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## Libya: Taking Control

The seismic political changes taking place across the Middle East are causing a degree of panic in the region itself and consternation in the West. As the domino effect sweeps away the heads of government in states primarily allied to the West, the shape of what is to come remains indeterminate. There is little doubt that the events of the past few weeks were totally unexpected. One can only marvel at the disjointed and anodyne remarks by politicians of all hues as people poured into the streets in country after country determined to rid themselves of their governments. That most of these states were, at least in part, satellites of the West, got virtually no mention at all.

However, when it comes to Libya, the attitude of the West is unequivocal condemnation. To some extent the upheavals in Libya make it far easier for western governments to portray themselves as champions of the oppressed over centralized, oppressive, governments, notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of these governments have been allies of the West. No talk of referring Mubarak to the UN when some 400 people were shot within the first two or three days of the uprising. No condemnation of the Saudis banning any demonstrations.

The fact that Col Qaddafi has been a thorn in the side of many Western governments needs no explanation here. The kind of splits now appearing in Libyan society are grist to the mill of the unthinking, kneejerk, imperialists of the West. And Britain's farcical attempts at engaging with the secessionist forces around Benghazi have almost certainly done neither them nor us any good. Both the U.S and Europe now wish to gain some degree of control over the unfolding process. But Libya is different. Libya has oil, and lots of it.

The portrayal of Libya as a backward and underdeveloped state needing the guidance of the west is also misplaced. In 1969 Qaddafi nationalised the country's oil wealth and drastically improved the quality of life of the Libyan people. Libya has the highest per capita income on the African continent and the literacy rate among women is among the highest in the Arab world. Nor has Qaddafi been persona non grata in the west. True, in his revolutionary heyday he supplied arms to the IRA and the ANC. But those days are long gone.

Recently there have been widely publicised photo opportunities with the likes of Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, Nicolas Sarkozy of France and of course Tony Blair. The U.S re-established full diplomatic relations in 2004 and in 2008 George Bush's Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice visited Qaddafi. And as late as 2009, Barack Obama warmly shook the hand of Qaddafi at the Rome summit. Nor had Qaddafi been coy in supplying the west with information. According to David Mack, a former U.S Ambassador and senior Department official "The Libyans gave us the key to the whole A.Q. Khan network" referring to the Pakistani nuclear scientist allegedly responsible for running a clandestine nuclear smuggling ring.

At the moment of writing the U.S and the European Union seem hell bent on supporting the "people" of Libya. But which people? The rhetoric masks the reality. That there is no love lost between the east and west of Libya is no secret. Although the vast majority of the population are Arabised Berbers, tribe still plays an instrumental role in the social organisation of the country. When the demonstrations first erupted in Benghazi on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February the flag they raised was that of King Idris, a puppet of the West. This was almost certainly a calculated affront to Qaddafi. Most of the tribal leaders of the east, including those of the influential Senussi, were supporters of the king and therefore lost influence with the revolution of 1969. In the west the important tribes are the Qadhafa, Col Qaddafi's tribe, the Maghaha and the Warfalla still support the government. The

“Free Officers” of the 1969 revolution all came from these tribes.

In the first week of the uprising in Libya, Col Qaddafi gave a defiant speech from the ruins of buildings in Tripoli bombed by Britain and the U.S in 1986. In the speech he condemned the uprising as Islamic inspired. This to the west was simple posturing by a deranged madman on the edge of defeat. This is not the case. Libya was one of the first countries to seek an international arrest warrant for the arrest of Osama Bin Laden. All through the 1990s there were sporadic clashes between the government and Islamist inspired militants in and around Benghazi. In some cases these resulted in armed clashes and house to house fighting. The fact that this happened in Benghazi is not that surprising. The conflict was essentially between the government and the Senussi's, which in pre- revolutionary Libya commanded adherents from the deserts to the coast for its ascetic, fundamentalist brand of Islam. The very people we are now supporting.

Tribal loyalties have come to the fore. Most of those who have resigned have come from the eastern region. There is no doubt that these defections have depleted Qaddafi's government, at least in the short term. But there is also no doubt that there is residual support from tribes of the west which may enable him to rebuild the government. Sarkozy's recognition of the Benghazi rebels seems premature at best and seriously misguided at worst. The fact remains that Libya is divided. The interim government in Benghazi represents a minority of the population of Libya. Any imposition of a western backed government based in Benghazi would be seen as a return to the imperialist past.

Europe in particular has now boxed itself into a tight corner. Cameron and Hague's strong rhetoric at the start of the uprising was almost certainly designed to up the pressure on Qaddafi. Something they failed to do in all other cases. Perhaps stung by the criticism of their ineffectual response in Tunisia and Egypt, Col Qaddafi must have seemed easy pickings. Once the rhetoric was ramped up all the tried and tested responses could be put in place. Arms embargoes, referral to the international criminal court, the seizing of Libya's assets held abroad.

But Qaddafi didn't go quietly instead he rebuilt his position with his followers and allies and went on the offensive. The situation now looks very different. With The European Union in disarray as to its policy towards Libya, it is increasingly being left to individual heads of state to wallow in meaningless rhetoric. The French and British can't impose a no-fly zone without American backing. Nor can they supply the Benghazi rebels with arms without compromising their own, self imposed, arms embargo.

It now appears that Col Qaddafi may well see off the rebels and retain control of Libya. If he does, the West, and particularly Europe, will almost certainly come out of this weakened. Will the new governments (if any truly new governments emerge) of the Middle East look at Europe in a favourable light? It seems just as likely that they may well look for opportunities further afield, the East, maybe China, beckons.

## Pyramid Selling

Hold the front page, stop the presses, it's Hosni Mubarak we must disengage. Though our friend for thirty years he developed excesses. Even the tabloids join in the attack.

Now the presses roll: It's a revolution! Fit, we're told, for democracy, as a solution. (when it agrees with the West, and is shaped in their mould)

When we marched one million strong to parliament, from Marble Arch, we were wrong. They wanted war and dismissed the throng. So just leave it to the Taliban to sort out cloud-cuckoo-land.

There's nothing like a demo (when it's in another country) with its off-hand bon mot: Put the kettle on, it's every ism.

Young playful students grow pale in prison, while a coalition imprudent dreams up old Empire, as the soul of the nation expires.

Wilson John Haire.

# The Labour & Trade Union Review

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# Remixing the Mixed Economy

A review of Ha-Joon Chang's *23 Things They Don't Tell You about Capitalism*

Gwydion M. Williams

South Korea got rich because it ignored Free-Market orthodoxy and went its own way. As a man of South Korean origin – though currently an academic at the University of Cambridge - Ha-Joon Chang has said some sensible things about what's wrong with the Thatcher-Reagan orthodoxy. Documented the actual economic history of Western Europe and the USA in *Kicking Away the Ladder-Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* back in 2002. Here, he is much more concerned about the present, the trends that led up to the crash of 2008.

There are some things I'd disagree with in his outlook. In what's now called the Keynesian Era, the dominant system was usually described as Mixed Economy, a mix of socialist and capitalist elements. Ha-Joon Chang rejects this, instead saying:

“This book is not an anti-capitalist manifesto. Being critical of free-market ideology is not the same as being against capitalism. Despite its problems and limitations, I believe that capitalism is still the best economic system that humanity has invented. My criticism is of a particular version of capitalism that had dominated the world in the last three decades, that is, free-market capitalism.” [A]

Having said that he is for capitalism but also against capitalism and against the free market, he then devotes the first chapter to explaining that ‘There is no such thing as a free market’. He does however put the argument quite well, saying “A market looks free only

because we so unconditionally accept its underlying restrictions that we fail to see them.” [B] This is well documented, and followed by an explanation that running companies for the benefit of shareholders hasn't produced the general economic benefits that Thatcher and Reagan promised:

“The growth rate of per capita income in the US fell from around 2.6 per cent per year in the 1960s and 70s to 1.6 per cent during 1990-2009, the heyday of shareholder capitalism. In Britain, where similar changes in corporate behaviour were happening, per capita income growth fell from 2.4 per cent in the 1960-70s when the country was allegedly suffering from the ‘British Disease’, to 1.7 per cent during 1990-2009.” [C] But the overall decline in growth has gone along with gains for a rich minority.

“The free-market policy package, often known as the neo-liberal policy package, emphasises lower inflation, greater capital mobility and greater job insecurity (euphemistically called greater labour market flexibility), essentially because it is mainly geared towards the interests of the holders of financial assets.” [D]

The book also exposes some of what's wrong with the USA:

“There is a large inflow of low-wage immigrants from poor countries, many of them illegal, which makes them even cheaper. Moreover, even the native workers have much weaker fallback positions in the US than in European countries of comparable income level. Because they have much less job security and weaker welfare supports, US workers, especially the non-unionized ones

in the service industries, work for lower wages and under inferior conditions than do their European counterparts. That is why things like taxi rides and meals at restaurants are so much cheaper in the US than in other rich countries. That is great when you are a customer, but not if you are the taxi driver or waitress.” [E]

“The Americans also work considerably longer than their counterparts in competitor nations. Per hour worked, US income is lower than that of several European countries, even in purchasing power terms. It is debatable that this can be described as having a higher living standard.” [F]

But the real victim has been Africa, where Neo-Liberalism has had a fairly free hand, imposing its will on weak and unstable governments that are small and poor by global standards:

“During the 1960s and 70s, per capita income in Sub-Saharan Africa grew at a respectable rate. At around 1.6 per cent, it was nowhere near the ‘miracle’ growth rate of East Asia (5-6 per cent) or even that of Latin America (around 3 per cent) during the period. However, this is not a growth rate to be sniffed at. It compares favourably with the rates of 1-1.5 per cent achieved by today's rich countries during their Industrial ‘Revolution’ (roughly 1820-1913)...

“African growth suddenly collapsed since the 1980s....

“Since the late 1970s (starting with Senegal in 1979), Sub-Saharan African countries were forced to adopt free-market, free-trade policies through the conditions imposed by ... the World Bank and IMF (and the rich countries that ultimately control them)...

“During the 1980s and 90s, per capita income in Sub-Saharan Africa

*fell* at the rate of 0.7 per cent per year. The region finally started to grow in the 2000s... after nearly thirty years of using ‘better’ (that is, free-market) policies, its per capita income is basically at the same level as it was in 1980.” [G]

“When the dreaded over-taxation of the rich started in earnest, it did not destroy capitalism. In fact, it made it even stronger. Following the Second World War, there was a rapid growth in progressive taxation and social welfare spending... the period between 1950 and 1973 saw the highest-ever growth rates in these countries – known as the ‘Golden Age of Capitalism. Before the Golden Age, per capita income in the rich capitalist economies used to grow at 1-1.5 per cent per year. During the Golden Age, it grew at 2-3 per cent in the US and Britain, 4-5 per cent in Western Europe, and 8 per cent in Japan. Since then, these countries have never managed to grow faster than that.” [H]

As I said earlier, the system was called Mixed Economy at the time and this remains the best name for it. But the figures are clear enough, and it is amazing that the left don’t make more of it. Of course most of the left have a background in either Trotskyism or pro-Moscow Communism. This gives them a bias towards sneering at the major achievements of Moderate Socialists in the ‘Golden Age’.

Surprisingly, Ha-Joon Chang also recognises the necessity for Stalin’s high-speed industrialisation in the 1930s. “Without Stalin adopting Preobrazhensky’s strategy, the Soviet Union would not have been able to build the industrial base at such a speed that it was able to repel the Nazi invasion on the Eastern Front in the Second World War. Without the Nazi defeat on the Eastern Front, Western Europe would not have been able to beat the Nazis.” [J]

This hypes Preobrazhensky, but is otherwise a good description of what happened, and *why* it happened. Stalin was well aware of the rise of fascism and the threat it posed. Poland had defeated the Soviet Union in 1920. Nazi Germany overran Poland in just over a month in 1939. But thanks to Stalin, Nazi Germany was stopped and then defeated in

the Soviet Union. A more moderate path of development would not have produced sufficient industrial strength in time.

