of belonging - he calls it nativist - what set of affective experiences might begin to replace it?

Based partly on research in a very poor peri-urban community in Delhi, the book detracts from the acuity of his vision by an inexorable flow of academese. ‘Affordances’, ‘Phatic’, ‘Semiotic Associations’, and so on, evoke that retro-claim of the old Reader’s Digest: ‘It Helps to Improve your Word-Power’. This is a pity because he suggests a terrain of social relationships, conviviality, cohabitation, shared travails, in which a different nationalism based on acceptance of diversity and universal values might grow. This would be built on a recognition of the many ‘border crossings’ created by a specific history of colonialism, reaction to it and its consequences, a plural and multi-cultural society.

There is so much in the UK which is the antithesis of a nativist them-and-us, the rejection of the ‘experts and the urban elite’, blaming migrants for the results of political choices beyond their control. Here, from my own experience, are two examples of the negotiation of identity and relationship in the rich, ever-changing diversity of life in Britain. Readers will recall their own.

I remember some years ago the elders of the Somali community in Ealing worrying about the vulnerability of some of their children who were troublesome in school. Their initiative resulted in an expert in psychology and religion being asked to put on a course for them. It seemed a good idea to have Somali pop music playing as everyone arrived, a symbol of mutual acknowledgement. The most popular star was recorded and played. Big smiles all round except for one or two elders from the puritanical wing of Islam. Aesthetics matter. Expertise and local knowledge matter too.

Then there was the Catholic school I visited where some of the Muslim girls ‘went to Confession’. They explained. “We don’t say ‘Bless me Father for I have sinned’. So he knows we are Muslim. We just like having a space where we can talk privately”. There are more ways of enriching the cultural life of a nation than conceived by Lord Reith. And they are all built on mutual trust.

The texture of much of British society are networks redolent of a relational civic nationalism. Despite the partial decline of the trades unions and Churches, NGOs, large and small, volunteer associations and choirs have shown a comparative resilience. Add to their role in civil society countless sponsored individual activities, and the great urban marathons and half marathons. Yes, London’s nine million people have an average income way above the rest of the country, but Londoners show how to live with diversity as a creative force. How can this be built on elsewhere?

Life during the worst of the COVID pandemic, the popular re-evaluation of the value of people’s jobs contained in the concept of ‘key workers’, the self-sacrifice of bus drivers, hospital workers, nurses, doctors, made up of many different ethnic identities, and the universal recognition of how they gave their lives for the common good, spoke of a new relational national identity. But within a couple of years, it had dissipated: business as usual again

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

with low paid wage earners increasingly dependent on food banks, Government removing the cap on bonuses to assuage corporate greed, and the poor with zero job security in the gig economy.

We are not going to regain a healthy, open, nationalism easily. The power balance is dramatically against it. But the BBC still enriches the intellectual and cultural life of the nation as Reith wanted. And beyond the nation as the outstanding work of the BBC World Service demonstrates daily – or nightly if you are a poor sleeper. Advent is supposed to be a time of waiting, of hope and patience. It is no time to let nativism have the last word.

WHAT'S LEFT - AND WHAT'S WOKE?

08.07.2024

Sir Tony Blair's message to Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer in the *Sunday Times* included the following advice: "Avoid vulnerability to wokeism". During the last decade, within the vocabulary of political abuse, the word 'Woke' leaked into the word 'Left'. This was partly because both words have fluid meanings. But it was also an example of the Right's skilful manipulation of language. On 13 November 2023 Rishi Sunak appointed Esther McVey, MP for Tatton, Minister without Portfolio, an appointment widely understood as Minister for Culture Wars, rooting out wokeism and pinning it on the Left.

Like so many words, 'Woke' migrated from the USA, originating in a call in a 1938 song by folk and blues singer Lead Belly, protesting the conviction of nine black teenagers falsely accused of rape, to 'stay woke' to racism. That call to be 'woke', awake to the persistence of racism, was powerfully renewed by *Black Lives Matter* in 2013 after the acquittal of police officer who had fatally shot an unarmed seventeen-year-old African American. In 2020, during protests at the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, *Black Lives Matter* brought some 20 million Americans onto the street. A small number were responsible for looting and a prodigious destruction of property. Protest soon spread to other countries and the word 'woke' travelled with them.

'Left' as a political identifier has been around a long time. Its meaning has had 250 years to change from signifying the choice of seats in the French National Assembly during the early days of the French Revolution to now naming a spectrum of political positions that share commitment to social justice, a fair economy, and internationalism. In short order, 'Woke' mutated to become an

expletive directed at the 'Left' and at an ill-defined 'elite' accused of suppressing the common sense and language of 'ordinary people'.

Like a fish bone stuck in the throat, the UK had its Empire as well its slave trade, lodged in its national memory. It did not take long before accusations of woke were made against anyone challenging the normative story of Empire, bringing law and civilisation, or dwelling on the violence of imperial expansion and colonialism. In universities the noise of battle rolled over trimmed lawns and across seminar rooms. Even the National Trust came under fire for starting to provide information about slavery in properties where it was deemed relevant.

The political landscape of the Left, of course, had also been changing. The supposed triumph of neo-liberalism after the ending of the Cold War reduced the ambition of the Left to achieving slow incremental change. A rightward slide gained pace as economies stagnated and inequality grew.

Susan Neiman in *Left Is Not Woke*, Polity 2023, makes much of the Left swallowing whole the pessimistic writing of the French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault and its impact on woke thinking. Foucault's critical writings about justice as a chimera and power as the determining reality became key university texts. Moving out beyond the universities, the take-away, Foucault for the masses, was that trying to make things better is most likely to make things worse, feeding into a general loss of hope in progress. Behind any Enlightenment objective truth lay concealed a subtle exercise of power rendering an impoverished majority powerless. There was, of course, a reaction. In the words of the celebrated French economist, Thomas Piketty: "When people are told there is no credible alternative to the socioeconomic organisation and class inequality that exist today, it is not surprising that they invest their hopes in defending their borders and identities instead".

According to *Left Is Not Woke*, what the Left and woke share is “empathy for the marginalised, indignation at the plight of the oppressed, determination that historical wrongs should be righted”. These are virtuous emotions. But emotions, as Hamlet’s replied when Polonius asked what he was reading, are expressed in “words, words, words”. Or, sometimes, in expressive acts like pulling down statues. And both the woke and their opponents certainly focus on words. In 2015, Benedict Cumberbatch had to make a grovelling public apology because, whilst supporting the cause of black actors, he had used the word ‘coloured’ not black. ‘Action not words’, as the Prime Minister said in his first press conference. As Neiman tartly points out, changing your pronouns in no substitute for changing your society.

Virtuous emotions, like empathy, have proved no match for an - excluding - nationalist or ethnic consciousness. The Left absorbed a kind of exclusive collective identity that inadvertently magnified tribalism - Neiman’s word. But anyone’s identity is so much richer and broader than can be captured in a single word such as black, female, Jewish or even French. With the best of intentions, people are lumped together as the marginalized, as victims, rather than as individuals with a range of opinions, tastes, and sentiments. They have every reason to say – as I have once had said to me - “sometimes I just wish I could be me not the Muslim woman with a hijab”. And tragically, we have seen where victimhood as an integral part of Arab/Muslim and Jewish identity can take you in Israel/Palestine.

Getting the right balance between the ‘we’ and the ‘I’ for the common good, is as important to the Left as to those neo-liberals who sometimes seem to share some of the Left’s values. Exclusive emphasis on national, ethnic, religious and gender identity, cherished components of diversity, risks forgetting the diversity of individuals’ character, integrity and skills which matter, not least

in political life. For every diverse Obama government, not of course without its mistakes, there is an equally diverse Truss Cabinet promoting, in Neiman's words, "the most extreme Tory policies in living memory".

Cancel culture is an unfortunate consequence of woke in action. Aiming to further the common good through sensitivity to people's feelings and respect for their dignity, one result has been a damaging climate of self-censorship. But we all need a shared understanding of what and why certain language is offensive, and the difference between unintentional and intentional offense. And we all need to discuss matters that are contentious and sensitive, and not be blackmailed into silence for fear of offending.

Each of us belongs to a tribe as well as to so much more. And whatever nationality or origins, whether Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, or Hindu, male or female, we do, say and write things for many more reasons than being members of a tribe. With a new centre-Left government tackling the grave problems facing the UK - and found in both USA and Europe - what kind of society the Left stands for needs to be explored and discussed without fear. The analysis of Woke, that Neiman bravely attempts, is a good start.

Part Three

PUTIN'S UKRAINE WAR

IS UKRAINE PUTIN'S HOLY WAR?

06.04.2022

Putin's mother may or may not have been a closet Orthodox Christian who had her son secretly baptized. Metropolitan (head of a major diocese) Tikhon, friend of Putin, first trained as a screenwriter, is known for his ultraconservative nationalist theology, his opposition to democracy and support for censorship as well as his promotion of Orthodoxy as the antidote to 'Western decadence'. The friendship between Putin and Tikhon dates from the late 1990s and developed into a close relationship as their careers blossomed. Tikhon reached the status of Archimandrite (Grand Abbot) in 1998 and became Rector of the restored Stretensky Seminary in Moscow in 1999. Putin became President of the Russian Federation in 2000 in time to oversee the rebuilding of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

I went to Moscow in 1991 to talk to Gorbachev's religious advisers and to visit a little catholic church and its community in the shadow of the Lubyanka. Two surveillance cameras were

trained on the door. The parish priest was a resilient Ukrainian who had spent many years in prison. Catholicism is not Russia's favourite brand of Christianity.

Gorbachev's religious advisers wanted to talk about life after communism. They were worried about what would fill the vacuum and hold society together. "Now our communist ethics [sic] have gone what is going to replace it?" Enter Christianity seen by them as the only available solution to providing the glue for Society. I told them things weren't quite that simple, they would need to accommodate different varieties of Christianity. I wondered privately about the future role of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Thirty years on and Russia is 70% Orthodox with quite a high level of observance. Pentecostals and Plymouth Brethren are given a very hard time and there is little love wasted on the Catholics. Orthodoxy in Russia has largely become a politicised religion.

It is difficult to assess what the Russian Orthodox Church means today for Putin's life, thinking, imperial ambitions and legitimacy. Until Archbishop Rowan Williams' recent denunciation of the Moscow Patriarch Kirill's collusion with the war in Ukraine, Putin's thinking about religion hardly featured in UK media analysis of his motivations. The question remains unanswered whether Putin is simply using religion as a political tool seeing war as "a mere continuation of policy by other means." . There is nothing exceptional in a Head of State attending a thanksgiving service after their inauguration – in this instance in 2000 - Putin went straight to prayers in the Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Kremlin. We do know that Putin makes diplomatic use of his relationship with Orthodoxy. During a visit to George W. Bush in June 2001 Putin drew attention to the baptismal cross his mother allegedly gave him. "This was a very good meeting", Bush enthused. "And I look forward to my next meeting with President Putin in July. I very much enjoyed our

time together. He's an honest, straightforward man who loves his country. He loves his family. We share a lot of values. I view him as a remarkable leader". Trump was not the only President to be enamoured. Putin knew which buttons to press.

Archimandrite Tikhon has on several occasions accompanied Putin on foreign visits and Putin has visited the impressive Russian Orthodox monastery of St. Panteleimon on the Greek peninsula of Athos at least twice. The first time was in 2005 and the last in 2016 when, with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, he joined celebrations of the thousandth anniversary of Orthodox monks establishing themselves on Athos. Recently a friend of mine on pilgrimage to Mount Athos saw about thirty men, in a small *taverna* in the ferry port of Ouranoupolis all in their late 20's with shaved heads, eating supper in silence. Next day he watched them disembark in orderly fashion at the first Russian monastery on the peninsula. His immediate thought was that they were Russian soldiers from a military academy.

There is other evidence of militarisation of religion. In June 2020, Defence Minister, Sergei Soigu, opened the main church of the Russian Armed Forces on the outskirts of Moscow. The khaki-coloured Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ was dedicated for the 75th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War. Its metal floor is made from melted down Nazi ordinance and armour. It has icons of martyrs who fought for Russia, most strikingly that of Fyodor Ushakov, 'righteous commander of the Black Sea Fleet'.

The Ukrainian capital has religious significance for Russians. In 988 Prince Vladimir was baptized in the Crimea. The conversion of the *Rus* people began when he returned to Kyiv. An equally significant date for Putin is 1686 when the Orthodox Church in Ukraine was brought under the Moscow Patriarchate, only to split away in 2019 – supported by the then Ukrainian

President Petro Porochenko - when the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul granted it 'autocephaly'. Patriarch Kirill's view of Kyiv as the Jerusalem of Russian Orthodoxy might explain why central Kyiv has not been shelled.

According to the Christian Think-tank, *Theos*, Putin does believe Grand Prince Vladimir's 'spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy' "predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus". And Patriarch Kirill sees his role as being "concerned with the maintaining and strengthening of spiritual ties between people living in these countries for the sake of preserving the system of values which the one Orthodox civilization of Holy Russia reveals to the world." In short, for Putin, the old canonical boundaries of the Russian Orthodox Church provide the template of Russia's rightful political boundaries, and after the catastrophe of the Soviet Union's disintegration, justification for the resurrection of 'the Russian World' (*Russki Mir*) to challenge and defeat the 'secular political project' of Ukrainian politicians who are backed by a 'degenerate' Western world.

Does Putin really believe his barbarism in Ukraine is a Holy War promoting a glorious expansive, ethnic vision of Holy Mother Russia? Or is he simply instrumentalising religion? If so there are signs it is backfiring. On 13 March 2022, distinguished members of the Russian Orthodox Church signed and circulated A Declaration declaring *Russki Mir* a heresy. At time of writing, it has 1,280 signatories including theologians and others from different Christian traditions around the world. Some have compared it to the Declaration of Barmen which described the Nazi 'Christian Movement' as a heresy.

Perhaps the secular West should consider that some atavistic part of Putin really does believe in this perverse religious vision.

The militarisation of Russian Orthodoxy is obvious and worrying.
It has policy implications for the West, Ukraine – and the world.

PUTIN, WAR CRIMES & HATE SPEECH

23.05.2022

In a recent interview Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky asked a simple yet profound question: Why this cruelty? Are Russian war crimes in Ukraine simply a further illustration of the inevitable barbarism of warfare? Only what might be expected from past experience of Russian army brutality? Yet there was something pathetic in the sight of a downcast young Russian soldier on trial last week, the first no doubt of many, pleading guilty to murdering a Ukrainian civilian. Even the mother of the victim felt sorry for the young man though said she could never forgive him.

We have become accustomed to hearing Zelensky's voice from war-torn Ukraine, the consistency of his appeals for help and his defiant courage. So listening to him in translation when he was beamed into Chatham House, the international affairs think-tank, seemed nothing unusual. Though Zelensky's reflections on the reason for the war crimes committed by Russian troops against Ukrainian civilians were unexpected.

Zelensky's believes that Putin's flood of propaganda during the eight years since the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk region has had a profound effect. Russian war crimes were both "a victory" and a "collective witness" for the success of Russian propaganda and psyops. Many of the soldiers committing the atrocities would have been 10-12 year old in 2014 and since then exposed to unremitting lies and hate speech. The problem was getting hateful ideas out of soldiers' minds, 'cleansing this propaganda' once it was implanted. "Goebbels is a child compared to the adults in the Kremlin machine hunting a whole nation", was his well-chosen

comparison. That Zelensky is Jewish himself made his reflections all the more powerful.

Zelensky's sense of the power of propaganda can be applied to other mass crimes in other countries. The vicious anti-Tutsi propaganda in the months leading up to the by *Radio Libre des Mille Collines* controlled by Hutu extremists contributed significantly to the Rwandan genocide. The Tutsi were dehumanised, called *inyenzi*, cockroaches, as, of course, were Jews during the build up to the Holocaust. Unlike, for example, in many Latin American countries, the Catholic Church in Rwanda did not have a radio station able to combat the poisonous ethnic propaganda.

The active promotion of hate-speech and falsehood by governments, authoritarian or racist, is one thing. That by non-state actors is another. In liberal democratic States, the State has the apparatus to counter extremist hate-speech whether white supremacist or tending towards jihadism. Whether or not it is used effectively, and dog-whistle 'othering' of minority ethnic groups or migrants for political purposes outlawed, is another matter. And Zelensky's reflections raise the question of how a political culture of lies can be combatted, the role of journalists and social media, at what point cracks appear and the public realise they have been taken for fools?

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, a client State, suggests some answers. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, it claimed that it was defending the 1978 April Afghan revolution to bring 'liberty, fraternity and equality' [*sic*] to the Afghan people who needed the support of 'warrior-internationalist' Soviet troops and air-power. Thanks to the CIA's Operation Cyclone providing the Afghan *mujahideen* via Pakistan with increasingly sophisticated weaponry (from September 1986 onwards the US delivered 2,300 Stinger surface

to air missiles - shades of the future Ukraine) the war dragged on until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. While the probable number of Afghan deaths was between 600,000 and 1.5 million, crucially some 15,000 Soviet troops had died. Within four years of the invasion public opinion was turning against the war. Pre-Putin Russia was getting uncensored reports from bereaved mothers and news media, domestic and international.

In his book *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-1989*, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, a former ambassador, estimates that Soviet Russia made 6,412 criminal charges against its own troops, including 714 of murdering civilians and the rest related to drugs and weapons sales. (There was also much cover-up). The common excuse for these war crimes was retaliation for the *mujahideen*'s own use of torture and their violation of the rules of war. Captured Soviet troops sometimes killed themselves rather than fall into *mujahideen* hands. "Even senior officers could be punished for allowing their troops to commit excesses", Braithwaite claims. For example, the commander of the 191st. Independent Motor-rifle Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel Kravchenko, was court-martialed and sentenced to ten years after Afghan prisoners were shot.

Orchestrated hate requires a conductor of the orchestra. Enter President Vladimir Putin. Prime Minister 1999, President 2000-2008, Prime Minister again from 2008-2012, and then again President, Putin's influence soon became apparent. During the war in Chechnya 1999-2009, Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and the European Court of Human Rights all found that no official had ever been tried for the enforced disappearance of from between 3,000 and 5,000 Chechens, or charged with any of the 60,000 Chechens deaths. Grozny, Chechnya's main city, had been flattened like Aleppo and Mariupol. There are no signs that Putin will be submitting troops who have committed war crimes to court-martial or punishment in Ukraine. On the contrary the

Russian Parliament is talking about trying Ukrainian troops surrendering from Mariupol for war crimes labelling them as Nazis. Putin and his coterie deny and condone Russian military atrocities.

“They hate life”, Zelensky told Chatham House. And hate, history tells us, is easier to conjure up than love. Soldiers sometimes talk of an overwhelming blood-lust after comrades-in-arms have been killed or tortured (there were notable US examples in Vietnam). Add the ruthless brutality of a leader whose sensibilities have been honed in the old KGB. Add years of conditioning Russian society for hate, shutting down all uncensored sources of news, and you have mass graves again. With perhaps worse to follow.

ERDOGAN: PUTIN'S PARTNER INSIDE NATO?

29.08.2023

After the USA, Turkey with its 775,000 strong armed forces is militarily the most important member of NATO. It is also the NATO member most strategically located sharing extended land borders with Syria, with hostile Kurdish militias, notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and with Iran all the way from Azerbaijan to Iraq, as well as having sea borders in common with Russia and Ukraine. Sales of natural gas, oil, grain and arms mean Russia has a moderate but significant dependency on export revenue from Turkey. Not surprisingly Putin has been wooing Erdoğan for many years.

Following its annexation of Crimea in early 2014, Russia's military intervention in Syria from September 2015 added to the complexity of Turkey's foreign relations. On the one hand, the USA was supporting Kurdish anti-Assad militias seen by Obama as the most effective force against ISIS in the region, but by Erdogan as a major threat as the PKK conducted separatist attacks in south-east Turkey with heavy casualties. On the other, the Crimea for Turks evoked the glory days of the Ottoman Empire. The local remnant of its indigenous Turkic ethnic group, the Tatars, persecuted and deported by Stalin, opposed the annexation and were suffering as a result. Erdoğan felt obliged to speak out against Russia's annexation but avoided denouncing Putin, refused to join sanctions being imposed by most of NATO's members and supported Turkish government officials whose shady deals with Iran had been breaking US sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

But if Russia and Turkey are in a marriage of convenience today, the failed 16 July 2016 military coup - which caught Erdoğan on holiday in the resort of Marmaris - should count as the

moment Putin slipped on the engagement ring. Erdoğan narrowly missed being seized and overthrown but emerged from the crisis stronger than ever. He took advantage of enhanced public support to brand *Hizmet*, the Gülen movement, an extraordinarily successful and moderate Muslim organisation, as coup planners and terrorists, the perfect opportunity to destroy a powerful internal Islamic competitor with whom Erdoğan had once been allied (See ‘Erdoğan’s Victory: The Decline of Democracy’ 30/05/2023). *Hizmet* is generally seen as pro-American and anti-Iranian. Fetullah Gülen, founder and inspiration of the movement, lived, and still lives, in exile in the Pocono Mountains near Saylorburg in Pennsylvania. The US refused Turkish requests to extradite him. The USA was also a little slow to forthrightly condemn the coup. Russia wasn’t. Erdoğan’s first foreign visit after the coup failed was to Moscow.

Putin proceeded with his courtship in October 2016 by returning Erdoğan’s visit coming away with an agreement to provide Turkey with natural gas courtesy of GAZPROM, the Russian majority state-owned giant gas corporation. A new pipeline costing some \$11.4 billion dollars, would cross the Black Sea from Russia’s Krasnodor region to Kiyiköy north of Istanbul. *TurkStream* was subsequently extended into the Balkans to sell Bulgaria and North Macedonia gas bypassing Ukraine and Romania. Erdoğan and Putin inaugurated flows in January 2020 in good time for anticipated US sanctions after Russia’s ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine.

Weapons play no small part in cementing Russia’s relationship with Turkey. American Patriot missiles deployed at Turkey’s Gaziantep 5th Armoured Brigade Command to protect the Turkish-Syrian border were withdrawn in October 2015 amidst rising US-Turkish tensions over US training and arming Kurdish guerrilla forces. In 2017, a year after the coup against Erdoğan,

and after protracted and failed negotiations with Washington to supply the Raytheon Patriot missile system, Erdoğan stunned NATO by signing an agreement with Russia to buy its S-400 air-defence system. According to Maximilian Hess in *Economic War: Ukraine and the Global Conflict between Russia and the West*, Hurst 2023, by way of response the US dropped Turkey from ‘participation in its programme to develop the F-35 fifth generation fighter jet’, on the grounds that Russian missile technicians would get access to the technology in the state-of-the art plane.

President Trump initially blocked additional retaliatory sanctions under the US 2017 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) but then implemented them in December 2020, during his last chaotic days. A better offer of Patriot missiles was made. The game continued with Turkey seeking more S-400 batteries from Russia. As *Economic War* says: “Russia had successfully developed its partnership with Turkey to increase its energy leverage over Europe through the *TurkStream* pipeline, and the West’s sanctions had failed to halt closer Russian-Turkish cooperation”.

During April this year the foundations were laid on the Turkish coast north of Cyprus for the Akkuyu nuclear power station, costing some \$20 billion and comprised of four units of a Russian designed nuclear reactor. A joint enterprise between a subsidiary of the Russian State corporation, Rosatom, and a Turkish company, when finally constructed the reactors will provide 10% of Turkey’s energy needs. Talks on the building of another nuclear power station are taking place between Turkey, Russia and South Korea.

These snapshots of the relationship between Russia and Turkey, taken partly from Hess’ scholarly book (almost 40% of it made up of footnotes, bibliography and index), give some idea of the intense economic war that accompanies the fighting in Ukraine. As a new multi-polar global configuration of states comes to birth

with the formation of new trading blocs, the hegemony of the US-led 'West' wanes. And as it does, the limited effectiveness of sanctions becomes more apparent. The US Treasury hasn't even been able to grab *Graceful* in Germany, a yacht in which 'Putin had an interest'. It was spirited back to Russia two weeks before the invasion of Ukraine and appropriately renamed *Killer Whale*.

The dollar retains its global power, but few surpass Erdoğan's ability to manoeuvre between shifting alliances playing one side against the other. Visitors to Turkey, lured by promises of accessible dental treatment – a remarkable advertisement on London Overground trains – cheap holidays and expensive Catholic pilgrimages to Ephesus, might ponder Erdoğan's choice of strategic partner on the world stage. At the least he is giving pragmatism a bad name.

THE SEARCH FOR A JUST PEACE IN
UKRAINE

16.09.2023

‘Among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth by falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages’. That’s Samuel Johnson in November 1758 writing in his *The Idler* essays for the *London Weekly* about the growing role of journalists - ‘news-writers’. You wonder what he might have made of Putin’s news media.

‘The first casualty of war is truth’, our terse twentieth century version of Johnson. The aphorism applies to the coverage of the war in Ukraine both through what is generally omitted, what is told and untold. The ethical principles underlying journalism are accuracy, impartiality, independence, accountability, humanity and truth. They are notoriously difficult to abide by - sometimes career-threatening - in the face of strong public opinion, particularly during war when a degree of self-censorship is prudent.

Take just two examples of Western reporting. The Russians claimed they were promised in the 1990s that NATO would not expand eastwards. Denials were reported uncritically. But US National Security Archives opened in December 2017 reveal Gorbachev was indeed assured in 1990-1991, not only by US Secretary of State, James Baker, but by Thatcher, Kohl, Mitterrand, Major and Bush senior that there would be no NATO expansion. This litany of assurances – Baker’s “not one inch east” - came as quid pro quo for Gorbachev’s consenting to German unification within NATO. Promises to Russia were reneged on in response to understandable pressures from Central and Eastern European countries plus lobbying by the six major US armaments corporations led by Lockheed Martin. In 1996, Congress passed

legislation enabling expansion, the NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act.

The former ambassador to the Soviet Union and doyen of foreign policy within the State Department, George Kennan wrote in the 29 June 1997 New York Times with extraordinary prescience: “Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era. Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking”. As Putin was consolidating his power between 1999-2004, ten countries, four bordering Russia, joined NATO.

NATO’s expansion does not justify Putin’s criminal invasions of Ukraine nor his war crimes, nor his tyrannical rule. But it does provide him with a public rationale for attacks on his southern, sovereign neighbour (his imperial fantasies seem to have taken over now). As long as acknowledging the truth of what Kennan wrote back in 1997 about NATO expansion incurs strident media accusations of supporting Russian aggression, we are not going to learn from history - though perhaps we never do.

The second example of constrained reporting has profound implications for ending the war through a peace agreement and ceasefire. Russia’s fantasy of blitzkrieg and swift overthrow of Ukraine’s pro-western government failed. In March 2022, a month after the invasion, as a result of Turkish mediation, Russia and Ukraine appeared on the verge of finding a negotiated end to the fighting. Key elements were Russia’s withdrawal to its pre-24 February positions in exchange for Ukraine’s neutrality, that is excluding any foreign bases or troops from its territory – even on joint exercises. The US, UK and other countries were to provide

joint security guarantees promising to intervene in the event of Ukraine being attacked again. Crimea would be left on the back burner with an understanding that within the next fifteen-year years, while seeking a resolution, neither party would use military means to change the territory's current status. The disputed Donbass area would also be the subject of separate negotiations.

According to Milan Rai writing in *Peace News* 2 April 2023 Ukraine abruptly withdrew from the negotiations because of the mass murder of civilians and prisoners of war by Russian troops in Bucha, a town just 25 kms west of Kyiv, and as a result of pressure from the US and UK (Boris Johnson made a special visit to Kyiv on 9 April and refused to sign the proposed special guarantees). A few days later Russia pushed into the territories it had recognized as independent in eastern Ukraine.

Maybe events simply made steps to reach a just peace impossible. Maybe Putin was negotiating in good faith. The Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett who was engaged in the negotiations believed so and thought there was a 50/50 chance of success. We just don't know. The point is that the two parties were at the negotiating table once discussing a plan that might have worked, but talk of negotiations now gets treated as, at worst, a betrayal of Ukraine or, at best, naiveté. Yet the chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, not known for his naiveté, was talking openly of negotiations in November 2022. He compared the trench warfare in eastern Ukraine and its appalling casualties with those of the First World War and received a customary backlash for not promoting outright victory for Ukraine.

In a comparable way, Pope Francis has been widely criticised for maintaining the neutral position required for promoting dialogue, and very recently for praising the cultural wealth of 'great Mother Russia'. Yet on 2 August 2022 the Vatican had

fiercely denounced the Russian invasion: “the interventions of the Holy Father Pope Francis are clear and unequivocal in condemning it as morally unjust, unacceptable, barbaric, senseless, repugnant and sacrilegious”.

Both Pope and President Volodymyr Zelensky find themselves caught between contending expectations and demands. On the Pope’s side, taking up a clear moral, so partisan, position versus a traditional papal role as neutral peacemaker. On Zelensky’s, the burden of rising Ukrainian casualties and openness to negotiation versus retaining his international and national support by a position of nothing- but- outright- victory and maintaining his decree banning negotiation. To pursue the former, with a consistent 90% approval rating for pursuing the latter, would be political suicide.

The intensity of the ground artillery war is prodigious. Both sides are beginning to run out of ammunition. Stockpiles of 155 mm shells held in the West are very low. The UK has resorted to sending Ukraine depleted uranium tank-busting shells believed to have caused illness amongst civilians and troops in Afghanistan. The US is supplying cluster bombs known to mutilate children and to take years of clearance post-war. The Russians are reduced to seeking ordinance and weaponry from North Korea.

On 12 September this year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke of Zelensky needing to lift his decree banning talks with Russia as a first step towards negotiations, saying that, if Ukraine was unwilling, it was for the USA to make it happen. Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, a leading member of the Sant Egidio community based in Rome, which successfully mediated the civil war in Mozambique, has just returned from Beijing. His mandate from the Pope is to "support humanitarian initiatives and the search for ways that can lead to a just peace" in Ukraine. Sergei

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, indicated his willingness to have him come to Moscow on Friday.

Are we approaching another March 2022 moment of mutually felt weakness that might make steps towards dialogue, negotiation, a ceasefire and an agreed peace possible? For the sake of the Ukrainian and Russian people dying in Putin's war let's hope against hope we are.

THE KLEPTOCRACY NETWORK

30.08.2024

We live in interesting times. The Soviet satellites in eastern Europe and elsewhere, the military oligarchies once supported by the United States in Latin America, have receded into the past, features of the second half of the 20th century. During the Cold War, those who suffered under, and resisted, authoritarian regimes understood their rules, their alliances, their diversity and what qualified those who sought change for prison or worse. The collapse of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev heralded not the gradual global triumph of liberal democracy but fresh growth and development of unpredictable authoritarian States.

What causes authoritarianism? Economic explanation of political structures is the tribute Liberalism paid to Marxism. The old liberal refrain was apartheid would be ended if only a black middle class could form sharing in national wealth. The Soviet Union collapsed after economic failure. The ending of support from East Germany and the Soviet Union were largely instrumental in bringing Mandela's ANC to the negotiating table. And it was economic sanctions against South Africa that drove the Afrikaner regime to negotiate.

In October 1990, West German diplomacy achieved the re-unification of Germany. Germany firmly believed that key to its success lay in trade and economic development. As Anne Applebaum puts it in *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators who Want to Run the World*, published this year by Allen Lane: * "They also believed that trade and diplomacy would, eventually, help normalize relations between Russia and Europe", a foundational element of Angela Merkel's thinking. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline was born. In 2022, the \$20 billion project designed to bring gas - bypassing Poland and Ukraine - direct from Russia to Germany,

was destroyed in an underwater explosion. The hope of “*Wandel Durch Handel*”, change through trade, went with it. As energy bills rise this winter, we are still living through the consequences of the policy.

The priority of trade and economics were UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s refrain as he promoted interdependence with China hoping to bring it into the democratic world during his tenure as Prime Minister from 2010 to 2016. Such was the hold an optimistic economism had on international relations. In 2022 former Hong Kong Governor, Chris (now Lord) Patten, called Cameron’s position on China “mush diplomacy”, “hoping for the best is not a very good basis for policy”, he added.

Yet, a stubborn belief persisted, at least during the first decade of the 21st. Century, that, given time, economic progress, wealth creation, and reduction in inequality could sort things out. As Quartet representative, 2007-2015 (for the UN, EU, US and Russia), Tony Blair was tasked with promoting economic growth in Gaza and the West Bank in pursuit of peace. A kind of economic faith that with enough GDP all manner of things would be well lingered alongside faith in economic sanctions against declared enemies.

