

Labour & Trade Union Review

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The Eurozone Crisis and the Decline of British Influence.

Europe's problems started when it dismantled the protectionist policies on which it was founded and then adopted new financial policies at British behest. The tariffs which enabled European industry to maintain itself have been gradually dropped. With them have gone productive capacity and the ability for the region to support itself has been undermined. Financial deregulation has meant that money which should have gone into productive investment, infrastructure development and social services is used for what must be described as gambling. The game at the moment for finance capital is to bring down the Euro, that is to end its role as a general currency for its 17 members. Investors and fund managers are reckoning that this is do-able.

Europe's protectionist and social market approach has become anathema to the Western Powers since the collapse of the Soviet Union. With all its faults, the Soviet Union stood for an alternative way of doing things, particularly as it was using State planning to develop productive capacity and develop social services. The egalitarian ideal was encapsulated, however imperfectly, with the Soviet development. With the collapse of morale in the Soviet Union, America and Britain set about enforcing a fundamentalist liberal economic doctrine based on the Austrian economist and ideologue, Hayek, on Russia and on the rest of the world.

Russia is coming to understand the limitations of liberal economics, but that realisation has failed to dawn in the New Europe. For the social market of Europe has been gradually dismantled since the fall of the Soviet Union. It is a logical development. If you have free trade across the world, you cannot have a social market in Europe. The consumer is brain-washed into always wanting to buy the bargain. Free trade is a beggar-my-neighbour system. Countries subject to universal free trade are

weakened economically and politically. Their capacity for independent action seeps away.

The founding fathers of Europe wanted to build a bloc that was capable of being independent of Anglo-America. They had reason for this ambition, because Britain had foisted two World Wars on Europe. Keeping Europe weak and divided left Britain and America free to pursue world ambitions. America supported the Europe project, so long as the Cold War lasted, to keep Soviet power at bay. But that policy changed with the end of the Cold War.

There is more to the speculative attacks on the new European currency than the desire to make a quick buck – though that is the means by which the greater purpose is carried out. The Euro-zone leadership has failed so far to understand that there is a political project, which harnesses the speculators. The response to the speculative attack has been piecemeal and tentative.

There have been small signs that it is beginning to dawn on European leaders that they have to break free of British hegemony if they are to save their project and

their currency. Britain was kept out of a crisis meeting of the Euro-zone countries, even though it lobbied hard to get in. It looks as though financial speculation might be curbed. The most recent move to move towards closer intergovernmental co-operation without Britain, which exercised its veto, is a significant step in shaking free of British influence.

But, if the European project is to be saved, they will have to think far bigger than that. The move towards free trade needs to be put into reverse. Protective tariffs around Europe have to be restored and labour law must reflect best, not worst practice for the protection of workers' rights. Competition should not be made a prime consideration, as it is at present – particularly as the rationale of the European Court of Justice. And the sphere of the social market needs to be enlarged.

With the prospect of imminent catastrophe looming, the Eurozone crisis is now moving to the first of many resolution points with the putting in place of the basic elements of a fiscal union, arranged by the two leading powers, Germany and France, of which France is very much the junior. And, as we saw, there was an immediate response from finance capital in the form of a threat from the 'rating' agency, Standard and Poor, to downgrade France and Germany's debt and a negative response from the bond markets.

Since abandoning institutional government through the European Commission about 10 years ago, the reality of interstate governance is becoming clear. Germany is the hegemonic power in a confederal Europe that is looking to become a fiscal federation of some kind. These developments will have a profound effect on British politics if the seventeen euro countries do succeed in making arrangements for fiscal regulation independently of British desires.

Britain, meanwhile, is happy to make life as difficult as possible for the Euro zone members while at the

same time worrying about the consequences to itself of the Euro's collapse. Britain's economic position is dire and it should dread a Euro zone collapse, particularly in the absence of any internal expansionary policy of its own. Its best bet is to allow the Euro zone to limp on without a clear resolution to its current difficulties.

The current Tory upheavals about Europe have an air of unreality about them. Britain's best hope of destroying the European Union in the medium to long term is to stay closely within it and to undermine it from within by obstructing the development of a permanent Franco-German axis and a stable settlement of the governance arrangements of the Euro zone. 'Repatriating powers from Brussels' is displacement activity. It would be a shame for the British ruling élite if, so near to achieving their historic goal, they were to succumb to a wave of jingoism from the Tory right.

For the first time since Britain joined the EU in 1972, there are signs that British disruptive activity will be ignored. We should be very cautious about predicting this given the deference shown to British ideas by the European élite, but the extreme nature of the crisis may just be driving a significantly new development. The coming weeks and months will make this clearer. One thing is for sure: the exclusion of Britain from decision-making in the Euro 17 will be a disaster for British finance capital and, in the absence of any desire to reconstitute the productive powers of the UK, is likely to be a disaster for the British people as well.

The Labour & Trade Union Review

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We Now Have a New Proletariat

No Briton is an island: we are connected with the global order that we largely created. This has also tended to include the Irish, with modern Ireland normally standing closer to the Anglo-sphere than to Continental Europe. The Irish several times came close to choosing differently, but so far have not. And if they did, it would not make that much difference to the dynamic of Britain as a whole. Nor would the subtraction of Scotland, except that it might give an example of an English-speaking nation successfully living by different values.

Britain was traditionally a fairly unified community, though suspicious of outsiders until they learned to adapt, and tending to view non-whites as always alien, tolerable only in small numbers. Reformers were too quick to take the unification for granted, rather than treating it as something organic that needed careful handling to be guided to a broader outlook on the world.

Racial intolerance and suspicion of everything foreign were just as much part of the organic British working-class culture as the solidarity and sense of fairness that left-wingers valued. This awkward truth was mostly not faced up to, though we in BICO / Bevin Society did note it and say that realistic left-wing politics had to accept that the society had a limited capacity to absorb outsiders. One might *wish* for people to be more tolerant, but acting as if such limits could be ignored or wished away was one of the things that damaged the labour and the trade union movement. Most of them got sold a version of the liberal-libertarian view of all humans as instances of *The Individual*, with each instance knowing how it ought to behave if told so with sufficient forcefulness.

There was a much worse infestation of libertarianism in the Tory Party,

Gwydion M. Williams

and to some degree among the Liberal Democrats, where the social realism of the original breakaway Social Democrats failed to survive a merger with the corrupt remnants of Britain's Whig traditions.

The right-wing answer has not been to preserve these organic elements, the normal task of conservatives. The Thatcher-Reagan reform blamed the state for the weakening of social values that had been inherited from a past order where business people rated traditional middle-class decency as more important than money. They argued – and Thatcher at least would have believed – that removing state interference with the economy would fix both the moral and economic problems.

The very reverse has happened. Coming to power in what was still a relatively safe and unified society, Thatcherism has made it a snake-pit. Nor have the British or US economies got better: the new policies did successfully mess up France, West Germany, Italy and Japan, but now China and India are rising.

The Keynesian system that ran successfully from 1950-1975 worked in part because it appealed to conservative instincts. When it became clear that society was changing regardless, the consensus broke down. In part it was broken down by the increased power of Trade Unions. Wages-only militancy was futile, workers largely had as much as they could expect without radically restructuring the society. In that context, there was a very real hope that militancy could be transmuted into Workers Control. Ernest Bevin was useful in that

context. But the bulk of the left had totally misread the situation and recalled Ernest Bevin as a bad example, if they remembered him at all.

