

FAR RIGHT IN EUROPE

Three interviews with **Glyn Ford MEP** (Labour, South West England and Gibraltar), **Graham Watson MEP** (Liberal Democrat, South West England and Gibraltar) and **Giles Chichester MEP** (Conservative, South West England and Gibraltar).

I) Interview with Glyn Ford MEP, Labour, for South West England

For over two decades Europe has seen a rising tide of racism and xenophobia threatening to engulf its politics. Increasingly since 9/11 this has become particularised in the form of islamophobia, coupled with an ideological anti-Semitism propagated by neo-Nazi parties. Since 1984 the political expression of this social disease has been the growth of neo-fascist and far-right parties. The two have fed off each other. Yet to a degree it has been held in check by the 'historic memory' of the horrors of Hitler's Germany. However, this has begun to change as recent events have triggered the perception that Christendom is at war with the Dar al Islam, allowing far-right parties to claim a popular resonance and to repackage themselves in a way that jettisons much of their historical baggage.

In June this year 732 members of the European Parliament were elected by 350 million voters in what was one of the world's largest ever elections. What was the outcome?

Parties of power were punished across the continent, except the winners were often not their traditional opponents from the left and right, but right populist parties. In these elections, twenty five MEPs from ten neo-Nazi and extreme right wing parties, across seven member states (including three of the recent accession states), were elected to the European Parliament. They were joined by dozens more MEPs who share the rhetoric, if not the underpinning ideology. This threatens to further intensify the discrimination against the 12-14 million Third Country Nationals and the 4 million Black Europeans living in the European Union (EU). who already they face the threat of physical violence, daily discrimination, verbal harassment; a second class status with third-class treatment. Following Europe's enlargement into the Former Soviet Empire the Far Right have new victims in the millions of Roma.

The EU insists on the inclusion of equal rights in the law of all new Member States. Yet its practice is threatened by the seductive appeal of the new right wing parties' innumerate policies on lower taxes and higher public services, whilst their narrow nationalism strikes a chord with areas of the general public drip-fed on a tabloid diet of xenophobia. Before the election the political and media climates were certainly in the new Right's favour. For example, the Belgian *Vlaams Blok*, France's *Front National* (FN), the Italian *Alleanza Nazionale* and the British National Party (BNP) had all performed well at recent local and regional elections, bettering political predictions and in some cases their own expectations. In Europe, the press enjoyed a feeding frenzy with the supposed threat of a torrent of economic immigration as a result of EU enlargement that in reality turned out to be barely a trickle. However, this factoid - something believed, but not actually true - had enabled the far-right and new right to stoke up the public fear and reap the benefits, while minority groups were libelled, assaulted and fearful.

In Britain the result was that the climate created by the tabloid press and the neo-fascist BNP's rhetoric combined to collude with the racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and Little Englanders of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The historical baggage of the BNP and its leadership, with its neo-Nazi connections, was just too heavy to be countenanced by most voters. Instead it was UKIP who stole the BNP's thunder and the Tory's glory. They targeted the tabloids and garnered a support that is reflected in the final vote: the BNP got 4.9% of the national vote while UKIP recorded 16.1% (more than the British Liberal Democrats) and eleven seats. UKIP is packaged in Tory colours, but inside it is a 'BNP-Lite' party with policies on immigrants, Europe and Trade Unions, that are barely distinguishable. As one leading light of UKIP theologially put it at their 2003 Conference, 'a pact with the Trade Unions is a pact with the devil'. The same is true elsewhere.

Across the Channel, Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN was fighting its own internal battle over its leadership succession and direction in the run up to the elections. Le Pen intends the next leader to be his 'right reformist' daughter, Marine, rather than his current 'national revolutionary' deputy Bruno Gollnisch. Marine is willing to dump FN ideology in order to break out from their electoral ghetto and expand beyond the 20% of the French electorate already willing to vote extreme-right.