Applebaum makes a strong case that Russia did not emerge from the 1990s as a State that for a variety of reasons had tried, but failed, to adopt the liberalism its Western advisers were promoting. Rather, from Putin’s first days in the new century, she argues, he was setting up Russia as a mafia State to enrich his coterie, a kleptocracy with added nationalism and a “restorative nostalgia” for a defunct imperial Russia as its motif.

The new feature of most post-Cold War authoritarian regimes is organising power primarily to enrich themselves. Trump-like, they do deals with each other forming an eclectic, transactional rather than ideological, network. Such unlikely bedfellows as

Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Mali and North Korea are participants. In pole position, there is a pragmatic China relying on its economic power to reel in client States and supporting Russia in its episodes of combat with Europe and the USA. There are also States of geopolitical importance, even functioning democracies like Turkey and India, as well as Saudi Arabia governed by a dynastic dictatorship, who for their own purposes occupy a Janus-like position. Iran remains a full-blown autocratic Shi'a theocracy, an active player in the network. Afghanistan under the Taliban stands alone as a Sunni tyranny driven by a crazed gender ideology.

The key to the new projection of authoritarian power is found not only at national level: a brutal security apparatus and, in the case of China, Orwellian levels of surveillance. Internationally, technological opportunities open to all allow the spread and sharing of disinformation tailored to intensify social conflict in democracies and the political advancement of political extremes. Social media provides multiple platforms on which “to manipulate discontent, channel anger and fear”, in their target communities and enhance a search for homogeneity, belonging and order over diversity and difference. As Applebaum succinctly puts it, liberalism and democracy were not exported to the East, rather an ‘autocratic pre-disposition’ and illiberalism infected the West. This was a message in her *Twilight of Democracy* first published in 2020 by Allen Lane.

But the picture looks a little less dire today. Beginning with the 2023 defeat of the Law and Justice Party in Poland by Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition (KO), followed this July by the Labour Party landslide crushing a Conservative Party too long in hock to its right-wing, then Marine le Pen's setback in the French elections followed by Bangladesh ridding itself of Sheikh Hasina

in August, and the USA seemingly past peak-Trump populism, liberalism has been making a comeback.

The problem with Applebaum's two books – and some sympathy is appropriate – is that while with great journalistic skill she pulls together a convincing diagnosis, her policy prescriptions are either too generic or underemphasise the powerful forces that will block their impact. Most notably getting some control over cyber-subversion and political interference of a sophisticated kind on social media platforms seems intractable. (The arrest of the *Telegram* CEO, Pavel Durov, in France suggests one possibility). She also – laudably - advocates non-violent resistance while acknowledging the terrible toll of civilian casualties that resulted from street demonstrations and resistance in Iran, Myanmar, Egypt, Syria and other authoritarian States. She is right that autocratic drift, the ubiquity of corruption enriching political leaders for whom elections are a form of 'decoration', needs calling out. But her suggestion that civil society in democracies, as well as diasporas, should see themselves linked to citizens in autocratic regimes, faces the longstanding dilemma: "foreign interference, working for a foreign power" is the first thing on the charge sheet.

Autocracy, Inc. provides a welcome coherent analysis of the kleptocracy network from a prominent centre-right figure. There are very few lacunae in the story Applebaum tells. You get a handle on a vital security topic in double-quick time. It was news to me that an emphasis on a 'multipolar world' is a key authoritarian card played to justify repressive political systems, or that the repetition of 'the decadent West' is primarily aimed at non-aligned nations.

Applebaum's warning is timely. It explains why States need to pool expertise to counter effectively the combined forces against democracy. There is no doubt the way forward will be demanding

for democratic States struggling with overwhelming internal problems created not by authoritarian States but by feckless governments, bankers, tech-giants and, secondarily, by the international energy companies.

*Talking about the book in Union Chapel, Compton Terrace,
London N1 2UN, September 2nd Doors open 18.00

PUTIN'S NEXT MOVE

10.10.2024

There is no shortage of experts predicting what Putin may do if Zelensky fires his Western long-range ATACMS (army tactical missile systems) deep into Russia. On Syria's borders are both US military bases and Russian including Putin's strategically important naval base at Tartus on the Mediterranean. But opinions how Russia might respond to a major Israeli attack on Iran, with US back-up, are notable by their absence. Instead, we hear repeated, imprecise warnings of a 'wider war in the Middle East'. How wide though?

From the inception of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, like Iran, Russia provided Assad with military aid. And from late 2011 Iran sent Revolutionary Guard Forces (IRCG) to join the Hezbollah militias propping up Assad's collapsing regime. In July 2015 General Qasem Soleimani, later assassinated by Israel, visited Moscow to coordinate military tactics. Two months later Russia intervened decisively with its air-force and troops including Wagner Group irregulars. The resultant bombing and slaughter set a pattern for future Russian war crimes.

"A red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilised", the words of President Obama in August 2012. Almost a year to the day President Assad used sarin gas on the population of Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, killing some 1,400. No US military intervention against the Syrian regime followed. For a variety of reasons, not least the US' previous debacles in Somalia and Iraq, the red line had been erased. In 2014, a US-led coalition did act but in an air campaign against ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front in Syria. An opportunity for Putin had opened up. In 2015, Russian firepower was turned indiscriminately on the Free Syrian Army fighting Assad whose

murderous regime was helped cling onto power. Syria fell apart, hundreds of thousands died, 6.7 million left the country mainly to Turkey and Lebanon, and 6.8 were internally displaced. Syria became a haven for militias and terrorist groups.

Fast forward to today. It is almost a year since Iran's Deputy Defence Minister, Brigadier General Mahdi Farah, announced the forthcoming delivery of 24 Russian Sukhoi fighter jets and Russia is also believed to be in receipt of some 200 Iranian surface-to-surface short range (75 kms) battlefield missiles and to be supported in manufacturing drones for its war in Ukraine. How Russia would respond to a major Israeli attack on Iran, with or without US support, remains speculation. But Putin's past record offers some clues.

Catherine Belton's *Putin's People: How the KGB took back Russia and then took on the West* (William Collins 2020) presents Putin as an adept practitioner of the dissimulation, oppression and criminality of the Russian intelligence services both internally and externally. He, and they, foresaw the collapse of Soviet communism, were determined to retain power in any new dispensation, and moved KGB funds into overseas accounts, notably through the 'Londongrad laundromat'.

In the 1990s, Putin deployed his training in deception as a KGB lieutenant colonel, his spy's divided personality, to great effect, hiding ruthless ambition, saying what his listeners wanted to hear, and for several years took in both Angela Merkel and Tony Blair. He had risen from a modest KGB post in Dresden organising the smuggling of Western embargoed technology into Russia. Then, via the mayor's office in St. Petersburg (deputy mayor in 1994), he became a trusted advisor to President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999). The next task was to remove Yeltsin and his entourage and become President, then to use of the organs of state to bring the primary beneficiaries of Western enforced privatisation, the

oligarchs, to heel, and concentrate power in his own hands. State capture, taking over functioning institutions, required and allowed the gradual accumulation of power, national wealth plundered by selected associates, predominantly FSB, successor to the KGB. Belton tracks the process in extraordinary detail.

Until it was too late few Western politicians seemed alarmed that Putin was creating a mafia-style autocracy, opponents assassinated or wasting away in Siberian gulags and prisons, punished for disloyalty. Meanwhile huge sums of money that could be used as future FSB and GRU (military intelligence) *obschak*, slush fund for subverting democracy, was flowing into London and offshore banks. Bankers, lawyers and reputation managers in London took their fees, oligarchs bought up prime property driving up prices, and FSB enemies were assassinated.

But like any good spy Putin needed a good cover story. It was sitting there waiting for him amongst Russia's economic ruins, the wreckage of the loss of the Soviet Union, and America's growing influence in Georgia and Ukraine. He, Putin, the story ran, had taken up the Presidency to restore the fatherland and return Russia to its imperial glory. Belton suggests that Putin picked up this Tsarist-sounding nationalism in the 1990s from Paris-based aristocratic White Russians who had fled the Bolshevik Revolution and whom he had met and liked. Putin's adoption of the Russian Orthodoxy that White Russians held dear, as an ideological substitute for communism, fits this analysis.

I visited Moscow in 1990 and met with Gorbachev's religious advisers. They were bewailing the loss of 'communist morality'. Would Christianity take its place, they asked me? Putin, several years later, seems to have had a similar idea alleging that he'd been secretly baptised by his mother. Archbishop Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, most likely a former KGB asset - undiplomatically warned by Pope Francis not to become "Putin's

altar boy”- was a natural ally. Army officers were even sent to the Russian Orthodox monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos for religious retreats. Kirill proclaimed Ukraine a Holy War.

Putin shares space satellite programmes with Iran, contempt for ‘Western decadence’, rejection of all things LGBTQ+, and, of course, the rhetoric and reality of hatred of the USA. Beyond the distorted world of Putin’s propaganda Russia as Christian bulwark against Western secularism seems bizarre. After Afghanistan, Russia’s brutal conflict in Chechnya involving Sunni jihadists, the terrible 2004 Beslan school slaughter of young children and the horrors of ISIS, and with American bases in most Sunni States, it’s not surprising Russia might be more comfortable with the geopolitics of Iran, a Shi’a-led State.

What then is Putin’s next move in the Middle East? Russia received a Hamas delegation in Moscow in 2023. It has de facto abandoned its former balanced position on the Palestine-Israel conflict. But this does not amount to the Kremlin committing Russian military forces to support Iran against Israel. The IRCG are competing with the needs of Russian forces in Ukraine. Iran even denies that the awaited delivery of Russian Sukhoi fighters is imminent.

Putin will continue attempting to use disinformation and cyber-attacks to disrupt UK society as punishment, not for support of Israel, but for Britain’s outspoken role in Europe championing Ukraine. His immediate task is getting Trump elected and US support for Ukraine curtailed, the decisive victory this would give Russia in the Ukraine war, putting NATO in jeopardy. Ukraine takes, by far, priority over Palestinians, Lebanese and Iranians. One thing is sure: Putin will increase his cyber efforts to influence the November US presidential elections and put his friend, Donald Trump, in the White House again.

USA

WHAT WAS ALL THAT BIDEN-BASHING ABOUT?

27.08.2021

President Biden has taken a lot of stick over Afghanistan, some of it justified. From Tony Blair to the Tory back-benches, in Parliament and on the BBC, we have been treated to days of passionate denunciation of American withdrawal – announced, of course, long before the current rush to blame. A miasma of unreality and theatricality rose from all the understandable political emotion and anguish.

It is as if in Clausewitz's account of the nature of war, his mixture of emotion, chance and rational calculation, the rational can simply be ignored. "War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will", Clausewitz wrote - to balance his war as 'politics by another means'. The Taliban applied his lesson successfully. From Trump to Biden, as a consequence of chains of policies, decisions, and mission-creep, and as a result of a successful insurgency against a corrupt government and foreign invaders, the US was finally forced to submit to the Taliban's will, negotiating and implementing its own exit from Afghanistan. It is not Biden's decision that will determine the outcome for thousands of fleeing Afghans seeking but the Taliban's.

According to Aristotle, a dramatic tragedy needs to obey the three unities of place, time and action. Reacting to the retreat into Kabul airport, the flights and chaos of the last week in and around it, we find political leaders playing their parts in such a tragedy. The G7, calling for the USA to extend the withdrawal time to allow more Afghans to escape, pitted NATO members against an American President, a President who rationally calculated that this

course of action would escalate into a disastrous fire-fight with the Taliban lobbing mortars into the airport and fierce ground assaults on US forces trying to hold a perimeter (as Daniel Johnson indicates *TheArticle* 25/08). It is and was a tragic dilemma. But it was Biden who behaved like a rational statesman and refused.

It is perfectly understandable that denial and raw emotion prompted the positions taken up by MPs who had served in Afghanistan and played military roles in the tragedy. But it is not obvious why so many others took the opportunity to scapegoat Biden. Did they seriously think that more troops flown into Kabul airport would have kept it open for flights without it becoming a modern Alamo? Did they advocate a position they knew would be untenable to put pressure on the Taliban? Were they just ‘virtue signalling’, or in the case of Britain just trying to ‘punch above its weight’? And doesn’t the appalling ISIS terrorist atrocity at Kabul airport suggest at least one area of common concern between NATO and the Taliban that will require cooperation?

Perhaps the Biden-bashing sprang from deeper causes than his misjudging the resolve to fight of the Afghan National Army who in many instances fled the Taliban without firing a shot, or even his failure to foresee the corrupt government would collapse like the proverbial house of cards. Given the lack of clear and up-to-date intelligence from rural areas, a hasty withdrawal was inevitable. The CIA can claim to have presented the Commander in Chief with sudden collapse as one of several possible scenarios depending on the amount of American force available on the ground and in the air. But in a matter of a week or two abandoning a vast armoury of US military equipment?

Apart from Canada, all the loudly lamenting G7 members have at some point passed through a significant period of imperial ambition, and some have experienced imperial grandeur. Their dream of defying the victorious Taliban seems a post-imperial

fantasy. Perhaps these Prime Ministers and Presidents still believe in some inviolable right to order the world and export Western values, and couldn't recognise their own hubris and its consequences. Or perhaps we were watching a – deflected - fear of a US isolationism that long preceded Biden.

It is not as if US isolationism versus intervention was a new issue. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff then US Secretary of State, and Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Defence, along with Tony Blair and his chief of staff in the UK, Jonathan Powell, had debated the issue before 9/11 including drawing up criteria such interventions must meet. Tony Blair's wide-ranging 24 April 1999 speech in Chicago after the atrocities in Kosovo – justifying intervention and bombing - was a significant contribution. There was also the UN World Summit in 2005 on 'The Responsibility to Protect' that defined circumstances that required international intervention, looking back on the failure of any world power to intervene in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Blair, in a recent speech opposing American withdrawal called Biden's use of the slogan 'forever wars' as 'imbecilic'. But didn't Biden's decision to leave by 31 August comply with the very criteria for military action which Blair had proposed in his Chicago speech? In Chicago he had said "Third, on the basis of a practical assessment of the situation, are there military operations we can sensibly and prudently undertake?" Breaking the agreement to leave by the end of the month concluded with the Taliban would have been neither sensible nor prudent. It could not have succeeded without massive military re-engagement and loss of life.

The aura of unreality surrounding this widespread denunciation of Biden, the assumption that America has only to say the word and the date of the exit could be changed, may spring from elsewhere: delayed recognition that US isolationism is here to stay,

or fear that the USA was changing its strategic priorities, turning its back on Europe to concentrate on China. Nothing new here. Blair's Chicago speech ended: "I say to you: never fall again for the doctrine of isolationism. The world cannot afford it. Stay a country, outward-looking, with the vision and imagination that is your nature. And realise that in Britain you have a friend and an ally that will stand with you, work with you, fashion with you the design of a future built on peace and prosperity for all, which is the only dream that makes humanity worth preserving". There was surely some element of fear this was a fading dream lurking behind the attacks on Biden for his failure to consult with his allies.

Some clear and specific reassurances from the American President, if not some apology and explanation for the lack of consultation with his NATO allies, are long overdue. We must now respond to the consequences of the change in US priorities. But like COVID we are going to have to live with the Taliban More tragically, so are the Afghan people.

see TheArticle 27/08/2021

POOR OLD JO BIDEN OR POOR OLD US?

12.11.2021

President Biden has led in Glasgow with his outreach to Beijing and an announcement on cooperation on Climate Change. But recent US Gallup polls put his positive ratings at 42%, the second lowest yet at this point in any previous presidency. Trump dropped to 37%. Psephological wisdom has it that going below 50% in the ratings means losing 37 Congressional seats. Though Biden's immediate problem is two maverick Democrat Senators, Joe Manchin, senior Senator for West Virginia (the second poorest State in the USA) and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona (where Sinema is the first Democrat Senator for twenty years and where in 2020 Biden narrowly won the State's delegation to the National Electoral College).

Each individual Senator matters. The Democrats in the Senate are working with a 50-50 split with the Vice-President, Kamala Harris as president of the Senate, presiding over its proceedings and currently holding a tie-breaking vote. Manchin who has considerable political funding from oil and gas companies is delaying Biden's \$1.75 trillion *Build Back Better* social spending and climate change bill, known as the Reconciliation Bill – whittled down in negotiations with the Republicans from \$3.5 trillion and to be spent over ten years. Sinema won't support getting rid of the filibuster a key weapon in the hands of the Republicans who are determined to block Biden's social and climate plans. The Democrats have got a bi-partisan \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill through Senate, but Democrat leader Nancy Pelosi has been traded its progress in Congress against the Republicans unblocking Biden's Reconciliation Bill for a while. The infrastructure bill was finally passed on 5 November. But with

the US economy not rebounding fast enough, Biden is still under enormous pressure.

A core plank within traditional Republican ideology, like that of the old-style Conservative Party here in the UK, is small State good, big State bad. But the 2008 financial crisis and the 2019-2021 COVID pandemic proved that major government intervention in times of crisis is essential. The same is true of Climate Change if we are to contain global temperature rise at liveable levels and avoid catastrophe. This is the context in which Brandeis University Professor Robert Kuttner asks in the *New York Review of Books* (18 November 2021) if Biden is “ready to insist that full-on planning and explicit targeting of vital industries” is urgently needed. Indications are that he is.

In February, with his feet barely under his desk in the Oval Office, Biden issued Executive Order 14017 tasking the National Security Council and National Economic Council to undertake reviews of the vulnerability of the USA’s supply chains for, amongst others, semi-conductors and electric car batteries. What he received in June was a far ranging Keynesian recipe for a replay of Roosevelt’s New Deal coupled with a vision of ‘government led scientific advances as the main engine of growth’ following the prescription of the former Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950). The implications of such an approach to Climate Change is not difficult to discern. Biden is trying to marshal substantial government financial support to realise economic change in pursuit of this vision. This is not some minor battle in the culture wars but a well-defended front manned by die-hard Republicans, a potential Stalingrad for Biden.

You could argue that getting to net-zero by 2050 will need the sort of command economy created during the Second World War. Think of the production of Spitfires in Britain, recently celebrated in BBC documentaries. Think of the female labour drafted onto

the land and into munitions factories. In the USA no cars for civilian use were produced between February 1942 and October 1945. Fordist production lines were all converted to war production. For military vehicles and aircraft then read electric cars, wind turbines, solar cells, and carbon capture technologies now.

But the thought of Boris Johnson and his clique directing a command economy doesn't bear thinking about. In a future planet-saving economy the alternative to a full-blown command economy could be substantial sector-specific government investment in key technologies – a route taken by several East Asian economies in the 1990s and substantial financial support for transformations in the life of the poor – taken because of the pandemic between 2019-2021 in the USA with a significant and remarkable decrease in poverty. But the old taboos are again reasserting themselves.

Decisive action by government itself to shape their national future economic activity seemed to take second place in Glasgow. Instead we have the impressive pledges by corporations and financial services to invest in climate friendly production aimed at reaching net-zero. Recognition of their power and potential for good is welcome. Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England until 2020, recognises that it is not enough and government has to take a firm steer. But he has done an outstanding job in putting a case that Supply and Demand, the market, will direct the money where the action needs to be. Let's hope so. Let's hope against hope so. But Adam Smith was not facing runaway climate warming.

If ever there was an issue of national security, as Biden recognised by involving his National Security Agency in his economic reviews (they are moving on to energy in 2022), it is Climate Change. And national security, in Republican terms a

good thing, requires national planning and targeting of substantial amounts of public money to mitigate Climate Change, in Republican terms a bad thing. Ideology is doing more than getting in the way of a bi-partisan solution. It threatens national and global security.

Can Biden convince American voters and both Houses of Congress that half-measures are not enough, that a Republican victory, with or without Trump, spells a terrible setback that will cost lives in the USA and around the world? Can he make a divided society understand the really important choices? Some journalists have taken to calling him ‘Poor Old Joe’. It’s poor old us if he doesn’t succeed.

Turning to the UK with Biden’s dilemma in mind, can the British government turn rhetoric into concrete national plans commensurate with the threat of global warming? Can it take the public with it during such a radical transformation? These are the choices that will profoundly alter the lives of the next generation. . It is time to finally drop longstanding economic taboos.

BRITAIN, USA & FRANCE: QUARRELS
ANCIENT & MODERN

10.12.2021

Britain, France and the USA fall in an out of love regularly. Relations between Britain and France have recently reached a new low point. A number of disputes are commonly presented as the reason. But there is one ultimate cause: mutual hostility. Mutual hostility plays well in politics on both sides of the Channel. Yet, we are neighbours and share a broad spectrum of democratic values. This raises the question: why?

A long history of conflicts large and small has to bear some of the blame. Nothing extraordinary in that. It was an American writer, James Baldwin who said: “People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them”, a reflection on racism in the USA but the aphorism applies no less to the UK and France, and not just to racism.

Thanks to decades of Second World War movies, in Britain we often seem trapped, not in the glory of Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, but in our memory of May 1940, the heroic, alone-against-all-odds stand after France fell. Not such a bad trap when it comes to sustaining a sturdy sense of national identity during loss of Empire, but a misleading guide for navigating the contemporary world of great power blocs and militarised autocracies. Policy and diplomacy require a finer grained understanding of history. The military historian, Professor Michael Neiberg, in his recent *When France Fell; The Vichy Crisis And The Fate Of The Anglo-American Alliance* (Harvard University Press) provides it.

“When we mislead ourselves about our past, we not only fail to learn, but we sometimes learn exactly the wrong lessons”, Neiberg warns. Well, we mislead ourselves when we fail to acknowledge

that Hitler began losing the war after he invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, and fail to recognise how much we owed to the Soviets' dreadful sacrifice of human life. We also misread the impact of events by forgetting that the USA in 1940 was nothing like the incomparable military force it became and is today.

The fall of France was a mighty shock not only to us but to a militarily weak USA. Kabul taken in a week was nothing compared to the surprise of Paris taken in a month - supposedly protected by the 'impregnable' Maginot line but breached at Sedan. The Americans saw this calamitous rout as the disappearance of a vital defensive barrier from the *Wehrmacht* thrusting west to the Atlantic. They feared, with a touch of paranoia, possible threats to the USA by coups in Latin American states and French colonial possessions becoming available as Nazi launch-pads for attacks. Unsurprisingly they thought that Britain would be the next to fall.

As colonial powers Britain and France had large and powerful navies. After the French armistice with the Germans on 22 June 1940, American policy was directed at stopping the Nazis getting hold of the French fleet: it consisted, according to Neiberg, of an aircraft carrier, eight battleships, twenty cruisers, seventy destroyers and seventy-eight submarines. To Britain's chagrin, President Roosevelt recognised Vichy – (essentially the south-east two-fifths of France beyond the extensive Nazi occupied zone minus the French coast) – largely to keep Marshall Philippe Pétain, its figurehead and hero of the First World War, from handing, or being forced to hand over, his ships to the Nazis. It was an embrace based on fear.

On 3 July 1940, Churchill authorised an attack on the French naval base of *Mers-el-Kébir*, Oran, Algeria, killing 1,300 French sailors and destroying or wrecking three battleships and four destroyers. The battleship *Richelieu*, the pride of the French fleet

undergoing repairs in Dakar on the West African coast, was also attacked and disabled. The Americans denounced the British action in public but breathed a modest sigh of relief in private. The French never forgot Churchill's ruthless attack on an erstwhile 'ally'.

Admiral Jean-François Darlan, Commander-in-Chief of the French navy, was an unscrupulous quisling interested only in backing the winning side to forge a path to power, he rose rapidly to become de facto head of the Vichy Government under Pétain, and sent countless French Jews to their death. He surfed an incipient French civil war. General de Gaulle called him 'the root of evil'. Neiberg memorably corroborates de Gaulle's assessment, quoting a description from an American officer: "a short, bald-headed, pink-faced, needle-nosed, sharp-chinned little weasel".

The USA entered the war in December 1941 after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour. North Africa and its ports had already become strategically critical. Control was contested by Vichy France in the form of Darlan, briefly 'High Commissioner of France for North and West Africa' until his assassination on Christmas Eve 1942, and the Americans and British who landed 73,000 troops on the Moroccan and Algerian coasts in November 1942 to engage the German forces in Tunisia. The Americans continued reluctantly to back Darlan, who was caught in Casablanca, and had to change sides becoming the Americans own 'weasel' until two bullets from a French monarchist liberated them from their flawed policy towards Vichy. The British, not grinning but bearing it, supported de Gaulle, their 'Cross of Lorraine' in London, and in this rare instance shared his opinion.

In retrospect, I would suggest US support for Vichy and Darlan set a pattern for their later backing of murderous dictatorships in Latin America. The motto for the early years of the CIA should

have been ‘Coups Are Us’, two major blunders in the 1950s each with damaging consequences: Guatemala and Iran. As Talleyrand said of the restored Bourbon dynasty post-Napoleon: “They had learned nothing and forgotten nothing”.

Apart from the military forces of the Third Reich, there were other fears shared by the Western Allies: communist subversion and anti-colonial uprisings, notably Islamic ones. But there was little love lost between them. Roosevelt couldn’t stand de Gaulle’s grandiloquence, associating him with the French Resistance viewed as a hotbed of socialists and communists. Holding his nose the US kept lines more than open to Vichy France. While Churchill knew that he had to put up with de Gaulle and the Free French however infuriating. Nothing was forgotten. In 1963 de Gaulle gave as explanation for his refusal to admit Britain to the European Economic Community his belief that it would mean opening the door to US influence. And it wasn’t just an excuse. Relations with Washington were bad and he downgraded his participation in NATO in 1966.

When France Fell is a compelling read. It is as if a Norma Percy documentary had been turned into a book, translating to print that fly on the wall experience and intimacy she achieves through interviews with the big players who created the action or tried to catch up with it. It provides corrective insights to a history we thought we understood. If you are interested in these critical years, it tells a surprisingly exciting and gripping story. The book would even make Christmas reading. If you think we should learn from how the proponents of *realpolitik* can get it very wrong, as in US policy towards Vichy, and draw the wrong lessons from it, it’s definitely for you.

HAS AMERICA HIJACKED CHRISTIANITY?

04.01.2023

The delayed UK 2021 Census showed that the number of those identifying themselves as Christian had continued to fall and was now less than half of the overall population. A flurry of news stories brought tidings of secular joy at further evidence of Christianity's decline, and variations on 'oh dear' from the different Churches.

British politicians still generally don't 'do God', nor are they likely to. In this sense they may reflect public opinion, though the present Prime Minister does Diwali. Pan to President Trump outside St. John's Episcopal church parish house, Washington, Bible in hand. US politicians, predominantly Republicans, for a variety of reasons increasingly do God.

The US Democrats might look enviously at Britain's comfortable secularity. Evangelicals make up almost a quarter of the US population of 332 million and dominate American Protestantism. They share related commitments and attitudes: to biblical literalism, rejection of ideas other than their own, and for many, strange ideas about the end of the world alongside core Christian beliefs. In November 2020, White evangelical Christians voted 84% for Trump - up from 77% in 2016 against Hillary Clinton. The USA is in fact becoming more secular like the UK. Of people born in the US between 1981 and 1996 the respected Pew Foundation reported that 40% said they had no religion. Yet US politics are becoming more religious.

Since Reagan (1981-1989), Republicanism has increasingly appropriated the themes of its powerful evangelical backers. Thanks to the Republicans a package of religious issues, notably abortion, gay marriage, and gender, forced their way into Congress and the Supreme Court. In the 1970s abortion, Roe

versus Wade, was essentially a Catholic issue. It had become a central evangelical concern by the 2020 Presidential election arousing passionate responses on both sides of the argument.

Both the leading British Parties in their pursuit of electoral advantage look over their shoulder at the tactics of the two American Parties. Both have used data collection and targeted campaigning. The Conservative Party has picked up a trick or two from the Republican Party, its wrecking ball tactics, its voter suppression. The Elections Act 2022 demands visual ID on the spurious grounds eliminating virtually non-existent identity fraud. It will have the effect of discouraging minority, younger and poorer voters.

Much of our contemporary insecurity derives from the rise and increased threat of unaccountable, authoritarian regimes, but also from the undermining of democracy by the politics of irrationality, by culture wars, lies and deceit. The takeover of American Protestantism by evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity decoupled faith from reason providing a religious antechamber to QAnon. US democracy itself barely survived the stress-test set by Trump. America's slide in the last decade into near insurrection at the beginning of 2021, the British government's rapid descent into the politics of factional farce, give a whole new meaning to the 'special relationship'.

David Hollinger in his recently published *Christianity's American Fate* presents US Christianity as a religious 'two party' system mapped onto the two political Parties. He labels the old mainstream Churches 'ecumenical': open to multi-culturalism and dialogue, at ease with enlightenment and science, committed to social justice - yet finding its congregations drifting away. The alternative - well-defended, populist, aggressive and burgeoning - Christian communities are immersed in culture wars set on winning at all costs. Reality is, of course, more nuanced with Jim

Wallis' evangelical Sojourners notable for its 'social Gospel'. Pastor Rick Warren's Saddleback mega-church has charted new territory (see the success of his book *A Purpose Driven Life*) helping minorities and outsiders and working on AIDS and recovery from addiction.

Roman Catholics like the evangelicals now make up nearly a quarter of the US population thanks to the growing number of Hispanic Americans. According to the Pew Foundation, the largely Catholic 32 million Hispanic voters split one third Republican two-thirds Democrat. But interestingly six out of ten White Catholics who attend mass monthly, or more often, voted for Trump in 2020 against 36% for their fellow Catholic Jo Biden. At this time there were 22 Catholic senators of whom 10 were Republican and 12 Democrat compared to 1965 when all but two of the then 14 Catholic senators were Democrats.

Because of the size and wealth of the US Church, the Catholic Church globally has felt the backwash from this growing politicisation. The movement against the present Pope, motivated both by the style and inclusive openness of his papacy, outside the Vatican is primarily US-based. In August 2018 Archbishop Carlo Viganò the Apostolic Nuncio (Vatican ambassador) to the USA from 2011-2016, led attempts to discredit Francis and push him to resign. Viganò was supported by some two dozen US bishops.

The recently elected leading officials of the US Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) give some idea of the Pope's problem. The President is Timothy Broglio, Archbishop to the military services, who in contradiction to the Pope's message to get vaccinated called for a waiver for troops not wanting COVID vaccination. Broglio has also linked clerical homosexuality to sex abuse scandals, a widely rejected assertion.

The Vice-President is Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore chairman of the committee on Pro-Life Activities. Victims of the

Maryland clerical sex abuse have called for his resignation. Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma is chairman of the key Committee on Priorities and Plans and current Secretary to the Conference. He has spoken out in favour of abolishing the death penalty but has also expressed “deepest respect for Archbishop Viganò and his personal integrity.”

The former President of the USCCB, Archbishop Gomez of Los Angeles and Archbishop Coakley both hold advisory roles to a wealthy business association, NAPA (founded in a late 19th century in a small North California town of that name), which attracts super-rich members with strong right-wing views and Republican sympathies. It promotes in sympathy with powerful figures in the US hierarchy an ecclesial-political agenda opposed in most ways to Pope Francis’ vision for the Church and Society, expressed in his speeches and encyclicals and shared to a great extent here in Britain by the Anglican and Catholic leaderships.

The late Pope Benedict who died on New Year’s Eve will perhaps best be remembered in Britain for his Westminster Hall speech on 17 December 2010 about the moral underpinnings of democracy. He found sympathetic listeners. “I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith - the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization”. A message the USA Republicans would do well to heed.

Thanks to the theological common-sense and caution of the Evangelical Alliance in Britain, the Anglican Church and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales as well as the Scottish Bishops, we have avoided the dangerous ecclesial-political convergence of the USA. Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism remain wedded to both faith and reason

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

and have an important contribution to make to our weakened democracies.

The New Year holds many problems for both President Biden and Pope Francis who face heavy pressures that are related but different. The erosion of democracy on both sides of the Atlantic needs urgent remedy. And in 2023 commentators should resolve to remember that while numbers matter when it comes to church membership, numbers, vide the USA, are not necessarily a sign of good health.

JO BIDEN & OLD AGE: EXPERIENCE OR INFIRMITY?

03.07.2023

I don't want to be a killjoy but the mirth with which signs of Jo Biden's age are greeted strikes me as mindless. Good for a few laughs on *Have I got News for You*. Look, ha, ha, ha, he's just tumbled over a sandbag. Trump at his rallies will be laughing along too.

"If the measure of a man is his gait, speech and memory for trivialities, then we are lost", declared a letter-writer to the *New York Times* on 7 June summing up the dilemma facing uncertain voters in next year's US Presidential elections. Will Jo Biden at 81 with some of the frailties of old-age be up to the job?