Sadly – though not unexpectedly – the book ignores Mao’s achievement in tripling the Chinese economy. Tripling an economy in a quarter-century hasn’t often been done, and it was amazing to have done it in a society which had been stagnant for centuries. Under the Blue Republic (1911-1949), there was a little growth in the coastal cities, but this did not make up for the decay of the rural economy. This gets overlooked, perhaps because Mao’s success cannot conceivably be presented as yet another variety of capitalism. But he does at least make it clear that the post-Mao economy has remained heavily regulated. [K]

What about entrepreneurship? He makes some very good points here, noting that busy self-employed workers are everywhere in poor countries. “People are far more entrepreneurial in the developing countries than in the developed countries. According to an OECD study, in most developing countries 30-50 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce is self-employed (the ratio tends to be even higher in agriculture)... In contrast, only 12.8 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce in developed countries is self-employed. In some countries the ratio does not even reach one in ten: 6.7 per cent in Norway, 7.5 per cent in the US and 8.6 per cent in France.” [L]

“What really makes the rich countries rich is their ability to channel the individual entrepreneurial energy into collective entrepreneurship.

“Very much influenced by capitalist folklore, which characters such as Thomas Edison and Bill Gates... our view of entrepreneurship is too much tinged by the individualistic perspective – entrepreneurship is what those heroic individuals with exceptional vision and determination do. By extension, we believe that if any individual, if they try hard enough, can become successful in business. However, if it ever were true, this individualistic view of entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly obsolete. In the course of capitalist development, entrepreneurship has become an increasingly collective endeavour... even exceptional

individuals like Edison and Gates have become what they have only because they were supported by a whole host of collective individuals... the educational system that supplied highly trained scientists, engineers, managers and worker that manned those companies.” [M]

He might have added that the workings of a developed economy guarantees that most would-be entrepreneurs will fail. Bill Gates succeeded by creating a string of successful operating systems that pushed out the various alternatives on what were originally known as ‘IBM-Compatible PCs’. Dozens of others tried and failed in the same market. Likewise Henry Ford’s success was at the expense of most of the rival automobile companies that flourished in the early days. If more people try to be entrepreneurs, more of them will fail. That’s the name of the game.

If one studies early industrialism, one finds something similar. James Watt was just one of many men who tried to develop steam power. The first useful engines had been developed decades earlier by Thomas Newcomen. Watt had a splendid idea for improving Newcomen’s Engine with a separate condenser for the hot steam, but his ideas pushed the limits of 18<sup>th</sup> century engineering and he might have failed without his partnership with Boulton. Both Newcomen and Watt used low-pressure steam: metalwork had to get a lot better before high-pressure steam could be used. But Watt was at least original: Sir Richard Arkwright was splendidly successful but the balance of evidence is that he stole the inventions of others. He lost a patent case in an English court, but managed to carry on regardless and remained rich whereas many genuine pioneers died in poverty. (John Kay the inventor of the Flying Shuttle, for instance.)

Bill Gates, incidentally, seems never to have had a single original idea in his entire career. His talent – real and valuable enough – has been to move into an existing area of fast development and create software that everyone finds it convenient to use. He gets disproportional rewards for his skills, but at least others benefit. This is not true of people who play financial games. *23 Things They Don’t Tell You about Capitalism*

details how two economists claimed a superior method to determine the value ‘derivates’, complex financial instruments that can be used as insurance by people running real businesses, but have mostly been adapted for gambling on a global scale. They were given the so-called ‘Nobel Prize for Economics’ in 1997, then contributed to the bankruptcy of ‘Long Term Capital Management’ in 1998. One of them set up another hedge fund in 1999, found backers and suffered disaster again during the 2008 crash.

Missing from the book’s vision is an awareness of news media. These are largely funded by advertising, and owned by the people who are doing well out of the ‘Privatised Corporatism’ that grew up in the 1980s. It also benefited from the breakdown, at least in Britain, of the older very visible marks of class difference. So it has been possible for the media to focus people’s attention on the wrong things. Which doesn’t change the fact that the West took a wrong turn in the 1980s and has yet to correct it.

#### References

- [A] Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things They Don't Tell You about Capitalism*, Allen Lane 2010, page xv.
- [B] *Ibid.*, page 1.
- [C] *Ibid.*, page 19
- [D] *Ibid.*, page 60
- [E] *Ibid.*, page 108-9
- [F] *Ibid.*, page 111
- [G] *Ibid.*, page 117-119
- [H] *Ibid.*, page 142
- [J] *Ibid.*, page 140
- [K] *Ibid.*, page 196
- [L] *Ibid.*, page 159
- [M] *Ibid.*, page 165-6
- [N] *Ibid.*, page 170-1

## What Osborne prefers to leave unsaid on debt and the deficit

• [The Guardian](#), Wednesday 2 March 2011

[George Osborne](#) dissimulates. He knows that Ed Balls is at odds with [Labour](#) party policy on cuts, knowing that we have 12 to 13 years to pay off debt and deficit. But he also knows that our level of debt (less than 60% of GDP net of bank assets) is within Maastricht Treaty limits (60%) and lower than almost all OECD countries; that this debt is low by historical standards (we sustained debt at more than 100% of GDP for 20 years up until the early 1970s); that debt repayments (less than 3% of GDP) are lower than they were under Thatcher (5.15%) and Major (3.8%); that our deficit is partly created by a low overall tax-take (around 36% compared with the EU average of 40%). He knows this because these are official statistics (available on Google - mostly Office for National Statistics but also [ukpublicspending.co.uk](#)).

He knows, therefore, that whereas our economy, dominated by manufacturing up to the early 1990s, delivered GDP growth of 2.5%, the financial sector since then has delivered growth rates of less than 1.5% – another element of structural deficit. He knows that, whereas public sector costs have risen year on year over the past 30 years, so has outsourcing to the private sector – currently at around 20% of total public sector resource.

Though he may privately be content with Labour’s failure to stem the concentration of wealth (the index of inequality rose under Labour – the Gini

Coefficient up almost 5 points), Osborne will be more circumspect that Labour borrowed less and repaid more debt than previous Conservative administrations (borrowing was roughly 50% less under Blair/Brown than it was under Major – more than twice Thatcher’s debt repayments were made).

And his biggest dissimulation – under the continuing influence of the previous Labour administration, 2010 saw £20bn more than forecast wiped off the deficit as a result not of spending cuts but of “New Deal”-style growth stimulation. It is unremarkable that Osborne can point to the OECD and IMF supporting cuts – they are the global advocates of public austerity.

He does not mention the three Nobel prize-winning economists (Pissaredes, Stiglitz, Krugman) and Martin Wolf of the Financial Times, all of whom condemn this austerity policy as a serious historical error. Why not? Clearly because he wants no balanced public contestation over the sustainability of a public sector. The real question is why opposition parties and dissident Lib Dems allow this level of narrative control by the coalition government – “crisis”, “unavoidable cuts”, “Labour’s fault”. It’s neither “middle” nor “muddle” nor an economic crisis – it’s a crisis of democratic debate.

**Barry Kushner**

# Can Pakistan become a theocratic state?

Khalid Bhatti

## Religion, politics and the working class

After the murder of Punjab Governor, Salman Taseer, many questions have been raised about the future of country and possible take over by religious extremist forces. A lot of material has appeared both in the local English media and international press about the rising tide of religious extremism and collapse of liberal and secular layers in Pakistan. Some articles even gave the impression that whole country is in the grip of religious bigotry and the entire liberal and secular layers have been silenced.

This impression is wrong and is an exaggeration of the current situation. There is no doubt that religious extremist forces have gone onto the offensive on the issue of blasphemy laws and the 'liberals' have mainly been on the receiving end. But it will be a mistake to draw the conclusion from the present religious offensive that religious political parties enjoy overwhelming support amongst the masses throughout Pakistan.

This would be a simplistic and one-sided analysis of the present situation. The situation is much more complex and contradictory than what most of the western commentators and experts have argued. The same religious parties, who are organising large rallies and protest demonstrations in some parts of the country, were routed in the last general elections held in February 2008. These parties got less than 3% of seats in par-

liament and less than 5% of the popular vote. It is true that the religious parties are better organised and have a better trained layer of activists compared to the capitalist liberal and secular parties of the country. It is also important to note that a majority of the participants in these rallies come from religious schools where nearly 2 million students are studying the religious syllabus.

There is no doubt that generally, Pakistani society has become less tolerant and progressive in last three decades thanks to the politics of deceit, hypocrisy and religious bigotry. But it will be wrong to assume that overwhelming majority of Pakistani people support religious extremism and its ideology. We need to differentiate the religious sentiments of the ordinary people from support for religious extremism in general. We also need to consider the fact that nearly 96% of the population is Muslim and a majority of them have been kept illiterate and backward by the reactionary and rotten ruling classes.

The ruling classes have played with the religious emotions of the masses and used religion as a tool to justify their cruel and repressive rule over the years. The Pakistani state has mixed general religious beliefs and politics to the extent that it has become impossible to separate them on some occasions. The use of religion by the state to gain political mileage has made it easier for the religious parties and clerics to exploit the religious emotions of masses. That is what is happening at the moment. The religious clerics and parties have simply made the debate on the misuse of the blasphemy laws into the issue of protecting the honour and dignity of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). The religious hawks in the media help

the religious extremist forces create this perception. They used this very sensitive religious issue to make political gains.

The question arises here of how many people have been killed in last few weeks just on the ground that they pointed out the misuse of blasphemy laws and proposed changes to these laws. The present wave of religious fever in some sections of society is a temporary phenomenon may not last long. But it does not mean that the phenomenon of religious extremism will disappear. It would also be wrong to dismiss the dangers it poses to the working class and society in general. The rising tide of religious extremism also poses serious dangers for the organised trade union movement and Left forces in the country.

We have to accept the reality of the situation: that religious extremist forces do exist and will continue to exist until the system is that creates such reactionary forces is changed. The capitalist and feudal system is responsible for the conditions in which such forces flourish. The Pakistani ruling classes did not separate the state from religion to establish a secular state in last 64 years. They are also incapable of completing the tasks of the national democratic revolution (bourgeois revolution) in the country. They did not abolish feudalism and tribalism to solve the agrarian question. The Stalinist and Maoist left pin hopes with one section or the other of the ruling classes to accomplish the tasks of national democratic revolution as being the progressive wing of the capitalist class. It never happened because no such progressive wing exists in Pakistan.

What is clear is that our "liberal intelligentsia" is floundering. Both the substance and strategy of their campaign separate defence of these democratic rights from demands that related directly

to popular grievances. And it is understandable why: many of the leading advocates come from either the bourgeoisie which had come to the fore during the lawyers' movement, or from the PPP and its sympathisers—groups that have been in recent years, as a rule, consistent cheerleaders of war and neoliberal restructuring.

In fact, their role recalls Marx's verdict on the Prussian bourgeoisie, after their betrayal of the revolution of March 1848. "Without faith in itself, without faith in the people, grumbling at those above, frightened of those below, egotistical towards both and aware of its egoism; revolutionary with regard to the conservatives and conservative with regard to the revolutionaries... Haggling over its own demands, without initiative, without faith in itself, without faith in the people, without a historic mission." (The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution, December 1848)

It is a sad fact that, even while the blasphemy laws remain a barometer of the cruelty of life in Pakistan today, they do not figure in the everyday injustices faced by the vast majority, who remain centrally preoccupied by hunger, poverty, and war. The number of cases registered of the use of blasphemy laws in the last three decades is in the hundreds—less than the number of Pakistani children that die, daily, from malnutrition and related causes.

This is not to suggest that these laws are unworthy of urgent attention. But it is to argue that the task of making their repeal central to people's understanding of progress is precisely that – a task. Progressives find themselves in a political context that requires them to make the case, as organisers and not just as commentators, that freeing the State from the grasp of religious bigotry is an important step in the struggle to transform the society along socialist lines. A progressive society can not be built on the basis of a rotten capitalist system, as many liberals and progressives believe. The struggle to emancipate society from the clutches of religious bigotry is not a separate struggle, but an integral part of the struggle to emancipate the working class and poor of the country from the shackles of capitalist exploitation and

repression.

We will never win popular confidence without participating in and leading struggles against the cruelty of everyday life in our country—for a living wage, decent housing, jobs, land rights, meaningful and decent education, healthcare, public transport etc. The Pakistani masses want to live like human beings and demanding better living conditions. The so-called liberal and secular ruling parties and ruling classes have failed to offer anything to the working masses and poor. This has created a political vacuum which the religious right is trying to fill with religious slogans. This is indeed an ideological offensive from the religious right and so-called liberal and secular leaders and parties have no answer to counter this attack. The reason is simple.

These parties and leaders have no ideology, vision, strategy, programme and manifesto to launch the counter-offensive. They also lack the courage and determination to take up the challenge. In this situation, these leaders and parties find it easier to appease the religious forces to calm them down. The parties like PPP, PML-N, MQM and ANP are more concerned to maintain their vote and thus avoid confronting the religious right. All these parties support one religious party or another to get their votes at elections. The religious right knows this and exploits the weakness of these parties and leaders to their advantage.