This year's result was a victory for Le Pen with the FN improving their standing, coming fourth behind the Socialists and the two Conservative parties. Seven FN MEPs were elected compared to five in the previous Parliament, on a reduced number of French seats and with a new less favourable electoral system. In Italy, Gianfranco Fini's *Alleanza Nazionale*, an avowedly neo-fascism party a decade ago, but now a right populist party and a key component of the Government, maintained its strong support, despite the fall in support for Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, while the overtly fascist *Alternativa Sociale* of Alessandra Mussolini (Mussolini's grand-daughter) won just a single seat.

Amongst the new member states Poland saw far-right, ultra-nationalist parties triumph, with the *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (Polish League of Families), *Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc* (Law and Order) and *Samoobrona* (Self Defence) recording worrying high votes. Elsewhere the former Soviet colony countries saw similar, if less spectacular, results with xenophobes outpolling internationalist parties. Yet it was not entirely one-way traffic. In some Member States the populist right were disappointed. Euro-sceptics lost two-thirds of their seats in Denmark and the anti-immigration *Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, which had a desert blowing after the assassination of its leader two years ago, came in a resounding 9th in Holland. In Austria, the extreme-right wing Freedom Party of Jorg Haider crashed from six seats to just one in the European Parliament. In all of these countries mainstream parties have embraced the anti-immigration rhetoric of the new right.

Across the whole of the EU, sceptics and xenophobes dressed in sheep's clothing made ground at the expense of those openly proud right-wing extremists. It was only in Belgium that the still unreconstructed, neo-fascist *Vlaams Blok* continued to advance at the expense of all other parties without publicly diluting its message.

'Fascist-Lite' outpolls fascist right. Yet these new Populist fellow travelling parties are as dangerous, if not more so, as their neo-fascist counterparts. To a degree, the electorate is still inoculated against the political and ideological heirs of Hitler. This is not the case with those who can hide their antecedents through repackaging or re-invention. The less public face the banalisation of racism, the more the growth of race-hate music in the unsavoury shadows of Europe. Bands like 'No Remorse', short for 'No Remorse for the Holocaust', and their ilk produce albums called 'Barbeque in Rostock' which celebrates the petrol bombing of immigrant housing in that German city.

Yet there are countervailing forces. The EU has been trying to create a Europe that embraces the principles of dignity, freedoms, equality, solidarity, citizens' rights, and justice. As part of this, in December 2000, the EU signed a Charter of Fundamental Rights. For the first time in the Union's history, this set out the range of civil, political, economic and social rights both of European citizens and those resident in the EU in a single text. The EU has also played a key role on the International stage. It helped broker a deal, under the auspices of Louis Michel, the new EU Commissioner for Development, at the Third UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001. Despite a US walk out, a final declaration was agreed.

Internally, the EU has tried to isolate the extreme-right. It established the EU Monitoring Centre on Racism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism in Vienna to track their advance and to look at how best to tackle them. Also in 2001, following the formation of an Austrian government coalition that included for the first time the extreme-right Freedom Party, MEPs voted to impose diplomatic sanctions. These were only to be lifted if, following an investigation, it was shown that its new government was not violating the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty article 13 on non-discrimination. The threat was real. Haider, in power in the Province of Carinthia, had demonstrated through word and deed his commitment to exclude those who he considered were 'not proper' Austrians from civil society, with the abolition of all special measures for Austria's indigenous Slovene speaking minority. Twelve months later sanctions were lifted as the independent report showed that the Freedom Party was not being allowed to transpose provincial discrimination onto the national stage.

There have been other attempts to combat the growth of racism. Organisations like the European Network Against Racism which act as a contact point for anti-racism NGO's are funded by the EU. Equally, European legislation means each member state has its own Commission for Racial Equality. However, the influence of these organisations is dependent on political will at Government level.

As post-war generations succeed each other, the lessons of World War Two have slowly slipped into the history books. The forgetting has started. Le Pen intones 'Three million immigrants, three million unemployed, three million immigrants too many,' an echo of the Austrian Nazi slogan of the 1930s; '400,000 Jews, 400,000 unemployed, 400,000 Jews too many'. The question now is whether the emergence of these new right populist parties will legitimise the transformation of a rising racism and xenophobia into a day to day political programme. The creation of such a poisonous environment of hate and despair in Europe's towns and cities will augur ill for the future of Europe.