The criminal investigations besetting Trump have only reinforced his cult status with his core vote. Can he count on Biden's support eroding under withering scrutiny in the hostile media? Will the Republican campaign gain traction with each stumble, fall and wrong word?

Biden is often compared on the geriatric scale to the elderly – a decade younger actually – President Ronald Reagan. Reagan, aged 72, touched an approval low of 35% in early 1983 but in 1984 went on to win a second term in a landslide victory against the lackluster Walter Mondale. Like the actor he was, Reagan played the folksy grandfather and the American public, used to TV stereotypes, responded positively. President Biden's performance is less assured. His approval ratings have been bumping along at around 41% for many months. Recently there has been a small tick upwards.

For Biden a better comparison than Reagan would be with President Lyndon Baines Johnson (1963-1969) whose knowledge of politics 'on the Hill' and around State governors was legendary.

Biden too has brought stellar negotiating and deal-making skills as well as long experience to the Presidency. He has a talented and loyal team around him, with an outstanding Secretary of State, Antony Blinken though Kamala Harris as Vice-President is unpopular. Already the list of Biden's executive orders and bills is impressive.

US Congressional Acts are complex composites and US congressional representatives are far more independent of any Party discipline than their British counterparts. Biden's skills operating within this difficult terrain, made even more difficult by a politicised Supreme Court, are demonstrated by his handling of his portmanteau Build Back Better plan, a 'blue-collar blueprint' to win back poorer workers. When key parts were blocked in the Senate (as was his proposed George Floyd Justice in Policing Act) Biden made acceptable amendments and changed the bill's name to the Inflation Reduction Act finally signed off on 16 August 2022. The prices of prescription drugs were lowered, offering \$800 annual savings on health insurance for 13 million citizens, and providing investment of \$369 billion over ten years for climate change mitigation and clean energy use. Taxation was tightened and steps approved to reduce national debt. The Act built on the eye-watering, job-creating, \$1.2 trillion Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill signed on 15 November 2021.

Also in 2022, Biden's Safer Communities Act included, amongst other minor provisions, enhanced background checks on under 21s buying guns. A tiny step forward but the first successful – bipartisan - attempt at gun control legislation in thirty years. And a bipartisan agreement concluded this year's ritual 'debt-ceiling crisis' - it stood at an epic \$31.4 trillion - enabling Biden to sign the Fiscal Responsibility Act on 3 June. But none of this stream of legislation seems to have impressed an American public; the

perception is that the US economy is faring badly with the blame falling on Biden.

Aware that his approval rating for his overall handling of the economy was only 34%, Biden delivered a much-prepared speech in the Old Chicago Post Office on 28 June. He sounded distinctly Keynesian presenting what amounted to aggregate demand as the most important driving force in the economy and promising government intervention to increase output. These are all echoes of Roosevelt's New Deal. Contrasting Democrat economic policy with Republican trickle down, he rejected, "the belief we should cut taxes for the wealthy and big corporations...that we should shrink public investment in infrastructure and public education", thus summarising 'Reaganomics'. Instead the economy should be built "from the middle out and the bottom up". In a room festooned with 'Bidenomics' banners, an attack term used by the Republicans, the speech was a bold counter-branding exercise, not without risk.

Biden's core electoral support lies amongst more educated and Black voters as well as to a lesser degree Latinos. US Catholics comprise a little over a quarter of the national vote. You might think the large Catholic community would support a fellow Catholic, and he did attract more support than Hillary Clinton, but about half voted for Trump in the 2020 Presidential elections. Despite an impressive record harmonising with official Catholic positions on climate change and social justice, Biden's support for abortion provision will be an obstacle to deriving any significant electoral advantage from Catholic voters.

Americans largely agree with the Supreme Court's *Roe v Wade* decision of 1973 which divided pregnancy into three phases. Opinion polls suggest 69% of Americans think abortion should be legal in the first three months of pregnancy, 37% in the next three and 22% in the final. The respected Pew Foundation finds that

76% of US Catholics think abortion should be legal in some cases/contexts but amongst Catholics who attend mass regularly there is a significantly higher level of pro-life conviction.

Biden has made several attempts to address this problem. At a recent fundraiser for his re-election campaign, he spoke approvingly of the tri-partite division citing the first three months of a pregnancy as a matter for the family, the second three for the doctors and the third for the State – to ban or to allow when needed to save the mother’s life. “I’m a practicing Catholic”, he said. “I’m not big on abortion. But guess what? Roe v Wade got it right”. Pope Francis, while avoiding direct censure, described the President’s religious position as ‘incoherence’. US policy on migration across the southern border is also contrary to Church teaching as well as the practice of many US Catholics of welcoming and supporting Latin American incomers. But for Biden to adopt the Church’s official moral stance would most likely deliver the USA into Trump-dominated Republican hands.

In a democracy you cannot win over voters without making some concessions to popular opinion. And if you cannot win over voters you cannot win elections and achieve even incremental change. J.F. Kennedy made it clear that his catholicism would not influence his conduct of the US Presidency. Biden seems more equivocal, with his piety far more up-front, but makes necessary concessions. And with a man like Trump trumpeting around the country ever ready to divide and destroy we should not too easily condemn Biden’s à la carte catholicism. Nor laugh him out of court for manifestations of old-age. As Bette Davis once said: “Old age ain’t no place for sissies” - especially if it’s being jeered at.

DAD'S ON KAMALA'S TICKET: IS TRUMP TOAST?

16.08.2024

The sigh of relief on 21 July when Jo Biden stepped down as Democrat presidential candidate was deafening. Within less than a fortnight the Democrats nominated Vice-President Kamala Harris to replace the outgoing President with ratification to take place at their 19 August National Convention.

After intense consultations, at a Philadelphia rally on 6 August Harris presented Minnesota Governor, Tim Walz, as her Vice-Presidential running mate. Walz memorably described Trump and his running mate, J.D. Vance, as “creepy” and “weird”. Walz’s humour and masterful engagement with his audience in an acceptance speech was striking. To those watching from afar it suddenly felt like Trump was toast.

The Harris-Walz ticket is nicely balanced. Kamala Harris, a former senator who now presides over the United States Senate and a former Attorney-General of California, tough on crime, modern and colourful, father Jamaican heritage, mother Indian heritage, husband Jewish. Walz, white, Lutheran and folksy with a track record of worker-friendly policy in Minnesota and a personal history that might have been designed to counter Trump.

The son of an aspiring Nebraska Catholic family, Walz followed his father, a school superintendent, into teaching. He was his school’s football coach - the nearest thing to a secular priest. In three years, he turned a dud team around to win a state-level schools’ championship. The stuff of movies. He also served 24 years as a US Army reservist and, before entering politics in 2005, taught in China, his interest in human rights gained during this rich experience continues.

The religious dimension of the Democrat ticket is perhaps less well balanced. And given the significant white evangelical Christian support for Trump, this matters. Since the attempted assassination, Trump has been ‘doing God’ more and has found a fruitful narrative as beneficiary of divine intervention. Kamala Harris is a member of the progressive Third Baptist Church of San Francisco, established in 1852. It is led by the Reverend Amos C. Brown, a respected former black civil rights activist - taught by Martin Luther King - who supports same-sex marriage. Tim Walz, raised a Catholic, joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), the most liberal branch of Lutheranism and the largest in Minnesota where it makes up 20% of the state’s Christian community, second only to Catholics. He acknowledges his debt to his Catholic family. “My mum and dad taught us: show generosity to your neighbours and work for the Common Good”. Walz avoids ideological language and presents down-to-earth policy. He is also passionately pro-choice seeing it as a basic human right. His Minnesota State *Protect Reproductive Options Act* says, “every individual has a fundamental right to make autonomous decisions about the individual’s own reproductive health”.

Abortion is a salient issue for US voters. Some 82% of Democrat voters disapprove of the Supreme Court’s overturning of the 1973 *Roe v Wade* ruling that unduly restrictive regulation of abortion by states was unconstitutional. Polling of all Catholic voters by the respected Pew Foundation in 2022 indicates that only 42% think abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, though for the smaller number of those who attend mass regularly (20%) the figure is 68%. Despite there being some 70 million American Catholics, pro-choice is politically a vote-winning position.

The voting behaviour of other groups in US Christian communities remains important. White male and conservative

Evangelical Christian voters notably helped Trump defeat Hillary Clinton in 2016. Against that precedent the religious implications of the Harris -Walz ticket might remain a vulnerability. But there are far too many political issues for religious positions to determine the result of the Election.

Trump, now at sea strategically, has fallen back on branding Kamala Harris a 'left-wing extremist'. His denunciation of his opponent as a dangerous radical with a 'crazy laugh' is manna for Trump's core constituency, but US Presidential elections are won or lost by swing and undecided marginal voters in seven battle-ground states: Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Georgia, North Carolina, Arizona, and Nevada. A spectrum of local and national issues, several of them falling into the category of social justice, will decide their choice. The most dangerous for Kamala Harris, whom Trump likes to call Biden's former 'border czar', (though she never had that role), is immigration.

It is the American Constitution itself which gives these battle ground states their peculiar importance. In the national vote, which is a stage in the overall electoral process, voters determine the members of the national Electoral College which in turn determines who will be the next President. How many each state is allowed depends on how many representatives the state has in the Federal House of Representatives plus two Senators – a number which is related to each state's population. In all but two small states, the winner of the popular vote takes all the Electoral College delegates. And it is possible to become President without winning the national vote; Donald Trump did this in 2016 with 77 electoral votes more than Hillary Clinton who beat him by 2.87 million popular votes.

In the majority of states, the result of the election is predictable, in UK terms 'safe'. California, the largest US state with 54 electoral votes, has been solidly Democrat since 1992 and

Minnesota, with 10 electoral votes, Democrat led since Richard Nixon's Republican landslide victory in 1972. As in the UK, the strategic priority is to hold your safe seats and gain the marginals. Fewer than 80,000 combined votes in three out of six of the key marginal states gave Trump the Presidency in 2016.

Kamala Harris has considerable ground to make up and she is making it up fast. She is currently behind Trump in only one of the marginals, Nevada, and that by a whisker. Much of the two campaigns is happening and will happen on social media. She performs well with a lightness of touch, laughing at Trump, and benefits from endorsements and funding from stars such as Beyoncé. "She does it all with a sense of joy" in Walz's unexpected words. The same could be said of Walz himself. Homey, mildly amusing videos featuring his daughter Hope are attracting the generally pro-Democrat Gen-Z voters (18-27). There is a touch of the Lib Dem leader, Ed Davey's, endearing antics. Dad (or Grandad) is on the ticket.

A week is a long time in politics and there are under twelve of them before America chooses a President. The US has never had a female President, let alone a black woman, and nobody knows how the idea will play with the Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. Never underestimate misogyny or racism. Never forget the power of repeated lies and disinformation. So even with Dad on the ticket, it is perhaps premature to assume Trump is toast.

ELECTION RIGGING: TRUMP'S BIG LIE

04.11.2024

Discrediting the US electoral process is the key weapon in Trump's assault on democracy. Trump will not stop insisting that this, and the previous, Presidential election was rigged. Win or lose, narrowly or not, on Tuesday 5h November, he will persist. He has been laying the foundations for his own authoritarian rule for years. The threat of election-linked violence is part of it.

In swing (marginal) States, the harassment of State officials and electoral officers, from the declaration of Biden's victory to the January 2021 attack on the Capitol, has continued. Radio 4's PM programme on 25th October featured an interview with Tammy Patrick, Chief Executive Officer for Programs at the National Association of Election officials, and a recognised expert in election administration who for eleven years had served as a Federal Compliance officer for elections in Maricopa County, Arizona (population 4.2 million). She revealed how serious pressure on officials has become. The offices of electoral commissions in Arizona, and other States, have been threatened by *MAGA* (Make America Great Again) extremists. Now, electoral offices need guards and some have even installed bullet-proof glass. And after family members were followed some electoral officers are driving rental cars.

After the 3 November 2020 election, 62 Republican lawsuits claiming widespread electoral fraud and irregularities were filed, without supporting evidence. Within the last two years, an additional 165 lawsuits have been filed, mainly by Republicans and conservative organisations attempting to ease Trump into the White House. The primary purpose of this unprecedented level of litigation is to sow doubt about the electoral process.

It is impossible to keep up with Trump's lies about the elections, which include claims that illegal, unregistered immigrants will be voting, postal votes will be stolen, and there will be widespread impersonation of registered voters. The illegal immigrant voter is a key figure in Trump's manipulation of fears of uncontrolled immigration. After extensive enquiries, Tammy Patrick reported that Vigilant checking of signatures on postal votes made any chance of potential fraud 'infinitesimal' and described the incidence of voter impersonation in 2020 as zero. Stuffing ballot boxes, a resort of the worst autocratic State leaders, isn't feasible due to the tightly controlled US procedures.

How to Rig an Election: Defending Democracy from the World's Despots by Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas (second edition 2024 Yale University Press), whilst focusing on already existing autocracies and 'counterfeit democracies', casts a light on Trump's threat to democracy as well as the importance of Electoral Commissions and observers. But elections can be, and are, rigged long before the main body of election observers are on the ground doing their observing. And even then, there are never enough observers to cover all the polling stations.

Amongst the recent proliferation of lawsuits, there are indications that attempts to manipulate and discredit the elections has partly shifted, from the voting itself towards a focus on rigging before the ballot papers are printed or digital voting systems set up: gerrymandering, voter suppression, disinformation, buying votes, intimidation of electoral officials. Though both the US Parties have been guilty of some of the above in the past, they are all major features of the Trump/Republican electoral playbook.

Gerrymandering goes back to 1812 and Governor of Massachusetts, Eldridge Gerry. He organised the State electoral map so that the bulk of his rival Federalists were squeezed into a handful the electoral districts. The ploy was noticed at the time.

Cheeseman and Klaas describe a cartoon in the *Boston Gazette* depicting one such newly formed district, shaped as a salamander with a forked tongue, captioned “the Gerrymander”. It stuck. Gerry was not re-elected Governor but did end up as James Madison’s Vice-President, dying in 1814.

Both US political Parties have been guilty of gerrymandering though the liberal Brennan Center for Justice, a New York University Law School think-tank, estimate that Republicans currently benefit most, gaining for them some 16 seats in the House of Representatives. In Presidential elections, the biggest effect is found in three marginal States, Pennsylvania (19 electoral college votes), where at time of writing is tied at 48% each, Michigan where Harris is 0.7%% ahead (15) and North Carolina (16) where you can choose which poll to believe. Massachusetts (9) is a good example of democrat gerrymandering where in 2020, Jo Biden won a huge majority, 68.5% against 28.6% for Trump, so gerrymandering did not alter the overall result. Gerry might be smiling. Significant gaps between the two contender Parties are typical of most States.

The second major form of rigging was, and is, voter suppression. The 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) outlawed discriminatory voting practices in the southern States, notably literacy tests, inaugurating a period of enfranchisement of black voters and minority groups. It also established a VRA formula for deciding which jurisdictions, States and localities, needed to submit changes in voting laws to the Federal Justice Department for ‘pre-clearance’. The 2013 Supreme Court *Shelby County* (Alabama) v *Holder* (Federal Attorney General), by 5-4, did away - as outdated and correspondingly unconstitutional - with the VRA formula. Dissenting Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg described the judgement as ‘like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet’.

In the following decade 23 States created new obstacles to voting largely through varied ID introducing stricter demands for voter identification. It was alleged that changes were intended to counter voter impersonation – which was non-existent. Those who could not produce a passport or a driving licence, predominantly the poor, would be turned away at the polling facility. It is estimated that in the marginal, northern State of Wisconsin 300,000 citizens lacked the required voter identification documents. Trump won the State by 30,000 votes. Nationally, voter suppression gave an advantage to the Republicans - the main reason for its implementation.

Incentivising voters by offering some form of reward – for the individual or the Party - or for registering to vote, is run-of-the-mill practice on several continents, but provided the voter believes their vote is secret, is the least reliable rigging method. It is also illegal. Whether Elon Musk’s sweepstake, available only to registered voters in swing States who sign a petition ‘In favour of Free Speech and the Right to Bear Arms’, might also be illegal is unclear. A daily draw rewards the winner with \$1 million could be interpreted as appealing to Republican sentiment against the Democrats’ desire for gun control. Philadelphia District Attorney, Larry Krassner, is suing Musk and his Political Action Committee which funds Trump’s campaign on the grounds of breaching election law. Illegal or not, Musk’s intervention highlights, as Tammy Patrick said in her interview, that elections should be about ‘the Will of the People not the will of the billionaires’.

Trump’s election rigging gambit must be taken seriously. It works. The administration of the US 2020 Presidential elections was carried out with due auditing, caution and integrity. The 2022 Electoral Count Reform Act makes it more difficult for Trump to reproduce the chaos around Presidential elections. But an

astonishing number of people believe his allegation that they are rigged. The rigging that has taken place, was inherited, or planned, is not there to thwart Trump's autocratic ambitions, but to fulfil them.

TRUMP THE SEQUEL, STIGLITZ & STARMER

11.12.2024

Nobody knows what awaits us as we brace for another Trump Presidency. Probably not even Trump. His “drill, baby, drill”, if heeded, threatens the future of the planet. Imposition of damaging tariffs is probable. Against China in 2018, he imposed \$200 billion’s worth of tariffs creating a full-blooded trade-war. Such a trade war bodes ill for the UK, Canada and Mexico.

Both the immediate and more distant future are deeply worrying. One possible palliative for jangling nerves is *People, Power and Profits: Progressive Capitalism For An Age of Discontents*, Penguin, 2019, by Joseph Stiglitz.

Why bother to review a five-year old book by an American economist? Stiglitz is much published, renowned and reviewed. The clue is in the publication date. He was writing in reaction to the first Trump Presidency when policies were emerging from the chaos. He has a lot to say of relevance to Britain’s future.

John Maynard Keynes, 1886-1946, believed investment, government spending and consumption raised output of goods and services, demand-side economics for short. A ‘New Keynesian’, Stiglitz diagnoses imperfect competition and a variety of market failures that require stabilisation by government’s deployment of fiscal policy, as well as nuts-and-bolts interventions, to increase growth. Think of Rachel Reeves’ budget which raised government spending by increasing borrowing and new taxes.

Stiglitz served as Chairman of President Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisers from 1995-1997 and, for the following three years, as Chief Economist of the World Bank where he became senior Vice-President. Awarded the Nobel Prize for economic sciences in 2001, he became an honorary member of the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences from 2003-2023. He is obviously

comfortable in the world of *Laudato Si*, 2015, and *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, embodying Pope Francis' thinking on the environmental crisis and society. As the title hints, he would be no less comfortable in a European social democrat government though MAGA-minded Americans would consider him a rampant leftist socialist.

There is nothing narrowly economic in Stiglitz's thinking. He writes about Trump's contemporary attacks on the US economy and political system but also links them to wider themes of society and science. "There are two pillars to the increases in our standards of living over the past 250 years: better understanding of how to organize society (checks and balances, rule of law), and better understanding of nature – the advances in science and technology. We've seen how Trump and his team have tried to undermine both". Trump today is now more aware of the constraints on him restructuring society and economy to serve the wealthy 1% of the US population, which has more than 40% of the US' wealth, and to which he belongs.

Stiglitz repeatedly underlines the importance of research and innovation as the wells-springs of economic success; "That is why it is essential for there to be large *public* investments in research, especially basic research, and in the kind of education system that can support the advance of knowledge". But is there enough weight and funding given to this by Starmer in his quest for growth long-term?

Much of what Stiglitz writes about trade, globalisation, inequality and social justice today's Labour Party would sign up to, even if initially facing tight, inherited financial constraints. These limitations show up most acutely in the difference between Jo Biden's massive financial commitment demonstrated in the August 2022 *Inflation Reduction Act* to counter climate change,

some hundreds of billions of dollars on clean energy, electric vehicles and carbon capture.

During his first term, President Trump was working to sideline scientific and environmental experts while promoting industry executives and lobbyists, who were eroding the capacity of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Interior and other government agencies intended to serve the common good. He was unpicking some 125 environmental rules as Stiglitz went to press.

National debt and global warming are rightly considered as matters of intergenerational justice. Stiglitz served as an expert witness for the plaintiffs in a 2021 Supreme Court case on the admissibility of a lawsuit, *Juliana versus the United States of America*, first filed in Oregon in 2015 seeking an injunction to phase out fossil fuels. It involved 21 children aged between 8-18 and a non-profit (NGO) *Our Children's Trust* specialising in what is known as Atmospheric Trust Litigation, based on the idea of the atmosphere being held in trust for future generations. Kelsey Cascadia Rose Juliana, who gave her surname to the case, was 15 at the time. Litigation on it is still in play and such cases have been brought to court, or attempts made to get cases heard, for a quarter of a century. Here, Friends of the Earth in UK have spearheaded climate change related lawsuits with varied success.

Where Stiglitz is vehement and Starmer subdued is on the significance of the global 2008 banking crisis and the failures of the financial services sector which Stiglitz sees as serving mainly themselves. The reckless greed of the bankers went unpunished in the UK and money that might have gone to public services went to bail-out those with the incredible gall of very rich who continued to award themselves with bumper bonuses. Part of the investment crisis faced by the UK government clearly comes from the perverse asocial, amoral, *modus operandi* of the banking sector.

The problem is the market power of the bankers and the information technology giants. We need both, but regulated, as both, in practice are indifferent to our spectacular levels of inequality.

The USA has the advantage of a written constitution which embodies a set of values. *People, Power and Profits* holds together with this scaffolding of values, the social and moral norms sustaining the human need for social cohesion and approval of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* which Adam Smith published in 1759. We too need to hear and understand how core values inform our economy and democracy, social and intergenerational justice, equality of opportunity. We too need more reason, less emotion, and tolerance for those who have suffered persecution, in determining the path to a fair society. And the Labour government needs to present its policies more coherently as the outcome of its values. Yes, it's still 'the vision thing'. Stiglitz decries the way the American dream is more myth than reality. Labour Party dreaming seems to stop short at growth and grim pragmatism.

We are lucky that our mistakes, cutting ourselves off from the European Customs Union and Common Market, isolating ourselves as a pretentious offshore island at a time of global perils, Prime Ministers who made us the laughingstock of the world, cannot compare with those of America. Despite our reduced means we do have a vision of what needs to be done about climate change. If Trump indeed dismantles all of Biden's good work on green energy, I don't think it would be unreasonable to describe it as a crime against humanity.

When considering the forthcoming Trump Presidency we may come to hear Karl Marx's adage "first time as tragedy, second time as farce" as words of hope. Meanwhile it's good to know there are people like Stiglitz still around, smart, secular, surviving and offering a way forward.

SO WILL TRUMP "PRESERVE, PROTECT AND DEFEND" THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION?

20.01.2025

Now that President Trump has taken office, Jo Biden's parting shot warning of the danger to American democracy posed by an oligarchy of the super-rich – assembled by President-Elect Trump – seems all the more timely. But it is not the only threat. The rule of law is the institutional foundation and safeguard of democracy. Once it is undermined democracy crumbles. There is now a real danger that politicization of the American legal system will weaken this vital safeguard.

During the 2016 American election campaign, Stephanie Clifford, a go-getter, not to say a hard-worker known as Stormy Daniels in what is politely known as adult entertainment, was given \$130,000 to deny an affair with the future President of the United States. Michael Dean Cohen, Trump's lawyer and fixer from 2006-2018, attended to the fraught details of paying Daniels for a non-disclosure document (NDA). *Playboy* model Karen McDougal had an affair with Trump at much the same time, not long after Trump's third marriage - to Melania Knauss - and received \$150,00 from another source. Not long before how to pay hush money gets onto the standard business school curriculum.

Daniel's NDA payment would prove a transaction too far in Trump's transactional politics. In 2018 Cohen was found guilty under campaign finance laws for attempting unlawfully to influence presidential elections and was fined and sentenced to three years in a federal prison in which he served thirteen and a half months. In 2021 New York State's Attorney General Office and the Manhattan District Attorney Office initiated a criminal investigation into Donald Trump's business activities. In March 2023 a New York Grand Jury convicted Trump on all 34 counts of

falsifying business records to hide the origins of the hush-money he paid via Cohen (prosecutors serve up a fraud in several parts corresponding to key documents). A week or so ago Judge Juan Merchan, despite an additional contempt of court conviction, gave Trump an unconditional discharge. Trump escaped even the \$50,000 fine given Cohen. Until an appellate court finds otherwise, Donald Trump may be described as the first convicted felon to be inaugurated President of the United States.

Andrew Weissmann is a former US federal prosecutor appointed by President G.W. Bush in 2004 as leader of the Enron Task Force investigating massive accounting fraud in the over \$60 billion oil company bankruptcy. He was also Chief of Fraud Investigations in the Justice Department 2015-2017. Weissman said this of the unconditional discharge. "Judge Merchan made it clear that it was only because of the presidency, not Donald Trump, that he was getting this". Weissman went on to say: "And all of that is an undermining of the rule of law. It's an undermining of who we think we are in this country, but also in the rest of the world, which I think is going to have lasting damage".

Very true. But the problem is even deeper than that. Entry into the judiciary in the American system, unlike the British, is not independent of its two major political parties. A wide variety of processes for judicial appointments exist. For example, the President nominates and the Senate confirms the appointment of Federal Supreme Court justices, Courts of Appeal judges and district (regional) courts. In 13 States, partisan elections are held to select all or most State and local judges. About half the US States hold elections for their own Supreme Courts and appellate courts. Perhaps fine in an ideal democracy. But at times of intense polarization in society this is neither in the interests of the rule of law nor the common good.

Recent partisan judgements by the US Supreme Court and judiciary are worrying. The Supreme Court ruled in July 2024 by 6-3 that a US President was “entitled at a minimum to presumptive immunity from prosecution” for acts on the official and unofficial borderline committed while President. And complete immunity for official acts. In other words Trump is given almost free rein to do what might land ordinary mortals in jail. The three dissenting Judges described the ruling as making the President “a king above the law”. It is unlikely he will ever face charges connected with the mob violence at the Capitol on 6 January 2020.

Rulings of the Supreme Court can have profound impacts on American society. On 29 June 2023, in a landmark case, *Students for Fair Admissions v University of Virginia*, the justices voted 6-3 against affirmative action on the grounds that certain policies violated the equal protection clause within the Constitution’s 14th Amendment. In the case of Harvard University, decided at the same time, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, a former Harvard student and member of its Board of Overseers, recused herself making it a 6-2 vote. Two rulings which have the potential to strike at policies supporting diversity, equity and inclusion. Comparable to the Court’s ruling on Presidential immunity, this looks like a further consequence of the prevailing opinions of the justices appointed by Trump.

Not all the Supreme Court’s consequential rulings, of course, can be attributed to the peculiarities of a particular Presidential appointment. Going back further to 2010 and thus before Trump’s appointees, the court in the case of *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* overruled a lower court’s prohibitions on independent expenditures (advertisements expressly for a named electoral candidate on a range of platforms) by corporations and other bodies, thus competition for office remained at least partially a financial battle between Republican and Democratic elites.

Citizens United won 5-4. Justice Anthony Kennedy, deemed a moderate, voted with the conservatives owing to his fears of its effect on freedom of speech particularly its impact on newspapers, radio and TV spending. The focus was on transparency countering corrupt practice. The verdict reversed a century of restrictions blocking unlimited electoral funding, opening up a future in which corporate America could buy elections.

With a President who shows sociopathic symptoms, the inherent weakness in the judicial system, its susceptibility to political influence, becomes more dangerous. Trump began his campaign to re-enter the White House facing 12 Congressional, 10 Federal criminal plus 8 State and local investigations. In four major cases during just a few months in 2023 he was indicted for criminal conduct in and after his first term of office. Perversely, he has talked a significant number of Americans into believing that this was because there is a conspiracy to stop him becoming President. Not because he has contempt for the law, the courts and constitution. Most lies, if they become widely believed, contain a grain of truth. But the alleged conspiracy is upholding the principle that in a democracy no-one, however powerful, should be above the law.

The Presidential inaugural oath sworn by Trump contains the following words: “I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability preserve, protect and defend the constitution of the United States”. For many the hallowed words now sound hollow. In those few seconds on 20 January Trump may mean what he says. But, the most worrying thing may be, with vast sums of money at his disposal, he has seriously begun to believe his own lies and will continue to undermine the institutions which safeguard the world’s most powerful democracy.

TRUMP'S SECOND COMING: WHY & HOW DID HE WIN?

03.02.2025

Answers abound. But, after barely two weeks of President Trump's executive orders, the nagging question still persists. Why and how did he win for a second time? This isn't idle speculation if he is to be resisted.

The most frequent explanation of Trumps' victory is economic: the consequences of spectacular inequality, not least three super-billionaires earning as much as fifty percent of the American population combined, and Trump's claims that he would deal with the high cost of living. After many years of stagnant salaries, inflation experienced by millions of workers led to their rejection of an urban elite and identification with those who challenged the injustice of it all. Trump's own resentment is real coming from his past as a vulgar upstart shunned by sophisticated New York. Populist resentment stems from feeling humiliated 'losers' - a favorite Trump word - living lives blighted by inflation in a world of winners celebrating their wealth.

As the Irish author and journalist, Fintan O'Toole, argues, promote a shared resentment, add showmanship and self-parodying humour and you have the key ingredients of Trump's appeal. Trump's campaign benefited from the massive multiplier effect of social media unavailable to a former entertainer, Ronald Reagan, his more amiable, avuncular Presidential prototype. In 1980, Reagan's campaign slogan was 'Let's Make America Great', he believed in conspiracies (communist not deep-state), and somehow turned ignorance into a virtue and source of authority. President Reagan, the charmer, won the Republican heart. President Trump, the con-man, stole the Republican soul.

A feature of Trump's rallies and public performances that doesn't get much mention is his description of America's glorious past destroyed by a criminal elite - a portrayal which summons like a genie out of a bottle a sense of victimhood. Voicing "we the people" while speaking of the richest most powerful country in the world, one that has maintained its *macroeconomic* success during hard times globally, he presents himself as at one with the victims he has come to save. An extraordinary elision. Trump may be ignorant but he is far from politically stupid and he shows remarkable - frightening - skills of persuasion. In his second Inauguration speech on January 20th. we got a gala performance.

Some of that Inauguration speech was old Hollywood. We had the American spirit forged by the demands of the 'Frontier', the scenic backdrop to the 'American dream', the values and freedom of the big spaces, the wagons rolling West across the prairies. Older readers will remember Saturday morning pictures, the circled wagons surrounded by fierce Red Indian horsemen shot down by brave cowboys. I did vaguely notice that, close-up, the 'Injuns' looked rather like the cowboys with heavy makeup and bows and arrows. At the time, all good clean fun. It never occurred to me that I was watching a fictionalized version of the slaughter and expropriation of America's indigenous population.

Trump's uplifting, manipulative nostalgia did not include the words cotton or slaves, words which might have tempered enthusiasm for one of the origins of America's economic success. But mention of plantation slavery, lynching, disenfranchisement and discrimination would have been a sign of belonging to the urban elite, unpatriotically 'woke' when the glorious past for MAGA was bespoken. Since it was Martin Luther King Day, a black pastor from Detroit, Rev. Lorenzo Sewell, did speak of King's famous dream during the Inauguration Benediction, but only some 10 black people, including Barack Obama, were visible

in the Capitol Rotunda, capacity 600 - though camera angles were very controlled.

Forgive the pop psychology but perhaps a sense of victimhood and fear arises from vestigial folk memories, the fear of slave rebellion and guilt at the dispossession of the First Nation. Custer's last stand, the Great Sioux Wars, happened only 150 years ago. It was just 60 years ago black voting rights were fully honoured by legislation.

The Statue of Liberty's inscription (opened 1886) "Give me your tired, your poor. Your huddled masses. . ." once welcomed immigrants. When I was myself an immigrant living in New York in the late 1960s, you learned how to be American by watching TV. You were taught how to aspire to the American dream. Now the US government and many of its citizens are set on cruelty to immigrants who evaded border controls, and even to their children born there whose citizenship is protected by the Constitution. The 'shining light on the hill' that is America casts a long, dark shadow.

Deep political divisions existed in America in the 1960s too. At a peace rally against the Vietnam War, held near Columbia University, a young Harlem resident politely asked us why we were there. I told him that as Catholics we had conscientious objections to the war. "Jews N*****s and Catholics must stick together bro", he whispered in my ear and moved off.

It was a conversation you would probably not have today. The FBI took some nice family photos. Yes, the USA was deeply divided about the Vietnam war but these were divisions akin to those over Gaza, not about the meaning and survival of democracy which not only Jo Biden thinks is now at stake.