### **What the religious right want?**

The ongoing movement of the religious right has raised some important questions that need to be answered.

Firstly, what is the real agenda behind this movement? It seems that the main purpose of this movement is to regain the ground that the religious right has lost in last few years. The suicide attacks and bombings carried out by the Taliban and their supporters against innocent women, children and the general public in the main cities have proved counter-productive. The overwhelming majority of the masses are against these acts of barbarism and the tactics used by Taliban and Al-Qaeda linked extrem-

ist groups. Many religious parties and groups directly and indirectly support the Taliban and other extremist groups. The results of the last general elections (and by-elections held in the last two years), clearly show that the religious right had lost considerable support amongst the masses.

All the surveys conducted by foreign and local organisations before the beginning of the present right-wing onslaught confirmed this trend in the society. Jamat-e-Islami (JI), the main fundamentalist party in the country, contested two by-elections in 2010 in Lahore and Rawalpindi constituencies and lost significant votes. Traditionally, JI used to get at least 5,000-10,000 votes in both constituencies but only got 2,200 and 3,700 votes respectively, which was less than one percent of the polled votes. Now these religious parties are using the issue of Blasphemy laws to make the political gains.

Secondly, the right-wing fundamentalist sections of the establishment want to use this opportunity to form an alliance of the religious parties to campaign around the issues concerning them. This alliance will be converted into an electoral alliance along the lines of MMA (an alliance of main religious parties), which contested the 2002 general elections and won a considerable number of seats and over 11% of the votes. It is generally believed that the intelligence agencies were behind this alliance at the behest of General Musharaf's military regime. The same people wanted to repeat the drama of the 2002 elections in the next elections to manipulate politics inside and outside the parliament. But it will be difficult for the religious forces to repeat the electoral successes of 2002 in the next general elections.

Thirdly, the present campaign is being used to bring together the rival religious parties belonging to the different sects. There was bitter division among the religious forces before the eruption of this movement. The religious parties belonging to the Braelvi sect were organising the protest demonstrations and large rallies against the attacks on the most respected shrines in Lahore and Karachi. No one ever imagined that anybody could attack the shrines of

these most respected Muslim Saints. The Braelvis alleged that Deobandi's armed religious groups and the Taliban were behind these attacks. All the religious parties belonging to the Braelvi religious sect formed an alliance called Sunni Ittehad Council (Sunni alliance council). They openly allege that some Deobandi religious schools are involved in the religious militancy and should be closed down. They also organise anti-Taliban rallies and demonstrations in different cities. The situation was very tense between these sects and there was the possibility of clashes and killings. These tensions are not entirely over yet, even though they have eased up a bit because of the blasphemy issue.

Fourthly, the blasphemy issue is also being used to divert the attention of the working masses and poor of the country from the real issues faced by them in every day life. The acute energy shortage, skyrocketing prices, unemployment, increased poverty and hunger and crippling public services are the real issues faced by the masses. There is growing anger and desperation among the masses. The massive protest demonstrations, rallies and blocking of railway lines and main roads for hours by angry people in many cities in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces against the long hours of power and natural gas cuts sent shock waves through the ruling class. The ruling class is frightened of the prospect of a mass movement on these issues. They could get out of control and pose serious threats to the status quo. Even the religious right is very careful in their mobilisation. So far, they have organised big rallies and processions only in Karachi but have not so far issued a single call for national demonstrations. They are also afraid of a mass movement that might start on the religious issues with a dominant religious colouration but which could turn into a mass movement against the corrupt and rotten elite and repressive state machine. Once the economic and social issues come to the fore of the movement, the religious right will be pushed aside and loose control of the movement. The government is happy that the religious right has successfully diverted the attention of the masses and provided a breathing space for the government.

Fifthly, the religious forces want to maintain their superiority over the parliament in making or amending any Islamic law. They want to kill any debate on such issues, inside and outside the parliament. Various right wing political parties and extremist groups have succeeded in their malicious agenda of rendering the elected parliament ineffective by not allowing it to debate major political and social issues confronting the country. The hate-mongers on the other hand, have been allowed to talk freely about whatever their perception of Islam is, and how and under what laws they want the people of Pakistan to reel under. The religious right want to keep their tight control over religious issues, which they established during the General Zia's military regime.

The final and the most important factor in the situation is that the mainstream religious political parties are under immense pressure from Al-Qaeda linked groups and other developments that are taking place in these religious parties. The Pakistani and international media and intellectuals are just discussing and analysing the increased tensions between religious extremist forces and liberalism. But tensions are also developing within the religious right and extremist forces. Al-Qaeda's second in command, Aimanul Zawahri, has written a long article that is being distributed among the religious groups. In this, he declares that the Pakistani constitution is un-Islamic and asks the Muslims in Pakistan not to accept the constitution. He also said in his article that all the religious leaders who signed this constitution made a mistake. This decree from Al-Qaeda's top gun has put the three main religious political parties in a difficult position. JI, JUI-F and JUP leaders signed the consensus constitution in 1973. New extremist groups and hardliners within these parties are now posing new challenges to the leadership. Religious political parties are standing at the crossroads on the ideological front. New discussions are taking place and the formation of new and more hardline groups is taking place.

The mainstream religious political parties are part of electoral politics and also an integral part of power politics. The religious leaders have become part of the ruling class since 1977 and are enjoying

all the perks and privileges of the ruling elite. Their declared aim is to bring the 'Islamic revolution' about through 'democratic methods'. Now groups like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda with their increased influence and ideology have started to challenge the credibility and integrity of these leaders and parties. New groups are campaigning against democracy and elections and argue that the constitution is un-Islamic. They are arguing that the only way to establish an Islamic state is the armed struggle. Many hardliners have already split away from JI and JUI-F and joined the Taliban. Some people have also been expelled from JI and JUI-F for spreading Al-Qaeda and Taliban ideology in these parties. These leaders and parties have launched a movement to save the honour and integrity of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) to prove their credentials as the true leaders of the religious right. On the one hand, these leaders are putting pressure on the liberal sections of the ruling class and, on the other hand, they are struggling for their own survival within the religious right.

### **Middle class and religious right**

Some liberal intellectuals and commentators are painting the picture that the majority of the educated and professional middle class are supporters of the religious right and that religious extremism is deep rooted in this class. Before we draw any conclusion in this regard, it is important to analyse the middle classes in Pakistan. Traditionally, the middle class in Pakistan consists of traders, landed rural petty bourgeoisie, professionals like doctors, engineers, professors, lawyers and managers, and civil and military bureaucrats. The middle classes are not as stable in Pakistan as they are in the advanced industrialised countries. Every economic boom creates an artificial layer of the middle class that disappears with every economic crisis. Every economic boom enables some lower middle class layers and some better off layers of the working class to enjoy a relatively high standard of living for few years. Then the onset of a new crisis throws them back to their original position. Even lower layers of the middle class fall back to the level of the working class. The economic situation changes very quickly and thus changes the position of middle layers.



Traders are the most conservative and religious section of the middle class and also the largest section of middle class. Traders are conservative both politically and socially. Their political affiliations differ from province to province and area to area. For instance, a majority of traders in Punjab supports the PML-N in the elections and only a small minority supports the religious parties in the elections. In Karachi, MQM and Jamat-e-Islami (JI) get a major percentage of the traders' votes. The PPP and pro-establishment landlords enjoy support in rural Sindh and small towns. In Baluchistan, Baluch and Pashtun, nationalist parties and the fundamentalist JUI-F get the largest share of middle class votes. In Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa, ANP, JUI-F, JI, the PPP and PML-N get the votes of traders.

Traders provide much-needed financial support to the religious political parties and some sections of traders even generously supply money to religious extremist groups. Jihadi groups also collect a major share of their money from the traders. Historically, traders back almost every reactionary movement launched on religious issues and oppose every progressive movement. The upper layers are connected with the ruling class, as their class interests force them to become allies of the bourgeoisie. The middle and lower layers are close allies of the religious right. They are at the forefront of the ongoing religious movement. General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship provided political patronage to the traders and strengthened them. Traders were allowed to organise their associations and elect their leadership without any intervention by the state throughout the period of that dictatorship. On the other hand, trade unions and progressive parties were attacked and subjected to the worst kinds of repression and torture. Large numbers of traders not only share the world view of the religious right but also follow the strict moral and social code imposed by religious clerics. The interesting fact is that being one of the most religious sections of society, traders miss no opportunity to maximise their profits. They even use human tragedies like floods and earthquakes to earn super profits. When it comes to profiting and earning money, they forget all the teachings of

Islam on 'morality'.

The landed rural petty bourgeoisie are not as religious as the traders but hold conservative views. This layer of the middle class is more stable as it owns large and medium sized land holdings. This layer also produces professionals and military and civilian bureaucrats. This layer mainly supports two main political parties, the PPP and PML-N. It holds no particular political ideology. This layer is renowned for changing political loyalties in no time at all. This is one of the most opportunist layers of the middle class. In feudal dominated areas, this layer is an ally of the feudal lords. In central Punjab, it is closely linked with the bourgeoisie and military establishment.

The educated professional urban middle class is the layer that is often linked to religious extremism. There is no doubt that in recent years, this layer has inclined more towards religion than the past. In the 1950s, 60s and early 70s, this layer was considered more liberal and progressive compared to other layers and sections of the middle class. The students belonging to this layer dominated the progressive students' movement in that era. National Student Federation (NSF) was the largest student organisation in the country, which was a left student organisation. Thousands of college and university students used to join NSF every year.

The majority of them came from this middle class layer. However, after the collapse of the left and student movement in the 1980s and the rise of jihadi culture and the religious right, the situation changed. This layer produced outstanding writers, poets and intellectuals, who were part of the working class movement. NSF activists played an important role in the development of the trade union movement that flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The absence of the left as alternative force in the political arena paved the way for religious fundamentalist organisations like JI to make inroads on the university campuses. In recent years, a small minority of the educated professional middle class has joined new militant organisations. But it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that whole layers have

embraced the ideas of religious extremism. Once the working class starts to move and enters into the political arena, big sections of this layer can be won to the ideas of Socialism.

### **Role of the Working class**

The other missing link in the analysis of western commentators and the Pakistani liberal intelligentsia is the role of working class. None of these 'experts' ever mentions the existence of a powerful working class. According to the official figures, of a population of 170 million, 49 million are from the working class. If the workers in the informal economy and rural women workers in agriculture are included, then it numbers 69 million. That is nearly 40% of the population. The middle classes are around 34 million.

Not only the numbers but also the traditions and history of the working class are important to keep in the mind when discussing the future course of the country. The intervention of the working class in future events can bring a qualitative change in the situation. The role of the working class is decisive to determine the future of the country. The working class has the potential power to challenge and stop the march of the reactionary forces.

It is true that at this stage the working class in general appears as a mere spectator. It is also true that the trade union movement is weak and isolated. The working class in general is not involved in the political process because there is no party which represents their interests.

But this situation will not last forever. The working class will be compelled to take part in politics as it did in the 1960s, when it appeared on the scene like a thunderstorm. Nobody thought that the working class could take on the powerful military dictatorship of General Ayub Khan and defeat it. The working class did it in 1968-69. The working class also took on the religious right and defeated it in the first general elections in 1970. A little before the first general elections in 1970, more than 100 leading religious leaders, clerics and spiritual

leaders issued a decree that anyone voting for the political parties carrying the banner of socialism would cease to be a Muslim and if he or she is married then his or her marriage would be annulled. The working masses ignored this decree and voted overwhelmingly in favour of the PPP in West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and the Awami League in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) both of which described themselves in words, if not in deeds, as “socialist”. The religious right was routed in the elections. It was the political mistakes of founder of the PPP, Z. A. Bhutto, in the middle of the 1970s that gave new life to the religious right.

The religious right can not take power in Pakistan and make it a theocratic state until either the majority of working class people embrace the ideas of religious extremism or the working class is crushed in a thumping defeat. Neither has happened so far. The overwhelming majority of the working class has not yet supported the ideas of religious right. As soon as class struggle starts to take develop and political class-consciousness and radicalisation start to develop, the whole scenario can begin to change.

The setting up of the Progressive workers federation (PWF), which brings together hundreds of thousands of workers from various trade unions, is another example showing that the working class is still very strong in Pakistan. Furthermore, there have been a number of strikes and protests taking place in number of areas. The recent workers’ response to Karachi Electricity Supply Corporation (KESC) sacking 4000 workers is one such example.