Currently, there is a racial attack or racial incident every three minutes in the EU. Will the ongoing transformation from fascist right to fascist-lite see that rate rise alongside their continued electoral success? Or will those in Europe increasingly seduced by this New Right finally have the wool pulled from over their eyes and see them for what they really are: narrow vicious nationalists that threaten Europe's standing in an increasingly global world?

Interview with Graham Watson – Liberal Democrat MEP for South West England and Gibraltar

1. How did you become involved in politics?

My political views started to form in the early 1970s. I was opposed to apartheid and to UK tours by all-white South African sports teams. I was influenced by Schumacher's 'Small is beautiful' in my thinking on ecology. I campaigned for a 'Yes' vote in the 1975 EU referendum and in Scotland's 1979 referendum for a Scottish Parliament. My first structured involvement in politics was at university in Edinburgh in 1975.

I lived and worked in France during a gap year between school and university. As a linguist and a trainee interpreter I followed developments on the continent. A spell working in the House of Commons (as bag carrier for my party leader David Steel, 1983-87) convinced me I had no wish to be elected to Westminster. Yet I was working happily (and very profitably) in banking in the Far East when I decided to go for election to the European Parliament. We are motivated by different factors in life. In my case, my father's death at 62 made me think how little time I might have left and concentrated my thinking.

3. What does your typical day involve?

On Monday I get up at 0430 to catch the early flight from Bristol to Brussels. Other days I lie in until 0645 and leave home at 0730. If you can be at your desk by 0745 you can get much more work done. From 0900 it is meetings, meetings – parliamentary committees, meetings with difficult colleagues, receiving foreign visitors, giving interviews like this one – until 1800. In between the meetings I co-ordinate the activities of my staff in preparing speeches etc. I try to go to the gym two evenings a week: on the others the meetings continue until 1930, when there is invariably another type of meeting involving supper and wine. I rarely get back to my Brussels flat before 2230.

4. What was your response to Buttiglione's orthodox Catholic views on homosexuality?

He is entitled to his views and they should not disqualify him from holding office. But at a certain point he decided to become a Catholic martyr. His reaction to criticism sealed his fate, along with the revelation that he moved an amendment during negotiations on the EU Constitution to remove the words 'sexual preference' from the list of characteristics on which there can be no grounds for discrimination.

5. Is it important for you that MEPs' profiles are raised considering little media attention is paid to them in the UK?

As a father I benefit from the low profile of MEPs. My children are both in local state schools and get very little hassle about what I do. For the UK, however, it's very damaging that our MEPs have a much lower profile than those on the continent, since our people understand far less well how the EU works and what decisions the European Parliament takes in their names.

6. How do you think the British public can become more engaged on European issues?

I hope the UK Presidency of the EU (July-Dec this year) and the referendum campaign on the EU Constitution next year will lead to greater public understanding of the issues. But I'm not sure they will. After all, there's no greater loss of sovereignty which a country can suffer than to lose control of its newspapers to people like Rupert Murdoch.

7. What do you consider to be your achievements so far?

A MEP can have real influence on law making and I am tempted to say they are too numerous to list! But my major achievements have been in the field of citizens' rights, including the right of football supporters to buy

tickets for World Cup matches on the open market and the right of access to information about EU government documents. I've also managed to create the largest ever third force in the European Parliament.

8. Do you think Michael Howard's plans to set quotas for immigrants in Britain is compatible with EU membership?

There are no formal EU quotas yet, so technically the answer has to be No. But Michael Howard's whole political philosophy is incompatible with the demands of finding supranational responses to supranational challenges, among which are the major challenges of our age.

9. It is widely assumed that the referendum on the European constitution will get a 'no' vote, what do you think can be done to change this? Do you foresee the UK adopting the constitution?

If a referendum were held today, No. But I am an optimist and a campaigner. Only action by citizens can secure a Yes vote. If your readers would like to help me, they can find me at www.grahamwatsonmep.org.

Interview with Giles Chichester, Conservative MEP for the South West and Gibraltar

1. How did you become involved in politics?

I became interested at school and was strongly motivated by the damage being done Harold Wilson's Labour Governments in the sixties and seventies to be active in the Conservative cause.