The biggest influence and a profoundly hostile influence were the Trotskyists. They did for socialism what Al Capone did for Valentine's Day, proving to be very bad at power politics when it got beyond the matter of organising people ideologically committed to socialism. But pro-Moscow elements like Arthur Scargill were little better. Incomes Policy and Workers Control without the prior overthrow of capitalism were not in their world-vision, so they were fiercely condemned as a capitalist trick to impoverish the working class.

What's happened since has been a decay of the Trade Unions and of Labour politics, socialist politics in general. What was possible in the 1970s isn't possible now: a further rethink is necessary. We do have plenty of out-of-print material that summarises what Bevin did and what was tried in the 1970s. I'm not sure that more would do much good: wider issues also need to be addressed. As I said earlier, no Briton is an island.

With any luck, New Labour will be discredited by failure in Iraq, Afghanistan and North Africa. And by the rise of East Asia, provided that it is recognised that all of those countries have much more in common with Europe in the Keynesian era than with the rights-of-money version of capitalism introduced by Thatcher and Reagan.

And it is worth asking, just what is the working class anyway? Was it maybe always 'working classes', fragmented by trade and skill and nationality, however much socialists tried to bridge those gaps?

Beginning in the late 18th century, radicals and socialists in Britain began organising the new strata of working peoples created by the Industrial Revolution. There was also a lot of self-organisation, but this naturally took its ideas from sympathisers who already had a developed and compatible vision of the world.

These new Working Classes were predominantly people doing manual labour in new or hugely expanded cities and working closely with machines in huge impersonal factories. A particular set of cultural values grew up around this new type of human. What was called the 'working class' was also a social stratum with its own accents, habits and customs. On this basis – shared culture – it often included small independent traders. It did not include what used to be called the Professional Classes – doctors, teachers, lawyers etc. It also did not include what were called white-collar workers, generally people doing routine tasks with pen-and-ink, who felt very strongly about the sharp distinction between themselves and the working classes.

Things changed after 1945. The Welfare State meant that life became less risky. Employment levels were high enough that anyone who wanted a job could get a job, unless they had some serious disability. Relatively high wages for the young encouraged a growth of individualism. Old ideas persisted – Britons under 40 find it hard to believe that it used to be unusual for couples to live together for a few months or years to see how they got on. For most people even in the 1960s and 1970s, the Wedding Night was a big event, or sadly sometimes a big shock or disappointment. The idea of getting the key to the door at 21 years of age was also still around, though I'm not sure how widely it was still applied. And the Soviet Union was still the pioneer of rights for women and jobs for women up until the 1980s.

Things were already shifting in the 1960s and 1970s. The strong distinction between white-collar and working-class (blue-collar in the USA) was eroding. Jobs that would have been classified as middle-class became more numerous

and more open to people of working-class origin. Education, though unequal, did have a definite levelling and mixing effect. There was a development of individualism and also a comfortable living standard for all, combined with a desire for consumer goods.

Please remember also that the bulk of the working class were socially conservative outside of trade union matters. Radicals and socialists had organised them into trade unions and this was part of the culture. But among ordinary members there was a lack of belief in women's equality, some hostility to the Irish among British workers and a very strong hostility to non-white immigrants when they started appearing in Britain in large numbers. Trade Unionists did manage to overcome these things, put down racism of the sort that London's highly militant dockers showed in response to Powell's speeches on immigration

In the 1960s and 1970s, immigration was adding to pressures on the working class and also people's attitudes were still quite prejudiced. This was successfully dealt with, whereas the Tories were mostly irresponsible and tried fishing for the racist vote, much as the US Republicans did successfully win over racist voters in the US South who used to be solid Democrats. If we are to say more about history, why not include this irresponsible and anti-social line by the Tories and the successful Labour and Trade Union counter to it?

Powell had his clever moments, but he was broadly a fool. His later leadership of Ulster Unionists were inept: it seems he impressed them by 'opening doors they didn't even know existed', but he failed to lead them into British politics, membership of the main UK parties, which they needed for long-term. And at the same time was a devout believer in 'market forces', failing to recognise them as the biggest possible threat to the Little England values he cherished, and which have been immensely damaged by the unleashing of those same forces under Thatcher. I don't suppose either of them read the Communist Manifesto or picked up Marx's observation of the nihilistic effects of market forces, which functional conservatives have traditionally been more aware of.

Socialists should be more assertive about our successes. The USA has seen integration largely fail: a culture of racism is still there and the communities live separate lives. In Britain racism and segregation were largely uprooted, which has been a permanent gain but also involved damage to working class culture, undermining the confidence and loyalty of those who had been solid on purely trade union and welfare matters.

The world has moved on, and part of what we have been stressing is that some long-standing left-wing demands have been met. Traditional middle-class morality has collapsed, and nothing much is replacing it. A huge and largely parasitic financial sector has grown, while manufacturing has been run down and the traditional areas of working-class militancy have been particularly badly hit. Coal is marginal, ship building has gone, the merchant navy has been hijacked by 'flags of convenience'. Steel and car-manufacturing are much reduced and mostly under foreign ownership. We can and should ridicule the Tories for making a lousy job of being conservatives.

Meantime there is a 'new proletariat' of people in new industries who have seen their personal freedoms enlarge quite a bit. In my own job as an IT Professional, I spent some 20 years obliged to wear a business suit, though at least it did not need to be black nor the shirt white. In my workplace this has now gone, we can dress casually and even wear jeans and patterned t-shirts on Fridays. We may also all be out of a job in 20 months time following a take-over, that is part of the new pattern of work.

Globalisation has made everyone replaceable. There is little point in striking if this can put your employer out of business and leave the strikers jobless. That's a completely different situation from the 1970s. Also there is a Middle-Class Proletariat or Working Middle-Class, people who live on their labour and for whom whatever property they own is an expense, not a source of revenue. People who are also disinclined to draw a sharp distinction between themselves and the Skilled Working Class, which a lot of them come from. The former snobbery of the Professional Classes and White-Collar Workers has pretty much

vanished.

I don't care for the demoralising notion of 'history gone wrong'. Everything takes longer and costs more: that is a general rule for business enterprises and it is unsurprising that it also applies to socialist efforts to reshape the world. *Never the less, it does move.* There have been a vast number of improvements since 1917. It has not been all one-way since 1979: Thatcher and Reagan wrecked the possibility of a functional conservatism. They have also built their New World around parasitic finance that will have to be curbed eventually.

The second half of the 20th century has also seen the collapse of both the authority of the various Christian churches and of the culture of the European bourgeois. That this hasn't been replaced by 'rationalism' is down to a whole slew of irrational assumptions under the smooth-seeming surface of conventional rationalism, as I have discussed elsewhere. (Notably *The Disagreement Between Everyone and Anyone*, which sadly people seem to have taken no notice of.)

Note also the reduction of hierarchies and their replacement by networks. Modern bosses mostly don't draw a huge social distinction between themselves and those they manage – though it also means they see no need to look after 'their people', expecting everyone to swim or sink in the same way they do. What basis then for loyalty within capitalist enterprises?

As socialists, we can also be cheered by the fact that there is no longer much in the way of functional conservatism in Britain. Thatcher destroyed it, while believing of course that she was saving it. The grocer's daughter has helped create a world in which independent grocers and other small traders are a vanishing breed. So if the current culture of greed collapses, *the right wing have nothing to fall back on.* Meantime I think that the *Labour and Trade Union Review* has developed a rounded view of the world that could be passed on to large numbers of people if they should lose confidence in what they have now.