Cultural heterogeneity resulting from immigration may lie behind American anxiety but more likely deliberate disinformation - "them taking our jobs" - is to blame. In the first three years of Biden's administration 14.3 million jobs were

created, a 10.3% increase on the COVID years. But inflation is directly felt. The family next door getting a job – which might not exist but for Biden - isn't.

Old and newly fashioned voter suppression played a significant part in Trump's victory. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, a respected non-profit law and public policy institute reports that, between 2021-2024, "States enacted a total of 79 restrictive laws" suppressing voting. According to the investigative journalist, Greg Palast, an expert on controlling corporate power, before August 2024, self-styled 'vigilante voter hunters' accused 316,886 people voter fraud (200,000 in the swing State of Georgia alone). An audit conducted by the State of Washington (Pacific North-West) found ballots mailed in by black voters were four times more likely than white to be rejected, and a US Civil Rights Commission study undertaken in Florida found that 14.3% of black voters appearing in person had their ballots rejected. That's one in seven, though some would have voted for Trump. Palast reckons that without such voter suppression Kamala Harris would have won in the key marginal States of Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. What he calls "America's nasty little secret" is that such election rigging has become routine. In a first past the post system the consequences can be enormous.

China's Premier, Zhou EnLai's, "it was too early to say", in reply to a question from Henry Kissinger about the French Revolution, is a myth: his interpreter said Zhou misunderstood and thought the question was about the student upheavals of 1968. But were Zhou alive today, he might wisely want to reserve judgement on the reasons for Trump's second victory. Less wisely, I would highlight the years of mainly Republican-instigated vote rigging, President Biden's damaging of Democrat chances by his delay in resigning, and the extraordinary bouquet of policies

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

Trump offered to resentful voters who identified with, and trusted, a dangerous charlatan.

AFRICA

CAN MALARIA BE ERADICATED?

13.10.2021

Last week, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) approval of the 'roll out' of a vaccine against malaria made the news. GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) had been working on finding an effective malaria vaccine for thirty years. Stage Three trials, the final stage, took five years and were completed in 2015. Pilot implementation in Africa began in 2019. Before COVID such a WHO approval would scarcely have merited a paragraph. That's some measure of how vaccines are on everyone's minds. It also says something about the response to any killer or debilitating disease which is confined to the tropics. This is not a swipe at GSK particularly, nor at their perseverance, but comparison with the incredibly speedy design and production of anti-COVID vaccine does inadvertently highlight pharmaceutical companies' research – and commercial - priorities.

By the end of the 20th century malaria still caused over 800,000 deaths worldwide every year most of them children under five and pregnant women, mostly living in sub-Saharan Africa. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set a reduction target to reverse the incidence of the parasite and to halve deaths from malaria by 2015. The roll out of a new malaria vaccine, the first against any parasite, represents a collaborative response by GSK, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Seattle-based health not-for-profit *Program for Appropriate Technology in Health* known as PATH, an impressive outfit with some 1,600 staff. It is another step towards the goal of eradicating disease that emphasises the importance of partnerships.

Vaccines trigger our immune system to attack invading viruses. You might think that immune systems prompted by a vaccine would be easily aroused against the two malaria parasites, *Plasmodium falciparum* and *Plasmodium vivax*, large bodies when compared to COVID viruses. But you'd be wrong. *Plasmodium* is like some Alien life form transforming itself several times in its life-cycle: merozoites bursting out of red blood cells causing fever and turning into gametocytes, oocysts taking up residence in the salivary glands of certain types of female mosquitoes, merozoites finding such a home-from-home in our livers that our immune system ignores them. *Homo Sapiens* and *Plasmodium* have known each other for a very long time and the parasite has adapted and flourished. Finding the right stage of the parasite's development to intervene, zapping the parasite before it gets into the liver, or into the red blood cells, was only the beginning of the long haul to find an effective vaccine.

The danger of the vaccine being mistakenly taken for a magic bullet represents a problem for GSK. The present vaccine alone is at most 40% effective. Yet combined with seasonal treatments, two anti-malarial drugs administered during each of the year's most dangerous four months - after West Africa's short rainy season - it does create a high level of protection from the disease. But scaling up such combined treatments will make heavy demands on Africa's fragile health systems. And for malaria to be eradicated, established preventative measures must continue alongside vaccination.

Bed-nets impregnated with insecticides harmless to people contributed to the halving of malaria deaths around the world from an estimated 839,000 in 2000 to 438,000 in 2015 - though there was only an 18% drop in infections. American financier, Ray Chambers, appointed UN malaria envoy in February 2008, marshalled funding that contributed towards a global campaign

that delivered a billion bed-nets and prevented a total 6.2 million deaths. Even this simple solution was not as simple as it appeared. It required explaining the causes of malaria so that people understood what bed-nets were for and how to use them — and ensured they persisted keeping their young children tucked at bedtime in despite the nets reducing any cooling air-flow.

The World Bank bed-net programme in Sierra Leone and Nigeria was a case in point. Nets were delivered efficiently but too often they got used as bridal veils, or fishing nets, or sold, or not hung properly. Health education was necessary. And it will be just as essential to persuade people that besides getting vaccinated the other protections against malaria remain vital: correct use of bed-nets, cleaning up standing water where mosquitoes breed, access to rapid diagnostic kits – because misdiagnosis can be fatal. Changing parents' understanding and behaviour, as I learned in Sierra Leone, needs a nationally planned malaria control programme involving everything from radio jingles to engaging chiefs, local elders, imams, sheikhs, pastors and priests as health educators within their communities. I watched religious leaders preaching sermons and *khutba* on parents' moral duty to protect the under-fives as well as training others in their communities to undertake house-to-house visits introducing malaria prevention messages.

Malaria is *now* a tropical disease. But that is because in the last century countries with substantial budgets for health and well-developed health systems succeeded in producing effective anti-malarial drugs and eliminating mosquitoes and thus the disease. Eight US Presidents caught malaria. George Washington was infected in Virginia aged 17. Abraham Lincoln while growing up in Illinois. Deaths from malaria in Britain's marshy coastal areas only began to decline in the 19th century. In 1861 Britain was reading Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* in serial form.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

The story opens with Pip, the book's 'hero', staring at his parents' gravestone and describing those of his dead brothers as, 'little stone lozenges each about a foot long. . . arranged in a neat row'. It is in that graveyard that Pip and the escaped convict Magwitch first meet. The setting for this encounter, St. James, Cooling, in 'the marsh country down by the river' in Kent, was on one of Dickens favourite walks, and the 'stone lozenges' referred to can still be seen today. They marked the graves of a large family whose children had died of "the ague", malaria.

Malaria could be eradicated in Africa but it would require better co-ordinated national malaria campaigns, strengthening of health systems, and reversing our cuts in international development aid. Success to date has involved supportive governments and complex international partnerships. In Sierra Leone religious leaders, key influencers, reached five million people with national malaria programme messages. Ebola and the pandemic have slowed the momentum created by the Millennium Development Goals. When less than 1% of people in Africa have received COVID jabs, GSK's announcement may seem almost irrelevant. But the new vaccine has the capacity to further reduce malaria deaths from the present over 400,000 a year. It is a significant further step towards the goal of eradication. So perhaps not a herogram for GSK but at least two cheers.

See TheAricle 12/10/2021

SOUTH AFRICA'S HEROES: NEW TIMES,
SELECTIVE MEMORIES

03.02.2022

Archbishop Desmond Tutu's death over Christmas felt like the end of an era. For millennials the story of how apartheid was ended is history. Idris Elba in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* joins Michael Caine in *Zulu*, both movies about a fading past. The change, from white to black hero, is relatively recent. The screenplay of *Cry Freedom*, released in 1987, portrayed the life and murder by security police of Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko seen through the eyes of his journalist friend Donald Woods. Journalists' 'first drafts of history' are now giving way to second drafts with their selective memories and erasures.

In 2013, news of Nelson Mandela's death reached London as *Long Walk to Freedom* premiered – for a film company the financial equivalent of a miracle. The British establishment finally deemed him respectable enough for a Royal Film Performance attended by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

Twenty-five years earlier the non-racial African National Congress (ANC) was on President Reagan's list of terrorist organisations when Margaret Thatcher at the Commonwealth Conference adamantly refused pleas from Commonwealth leaders to impose sanctions on the apartheid regime. She characterised African National Congress (ANC) threats against British companies trading with South Africa as 'typical of a terrorist organisation'. Prince William had the good sense to describe Mandela as 'extraordinary and inspiring'.

There are other easily forgotten, perhaps 'inconvenient', facts about the struggle against apartheid that are worth re-stating. The conflict was inevitably drawn into the Cold War between the superpowers and seen by them through that prism. Mandela was

believed to be a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and therefore a danger to Western interests. A few weeks before the 1962 Cuban missile crisis a CIA-linked US diplomat tipped off South African security police about Mandela's whereabouts; disguised as a chauffeur he was arrested at a road block.

The ANC's decision, after the Sharpeville massacre by police of unarmed protesters in 1960, to form a military wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), and begin a sabotage campaign, hardened Cold War stances. Sabotage evolved into what the ANC called 'armed propaganda', attacks on prestigious targets such as the Sasolburg oil refinery, the Koeberg Nuclear station and *Vortrekkerhoogte*, the Pretoria command centre of the South African Defence Forces (SADF), attempting, with varying degrees of success, to avoid civilian casualties. The Communist Parties of the Soviet Union, East Germany and Cuba were inevitably drawn in and Communist States were soon supporting MK guerrilla training camps in Angola and Zambia. A great diversity of other actors became involved.

The global anti-apartheid movement was much broader than the well-respected, and effective London-based Anti-Apartheid Movement, of the same name. Compared with other nationalist and liberation movements of the time an extraordinary combination of protagonists *actively* resisted the apartheid regime. Liberals *as well as* socialists and communists, the schoolchildren of the 1976 Soweto uprising, the scores of organisations in the 1980s popular front United Democratic Front (UDF), minority religious communities as well as Christians and Church leaders, a broad coalition of ethnicities. Within and without South Africa from civil disobedience to sports and consumer boycotts from campaigns for economic sanctions to mobilising ANC front-organisations, from diplomacy to strategic planning by the

exile leadership as well as guerrilla infiltration, there was a huge variety of active resistance. A broad, heterogeneous movement fighting apartheid operated in the midst of the Cold War.

In the Catholic tradition the bishops denounced apartheid as 'intrinsically evil'. There were special theological reasons for Protestant Christian resistance to 'the system'. They confronted an ideology similar to that facing the 'Confessing Church' which produced the Declaration of Barmen in Nazi Germany. Not only a national security state that tortured and murdered its opponents – as in Latin America - but the heresy of a perverse form of Christian Nationalism, the ideological justification for apartheid promoted by the *Nederduiste Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK), the Dutch Reformed Church.

Many different hands dismantled apartheid. But two principal factors brought it to an end. By the mid-1980s sanctions were biting, business CEOs, including powerful multi-nationals, began putting pressure on the Afrikaner government to negotiate. Concurrently in Angola in 1988, Cuban and Angolan troops with East German pilots fought an overstretched SADF to a stalemate at Cuito Cuanavale using the same tactics that had defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The South African National Security State suddenly seemed much less secure.

In 1982, Sweden's Social Democrat government, the first and only non-communist State to do so, had begun clandestinely to fund the ANC internally – but not MK. Sweden's Prime Minister, Olof Palme, who initiated the funding, was assassinated on 28 February 1986, most likely by the apartheid regime's notorious - Orwellian - *Civil Cooperation Bureau*. In contrast, UK government strategy was to divide what they imagined was an 'Africanist' ANC from the SACP. When this failed hopes remained that Inkatha, a tribalist Zulu Party with German backing, might stop the ANC sweeping the board in the 1994 elections.

Finally and sadly, South Africa's peaceful transfer of power is a myth. In the early 1990s hundreds died in clashes between Inkatha and the ANC, and members of the unreformed security forces continued to assassinate ANC and MK returnees for several years. It might have been worse had Archbishop Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission not totally discredited the Afrikaner extremist right-wing and thus avoided more organised violence against the incoming ANC.

There have already been many touching encomia for Archbishop Tutu. He became the recognisable voice and face of non-violent opposition to apartheid violence. He made work for human rights a key part of the life of the South African Council of Churches which he led from 1978 to 1984. For many journalists his was the only name in their address book if and when they sought a newsworthy Christian leader for clear and courageous comment. In the repression of the mid-1980s, when the internal leadership of the ANC were almost all jailed, his national leadership became even more important. In New York in 1986 following a failed UK visit to change Margaret Thatcher's mind on sanctions, Tutu publically challenged Reagan's refusal to exert economic pressures on the apartheid regime. Despite Presidential vetoes, Congress later that year passed an Anti-Apartheid Act including some economic sanctions.

Six weeks before Tutu confronted Reagan, the apartheid regime had begun secret meetings with Mandela - moved from Robben Island to Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison in 1982. The ANC were particularly anxious that in his isolation Mandela might make concessions they could not accept. They needn't have worried. In triumphant scenes few will forget he was finally released in February 1990. Then the Soviet Union imploded. Funding for the ANC was cut off almost overnight. Negotiations

in the Convention for a Democratic South Africa in 1991 resulted in free and fair elections in 1994.

It was prolonged sanctions that proved to be the proverbial last straw – more a heavy bale - which broke apartheid's back. A unique case of God and Mammon serving a common cause?

PUTIN'S WAR & SOUTH AFRICA

28.02.2023

Two weeks ago, a Russian frigate docked in South Africa's Simon's Town naval base near Cape Town. Admiral Nikolai Evmenov, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian navy and his crew were not there for a swim with the penguins nearby but to lead a joint naval exercise off Durban and Richard's Bay. The exercise involves the South African Defense Force (SADF) and the naval forces of the People's Liberation Army of China. Evmenov's ship carries the Zircon hypersonic cruise missile, Putin's pride and joy.

The Mayor of Cape Town, Major Geordin Hill-Lewis, a member of the Democratic Alliance, expressed sentiments common to Western Governments and many observers: "All freedom-loving people around the world should rightly be outraged at the South African government's indefensible position and the moral position in this conflict. So, while the Russian ship is here and has been allowed here by the national state, it is certainly not welcome in the Mother City." Naledi Pandor, South Africa's Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, at first condemned the Russia's full invasion of Ukraine but then back-tracked under pressure from her President, Cyril Ramaphosa.

South Africa's policy towards Russia is not exceptional. Over 40% of African States have been abstaining from UN votes against Russian aggression in Ukraine. But South Africa, as a member of BRICS a loose association of Brazil, Russia, India and China, is the most significant.

Is there any more to say? Yes, even though there is always the risk that explanation will be interpreted as condoning. Why does President Cyril Ramaphosa - head of the Student Christian Movement at school, celebrated leader of the South African National Union of Mineworkers, legally trained, the adroit

negotiator who facilitated the deal with President F.W. De Klerk that brought Mandela to power, and a successful businessman - keep this sort of company?

We need to go back to the 1960s and early 1970s to the days of the ANC's then lackluster struggle against the apartheid regime when the Soviet Bloc were almost the ANC's only supporters. The South African Communist Party and its leaders were an integral and influential part of the ANC and seem to have had relatively high immunity to infiltration by BOSS (Bureau of State Security). The Soviet Union provided funds. From 1987-1988, Cuba and East Germany fought the apartheid army to a standstill and forced their retreat within Angola. The contrast with the policies of the Western powers could not have been more different.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher meeting with the Press during the 1987 Vancouver Commonwealth Conference, refusing to support sanctions advocated by the anti-apartheid movement, described the ANC threat to 'target' British companies in South Africa as showing 'what a typical terrorist organisation it is'. When, in May 1990, her Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, sought £1 million to fund UNHCR repatriation of South African refugees, she categorically refused saying she would never give money to any organisation that practised violence. Forthright and undiplomatic but not out of step with the hostility of British FCO policy towards the ANC.

US governments were no less hostile. Reagan adamantly opposed sanctions for years until Congress forced his hand in 1986. That July the New York Times reported credible suspicions that US satellite intelligence was being shared with the apartheid regime. This may have been behind the large-scale slaughter of Namibian nationalist guerrillas, SWAPO entering South African-occupied Namibia from Angola.

British policy aimed to split off a supposedly 'nationalist' section of the ANC from the communists. When that failed, virtuously pushing for Mandela's release in the late 1980s, Britain stood by whilst members of the European Economic Community (EEC) dabbled with the idea of supporting the - violent - Zulu Nationalist movement Inkatha to divide the black vote in the 1994 elections. All of the southern African liberation movements were viewed by Western governments through the prism of the Cold War. Only the Nordics responded with a supportive position seeing the future danger of the ANC beholden solely to the communist world.

The most notable was Sweden which began funding the external movement of the ANC from 1977, and from 1982 under the leader of the Social Democrats, Olof Palme, increasingly funded what they called the 'home-front component', the ANC's internal movement. It may have cost the Swedish Prime Minister his life. In 1986 at the height of the repression in South Africa, Palme was assassinated by an unknown assailant in the street outside a Stockholm cinema. Funding was managed clandestinely from the Swedish Legation in Pretoria under the resourceful direction on Birgitta Karlstrom Dorph, the Legation's head, using the Churches and civil society organisations such as the trades unions as intermediaries. Is it too much to imagine that Sweden's non-alignment in the Cold War and support for the ANC, versus Western governments' opposition, impressed Ramaphosa?

Shortly after the inauguration of the new government in 1994, South Africa joined the non-aligned movement and, from Mandela through the Presidency of Thabo Mbeki, made peaceful resolution of conflicts a foreign policy goal. South Africa's government has a sovereign right to adopt neutrality especially when the dominant narrative is that the world faces a re-run of the Cold War - at a much higher temperature. But joint exercises with

Russia during Putin's imperialist war does not look much like neutrality. The ruling ANC would argue that they conduct naval exercises with other countries such as France. But they should not be oblivious to the timing of such exercises nor heedless of the abhorrence in which most UN member States hold Putin's Russia.

True, neutral States have never consistently managed punctilious even-handed treatment of the two sides in a conflict. Nor is neutrality necessarily for all seasons as Finland and Sweden, now seeking membership of NATO, have shown. But hundreds didn't die and thousands suffer in the anti-apartheid struggle to give succour and propaganda opportunities to brutal autocracies. Their sacrifice was to bring about a non-racial democratic South Africa.

SWEDEN, SOUTH AFRICA & THE CHURCHES

06.04.2023

Finland has just joined NATO. Norway was a founding member in 1949. Sweden wishes to join but to date is blocked by Turkey.

A few days ago, the Russian Ambassador in Stockholm, Ukrainian-born Viktor Tatarinsev, commented “the Swedes will undoubtedly be sent to their deaths in the interests of others” adding that joining NATO would make Swedes “a legitimate target of Russia’s retaliatory measures”. Putin had similarly warned that Finland stood to suffer “serious military and political consequences”.

You have to admire these three Nordics close neighbors of Russia, Finland with 800 miles of shared border. Their total population today is a mere 21.5 million. They are threatened by a Russian Federation of 146 million. St. Petersburg is about the same distance from the Finnish border as Aberystwyth from London. Defiance like this takes courage. Not the first instance of courageous Nordic foreign policy.

In the 1980s while working on human rights and international development, I grew to respect Sweden and her fellow Nordics as international actors. My first encounter was with Birgitta Berggren, the southern Africa desk officer of SIDA (the Swedish International Development Agency) - at the time equivalent to Britain’s now defunct DfID. She was seeking assistance in funding the ‘home front’ of the African National Congress (ANC). A British passport meant I did not require a visa involving special checks to enter South Africa and my Church contacts would help.

The 1980s saw an intensification of the Cold War and the final crisis of apartheid. In 1982 Nelson Mandela was moved off Robben Island to Pollsmoor prison where the South African National Intelligence Agency could sound him out more privately

– most likely in the hope of driving a wedge between him and the ANC leadership. They failed. In November 1985 while Mandela was in hospital for a prostate operation, ‘Kobie’ Coetzee, the Minister of Justice opened the first government talks.

Under pressure from Pretoria, the Frontline States with their many South African exiles had reached bilateral agreements with the apartheid regime that restricted or closed the bases of the ANC’s military wing. But in 1983 within South Africa, the UDF (United Democratic Front) had been launched. Made up of some 400 civic, trades union, student, women’s and church-linked organisations, despite repression, it gained ground becoming the key pillar of the ANC’s ‘home front’.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Olof Palme until his assassination in February 1986, support for national liberation movements in Southern Africa was a key element of the Swedish Social Democrats’ foreign policy. By the mid- 1980s, in contrast to the US and UK who were doing their best to make sure the ANC failed, Sweden was treating the ANC as a government in waiting. What mattered for most western governments was that the ANC was ‘Soviet-backed’. ‘Swedish-backed’ or ‘Nordic backed’ would have been just as accurate a description, especially when referring to non-military support. *

Sweden had begun supporting the ANC’s “home-front” in the mid-1970s and in the 1980s sought to increase their funding via the trade unions and the Churches within South Africa. In the words of SIDA’s Lars-Olof Edström in Lusaka, Zambia in 1980: “ANC is no longer an exile organisation [but] very active inside South Africa. Support to the internal work must accordingly constitute an essential part of the Swedish assistance”. The Nordics’ intervention was both timely and strategically important. Between 1969-1995 SIDA’s regular assistance to the southern African liberation movements, using figures from Tor Sellström’s

Sweden & National Liberation in Southern Africa Vol II, adjusted for inflation and converted to sterling, amounted to £100s of millions in current values. And this does not include money for cultural activities, information, research work and emergencies. Half of it went to the ANC.

Many in the Churches inside South Africa were ready to help deliver financial assistance to the ANC. An influential group of radical Christian leaders supporting and consulting the ANC determined the spending priorities. They were led by Rev. Dr. Beyers Naudé, a prominent Dutch Reformed Church minister who had resigned from his ministry in order to oppose apartheid. He endured banning (severe restrictions on movement and political activity) from 1977 to 1985. Naudé, with influence in the Netherlands and internationally, then became secretary-general of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and a key point of reference for the Swedish legation in Pretoria. Alongside him were the theologian Father Albert Nolan OP, who when elected master-general of the Dominicans had asked to be allowed to continue his work in South Africa, and Rev. Frank Chikane, who succeeded Naudé as secretary-general of the SACC. He survived an attempted poisoning ordered by the Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok.

With the blessing of this Christian group Swedish money financed - non-military - needs of ANC activists as well as supporting organisations like COSAS (Congress of South African Students), the ANC's youth movement. A Catholic network led by the Fr. Albert Nolan worked with the internal organisations of the ANC. The Grail, a lay Catholic women's association, sheltered activists on the run, handing out Swedish money for travel and other needs. One need was a de-bugging device sourced in Croydon and delivered to the UDF. Thabo Mbeki, a future President of South Africa, speaking in a 1995 interview, said that

the special role of Sweden “was to say that the people have got the right and the duty to rebel against oppression” and “as part of the recognition of that right...you support the people who are engaged in the struggle”. “You do not define what they should be”. Or become, he might have added. Sweden through the Churches and trade unions made a significant contribution to internal grassroots mobilisation.

By the mid-1980s Church relations with the ANC extended from grassroots to the highest level. Thabo Mbeki travelled often to London so I was able to consult him in a variety of venues, mainly pubs. Meetings between the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) and the ANC began with a discussion between Archbishop Denis Hurley, President of the SACBC and Oliver Tambo, the exiled ANC President, at the Great Western Hotel, Paddington, London - hugs, beer and sandwiches. This meeting was followed by a more formal one in Harare between the South African bishops in the SACBC and Mbeki.

The Churches also established wider more complex links. Until the mid-1980s the European Economic Community (EEC), the USA and UK resisted pressure to impose sanctions on the apartheid regime. The EEC initiated, and was ready to fund, a face-saving ‘special programme for the victims of apartheid’ within South Africa. To this end they asked two representatives, one Protestant and one Catholic to a consultative meeting in Brussels. Rev. Beyers Naudé represented the Protestants. At the time, Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, secretary- general of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), was in prison and suffering torture. I was surprised to be asked to go instead of him.

The array of EU officials that greeted us was even more surprised to hear from Dr. Naudé of the restrictive conditions which the Churches demanded before they would accept and

distribute EEC funding. No money should go to Inkatha, an ethnic Zulu political movement shaping up for a civil war with the non-racial nationalist ANC. Germany, USA, and UK greeted Inkatha as an opponent to the ANC despite the risk of serious violence. Civil war came close during government negotiations between 1990 and 1994, with massacres involving Zulu militia trained and armed by the South African Defense Force.

During the 1994 elections, the Nordics through the Churches continued their efforts to contain violence. Highly effective election monitoring, notably by international World Council of Churches' teams, played a significant part in keeping campaigning and voting peaceful. I accompanied former President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, monitoring in KwaZulu Natal, the main area of Inkatha support. Tensions were palpable but a ceasefire ordered by the Inkatha leader, Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, held. The ANC won 62% of the national vote, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) 10%.

In the bipolar world of the 1970s and 1980s, Swedish governments of different persuasions and the Nordics, had the courage to break the Cold War mould by making difficult ethical and political choices. In their support for the liberation movements, they had in the main the enthusiastic agreement of civil society. Human rights and development agencies, diplomats, anti-apartheid and women's groups, trades unions and Churches interacted and worked together. The result and success of the 1994 elections was a vindication of their judgement.

The closing lines of Tor Sellström's magisterial study, *Sweden & National Liberation in Southern Africa* point to an anomaly worth pondering: "the great Swedish support to the South African struggle against apartheid has not become a fact worth mentioning in the textbooks... It would have been possible to point out the importance that also a small country like Sweden can have. But the textbooks are silent".

*See William M. Minter (Africa Today 1996),

ISRAEL & SOUTH AFRICA IN THE HAGUE

08.05.2024

For months since October 2023 Netanyahu defied the USA. Around the world, large demonstrations protested Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza, faring no better. Now the UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague, the nearest we have to a global judiciary, has intervened.

On 29 December 2023 South Africa filed an "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v Israel)", bringing a case to the ICJ based on allegations of acts of genocide by Israel in its war against Hamas. "It is important," the submission reads, "to place the acts of genocide in the broader context of Israel's conduct towards Palestinians during its 75-year-long apartheid, its 56-year-long belligerent occupation of Palestinian territory and its 16-year-long blockade of Gaza, including the serious and ongoing violations of international law associated therewith, including grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and other war crimes and crimes against humanity."

In the charged atmosphere created by Hamas' massive human rights violations while attacking Israel, 1,400 mostly civilian deaths and the taking of 224 hostages, followed by Israel killing over 30,000 Palestinians believed also to be disproportionately civilians in the destruction of Gaza, it is hard to overestimate the reverberations of such allegations. But why South Africa?

First some historical context. The ICJ was formed at the first session of UN General-Assembly and Security Council in April 1946 when genocide was recognised as a crime in international law. This was a product of the Nuremberg trials and a reaction to the Shoah, the holocaust. In 1948, genocide was carefully defined

within the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention).

Both the horrendous massacres accompanying independence and partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the migration of 14-18 million people, and the expulsions of Arabs accompanying the creation of the State of Israel, the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe in Arabic), were consequences of abrupt withdrawals of British imperial authority. During the same period, Afrikaner nationalists took power in South Africa. Any story of a steady, linear progress towards stable, co-operative nation states is inherently implausible.

After independence of the Portuguese colonies and Zimbabwe in the 1970s and 1980s, apartheid South Africa and the Israel-Palestine conflicts were left unresolved, unfinished business. Negotiations within South Africa, resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the accumulated impact of sanctions, brought apartheid to an end in 1994. It was possible to imagine the Oslo Accords (negotiated between 1993-1995) as a similar breakthrough, drawing a line under conflicts between contending – ethnic – nationalisms.

A Whig history of the decline of imperialism and settler colonialism leaving nationalism triumphant doesn't convince. For example, the Kurdish population, somewhere between 30-45 million, greater than three-quarters of the UN's member states, spread as minorities between Turkey (16%), Iraq, Iran and Syria, achieved no such denouement. Back to the ongoing court drama in the Hague. Hearings at the ICJ (mandated by the UN to litigate between States not to be confused with the International Criminal Court, founded in 1998, to prosecute individuals) are presided over by 15 experienced judges drawn from 15 different countries. Ruling on the December 2023 South African application, the 15 included allies of Israel, the USA, Germany, France, and Australia

alongside South Africa's fellow BRICS countries India, China, Russia and Brazil. Two extra judges were added for this contentious case: South Africa's Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke and the former Chief President of Israel's Supreme Court, Aharon Barak.

The very recently retired President of ICJ who presided over the first hearing, Joan Donoghue, a former foreign policy adviser to President Obama, has explained that the court – almost unanimously - concluded that South Africa had a right to present their claim to the court and the Palestinians had a “plausible right to be protected from genocide” After weighing the evidence, the ICJ found a risk of “irreparable harm to the Palestinian right to be protected from genocide”. Hence several provisional orders made by the court to the Israeli government directed at such protection. Donoghue emphasised that the ICJ had yet to rule on the plausibility of the South African claim that genocide was taking place. A Ugandan, Julia Sebutinde, the current ICJ Vice-President, was alone in sharing some of Israeli Judge Barak's dissenting opinions. The very day the ICJ, a UN body, delivered its first ruling on South Africa's application, 26 January, Israel alleged that 12 employees of the UN Works and Relief Agency (UNRWA) had participated in the Hamas attacks of 7 October.

South Africa made a further court application on 6 March this year in response to the deteriorating conditions in Gaza, stating that the Palestinians were “no longer facing only a risk of famine but that famine was setting in”. On 23 March, the court ruled that further urgent measures were required of South Africa, particularly that the military unblock, and permit immediate distribution, of humanitarian aid “in full cooperation with the United Nations”.

The distinctions made by the court are subtle, but none of their judgements suggest that South Africa's formulation of their case was unreasonable, politically prejudiced, improper or antisemitic.

Because of the constraints on journalists, disinformation, and ‘the fog of war’, the clarity of juridical thinking and observation, not of course infallible, is particularly valuable. The court commendably saw the war in Gaza through the lens of law meant to protect human rights. South Africa received no standing ovation from the US Congress.

During apartheid, of course, Israel offered close military and intelligence cooperation to the South African regime. This included in the 1970s joint action in Angola. Investigative journalists and the CIA both provided evidence of shared testing of a nuclear weapon in the southern Indian ocean. In return for its support Israel got uranium ‘yellow cake’ from South Africa’s then South-West African colony, now Namibia. Unsurprisingly, there was no love lost between the ANC, today’s South African governing Party, and the Israeli State.

But South Africa’s approach to the ICJ seems motivated chiefly by empathy with Palestinians in what their legal submission called the State of Israel’s “75-year-long year apartheid”. Nelson Mandela’s words at a 1997 solidarity event in Pretoria set a distinctive tone: “The temptation in our situation is to speak in muffled tones about an issue such as the right of the people of Palestine to a state of their own. We can easily be enticed to read reconciliation and fairness as meaning parity between justice and injustice. Having achieved our own freedom, we can fall into the trap of washing our hands of difficulties that others face.... But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians...”

Mandela tellingly did not describe Israel’s relationship with the Palestinians as ‘apartheid’. Instead, he talked simply about “the recognition that injustice and gross human rights violations were being perpetrated in Palestine”. This is clearly the problematic

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adopted by the ICJ court and could motivate the ICC to act against individual Israeli leaders.

As Mandela' speech also suggests, the unfinished business of the 1980s is about peoples obtaining freedom for self-determination and statehood. This is what linked Mandela's South Africa and Palestine in solidarity then, and still does today.

SOUTH AFRICA'S GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY: WILL IT WORK?

14.06.2024

I will never forget witnessing the determination and joy in the queues waiting outside South African polling stations on 29 May 1994. I had accompanied former President Kaunda of Zambia to Kwazulu-Natal only days before as an election observer. We feared serious violence between the Zulu nationalist party of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, Inkatha, and Mandela's ANC. Buthelezi, originally tasked to build up the ANC in the Zulu heartland, pulled back at the last minute.

In the triumphant election that ended apartheid the ANC won nationally with 62% of the vote. In this year's elections, after thirty years' unbroken rule, the ANC took only 40 per cent, losing their majority in Parliament. It was a humiliation, inflicted by a disappointed, angry electorate, but also a vindication of South Africa's democracy. This was a clear verdict on the ANC's performance in government over the last 15 years, during which corruption has become endemic.

Meeting on June 7 to discuss the way forward, the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC decided neither to seek a coalition partner or partners to form a majority government, nor to risk a minority government with a "confidence and supply" arrangement, but instead to propose a Government of National Unity (GNU).