2. Why did you decide to become an MEP? Did you have a special interest in Europe beforehand?

I had not succeeded in my ambition to be an MP and then the euro-constituency of Devon announced a vacancy for a Conservative candidate. I would not say I had a special interest but I was of course interested.

3. What does your typical day involve?

Lots of meetings and travel.

4. What was your response to Buttiglione's orthodox Catholic views on homosexuality?

He is fully entitled to his views and I found the hysterical reaction of the left liberal tendency wholly disproportionate and just as intolerant as they profess to believe him to be.

5. Is it important for you that MEPs' profiles are raised considering little media attention is paid to them in the UK?

I'm concerned to do my job. Much of it deals with matters which are complex and probably boring to the media and press so I can understand why we have low profiles. As people realize that the decisions we take affect our everyday life, I believe they will take more interest in our work and less in the sensationalist stories about euro scares and myths as well as our expenses.

6. How do you think the British public can become more engaged on European issues?

I have answered this under question 5.

7. What do you consider to be your achievements so far?

* A first reading adoption of a proposal to continue dual marking in duo decimal (or imperial) and metric units of measurement in 1999

- * Solving a number of individual constituents' problems that were previously unsolvable
- * Rejecting a draft directive on oil stocks as an un-necessary proposal by persuading an absolute majority of 367 MEPs from all parties to vote for my rejection amendment.

8. Do you think Michael Howard's plans to set quotas for immigrants in Britain is compatible with EU membership?

Yes. It was interesting to hear the European Commission tell us about what Blair has apparently given away without anyone realizing. We must take action.

9. It is widely assumed that the referendum on the European constitution will get a 'no' vote, what do you think can be done to change this? Do you foresee the UK adopting the constitution?

We are taking the lines we do on European issues because we believe them to be in the national interest and because we believe in making the EU work better. UKIP has a simplistic and wholly negative policy of withdrawal. The proof of the pudding will be to measure how they do in the General Election, the only one where they have a chance of getting a majority for their policy, that could actually do something, by comparison with the soft option protest vote in the European Elections, which don't make any difference to in or out.

Editors Note:

On Tuesday 30th November 2004 a debate took place between the Colombian Solidarity Campaign and the Colombian Embassy for the first time ever to publicly debate the on going human rights issues in Colombia.

I interviewed Dr Mario Novelli (Researcher, Centre for Studies of Globalisation, Societies and Education – University of Bristol, & a founding member of the Colombian Solidarity Campaign) to ask his opinion about the debate, the motion to remove the sale of Coca Cola on campus passed at the AGM, and to discuss recent developments in Colombia.

How do you feel the debate went?

Since we launched our campaign in 2001 when the Colombian Solidarity Campaign was created, we've had a range of contacts with the Colombian Embassy mainly informal meetings, but that's the first time we've had a public platform. I think for both sides in that debate it was a new experience. Overall I think that we managed to give light to a lot of information, which is often not available certainly not from the Colombian government, related to the human rights violation in the country. Having the chance to do that face to face with representatives of the Colombian government, I think was good for the audience. Whether either side learnt anything new is another matter. At least the audience managed to see both sides of that debate and particularly about the question of state terror, which is a key issue.

What was your main argument?

Well essentially our main argument is that the human rights situation in Colombia, particularly over the last 15 to 20 years, has worsened, and when we understand human rights, we are not just talking about political and civil violations, torture, assassination etc although those are important, but also economic, social and cultural rights. What we have seen over this period is a massive deterioration in the economic and social rights of many communities. Poverty is now at 60% of the population, inequality has increased dramatically and as a response to that there has been a range of resistance across the country and repression against that resistance has meant that on average we've seen between 6000 and 8000 political assassinations each year. There have been over 4000 trade union leaders and activists assassinated since 1986. That situation, despite its gravity, is not well enough known so that's our main argument.

The Colombian Embassy didn't accept any responsibility for any human rights violation. How can any progress be made until they do?