Don't be so negative, Joe.

Riotous Behaviour

Cathy Winch

Re the riots.

I disagree with Joe's interpretation.

He quotes Marx:

"The 'dangerous class', the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue."

And Joe comments:

"By 'reactionary' Marx and Engels meant acting in opposition to the spread throughout the width of the world and the depth of daily life of market economy."

I think Marx meant here that the dangerous class may be swept temporarily into something on the side of the proletariat, but that it can be too easily bribed and used against the proletariat.

The riots this August started with the police killing someone they wanted to arrest and who was apparently already neutralized when he was killed. The rioters had no quarrel with the market economy, they want to be part of it. They were not on the side of anything except themselves. They just made use of an opportunity that presented itself feel powerful, be on the television and grab some consumer goods; they also set fire to shops under ordinary people's flats and (allegedly) robbed them as they fled. The word riot denotes something that could be political, but on this occasion it wasn't.

In general

Joe says:

"Even more perhaps, in a period when the British labour and trade union movement has declined from the most powerful to the most ineffectual force in

national politics, I would have expected the paper published by the Ernest Bevin Society to have at least considered how Ernest Bevin might have had something to do with the labour and trade union movement's rise to its former power. I would have expected some examination of how the British Left's rejection of Bevin and all his works might have contributed to the labour and trade union movement's subsequent plunge to the depths."

You can't assign the rise of the working class movement to Bevin and its decline to the rejection of Bevin. Joe doesn't do that, he says "might have something to do with". Is Joe being ironical? Is he saying that Bevin had a lot to do with it?

Bevin would not have got anywhere without WW2. Working class movements did well as a result of the war everywhere. In France, there was a huge feeling for socialism, which was defused by De Gaulle, and the CP, quite rapidly. Also in Italy, where it was got rid of by the occupying Americans. In England, Bevin made the most of it.

WW2 also increased the power of the Soviet Union and its influence in the world; the Soviet Union was an asset and support to working class power.

WW2 was followed by a huge increase in productivity in the West, resulting in a change in working class life, with access to the same education and leisure and house ownership as the middle class.

Then new factors undermined working class power:

The collapse of its backbone, the coal and steel industry.

The transfer of working class manpower to the Third World, in particular for textile and consumer goods.

The transfer of working class manpower to wave after wave of immigrants; wave after wave because second generations don't do the work their parents did.

Strong anti-union propaganda by 100% liberal media and internal divisions like the setting of women against men.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of socialism in the Cold War and as an ideal.

We have now reached a stage where it's the rich who tell the world what should be done, viz the rich should pay more tax, and capital should be taxed as much as labour. In England, it was the BMA that led what campaign there was against the privatization of the NHS.

All this is well known, and this

objective situation is hard to deal with. Living standards, having improved over the years, have started to decline as the rich have taken a larger proportion of the wealth produced than they used to be able to. People are accepting this so far, see how cuts were generally accepted, as people were convinced they were necessary.

Conclusion

We should not leave it to Warren Buffett and the BMA to defend our tax system and public services. We should make those cases. Making a case for pay as you go pensions is also valid. We are not looking for a revolution at the moment. Marx pointed out that the English working class profited from England's exploitation of the world and that it would not be revolutionary as a result. That ap-

plies just as well today.

As Eamon says (in response to Jack):

"There is still a British society and if that society no longer has a working-class, it must be sustained economically by exploiting someone, somewhere and if we can identify that at least we can begin to construct a perspective based on it."

If Britain lives by exploiting the rest of the world, then it up to the rest of the world to sort things out. Here in England it was the immigrants who organised the big anti war march in 2003. Asians in Birmingham also provided the most hopeful episode of the August riots, when they defused a potentially catastrophic confrontation. Perhaps they are the hope for the future.

Froggy

News From Across The Channel

France's modern militarism

President Sarkozy is attempting to copy Britain in celebrating present day military adventures under the cover of traditional commemorations, presumably in order to persuade the population to support more wars "of intervention" all the year round. He is not finding the task as easy as it is in England.

The following is a translation of a political editorial on the radio station France Inter on the occasion of the 11 November ceremonies. France Inter is a public service radio with an audience of over 5 million listeners daily. The speaker was Thomas Legrand, and the short morning programme is called "Edito Politique". He discusses what is not often discussed in Britain, that is, the nature of the wars being commemorated.

The piece refers to French First World War soldiers by their nickname of the time "poilus"; literally this means "hairy", hence a slang word meaning 'virile and courageous', as in the man with hair on his chest.

The translation begins:

"The 11 November is traditionally the day when homage is given to the poilus of the first World War (la guerre de 14)... but this year, it's all changed!

"Our President has decided no longer to honour just the victims and the protagonists of the 14-18 slaughter, but to evoke also the soldiers fallen fighting external operations. That is to say, today's soldiers. Since 1962, since the end of colonial wars, 3000 French soldiers have died, all of them beyond our borders, in the Lebanon, in the Balkans, in Africa and of course in Afghanistan. These victims and the ex-servicemen of these conflicts do not have a day dedicated to their memory. The last poilu has died. It is therefore the right time to operate a symbolic transformation of the 11 November. For a number of years now historians have pondered about the French policy of remembrance. André Kaspi has compiled an interesting report on the subject for the president. The idea is to rationalise the commemorations and to stop the proliferation of remembrance days

instituted under the pressure of lobbies of ex-servicemen of all sort of conflicts and of descendants of all sort of categories of victims. The idea of a "memorial day" or a "veterans day" French style had come to the mind of the president and it is the gist of the two speeches Nicolas Sarkozy is scheduled to make today under the Arc de Triomphe and in Meaux where he will be inaugurating a museum to the Great War.

"However this evolution, which seems logical, is contested.

"In reality it is very difficult to change the habits of people on these questions, habits which have taken on the force of traditions. Remember the few initiatives, on the question of commemoration, which the President has tried to put forward, and which have all been abandoned. The symbolic adoption of the memory of a child victim of the Shoah by all children in year six classes will not happen. The reading each year, in secondary schools, of Guy Moquet's letter, is forgotten too [Guy Moquet was a 17 year old Communist shot as a

hostage by the Germans in 1941]. For everything connected to ex-servicemen, the weight of difficulties is greater still. The ex-servicemen of the Second World War (la guerre de 40) are attached to the 8th May; the veterans of Indochina or Algeria refuse to be amalgamated in an undifferentiated 11 November. The fourth generation of veterans, those who came after 1962, feel forgotten.

“But historians have asked whether it is really possible to mix together the memories of different wars and to keep clearly in mind what it is that is being commemorated. How can you lump together such very different events as the first World War—with its very patriotic aura and conscript army, the Second World War—which saw the struggle between democracy and dictatorship—the genocide, and imperialist wars to prevent independence—whose participants feel particularly despised and do not feel, all of them, that they were on the side of good? And then today’s fighters, of the professional army, feel that their fallen comrades are treated as if they were victims of work related death or injury. These memories do not mix any better than oil and water. However, remembrance is not only the property of those who make war. The question in the end is not really whether we should bring together the memory of all the combatants on the 11 November, but rather to work out what message we want to put forward each year on that date. Is it going to be a neo-nationalist, flag waving nostalgic message? Or is it going to be a rather naïve and silly “never again”? The best answer, to avoid these pitfalls, is probably to turn the 11 November and 8 May into vast history lessons, each year renewed and enriched.”