**Article submitted by Khalid Bhatti. The views and analysis expressed are those of the Author and not necessarily those of The Labour and Trade Union Review.**

# Froggy

## News From Across The Channel

### **Strong opposition to Sarkozy’s policies in France.**

Strong opposition to Sarkozy’s policies in France, not by trade unions or political parties, but by magistrates and, separately, by diplomats. Let us look at magistrates first.

It started with the murder of a young woman in January of this year; a suspect was arrested, before her body was discovered; the suspect, who had left jail twelve months previously and had a record of convictions for theft and violence, claimed it was a car accident. The case caused emotion in the public and Nicolas Sarkozy visited the family of the victim. He then said that there had been serious errors committed by the judiciary and the police and that those who had set free the “presumed guilty” would be punished.

Immediately, on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, magistrates protested against this slur on their profession and interference in the judicial process by refusing to hear non urgent cases and demonstrating outside their court houses in several French towns. A report was produced, in record speed, that showed that no error was committed, and on 17<sup>th</sup> February the magistrates ended their actions, saying, however, that the main motivation for their action had not been settled and they would continue to meet and monitor the situation.

Their main motivation is the lack of means to do their job properly.

The president of the French Association of Examining Magistrates, Marc Trevidic, explained on France Inter Radio (13/2/11) that the judiciary in France today is not separate enough from the executive power (the President) for several reasons. The president takes it upon himself

to comment on current cases and to vilify the judges, when no fault has actually been committed. He also says the first thing that comes into his head, talking of the presumed guilty, when he means the suspect, and accusing judges of setting the man free when he had actually left prison after serving his sentence. Trevidic does not insist on this, according to him, Sarkozy speaks “spontaneously”. (Except that he speaks in that way to please the public.) The main reason that the judiciary is not independent, says Trevidic, is that it is starved of resources and as a result cannot do its job.

Trevidic explained that the public are encouraged to expect perfection: they will no longer tolerate error, or any crime; they want a zero risk situation. Not only is this impossible, but at the same time the justice system does not receive anything like appropriate resources. France ranks 37<sup>th</sup> out of 43 European countries in terms of justice budget.

The magistrates demand that France should, gradually, within ten years, get up to the level of Belgium or the Netherlands, but this moderate demand has so far received no answer. In his televised speech on 10<sup>th</sup> February, Sarkozy said he would not give money to magistrates, but to the unemployed. Trevidic said that magistrates were not asking for money for themselves but for the rest of the service.

He gave some examples of situations where the service is not coping. The law says that when someone is held in police custody, a magistrate must be informed. In the past the magistrate was informed each time, even if it meant being woken up at night. Now cases are so numerous that, at night, a fax is sent to the judge’s fax machine in his kitchen and dealt with in the

morning, so the letter of the law is respected but not the reality. Children's tribunals can only sit if a legal clerk (*greffier*) is present. Most of the time there aren't enough clerks to go round, so the clerk signs the documents afterwards, not having been present. Everyone knows this goes on and that it has to go on if the machine is to go on working. When some dreadful event happens, a scapegoat is easily found, because false declarations had been made. At every level of the justice system staff are unable to do their job, simply because they have too many cases to deal with; meanwhile many are poorly paid, according to Trevidic.

An investigation during the magistrates' action concluded that neither the police nor the judiciary had made errors, and shifted the blame onto the probation service. Trevidic, the representative of the magistrates, pointed out that at the time of the murder, in the district where the murder case happened, 17 probation officers were responsible for following up 3, 443 ex-prisoners.

Trevidic is not just any magistrate: he specialises in anti-terrorism cases and is in charge of two very high profile cases (the Karachi bombing, where French ministers are said to be involved, and the monks of Tibhirine, the subjects of a 2010 feted French film.) This position gives him the confidence to stand up to Sarkozy and to claim loudly that the work load imposed on the judiciary is excessive and unrealistic.

It is not always easy for workers or their unions to explain to the public that their work load is excessive and unrealistic.

Magistrates are also able to make public their concern about the way laws are made, i.e. in reaction to public emotion, resulting in incoherence and meaninglessness, and not just under Sarkozy. Trevidic quotes the Outreau case, where a young examining magistrate had 17 people in preventive custody for a number of years, 13 of whom were eventually freed without charge. In reaction a law was

passed making it obligatory for every case to be dealt with by three examining judges, not just one. Needless to say the law was not applied; at the moment it is suspended until 2014.

There is a useful phrase in French which does not have a direct equivalent in English: "*Faits divers*" [miscellaneous events], defined in the dictionary as "category, or column in a newspaper, in which are grouped the incidents of the day: accidents, crimes, suicides etc." *Faits divers* were in the past relegated to inside pages and considered of minor importance. *Faits divers* now spark new laws every few years, and this is one of the complaints of the magistrates in France.

### The Marly group of diplomats

Another professional group has expressed views on current French policy, so strongly that the new minister for Foreign Affairs, Alain Juppé, felt he had to reply to it as the first thing he did on his appointment. (He was appointed in a cabinet reshuffle on 27 February to replace Michele Alliot-Marie, the one who offered Ben Ali the support of French Security Services in January this year and had a holiday in Tunisia during the same period, where she travelled in one of Ben Ali's friends' jet.)

French diplomats of different generations, active or in retirement, of differing political opinions, give a critical analysis of France's foreign policy under Nicolas Sarkozy. By choosing anonymity, they imitate the Surcouf group of military personnel, which is also a critic of the choices of the head of State. "Marly", their collective pseudonym, comes from the name of the café where they met for the first time.

Their main criticism is that France now just tags along with the United States, and has lost as a consequence a voice that could interest the rest of the world. Also, as in the case of the magistrates, policy has been made in an impulsive and amateurish manner, with an eye to the media, for exam-

ple the Union for the Mediterranean, which has come to nothing, or the damaging of relations with Mexico by Sarkozy's championing of a French woman convicted and imprisoned in Mexico for kidnapping children for ransom; Sarkozy insisted that the French 2011 "Year of Mexico" events should all include in their publicity the name of the woman involved. France needs to reconnect with its own priorities, in particular francophone Africa, which it neglects politically and to whom it denies the bilateral aid it used to give. The group Marly said in a "Point of view" column in *Le Monde* of 23 February: "We must define our objectives on vital questions such as the contents and borders of the Europe of tomorrow, our policy towards an Arab world in revolt, our objectives in Afghanistan, our African policy, our type of partnership with Russia."

### Presidential elections

The two stories above should have come from political voices on the left. Unfortunately all we hear from the socialist party is talk about personalities. Francois Hollande, one of the many prospective socialist candidates (still coy as they all are about whether he really is standing) made the very good point in an interview on France Inter on 6/2/11 that Nicolas Sarkozy is a bad president but will be a good candidate.

He is right. The professional groups in civil society are still with him, even if critically. Christine Lagarde, the economics minister, has a good reputation in the world. Hollande at the end of his interview did a useful bit of name dropping: I'm just off to talk to Jean-Claude Juncker (president of the Eurogroup), he said. But the rest of the interview gave us no inkling that this candidate is interested in the things that are important to the French people.

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# Notes on the News

By Gwydion M Williams

## Give Them Liberty Or Give Them Death

The USA gives priority to foreign governments being pro-USA. If they can also copy US politics by alternate power between two similar and broadly harmless parties, that is an excellent extra. But the USA has a long history of encouraging or sometimes organising coups to prevent elections or overthrow elected governments that they dislike.

The USA calls for 'freedom', but faces the horrible prospect that a roused public in foreign lands might think that 'freedom' extended to freedom to be something different from the USA.

The US public and politicians seem agreed that:

- a) their own system is near-perfect
- b) their own system is failing to give most of them what they are entitled to.

If the contradiction ever bothers them, it never leads to anything beyond a demand for more of the same. That's common ground between US Democrats and US Republicans, and also shared by a lot of the rest of the world

Various 'reflective' pieces have been written in the wake of the overthrow of existing governments in Tunisia and Egypt. The absence of a coherent government in either place does not bother the commentators. Nor a sudden surge in people trying to flee from Tunisia to Italy. It is Democracy and therefore it must be A Good Thing.

The USA does also seem to have learned some lessons from the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. The main lesson seems to be that you should rat on your Third-World friends as soon as they look shaky.

In Egypt, the protestors would have been wiser to have kept Mubarak once he seemed committed to reform. This would have been sound advice, but it was not the advice they were given. Instead the West more or less endorsed the hard-line stand that Mubarak must go before anything else happened.

The protestors missed what would have been the best way to ease tensions, an assurance of immunity. This worked in South Africa, but it was arrived at because the USA was then dominant globally and the USA was looking after its friends. Elsewhere they see no need for it. Mubarak may have thought the USA was his friend, but the way he was treated suggests that they saw him as their servant, and now 'surplus to requirements'.

The actual departure was curious. On Thursday 10<sup>th</sup>, Mubarak was scheduled to make a speech which was heavily publicised as a decision to resign. It was obvious from the first

few sentences that something else was happening. The man talked about what he would do, based on a clear assumption that he would retain power to choose. I followed it on the BBC, which provided a fast English translation, but which was slow to notice that the 'script' was not being followed.

On Friday 11<sup>th</sup>, we were told that Mubarak has resigned, but the news did not come from him. The world media has not heard from him, and the world media does not seem concerned, and the world media is not asking any awkward questions. I assume that he has been removed and is currently under arrest. If he isn't ill, then he soon may be.

The problem now is that there is no legitimate leadership, just a bunch of Mubarak subordinates who have removed their boss. Chaos is very likely, because the various forces that got together to protest don't have all that much in common.

Removing Mubarak solves nothing. There was little substance to the protest beyond demanding an end to corruption. But corruption typically reflects the general situation. I can't think of a single anti-corruption political movement that achieved anything, unless it had other issues of substance.

Removing Mubarak made sense in terms of the Liberal or Libertarian notion – there is some magic force will of the people, expressed in multi-choice elections from which harmony emerges, usually with two parties politely alternating in power. This rests on the assumption that there is a single thing called 'the will of the people'. But if there were, why would there need to be separate parties? The people could just chose the most worthy individuals, which was the original intention in the USA.

The Liberal or Libertarian view see dictatorial rule as a senseless interruption in the political process. I see it as a reflection of actual tensions within the system, that can be resolved by concentrating power. When tensions get less, then the system can manage with power more dispersed. But it's a mistake to see dictatorship s resulting primarily from personal ambition. Someone has to want the position to get it, but also there has to be broad consent that there should be a single 'strong man' in charge. And there are plenty of examples of a political system churning and producing nothing, but this lesson is not learned.

In Egypt, a lot of the anger has been about Egypt following a 'globalist' agenda, increasing inequality and trying to shrink the state. That's bound to be a big issue if elections actually get held. But it may also prove that no one can cope with the new politics except the Islamists.

As I said last month, the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9 proceeded by stages, with the Islamists eliminating their enemies

by stages. Something similar could happen in Egypt, particularly since the non-Islamic forces have nothing very obvious to offer.

Even though the Iran state that emerged from the Islamic Revolution has had popular elections that raise or cast down its leading politicians, it keeps making choices that the USA dislikes and is targeted. And the BBC obediently calls it a 'dictatorship', even though Ahmadinejad's election as President in 2005 was broadly accepted. The Opposition played the West's game by claiming ballot rigging in his re-election in 2009, part of a global pattern of disrupting every election that produces an unwanted result.

The Western media have also irresponsibly hyped revolts that stand little chance of success, and which are much more likely to lead to civil war. At the time of writing, 22<sup>nd</sup> February, Libya has the beginnings of a civil war. Bahrain may be heading for a compromise between the ruling Sunni and the majority Shia, but it would be unstable if it happened. Yemen and Morocco have had disturbances but seems to have ridden them out. If the army stands with the government and is prepared to shoot, a 'colour revolution' will not work.

#### Colour-of-Money Politics

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings are being seen as a continuation of the 'Colour Revolutions', the wave of well-organised popular protests that knocked over some of the governments which had emerged from the Soviet collapse.

The overthrow of most governments in Middle-Europe in 1989 had a definite logic: those governments had become little more than puppets of Moscow, and people wanted a sharp change. Mostly they wanted admission to the European Union and incorporation in the European Union's way of life. This is pretty much what they got.