In a statesmanlike speech, President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke of the – legislated – 1994 transitional coalition which followed the ANC victory, bringing together under Mandela's direction future President Thabo Mbeki and former President F.W. De Klerk, to govern until an interim Constitution requiring the allegiance of all political parties was finalised in 1996. The context, easing the

transition from apartheid, was radically different from that of today. Though once again the province of KwaZulu-Natal — now led by Jacob Zuma, the corrupt former President, and his new Spear of the Nation Party (*uMkhonto weSizwe* or MKP), cleverly appropriating the name of the ANC's former armed wing — is a threat to stability and to any unity government.

Ramaphosa described the unity proposal as in the best interests of the people of South Africa, in accordance with the vision of the preamble to the Constitution: to realise the full potential of all citizens and bring material benefits to an unequal and unjust society. It might indeed be best for South Africa, but a GNU is also in the ANC's interests.

All the potential coalition partnerships were highly problematic. The Democratic Alliance (DA), led by Durban-born John Steenhuisen, which took 21% of the vote, is viewed by many as a right-wing party promoting white interests. Then there was Zuma's MKP, with 14.5% of the vote, promising both to expropriate white-owned land without compensation and to change the Constitution. Thirdly, there was the former ANC youth leader Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), with 9.5%, calling for nationalisation of mines and land expropriation. Both Zuma and Malema are stridently populist, potentially violent, and determined to get rid of Ramaphosa. Any of these partners would have exacerbated divisions within the ANC. Only a Government of National Unity looked feasible.

At 82, Zuma has a score to settle with Ramaphosa. He connects with many of the poor and has ten years' prison on Robben Island with Mandela to his credit. In the 1980s, Zuma was the ruthless head of ANC Intelligence. He took the presidency in a non-violent internal coup against President Thabo Mbeki in 2009. As President, he accumulated power and money through a form of systemic corruption known as "state capture".

Ramaphosa led internal opposition to Zuma, forcing him to resign after a vote of no confidence in February 2018, allowing criminal charges for corruption and contempt of court to go ahead. But Zuma has only served three months in jail. His formation of the MKP in December 2023 heralded a political comeback with overwhelming support from his Zulu political base in Kwazulu-Natal. But just before the 26 May elections, he was banned from standing for Parliament.

I have seen Zuma up-close. It was in Zimbabwe in the mid-1980s, when, in the garden of the Rev. Michael Lapsley – who later lost both hands and an eye in a South African letter-bomb, Zuma suddenly emerged from behind a bush. There was something brutal and sinister about him. Frankly, I felt frightened by him — as well Ramaphosa might be. Zuma is a clear and present danger for stability and democracy in South Africa.

The ANC has until 18 June to pull together a government. Some 53 political parties contested the 2024 elections; only 6 of them won more than 300,000 votes. Of the three big Parties, only the DA has joined alongside Inkatha and the Patriotic Alliance. The MKP are refusing to join unless Ramaphosa steps down; the EFF is currently saying “we will not share power with the enemy”, though a few months back Malema did say he was open to a coalition with the ANC; and the DA wants to know more about how a Government of National Unity would function. A political minefield.

But the wider question is: could a Government of National Unity tackle South Africa’s problems? These include chronic corruption; over 45% youth unemployment; wretched health and educational provision for the poor; serious crime and insecurity. And after 30 years of the ANC, South Africa is top of the world league for inequality.

Systemic corruption has crippled the South African economy. André de Ruyter, the honest and competent CEO of the country's energy provider, ESCOM, was forced out for trying to eliminate the corruption that was causing persistent and prolonged power cuts. After having cyanide slipped into his morning coffee, De Ruyter's advice to any incoming CEO was not to have a personalised coffee cup.

Is Ramaphosa up to it? He is undoubtedly tough and talented — but “squeaky clean” are not the first words that come to mind. In 2020 a mysterious \$4 million dollars were stolen from his Phala-Phala farmhouse, a surprising sum to be stuffed inside the sofa. Head of the Student Christian Movement in his Venda High School, frequently detained while a law student, respected leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, brilliant negotiator, successful entrepreneur, skilled navigator of the dangerous shoals within the ANC, Ramaphosa's biography suggests he has the capacity. But he needs the support of determined, competent and honest ministers to bring about change.

Today the 400 members of the National Assembly will be sworn in, pledging to uphold the Constitution. As the ANC now knows, the people of South Africa will punish severely at the ballot-box failure to improve their lives, to provide jobs, and clean the Augean stables. A culture of accountability must be created, and prosecutions made. In a promising appointment, Rev. Frank Chikane, a courageous opponent of the apartheid regime, former General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches and *chef de cabinet* for President Mbeki, is now the head of the Integrity Commission to achieve this end. But support from the ANC parliamentary party will be essential.

Despite multiple obstacles ahead, Ramaphosa with his considerable skills may be able to steer a GNU in the direction of integrity. South Africa's future government should remember the

warning of Amilcar Cabral, poet and pan-Africanist: “Always bear in mind that people are not fighting for ideas.... They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children”. As Trevor Manuel, the – honest and successful — ANC Minister of Finance, 1996-2009, pointedly asked on Radio South Africa’s *Midday Report*: “Who will hold the feet of the GNU to the fire?”

RUSSIA'S & CHINA'S SCRAMBLE FOR
AFRICA

07.01.2025

New Year's Eve was a slow news night. You could tell because a story about Africa was the BBC lead item. It sounded a bit like *Schadenfreude*: the Ivory Coast and Senegal had told their longstanding French garrisons, in the nicest possible way, to pack up and go home. Both countries have important economic links with France. French troops had previously been told to leave Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali where they had been fighting jihadists. An opportunity not to be missed.

During Prime Minister John Major's *entente cordiale* with President Chirac in 1995, I attended a joint meeting on Africa, not much publicized, held in Paris. Apart from the fabulous, ever more sumptuous connecting rooms, ornate Louis XV furniture, and some threatening chandeliers – the venue was the Elyseé Palace – the most notable feature was a difference between the delegations. We Brits were a motley crew of anthropologists, NGO-bodies involved in international development, civil servants from FCO and DfID (now absorbed by the Foreign Office), plus the odd intelligence officer. The French partially matched these, but, pursuing their own priorities, fielded an impressive array of military figures. The colonial *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* formed in 1857 who fought on the Western Front during the First World War reflect a long and deep relationship. The expulsion of the French armed forces from West Africa is an historic blow to President Macron who cherishes his role in international affairs.

The expulsion of the French was also a significant sign of the times. The Russians' arms-length mercenaries, the Wagner group, moved into the Central African Republic in 2017 where they brokered a peace agreement between the warring factions - which

later fell apart. In North Africa after the fall of Gaddafi, they began operating with ‘Marshal’ Khalifa Haftar’s militia in Benghazi, Libya, in 2018. Support of West African military juntas came next beginning in 2021 with Mali in where in 2022 they contributed to the execution in the Mopti region of some 500 people by the Malian armed forces. Then in 2024 Wagner was invited into Burkina Faso and Niger. Wagner, recently renamed the *Africa Corps*, is now under the Russian Ministry of Defense. Africa is becoming a Syria-substitute playground for Russia and Putin.

The Mali story is extraordinary. The towns of Timbuktu and Gao are on the desert-edge in the *Bilad-al-Sudan* (from the medieval ‘land of the blacks’) that extends east as far as Darfur in Sudan. They are major targets for jihadist Al-Qaeda and ISIS linked groups and so in turn targets for the Wagner group. In Mali’s North-East Tinzaouten province abutting the Algerian border, a separatist coalition of nomadic Tuareg has on occasion been aligned with jihadists against the junta forces. The Tuareg are known as horsemen and cattle herders whose men famously wear a face-covering. They suffer particularly from the climate induced encroachment of the Sahara. *Le Monde* has been reporting on Ukraine’s support for the Tuareg coalition against the Russian mercenaries. In July 2024, 84 Russians and 47 Malians were reported killed in an Tuareg attack involving light quadcopter drones supplied allegedly – Kyiv denies this – by Ukraine. Well, my enemy’s enemy is my friend.

A further chapter in the Scramble for Africa has opened. This time it’s Russia and China. There is something almost fitting that the two vast militarized authoritarian giants wish to engage with more or less militarized, authoritarian regimes in Africa. From Grozny to Gao jihadism is a menace, and from Beijing to Bamako railways and infrastructure are basic to economic progress. Russia and China seek Africa’s rare minerals and metals, gold and

diamonds, cashew nuts and cocoa. Gold remains a lure. It is estimated that Russia has been taking out £1 billion worth of gold each year from African countries. The Wagner mercenaries took over a gold mine in Mali only last year.

Everything in the West African garden wasn't lovely before the new arrivals (the Chinese not so new). The northern borders of these West African states are highly permeable to people, weapons and smuggled goods. Travel north west from Maroua in Cameroon, you aren't far from Maiduguri in Nigeria, birthplace in 2009 of militant *Boko Haram* which forged links with ISIS and, in 2015, sought to form a Caliphate. Travel north east to the capital of Chad, N'Djamena, and you go through territory infested with militia of the *Islamic State in West Africa*, and the remains of *Boko Haram*. Go south you have miles of border with Nigeria, a smugglers paradise for vehicles and arms. And since 2018 there has been a debilitating civil war in Cameroon.

Failure both to alleviate poverty and command the confidence of citizens are contributory causes of jihadism. The high-flown titles of such armed groups can give a false impression. The foot soldiers of such militias have little knowledge of Shari'a and the Qur'an. They are in the employ of better educated jihadists, given a Kalashnikov, earn a living and eventually can pay the bride-price for a wife. The corruption in African States, the siphoning off of national wealth, the absence of reward for competence and merit, is not news to their citizens. I was being driven south from Makeni to Freetown in Sierra Leone and noticed a new railway running parallel with the road "Where does that go", I asked the driver. "Beijing" he replied. I could see him grinning in the rear-view mirror.

Neither Russia nor China are particularly bothered by the high level of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa. Russia's kleptocrats would find it amateurish. *Transparency International's* Corruption

Perception Index is a standard measure of public sector corrupt practice. The lower the score the higher the corruption. Denmark does best with 90. But 44 out of 49 sub-Saharan African countries score below 50. Nigeria gets 24, Cote d'Ivoire with 40. Botswana, something of a worthy exception at 60. To Russia and China diplomatic support, for example at the UN, and valuable, often scarce, commodities, are what matters from client states.

In the face of the deteriorating situation in West Afrika, and economic pressures in Europe, not a great deal is currently to be expected from either the UK and the EU. It is true that since 2015, there have been British troops training the Nigerian army, and personnel advising on counter-terrorism in North-East Nigeria, the Chad Basin and Cameroon in response to the ISIS threat in the region. There has also been some police training. But both the EU and UK, by cutting spending on Aid, are simultaneously undermining their own soft power and weakening the challenge to poverty. A great deal of the UK Aid budget is now diverted from poverty reduction abroad to covering the cost of asylum seekers in UK, including hotel accommodation, or on stimulating and facilitating trade. This as climate change brings ever severer immiseration to millions.

The current, declining, birth rate in Africa is 31 per 1,000 people. Though, the UN estimates, there will be 2.5 billion Africans by 2050, making up a quarter of the world's population. There is need to focus a little creative attention and action on this great continent beyond *Schadenfreude* at France's reverses. 'Waging Peace, Fighting Disease and Building Hope' - the Motto of the Carter Center in Atlanta, founded by the late President, would be a good start.

ISRAEL - PALESTINE - IRAN

WILL THE US REPUBLICANS CAUSE AN ISRAEL-IRAN WAR?

20.01.2022

Our fraught international relations increase the danger of nuclear proliferation and conflict between nuclear powers. Donald Trump withdrew the USA from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 abrogating the nuclear deal with Iran which America had signed in July 2015 with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council - Russia, China, France and the UK - plus Germany and the EU. Trump then implemented crippling new sanctions on shipping and Iran's banks directed at the heart of the Islamic Republic's economy, its oil sales. Iran is OPEC's fourth largest producer. The punishment was imposed for its "malign activities" in the Middle East and its continuing development of ballistic missiles.

The JCPOA took a decade to negotiate and curtailed Iran's production of the weapons-grade uranium needed for nuclear warheads, and so reduced the risk of war with Israel. Obama lifted some economic sanctions as a result. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), accountable to the United Nations and a respected independent body with sixty years' experience of inspection, was charged with validation of the agreement. Iran's nuclear sites became the most monitored in the world. The IAEA, acting as both guarantor and on-the-ground inspector, reported a high level of Iranian compliance which continued for several months even after the US withdrawal. The JCPOA worked. It relied on validation not trust – of which there was precious little. A functioning diplomatic achievement was wantonly destroyed by Trump and the Republican Party.

The EU tried to palliate the effects of Trump's new sanctions to little avail; any bank doing business with Iran would forfeit its business with the United States. Banks were not going to lose profitable links with the US by continuing banking with the Islamic Republic. Despite sanctions-busting shipments of oil to countries such as China, the Iranian economy took a big hit, playing into the hands of the USA's worst enemies, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards corps (IRGC).

The US renegeing on its commitments and imposing debilitating new sanctions on Iran had two consequences, one direct, one indirect. The Islamic Republic retaliated by setting its advanced centrifuges spinning and may now be making 60% enriched uranium (90% is weapons grade, a limit of 3.67% was agreed in JCPOA). The second consequence was indirect. Iran's hardliners blamed the relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani for trusting the Americans and for the parlous state of Iran's economy brought on by the new sanctions. Rouhani lost the 2021 Presidential elections as a result. Sayyid Ebrahim Raisi, a Robespierre-like figure involved in post-revolutionary executions of the 1980s, closely aligned with the ultra-conservative Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, to whom the (IRGC) answer, became President. Iran's nuclear future was now in the hands of hardliners.

Emboldened by Trump's policy of 'maximum pressure', Israel greeted Raisi's election with a drone attack on a site in Karaj where advanced centrifuges were being made. The Israelis had assassinated Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, head of Iran's nuclear programme, in 2020. In April 2021 an underground nuclear facility in Natanz was targeted. The background to these military actions was a progressive decline in the time Iran needed to assemble a nuclear weapon: 'breakout time'. The JCPOA had pegged it to one year. Breakout time is now estimated to have dropped below three months. Thus the threat of a nuclear-armed

Iran has significantly increased and with it the prospect of a major Israeli-Iranian conflict.

Since 27 December 2021, diplomats from the five members of the UN Security Council and Germany have been gathering in Vienna at the Palais Coburg for an 8th session of talks attempting to re-establish a version of JCPOA. The Americans sit in a separate room. Iran refuses to negotiate with them directly until Trump's sanctions are lifted Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the Iranian Foreign Minister, told Al-Jazeera on 6 January: "Lifting sanctions means lifting all forms of sanctions stipulated in the nuclear agreement, and the sanctions that Trump re-imposed contradict the terms of the agreement". 'Compliance for compliance', tough talk perhaps mainly for Raisi's domestic audience as there has been some 'back-channel' contact.

President Raisi seems set on becoming the next Supreme Leader. Raisi's concerns, and those of Iranian chief negotiator and deputy-Foreign Minister, Ali Bagheri Kani, are national security and avoiding any major rift between Raisi and the present Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, believed to be his patron. Hence the Iranian red lines on re-establishment of JCPOA: first, full lifting of nuclear sanctions, then a period to verify that sanctions have been lifted, plus a guarantee that the US will not renege on the agreement again. Given the aggressive stance of the Republican Party with Trump a possible Presidential candidate in 2024, and Biden's current low ratings, a guarantee is impossible and the Iranians must know this.

Two Spanish-speaking diplomats carry a big burden in the coming weeks: Enrique Mora, the EU's Deputy Secretary-General of the European External Action Service, acting as coordinator for the negotiations, and Raphael Grossi, director-general of the IAEA for the last two years. Grossi who is a graduate of the Pontifical University of Argentina was formerly Argentine ambassador to

Austria. He has – at least – six other nuclear sites to worry about. The main nuclear fuel enrichment plants, Natanz and Fordow, the latter with 166 advanced centrifuges, remain under IAEA surveillance. Thanks to Grossi, IAEA cameras were recently re-installed in Karaj to monitor centrifuge production despite Iran's fears that the Israeli attack of June 2021 was possible because the cameras had been hacked.

The mood music in the Middle East sounds more promising. Pressures from the Biden administration have somewhat eased Sunni-Shi'a tensions, most notably between Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Iran. This worries Israel. Begun under the more amenable President Rouhani, meetings in Baghdad between the Iranians and Saudis have continued. Kani has visited Abu Dhabi for talks. As things stand, President Raisi's choice is between compromise that could scupper his chances of becoming Supreme Leader or no-deal with continuation of the current level of economic disruption - which could also blight his chances. Shi'a Islam holds that both possession and use of nuclear weapons are *haram*, forbidden. And so Iran may only be seeking the capability to assemble a nuclear weapon. China signed a 25-year cooperation deal with Iran in 2021 and could influence the decision.

Biden faces a difficult choice too. Softening of the US position would be a gift to the Republicans, would cost the Democrats votes, and could help bring back Trump. The IAEA comes centre stage in any agreement: for example, synchronised with lifting of sanctions, Iran's highly enriched fissile material is shipped out and agreed rigorous inspection protocols become operational. Will then Iran return to full compliance and will MOSSAD stay the hand of an extremist Israeli government so outright war between Israel and Iran is avoided? At the moment the message from the US and the EU coordinator of negotiations Mora is: 'Time is running out'. Every week lowers breakout time. The sooner

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Trump goes away or goes the way of Al Capone (the tax man got him jailed), and the Republican Party comes to its senses, the sooner we can sleep a little more easily.

ISRAEL & IRAN: RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM & THE THREAT OF WAR

13.12.2022

How are Israel and Iran to avoid war? Israel is an ally of the USA. Iran is now an ally of Russia. Iran is a theocracy with a regime-controlled press, all serious opposition candidates barred from elections. Israel is a democracy with a free press and hotly contested elections. Iran is in civil turmoil. Israel and Palestine are in perennial conflict. The enmity between Iran and Israel means that for years they have been on the brink of war.

Whilst the political dynamics in each are, of course, very different the influence of religious extremism displays an odd recent convergence. The well-known Shi'a extremism of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij volunteers remains the force sustaining Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's theocratic tyranny in Iran against a persistent popular revolt. But now in Israel the Prime Minister-elect, Benjamin Netanyahu is also beholden to Right-wing and Ultra-Orthodox extremists. After the recent election he is head of a governing coalition holding only 64 out of 120 seats in the Knesset.

In both Iran and Israel, domestic politics and internal pressures encourage belligerent rhetoric so easily a prelude to military action. In both countries, recent developments are pushing religious and political extremists to the fore as powerful arbiters of their countries' future. Religion in Iran, resting on the Qur'an, is the mainstay of unaccountable tyranny. Religion in Israel, resting on the Hebrew Scriptures, the Torah, is used by some Jewish settlers to justify the dispossession of Palestinians. Control of women or possession of land: both purposes considered divinely mandated. And the problem with divine injunctions is that they brook no negotiation or compromise.

In Britain, there has been extensive coverage of the situation in Iran. Israel has been receiving far less attention. For that reason the focus here will be on recent political changes in Israel and the rise of religious extremism.

After another round of inconclusive elections, the Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, gave Netanyahu an extension until 21 December to pull together a viable coalition government. The slim majority he has built gives exceptional negotiating power to three extreme Right-wing and two Ultra-Orthodox Parties. Here are some details drawn from Israel's Press.

The most notable figure in the new government is Itamar Ben-Gvir, leader of the small Otzma Yehudit Party, hero of the West Bank settlers, a Jewish supremacist with national celebrity status. In 2007 an Israeli court convicted him of incitement to racism. At the time he was associated with a youth movement declared a terrorist organisation by the Israeli government. Ben-Gvir is now slated to head a new National Security Agency which will control Israel West Bank Border police. It requires little imagination to predict his effect on the West Bank's Palestinian population.

Ben-Gvir teamed up with Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionist Party to win 225,000 votes in the March 2021 elections doubling to half a million in the November 2022 elections. Smotrich campaigned to become Minister of Justice with the aim of restoring 'the Torah justice system', but failed. Smotrich is a hardliner with an overtly anti-Arab and a homophobic track record. Such are his extreme views that on a visit to UK this year the British Board of Jewish Deputies told him to go home. He believes 'following the Torah will lead to financial abundance'. Netanyahu has appointed him Minister of Finance for the next two years. The Religious Zionist deal with Netanyahu, just concluded, opens up the possibility of a creeping annexation of the West Bank.

Then there is Avigdor Maoz, a former civil servant and former director of the Ministries of Housing and the Interior. He is to be a Deputy Minister with responsibility for school curricula and for a new portfolio on Jewish National Identity. What this means is not clear though for 'Avi' Maoz it entails opposition to Reform Judaism, Arabs, secularism and LGBTQ Israelis. In 2019 he founded Noam, the Pleasantness Party! which holds a single seat, his own. Another Ultra-Orthodox group led by Yitzchak Goldknopf, the United Torah Judaism Party, will hold the Construction and Housing portfolio.

There is more. Netanyahu has just concluded a deal with Orthodox Rabbi Aryeh Deri, leader of the Shas Party, making him Deputy Prime Minister. He is the least extreme of the Orthodox minority Party figures, an experienced politician and fixer. But he has a suspended sentence for criminal tax charges hanging over him. There will have to be enabling legislation before he can take up ministerial positions. If Netanyahu succeeds in getting this through, the two top political posts will be held by men facing longstanding corruption charges.

The Shas party holds eleven seats in the Knesset. Deri is also appointed Health and Interior Minister before replacing Smoltrich when his two years as Finance Minister are up. This leaves Netanyahu's Likud with twelve Ministries, most notably Defence, Foreign Affairs and Justice. Not surprisingly this future Israeli government has sounded alarm bells in the Biden administration. But it is also clearly not to the liking of Israel's military leadership nor, most probably, to its powerful Intelligence services. The rolling dispossession of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank by Jewish settlers, the immiseration of Gaza, was presented by former Israeli governments, including those led by Netanyahu, as in the interests of National Security. Henceforth an

extreme right wing government may openly justify the settler onslaught on Palestinian land as Scriptural.

How has this happened? Israel has long been able to deal with external threats. It is the perception of an internal threat that has given the extreme-Right a head of steam. This fear took firmer hold after the May 2021 melt-down beginning with Arab evictions from East Jerusalem and police-worshipper skirmishes around the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount. Street conflict between Jews and Arabs spread around Israel's major towns. In turn this set off attacks and counterattacks from Gaza and the West Bank. Over 250 Arabs were killed but also ten synagogues went up in flames, 112 Jewish homes burned and thirteen Jews were reported killed. The level of civil conflict and deaths this year remains high. Such violence lends credence to the extreme-Right narrative of the enemy within.

Both Israel and Iran have entered a new period of instability with new pressures liable to split their political elites and enhance the sense of threat. Commentators now believe Iran has probably enough enriched uranium for an atomic warhead and it continues to project its military power in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Israel has wanted to destroy Iran's nuclear capacity since well before the signing of the defunct nuclear accords in 2015. With Iran providing Russia with drones used to attack Ukraine the staying hand of the USA may loosen its grip on Israel.

Were Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, however, Tehran's likely response would be the blockage of the three kilometre wide shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz (33 kilometres wide at narrowest point). Shipping of over one third of the world's natural gas and over a sixth of its oil production could stop overnight with catastrophic consequences for the global economy.

The present situation is not one in which peacemakers could gain traction. But that makes it all the more imperative for

moderate leadership of Shi'a Islam and Judaism globally to speak out and intervene at the highest levels possible before it is too late. The Iranian centrifuges are spinning. Events are raising the risks of an Iran-Israel war by the day.

See *TheArticle* 12/12/2022

IRAN: REVOLT OR REVOLUTION?

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“This is your captain speaking. We are just leaving Iranian airspace”. Instant removal of headscarves. That was twenty years ago flying out of Tehran.

This September it was the mandatory hijab worn, I imagine, pushed back, perhaps with a suggestion of defiance, that led to the arrest and murder of 22 year-old Mahsa Amini in Tehran at the hands of the *Gasht-e-Ershad*, the ‘morality police’, custodians of Islamic women’s dress code.

Mahsa Amini lived in Kurdistan Province in the North West of Iran and was visiting her brother in the capital. According to those detained with her, she was beaten in the police van and lapsed into coma. Her death triggered national demonstrations that still continue.

There have been major, but intermittent, demonstrations against Iran’s theocratic regime since the disputed Presidential election of 2009 brought almost two millions onto the streets. Each outbreak violently suppressed. But the embers of former protest were still hot this September. Mahsa Amini’s death was enough to breathe life into them. The blaze has been unexpectedly uncontrollable.

Street protests both in Mahsa Amini’s home town in Kurdistan and in Tehran spread rapidly to provincial towns, gaining in numbers. A rolling youth rebellion at first led by women and girls, students and school children, picked up support across age-groups including university teachers and professionals - reminiscent in some ways of the Soweto 1976 youth uprising. Strikes in many sectors, including oil, followed. As Jonathan Friedland wrote in a passionate article in *The Guardian* (26 November) it wasn’t just about mandatory wearing of the hijab – anymore than Soweto

1976 was just about compulsory Afrikaans in schools - it was about liberty.

The Iranian regime, led by the 83-year old Ayatollah Khamenei, supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), taken by surprise responded brutally. There was nothing unusual about State violence but this outbreak of protest didn't peter out and displayed new features. Rebellion in Kurdistan had secessionist potential. Throughout the Middle East the Kurds – a population of some 35 million - have been denied national sovereignty, a state of their own. Iranian Kurds are no exception.

The revolt's feminist dimension wrong-footed the regime. They had expected to suppress protests as easily as they had the 2017 and 2019 demonstrations in working class areas against the rising cost of living and unemployment - created at least in part by Western economic sanctions. Instead the protests took on a counter-cultural life of their own. *Women, Life, Freedom* banners became a permanent challenge on the streets. Hijabs were burnt, a news broadcast was hacked with attacks on Khamenei appearing, young girls pelted a Ministry of Education official with water bottles and chased him out of their school, women blocked CCTV cameras with sanitary-towels – none of the security forces would want to handle them.

Iranian singer, Shevin Hajipour's, poignant *Baraye (For)* has become the theme song of national protest. It is a litany of what over years the protestors feared or hoped: “for an ordinary life”, “for changing these rusted minds”, “for fear of kissing (in public)” and so on. Years ago I walked the ski-slopes north of Tehran and saw approaching hand-holding couples spring apart then laugh when they realised I was a foreigner.

More worrying for the regime should be the results of encrypted opinion polls by GAMAAN (Group for Analysing & Measuring Attitudes in Iran), a Dutch non-profit organisation

following punctilious sampling methodology - funded over 70% by North American and European foundations. The old divisions, between south Tehran, working class conservative, and wealthy north Tehran's progressives, between urban anti-regime and rural pro-regime, between pious elderly, and irreligious youth, are breaking down if the hijab is a yardstick. 74% of women polled were against the mandatory dress code but also 71% of men, with little difference in attitudes according to age, urban or rural backgrounds. 84% were in favour of the mullahs getting out of politics. The *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change* paper 'Protests and Polling Insights From the Streets of Iran: How Removal of the Hijab Became a Symbol of Regime Change' (22 November 2022) interprets these findings, along with a reduced level of praying five times a day, as a sign of secularisation. Less religiosity perhaps but a widespread loss of Shi'a identity? I doubt it.

Similarly, it is too early to see the current revolt as comparable to the events leading up to the end of the Shah's rule in 1979. The protesters have no leader waiting in the wings, no organisational centre. They are rallied by social media, but so are the regime's agencies of repression, with intelligence on the protesters' next moves provided for free by the internet. Death sentences have already been imposed on street demonstrators for alleged crimes such as 'enmity against God' and "corruption on earth". An estimated 450 protesters have been killed on the streets - some 10% of them children- deaths in custody are unknown. The IRSC have been entering the mainly Sunni areas of Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchestan in the south-east, in vehicles with mounted machine-guns and using them.

Revolutions succeed when cracks in the political elite widen and the armed forces split. But Iran has lived with cracks in its elite for a long time. Plenty of mullahs, even in the religious heartland of Qom thought, and think, that political life is

corrupting true religion. The former Speaker of Parliament, Ali Larijani, refuted Khamenei's claims that the hijab protests were not home-grown but engineered by Iran's enemy the USA. Yet Khamenei has held onto to power and, in every sense, stuck to his guns. Recently the government asked prestigious families help to calm things down. They – notably former president Hashemi Rafsanjani – preferred to keep their counsel. A split within the regime and, within the military, armed opposition to the IRSC and its Basij volunteers would probably cause a Syrian-style civil war; Khamenei pointedly warns of the consequences.

The duration of this protest movement, now often called a revolution, is itself a significant turning point. In the past fear of reprisals conquered. But women and youth are releasing the brake of fear and keeping resistance to the regime moving. They seem to be winning on the hijab, many women are ignoring the code. But as the distinguished Iran commentator, Christopher de Bellaigue, points out ('Khamenei's Dilemma' *New York Review of Books* 24 November 2022) the present Supreme Leader Khamenei lived through the Shah's collapse, saw the consequences of the Shah's indecision and will not repeat his mistakes. The present President, Ebrahim Raisi, is accused of involvement in the 1988 hangings of thousands of dissidents on orders from Ayatollah Khomeini. Khamenei will double-down. There are already an estimated 14,000 imprisoned. A majority in parliament supported a letter to the judiciary calling for harsh punishments of protesters – this can include the death penalty already being imposed. From now on it will be live rounds and draconian sentences.

It was almost a decade after the Soweto uprising before the apartheid regime decided on compromise and another five years before they decided to negotiate. The Iranian regime is not likely to change much faster than this even if they decide change is inevitable. The nuclear deal, scuppered by Trump, is dead. Iran is

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

hardening its position and increasing its uranium enrichment in Fordow and Natanz towards 60%. We are not looking at a regime about to crumble.

The removal of the hijab is a symbol of liberty. It will be a long time before it is a symbol of regime change.

ISRAEL'S CRISIS: RELIGIOUS & NATIONALIST EXTREMISM

28.03.2023

On Tuesday 21 March this year Israel's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) issued, in their words, an "unprecedented warning" in the form of a "strategic alert". The gist of the alert was that the 'judicial reforms' proposed by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his ultra-nationalist and religious extremist coalition would "seriously harm the functioning of the IDF" (Israel's Defense Forces), the economy, and "endanger relations with the USA". The reforms would give the Government of Israel control over the appointment of judges and weaken the Supreme Court's ability to undertake judicial review of legislation.

The unprecedented nature of the strategic alert is explained by the unprecedented level and nature of the protests against the proposed 'reforms' now entering their twelfth week. The numbers taking to the streets in Israel's cities have been prodigious with the Jewish crowds predominately – but not exclusively - drawn from Israel's professional elites. The INSS was in particular reacting to the increasing number of IDF reservists joining street protests and threatening not to turn up for military service. In two letters published on 16 March, some 750 Air Force, special forces, Mossad and military intelligence officers warned of imminent threats to stop volunteering for duty. The Likud Party Minister of Defence, Yoav Galant, publicly called for a halt to the reforms and was promptly fired by Netanyahu.

President Biden, throughout his political career, has strongly espoused the view of Israel as a deserving democratic outpost in the Middle East and has acted accordingly. His relationship with Netanyahu has been warm. But Washington is continuing to express 'concern' about the proposed drastic judicial curbs. In a

telephone call with Netanyahu, Biden expressed his belief that “democratic societies are strengthened by genuine checks and balances, and that fundamental changes should be pursued with the broadest possible base of popular support”. It is some measure of the Biden administration’s former inaction that this modest and diplomatic statement, barely a fraternal admonition, has had an impact on the INSS.

This current outcry in Israel is new. It is not an extension of existing Jewish protests against violations of the human rights of Arab citizens of Israel, nor of those of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, though some protestors may be supporters of B’Tselem, Yesh Din, and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) Israel’s major human rights organisations. Neither do current protests seem a harbinger of calls for a new peace initiative. But there are very good reasons why peace and human rights ought to be on today’s Jewish protestors’ placards.

Whether citizens of Israel, in Gaza or the West Bank, relations between Arab Muslims and Jewish Israelis - with Christians and Druze to a lesser extent - are at boiling point. The May 2021 evictions of Arabs from East Jerusalem and skirmishes around the Al-Aqsa Mosque on Temple Mount sparked street fighting between Jews and Arabs within Israel itself. This led to a wave of attacks and counterattacks on and from Gaza and the West Bank. 250 Arabs were killed, ten synagogues left in flames, 112 Jewish homes burned, and 13 Jews lost their lives. In October 2022 alone, 32 Palestinians and two Israeli soldiers were killed. This continuing high level of violence encourages narratives of the enemy within which carry with them the ugly prospect of civil war plus a third intifada. To date averting such dangers do not feature prominently amongst the protestors’ demands on Netanyahu.