Comment

This piece makes the important point that wars cannot be commemorated together and that the purposes and meanings of the wars should be studied and made clear.

It is a more comprehensive discussion of the topic than say Robert Fisk who refused to wear the poppy because people who do so don’t take seriously the suffering endured by soldiers 1914-18:

“All kinds of people who have no idea of the suffering of the Great War – or the Second, for that matter – are now ostentatiously wearing a poppy for social or work-related reasons, to look patriotic and British when it suits them, to keep in with their friends and betters and employers.” (Do those who flaunt the poppy on their lapels know that they mock the war dead? Independent 5/11/11)

The place of France in the world

At the European summit 8 and 9 December, Nicolas Sarkozy can be said to have defended the real interests of France and Europe.

On 1 December he had made an important speech in Toulon emphasising his attachment to Europe. So doing he placed himself in clear opposition to the anti-European National Front and scored points against the Socialists, some of whom the Foreign Minister Juppé was able to criticise for their anti-German positions.

(On this topic of making anti-German remarks, Le Figaro (4.12.11) noted that the Germans do not dredge up anti-French sentiments from the depths of history, and do not bring up against Sarkozy “the intransigence of Clemenceau at the time of the Versailles Treaty, or the harshness of Louis XIV laying waste the Palatinate.” It is not often said that the Germans could have old grievances against France)

This working together of France and Germany to the detriment of Britain (at least temporarily) reminds one of the Defence agreement between France and Great Britain, which seemed to be a sign of a special relationship between the two countries. Le Figaro (4.12.11) indicated that this alliance between the two countries, “according to Paris, could be extended to include Germany.”

Does this mean a change of attitude on the part of France? Will the Defence entente between France and Britain change its character, stop being an exclusive relationship and become a tripartite alliance? It is too early to say.

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Notes on the News

By Gwydion M Williams

The War Against Work

Each round of the economic crisis is used as an excuse to destroy jobs. And it is also used to harass more people into the labour pool. With millions out of work, they make life hard for the disabled and preventing old people from retiring at the standard age.

It's a matter of putting money rather than people in command. Life is seen as a burden on money. Relieved of such burdens, money would breed with money and make more money for everyone. That was the original Thatcherite promise.

It had a resonance with a large section of the hippy generation as they grew up, got jobs and found they had opportunities. They had all along seen the state mostly as something that interfered with them: they failed to see that it was also the guarantor of their way of life. Growing up in a world where anyone seriously interested in working could get a job, they failed to see this as an essential human right – something included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23, though this gets overlooked.

The hippy generation was initially radical but then became 'coolheart', cynical about the world and skeptical of the state's ability to improve it. Inclined also to see Trade Unions just as a nuisance, something they'd never need. So although Thatcher thought she was restoring pre-hippy values, that aspect of her program was never functional. But boosting unemployment and damaging Trade Unions was feasible. It also appealed to a significant minority of the working class, those who still thought they were living in a patriarchal society in which well-behaved workers would be looked after. And also the 'Only Fools and Horses' crowd who thought it was a great opportunity to get ahead.

What's happened since the 1980s is that the economy has shown about the same growth rate as we had before, but the rich get a bigger slice of the pie. They've done this even in the last two or three years of crisis – maybe they are expecting it all to go bust soon. [D]

Reducing the power and prestige of the Trade Unions has removed a vital civilising force from the working class. Religion can't substitute. Religion is not taken seriously by most Britons. It lacked prestige even before the wave of under-age sex scandals made it look truly worthless.

We also now have the virtual certainty of a 'double-dip re-

cession' and a long period of stagnation. Labour in government refused to take on the power of Finance, while the Tories have positively cherished it. But if the Eurozone crisis end with a consolidated Eurozone better protected from speculative finance, that might be the beginning of the end.

Goldman, Goths and Vandals

Goldman Sachs has been around since the 1860s. It had its reputation damaged after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, but slowly built back. It is maybe the most powerful and influential of the crowd of corporate giants that persuaded governments from the 1980s to remove all of the regulations that had been put in place in the 1930s

Most of the regulations were quietly removed over the last three decades. Goldman Sachs played a role, with 'rotating door' careers that went from private to public and advised that people like themselves were geniuses who needed no supervision. But also people consented to be fooled. After a massive crisis that began with 'fancy finance', they were easily fed the story that government borrowing was the big problem. That it was urgently necessary to cut state spending, in case the bond markets panicked because of low credit ratings.

And who sets these ratings anyway?

Moody's and the aptly named 'Standard and Poor' reach their assessments without the least outside supervision. They wield huge power in being able to downgrade a country's credit rating as they see fit. Very conveniently for the financiers, this then seems to put that country in a weakened bargaining position. A bad pronouncement from these unelected credit-rating agencies, and you're for the dustbin.

Credit ratings are based on how much money outside investors can get out of the economy, which is obviously very different from economic welfare as such. That's the main issue.

Having said that, it does seem an obvious area for manipulation or social pressure. Who actually owns these bodies? Ownership seems dispersed, but one would expect that most shareholders would be part of the financial community. You'd expect them to make sure that their collective interests were looked after.

Note also that all of the bad investments that were revealed as near-worthless in 2007-8 were given high ratings for years before that, and Madoff (who cheated those closest to him) was a substantial figure in the financial world. If they couldn't spot an obvious crook and couldn't spot packaged junk before the

market actually collapsed, what can they spot. They can spot a government not doing its best to look after the financiers. That's when a new crisis gets generated.

Election Round-Up

In Russia, there has been a big swing to the left. Putin's United Russia party lost votes, but still got nearly half the votes and keeps a majority. The big gainers were the Communists and a social-democratic and pro-Putin party called 'A Just Russia'. The right-wing 'Liberal Democrats' also made gains, but smaller gains, and have fallen from 3rd to 4th party.

Russia's pro-Western liberals have once again scored derisory figures, failing to get the one-twentieth of the votes that would give them seats. The remaining two parties - the left-nationalist 'Patriots of Russia' and the pro-middle-class 'Right Cause' - are even more feeble, below 1%. You can find these figures on the BBC if you look hard, but they have given emphasis to the protests by pro-Western liberals who've long since lost popular support. If anyone was cheated it was the left.

The western media aren't asking how the West's ruling class massively screwed up a unique chance to turn Russia from foe into friend. Why they weren't smart enough to match what the Keynesian generation managed in much tougher circumstances, winning over Japan, Italy and West Germany. The guilty parties wouldn't care to be accurately described, and mostly the media respect this. Instead they fling dirt at Putin for having dared ignore the West's continued "good advice".

Meantime some appalled Western liberals are asking if it is "Arab Spring, Islamic Winter"? It probably is. The Egyptian elections are being won decisively by the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are being re-invented as moderates now it is clear they are the people's choice. A more hard-line version of Islamist look to be the second party in the new parliament. Morocco saw the local Islamists advance and form

the new government. Islamic elements are also the most coherent thing in the Libyan mess (no longer given much attention now that Gaddafi has gone).

None of which stops the West from targeting the last-but-one secular Arab nationalist regime. I assume that Syria is targeted because it is friendly to Iran, and a war with Iran is the latest Good Idea among the people who can't produce an acceptable outcome from their earlier invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. I assume Turkey backs it because Turkey's current government would be happy to see the religious Sunni element dominate in Syria. Meantime Yemen and Bahrain are not under pressure. Yemen would likely see another Islamist victory, if it comes to elections, as now seems likely.