The change to a Western system was carried through without disaster in countries where there was a memory of

multi-party politics. It has still been distinctly disappointing, with many of the new politicians making fools of themselves at international gatherings. Still, it has lasted.

East of Middle-Europe – east of the Baltic states and the Carpathian Mountains – things were much more muddled. Middle-Europe could see itself as returning to its natural place as the close associate of Western Europe. The true Eastern Europe had different traditions and nowhere clear to go.

The 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia is normally counted as the first of the Colour Revolutions. This resulted in a stable new government, but also a government of fools who got into a confrontation with Russia over a non-Georgian enclave that had been bundled with Georgia when they were all part of the Soviet Union. The Georgian leadership clearly expected the West to back them, and they were dead wrong. Russia still has nuclear weapons and the West's bark has proved worse than its bite.

The next big event was the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine. It was part of a futile political merry-go-round involving the rival leaderships of Yanukovich, Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, what could be called the Y-Y-Y Effect. Yanukovich was overthrown in the Orange Revolution of 2004, but the new government was pretty lousy and Yanukovich was re-elected in 2010.

Compared to Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine is quite orderly. The Tulip Revolution of 2005 brought Bakiyev to power: he was thrown out again in 2010 after allegedly rigging an election. North and South cannot get along together. There is a real possibility that the country may break up.

Why should anyone be surprised by this? Competitive politics easily spills over into Civil War. In Britain, the relatively stable settlement of 1688 came after several decades of disorder. It worked because each faction had tried to dominate at one stage or another, and all had failed. It seemed safer to stick to electoral contests, elections that were often corrupt and not even loosely democratic until the 1880s. The system

worked because people accepted the result and assumed they would have another chance later. This is highly unnatural behaviour, and attempts to reproduce it elsewhere have often failed. France ran through three monarchies, two Empires and five Republics before achieving its current stability. Of course the Fifth Republic will need to last past 2028 to displace the much-despised Third Republic as the longest-lasting system of government since the French Revolution.

Elections can spark civil wars – this happened in 1860-61 in the USA, the Spanish Civil War of 1936 and the secession of East Pakistan as Bangladesh in 1970-71. Multi-party politics did not prevent the Irish War of Independence, the subsequent Irish Civil War and the series of IRA campaigns that have undermined but not yet destroyed British rule in Northern Ireland. Back in 1914, Irish Home Rule was so contentious that there seemed a real chance of civil war in Britain as well as Ireland: World War One intervened. In Ceylon – now Sri Lanka – multi-party elections polarised the island between Tamils and Sinhalese and led to a long-running secessionist war that ended only with the Tamil Tiger defeat in 2009.

Transitions from authoritarian system to multi-party government have gone wrong more often than they have gone right. The Arab world seems particularly unlikely to get it right.

There is an old joke about a man who is asked "can you play the piano?" And he replies, "I don't know, I've never tried." It's the same with a multi-party system, it only works if people have an existing set of political habits, mostly quite different from what the liberals and the libertarians claim to be necessary.

If you are not afraid of freedom, then you have no understanding of freedom. Freedom normally involves people doing things you never expected. Freedom means freedom for what you hate or fear as well as what you hope for or desire. You will probably call something else, but that's just your opinion. You may try to impose the 'Sinatra Principle': I'll do it my way, you'll do it my way. But how do you actually impose your ideas

on someone who can fight back?

Rapid change also has its thrilling aspects, but that's precisely because it is dangerous and unpredictable. Myself, I am looking forward to a further decline of US power and the likely emergence of governments hostile to the USA in Arab counties. I am also waiting for those who currently cheer on the process to express utter shock and amazement that it has ended up as something quite alien.

### Democracy's Strange Fruit

The Western media say 'democracy' when they mean 'legalised forms of political aggression against the legitimate political authorities'. Historically, the two have been separate. Britain's system didn't include a majority of adult males living in Britain until the 1880s. The most successful democracies are those where elected politicians gradually learned politics while the state was governed by someone else. This was true even in the British colonies that seceded as the USA: they had state assemblies that worked as local agents of the British Empire and had a set of political habits that let them run the new Republic fairly smoothly. (And the USA's much-hyped constitution is largely the former British system of rule with a republican gloss.)

A multi-party system works OK when a single view is dominant. It is often a burden on a weak system. Stable multi-party politics should be seen a result, not a system. It depends on a lack of major issues between the electable parties. No issue worth dying for, at least.

One should also remember what it was like in the US South from the 1870s to 1960s. Before the South seceded, almost all of the North excluded negroes from voting. They were also not allowed to join the Union army in the early years of the war. They had been allowed to fight in previous wars – on both sides in the War of Independence, though this was also true of many white Americans. But the US Civil War began as a war of two racisms, with the North objecting to slavery because it wanted an all-white free society. Abraham Lincoln was responding to popular opinion when he

looked for some scheme to persuade the newly freed negroes to quit the USA.

As things happened, a brief surge of Northern triumphalism led to constitutional amendments which affirmed that negroes were citizens and also gave them the vote. It was of course men-only until 1918, but it would have been a huge advance if it had stuck. But the North then got wobbly and allowed the mass terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan to deprive negroes of the vote. It was of course a continuation of something de Tocqueville noted in the 1830s in *Democracy in America*, non-whites intimidated out of voting even where they had the vote.

And so it continued really up until the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement successfully challenged and faced down the terror. It took a long time, and might not have happened had the USA not been preoccupied with their Cold War against the Soviet Union and keen to clean up domestic politics to conciliate world public opinion, particularly the newly independent states of Black Africa.

The *Guardian* recently carried a reminded of how it was back in the 1930s:

"You've heard the buzz about the resident singer, a 23-year-old black woman called Billie Holiday who made her name up in Harlem with Count Basie's band....

"She begins her final number.

"Southern trees bear a strange fruit.' This, you think, isn't your usual lovey-dovey stuff. 'Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.' What is this? 'Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze.' Lynching? It's a song about lynching? The chatter from the tables dries up. Every eye in the room is on the singer, every ear on the song. After the last word – a long, abruptly severed cry of 'crop' – the whole room snaps to black. When the house lights go up, she's gone.

"Do you applaud, awed by the courage and intensity of the performance, stunned by the grisly poetry of the lyrics, sensing history moving through the room? Or do you shift awkwardly in your seat, shudder at the strange vibrations in the air, and think to yourself: call this entertainment?"

"This is the question that will throb at the heart of the vexed relationship between politics and pop for decades to come, and this is the first time it has demanded to be asked.

"Written by a Jewish communist called Abel Meeropol, *Strange Fruit* was not by any means the first protest song, but it was the first to shoulder an explicit political message into the arena of entertainment. Unlike the robust workers' anthems of the union movement, it did not stir the blood; it chilled it. 'That is about the ugliest song I have ever heard,' Nina Simone would later marvel. 'Ugly in the sense that it is violent and tears at the guts of what white people have done to my people in this country.' For all these reasons, it was something entirely new. Up to this point, protest songs functioned as propaganda, but *Strange Fruit* proved they could be art...

"It was not, by any stretch, a song for every occasion. It infected the air in the room, cut conversation stone dead, left drinks untouched, cigarettes unlit. Customers either clapped till their hands were sore, or walked out in disgust....

"Holiday's regular label, Columbia, blanched at the prospect of recording it, so she turned to Commodore Records, a small, leftwing operation." [A]

What's this got to do with democracy? Everything, because Southern Racism was very democratic within its defined racial limits. It had and in part still has a real sense of community. It had and still has all of the feature of the smooth-running democracy of the global English-speaking community. And all of these English-speaking communities were racist to some degree, varying mostly on the basis of how many non-whites they co-existed with and whether they were part of a secure global empire, as they were in the West Indies.

Lynching – mob action – is also very much part of the tradition. Not originally racial and never exclusively anti-black, it served as a useful underside to the fine words of official politics. 'Lynch Law' was a term that evolved from the very rough and biased system of punishments applied during the break-down of regular law during the American War of In-

dependence. The most likely origin is the work of Charles Lynch, a Virginia planter and Quaker of Irish origin. But the idea was much older, mob action on a vaguely legal basis. And it worked only for as long as most people went along with it, failed to challenge it even when they took no part in it.

Hence *Strange Fruit*. It's worth quoting the song in full:

“Southern trees bear strange fruit, / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, / Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

“Pastoral scene of the gallant South, / The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth, / Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh, / Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!

“Here is fruit for the crows to pluck, / For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck, / For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop, / Here is a strange and bitter crop.”

Racist democracy in the USA was very successful and very democratic within its defined limits. Left alone, it might still be around today, might have propagated itself into an indefinite future. It was broken up by elite action, judges putting a set of absurd interpretations on the constitution as part of the price the USA paid to become global superpower.

The former racist democracy was not at all the same as the Tea Party movement, though strong covert racism has certainly played a part in the Tea Party's rise. But the Tea Party movement is not acting in its own interest, it is manipulated by the rich and foolish and used to let the US 'overclass' accumulate even more wealth. The Tea Party movement is a movement fit for chimps.

One must regretfully reject the hopeful populist notion that 'the people' would choose a good system once they were educated and free to choose. They don't – and in much of the USA and some parts of Britain, they even take a pride in not being educated. The former racist democracy of the US South was highly effective for what I'd view as bad ends, what most people nowadays would

view as bad ends. The current Tea Party movement has been highly effective in electing Republicans but is actively undermining the social order that it thinks it is defending.

#### Remembering Abraham Lincoln

In the US Civil War, the North largely stood for a purer form of White Racism than the South. The South had become dependent on black slave labour for its cash crops, the core of its economy. The North largely managed with free white labour, and found the expansion of slavery unacceptable. But if blacks were not to be slaves, what should they be? A few radicals started out with the belief that they should be equal citizens, or at least theoretically equal. A rather larger number just wanted to be rid of them, and Lincoln was one of them.

“A new book on the celebrated US president and hero of the anti-slavery movement, who was born 202 years ago on Saturday, argues that he went on supporting the highly controversial policy of colonisation.

“It was favoured by US politicians who did not believe free black people should live among white Americans, and had been backed by prominent abolitionists like Henry Clay as far back as 1816.

“Mr Lincoln also favoured the idea. But he was believed to have denounced it after signing the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed of most of America's four million slaves, in January 1863.

“The notion that he came to regard it as unacceptable contributed to the legend of the 16th president, who is frequently voted America's greatest, and is held by some to have left an impeccable record.

“Yet Phillip Magness and Sebastian Page, the authors of *Colonisation After Emancipation*, discovered documents in the National Archives in Kew and in the US that will significantly alter his legacy.

“They found an order from Mr Lin-

coln in June 1863 authorising a British colonial agent, John Hodge, to recruit freed slaves to be sent to colonies in what are now the countries of Guyana and Belize.” [B]

#### The Wealth and Misery of Nations

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is a much more subversive than the *Communist Manifesto* or *Das Capital*. A serious right-winger could accept Marx's writings as a description of reality and then look at how to reach some other end. But anyone who accepts Smith's work as a description of reality is on the road to ruin.

Marx correctly identified capitalism as an erosive force that would bust the conditions of its own existence. Successful conservatives have been those who accepted this much as true. It is anyway part of traditional wisdom – material wealth was socially corrosive, Marx's contribution was to accept that as true and to suggest that something better might come out of the corrosion. Successful conservatives saw the same and tried to save what they cherished.

When I speak of successful conservatives, I mean successful in actually having a conservative effect, not in winning elections and holding office on a nihilist populist program. Traditional values eroded fast under Thatcher and Reagan, but they managed to shift the blame. But brilliance in shifting the blame is of little use if you are really concerned with outcomes.

What was Adam Smith's own motivation? He had a Deist agenda, believing in some sort of distant rationalist God but rejecting the Christian notion. He was careful in his published works, but from his surviving letters we know that he disliked Christianity in all its forms, and also had a contempt for it. Yet he also approved of gentry rule, which was actually the first casualty of the new economic forces. He was treated as a trusted insider and advisor by the British politicians who provoked the American War of Independence. In short, his insights were incomplete and his reassurances false.

Smith and others have justified it as economic freedom. But since all of us live within a single economy – independent small-scale production has long been undermined by the cheapness of factory goods – freedom for a few rich people and a few more ambitious rising people is at the expense of everyone else.

### Why China Works

With the turmoil in the Arab World, there was a brief attempt to get something going in China. But the authorities were ready and it got nowhere:

“Police in China showed up in force in several major cities after an online call for a ‘jasmine revolution’.