The objective of our campaign is not necessarily to change the minds of the Colombian government but to change the actions of the Colombian government. For that what we need to do is to exert pressure on the Colombian government through the production of evidence and information. The Colombian government like any other government exists within an international community, and the international community has certain norms and regulations. The Colombian government has signed up to a whole range of international human rights agreements and it has an obligation to fulfil those. Because of that, it needs to be accepted within the international community so when evidence is presented; it has to review those facts. Our aim is to raise awareness amongst the international community that this is what's going on in Colombia, that there is state terror, violence and collusion. We aim to place that evidence in the public domain so that national governments from different parts of the world, community organisations, lawyers etc can then pressure the Colombian government to alter its behaviour, which is our rationale. It is not that if we present the Colombian government evidence that its been involved in murders that suddenly its going to stop them, but that the pressure from a range of mechanisms will help. The international side is only a small part of that and that process has been taking place and is taking place in Colombia every week, and every month with a range of organisations. The Colombian government has been taken to the Inter American human rights court and found guilty on a range of cases where it is not protecting the human rights of trade unionists and has been forced now to provide many trade unionists with protection, body guards, bullet proof vests, means of communication etc. All of these cases,

where the government has lost the case and been proved that they have not protected the human rights of Colombian activists, provides strength to the case we are building. But it is a long process, which takes place both in and outside Colombia.

At the recent University of Bristol AGM the motion to ban coke on campus was passed. What are your opinions and is this a good thing?

I think its very good that Coca Cola an iconic organisation around the world is being questioned about its behaviour not only in Colombia but also in India, as the motion was based on environmental damage that's taking place in India and Coca Cola's involvement with the assassination of trade unionists in Colombia. I think its brilliant that students are acting on that and trying to pressure Coca Cola to reform its behaviour in Colombia and other parts of the world. I think that a vote in a student AGM is only the beginning of that kind of pressure. Now the students need to raise awareness of what coke is doing amongst the whole of the student body, so that people realise what the relationship is between Coca Cola and these human rights violations.

The President of Columbia – Alvaro Uribe and of Venezuela - Hugo Chavez, met last week to discuss a recent kidnapping of a known leader of FARC, which is reportedly sponsored by Columbia. Do you think the situation will improve or worsen between the two countries?

I think that the situation between Colombia and Venezuela is a reflection, a microcosm, of what's more broadly going on in Latin America. In a sense it seems to me that there are two very different paths, one that the Colombian government is taking which is very much tied to the interests of the United States, very neo-liberal in its economic perspectives and promoting a form of development that is very much based on the interests of trans-national corporations and private capital. On the other side with the Chavez government what you are seeing is an attempt to create an alternative economic development model based on redistribution of wealth and land, higher taxation that is being put into the education and health systems. Over the last 5 years the Chavez government has increased spending on education 500% and they have done that through increased taxation on oil and natural resources.

If you contrast these two countries it is a reflection of what is going on across Latin America, so it is not just about Chavez but Lula in Brazil and the possibility of other more social democratic leaders coming up as an alternative to Uribe and other neo-liberals in the region. The tension then is not just about Colombia and Venezuela, but a broader one taking place across the region relating to different development paths.

The conflicts along the border between Venezuela and Colombia may well spill over into bigger situations, and the tension has got worse over a range of issues. Most recently was the kidnapping in Caracas of one of the international representatives of the Revolutionary Armed forces of Colombia but there was also another tension a few months before where over 100 mercenaries were caught just outside of Caracas. Colombian mercenaries that were apparently planning the assassination of Hugo Chavez, the assassination plan was unravelled and it was found that there were several meetings in Miami and that behind this there were many powerful forces. In a sense the tension has been going on for several months it just happens to have come to a head with this particular incident.

You mentioned the US have a major influence on Colombian government policies, what role do you think US economic interests and multinational corporations play in this ongoing problem?

I think that the role of the US historically in Latin America has been very strong but particularly after the 2nd world war, when the US emerged as the most powerful economic nation in the world taking over the reigns of Britain and France. The US has attempted to control its strategic interests in a range of different ways and Latin America has seen that influence in what has been known as counter insurgency policy and the US has been massively involved in that for many years.