Algeria will probably be the final expression of secular Arab nationalism. Back in 1991, there was no talk of 'protecting civilians' when they crushed their own Islamists after they seemed set to win a general election. Protests this year seem to have fizzled out.

Meantime, the Spanish general election was won by the centre-right. Or more accurately, it was lost by the governing Socialists. Half their lost vote went centrist or centre-right, the rest went left.

In Croatia, the opposition leftist coalition have won, with a hard core that came out of the Yugoslav Communist Party to re-connect with the social-democrat tradition. Sadly, they are acting much like other European social democrats, treating the financial crisis as if it were a natural disaster and accepting austerity as unavoidable.

Catch-22 and the Good War

"Fans of Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* may be surprised to learn that the American author actually enjoyed his military service during the second world war – at least according to a letter about to be auctioned in the US.

"The 1961 novel, a powerful satire of military bureaucracy and official

doublethink, features on lists of the best works of 20th-century fiction and made its author a millionaire, but the three-page-long typed letter, written in 1974, contrasts his experience with that of *Catch-22*'s central character, John Yossarian.

"How did I feel about the war when I was in it?" Heller wrote in the letter to an academic preparing a collection of essays about the book. 'Much differently than Yossarian felt and much differently than I felt when I wrote the novel ... In truth I enjoyed it and so did just about everyone else I served with, in training and even in combat.

"I was young, it was adventurous, there was much hoopla and glamour; in addition, and this too is hard to get across to college students today, for me and for most others, going into the army resulted immediately in a vast improvement in my standard of living.'

"Heller says he made \$65 or \$75 a month while in the US military – more than the \$60 he received as a filing clerk – 'and all food, lodging, clothing and medical expenses paid. There was the prospect of travel and a general feeling of a more exciting and eventful period ahead ... more freedom than I enjoyed in the long years afterwards.'

"The author enlisted in the US army air corps in 1942 at 19 and subsequently served, like Yossarian, on the Italian front, flying on 60 combat missions as a B25 bombardier.

"He spent much of the 1950s writing *Catch-22*, having gained a contract with the publisher Simon & Schuster on the basis of the first chapter. In a letter to James Nagel, then an English professor at Northeastern University in Boston, Heller explained: 'I knew [the book] would be published. I knew I worked slowly. I took my time and tried to make it the best book I could possibly write on that subject at that time.'

"Two of his letters to Nagel are being auctioned by the Nate D Sanders

online auction house over the next fortnight – and are expected to fetch between \$2,000 (£1,253) and \$3,000. The 1974 letter cites Heller's inspirations: Céline, Nabokov, Faulkner and – 'always present in my awareness' – TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*." [A]

I read *Catch-22* and found it to be mildly funny, but not at all believable and shallow in its insights. It fails to ask the question: 'just how should you run a large war-machine facing highly competent opposition?' Really, it is hard to see it could have been done much differently, assuming the war was going to be fought (and you'd not find many people nowadays believing that the war against Hitler should not have been fought). You could make a case that bombing wasn't the most effective methods, but ground combat is worse from the viewpoint of those in it. So what's the logic?

It's not a good description of warfare or of life in general. When I saw the chief character Yossarian identified as an Assyrian, I took this to be part of joke, much as if he were an Ancient Egyptian. Later I learned that such a people do exist, a Christian survival of some 3 to 4 million people scattered between modern Arab states. They are among the Christian communities that have suffered in Iraq after Saddam's secular dictatorship was destroyed. A lot of the rest are in Syria, where a similar fate is likely to overtake them if the West gets its way and destroys Assad's secular dictatorship.

Catch-22 was one of a number of cultural products that had the general effect of ridiculing and deflating the considerable achievements of World War Two and the subsequent peace. Heller, a man who enjoyed the actual war and had seen his economic circumstances improve, got literary ambitions. He somehow acquired a dose of T. S. Elliot, a man I'd class as a good wordsmith with not a single new or interesting ideas. Elliot was US-born but preferred Britain and tried to become part of its ruling class. But he was trying to join what was by then very much a failed elite. In this he was similar to Evelyn Waugh, discovered weakness and worth-

lessness in what they aspired to. And had no other ideas except to be another futile moaner

Maybe for Heller this was a way of handling the horrors of war, but a pretty pointless way. The result of such works in the wider society was the Coolheart view, which doubts everything and has no coherent defence against the New Right outlook, even though it often dislikes it.

China: 1911 And All That

The more the 'Atlantic Crisis' damages the USA and Europe, the more insistent its pundits are that their system must be imposed on everyone else. The 100th anniversary of the start of the Chinese Revolution in October if this year was mostly cited as something to nag Beijing about, because Beijing shows no interest in repeating that failed experiment. China's first generation of revolutionaries tried importing a Western electoral system where it had no strong local roots, and it failed badly.

A partly successful rising of October 1911 laid the basis for a Chinese Republic to be proclaimed in January 1912, with Sun Yatsen as President. But it was confined to South China, while General Yuan Shikai in Beijing had a much bigger army and threatened to win a civil war.

February 1912 saw a botched compromise – Sun Yatsen agreed that Yuan Shikai could be President, provided that Yuan compelled the Imperial family to abdicate on behalf of the infant Emperor. Elections followed in 1913 – not at all democratic, based on a limited franchise, but still hopeful if they had produced a viable political system. They didn't. Sun's Kuomintang won, but Yuan Shikai had the bulk of the army and refused to yield. In 1915 he tried to become Emperor, but failed and died disappointed in 1916. Thereafter the state broke down completely, with regional warlords creating chaos.

Interestingly, there was no coherent account of this process in any Western news source that covered the October anniversary, or none that I saw after taking

a keen interest in the process. The story of China's botched 1911-12 revolution would have made a fine television documentary, but it would be impossible to tell the story in a way that didn't make it obvious that Western values in China flopped badly when first tried. So instead there was only oblique sniping at China's current rulers.

Back in 1911/12, the West showed no interest in helping people like Sun. People who stood for broadly Western values but also insisted that Chinese were equal. Most Europeans at the time would have denied it and Chinese were treated as inferiors in their own country up until World War Two. A reluctance to accept Chinese as equals lasted into the 1960s. Books such as *The blue ants: 600 million Chinese under the Red Flag* by Robert Guillain in 1957, and *Mao Tse-Tung, Emperor of the Blue Ants* by George Paloczi-Horvath in 1961. Also the 1961 Arrow edition of a rather improbable thriller by Dennis Wheatley called *The Island Where Time Stands Still* says in its back-cover blurb "a fantastic tangle of slit-eyed intrigue and murder in China". (Wheatley is obscure nowadays, but once he sold millions.)

In 1920s China, Sun Yatsen found himself abandoned by the West. So he made an alliance with the Soviet Union, the only power willing to help. Soviet advisers made the Kuomintang much stronger by reorganising it on Leninist lines, in alliance with the newly formed Chinese Communists. Sadly, Sun Yatsen died in 1926. The Kuomintang launched a Northern Expedition that got as far as Shanghai, briefly held by the Kuomintang-Communist alliance. But Chiang Kai-shek didn't dare try to keep a city that was then dominated by foreign-run enclaves created by one of the Unequal Treaties imposed on Imperial China and inherited by the Republic. He preferred to massacre the left and make peace with the West, who allowed him to set up a nominal government in Nanjing. Within a few years, most of the warlords officially recognised him, but they never exactly obeyed him. Most of them remained effectively independent until the late 1940s,

when they made separate peace agreements with Mao and the People's Army, securing their personal future without much regard for ideology. A few may have welcomed national unity and a few had taken risks earlier on when Japan invaded China, but most of the warlords were selfish from first to last.