“Calls for people to protest and shout ‘we want food, we want work, we want housing, we want fairness’, were circulated on Chinese microblog sites.

“The message was first posted on a US-based Chinese-language website.

“Several rights activists were detained beforehand and three people were arrested in Shanghai, but the call for mass protests was not well answered.

“Reports from Shanghai and Beijing said there appeared to be many onlookers curious about the presence of so many police and journalists at the proposed protest sites, in busy city-centre shopping areas.

“Police in the two cities dispersed small crowds who had gathered. There were no reports of protests in 11 other cities where people were urged to gather on Sunday.” [C]

There is not so far the basis for mass discontent. Wages are rising and there is actually a shortage of workers in some parts of the country:

“On one of the busiest recruiting days of the year, Yang Guowei of New Happiness Hair Accessory Company sits slumped behind a small table, one of many set up at a labour exchange in Yiwu, a city in China’s eastern province of Zhejiang.

“Mr Yang is trying to recruit migrant workers as the Chinese New Year holidays wind down. He is offering a monthly salary of Rmb1800-Rmb3000 (\$274-\$456), and looking to hire 10 workers to make rhinestone-embellished hair baubles, but has had no takers in spite of offering wages 30 per cent higher than last year.

“‘I have been here for four days and I haven’t found anyone yet,’ Mr Yang says.

“Nearby, Langsha Knitting, one of the world’s largest sock producers which makes 1m pairs of socks a day, is having an easier time. Its human resources manager, Wang Lai, reports that he has signed up nearly all the 2,000 workers he needs.

“Labour shortages for manufacturing workers have dominated headlines in the Chinese media as migrant workers return from their holidays, but some employers are proving more able to hire workers than others.

“While smaller factories struggle with a nationwide tightening in the labour market, larger firms that offer better wages and benefits – those that are more likely to have HR managers – are able to recruit the staff they need.

“Across the country, local governments have been raising the minimum wage. Next month, Guangdong province, home to a large share of China’s manufacturing, will raise the minimum wage by 18 per cent.

“In Dongguan, a city in the province that is home to many of China’s light manufacturing factories, employers are promising an annual bonus, annual leave, and even rewards on their birthdays in a bid to sign up workers.

“‘Workers are God now,’ complains Mr Yang.

“His hyperbole underlines an important demographic shift. China’s once endless supply of workers is looking less infinite. The cohort of those entering the workforce, defined in China as those between 15 and 24 years old, peaked in 2005 at 227m and is expected to fall to 150m by 2024...

“Most companies are unlikely to shift manufacturing operations in China to countries like India or Bangladesh.

“Dragonomics, a research consultancy, calculates that labour productivity in China grew by 13 per cent annually in apparel manufacturing between 2003 and 2010, offsetting most of the increase in wages. China’s rate of labour productivity growth comfortably outstrips that of Brazil, Vietnam, Indonesia and Turkey, it says.

“Moreover, for industries such as the assembly of electronic components, efficient and tightly knit supply chains passing products from factories in Japan or Taiwan to the Pearl River Delta for labour-intensive work make it difficult to move manufacturing facilities elsewhere.

“And behind the headlines about China’s exchange rate lurks a more lethal secret. China’s infrastructure is on a par with South Korea, according to the World Bank. Dragonomics says that means China combines ‘Third World wages with First World infrastructure.’ [D]

“Rising labour costs in China are not a new phenomenon. Research by the International Labour Organisation suggests that Chinese wages have been outpacing the rest of Asia for at least a decade.

“Chinese workers received real wage rises averaging 12.6 per cent a year from 2000 to 2009, compared with 1.5 per cent in Indonesia and zero in Thailand, according to the ILO.

“At about \$400 a month, Chinese workers are now three times more expensive than their Indonesian counterparts, and five times as costly as in Vietnam, although they remain considerably cheaper than in Taiwan and Malaysia.

“However, that simple calculation takes no account of changes in relative productivity. Stephen Roach, chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia, says World Bank data indicate productivity growth in Chinese manufacturing of 10 to 15 per cent a year since 1990.

“That averages out at close to the same level as annual real wage increases over the last decade, suggesting unit la-



bour costs may have risen very little, if at all.

“Accenture, the global management consultancy, concluded in a report published on Monday that a minimum wage rise of 30 per cent would cut margins by just 1 to 5 per cent for companies with a large Chinese manufacturing base.

“Noticeably, much of the discussion about production shifts relates to labour-intensive, low-margin sectors such as footwear and textiles, which have been relocating for years to Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia and elsewhere.

“There is little talk, however, of shifting more complex manufacturing such as silicon chips and flat panel screens, for which labour makes up as little as 2-3 per cent of total costs.

“Intel, the US chipmaker, recently opened a \$1bn plant in Vietnam, and Hon Hai and Compal, the Taiwanese equipment manufacturers, have also set up assembly plants there.

“However, manufacturing experts doubt that many high-tech companies are planning to abandon China – not least because many rely on suppliers who have co-located in southern China’s vast technology clusters specifically to be near their customers.” [E]

China has also learned from the Soviet Union and refused to reject its own past. Chairman Mao is on all the banknotes: back in 1997 he was merely first of four ‘first generation’ leaders on one of the banknotes. And a report of a new official history suggests that his position will stay unchallenged:

“*The History of the Communist Party of China (Part 2)*, a book about the history of the Communist Party of China (CPC) from the founding of the People’s Republic of China (1949) to the 1978 Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CPC, was published last month after 16 years of research by the Beijing-based Party History Research Center of the CPC Central Committee.” [F]

I don’t know what it actually says in detail, or whether it will ever appear in

English. But it certainly doesn’t sound as if Mao is being blamed for anything. And since the current leadership are pursuing a version of the politics Mao created, it would make no sense for them to do so.

#### Climate Change

The weather is always a series of unusual events. But recently it has been much more unusual than the norm.

Predictions for ‘global warming’ have always been a general trend. Models of future weather show an overall warming, but also some local cooling. The real weather is being ever less predictable:

“Freezing weather and snow have paralysed much of northern Mexico, which is experiencing its lowest temperatures in more than 50 years.

“Thousands of homes have been left without electricity and water, and schools and factories have been closed.

“At least six people are reported to have died from the cold.

“Among the worst-hit cities has been Ciudad Juarez, which is already suffering the worst violence in Mexico’s drugs war.

“Temperatures in the border city have dropped as low as -18C (0F).” [G]

“Last year’s drought in the Amazon raises concerns about the region’s capacity to continue absorbing carbon dioxide, scientists say.

“Researchers report in the journal *Science* that the 2010 drought was more widespread than in 2005 - the last big one - with more trees probably lost.

“The 2005 drought had been termed a ‘one in a century’ event.

“In drought years, the Amazon region changes from being a net absorber of carbon dioxide into a net emitter...

“The 2010 drought saw the Amazon

River at its lowest levels for half a century, with several tributaries completely dry and more than 20 municipalities declaring a state of emergency.

“Research leader Simon Lewis, from the University of Leeds, is the scientist who gained an apology from the *Sunday Times* newspaper last year over the so-called ‘AmazonGate’ affair.

“‘It’s difficult to detect patterns from just two observed droughts, but to have them close together is concerning,’ he told BBC News.

“Both droughts were associated with unusually warm seas in the Atlantic Ocean off the Brazilian coast.

“‘If that turns out to be driven by escalating greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere, it could imply that we’ll see more drought years in the near future,’ said Dr Lewis.

“‘If events like this do happen more often, the Amazon rainforest would reach a point where it shifts from being a valuable carbon sink slowing climate change to a major source of greenhouse gases.’

“Some computer models of climate change - in particular, the one developed at the UK’s Hadley Centre - project more droughts across the region as the planet warms, and a diminishing capacity to absorb CO2.” [H]

“The heaviest snowfall in more than a century on South Korea’s east coast is causing widespread chaos.

“Hundreds of houses have collapsed under the weight of the snow. One newspaper described it as a snow bomb.

“The South Korean government has deployed 12,000 soldiers to rescue stranded residents.

“The worst weather has been in Gangwon province. Weather experts say there will be more snowfall in the area in the coming hours.

“‘I am 83 years old. It’s the heaviest snow in my life. I am really grateful for the soldiers’ help,’ said Park Chae-ran.

“The BBC’s Nick Ravenscroft in Seoul says that although winters are colder than anywhere else at its latitude, with frequent frost and snow, this year has been different.

“January was the coldest since the 1960s.

“In Gangwon on the eastern coast, one city recorded 80cm (2.6 feet) of snow in a single day - the heaviest fall in 24 hours since records began there back in 1911...

“The Han River in the capital, Seoul, iced over for the first time in years - but the latest snowfalls have left the capital unaffected so far.” [J]

“Global warming made the floods that devastated England and Wales in the autumn of 2000, costing £3.5bn, between two and three times more likely to happen, new research has found. This is the first time scientists have quantified the role of human-induced climate change in increasing the risk of a serious flood and represents a major development in climate science.

“‘It shows climate change is acting here and now to load the dice towards more extreme weather,’ said Myles Allen of Oxford University, who led the work, which he started after his own home was nearly flooded in 2000. It will also have wider consequences, say experts, by making lawsuits for compensation against energy companies more likely to succeed.

“It may also have billion-dollar consequences by determining which countries benefit from the future \$100bn-a-year UN adaptation fund which aims to build resilience against the impacts of climate change.

“‘This is ground-breaking work,’ said Professor Bob Watson, chief scientific adviser to the department of the environment and former chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Until now, he said, scientists could state that global warming was expected to cause more extreme weather, but not that it was to blame for any specific event. ‘The research shows human-induced climate change is not an issue

for the next decades or century: it is an issue...

“Between September and November 2000, over 500mm of rain fell in the UK, the wettest autumn since records began in 1766. More than 10,000 homes were flooded and £3.5bn of insurance claims were made. After Allen’s home was nearly flooded, his colleague, Pardeep Pall, suggested using modelling to determine the role of global warming, but the amount of computing time required was formidable. To solve that problem, Allen used his Climateprediction.net project, through which members of the public have donated over one billion hours of PC time to running models.” [L]

In Britain, December’s abnormal cold has been followed by a typically wet English winter, at least in the south. But who knows what next? Globally, there have been crop failures that helped fuel the riots and revolutions in the Arab world.

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# Parliament Notes

## Dick Barry

### Bank And Pile

Chancellor George Osborne was asked by Labour's Alan Johnson on 11 January to make a statement on bankers' bonuses. Osborne opened with the following: "We inherited from the previous Government a failed system of banking regulation and a situation where billions of pounds had been provided to bail out bankers with nothing demanded in return. It was a something-for-nothing deal that rightly left the British people seething with anger, and the British people and this Government will not accept extravagant bonuses this year without a change in behaviour." Naturally, Osborne failed to remind MPs that in February 2008 he opposed the temporary nationalisation of Northern Rock, which his coalition partner Vince Cable believed represented the best deal for the taxpayer, and which most commentators welcomed. Nor did he say that in November 2009 he criticised the "sheer size" of the bailout of Lloyds and RBS, but not the bailout itself. And lest we forget, a year later in November 2010, shortly after he announced deep cuts in UK public services, he justified a £7billion loan to Ireland as it was, "a major trading partner with a banking sector 'interconnected' with the UK's."

Outlining his objectives for the banking sector Osborne told MPs, "This is what a new settlement with the banks should look like: they should lend to the British economy; contribute to the British Exchequer; provide jobs for British people; be responsible on pay and bonuses; and make sure that Britain is a world centre of a properly regulated and internationally competitive financial services industry. If the banks cannot commit to that, I have made it clear to them that nothing is off the table." Responding to MPs' questions later in the debate he said, "Of course I understand and share the feeling of anger that if we do not get

a change of behaviour, these bonuses could be paid, and that is what we are addressing", but four weeks later it was reported (The Independent, 10 February) that bonuses of around £7billion would be paid to senior banking staff. Lloyds Banking Group, which had a cash injection of £22billion of taxpayers' money and £260billion assets protected, last year paid its Chief Executive a salary of £1million plus and a bonus of £1.45million. While RBS, which had a £54billion cash injection and £325billion assets protected, paid its Chief Executive a bonus and salary of £2.04million.