In terms of the role of the US military in Colombia it is very clear. Colombia is now the third biggest recipient of military aid; several billions of dollars go into Colombia from the United States so it is clear that there are big interests in Colombia for the United States. The question is whether it is just the interests of the United States or also the interests of Europe and what role the US plays in that. The US has clear oil and geo-strategic interests for example the US now directly funds a Colombian Military battalion that guards a particular pipe line in the north of Colombia, which allows petrol to be transported out of the country. So the relationship

between the military and the raw material of oil is evident. There are also a range of multinational interests and what's happened over the last ten years has been that regulations have been changed, as in many other parts of the world, to allow foreign direct investment and foreign corporations to buy up public services, state industries, and get more involved in mineral extraction etc so those regulations have allowed the inflow of powerful financial interests. It would be unfair to say that it is just the US that is involved in this, because what we have seen particularly over the last ten years is massive presence of major European corporations in Colombia as well, for example the Spanish have been involved in purchasing a lot of the banking sector in Latin America. In Colombia you can see all those forces at work, European multinational corporations, British corporations such as British petroleum and US corporations. So the US plays a very complex role in Colombia on the one hand trying to promote its own national interests and the interests of its multi-nationals corporations, but also ensuring the conditions for all of those different foreign corporations to invest in Colombia. As a product of that there is a complex relationship between the political, economic and the military. It's the military and the violence, which is probably the most worrying situation. Plus we are talking about Colombia where nearly 40% of the territory is disputed between armed guerrilla organisations, far right paramilitary organisations linked to the Colombian government and the Colombian military, one can see how messy investment, mineral extraction and the role of businesses can be in that kind of conflict situation. We have seen this in different parts of Africa where minerals, business and war often get mixed up and it is difficult to see who is involved exactly where and when.

The recent arms deal between Venezuela and Russia raised eyebrows amongst the US and Colombian government as they were concerned the arms would fall into the hands of Colombia's two left wing groups. How likely is this?

I think highly unlikely. Chavez is a national popular leader but there is no evidence that he is a sympathiser of either the FARC or ELN which have very different political trajectories so the idea that both of them would benefit from this government anyway is debateable. I think the real question is, is it possible to have an independent foreign policy in a world so dominated by one major superpower the US?

Hugo Chavez has been in trouble for a range of reasons in terms of their foreign policy. One of the things he has tried to do over the last years is to revitalise OPEC as a force in terms of oil production and the other thing is to try to build bi-lateral relationships with a range of different countries. That doesn't appeal to a US who sees its role as completely controlling all economic, political and military alternatives in the contemporary world. The fact that the Venezuelans are buying weapons for national defence from Russia is for Chavez a question of the right of national independence and the right of national defence in a country that incidentally has survived a serious military coup where there was clear evidence that the US, if not actively involved in the execution of the military coup, was involved in the planning. The fact that Hugo Chavez doesn't want to buy weapons from the US and looks elsewhere is hardly surprising after both Condoleezza Rice and George Bush have accused Chavez of being a destabilising force in the region. Whether Chavez can survive is a different matter because we have seen many governments try to stand up to the US and the next thing we know there are a range of interventions, which take place. I think that we need to reframe the debate and ask the question of why does the US have the right to control everybody else's foreign policy in a world of so called independent nation states? The fact that Chavez is prepared to go to different places to try to defend his nation, I think that it is not a threat to the US.

What do you think the next steps for the Colombian government and the Colombian Solidarity Campaign are?

At the moment it seems very clear that there is a worsening of the conditions in Colombia: the economic conditions and the possibilities for social organisation, social movements to operate. Part of that is the product of the more general shift in state/society relations that has taken place in the world in terms of the war on terror etc. Many governments can now get away with much more repressive measures than they could and in a sense the post September 11th world allows governments, and that includes our own British government, to persuade politicians and the public to accept more repressive measures. Therefore it is much more difficult for activists to operate in Colombia. I think the important thing here in Britain is for us to keep pressuring the European parliament, and for European governments not to support and give further military and economic aid to Colombia until it fulfils the United Nations recommendations. In early February there was a meeting in