Mao's rule saw the economy triple in a quarter century, better than most countries in the same era. He also achieved this in a country that had had no net growth for centuries, and in the face of a hostile outside world. And life expectancy rose rapidly, ahead of countries like India or the Philippines despite the setbacks of the Three Bitter Years.

Europeans have a tradition of accepting rulers chosen by election, though not democratic elections until relatively recently. In Britain, it was only in the 1880s that a majority of adult males had the vote, no women voting till 1918. But there was a general view that the outcome of the election must be accepted, a view that was dignified by centuries of doing so. This did not apply in China in 1911, and would probably not apply now if there were multi-party elections.

Dead dead Winehouse

So it was alcohol rather than heroin that got her. Alcohol is not as dangerous as most drugs: to kill yourself with alcohol, you must already be seriously maladjusted. But Amy Winehouse was definitely that: one of many young lives ruined by sudden success in the highly uncertain world of pop music. Heroin or LSD or vodka or red wine, it can call be lethal.

We also have the ongoing trial of Michael Jackson's doctor, who was a minimum letting him use a highly dangerous sedative. He was never an artist I liked, yet he clearly did have musical talent and should have been helped develop it. Instead from early to end, he became just a 'cash cow' for all sorts of people around him.

Is it getting worse? Someone could check, doing a statistical study of those

alive at 30, 40, 50, 60 or 70 after getting a hit record at a fairly young age. The results might be interesting: possibly the 'one-hit wonders' live longer.

Shakespeare: the Play's the Thing

No one questioned the authorship of the plays in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* until long after the event. Nor were they generally seen as better than other plays of the period. Only once it was realised that these particular plays had kept their relevance centuries after their time were questions raised about whether an otherwise undistinguished fellow called Shakespeare had actually written them.

I've heard the arguments, including those in Brian McClinton's *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*, and now a film called *Anonymous*. It does seem that the fellow from Stratford-upon-Avon owned no books and took no part in literary life as it existed in his time. But is that really an argument against?

Most playwrights nowadays are literary, but that's because it has become a high-prestige art-form. In Shakespeare's day it was seen as rather vulgar, but also a way for a man of middle-class origins to win favour from the powerful. Maybe also he wrote up some of their fancy ideas and listened attentively to their views of how power-relationships would have worked out in some of the histories that he dramatised.

(It's been claimed that real life gangsters attended the filming of gangster-movie *The Long Good Friday* and made comments about how a real gangster boss would handle the fictional situations. Someone modest enough to listen and learn can pick up quite a lot.)

It's quite possible to imagine Shakespeare as a clever chatty fellow taking ideas from Francis Bacon (whose own prose style is almost unreadable, but whose *New Atlantis* might have made a fine drama, one we still lack. An opening for someone who can write fluent Elizabethan English.) Or maybe Marlow lived on after his reported death and

wrote plays, which Shakespeare re-wrote and adapted and introduced errors of fact that Marlow or Bacon would have been unlikely to make. And also added a human understanding that Marlow's plays lack.

The plays contain a funny mix of learning and simple errors, like giving Bohemia a sea-coast. Asimov's *Guide To Shakespeare* is well worth reading: he cites a number of errors that a university-educated writer would not have made. So maybe Shakespeare was primarily an actor who was uninterested in either reading or writing as such: they were just means to create new dramas. Successful drama is a very un-intellectual art. Things that read well may flop on the stage. An inconsistent or incomplete education may actually help. Consider William Blake, an unlikely genius mostly ignored at the time, but his style is so distinctive it cannot be argued about.

Steve Jobs and Apple

The late Steve Jobs was very much part of the hippy era. He had his own vision, an idea of the end-product he wanted. He pushed the engineers into developing machines that would do the job, created products with a nice integration of hardware and software. There was a time when he was criticised for not allowing the Apple operating system to be used on all sorts of machines. But Apple has survived as the only big alternative to Windows PCs. (Themselves an outgrowth of what was originally the IBM PC.)

The Apple II was the first success: I actually used one. Like every other machine in those days, it needed long strings of instructions to be typed in. Xerox had developed a better idea, a 'desktop' of imaginary objects, but their Xerox Alto had little success. Jobs picked up the idea – he arguably violated copyright, but won his case in the courts. He produced a machine called the Apple Lisa, which was the right idea but it made a limited impact, in part because it cost nearly 10,000 dollars. Some of the same ideas were then packaged much more cheaply the Mac, which was his second big breakthrough. I used Macs in

the days when they ran from floppy disks and a hard-drive was a distant dream, yet they were nice machines.

The US computer industry thrived while its auto industry withered, in part because in the world of computers the 'bean-counters' were mostly ignored. Power was in the hands of people who valued the product much more than the financial return.

Which is not to say 'nice people'. He was a man centred on his own vision of what other people should have and he mostly succeeded, but not a very caring person:

"Unlike his contemporary, Microsoft's Bill Gates, Steve Jobs showed little inclination to use his personal wealth for philanthropic purposes.

"And, strangely for a self-professed Buddhist, he did not embrace environmental concerns, with Apple coming under fire from Greenpeace for its reluctance to produce easily recyclable products.

"Steve Jobs was a one off; a man who had total belief in his own abilities and a shortage of patience for anyone who failed to agree with him.

"His great gifts were an ability to second guess the market and an eye for well designed and innovative products that everyone would buy.

"You can't just ask customers what they want and then try to give that to them,' he once said. 'By the time you get it built, they'll want something new.'" [B]

He was thrown out of Apple by a manager he had brought in, but then came back for further triumphs. And finally probably shortened his own life by being a dedicated hippy and hoping for a 'natural cure' for his cancer when modern medicine is mostly quite effective. Still, it was an amazing life and a permanent legacy.

Cameron as Conservative and Nihilist

"Marriage is not just a piece of paper. It pulls couples together through the ebb and flow of life. It gives children stability. And it says powerful things about what we should value. So yes, we will recognise marriage in the tax system.

"But we're also doing something else. I once stood before a Conservative conference and said it shouldn't matter whether commitment was between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, or a man and another man. You applauded me for that. Five years on, we're consulting on legalising gay marriage.

"And to anyone who has reservations, I say: Yes, it's about equality, but it's also about something else: commitment. Conservatives believe in the ties that bind us; that society is stronger when we make vows to each other and support each other. So I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative." [C]

Conservative but not conservative. There were a lot of right-wing gays lurking covertly in Thatcherite think-tanks back in the 1980s. Labour took the odium for pushing gay rights and other social reforms, with the Tories talking in a manner that would have led the voters to believe that they were defenders of the existing social order. But it was a sham. After New Labour had sealed the new consensus and with a lot of the older voters safely dead, the Tory gays and their libertarian sympathisers 'came out' and adjusted party policy to suit their own tastes.

The 'ties that bind us' depend on tradition to actually bind us. You can't undermine one part of that tradition and expect the rest to stay strong. Myself, I am not bothered about gay marriage heading for legalisation, or about the general collapse of the prestige of marriage. But I'm not a conservative and I fully expect things to change very radically in the decades ahead.