Osborne neatly sidestepped embarrassing questions put to him by Labour MPs. Streatham's MP Chuka Umunna said, "The Chancellor has given the impression that the new bonus restrictions have been implemented at his instigation, whereas, of course, they have been introduced to ensure compliance with EU rules, particularly those of the capital requirements directive and the Committee of European Banking Supervisors. The directive was opposed by Conservative MEPs." Osborne ignored the point about EU rules and claimed that "we have introduced in this country the toughest financial code on bonuses of any financial centre of any size in the world." But if it is as tough as Osborne claims, why has there been no word of protest from the banks other than a tiny squeak from HSBC? And Edinburgh East's MP Sheila Gilmore asked, "When the Chancellor's colleague the Prime Minister said in 2009 that no bank with significant taxpayer support should pay bonuses of more than £2,000, was he jumping on an Opposition bandwagon or was it a serious policy initiative? If it was the latter, what has changed since 2009?" Osborne also ignored this point. What has happened, of course, is that Cameron and Osborne are now in government and the bankers are their friends and paymasters.

The Independent on 10 February, reported that the City of London institutions provide half of the Conservative Party's income. The paper said that, "Since David Cameron became Conservative leader in December 2005, the amount of money the City has given the Tories has gone up fourfold, to £11.4million a year. Over those four years the City has donated more than £42million to the party." Donors included bankers, financiers, and hedge fund managers. The top ten donations range from £465,000 to £4.031million. The analysis of Conservative Party donors was carried out by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. The Independent was quick to point out that, "There is no evidence to suggest that any individual has used their influence to demand a relaxed approach to bank, hedge fund or private equity remuneration, tax or leverage limits." And why should they? The extra £800million bank levy, on top of the £1.7billion already announced, will make no more than the tiniest dent in bank profits that run into many billions. And the bank levy will be clawed back through a reduction in Corporation Tax from 28% to 24% over the next four years. To sweeten the pill further, Osborne has assured the banks that no additional levy will be imposed in future.

City estimates show that the top five banks are set to earn between them at least £51.7billion in 2011; around £1billion a week. No wonder they are said to be pretty relaxed about a Government levy of £2.5billion. This year's bumper profits follows loss years in 2008 and 2009. RBS, for example, made a loss of £3.6billion in 2009, yet still managed to pay out a bonus of £1.3billion. In the three years 2005 to 2007, RBS churned out total profits of £27.5billion, yet still required a bailout in 2008/09 of £54billion. The banks, including RBS, have graciously agreed to lend, at commercial rates of course, £190billion to British business,

including £76billion to small businesses. They have also agreed to advance £200million to the "Big Society Bank", again at commercial rates. The Government hope that this will help to offset the huge cuts to charities and in local services and enable some of them to continue to operate. It is intended to stimulate what is called 'social enterprise'. The final word on bonuses must go to Lord Oakeshott who, on scrutinising the small print in the deal with the banks, resigned as a Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman. Oakeshott said, "They've done the best they can, but I'm afraid when you look at the small print, it's not really as good as it looks...A multi-million pound bonus is still a multi-million pound bonus. If this is robust action on bank bonuses, my name is Bob Diamond and I'm going to claim my £9million bonus next week."

### Nice Pay If You Can Get It

On 2 February Labour's Tony Lloyd (Manchester Central) begged to move, "That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the establishment of a High Pay Commission; and for connected purposes." Setting out his reasons for the Bill he said, "Top pay is driven by the bonus culture and by the capacity of remuneration committees - the old pals' act - to operate on the basis of 'I'll scratch your pay packet as long as you scratch mine'. That is wrong and unacceptable. If we look at the evidence on pay, we see that the bonus culture has grown massively in the years since 1997. That is not just in banking, because the Prime Minister is right that we should not scapegoat banking. We should examine the top pay across the whole of our society. In 1997, bonuses across the City were estimated at £1.5billion, not a small sum. By 2006, that figure had grown to £8.8billion. It dropped a little at the bottom of the financial crisis, to £3.6billion in 2008, but it is believed that this year bonuses will be back up to £7billion. The Government, frankly, have not dealt with the problem."

So much for bonuses, but what about the salaries of top executives?

Lloyd had this to say: "If we examine the pay of chief executives across British industry, we see that the average pay of chief executives in FTSE 100 companies was something in the order of 47 times that of the average worker in those companies in 2000. That difference had grown to 88 times in 2009, so it has doubled in real terms from already colossal levels. In fact the average executive is now paid 200 times the minimum wage. In a society such as ours, fairness means that if the poor and those on squeezed middle incomes are playing their part in the Government's austerity programme, so should those at the very top." Of course Lloyd didn't say that it was a Labour Government that presided over the massive hike in top pay. And not only did Labour do nothing about it, some Ministers actually approved of it. Wasn't it Peter Mandelson who said that as long as the poor were better off, Labour "could be intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich?" The Bill will be read a Second time on 18 March, when one expects Business Secretary Vince Cable, who advocated a High Pay Commission in opposition, to explain why he has changed his mind.

### The Income Gap

A question relating to weekly average incomes, from Labour's Michael Meacher to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 14 February, revealed the extent to which the gap between those in the bottom and top decile income groups had grown over the twenty year period, from 1988-89 to 2008-09. The figures are for the whole of the UK and are calculated at current prices, both before and after housing costs are taken into account.

In 1988-89 the median weekly disposable household income, before housing costs, in the bottom decile income group, was £67. By 2008-09, this had risen to £151, an increase of 125%. Whereas in 1988-89, the median weekly disposable household income in the top decile income group was £398. By 2008-09, this had risen to £1,072, an increase of 169%. However, when housing costs are taken into account

the percentage difference in disposable income reaches alarming proportions. The median disposable income, after housing costs, in the bottom decile income group in 1988-89, was £51. This rose to £84 by 2008-09, an increase of 64.7%. But in the top decile income group, median weekly disposable income, over the same period, rose by 174%, from £350 to £960.

Interestingly, over the seven years of the Labour government, between 2002-03 to 2008-09, the median weekly disposable household income, after housing costs, in the bottom decile income group, actually fell, from £87 to £84. On the other hand, the median weekly disposable household income in the top decile income group, rose from £752 to £960. Over the same period, the median weekly disposable household income, before housing costs, in the bottom decile income group rose from £131 to £151, an increase of just £20. But in the top decile income group, median weekly disposable household income increased from £839 to £1,072; that is by £233, more than ten times the increase in the bottom decile income group.

### Cameron's Take On Terrorism

David Cameron began his speech to the Munich Security Conference on 5 February saying he wanted to focus on terrorism, then spent the rest of it attacking Islamic extremism, equating extreme religious views held by young Muslim men, with acts of terrorism. But first he denied that Britain was retreating from what he termed "an activist role in the world." He told delegates, "Yes, we are dealing with Britain's budget deficit, but we are also making sure our defences are strong. Britain will continue to meet the NATO 2% target for defence spending. We still have the fourth largest military defence budget in the world. At the same time, we are putting that money to better use, focusing on conflict prevention and building a much more flexible army. That is not retreat, it is hard headed."

Conflict prevention is a term used to disguise the military invasion of

other countries. For example, it is currently used to describe Britain's involvement in Afghanistan. In fact Cameron more or less admitted this when he said, "Every decision we take has three aims in mind. First, to continue to support the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Second, to reinforce our actual military capability.... Third, we want to make sure that Britain is protected from the new and various threats that we face. That is why we are investing in a national cyber security programme....and we are sharpening our readiness to act on counter-proliferation." To describe the invasion of Afghanistan as a "mission" makes it appear as if NATO troops, mostly American and British, went there with goody bags and good-will messages from Western leaders. Rather than to search out Osama Bin Laden and to wage war on the Taliban, which has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, cynically referred to as "collateral damage."

Afghanistan is not a conflict prevention zone. According to Cameron and his immediate predecessors it is the source of global terrorism, the breeding ground of Al'Qaeda. And this justifies a British military presence there. But if Cameron believes this, why did he tell the Conference that, "We should acknowledge that this threat comes in Europe overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam." And that, "We have got to get to the root of the problem and we need to be absolutely clear on where the origins of where these terrorist attacks lie. That is the existence of an ideology, Islamist extremism."

Here we get to the nub of the problem. Cameron insisted throughout his speech that he was attacking Islamic extremism, not the religion of Islam; that he was criticising a political ideology, not a religious belief. However, his choice of words and his constant association of Islam with extremism suggested otherwise. Here is how he saw the difference: "Islamist extremism is a political ideology supported by a minority. At the furthest end are those who back terrorism to promote

their ultimate goal: an entire Islamist realm, governed by an interpretation of Sharia. Move along the spectrum, and you find people who may reject violence, but who accept various parts of the extremist world view, including real hostility towards Western democracy and liberal values.. It is vital that we make this distinction between religion on the one hand, and political ideology on the other. Time and again, people equate the two. They think whether someone is an extremist is dependent on how much they observe their religion."

It is difficult to know what to make of all this. It is Cameron himself who equates what he calls "Islamist extremism" with the religion of Islam. But he says that "the ideology of extremism is the problem; Islam emphatically is not", as if it is pure politics with no religious base. And he believes that the protests in Egypt and Cairo are proof that the West and Islam can live together comfortably, even though he slates Islam for producing dangerous extremists. Rejecting those who argue we should cut ourselves off from Islam he said, "If they want an example of how Western values and Islam can be entirely compatible, they should look at what's happened in the past few weeks on the streets of Tunis and Cairo: hundreds of thousands of people demanding the universal right to free elections and democracy." So, according to Cameron the protestors, who were a mix of Christians and Muslims, showed that "Western values and Islam can be entirely compatible", because they were "demanding the universal right to free elections and democracy." There is, however, more to it than Cameron ascribes. Most of the protestors were young and jobless and saw no future under Ben-Ali and Mubarak. They were not simply demanding free elections and democracy. And it is doubtful whether they associated what they were demanding with "Western values."

Cameron then turned his attention to "those on the soft left who also ignore this distinction", i.e. between "the ideology of extremism and Islam", and who "lump all Muslims together, compiling a list of grievances, and ar-

gue that if only governments addressed those grievances, the terrorism would stop. So, they point to the poverty that so many Muslims live in and say, 'Get rid of this injustice and terrorism will end'. But this ignores the fact that many of those found guilty of terrorist offences in the UK and elsewhere have been graduates and often middle class. They point to grievances about Western foreign policy and say, 'Stop riding roughshod over Muslim countries and the terrorism will end'. But there are many people, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who are angry about Western foreign policy, but who don't resort to acts of terrorism. They also point to the profusion of unelected leaders across the Middle East and say, 'Stop propping these people up and you will stop creating the conditions for extremism to flourish'. But this raises the question: if it's lack of democracy that is the problem, why are there so many extremists in free and open societies?"

There are so many Aunt Sallys in the above, it is difficult to know where to begin, but let's start with Cameron's line on propping up dictators across the Middle East. Within weeks of dismissing this as a reason for terrorism, and a matter of days after the Government revoked some licences for arms exports to Bahrain and Libya, he was in the Arabian gulf with a trade delegation helping to promote the sale of British arms. And while he was there he told Egyptian protestors how much he supported what they were doing. The official line on arms sales is that the Government will only sell arms and other military equipment on condition that they are not used for internal repression. But what other use is there for the crowd control equipment, part of the business of arms sales, Britain has sold to these despotic regimes?

Cameron also refuses to accept that British involvement in the military invasions of Muslim countries creates terrorists. And while admitting that terrorist attacks have been "carried out by our own citizens", he ignores the fact that those responsible for the 7/7 bombings in London said it was Britain's foreign policy that

made them terrorists. But this thought is too much for Cameron to bear. And so, pouring confusion upon confusion he said, "Even if we sorted out all the problems that I have mentioned, there would still be terrorism. I believe the root lies in the existence of extremist ideology. I would argue an important reason so many young Muslims are drawn to it comes down to a question of identity."

According to Cameron therefore, none of the above reasons - propping up dictators, invading Muslim countries, maintaining military bases in the Middle East, the dire poverty of many British Muslims - have any connection with terrorism. The extremist ideology to which he constantly refers is clearly the result of a confused identity. Young Muslims are disorientated; confused as to who they are. And if only we could inculcate them with British values, whatever they are, they would renounce extremism and become like us. But then Cameron implies it's all our fault: "In the UK, some young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practised at home by their parents, whose customs can seem staid when transplanted to Western countries. But these young men also find it hard to identify with Britain too, because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multi-culturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values."