The dangers, though, were clearly spelt out in a prescient response to the May 2021 communal violence by the Catholic

Bishop Declan Lang and the Anglican Bishop Christopher Chessun in the Holy Land Coordination: “unless the international community is willing to adopt a rights-based approach to its peace-making, Israel’s control of the occupied territories will become ever more entrenched, Palestinian rights further encroached upon and outbreaks of fighting increasingly likely. Israel’s security cannot be based on the permanent inequality and disenfranchisement of Palestinians.” (The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales set up the international Coordination group in the late 1990s to act in solidarity with the Christian communities of the Holy Land).

Since the 1967 war some 450,000 Jewish settlers have moved into the West Bank and 235,000 into East Jerusalem creating 279 new settlements. I once heard the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks speaking passionately about peace emphasising repeatedly that “peace is in everyone’s interests”. But the truth of that is called in question if it means, without redress, you lose your land, your home, your olive groves and your schools (currently 44 Palestinian schools are due for demolition), all to make room for Israeli Jewish families. The pre-conditions for a two-State solution have disappeared.

Israel’s Minister of Defense, Yoav Galant, recently signed an agreement with Bezalel Smotrich, the ‘adjunct Minister of Defense’, giving Smotrich administrative authority over Area C, that is 60% of the West Bank - extracted for Religious Zionist Parties’ support for Netanyahu. A little over a year ago the Board of Deputies of British Jews described Smotrich, during a visit to the UK, as having “abominable views and hate-provoking ideology”. “Get back on the plane”, they wrote in a Hebrew tweet “and be remembered as a disgrace forever”. Five years ago Smotrich was advocating flooding the West Bank with settlers.

Irrespective of how much control he will be able to exert over the territory, his annexationist intentions are obvious.

The international context is also changing. The bilateral deals that the Trump administration brokered between Israel and the frontline Arab States are fraying. Jordan's Parliament has voted to expel the Israel ambassador after a typically provocative speech by Smotrich in front of a map showing Jordan as part of 'Greater Israel'. "There is no such thing as a Palestinian nation. There is no Palestinian history. There is no Palestinian language," he said in Paris on 19 March. And China's unexpected intervention to reduce the enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a new move in the Middle East with unknown consequences. Meanwhile Netanyahu has been doing the rounds in Europe to garner support.

Here, Rishi Sunak is echoing Biden's mild diplomacy, speaking of the importance of 'shared democratic values'. In December 2022, he told the Conservative Friends of Israel that Britain's relations with Israel had 'never been stronger'. Reading the 2030 Roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations, signed on 21 March by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Israel, you can see what he means. It commits to seeking a very wide-ranging partnership including trade, development, defense and security. To say the least, it is unfortunate timing. Foreign Minister Cleverly's roadmap gives no hint of the cliff edge ahead nor that Israel is in - the INSS' words - "a looming crisis".

After massive national demonstrations last Sunday provoked by the Minister of Defense's sacking, a general strike with disruption of Tel Aviv airport and major ports shut down by striking workers, Netanyahu announced yesterday he was postponing the new legislation. It is not enough. Ultra-nationalists were already counter-demonstrating Monday night with violence threatened. Netanyahu is caught in a trap of his own making:

requiring concessions to both anti-reformers, delaying until May with less drastic legislation, and pro-reform, granting his extremist National Defense Director, Ben Gvir's demand for a new civil 'national guard'.

Netanyahu may continue to push for a decisive attack on Iranian nuclear facilities hoping to close ranks behind his inherently unstable coalition government. Iran is fast moving towards sufficient enriched uranium to make a nuclear warhead, and fear of the threat of nuclear proliferation is shared with Western allies. But whatever his next move to prop up his political house of cards, it is unlikely to reduce conflict or be without consequences for the Middle East.

See also *TheArticle* 28/03/2023

AYATOLLAHS, BOMBS & BARBIES

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Democratic states are all alike; every autocratic state is autocratic in its own way. (Apologies to Tolstoy for rewriting the opening line of *Anna Karenina* about happy and unhappy families). Democracies are alike in featuring universal suffrage, striving for a body of robust accountable institutions and political practice, and sustaining a vibrant civil society. Autocracies, however, have strikingly distinctive features.

Take Iran and China. Despite common features for example, Iran like China now wants spies to harass and report back on dissidents in the UK and alternates brutal repression of dissent with reform and diplomatic activity. Putin, of course, brazenly carries out political assassinations of exiles, and opposition leaders such as Alexei Navalny. But Iran's religious history has created its own unique political dynamics.

Reformists can become President in Iran. Towards the end of Muhammad Khatami's time as Iran's President, 1997-2005, I used to visit Tehran for formal sessions of interfaith dialogue, a rare opportunity to observe the interaction of religion and politics. In 2003, seeking better relations with the USA, Khatami offered G.W. Bush a "grand bargain deal" signed off by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Prolonged behind-the-scenes negotiations at the UN had led the Iranians, in return for the lifting of debilitating economic sanctions, to offer to end support for Hamas and to pressure Hezbollah to stand down its military wing. A way would have been opened for Iran to join the WTO. Bush did not reply - arguably a costly lost opportunity.

President Reagan went on a six-day visit to China in 1984. In comparison, after the capture of diplomat hostages during the revolutionary fervour of Ayatollah Khomeini's takeover in 1979,

and after the West's support for Iraq in the war against Iran (1980-1988), the Islamic Republic became what might be called the USA's official enemy. Bush, who included Iran alongside North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq in his "axis of evil", was in thrall to a neo-con clique, led by his Vice-President Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld (Secretary of Defense). They were pushing for regime change and had destabilisation plans. Iran was not about to be visited by a US President.

The Iranian State, its constitution, politics and power structures, are complex, opaque and sui generis. The Foreign Minister, for example, is appointed by the President, but the Judiciary and Supreme Court by the Supreme Leader, the name given to Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor, Ali Khamenei (84), the ultra-authoritarian Supreme Leader for 35 years since 1989, with the IRGC, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as his military base, can block Presidential initiatives. The constitution makes tension between elected and religious authority inevitable.

Both President Khatami and President Hassan Rouhani 2013-2021, who had studied in Britain, were by Iranian standards reformists. They were both succeeded by hardliners. The White House was partly to thank for provoking reactionary policy change. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, mayor of Tehran, who followed Khatami in 2005, was something of a religious fanatic, anti-American and anti-Israel. Ebrahim Raisi, elected President in 2021 after Rouhani, was a protégé of the Supreme Leader and a former member of a four-man prosecution committee which in 1988, according to Amnesty International, executed political prisoners in their thousands, many by hanging from cranes.

Whilst President, Rouhani achieved a major diplomatic breakthrough. In 2015 The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) limited Iran's development of nuclear power to peaceful purposes - as had Khatami when President. Signed by China,

Russia, France, Germany, UK, the EU and the USA, the agreement gave Rouhani a timetable for the lifting of sanctions which had been wrecking Iran's economy. At a reception in London a few years ago I asked former President Khatami about Shi'a teaching on nuclear weapons. 'Haram' (forbidden) he said. 'Haram for use?' I queried. 'Haram for use and possession', he replied with emphasis in English. We await the day Patriarch Kirill of Moscow declares that Russia's nuclear weapons are forbidden.

A Guardian Council appointed by the Supreme Leader selects nominees for the Presidential elections. In 2017, Ibrahim Raisi, by then Chief Justice of Iran, stood against Rouhani who was seeking a second term and was trounced getting 38% of the vote against Rouhani's 57% on a 73% voter turnout with 3% of votes invalid. But in 2021 Raisi won the presidential elections with 62% of the vote on a 48% - post-revolution lowest - turn-out with 13% of the votes invalid.

What had happened in the interim? Trump had happened: providing a damaging example of American impact on Iran's internal affairs. After only a few months in office, Trump refused certification for lifting sanctions on Iran and, on 8 May 2018, withdrew from the JPCOA. Rouhani and the reformers were discredited, the hardliners rejoiced, Raisi had a virtually clear run at the presidency, the centrifuges whirled away again seeking to produce enough weapons grade uranium for a bomb. The American neo-cons had undermined the Iranian reformers.

What of Iranian civil society? The world witnessed mass protests in 2022-2023 after Mahsa Amini died from police beating. The women and men of Women, Life, Freedom, were brutally repressed by Raisi's murderous security apparatus. The protesters' courageous defiance and greater numbers than those facing Putin's mafia in Russia shocked the Iranian government. Iran's civil society has paid a high price for Bush and Trump's policies.

Iranian foreign and external security policy may have positive nationalist support and tacit approval.

Iranian culture is, of course, strikingly different from that of China and Russia. I witnessed a telling little cultural clash between Iran's governed and government in 2002. To counteract the attraction and influence of western Barbie dolls the religious authorities announced the launch of Iranian dolls, Dara and Sara, dressed in traditional fashion in keeping with Islamic values. Guided by the wife of a friend I plunged into the Tehran bazaar, crowded with women, black hijabs and chadors all around, intending to buy the new dolls to take home for the grandchildren. I discovered a silent revolt against the velayat e-faqih, the rule of the mullahs. No Dara and Sara. Lots of Barbies.

Weeks after my return home a letter arrived inviting me to the Iranian embassy. I had written an article critical of Iran's human rights record ending on a light note with my failed quest for Dara and Sara. I guessed a ban on future entry to Iran awaited me. At the Embassy I was ushered into a large hall and seated at an isolated table with a covering cloth and flowers – hiding a microphone I assumed. There, as I expected, my host upbraided me at length for my 'negativity about Iran'. Then he lifted the tablecloth and presented me with Dara and Sara. Urbane, unexpected and sophisticated diplomacy.

Today Iran is in the hands of particularly dangerous hardline characters. But in the future there may be more opportunities for liberalising change than in other autocracies. For this is not Putin's Russia or Xi's China. There are still Khatamis and Rouhanis in the wings. Twenty years ago, the autocratic, black and traditional world of Dara and Sara could dialogue with the democratic, pink and modern world of Barbie. Let's hope one day another opportunity for dialogue and negotiation will arise and not be thrown away - however bleak the picture is today.

PALESTINIANS: THE TEXTURE OF
INJUSTICE

23.10.2024

Perceptions are formed and shaped by experience. Nathan Thrall's *A Day in The Life of Abed Salama* (Penguin 2023) offers a vivid vision of the world of Abed Salama, a Palestinian father from a traditional village, close to East Jerusalem, occupied by Israel since the 1967 war. In the words of Alex Preston of *The Observer*, this book "speaks with truth of ordinary lives trapped in the jaws of history".

Unlike other Europeans most British people have no historical memory of Occupation. Most of us – Irish immigrants excepted – don't have that spontaneous sympathy based on historic experience of political domination. South Africans have it, derived from apartheid, passionately enough to take a case against Israel to the International Court of Justice.

The conflict over land between Israelis and Palestinians produces two powerful and contrasting emotional responses. The first is sympathy for Israel rooted in the horror of the Holocaust and a European history of Christian pogroms inherited by post-war generations. The second is sympathy for the plight of Palestinians confronted with the might of a US-supported Jewish State blocking their right to self-determination and punishing attempts to achieve it.

Emotion can open the mind to empathy and imagination, or to hatred. Consider the emotional impact of the savage Hamas attack of 7th October and the taking of hostages on the many Jewish people for whom the state of Israel is a powerful symbol of safety. Consider the emotional impact as the texture of a Palestinian society is torn asunder, Gaza a killing ground, casualties in the West Bank growing daily. Which is uppermost in the minds of

people in Britain, in many cases, will depend on who is winning the propaganda war accompanying the actual conflict, or simply their personal identity.

The BBC tries hard to maintain balance between these two perspectives, encouraging the listener or viewer to imagine both, better to understand what the conflict is about and how it might end. (Though only the simplistic story of good allies, some-going-too-far, versus bad terrorists, all-beyond-the-pale, appears admissible to its critics.) Whilst TV images of grieving Palestinians *in extremis*, filmed in a bombed-out wasteland, or Hamas footage of the 7 October massacre of Jews, can elicit a range of emotions, empathy is not necessarily the most powerful of them. A focus on the present, on news, without historic context does not help understanding.

The Life of Abed Salama was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction in 2023. Thrall, an accomplished writer, is a contributor to several upmarket US and British periodicals. A Jewish American living in Jerusalem, he also lived for a while in Gaza working from 2010 to 2020 for *International Alert* (an NGO dedicated to “solving the root causes of conflict across divides”) leading its Arab Israeli Project.

Thrall’s narrative pivots around a 2012 bus crash north of Jerusalem that killed a teacher and six children, several horribly burnt, one of whom, Milad, is the son of Abed Salama. Thrall knew Abed well and his story is knitted into the history of Israeli Occupation in a matter- of- fact way, Israeli Defence Forces’ (IDF) roadblocks, checkpoints and boundary walls taken entirely for granted.

The much-delayed appearance of firefighters and ambulances at the scene of the accident reminded me of entering Israel from Jordan by the Allenby Bridge in the early 1990s. I emerged opposite a large military control tower. After time in South

African-occupied Namibia in the 1980s I recognised an occupied territory. And waiting by the bridge I watched with surprise a Palestinian ambulance transferring a patient to an Israeli one. All of this would have been wallpaper for Thrall.

For a Palestinian, transport and the geography of Jewish settlements add hours to travel time and complexity compared with the experience of an Israeli citizen. There are three West Bank zones each with their different rules plus Palestinians' different coloured identity cards, determining where you can and can't go. The movement of people and goods, both essential to economic development are strictly controlled and obstructed.

The office of the Quartet Representative (UN, US, EU and Russia) was created in November 2015 to develop the institutions and economy of the Palestinian territories. The movement of Palestinians living in Gaza, and of goods, was especially restricted requiring a perpetual struggle with the Israeli authorities to keep open Gaza's border crossings. The much publicised tunnels were dug to allow the import and export of goods sustaining the vestiges of an economy . They also served as the means to import weapons and as arsenals.

Thrall is comfortable with cultural difference between Arab and Western societies. Muslim prayer, piety and practice structure time and daily life. And honour, a prime virtue, is paramount. The Palestinian *dramatis personae* in his book mainly belong to two large extended families who do not intermarry. Marriages themselves are strongly influenced by family interests and parental guidance, not romance. Abed himself as a young man had fallen in love with Ghazl a member of the Hamdan family, he a Salama, a Romeo and Juliet story.

Abed's membership of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) also had implications for personal relationships. Imprisoned for a while because of his DFLP

activities, like many, Abed was contemptuous of Fatah and its role in policing the scattered Area B zones on behalf of the Israelis. On the other hand, Abed's first cousin, Ibrahim Salama became head of the Palestinian Interior Ministry for Jerusalem. And he maintained reciprocal, supportive relationship with his Israeli counterparts. The bond with Dany Tirza and Colonel Saar Tzur, provides the reader many insights. Also unexpected, on the Jewish side of the divide is early Ashkenazi (Central and Eastern European Jews) discrimination against *Mizrahi*, Moroccan Jews, officially led by Israel's founding father David Ben-Gurion.

Thrall is not writing to make political points, daily life makes the points for him. In the first *intifada* (1987-1993), Abed was detained for his participation: "The plainclothes captains of Israel's intelligence service, the *Shabak*, tortured him in the usual method, known as *shabih* ...hands shackled to a pipe high above him so that only his toes touched the ground, pulling his limbs as if on a vertical rack". Written like remedial instructions from a physiotherapist. Everyday stuff.

The Life of Abed Salama describes what is happening on the ground, the relentless expropriation of Palestinian land, destruction of property and exclusion of more and more Palestinians from areas claimed by Jews. Thrall's big picture is of cycles of violence, people somehow getting used to it, while others by their violent actions ensure that peace eludes the peacemakers. Update and add in Muslim and Jewish religious extremists in power on each side, to account for the contemporary catastrophe.

Thrall's book captures the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of a Palestinian community under occupation. Its disciplined prose conveys a deep empathy which many readers will share. It offers no solutions to an intractable problem. But as much as any words can, it may help some readers to beware of

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importing a tragic conflict from the Middle East to communities in Britain.

THE POPE, GENOCIDE & THE WAR IN GAZA

20.11.2024

Last weekend, Vatican News and the Italian daily *La Stampa* quoted Pope Francis having said that some international experts had declared that “what is happening in Gaza has the characteristics of a genocide”, an excerpt from interviews in a book *Hope Never Disappoints*. “We should investigate carefully to assess whether this fits into the technical definition (of genocide) formulated by international jurists and organisations,” the Pope urged.

These remarks will, without doubt, have caused distress in Israel and in Jewish communities around the world with whom the Pope has worked to have better relationships. Francis visited the tomb of Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism in 2014, Auschwitz in 2016, and expressed concern about growing antisemitism on Italian television in November 2023. But tensions have been growing as the Israel-Palestine conflict escalated with religious affiliation becoming more significant. The Vatican’s attempt to achieve a balance between Islam and Judaism has become more challenging.

Last December, to some degree South Africa pre-empted the Pope’s call, filing a complaint, a ‘Memorial’, in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel for its actions in Gaza. The Genocide Convention was adopted by the UN in December 1948 as a response to the Holocaust. Alleging that a Jewish State needed to be prevented from committing the crime of genocide is particularly shocking.

The Pope is seeking clarification on whether the Convention is applicable to the situation in Gaza. So, on what grounds did South Africa institute such legal proceedings in the ICJ? There are certain international Conventions which “all States can be held to

have a legal interest in their protection” and thus an obligation to intervene. The Genocide Convention, an international treaty, is one of them. This principle, *erga omnes partes* (directed at all parties), was endorsed by the ICJ in 2022 in a case of Gambia v Myanmar involving the plight of the Rohingya. In approaching the ICJ South Africa found legal means and precedent to express its solidarity with Palestinians.

In international law the definition of the crime of genocide is highly restrictive. Nonetheless, thirteen other States, including Spain, Mexico, Ireland and Belgium, have indicated their intention of intervening on the side of South Africa at the ICJ with their own ‘Memorials’.

A look at how genocide became a crime recognised in international law sheds some light on the difficulty of establishing it legally today. The Polish, Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, coined the term ‘genocide’ in late 1942 in the context of Axis rule in occupied Europe: a process of destruction of an oppressed group “after removal of the population and the colonisation of the area by the oppressor’s own nationals”. He struggled to define the term but was clear about its historical precedents. “Bartolomé de las Casas, Vitoria [*16th century Salamanca Dominican Friars who championed rights of indigenous peoples*], and humanitarian interventions, are all links in one chain leading to the proclamation of genocide as an international crime by the United Nations”, he wrote in a later unpublished essay.

By the end of World War II, the crime of genocide was still not fully defined but the prosecutors in the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (1945-1946) did not flinch from using the term. Though none of the convicted Nazi leaders were found guilty of genocide as a specific crime. The Nuremberg indictments were for one or more crimes notably ‘war against peace’ (waging aggressive war), war crimes and crimes against humanity – which

covered genocide. At the time, Lemkin was defining genocide as “the criminal intent to destroy or cripple a human group” with an added emphasis on the destruction of cultures and their loss to humanity. His focus then was on the destruction of racial and national groups citing the fate of Poles, Gypsies and Jews.

In a resolution in the September 1948 session of the United Nations, the General Assembly declared that genocide was a crime that could take place in peacetime. In December 1948 the Convention defined genocide in Article II as: “a crime committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnical *sic*, racial or religious group, in whole or in part”. Because of the imperial sensitivities of UN member States, Lemkin’s emphasis on the destruction of cultures had disappeared, nor were political groups included.

On 8 October, the BBC led on an update report from the UN’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory set up in 2021 by the UN Human Rights Council. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) had not allowed them into Gaza. The UN team of three brought considerable combined experience to a difficult task. Members were South African Navi Pillay, former President Judge of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, Miloon Kothari, a former convener of the Working Group on Human Rights in India and the UN, and Professor Chris Sidoti, an academic expert on international human rights law and formerly Australian Human Rights Commissioner and head of the Australian Justice and Peace Commission.. Their report highlighted both Israel’s actions and those occurring during Hamas’ terrible 7 October attack when 1,200 Israelis died, 40 children killed, and hundreds were wounded. At the Nova music festival alone 136 women were slaughtered and there were incidents of sexual violence. 251 hostages were taken.

The UN Human Rights Office has examined over 8,000 deaths in Gaza from the beginning of the war. Requiring three sources for

each verification of death - for that reason mostly inside residential buildings - the Human Rights Office found 44% were children, 26% women and 30% men. Assuming for every direct killing four indirect deaths because of the war, *The Lancet* estimate some 190,000 Palestinians have died. In the words of the Austrian diplomat and High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, “unprecedented levels of killing, death, injury, starvation, illness and disease”.

Overall, the figures support allegations of indiscriminate bombing and shelling and appear incompatible with Israel’s claimed policy of legitimate self-defence: ending terrorism by targeted attacks on Hamas belligerents. An action cited by Article II as genocidal in the Convention, and relevant when considering the war, is “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”.

Under Article III of the Genocide Convention, direct and public incitement to commit genocide is legally punishable whether or not it results in actual genocidal action. On 28 December 2023, in a letter to Israel’s Attorney General, a group of former Knesset members, Israeli diplomats, academics and journalists gave details of “extensive and blatant incitement to genocide’ by influential Israeli public figures and called for their prosecution. The most significant calls had come from Itamar Ben-Gvir, Minister of National Security, who declared those who “celebrate, those who support.... they’re all terrorists and they should also be destroyed”, and from former Minister of Defence, Yoav Gallant, who said Israel was fighting “human animals” and that he was “imposing a complete siege on Gaza. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel”.

In a statement on 28 October 2023 on war against Hamas, Prime Minister Netanyahu himself urged Israelis to remember

their biblical enemy Amalek citing Deuteronomy 25.17. Samuel 15.3 on the Amelekites reads: “Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants...” Emotional rhetoric after the security failure and the tragic losses and hostage-taking of 7 October, or incitement and indications of intent? This is the kind of material jurists consider.

Proof of specific genocidal purpose will be critical if South Africa’s case is to succeed. Genocide, like any other crime, may be committed for a variety of motives ranging from ethnic or religious hatred revenge or fear to the elimination of an enemy and acquisition of territory. But when purpose/intent is inferred from circumstances rather than directly proved, genocidal purpose must be the sole possible inference that can be drawn from the criminal actions. That would be very difficult. Restriction of medical supplies, food and water, mass displacement as well as killing of the civilian population, conditions close to siege, do not necessarily add up legally to the crime of genocide.

But South Africa’s proceedings at the ICJ are looking increasingly grounded in facts. The UN’s Independent Commission of Inquiry is examining Hamas’ and the Israel’s actions as possible war crimes and crimes against humanity, no less serious crimes than genocide in international law but more easily proven.

All States have a common interest in fulfilling the purposes of the Genocide Convention. South Africa has taken the lead in upholding international law under threat today from so many quarters. The Pope was asking for the situation in Gaza to be clarified legally not claiming that the IDF is committing genocide. Any judgement from the ICJ will take a long time and is far from a foregone conclusion.

This is an acutely difficult time for a compassionate Pope seeking ways of stopping or reducing the suffering. Difficult for

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Catholics horrified at the plight of Palestinians, and difficult for Jewish friends too, processing the pain and insecurity of 7 October. This is an intractable conflict. Pope Francis leads a global Church not the allies of Israel or Hamas. As in the motif of the Synod, Francis would want to open the hearts and minds of both sides to each other. But for the time being that looks impossible.

THE POPE & GAZA: REPLY TO THE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN ORTHODOX
RABBIS

28.11.2024

In a newly published book, *Hope Never Disappoints*, Pope Francis called for an investigation into whether Israel's actions in Gaza fit the legal definition of genocide. On 19 November, an important part of Europe's Jewish leadership responded.

The Conference of European Orthodox Rabbis Standing Committee represents an alliance of some 700 Orthodox Jewish leaders in Europe. Their statement was distributed by a Public Relations Company, ROATH. We should have some sympathy for the Rabbis being "deeply disturbed", their phrase, by Francis' words. Their language was significantly more measured than Prime Minister Netanyahu's "disgraceful".

In such a passionate, polarised debate there is urgent need for shared understanding of basic facts. What the Rabbis say deserves consideration and a reply. In what follows all words inside quotation marks are from their short text, nothing I hope considered out of context. I have tried to take their points in order of importance.

"Israel is committed to international humanitarian law". This is the key issue considered by the UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC). Both focus on the cutting off of Gaza's civilian population, intentionally and knowingly, from adequate food, water, electricity and medical supplies. This, rather than the estimated 44,000 Palestinian casualties of war, is the nub of the ICJ indictment of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), and of the recent arrest warrants issued by the ICC for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and former Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant.

Describing Israel's actions as "defensive war", after a brutal and criminal attack by Hamas waged against an "unprovoked, barbarous enemy", does not ensure legality in international law. Evidence from the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, describing near-siege conditions and estimating that 70% of Gazan casualties are women and children, does not support the view that Israel is observing international humanitarian law. The ICJ's opinion is that Israel, charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity of the most serious nature, with *possibly* genocidal intent, has a case to answer. Let's be clear. The ICJ also accused Hamas of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. An arrest warrant for Hamas military leader, Mohammad Deif (probably dead) was also issued.

Nothing can justify 1,200 Israelis killed including hundreds of women, scores of children, and many wounded. But were the atrocities of 7 October "unprovoked"? Many would argue that Israeli governments' longstanding denial of self-determination for Palestinians, their occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and encouragement of settlers, and the shooting dead of children throwing stones at the IDF, all call in question the Rabbis' assertion Hamas was "unprovoked".

Hamas, the statement claims, is "a terrorist army that purposefully operates from within civilian population centres", a slightly less incendiary version of the Israeli Government's accusation that Hamas is using the civilian population as human shields. No independent observers or unembedded journalists are allowed into Gaza so there is simply no way of verifying or disproving such allegations. But Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. The land area on the eastern Mediterranean is 141 sq. miles, 3.7-7.5 miles wide and 25 miles long with a population density of 14,000 per sq. mile (Singapore

has 21,500 people per sq. mile). 80% of Gaza's 2.23 million Palestinians live in urban areas. It is practically inevitable that Hamas' military wing would be present in "civilian population areas" and in tunnels beneath them, some of which were originally made for movement of imports and exports to sustain a rudimentary economy. This is not to say that the high concentration of civilians in Gaza doesn't serve Hamas' fight against a vastly more powerful enemy, and in the propaganda war that accompanies the conduct of asymmetric warfare.

"Israel in its military measures to defend itself can still not be said to be engaging in genocide", the Rabbis' statement declares. But UN bodies, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the Pope are not stating that Israel is engaging in "genocide". The near siege of 2.23 million Palestinians in Gaza *is* being condemned as a war crime and a crime against humanity. This is not a matter of "singling out the Jewish State". They are aware that any such accusation must be determined legally within the very restrictive framework of the 1948 Genocide Convention, itself an international treaty that obliges States' adherence in international law. A much less publicised case against Myanmar's military rulers is being pursued. There have been convictions for genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia. Putin is driving his tanks, missiles, paid-for North Korean soldiers and Russian troops through international law. Now is the time to support the operation of our international courts.

Israel has made itself more vulnerable to charges by the ICJ and ICC of breaking international humanitarian law by failing to adequately curtail and punish criminal military conduct. Failure to institute proceedings when military forces are under suspicion of breaching international law is a cause for the ICC, which has issued individual arrest warrants, to intervene. When it comes to

litigation, the ICC's work is seen as complementary to that of UN member States.

The assertion that Netanyahu is "fighting for return of 101 hostages" taken last October is not convincing. Netanyahu knows well, as do countless Jewish protesters including hostages' families, that the return of the hostages alive depends on a ceasefire and that continued fighting renders a final hostage deal improbable. Netanyahu also knows that an end to hostilities will very likely spell an end to his government and political career.

The conclusion to the Rabbis' statement reads "every word issued from a major leader has immense consequences" which "our lived experience, suffering from rising violent antisemitism sadly confirms". Their anxiety is understandable. But presenting public concern for the plight of the Palestinians as a cause of antisemitism in Europe is highly questionable. It demeans the Jewish minority around the world who openly oppose the IDF's conduct in Gaza and are afraid Israel is becoming a pariah state.

The European Rabbis do not echo claims often made by representatives of the Israeli government that Israel's accusers are asserting a *moral* equivalence between Israel and Hamas, an omission for which they deserve recognition. The role of the ICC and ICJ is to make *legal* judgements. When there is sufficient evidence, they make judicial decisions in international law about State and individual criminality - on both sides of a conflict. The ICC and ICJ cannot, and do not, ignore war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Hamas or Israel.

The Rabbis' loyalty to Jewish troops in combat and their fears for Israel itself are understandable. Much less understandable is uncritical loyalty to the current Israeli government beyond the suggestion "the effectiveness of Israel's ongoing war can be debated". The Pope's call was motivated by compassion for those suffering in Gaza and fear for what follows if the Middle East

conflict further undermines the international order. It would help to put an end to this tragedy if the European Orthodox Jewish leaders were to put their moral authority behind the quest for a ceasefire in Gaza. Upholding international law, without fear or favour, at a time when international order is crumbling, should be paramount.

Part Four

CLIMATE CHANGE

COP26: AN END TO THE 100 YEARS WAR ON CREATION?

05.10.2021

Climate Change is a perilous turning point in human history. We are beginning to acknowledge this but are still far from achieving the level and intensity of economic change required to meet the threat. The kind of planned, co-ordinated, *radical* action by governments that is needed is just not happening. As Greta Thunberg put it at the September *Youth4Climate* conference in Milan, “We can no longer let the people in power decide what hope is. Hope is not passive. Hope is not blah blah blah. Hope is telling the truth. Hope is taking action”. Lies and half-measures condemn her generation to be Climate Change’s victims. They will be living with its dire consequences. Climate Change is about the betrayal of youth.

Hope, along with faith and charity (or love), is traditionally known to Christians as one of the theological virtues, one of the habits or skills that promote moral conduct. These virtues are

found in St Paul's Epistles - but not in Aristotle - and are seen as a divine gift. They and the moral conduct they promote, carry sacred authority for Christians who are enjoined to hope. But much of the West has to do its hoping – telling the truth and acting courageously with urgency - without the sacred authority.

Climate change is not just a turning point in human history it is as great a moral issue as the threat of nuclear holocaust and for the same reason. The moral conduct that can significantly reduce the peril has to characterise governments as well as citizens, within the context of geo-politics. But geo-politics is dominated by a very limited concept of national interest. Foreign policy, moreover, perpetually looks over its shoulder at public opinion and domestic policy. The geo-political world is not accustomed to acting on the principle that the purpose of politics is justice, a proposition elaborated by the thirteenth century theologian, Thomas Aquinas. In the case of Climate Change today, it is justice for future generations. Without massive public pressure, based on a moral argument about responsibility to future generations, governments' action will not be commensurate with the magnitude of the threat.

No contemporary political system or government wins prizes for effective action to curb global warming. The Chinese Communist Party could but, despite coercive and authoritarian rule, isn't giving up its damaging addiction to coal as an internal energy source. It tries to make itself into a secular version of sacred authority, threatening a dictatorial surveillance dystopia with ugly results. In democratic societies, because of the dominance of individualism and libertarianism, countering Climate Change becomes a matter of personal choice; you can modify your behaviour – what you eat, how you travel, energy use, or not. But to choose to do nothing can seem justified when you acknowledge how little difference individual actions will make without dramatic political and economic change by the major

carbon emitters, the USA, China and India. How many trees and vegans, for example, are needed to offset China's use of coal?

The world's faith communities, led by Pope Francis, are taking action whilst governments seem to have been on a drag-anchor moving away from the binding 2015 international treaty agreed in Paris and committing us to "holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. " On 4 October, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, forty leaders of the world's major religions together with leading Climate Change scientists met in the Vatican. They had gathered together as faith leaders to sign their appeal, *Faith & Science Towards COP26* worked on since February, and handed to them by two representatives of the September *Youth4Climate* conference in Milan.

"We plead with the international community, gathered at COP26, to take speedy, responsible and shared action to safeguard, restore and heal our wounded humanity and the home entrusted to our stewardship" reads the summary addressed to the participants of COP26 to be held in Glasgow next month. Underlining the importance of the occasion the Pope then presented copies to the two President-Designates of COP26, Alok Sharma and the Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio. (Italy and Britain, chairing the G20 and G7 respectively this year, have been supporting preparations for this religious summit). "COP26 in Glasgow represents an urgent summons to provide effective responses to the unprecedented ecological crisis and the crisis of values that we are presently experiencing, and in this way to offer concrete hope to future generations. . . Future generations will never forgive us if we miss the opportunity to protect our common home," said the Pope.

British Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States and spokesman for this gathering of faiths,

has emphasised how the different religions saw ‘nature, world, environment as a gift to us. . . not something we are here to abuse’. In the words of Sally Axworthy, Britain’s former ambassador to the Holy See, we need to “moderate our desires, *rethink our economic model to be within the bounds of what nature can sustain*, [*my italics*] and focus on support for those least responsible for but most affected by climate change. The dialogue with the scientists has been creative – facts and values coming together – or as one speaker put it, enlightened passion”.

This consensus between youth, scientists and the world’s faiths, sealed in a symbolic event, is a hopeful sign of truth-telling. We urgently need facts, values and virtues to be aligned. We urgently need governments to heed the faiths’ vision that countering Climate Change is a moral obligation. And to heed the scientists whose disclosure of facts must dispel our tendency for denial. "We have in the past 100 years declared war on creation", declared the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in Rome. It must end.

Catholics are taught that inaction and half measures, the absence of truth, can be grievous sins of omission. The secular world should perhaps settle for a different description: crimes against humanity.

See also *TheArticle* 05/10/2021

THE WEST'S MILITARY CARBON BOOTPRINT

25.11.2021

'No war, no warming': slogans on placards at COP26. But what has the peace movement to do with climate change? Judging by states' final commitments in the 'Glasgow Climate Pact' nothing at all.

Yet, worldwide the military carbon foot-print amounts annually to around 5% of all global carbon emissions. This figure includes military bases, land, use of equipment, as well as the military production. Add the impact of contemporary wars and the total could be 6% - one of several estimates from *Scientists for Global Responsibility* (SGR), an organisation formed in 1992, led by distinguished scientists from different disciplines working to end "the misuse of science and technology in threatening human life and the wider environment".

But among Heads of State closeted in the Glasgow 'blue zone' military spending was the dog that didn't bark. Thanks to SGR and the peace movement amongst *the People's Summit for Climate Justice* – a broad coalition of NGOs and climate activists assembled to strategize and plan action - it barked after all.

The USA spends \$778 billion on defence annually, China around \$250 billion, India \$75 billion. According to SGR the USA's annual military emissions are 205 million tonnes, the UK's around 11 million - the highest in Europe - with France next at 8 million. Just moving military personnel and equipment around by air, sea and land burns a prodigious amount of fossil fuels; a Humvee, and America has 60,000, consumes a gallon of diesel every 4-6 miles. There are no accurate figures for China though *total* carbon emissions are believed to be 10.2 billion metric tonnes.

The 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) came into effect in 1994. It required signatory nations to provide a regular inventory of their greenhouse gas emissions and negotiate further treaties to control emissions. The 1997 Kyoto protocol set legally binding emissions reduction targets for wealthier nations. But the US negotiated an opt-out for military emissions both from reporting and reduction targets. Kyoto was followed in 2015 by another international treaty, the Paris Climate Agreement. Trump withdrew the US from it, but Biden re-joined this year. Faced with reporting demands, the most militarised nations have adopted a dual strategy: avoiding systematic reporting or, failing that, burying military emissions under wider anodyne headings. For example, energy use in Canada's military bases falls under 'commercial and institutional emissions' and military flights hide beneath 'general transport'. After the Paris Agreement, under Obama and Biden, the US Department of Defence did begin reporting, but their published figures need to be scaled up significantly to obtain a more accurate picture of total military carbon emissions. Some data points to the supply-side of the military-industrial complex being over five times more polluting than ... direct energy consumption by armed forces. Then there are emissions from bombed fuel depots and the reconstruction of buildings following ceasefires. Saddam Hussein setting fire to Kuwaiti oil fields offers a striking illustration.

With COP26 approaching, at the end of March 2021 the UK Ministry of Defence bestirred itself and produced a slim and optimistic volume and a fine piece of climate virtue signalling. The green transition could even add to the UK's military capabilities. Energy-saving drones and new technology were anticipated. There would be lots of carbon offsetting. The behemoths of modern warfare would in future feed on bio-fuels and nuclear power. Though it was expected that actual combat in

climate-changed, ravaged environments would become more difficult. The impact on food production, were British planes and missiles to be fuelled as proposed by ‘algae and alcohol’, was not discussed.

The poorer nations most immediately affected, or threatened by climate change, left Glasgow disillusioned. Substantial funding needed to mitigate impending climate-induced catastrophe was still not forthcoming. The British Government’s priorities are clear from its plans and actions. By 2025 the UK’s military budget will be increased by over 10% above inflation, but from 2021 the International Aid budget will be reduced by 30%. Until at least 2030, the rich industrialised world, or some 1% of the global population, will be generating 16% of global carbon emissions. Emissions attributable to the Pentagon are larger than those from the 140 poorest countries combined. Not for nothing did the NGOs entitle their meeting during COP26 “The People’s Summit for Climate Justice”.

Have the NGOs’ efforts to highlight the impact on climate of world expenditure on the military, some \$2 trillion globally last year, been successful? On 1 January 2021, the US National Defence Authorisation Act became law after Congress overrode a Trump veto. It requires the Secretary of Defence to produce a detailed report on the Pentagon’s greenhouse gas emissions for each of the last 10 years. In addition the Pentagon must have clear emissions reduction targets and commit to “monitor, track, and report greenhouse gas emissions from all its operations, including combat operations, deployments, drone attacks, weapons production and testing, and base construction and functions”. In June NATO set a target to “contribute to” achieving net zero by 2050. At COP26 itself, the *Conflict and Environment Observatory*, working with Durham and Lancaster Universities, launched a website, www.militaryemissions.com, monitoring and tracking

reporting from the 60 countries with the highest military expenditures. Amongst western nations, to some degree, the NGO campaigns have been successful. Perhaps the most significant breakthrough to date is a radical Resolution on climate and military emissions being put to the US Congress by Barbara Lee, a Democrat Congresswoman for California's 13th District (Oakland), with the support of 100 NGOs, many well-known names. The only person in Congress to vote against the Iraq war, Barbara Lee is hardly mainstream Democrat. In her mid-70s, raised a Catholic, her track record of opposition to militarism and war has been, like that of Bruce Kent in UK, courageous and consistent.

In his first week in office President Biden issued an Executive Order requiring a climate risk assessment from the Pentagon. Described by Lee as the "single largest institutional source of greenhouse gas emissions on the planet", the Pentagon dragged its feet. Its analysis published in late October only just scraped into print before COP26. While recognising Climate Change as a major National Security issue, it lacked the concrete action Lee is seeking in her Resolution.

The combined peace and climate movements get another opportunity to tackle military emissions when COP reconvenes in Cairo next year. But they will be operating in a regime led by, President Sisi, a ruthless politician who swapped his military uniform for a suit. The Egyptian army remains politically powerful. Then again the Nile provides 97% of the country's water source. Egypt knows it will be one of the first countries to run dry.

The anti-war and environmental movements with their focus on military emissions have highlighted a fundamental truth. Our acceptance of globalised competition for military ascendancy is incompatible with our quest for a secure future and mitigation of runaway global warming. Negotiations for disarmament must

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urgently return to the agenda of international diplomacy. And for that we need Statesmen for Global Responsibility - not just scientists and religious leaders.

See *ThArticle* 19/11/2021

POLITICS, POWER & PROFITS: THE OIL COMPANIES

27.10.2022

Tomato soup over Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* in the National Gallery? (The painting was protected by glass, but the protestors are being prosecuted for damaging its frame.) You can agree with the goal, ending our global addiction to fossil fuels, but wonder at the methods of achieving it. And not just because, environmentally speaking, beef consommé would carry more symbolic charge. Nor because such protests provide another excuse for the authoritarian provisions of the Public Order Bill courtesy of Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, and her predecessor Priti Patel.

What is the *Just Stop Oil* activists' theory of change at work here? It seems unwise to alienate those who maybe agree with your goal or who are open to persuasion, those who enjoy what John Stuart Mill called the 'higher pleasures' of viewing great art or are tired and infuriated Londoners trying to get to work. Yet, such newsworthy public protest is understandable. *Just Stop Oil* attempted to block UK oil terminals and shifted tactics after injunctions brought risk of court convictions for contempt. Parliament, they argue, has failed to date to combat climate change effectively, a reason some environmental groups conclude that only direct action can save the planet. But civil resistance needs to educate, recruit and internationalise rather than just disrupt and irritate. Some shared understanding of precisely who, where and what needs worldwide resistance, what those seeking to curb carbon emissions are up against, would help.

Few of us, for example, grasp the dynamics of the oil/fossil fuel juggernaut, both the profit-seeking private sector and income-generating nationally owned oil companies; the magnitude of their operations and infrastructure, the geopolitical

significance of fracking, now in the news, the future of shale deposits, the energy demands of the massive economies of the Asia-Pacific. The Canadian Professor, David A. Detomasi teaches a course on this subject at the Business School of Queen's University's Toronto campus. His *Profits and Power: Navigating the Politics and Geo-Politics of Oil*, (University of Toronto Press), offers enlightening figures.

We are accustomed to flattering self-portraits painted by private sector oil companies showing themselves mutating into responsible energy companies. The 'supermajors' for example Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon-Mobil and Chevron presenting themselves as if they were the commercial wing of the Green movement. Detomasi's figures are revealing. The costly advertising messages only weakly relate to reality. Whatever the official investment targets, in 2018 only 1-5% of overall expenditure went on increasing the proportion of renewables within their energy offering. Targets for renewable investment have since risen. But few believe they will be achieved. In contrast, in 2016 exploration and drilling expenditures were: ExxonMobil \$19 billion, Shell \$25 billion, Chevron \$26 billion – and this was down considerably on 2014. And the six largest supermajors are only responsible for about 15% of global production. The national or nationally-directed giants, Saudi- Aramco, Rosnet, and those of Iran, Kuwait and China produce the majority of the world's oil. For the period 2016-2019, total 'upstream' expenditure by oil producers globally, including the national companies, supermajors and smaller players is estimated as \$400-500 billion dollars. These are not sums you'd expect if serious reductions in production and use in the 2020s were planned. They appear more indicative of a future in which deadly amounts of fossil fuel will be found, shipped, sold, refined and used. And this can be seen as the response to the Paris COP21 conference's legally binding treaty to

limit greenhouse gas warming to well below 2 degrees, preferably 1.5C, signed on 12 December 2015 by 196 countries.

Profits and Power is a telling title for Detomasi's book. He is indicating that oil companies' behaviour will continue to be determined by calculations of costs and returns on barrels of oil extracted and sold. Global annual oil production rose from 64.8 million barrels a day (mbd) in 1980 to 99.2mpd in 2019 with the USA alone consuming 20% of the total, 20.5mbd, and the EU less per capita but 14mbd. India with a current population of 1.4 billion consumes 3.7mbd a figure set to increase to 10mbd by 2040. Power comes out of oil barrels as well as guns.

Oil profits depend on ease of extraction and, of course, demand. Overproduction glutting the market lowers the price. Government reserves and income influence the amount of oil being extracted. Saudi-Aramco, sitting on fields discovered in 1948 whose oil is still relatively easily extracted, is calculated to be worth today two trillion dollars, the second highest market capitalisation of any company in the world after Apple. So Saudi Arabia is the most able to ride out global reductions in oil price and can safely cut production to push up price. Highly efficient oil companies such as Chevron make profits even when oil price slumps; in the fourth quarter of 2014, after months during which the oil price had halved, Chevron recorded a \$3.5 billion profit.

Tax revenues from oil production and consumption are politically significant whatever the government. Taxes on Russia's oil and gas revenue have been accounting for over a third of Putin's federal budget. For every \$1 dollar increase in the global oil price it has been calculated that c. \$1.9 billion flowed into the Russian exchequer, with at least some of it going into offshore bank deposits of Putin and his oligarchs. He is now being forced to raise taxation with unpredictable consequences in a population already showing signs of war weariness. This is another powerful

player in the complex global behemoth against which *Just Stop Oil* pitches itself calling for a complete halt to licensing, development and production of fossil fuel exploration in the UK. As Putin has demonstrated it is the power of oil-rich governments, trapped in the 'oil curse' of corruption and failure to diversify that is the major problem. The USA is amongst the top three producers with 33 of its 50 states rich in oil and gas plus some drilling in the Gulf of Mexico providing wriggle room. President Biden has felt able to throw his weight behind the latest COP climate change conferences. Cheap and flexible fracking – easy to shut down and restart - almost halved US oil imports in the last two decades and this has facilitated the swing in foreign policy focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. It has given the US Democrats a degree of immunity to Putin's energy blackmail that currently besets Europe. . By way of a conclusion Detomasi presents climate change not as an existential threat to human civilisation, *a qualitatively different* level danger, but just one of many forthcoming problems confronting a world economy dominated by oil and gas. Doubtless the dominant view from the oil industry, an informed one, but clearly not the assessment of climate scientists.

Governments and States through their economies and national oil companies are heralding the four horsemen of the apocalypse. This does not exculpate the supermajors. They too are going to have to change quickly and move fast and with far more determination and money. They need to demonstrate to the world that commitment to renewable energy sources is not a path to bankruptcy. Meanwhile a substantial UK windfall tax on their profits should go straight into a sovereign wealth fund to protect the poor from debilitating energy costs with funds set aside for subsidising research on renewables and carbon capture.

So far the desperate young people of *Just Stop Oil* have been getting arrested in their hundreds with discrepant effects on public

opinion. Perhaps the world faiths can find a better way to persuade us all that we must change our habits of consumption, shun fossil fuels and end blinkered promotion of indiscriminate economic growth. The global religions are in a unique position to transcend the lethally narrow vision of national interest and national security that prevails, and have much to say about both profits and power. Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* provided a foundational document for fundamental change. But it needs serious attention and political action not dismissal as naive and utopian.

RISHI SUNAK NEEDS AN ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

06.11.2022

It looks as if Britain has two Chancellors of the Exchequer at work. Three if you count the unhidden hand of the financial markets. But have we got a Prime Minister focussed on *his* job? Rishi Sunak's initial excuse for not attending the Climate Change COP27 conference was that he was too busy - with what everyone assumed to be the difficulty he has with 'balancing the books'. If dealing with the economy, whatever its difficulties, is going to get Sunak's undivided attention, you might even feel a bit sorry for Jeremy Hunt, whose job it is to be Chancellor. And you might wonder if Sunak grasps the breadth and depth of prime ministerial responsibilities.

Next the Prime Minister lets it be known that, if he's got time, he might go to COP27. Then he announces he really is going. Bravo. The ability to U-turn, preferably avoiding ridicule, has become a qualification for high office. To be charitable, Sunak reversing his decision does imply willingness to listen, to heed good advice, to respond to criticism and parliamentary shaming. But the frequency of U-turns is a sign of instincts out of tune with the world beyond money-making and neo-liberal ideology. Rishi Sunak's has at least fifteen years' experience in financial services, in hedge fund management and venture capital companies, starting with an investment bank, Goldman Sachs, and ending as director of his immensely rich father-in-law's Catamaran Ventures. He knows what successful small and big companies look like and how to make money out of his own and other people's money. His winning the leadership of the Conservative Party on the second attempt should come as some relief to the City of London. But it is little preparation for the complex, interlocked problems of the

2020s when the interests of international capital must come second if not third when responding to extreme weather events, movements of population, mass starvation, globalised epidemics and war.

Even when the Prime Minister seems to be lifting his head from the books of 'UK plc', his vision is narrow. He sees renewable energy sources as a requirement of 'energy security'. He presents dealing with the huge global issue of climate change as essential to achieving the 'long-term prosperity' of which he talks, and which he finally gave as his explanation for going to Sharm-el-Sheikh. And it is a good reason. But there is so much more needs saying and doing. Achieving 'long term prosperity' does not necessarily commit Sunak to anything in particular, for example, the pledge of a \$100 billion per year support to developing nations made at COP 26 in Glasgow chaired by Alok Sharma then a Cabinet Minister (a pledge first made 13 years ago at COP 15 in Copenhagen but never honoured), or halting and reversing forest loss and land degradation, while delivering sustainable development. Sharma is clearly dedicated to making international progress on drastically reducing fossil fuel emissions so appealed to Sunak to drop plans for opening a coking coal mine in West Cumbria. Sunak dropped him from the Cabinet.

After William Pitt the Younger (first term aged 24), Sunak is our youngest ever Prime Minister. His political instincts seem undeveloped. He may learn. But he has to carry the fractious Conservative Party with him whilst facing a confident Opposition and multiple, intractable problems. And he has Parliament's European Research Group (ERGs) lying in wait. No wonder Conservative MPs are looking for their next job. Meanwhile we seem no longer to wish to provide some kind of leadership in the world's slow march towards reduction in carbon emissions. The 'windfall tax' on oil companies is linked to 90% tax relief on

investments in exploration for more oil and gas. To date we have heard nothing from this government about how to achieve carbon emissions targets by mid-century. Youthful stamina and all the personal wealth in the world will not solve such problems.

Sunak has not been to see King Charles to tell him to ignore previous advice not to attend COP27, nor told him that Britain is proud of his decades of work building awareness of the rolling catastrophe that is global warming. Nor indicated that most of the British people would want the King to continue his work. Curbing climate change is a global imperative which he has been speaking about for many years, not a personal campaign like the one against architecture he didn't like.

Treating the struggle to achieve a global consensus on combatting fossil fuel emissions as a contentious matter of party politics or ideology is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Even extreme libertarians must want a planet liveable enough for their descendants to be libertarian in, though some of the ERGs, the back-seat drivers of Tory policy, behave like closet climate change deniers. As the constitutional monarch of a supposedly 'global Britain', Charles should go beyond the limitations of traditional monarchical duties, always being the passive symbol of past glories, a figurehead, a fig-leaf hiding disunity. He has more than the right, he has the conviction to speak for the future of every man, woman and child on the planet.

Other voices have been raised. Before last year's Glasgow COP 26, Cardinal Vincent Nichols wrote to the Prime Minister calling for the UK to 'lead in championing green energy solutions', 'support poorer and vulnerable communities', and lead in creating international partnerships to the same end. A revised edition of '*The Call of Creation*', written by the English and Welsh Catholic Bishops, now twenty years old, was issued calling for a 'profound internal conversion'. Bishop John Arnold, the lead Catholic

bishop on the environment, followed up the publication in a podcast this October saying: “Pakistan – 33 million people directly affected by climate change. We’ve got Japan with Typhoon Nanmadol – three million people evacuated; the Puerto Rico typhoon; Alaskan storms; the west states of the United States with their wildfires; Kentucky with its ongoing flood damage. Really, it’s an appalling state of affairs. When are we going to make it urgent to be effective in our response?”

“The COP 26 summit must not be allowed to fail through governments’ refusal to take decisive action because they think public opinion is against them”, *‘The Call of Creation’* warned last year. The government must know that the same warning should be heeded this year but with even greater urgency. It would be an instructive read for Rishi Sunak on his forthcoming flight to Egypt. Before appearing at COP27 he might also find time for the 2009 Hindu Declaration on Climate Change.

OBSERVATIONS

ON DUNWICH BEACH

29.10.2021

Beaches are very much a matter of taste - and timing. Perilous for Government ministers in times of crisis, and for unwary walkers when the tide comes in too fast. A temporary home for sea anglers. Delightful in Connemara where breaking waves turn sea water into chilled champagne. And delightful, once you've avoided the sea-urchins, at the foot of the French Pyrenees where Matisse and the Fauvists came to paint.

The dazzling azure waters of the Mediterranean are seductive. Floating in the blue is a cheap, if partial, experience of weightlessness without being shot twenty miles into the air sitting on a fiery bomb. But in Summer you must dodge the ranks of human flesh cooking on sun-loungers to reach the sea. And then there are the jellyfish, water-skiers, speed boats, wind-surfers. Give me the ever changing grey, gritty waters of the North Sea off the East Anglia coast any day – or almost any day: sombre and Sebaldian or sparkling in the sun, crashing in on a strong easterly with spray turning to mist, or lapping gently and flat all the way to a sharp horizon, the shoreline temporarily domesticated by holidaymakers, children and dogs doing things you do on the beach. Dunwich with its choice of pebbles at high tide, emerging strips of sand at low, is a good place to begin acquiring a taste for the North Sea. No sun-loungers here.

Perhaps humanity evolved at the sea's edge, experimented with being bipedal, taking advantage of the sea's buoyancy. There does seem to be something hard-wired about beach behaviour. Family groups position themselves, in little camps, facing the sea at discreet distances from each other with their surrounding clutter:

windbreaks, beach chairs, thermos flasks, backpacks. Small children – and parents - make sand-castles with intense concentration and seriousness, collect sea-water in buckets and dig out moats. But crossing that line between the beach and the sea is another matter: frantic retreats and compulsory screams at even the smallest wave whilst parents sit or lie or hurry to the rescue. The whole picture waiting for an Impressionist to capture its harmony and essential serenity.

Autumn, when swimmers have given up hope that the sea will get warm, is a surprisingly good time to start getting that taste for the North Sea. One or two fishing boats with huts for winding gear, a shed where retired fishermen can have tea early in the morning next to a fish-and-chip shop in a large free car-park, two dedicated benches sheltered from the wind. Even the occasional solitary seal, black dog's head scanning the beach. Under the water the remains of the mediaeval town submerged by tidal changes, where a submarine could bump into a church tower. Inland it's marshland, cows and skylarks. Turn through 360 degrees any season and it's all beautiful.

By October, coach parties and school-trips have dwindled and sea anglers become the sole true occupants of the beach. There are plenty of brisk dog walkers and the occasional detectorists following the line of the cliffs, methodically sweeping the pebbles and sand like security officials dealing with a radioactive leak from nearby Sizewell, always one lucky day away from an Anglo-Saxon horde of gold, making do meanwhile with lost rings, silver groats and a skull or two from a mediaeval graveyard that is slipping into the sea as the cliffs crumble.

This is the time and place to talk with fishermen and to hear the lovely, but increasingly rare, gentle Suffolk accent, the beach a special place where you have permission to chat to strangers or simply be alone. And it is usually *men* fishing. They walk

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

determinedly from the car park, laden with long black holders with their rods and tripods and one-man canvas shelters or big black umbrellas against the elements, plus modest provisions for many hours fishing. When they've chosen a spot quite high up the beach, there will soon be three lines taugth against the current, running out to sea well above head-height, and similar little encampments dotted along the seashore. It is a timeless scene.

Talking to fishermen and watching them cast is another beach pleasure. With a 'multiplier' reel and correct handling of the rod, press the button on the spool and the lead weight with hook and bait flies an enormous distance through the air. The most skilled can accurately cast two hundred metres or more. A turning, high or low tide is generally thought to be a good time to land fish. A 'bass sea' is one that is rough. You catch flatfish, dabs, on calmer days. But these fishermen are not just Man as hunter and provider. Nor are they simply escapees from work and family. They are Man as contemplative - and when asked they agree. Those one-man shelters are temporary hermitages, the fishermen short-stay hermits gazing at the power of Nature. Sometimes two friends fish together but there's not a lot of conversation. The sight and sound of the sea, its spiritual effect, is deeply calming.

There, contemplating the immensity of the ocean, with time measured in tides, and space by the shifting sea, the Dunwich angler experiences some of the wonder of creation, disturbed only by freeing a line that has just got snagged. And watching and talking with them on Dunwich beach you begin to understand why Jesus of Nazareth chose men fishing with nets on the vast lake, the Sea of Galilee, to be his companions.

THE DETECTORISTS

22.02.2022

On the London Underground the unwritten rule is that you don't talk. A fleeting smile across the aisle might just be in order. And, if you are old, you might get away with asking someone next to you if their interesting-looking book is a good read, if they would recommend it. A transient, non-transgressive book clubbish bonding. If the title is Satanic Paedophilia, avoid. The under-70s should prudently keep the rule of silence.

Walking along the beaches in East Anglia south of Lowestoft – where there are long stretches of firm sand at low tide – is another matter. You can, perhaps should, acknowledge passing people, chat to them, even enquire where they live. Admire their dog, or post-lockdown more frequently dogs, and have a few pro-forma, pro-canine words at the ready. Commenting on an owner's failure to demonstrate control of their dog, much shouting at the unleashed pet which is ignoring all calls and nearly knocking you over, is not advisable.

This narrow strip where the North Sea meets land is a remarkably social space. You can talk to fellow walkers. It must be something to do with there not being many of us during January. There is mutual recognition, all members of a select minority who, when weather permits, quietly delight in the low Winter sun spreading a glittering triangle on the sea. Even the fishermen, here for quiet and contemplation, will briefly chat.

Apart from walkers, the most likely to stop and talk are the detectorists slowly sweeping the pebbles and sand for hidden treasure. *The Detectorists* (the comedy series BBC4 2014-2017) introduced Britain to two Essex characters Lance (Toby Jones) and Andy (Mackenzie Crook) and their metal detecting club. Filmed in Suffolk on location at Framlingham, Great Glenham and Orford,

the series may have created a small local surge in detectorists. It would be interesting to know if viewers after watching found our real-life, local Suffolk searchers more endearing or more eccentric or both. If you stop them in mid-sweep on the beach, you are rewarded with engaging conversations with self-taught men who are both detectives and proto-archaeologists, who know their local history, and are not odd at all.

Our - truthful - approach to beach detectorists has been to explain first that we are looking for stories to put into emails to young grandchildren in North America who, blessedly, are spared knowing about Boris Johnson and the routinely newsworthy in Britain. Asking “What is the most interesting thing you’ve ever found?” is the prelude to a fascinating dive into the past: a bronze age axe-head and why they were stored underground (because they deteriorate in the air over time); gold coins – I looked up the find of an Henry VIII ‘angel’ and there was a 16th century golden Archangel Michael making short shrift of a dragon; the humble silver groat minted for five centuries until the 1860s; a mysterious gold ring with a Nazi Swastika on the inside – a drowned German sailor or a careless Mosley fascist signalling to a German submarine? One man had taken his kit on holiday to Bermuda and found a bit that had dropped off Apollo 13. All good story material. Though none of the detectorist I have spoken to shared Lance and Andy’s obsession with finding the burial site of King Sexred of the East Saxons.

There is something about the beach at Dunwich which specially attracts real-life detectorists. I’ve never seen them on North Sea beaches elsewhere. It may be because the port town featured in the Doomsday book with a population comparable to London at that time - at least 15 times greater than Dunwich today - but the town shrank as the mouth of its river finally silted up in 1328 and changed its course to Blythburgh and the sea. A number

of huge storm surges in the 13th century and the St. Marcellus Flood of 16 January 1362, known as the Great Drowning, left most of what remained of Dunwich completely submerged. Today the sea offshore from Dunwich, ten metres below the waves, is a marine archaeological site. Who wouldn't wonder whether artefacts from the depths might be washed up?

The detectorists I've chatted with enjoy digging and reaching back into the past. They express a certain awe when questioned. They have a historical humility, a sense that the past has something to say to us from which we can learn. There is also the expectation and hope that they will unearth something historically significant. But it is not like the Lottery a venal hope for an unearned fortune of a lifetime. The detectorists I have met are scrupulous about handing over any important finds to authorities and museums. The key word is 'unearthing'. These men are in the very human business of revealing the hidden. You might even say - after a few pints of Adnams - they are the artisans of our apocalyptic 21st century humbly involved in *apokálypsis*, uncovering and revealing what has been hidden, lent us from the past. Though I'm not sure Lance and Andy would put it quite like that.

HOW FREE IS OUR FREEDOM OF CHOICE?

02.03.2022

“I’ve always supported the freedom to choose what you put in your body”, Novak Djokovic declared a couple of weeks ago, back before the world changed on 24 February. Cartesian dualism is alive and well in Serbia you might conclude. Mr. Djokovic and Mr. Djokovic’s body are both in play here, the former putting things, or not putting things, vaccine to be precise, into the latter. In case we missed his claim to ethical probity, Djokovic, speaking in an exclusive interview on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme in the wake of his deportation from Australia, stated that “the principles of decision making on my body are more important than any title or anything else”. He went unchallenged.

Amal Rajan, the BBC’s interviewer, persisted for some twenty minutes in probing why Djokovic wouldn’t get vaccinated against COVID despite the cost to his career as the leading star in the tennis firmament. For those not much interested in tennis celebrities it felt like an interminable wait for the real news. But it was – incidentally - a remarkable lesson in how modern ethics rest on the powerful illusion that each man is an island. That long twenty minutes illustrated how celebrity could highlight an unbalanced individualism: the denial of what it is to be a social being, a person whose character and personality are moulded by the social, economic, political and cultural factors which shape our choices. Djokovic seemed oblivious of all this. Nowhere was there any clue that the economics or national politics of elite sport cultivate an obsession with the body or how much Djokovic’s own way of thinking might be socially shaped.

Vaccinations reduce the spread of viral infection and do so most effectively when a high percentage of a given population are vaccinated. Individuals who decline vaccination undermine the

protection vaccines afford to everyone. Neither Djokovic nor Rajan gave any sense that to choose to be vaccinated against COVID is to take action for the common good. Discussions about such choices need to be discussed within their social context not decided solely on individualistic grounds and justified by the right to freedom of choice. Though, to be fair, Djokovic did recognise a wider world which was “*collectively*“ (his words) trying “to find a best possible solution to end the virus”. In short the unchallenged premise of the interview was that moral choice resides in the atomised, autonomous individual deliberating with himself or herself and reaching an unchallengeable personal decision.

Freedom of choice is indeed important but it is also important to recognise how many of our choices are unconsciously collective choices, or, when consciously taken, should keep the common good in mind. Most immediately, it is what lies at the heart of the tragedy of Ukraine. We have watched a people who want to choose their government, who seek to associate for a variety of reasons with other democratic nations, attacked by a dictator using overwhelming military force to impose his will. And we have seen the power of Ukrainians’ collective choice to resist despite the costs and danger to the integrity of their bodies and their individual lives. A stark contrast with Djokovic’s mind-set.

At no point in the interview was the purpose of freedom of choice directed to anything other than the professional interests of Djokovic himself - winning world class tennis matches if he chose to play them. Djokovic assured Rajan that he was willing to sacrifice opportunities to play if they clashed with his individual freedom of choice. There was no indication that anyone might expect him, or any other sporting celebrity for that matter, to consider the wider implications of this stance, his position as a role model and therefore what choice might in this instance serve the common good.

One of the main engines driving the economic growth we have come to expect is the never-ending diversity of things we are offered and which we choose to buy, experience, dominate and own. But this engine has made the amoral freedom of the market the template for thinking about ethical choices and has driven us along a track leading to climate catastrophe. It is almost as if the act of choosing has become the good sought and can be dissociated from the good chosen.

The fashion industry has long ago learned how to manipulate choice and stimulate collective imitation. What you shop for and wear becomes a major expression of identity. And recently BBC listeners have heard that a ‘vibe-shift’ is taking place in which, you can guarantee, a new form of ersatz freedom and self-expression will get the tills ringing with cash extracted from youth.

While their shared choice for many Ukrainians is a matter of life and death and national solidarity, freedom of choice for others, including Djokovic, seems to provide a trivial statement of who you are and want to be. Tellingly, so unbalanced is the contemporary focus on the individual that the faults of collective thinking and action are more readily perceived, labelled and challenged. We have special words available to describe shared choices and those making them: the crowd, the mob, group-think, ‘institutionally racist,’ and with them associated behaviour, impulses to loot, to violence as in ‘joint enterprise to murder’, to discriminate, and to ‘trample on liberal values’.

We are not atomised individuals taking moral decisions in a vacuum. It’s a grand illusion. We are social beings formed in community by our relationships, beliefs and experience. Since we value freedom of choice highly, it is well to be aware of the range of factors that shape our judgement and decisions. Such consciousness would enable us to evaluate how they undermine or

contribute to the common good. But to be aware how these factors influence us requires living in a society in which accurate information is available, where there are spaces for deliberation about what constitutes the common good, and with all participants equally valued. That is what democracies aspire to achieve and totalitarian regimes fear.

THE DUNWICH DYNAMOS & THE GOOD
SAMARITAN

12.08.2022

On Saturday 17 July between 8pm and 9pm the ‘Dunwich Dynamos’ cycled away from their London Fields assembly point. The fastest would reach Dunwich beach on the Suffolk coast at around 5 the next morning. Three friends in their early-20s made good time that night reaching Sudbury and the Suffolk border by 3am. Accelerating down a hill, one hit a pot-hole and was thrown onto the road, badly cut and shaken up. The bike itself was a complete write-off.