One oddity about gay marriage is that its advocates are generally against the notion of legalising polygamy or polyandry,

even though these have a much stronger basis in human history. No doubt you could have a conservative society in which gay marriage was normal. Traditional Japan was pretty relaxed about both divorce and homosexual relationships. But that was their own society, and a society that was hideously restrictive and patriarchal. And as far as I know, both the Japanese and the Classical Greeks saw homosexual unions as a thing in itself and quite separate from marriage, a legal regulation of sex that governed inheritance rights for any resultant children.

But the Tories seem in the grip of libertarian ideology. Toryism once had real roots in Scotland, now it is dying. They've just elected Ruth Davidson as their new leader, an open lesbian in her 30s.[E] It's a peculiar end to a grand tradition.

Functional conservatism has to be familiar and comfortable to the population you are dealing with. But nothing nowadays is familiar or comfortable. The current crop of Tories seem to think they can selectively disrupt some parts of the society and keep other parts safe and harmonious. This has no chance of working.

You can't change anything without the risk of changing everything. Radicals might think this a bonus. Tories should be more scared and modest, but this seems unlikely.

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Parliament Notes

Dick Barry

E-Petitions : A Commitment To Debate?

The Government's e-petition website is attracting increasing public interest. On 3 November, David Heath, Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the House of Commons, told MPs that, "Since the launch of the site in July, five petitions have reached the threshold of 100,000 signatures, and three out of those five have already been allocated time for a debate." But he pointed out that the holding of a debate is dependent upon a Member of the House of Commons taking the petition forward and for the appropriate Backbench Committee to decide whether it is a matter that has not been debated in some other form. So there is no guarantee that a petition reaching the 100,000 threshold will be debated. And Heath told MPs that it was never the Government's intention to make time available to debate any petition. "It is," he said, "a mechanism for allowing members of the public to express an interest in a matter, and it is for the Backbench Business Committee, which has the time available, to consider that. If we find that there is a huge over-subscription, of course we will look at it, and I think the Procedure Committee will want to do that in due course. It makes sense to do so. However, we must not lose the capacity for the House properly to consider legislative business as it should, or to consider matters raised by hon. Members, which is also important." Given Heath's comments on e-petitions, matters raised by hon. Members will not necessarily include those of concern to members of the public, as expressed in an e-petition. Labour's Gavin Shaker told Heath that "when people outside the House are asked to sign a petition they expect it to be debated on the floor of the House." Not so, Mr Shaker.

Lest We Forget

Harry Patch, who died in 2009 at the age of 111, was the last British soldier to have fought in the trenches of the First

World War. In an account of his life, 'The Last Fighting Tommy', he said that "war is organised murder and nothing else". But here our political representatives go again, eager to commemorate the 100th anniversary of one of the greatest acts of organised murder in British military history. On 7 November Tory backbencher Keith Simpson asked Defence Parliamentary Under-Secretary Andrew Robathan what plans the Ministry of Defence has to mark the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War. How, one wonders, does Simpson believe Britain should mark the start of a war? With commemorative balloons, bunting and street parties, perhaps? This was Robathan's reply.

"Traditionally, we mark the anniversary of the conclusion of a conflict rather than its beginning. So the main commemorations will be on the centenary of the First World War in 1918." But not wishing to disappoint Simpson and others who believe we should mark (celebrate?) the start of a war in which Britain was victorious, Robathan went on to say, "However, given the importance of the centenary of World War 1, a number of anniversaries of key events from 2014 to 2018, including the beginning of the war, will be marked in an appropriate way. The Prime Minister has asked my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) to act as his special representative and co-ordinator for World War 1 Commemorations. Dr Murrison will work with international partners to ensure that the UK plays a full and active role; and will co-ordinate the cross-Whitehall effort in respect of the commemorations."

This is an interesting answer. So the beginning of the war will be commemorated in some, as yet unknown, way, but one assumes that Dr Murrison will not be consulting what now exists of the Central Powers of Austria-Hungary, Germany, Turkey and Bulgaria, who lost more than 3.4 million combatants in the war. The Allies (Britain, British Empire, France, Italy, Russia, USA.), lost almost 4.6 million personnel. Presumably they will be

Pensions Facts

Two thirds of the £30 billion of tax relief on pension contributions goes to higher rate tax payers

Two in three private sector employees are not members of a workplace pension scheme

Two in three public sector staff earning between £100 and £200 a week are in a pension scheme, compared with one in seven private sector employees

Pension provision in the private sector varies widely, with four in five workers in the energy sector having a pension, but only one in 16 in the hospitality sector

The average public service pension is around £7,800 a year. For women working in local government the average is £2,800 a year, while the median pension for women working in the NHS is £3,500 a year

The NHS pension scheme is 'cash rich' and currently pays to the Treasury around £2 billion a year more than it costs to pay the pensions

Two in three private sector staff get no employer help with a pension, and the Government recently announced a year's delay in giving the staff of medium and small businesses a right to employer help through auto-enrolment

Private sector companies have indicated their willingness to take over some public services, as long as pension costs can be reduced before the services are outsourced

Source. UNISON, the public services union.

commemorated and not the 3.4 million plus of the 'enemy.' And it is, perhaps, significant that South West Wiltshire, the constituency of Andrew Murrison, chosen to act as adviser to Cameron, is adjacent to North Wiltshire, which includes the renamed Royal Wootton Bassett, location of the military processions which until recently carried the bodies of those killed in Britain's latest military adventures.

UK Arms Trade Defaulters

The Government may believe that the Arab Spring heralds a new era of democracy and human rights in North Africa, but it looks as though Libya and possibly Egypt will fail to live up to Britain's hopes. Libya is now in a terrible mess, though Cameron and Hague continue to focus on the 'good', meaning largely that its people are rid of a tyrant. Egypt meanwhile is experiencing further upheaval, with the military promising to step aside but delaying the moment. The recent elections which gave the Muslim Brotherhood a majority over other parties is an interesting and useful indicator of Egypt's future. And lest we forget, Egypt still owes Britain £93.1 million for the purchase of arms in the 1970s and 1980s. Fat chance of that being recovered. But Egypt is not alone. Iran and Iraq also have outstanding debts to Britain.

Financial Secretary to the Treasury Mark Hoban told MPs on 10 November, "Egypt currently owes £93.1 million to the Export Credits Guarantee Department (ECGD). This amount arose as a result of claims following defaults by obligors in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s. The debt was rescheduled in 1986 and 1991 through Paris Club agreements, leading to 50% of the outstanding debt being written off." He went on to say, "Only Iran and Iraq in the Middle East and North Africa region (excluding Egypt) have outstanding debts to the UK Government, where the original claims relate to the purchase of defence equipment from UK exporters. For Iran these claims relate to export transactions prior to its revolution in 1979. For Iraq these claims relate to transactions over the 1970s and 1980s. Iraq received substantial debt re-

lief and rescheduling of these claims in 2005." However, not to worry. Britain will recover this and more when defence equipment sales pick up in the region. But arms sales to Iraq in the 1980s! Now what was it Saddam Hussein's Iraq was engaged in over that decade?

The Militarisation Of British Society

The intense, relentless, pressure to wear the poppy signifies that there is something wrong with British society. Wrong, that is, with the British people who, increasingly, are refusing to succumb to the pressure. There was a time when the poppy was worn in great numbers, but this is no longer the case. It was seen as a mark of respect for those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Now it is more widely regarded as an emblem of support for all British military activity. Of course, the politicians deny this. But their choice of words suggest otherwise. On 10 November the Minister for the Armed Forces Nick Harvey introduced a debate on 'Armed Forces Personnel', in which he said in his opening remarks, "Remembrance is not a political occasion, and it is not above one's personal views on this conflict or that. It is about recognising that the real price of war, any war, is a human price - a price paid not just by those who have died but by their families and by all those who have returned wounded, physically or mentally. We therefore remember the hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of people from the UK and the Commonwealth who fought and fell in the two world wars of the last century."