As far as one can make out it sounds as if Cameron is asking British Muslims, particularly young British Muslims, to give up their culture and religion and adopt the culture and religion of the British. Muslims, and presumably other religious groups (including Orthodox Jews?), must stop living separate lives. One way to do this would be to halt the state funding of faith schools, but Cameron and Grove are actively promoting them. And if young Muslims are to

integrate into the British way of life, does it mean them joining their peers on weekend alcoholic binges? It's not so long ago that young Muslim males were castigated by the tabloid press for grooming young British girls for sex. But was this not an example of adopting British ways? Weren't they simply emulating young British white males who've run this particular sex trade for as long as one can remember?

In order to defeat extremism Cameron believes "we must build stronger societies and stronger identities at home." "Frankly", he said, "we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more muscular liberalism. A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will just leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values. But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and actively promotes them." A bit like Islamic countries then? This is the part of Cameron's speech that is the most worrying. Instead of leaving us alone to live our lives, as long as we obey the law, he wants not only to tell us how we should behave, he also is determined that we will do so to satisfy his vision of a muscular liberal society.

### **Votes For Prisoners? Not In Our Name!**

Tory Europhobes voted in strength on 10 February to support a motion upholding British law which denies prisoners the right to vote, "except those imprisoned for contempt, default or on remand." The debate on the motion was held as a result of "the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights in *Hirst v the United Kingdom* in which it held that there had been no substantive debate by members of the legislature on the continuing justification for maintaining a general restriction on the right of prisoners to vote." Members of the Government were allowed a free vote, while Government (Cabinet) Ministers abstained. The motion was supported by 234 votes to 22. Of the 22 MPs who voted against, there were 9 Liberal Democrat, 7 Labour, 3 Plaid Cymru, 1 Conservative, 1

Green Party and 1 Independent.

The seven Labour MPs who voted against the motion were: Barry Gardiner (Brent North), Kate Green (Stretford & Urmston), Glenda Jackson (Hampstead & Kilburn), Andrew Love (Edmonton), Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East), John McDonnell (Hayes & Harlington), and Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East). Sir Peter Bottomley (Woolwich East), was the only Conservative member to vote against the motion. Rotherham's Labour MP Denis MacShane, who spoke against the motion, did not vote. Jeremy Corbyn (Labour) and Lorely Burt (Lib. Dem.) acted as tellers for the Noes. Fifty two Labour and four Liberal Democrat MPs supported the motion. The fifty two Labour supporters included ten from Scotland, nine from the North East of England, eight from the North West, eight from London and seven from the Midlands, among whom was Denis Skinner, MP for Bolsover.

Much of the argument proffered by Conservative supporters of the motion focused on whether the UK Parliament or an outside body, such as the European Court of Human Rights, should determine British law. They also appeared to justify their stance by suggesting that, because they had not encountered any demand for a vote by prisoners themselves, they should continue to be denied that right. Some even went so far as to argue that the franchise was a privilege, not a right. Bernard Jenkin (Harwich & North Essex) referred to "that so-called right", and David Davis, the mover of the motion, said, "It would be quite interesting to see how many prisoners have ever voted, let alone how many voted at every election in the run-up to their incarceration." A test which, if generally applied to determine who should be allowed to vote, would result in a very low turn-out at elections.

Labour's Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) dealt with the question of where sovereignty lies with a neat put down of those who claim it always resides in Parliament. He said, "Those who say that our House of Commons is a completely sovereign body and can do whatever it wishes are frankly

wrong. Every time a country signs up to treaty in any sphere of influence or activity, it removes some of its own sovereignty. That is the nature of international law and of signing up to treaties. Let us get real. We are part of the Council of Europe and the European convention on human rights, and that has made a big difference to the lives of an awful lot of people across Europe and in this country. We should approach this issue with a degree of rationality and sense about what is meant by human rights." And no one, not even the Attorney General, Dominic Grieve, challenged him on this. Indeed, earlier in the debate, the Attorney General told MPs that, "The rule that has been long established in this country is that once a treaty has been ratified by the United Kingdom Government through that process, the Government and their Ministers consider themselves to be bound by its terms."

The Attorney General also dealt with the issue of the European Court of Human Rights' ruling on *Hirst v the United Kingdom*. He said, "The Court took the view that it was well established that article 3 of protocol 1 to the convention, to which we are signatories, guarantees individuals the right to vote and to stand for election. The Court considered that to be a right and not a privilege..... The Court's reasoning, with which I appreciate many hon. Members disagree, is that, in view of the fact that the convention does not allow prisoners to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment or to have restrictions placed on their freedom of expression or freedom to practise their religion, a restriction on their right to vote should have the aim only of 'preventing crime by sanctioning the conduct of convicted prisoners, and enhancing civic responsibility for the rule of law.' " And he stressed that, "The Court also recognised that participating states had a wide margin of appreciation in deciding on such restrictions, but that was not an unlimited discretion. It felt that the restriction should be proportionate and - this is the nub of the issue - that section 3 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 imposed a blanket ban, which

was seen as being so discriminate as to fall outside the acceptable margin of appreciation."

Speaking in support of the motion, Labour's Jack Straw (Blackburn) told MPs that, "Our motion has been carefully drafted. It is respectful of the Court and our treaty obligations, but is intended to answer one of the three objections that the majority of the Court in Strasbourg had to our so-called blanket ban - that there had not been any substantive debate on the matter in the light of modern penal policy and human rights standards." And he acknowledged that, "Since the Strangeways riots of 20 years ago and the Woolf report that followed it, there has been a quiet revolution in penal policy. As the chief inspectors of prisons have recognised, conditions for prisoners have been transformed. Every effort is rightly made to treat prisoners with dignity, and to prepare them better for the outside world..... However, the exact mix must be for domestic Parliaments to decide...The ban on prisoner votes is part of the mix of our penal policy. It is the subject of wide consent among the public, and at least of acquiescence by the vast majority of prisoners, as the silence of our postbags makes clear." (my emphasis).

A prisoners' right to vote is severely restricted in the UK, but in which countries does the right exist? Labour's Denis Mac Shane asked, "What are the facts? Different democracies in Europe take different approaches. In January, I was with Conservative colleagues at a meeting with Swiss parliamentarians, and in non-EU Switzerland, all prisoners have had the right to vote for 40 years. That is also the case in Conservative-governed Sweden, Denmark and other EU countries. Britain stands with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and - let us not forget - Russia in banning the right for prisoners to vote. Since Wikileaks told us that the Mafia runs politics in Russia, it has been clear that criminals there get elected rather than end up in prison..... In other EU countries, prisoners can vote according to the sentence. In France, a judge adds a loss of civic rights to sentences

for serious crimes, which is a compromise that satisfies the European Court of Human Rights and could easily be introduced here."

A number of the motion's supporters called in aid their constituents, most of whom they claimed agreed that prisoners should not have the vote. Ignoring the wise counsel of the great conservative philosopher Edmund Burke, Karen Bradley, newly elected Conservative MP for Staffordshire Moorlands, said, "I was elected to be the voice of my constituents in this place, and many of them have contacted me to express their concern about the matter. They are firmly, to a man and a woman, against any move to give votes to prisoners, and I am wholeheartedly in agreement with them." Which is no doubt why she is willing to be the voice of her constituents. But how will she vote when she is not in agreement with them? Or will Karen Bradley simply be a mouth-piece without a mind of her own?

Liberal Democrat member Tom Brake (Carshalton & Wallington) effectively summed up the case for the opponents of the motion when he said, "The case that I am making is based on two simple principles. The first is that when the European Court of Human Rights finds that UK law contravenes the European convention on human rights - in other words, that UK law is unlawful - the UK Government should address that illegality. Once we start picking and choosing the laws we believe should apply and those that we can disregard - the pick-and-mix approach, as the Attorney General put it - where does it end? The Americans know where it ends: in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib..... The second reason why I am speaking in favour of more prisoners being given the right to vote is that it is the appropriate course of action. Prisoners have committed a crime. Their punishment is to lose their liberty. That is fair and just. What is then gained by seeking to inflict civil death on them? In what way does that benefit the victim? Does it increase the chances of rehabilitation? What is the logic behind the ban? We do not remove prisoners' access to health care, nor do we stop them prac-

tising their religion, so why should we impose a blanket ban on prisoners' right to vote? Surely we have moved on from the Victorian notion of civil death." On reading the debate at this point, one could almost hear a deathly hush descend upon the House.

### The Alternative Vote: A Question Of Percentages

The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill received royal assent on 16 February, but not without a long, occasionally acrimonious, passage through the Commons and Lords. Labour Lords, with the support of the odd independent, staged a series of filibustering tactics to prevent the Bill becoming law. The most contentious of the Lords' amendments, which was debated in the Commons on 15 and 16 February, was moved by Labour's Lord Rooker and carried in the Lords by just one vote. It provided that: "If less than 40% of the electorate vote in the referendum, the result shall not be binding." Speaking for the Government on 15 February, Mark Hooper, Cabinet Office Parliamentary Secretary, reminded MPs that they had already rejected a similar amendment tabled on report by Conservative backbencher William Cash, by 549 votes to 31. He argued therefore that any decision on a threshold should be made by the elected Commons and not the unelected Lords.

The debate then focused on whether there should be a threshold and, if so, at what level it should be set. But first, Conservative member Bernard Jenkin threw a spanner in the works when he said, "Here we are looking at a referendum that might introduce a new voting system under which a Member elected to this House will be required to get 50% of the votes cast, yet we cannot even put in a threshold to require a 40% turnout to give credibility to the result of a referendum. What serious constitution around the world does not have some form of threshold and why should we not introduce one in this case?" The Minister disagreed with Jenkin's understanding of the AV system, arguing that, "On the effect of AV, it is not, of course, the case under

our system of optional preferential voting that it is necessarily 50% of the votes cast that counts; rather it is 50% of the vote remaining in the count. If lots of people choose not to accept a preference, AV does not imply that a Member of Parliament must get more than 50% of the vote." And this highlights the absurdity of the AV system. Under it voters are not obliged to cast more than one vote; they can simply vote for the candidate of their choice and no other. If most voters do this the system would not function as it was designed to do.

Having rejected the Rooker amendment by 317 votes to 247 on 15 February, the following day the Commons debated an amendment which stated that the Electoral Commission must publish information about the turnout. The amendment provides that: "Following the referendum, the Electoral Commission must - (a) publish the most accurate estimate that it is reasonably possible to make of the turnout in each of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland." However, rather than debate this amendment MPs, like a dog chewing on a bone, were determined not to let go of the principle of a threshold.

Labour's Chris Bryant, although a supporter of the AV, told the House, "Some think that the threshold would act in a way that other thresholds have acted elsewhere - in other words, that it would be impossible for the Government then to bring forward the alternative vote. That is expressly not what it does and I am afraid that the Minister rather elided his interpretation of the Rooker amendment yesterday evening. It is absolutely clear. As Lord Rooker said in this afternoon's debate in the other place, 'I have said all along that if the turnout was less than 40%, the House could decide to implement AV and I would not argue with that.'" Bryant went on to say, "The amendment that has come from their Lordships would not kill off the decision that might come through if fewer than 40% of voters voted in the referendum in May, it simply means that Parliament would have to take cognisance of the decision, so it would be an advisory referendum rather than an implement-

ing referendum."

Reaffirming current British law a week earlier, that prisoners, with a few exceptions, should be denied the right to vote, a number of MPs said there was no demand from prisoners themselves for the vote. And Labour's David Winnick used the same argument to support his case against a change in the electoral system. He said, "An article in today's Evening Standard by a former editor of The Spectator makes a valid point about how little interest there is in changing the electoral system; there is very little enthusiasm for that. As I asked yesterday, where is the pressure? Where are the letters and e-mails? Where are the people coming to our surgeries and saying, 'This is the most crucial issue of all?'" This a fair point to make, but it should not influence one's position on this, or indeed any other issue.

Winnick's other point was more observant. He said, "It is important to bear in mind the fact that there would have been no possibility of such a referendum if the Conservatives had a working majority; indeed, they would be arguing the opposite of what the Minister was saying." The plain fact is, as the DUP's Dr William McCrea, and other members, pointed out, "The Prime Minister giving his word to the Deputy Prime Minister is one thing; what counts is the Prime Minister's word to the people of this United Kingdom. Our Prime Minister has no appetite or conviction for this legislation at all. This is a grubby deal simply to keep a party happy, and to keep its Back Benchers happy at this time, but on a major constitutional issue such as this, is that the way in which we run our country?" McCrea is right. It is a grubby deal, done to placate a party that won just 57 seats with 23% of the vote under our current electoral system, and which expects to win more under a more proportional system. The Liberal Democrats accuse supporters of the current system, of self interest. But what are the Liberal Democrats, if not self interested?