Their first call for help was to the ambulance service. There was plenty of blood but it wasn’t spurting. It would be an estimated eleven hours wait for assistance. Their second call was to a taxi company who clearly weren’t interested in picking up three young men by the roadside at that time of night. No turning out if you hadn’t got an address. Things did not look promising.

Then out of the darkness came a homeward-walking party-goer, much the same age as them, definitely the worse for wear. Hearing that their only chance to get some transport to A&E was to be at an address, he phoned his mother: what parents have to put up with! She got out of bed, got in the car, found them in the dark, picked them up and took them all back to her home. A taxi then consented to take them to A&E in Bury St. Edmunds.

A modern day version of the parable of the Good Samaritan? Two services to the public passed by on the other side before an exemplary stranger helped them. There is an important difference. The startling point of the parable was that the Samaritan rescuer was for listeners the ‘enemy’, the despised ‘other’, a member of a neighbouring cult rivalling the Temple in Jerusalem. A contemporary version would perhaps be a kindly Protestant on the

Falls Road during the Troubles helping a bleeding Catholic, or a Muslim with ultra-conservative views aiding an unveiled Muslim woman. No, the cyclist who fell by the Suffolk wayside is just a story – a true one involving a family member – about sympathy and kindness.

We are surprised and delighted by personal kindness especially from young people. Yet on public transport far more often than not the young are on their feet, matter-of-factly and immediately, for an elderly person or pregnant women. And they are accepting of difference whatever it is, willing to respect others and include them in their activities. Though it does tend to be older people, not exclusively, who visit the sick and imprisoned, care for the frail and feed the hungry by replenishing food banks.

Actions to further social justice – fairness as it has become known politically – are rarer. Giving to food banks is more common than campaigning to make them redundant by ensuring that wages and benefits cover the costs of nutritious meals. Anyone who has ever fundraised will know how difficult it is to persuade donors to support work upstream to bring about change that will reduce the need for personal charity. This kind of work is so easily seen as ‘politics’, the domain of government while person to person charitable giving, in one form or another, is seen as the true domain of civil society, NGOs and Churches.

The problem with this division of labour is that political parties which believe in small government have of necessity to believe in the ‘big society’. More and more preventable misery and misfortune can then become the responsibility of the personalised domain of charity, the domain that is least equipped to prevent poverty and increasingly unable to act as a government-substitute in dealing with the consequences of poverty.

Our present overlapping crises are destined to remain our reality for the foreseeable future: climate change, inflation in food

and energy costs, growing social divisions, mass migration, war in Ukraine, pandemics. In this context a drive for small 'lean' government becomes acutely dysfunctional, leaving government unable to respond effectively to the magnitude and urgency of the present need for action.

Once progressive taxation and 'redistribution' become toxic ideas liable to damage the electoral chances of political Parties, we begin to give up on the idea that politics is about the advocacy of social justice and the implementation of policies that bring it about. Going back to the story of the cyclist hitting a pothole in the dark, we end up relying on spontaneous acts of kindness to make up for the impossibly overworked public services, including the NHS, when we should be demanding that Government also provide Local Authorities with enough money for all their services, including filling in the potholes.

Politics is not, of course, the domain of personal kindness as those appealing for kinder, gentler politics acknowledge. It should be about working for social justice and fairness. The role of civil society is to exert the kinds of pressure on politicians that oblige government to implement legislation that fulfils this defining purpose. And, pace Mrs. Thatcher, the Samaritan story is not about the Good Samaritan having enough money to pay for lodging and care for the man who had fallen amongst thieves. It is about a politics at ease with difference that strives for a just society, not a them-and-us society that relies on exclusion.

LIFE BEFORE BIRTH

08.09.2022

A new-born baby's first cry: a sound that signals its triumphant transition from the fluid world of the womb to the air of the outside world, from complete dependence on the placenta for oxygen to independent breathing. A transition, for which nine long months of pregnancy have prepared, achieved during the first seconds and minutes after birth. Almost miraculously the new-born child instantly adapts to life in another world.

Towards the end of pregnancy, the baby increasingly exercises its breathing muscles, taking in and expelling amniotic fluid from its trachea. After the umbilical cord and artery are tied off, with its first breath, the arteries in the baby's lungs dilate and their air sacs are ventilated as the oxygenated blood flow switches to the pulmonary artery. To change the blood flow, a little flap-valve in the foetal heart, and a small duct between the major pulmonary artery and aorta close, one immediately, the other over a few hours, sending all the blood through the lungs at each heart cycle. To grow and develop successfully, to reach this point, the baby has depended on its surrounding environment.

Peter Nathanielsz has recently updated and expanded his book, *Life Before Birth; The Challenges of Foetal Development*, (Life Course health Press ISBN: 978-1-7359896-0-0). Professor Nathanielsz is an internationally respected expert in foetal physiology. His original work, translated into fourteen languages received accolades from around the world. Written in clear English with helpful diagrams and illustrations, an excellent glossary and index, the book established a trend making scientific research accessible to the non-specialist, continued today in the BBC's science broadcasting. He keeps to his promise to avoid speculation and provide only factual information that is backed up

by credible and tested research. In this second edition the story of foetal development is filled out with evidence from the last thirty years' scientific researches. And what a story it is!

The Human Genome Project, unravelling the make-up of our genetic code, our *genotype*, completed in 2003, was just getting underway in 1992 when the first edition of *Life Before Birth* was published. This recent edition includes fascinating data from molecular biologists on the complex process of how particular genes are 'expressed', that is step by step how they provide instructions for building proteins and the body's different cells and tissues, controlling and regulating the events that take place during the development of the placenta, embryo, foetus and new-born baby. For example, a single gene, SRY, on the exclusively male Y chromosome provides instructions for the primitive gonad to become a testis.

Experiments on, rats, mice, sheep, and rhesus monkeys have yielded much of the results applicable to human development. Ultrasound, MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scans and technological advances have played their part. Studies on sheep, for example, have shown the sensitivity of the foetus to sound and light. Foetal response to sound begins and grows at two-thirds through human pregnancy. If a mother whispers in one ear of new-born baby and the father in the other, the baby will invariably turn towards its mother; *in utero* it has heard her voice most often. But the core theme of the book is in the title: 'challenges to foetal development'. We are susceptible to a range of intra-uterine experiences. As a result of current or past environmental changes, conditions in the womb may deviate from a normal range with resulting changes in gene function. Analysis of such changes in gene function are a growing area of study known as *epigenetics*. And some of these changes predispose the individual foetus to ill-health in later life.

Over the last thirty years, understanding has grown of how responses to challenges experienced in the womb may, as the book says, “alter the development of foetal organs changing their functional capacities in ways that can persist across the life-course”. This alteration of normal development is known as ‘developmental programming’. In other words how our inherited genotype plus environment creates, for better or worse, our *phenotype*, the sum total of our unique physical and behavioural characteristics.

Smoking, parental obesity or malnutrition, parental age, alcohol, ‘recreational drugs’ can all cause potentially measurable negative changes in foetal development with consequences in later life such as hypertension, obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular problems. Changes in developmental programming can even accelerate aging, a remarkable story told in later chapters of the book. Despite being an extraordinary nurturing organ, damaging molecules with potential to harm mothers cross the placenta, and by entering the foetus’ own developing gametes (sperm and eggs), to harm their children and grandchildren. Cocaine in the mother’s blood can harm the foetus by shutting down blood supply to the uterus without having to pass through the placenta.

It is not only the *mother’s* physical condition which affects the child. For example, recent Canadian research on male mice has shown how paternal obesity acts not only through poor sperm quality but also through the impact of seminal fluid/plasma on the biochemistry of the uterine lining. Mating with high-fat males produces offspring with poorer glucose tolerance in adult life and suggests damage to the energy-generating units in the offspring’s cells, the mitochondria, transmissible to the next generation.

In a final chapter Lucilla Poston, Professor of Maternal and Foetal Health at Kings College London, explains the importance and practical implications of our current knowledge of epigenetics.

Economic and social disadvantage affect future as well as present generations. Even from before conception foetal, neonatal and later health all depend to a significant degree on good diet, parental health and fitness. Another powerful reason for government to 'level up'. No-one pretends that will be easy. But there *are* more simple, achievable policies such as promoting dietary supplements: in one survey 'of more than 131,000 women planning pregnancy in the UK, less than one third were taking folate supplements' (folic acid prevents spina bifida and is essential for the body to make DNA).

Often the stuff of our contemporary 'culture wars', discussions about the beginning of life - with all its intricate self-regulation and complex bio-chemistry ignored - are increasingly fraught. Views are mainly expressed in the assertive language of conflictual rights, with little acknowledgement of duties, whether personal or social, and negligible concern for the significance of hard-won medical scientific knowledge on which health and lives depend. Nathanielsz brings four precious assets to his story: a well-honed scientific mind, wisdom, clarity of expression and above all facts. To say a book is a must-read is a cliché. But *Life before Birth* really should be widely read. This new edition is a treasure trove of material suitable for inclusion in school curricula. Poston cites as exemplary the University of Southampton's 'Life-lab' project which aims to teach secondary school children about biology and health from womb to tomb.

Finally, no disclaimer this, at secondary school Nathanielsz and I had the same inspiring biology teacher. We can both vouch for the importance of a first-rate science education for everyone. *Life before Birth* shows how it is done. Our generation owes the next not only good health but the awe and wonder that insights into foetal life evoke.

THE BRITISH STATE IN MOURNING

23.09.2022

Ten days of national mourning for the Queen touched and cheered a depressed, divided and anxious country. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of the BBC everything that should have been said was said, and heard. In addition, and less noted, the pageantry and media commentary demonstrated to the world the unique nature of British governmental institutions, the complex relationship between Church and State, the subtleties of its constitutional monarchy including royal protocol that placed President Biden in Westminster Abbey fourteen rows back behind the fifteen Commonwealth countries of which the Queen had been Head of State. Heartening as were the shared expressions of genuine grief, the ceremonies concealed certain tensions.

Throughout the period of mourning and her funeral rites the Queen's 'servant leadership' was recognised and applauded, her rigorous compliance with constitutional norms praised. She was acknowledged as the constant focus of togetherness during the transition from empire to commonwealth, a calming, reassuring voice in a changing world. But she was also Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, colonel-in-chief of sixteen British army regiments and many Commonwealth units. A living Britannia as well as a staunch practicing Christian and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The public ceremonies accordingly tried to strike an extraordinary balance between military choreography and Christian liturgy. Yes, it was extraordinary.

The expression of the State's military power during a British State funeral is very distinct from displays of the latest military technology at, say, a Russian May-Day parade where the threat is overt. Spectators at such parades clearly see what the State is all about: power. But in London and Windsor the dress uniforms, the

seductive colours and headgear, the Grenadier Guards, the Royal Company of Archers, the Household Cavalry, the many gun salutes and the Royal Navy's gun-carriage, the different steps and drum-beat rhythms, all speak of controlled, reassuring power, the strength of restraint, of discipline, soft power with swords. Military power nonetheless.

Before Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher anointed the 25 year-old Elizabeth II with chrism in June 1953, before she became 'Defender of the Faith', she had been a member of the Armed Services. Towards the end of World War II she took the first opportunity aged eighteen to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) training as a driver and mechanic and was awarded the rank of captain. One BBC commentator even described her later reign as 'burnished by war'.

The Queen's family has intimate connections to the Armed Forces some having been on active service. Prince Andrew's civilian clothes at the State funeral were a public expression of his disgrace and his family's disapproval - though he did not ask to wear uniform, it must have pained him not to do so. . A military profile is expected of the monarch and of close members of the royal family. Why this martial identity? Monarchs once led their troops into battle. Today a constitutional monarch represents or embodies the State and the prerogative of the State is sole possession of the means of coercion needed both to defend the realm and to maintain law and order. At the same time, because we have a national established Church, the monarch is Defender of the Faith, a faith which enjoins loving our enemies and worships 'the Prince of Peace'. We are so accustomed to this dual role we overlook any tension between monarch as head of a national Church and monarch as head of State, between the practice of Christianity and the practice of war.

The Queen's State funeral service in Westminster Abbey was almost defiantly Christian as if by way of counterweight to the spectacular military display we had seen up to this point. It was, as the Queen had wanted, within the magnificent setting of the Abbey, the ordinary simple Church of England prayer-book service accompanied by wonderful choral music. The Archbishop of Canterbury took the unprecedented opportunity to preach an evangelical sermon to a vast national and global television audience. 'Jesus – who in our reading does not tell his disciples how to follow, but who to follow – said: "I am the way, the truth and the life". Her Late Majesty's example was not set through her position or her ambition, but through whom she followed'. Words spoken a few brief lines into his sermon.

A little after came: "People of loving service are rare in any walk of life. Leaders of loving service are still rarer. But in all cases those who serve will be loved and remembered when those who cling to power and privileges are long forgotten". One wonders how the many leaders attending, the Queen's former prime ministers and politicians in office, fellow royalty, heads of State and dignitaries, felt as they listened. But around the world around millions of television sets there must have been cheers, or at least silent assent.

THE UKRAINE WAR: LESSONS FROM
HOMER

13.10.2022

When you approach the Ionian island of Ithaca through Yathi's beautiful natural harbour and moor alongside the undistinguished road leading into town, turn left and tucked away on a high plinth you'll find a small bust of *Odysseus*. Given the tourist trade an understated homage to Homer - assuming there was an individual Homer. And *Odysseus* probably ruled the once-an-island Paliki peninsula on neighbouring Kephallonia. But wherever home for Homer's hero might be, Greece can make you feel the lack of a classical education, especially if you have never turned a page of the Greek classics. Like the old FT advertising slogan, no *Odysseus*, no *Iliad*, no comment.

In the words of Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) - son of Rugby's reforming headmaster, a major poet, and himself a school inspector - classical education must convey the best that has been thought and "of the best, the classics of Greece and Rome form a very chief portion and the portion most entirely satisfactory". For some that belief in a classical education lasted another century. In the 1950s my own single-sex Grammar school, with an eye on Oxbridge requirements, taught us Latin. After several years of careful teaching I still believed that Caesar's *Gallic Wars* were fiction. Well, in mitigation, I did know Virgil's *Aeniad* was an epic poem and I do remember the opening storm at sea. But by the mid-1950s with discoveries such as DNA science was more exciting than the classics.

Better late than never, I recently set to and read Bernard Knox's excellent introduction to Robert Fagles fine translation of the *Iliad*, a doorstop of a Penguin classic, and, with their aid and encouragement, dipped into Homer's glorious poetry. You can

imagine a well-feasted Greek gathering, enjoying the rhythms of the verse as the story unfolds. Perhaps with news daily of war crimes and atrocities in Ukraine, it was not the best of times to plunge into the gory details of the Greeks' - Achaeans' - war with Troy. But the gore, the relish for graphic depictions of butchered bodies in the *Iliad*, came as a surprise. Homer's contribution to the classics, at least for me, was not as Arnold would have it "most entirely satisfactory". A screen-play by Homer would not be family-viewing.

Homer describes a world in which honour and warrior heroism, illustrated and demonstrated by savage killing and savagely being killed, were the true measures of a man. Was this what middle and upper class boys at Rugby and the other English public schools were absorbing at the turn of the twentieth century? Is this why they volunteered as officers in the First World War to slaughter and be slaughtered? Is this where the Greek values of honour and courage led? Or was Homer giving a terrible warning forgotten or ignored in a paroxysm of 20th century patriotism?

Of course there is, and was, vastly more to the Greek contribution to classical education, according to Arnold, than Homer: Saint Paul, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus and the lyric poet Pindar for example. Yet, the *Iliad* offers insights into the motivations for war beyond male honour, rivalry and personal jealousy. The purpose of war was booty whatever could be taken - Priam, the King of Troy's treasure. Loot. And, amongst valuable kinds of property, women. Helen was to be restored to her husband and true owner. In agricultural society, the two necessary elements of production were the fertility of women, new generations of labour in the fields, and the fertility of the land itself. Women were 'prizes', desired in every sense, the spoils of war for Achilles and Agamemnon to quarrel over.

What has changed? Whether for Trojans, Myrmidons and Achaeans to possess, or for Soviet troops to rape entering Germany in 1945 or, from 2011-December 2017, for ISIS to use as sex-slaves, women are still treated as booty. Rape is a constant in war. Despite declared national, imperial and ideological causes of war, and despite the rules of law *in bello* that evolved and were finally formulated in the Geneva Conventions, the original purpose of war has burst out down the ages: control of land and women. And sadly some forms of religion, with their own justifications for controlling women, can make matters worse just as Homer's Gods could play a malign role.

Homer single-mindedly celebrates warrior virtue, heroism in combat, whilst he portrays war as a raid on property. What survives of Homer's portrayal of warfare is war as control of territory and celebration of warrior heroism. The ease with which we laud from safety the heroism of Ukrainians in defence of their country, should make us uneasy watching the dying, the killing, and the war crimes in what is in many ways our proxy war. We are like ancient Greeks listening in comfort to epic poems of faraway savagery.

The Truss government recently invited a plane-load of journalists to witness military aid sent to Ukraine being delivered to a destination they could not divulge for security reasons. Not exactly gripping breaking-news. So why? Boris Johnson shone briefly on the world stage when sending arms and himself to Ukraine. Does the heroism of the Ukrainian people somehow rub off and refurbish political profiles and the stories politicians tell? Not a story-line Homer or his Greek audience would have countenanced.

DOGS: THE EVOLUTIONARY CANINE ECONOMY

11.05.2023

Today about 27% of adults in the UK own a dog. We have over 10 million ‘best friends’ second per capita in Europe only to Germany. That’s an awful lot of hungry animals. UK spending on dry dog-food alone is estimated at over £0.5 billion a year.

The dog market boomed during COVID. You see more couples with three dogs when you would have thought two’s company. The top price paid to date, in 2021, for a Border Collie with exceptional shepherding skills is £28,000 – and prices have risen with inflation. But what price the unalloyed love and affection of a pet dog?

Crufts showcases dogs at their healthy glossy best. This year’s Best of Show was a perfectly groomed Lagotto Romagnolo, not a football coach from North Italy but a former ‘duck hunter’ now employed to find truffles, a fine example of canine labour flexibility. On a more mundane note, I was pleased to discover that the dog-show judges score dachshunds for ‘good ground clearance’. It is surely time to create a class of Professional Pets judged on their ‘petting performance’, an opportunity for great family dogs. My own contenders would be two Hackney residents, Solly a curly haired, gentle and cuddly Wheaten Terrier- Poodle Cross and Charlie, a Cavalier King Charles-American Cocker Spaniel cross whose love is measured by the number of excited circles performed to greet visitors and reproachful looks when he’s washed.

But Solly and Charlie’s social skills pale when set against the abilities of working dogs, from guide dogs, an integral part of their blind owners’ lives, to trained sniffer dogs. Police German shepherds and Belgian Malinois find mobile phone by detecting

the TPPO, triphenylphosphine oxide, which stops the microchip in the sim card overheating. When after much running around tail-wagging and sniffing, a police dog sits down next to your suitcase, it is time to get worried. More difficult to pinpoint are explosive residues, there can be false positives. And then there's trained dogs' ability to smell out diseases. These dogs are public servants working in the canine public sector.

It seems extraordinary that animals so acutely attuned to human feelings, or so defined by human relationships, are descended from wolves. But you don't have to be an evolutionary biologist to appreciate that this is where, with considerable help from selective breeding, our plethora of dog breeds began, from chihuahuas to greyhounds and Great Danes. Our current canine economy, how dogs fit into ways of making a living today, not least dogged devotion for sale, is a good starting point for understanding evolutionary dynamics.

How did wolves and our ancestral hunter-gatherers get together? Who made the first moves? Shared hunting is thought to have developed between 32,000 and 18,000 years ago. The first undisputed domesticated dog found with human remains was buried some 14,000 years ago. By the beginning of the Neolithic – the agricultural revolution – 12,000 years ago, dogs were moving from a purely economic relationship with people to becoming companions.

One theory is that smarter, more enterprising, - more Thatcherite - wolves took the initiative, moved into hunter-gatherer settlements and became domesticated. Right now, there are foxes in London progressing from nervously raiding bins to entering kitchens in search of something to eat, and even one in Hackney who apparently without fear follows people walking home.

An alternative plausible domestication theory is that the hunter-gatherers initiated the relationship. Like wolves, hunting was central to their lives. Both wolves and men travelled in search of prey. Though sharing the hunt, taking advantage of wolves' sense of smell to find prey and rewarding kills with cast off portions of the meat, could only have worked if the prey was no larger than reindeer. Wolves were a highly successful species but could not cope with the main prize for human hunters, the mammoth.

The canine economy is much more complex today. Fox hunting hounds baying under government restrictions retain the old skills whilst still generating a few jobs - not to mention class hatred. Greyhound racing for the working class has almost disappeared. But dog-walkers by the thousands have entered the service sector alongside child-care for busy professional households. There are grooming salons with dog accessories, dog educators and dog psychiatrists. A beloved pet should be both beautiful, fit, well behaved and well balanced. With so much reported loneliness the demand for a dog's devotion is unlikely to diminish.

But the price of this unalloyed love can be high. Veterinary care is expensive. Anecdotal evidence suggests, contrary to good practice in human medicine, that too often pet diagnosis begins with costly testing such as MRI and CT scans only then moving on to simpler therapeutic trials with inexpensive medication. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons does have a code of ethical conduct, professional misconduct includes taking "advantage of your age and inexperience". But, unschooled in diagnosis, who is capable of resisting the authority of the veterinarian and denying their beloved dog the suggested treatment? And how many people realise after hundreds, sometimes thousands of pounds spent on preventing the unpreventable, and far too late, that the kindest way forward would have been to 'let their pet go'.

Wolves by contrast are still unloved. Little Red Riding Hood doesn't help their bad press. But there is something chillingly grand about them. They have not been subjected to ever more bizarre selective breeding. We don't run after them with poo-bags. They don't roll over to have their tummy tickled. They don't sneak up to sleep on your bed or cover the sofa with hairs - at least not yet. "The Eurasian Wolf", Rewilding Britain tells us, is "a vital top predator that can have a major influence on the landscape through influencing the behaviour of herbivores". Quite so.

The canine economy has proved productive, innovative and adaptive. Dogs both as workers and pets have established themselves amidst economic and home life. Their emotional ties to families look likely to defeat the future capacity of AI. And on the whole, canine evolution hasn't turned out all that badly - apart, that is, from those dogs facing the hazards of poor ground clearance.

I NEED TO TALK TO A HUMAN BEING

26.09.2023

It all began on a Sunday at Stansted airport. The Ryanair flight, full of people, like me, who had said they would never fly Ryanair again, was on time. The arrivals e-gate accepted my passport. Our two pieces of luggage bumped speedily onto the conveyor. Stansted Express announced a departure in four minutes. Down the ramps as fast as we could. Train marked Stansted doors still open. On we got, luggage into overhead racks, congratulating ourselves. Hubris. The conductor announced the train was going to Norwich via Cambridge.

We, and some others, struggled off with our luggage as fast as we could. On the opposite platform a train really going to London Liverpool Street in 20 minutes. But where was the green knapsack with our laptop and house keys? On its way to Norwich via Cambridge.

Human beings still survive as station employees though in many ticket offices staff have already been sent their redundancy notices. A real woman, what luck, behind a desk marked Stansted Express was kind and concerned. I hope she keeps her job. She ushered me into a Greater Anglia holy of holies, the station manager's office. Nice man. He phoned Cambridge and asked for a conductor to find and hand in the knapsack there. Fingers crossed.

On towards London, four scheduled stops, one longish delay – this was nobody's idea of an express - and a dead stop far from our destination at Harlow Town. And then a chirpy driver on the intercom to inform us of fire on the overhead wires ahead and “we'll be here for hours” and “you all will have to make your own way home”. Could he really have said that? He spoke the exact truth.

May You Live in Less Interesting Times

In Harlow Town station a lone railway worker at the ticket gate. Neither he nor the driver allowed the magic words “replacement buses” to pass their lips. And none appeared. Hundreds of heavily laden travellers decanted into a Sunday-quiet, broiling, empty, station concourse. Eventually a handful of local cabs and an uber or two summoned by born survivors arrived. And after some forty minutes the first London-style taxis pulled up at the head of a vast queue. Fierce defence of our £10 places in a six-seater before we could set off to Epping.

Epping is one of those exotic end stations on the Tube, like Mill Hill East and Morden, known to battle-hardened commuters. On hot or overcrowded days, lacking air conditioning, the Central Line temperatures are life-threatening. And it was hot. But joy - a text from the Stansted Airport station manager - the knapsack had been handed in at Cambridge. A granddaughter fills in a form online and says she will pick it up next day. To avoid a wasted journey for her, I phone Greater Anglia Customer Services to ask how long lost items are held. A voice at the other end monotonously repeats that lost property is handled by another company with which they can't communicate. Eventually I extract the words “two weeks”. More joy, more hubris Next day at Cambridge station we are told the knapsack is not there.

I decide to make a formal complaint and call Customer Services again. Foolish move. But, I get myself bumped up to management - almost certainly in the Philippines - a triumph of the will. The helpful call-centre manager, offers to put me through to a UK Greater Anglia number that I already know is automated. It has eight options. There should be a ninth: despair. So a dead end. Emotionally exhausted, I hear myself insisting “No, I need to speak to a human being”.

Three days later a text arrived saying the knapsack was on its way. It turned up, all contents in order. And so ended my attempt

at getting long-suffering Tagalog-speakers to join an international endeavour to discover what had happened to a green knapsack mistakenly left on a train to Cambridge.

Lost Property used by Greater Anglia should be renamed the Silent Service. Indeed, you'd be forgiven for believing the Lost Property Service does not involve any human beings. Or they are carefully hidden. At least you can't speak to them. I imagine a Wallace and Gromit contraption grabbing the green knapsack, like Wallace pulled into his trousers, then dropping it into a pool of lost knapsacks somewhere in East Anglia. Finally, the *deus ex machina*, or AI, texts the equivalent of 'trousers are secured', automated procedures extract your knapsack from the pool and send it to you. But, several days of unarmed struggle with automation has not been a pleasant daydream, more a nightmare.

No-one escapes these impersonal labyrinths set up by business, labyrinths built on redundancy notices and corporate profits. If we do encounter people on our confused phone and on-line wanderings, they are people with fixed protocols trained to act as robots, fearful of losing the jobs which support their families, and so can't hear what we say, whose replies, which are mostly not replies to our questions and pleadings, reduce us to helpless frustration.

Even though they may make mistakes, experienced human beings are our best bet for sorting out most problems. But because of difficulties with my own website, I've discovered that payment for the privilege of talking to a human being, rather than struggling with an automated system, is fast coming in. We may sooner rather than later be obliged to pay a premium to speak to an actual person when we are dealing with most corporations, banks and mobile phone companies. It's called progress.

SIZEWELL C: TOO DESTRUCTIVE, TOO EXPENSIVE, TOO LATE

13.04.2024

Joan Girling grew up near the Suffolk coast with its little terns, barn owls, harebells, ladies bedstraw, sedums, blue butterflies and acid grassland. There was no nuclear power station. “It was perfect, a nature lover’s paradise”, she told me.

In 1959, Joan’s father faced with compulsory purchase was forced to sell off a corner of their front garden with its large pond full of water lilies and wildlife. It was to make way for workers’ traffic to the site of Sizewell A, a nuclear power station, today a great, ugly, Stalinist-looking excrescence looming above the sea-shore. Her grandmother who lived next door watched as they filled in the pond. “The worst part was to hear my grandma crying. I remember it as if it was yesterday”.

In the late 1980s it all happened again: Sizewell B. This time Joan moved house with her family to escape construction traffic. From 1993-2005 she served on Suffolk County Council. Fifteen years ago, Joan Girling became a founding and deeply dedicated member of *Community against Nuclear Expansion* later renamed *Together Against Sizewell C* (TASC).

The human and environmental costs ought not be underestimated. The disruption and destruction accompanying years of building accounts for the level and persistence of local protest. *Stop Sizewell C*, originally a parish of Theberton and Eastbridge action group, alongside the local Friends of the Earth, joined TASC in a long-running legal campaign. Crowd financing helped fund three rounds of court action seeking judicial review of the Sizewell C project. The last challenged the Business Secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng’s, 2022 Development Consent Order giving the green light to start construction. Kwarteng rejected the Planning

Inspectorate's conclusion (part of the process required by the 2008 Planning Act) that in the absence of an assessed, permanent, potable water supply for the project, "the case for the grant of development consent is not yet made". Sizewell C will be forced to use a desalination plant during construction. The Court of Appeal found for the government in December 2023.

The construction of Sizewell C means heavy truck traffic. New roads, a large park and ride facility, as well as a railway branch line, will have a major impact over a large area much of it designated by Natural England - sponsored incidentally by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) - as a Suffolk Coast and Heaths National Landscape (formerly Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). A small bite comes out of reed beds and marsh land declared a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The new reactors will lie right next to Minsmere, a popular RSPB reserve where the drain-pipe boom of the bittern can be heard. Building Sizewell B will blight tourism for two decades but boost other aspects of the local economy. But before dismissing protest as *Nimby*-ism (Not in My Back Yard) it is as well to evaluate what lies in the backyard.

Sizewell C planning first saw the light of day under Prime Minister Gordon Brown, 2007-2010, when coastal Suffolk was selected alongside other sites with existing nuclear reactors. The initial choice of investors, EDF (*Electricité de France*) and a Chinese Company CGN, was almost as contentious as the choice of site. In 2009 EDF, 85% French government owned, bought British Energy, the UK's largest electricity energy-generating company. By 2019 EDF was over 50 billion Euros in debt and its share price had dropped from 42 to 10 Euros. The company was re-nationalised in 2023. EDF's track-record building two reactors at Hinkley Point, Somerset, does not inspire confidence that all manner of things will be well at Sizewell C. Building of the EDF's

first Hinkley Point reactor began in March 2017 but is unlikely to be completed before 2030 at a cost of possibly £47 billion (the initial estimate in 2016 was £18 billion).

Actual construction of a reactor starts usually after three years of preparatory work once a *Final Investment Decision* (FID) is issued indicating that financing for the entire project looks assured. FID for Sizewell C remains ‘expected’ by the end of this year. Professor Stephen Thomas of Greenwich University Business School estimates the length of time from inception to first commercial power production of nuclear power stations worldwide at between 15-20 years. Given the pace of climate change, that is too long to wait.

Geopolitics put paid to Chinese part ownership in Sizewell C; CGN’s stake was bought out by the UK government in 2022. Nuclear power is costly. Government, now the majority shareholder in the project, turned to what is called the Regulated Asset-based (RAB) model, an array of investors, in a bid to attract pension funds. But this has not been successful. It is now wooing investors such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the UK electricity company Centrica. Professor Thomas’ optimistic estimate of cost for 13 years of Sizewell C construction is £26.3 billion and his pessimistic, some would say realistic, estimate for 17 years, £43.8 billion. Just too costly.

No-one knows what international energy prices will be when the reactors start up - thus creating a very wide margin of risk. RAB offers possibilities for the government to reward potential investors. In Thomas’ words: “First, because the risks will fall on consumers and taxpayers, the project would be seen by financiers as low risk to them and would attract a low interest rate. Second, the finance charges [and these would be significant] would effectively be paid by consumers as a surcharge on their bills payable from the date of *FID* to completion of the plant”.

There are alternative sources of energy. In the past fifty years, the cost of renewables has gone down, real nuclear costs have only ever gone up. But Shell expects to make 15% profit on investment in oil and gas against 5-8% returns from renewables. This is one reason for the continuing investment in new fossil fuel extraction and faltering financing of the realistic option for meeting carbon emission reduction targets; solar panels and wind turbines. Government colludes with energy companies and investors seeking to be as risk-free as possible, with their decisions and actions critical for mitigating climate change, based on profit taking at the expense of the citizen/consumer.

Windfarms, for example off Lowestoft with one hundred turbines serving 630,000 homes, take after a preparatory phase, 2-3 years for construction offshore, longer for a larger windfarm under more difficult conditions. Their coastal infrastructure needs to be kept to a minimum, ideally with an offshore grid and subsea cables. With the kind of money made available for nuclear reactors, the energy-storage problem – caused by variable wind - is soluble.

Renewables do not take 15 years to become operational, nor have an unmanageable afterlife: the disposal of highly radioactive material. Meanwhile access roads are being cut through nearby countryside, and the government has found £2.5 billion for the Sizewell C preparatory pot.

Five years ago, it was estimated 37.5% of the world's carbon emissions came from electricity generation. There is now urgent need for low carbon electricity-generating infrastructure. Government is obsessed with nuclear power stations as a solution. But they are too late. As Professor Thomas put it to me in conversation: "In an emergency you don't choose the slowest and riskiest option".