But according to Harvey it's not just about those (on the British side) who fought and fell in the two World wars. "This" he said, "is also about those who have fought for their country in more recent times. Next year will mark the 30th anniversary of the Falklands conflict, in which 253 members of Britain's armed forces were killed liberating the islands. This year marked the 20th anniversary of the 1991 Gulf war, in which 44 service personnel were killed." Following a short interruption he went on to say, "The 1991 Gulf war was not the end of the loss of British lives in Iraq. One hundred and seventy-nine were killed in Opera-

tion Telic between 2003 and 2009. Last month, we marked 10 years since the beginning of operations in Afghanistan, where 385 service men and women have been killed." Of course it didn't occur to Harvey, nor to any other Member who spoke in the debate, that there would be no loss of life if Britain stopped behaving as an imperial power. But Harvey and most other British politicians seem to relish Britain as an imperial nation. What concerns Harvey and others is declining public interest in and understanding of Britain's armed forces and he attempted to explain it by contrasting public attitudes to the two world wars and more recent conflicts.

"The armed forces of today", he said, "are different in many ways from those who fought on the Somme or at El Alamein. The conscription that created the massed forces of the world wars was a reflection of the existential threat facing the country at the time. When world war two ended in 1945, there were around 5 million men and women in uniform. Almost every family in the country was connected in some way to the sacrifice that had been made, and service in the armed forces was woven deeply into the fabric of the nation, but for many years now, our armed forces have been a smaller, professional, all-volunteer force, including reserve forces, which have been used widely in recent conflicts." One can almost hear the regret and sadness in his voice at the wearing away of the nation's military fabric, and a yearning for its return.

But Harvey and the Government have a plan to weave once more the spirit of Dunkirk and other glorious adventures into the fabric of the nation. Before outlining his plan, however, Harvey continued with his lament. "As the older generations who fought in the world wars or undertook national service dwindle, and as the services have reduced in size since the end of the cold war, public understanding of our armed forces has declined as a result. I am suggesting not that the respect and esteem in which our armed forces are held by the nation has in any way diminished - the way the people of Royal Wootton Bassett chose to mark the return of the fallen is surely testament to that - but that people understand less how members of the armed forces view risk

and reward, and what motivates them to do the dangerous job they do.”

Harvey is barking up the wrong tree here. It isn't that people understand less about the armed forces, including the risks involved in their job. It is more the case that people are increasingly sceptical of the motives for the armed forces activities. There is now a widespread feeling that Britain should cease invading other countries which have no intention of invading Britain. Harvey, and he speaks for most politicians on his side of the House and not a few on the other, is concerned about the demilitarisation of Britain. So his plan is to reinvigorate the covenant between the armed forces and the British people. Harvey explained it like this.

“What a life in today's armed forces is like and the impact that service life has on modern families is also less widely understood. That is why, as we seek to reinvigorate the armed forces covenant, we must raise people's understanding of the impact of service life. Fulfilling the armed forces covenant has to be a whole-of-society enterprise: it is not just for the Ministry of Defence but for all Departments; it is not just for legislators here in Westminster but for legislators at all levels; and it is not just for the Government, but for charities, the private sector and private citizens.” In other words, Britain's armed forces and their military activities must permeate the whole of our lives, they must be the *raison d'être* for our very existence. Without them we are nothing, as a people or a nation.

Remembering The Jarrow March

On 1 October last, 200 men walked from Jarrow in the North East of England to London in a re-creation of the historical Jarrow march or crusade which began on 5 October 1936. To mark the 75th anniversary of the original march, Jarrow's Labour MP Stephen Hepburn initiated a short debate in the House of Commons on 31 October. In his comments he reminded MPs about the reasons for the 1936 crusade. “The mere mention of the great town of Jarrow still strongly symbolises the fight for work, dignity and respect, even 75 years after the march took place. That

certainly was not the intention of the marchers at the time, however. All that they knew was that their town had been murdered by a cartel of businessmen who, backed up by the Government of the time, had closed the shipyard and thrown 70% of the town on the dole. The idea for the march came from a local man called Davey Riley, who persuaded first the local Labour party and then the town council that the town needed to take its case to London to persuade the Government of the day to bring jobs back to Jarrow. That is where the politics ended. The town council, which was composed of all the political parties and people from various backgrounds in the town, resolved unanimously to support the march and give it the backing of its citizens, from the bishop to the businessman, so that it could be a success.”

“The march caught the imagination of the people of Jarrow straight away, as it did with the rest of the public as it travelled south to London. Two hundred men were selected to march, and a petition was signed by 12,000 townspeople. With the backing of the local council, local businesses and the local clergy in Jarrow, the men set off on their 300-mile crusade. As was well documented, the march did not have the backing of the Government at the time. Disgracefully, it did not get the backing of the Labour leadership either. However, it did enjoy the support of the public wherever it went on its journey.”

“The men marched military style, as most of them had been in the army in the past. With the famous Jarrow banners held aloft and the mouth organ band in the lead, they raised the hearts and spirits of everyone they came across during those bleak days of the depression. They delivered a message of hope for the people who needed hope, right across the country, at the time. To ensure that all went well en route, the then Labour agent, Harry Stoddart, and the Tory agent, Councillor Suddick, proceeded before them to ensure that the sleeping and eating arrangements were in place.”

“Of course, we all know what happened when the men reached London. Their pleas for work were ignored, and they were sent home with a pound in their pocket to pay for their train fare.

When they got back to Jarrow, they found not only that their dole had been stopped but that the dreaded means-test men were waiting at their front doors. We all know the history: work did come back to Jarrow a few years later, when the Government saw the need for rearmament in the face of Hitler's menace and the horrors of war.”

Hepburn went on to draw parallels between 1936, when a coalition government was in power, and 2011 when Britain is experiencing another coalition. In 1936, public welfare was a mere skeleton, with precious little help for the disabled, the sick and the unemployed. Today, the disabled, the sick and the unemployed are bearing the brunt of the coalition's attack on the welfare state, built by a post-war Labour government under the most difficult circumstances. Here is what Hepburn had to say about the two periods.

“The real challenge for the Government today is to have an economic policy in which the interests of the community and people, not the short-term interests of the bankers and financiers, come first. In the wake of the banking crisis, when more than 90% of the people of this country are experiencing the same worries and fears about losing their house and savings, now is the ideal time to bring about change for the better, just as happened with consensus after the second world war. But no, instead we are returning to the same old Tory values of us and them, and a return to the pessimism of the '30s when the Government's only answer to people's pleas for work was unemployment in a divided society.”

“It is little known that at the time of the Jarrow crusade there was a march by blind people, and it set off in October 1936 at the same time. Conditions for disabled people have improved vastly since the '30s. Then, the fear was the famous - or infamous - and dreaded means test. Today, there is a parallel. The unfairness of the work capability test has been highlighted by disability groups throughout the country, and I am pleased that the Minister has commissioned a report into that. If that report identifies errors in the present system of assessing people's mental and physical disabilities, the Minister should review all past cases