Cartagena, of the international donors that have been giving money to Colombia. This followed a meeting that took place in London in 2003. In that meeting the European Union argued that there was a big problem at the moment with the demobilisation process that's taking place in Columbia, that many thousands of paramilitaries are being demobilised but actually there are many atrocities still taking place. During this peace process there has been over 1700 deaths that are directly attributed to paramilitary organisations yet supposedly they are in a ceasefire. The second question is that there have been a range of massacres that have taken place over the years in Colombia and it is important for the victims of the families and for the people that these crimes do not go unpunished and there is not an amnesty for these atrocities and in these 'peace' processes these things appear to be up for negotiation. It is very important that the EU does not allow all of these crimes to go under an amnesty as happened in Chile and Argentina and that's really where we are focusing on now. The question of paramilitary demobilisation and true reparations for the victims is crucial and we must not allow a political amnesty to take place for these, which we see as directly linked the Colombian state. If you look at the emergence of paramilitary organisations they were directly linked to the strategies of the Colombian state and we don't make a separation between the two and for that reason we find it very hard to agree that actually there is a process of negotiations going on when we see this as a family squabble rather than two organisations having very different interests. So at the moment we are trying to raise awareness of that. This month in march there are many Colombian politicians coming to this country such as Alexander Lopez, a member of Colombian congress, and the governor of the southern region of Colombia, plus there will be a range of things around Britain to try to raise awareness about the situation and to bring another perspective on what's going on in Colombia.

Interviewer: Michelle Lambe

THE YEAR OF AFRICA

By Stephen Ellis (Afrika Studie Centrum, Leiden, the Netherlands)

For anyone living in the United Kingdom, 2005 promises to be the Year of Africa. Why?

Africa is, by common consent, not in good shape. Whether it is judged to be in the early or middle stages of some sort of epochal catastrophe signaled by famine, disease and war, or whether it is at last emerging from the shadow of colonialism and finding its self-confidence in what South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki calls an African Renaissance, or whether it is somewhere in between these two points, depends largely on individual temperament combined with what bits of Africa the observer chooses to concentrate upon. Amid the vast numbers of statistics, one I find particularly interesting: that produced in a BBC World Service opinion poll in Africa which found that the great majority of Africans declared themselves to be proud of their continent and to be happy to live there.

There are plenty of reasons to be concerned about Africa. Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed his view when he famously called Africa 'a scar on the conscience of the world'. Both he and Chancellor Gordon Brown – one a practicing Christian, the other a son of the manse – have shown a consistent concern for Africa expressed in a form that has deep roots in British evangelicalism going back to the 18th century. (Do not take this observation as a form of mockery: I intend it only as a way of situating the current UK government's concern for Africa within a historical tradition).

What is special about 2005 is above all that the UK government, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, will simultaneously chair the G-8 and be president of the European Union. Prime Minister Blair and his advisors realized some time ago that this would provide a unique opportunity to place one or two big issues at the centre of world attention, and it is for that reason that Mr Blair also established a Commission for Africa, conceived somewhat in the same spirit as the Brandt report in the 1970s, that will also provide a major statement on Africa. The Commission is due to publish its report in just a few weeks from now.

All these, then, are reasons why Africa is going to be in our newspapers and on our TV screens for some months to come.

It is fairly easy to predict what some of the main preoccupations of the coming debate will be. Poverty, aid, HIV-AIDS, debt, conflict and the quality of governance are certain to figure prominently. Some critics think that the UK government's Commission on Africa will do little more than restate problems and recommendations that have been identified many times before, telling us little new and pointing out little in the way of new ideas for solutions. I would agree that there is a risk of this.

To illustrate the point, let me take the case of aid. The Africa lobby in Britain and northern Europe generally, or rather that section of the general public that expresses an interest in Africa's welfare, often attaches great importance to donor countries meeting the target set in 1970 of giving 0.7% of their national income as development aid. African heads of state, of whom there is a smattering among the members of Mr Blair's Commission on Africa, also tend to be in favour of increased aid, for obvious reasons. But if one thing has become clear in recent years, it is that financial aid has done surprisingly little good to Africa and in some ways has harmed it.

We may consider the frequently heard plea for a Marshall Plan for Africa, using the analogy of US aid to rebuild Europe after the Second World War. The truth is that Africa has had several Marshall Plans already. In the original 1940s Marshall Plan, the US provided some \$13 billion over 3 and a half years, or \$76 billion at today's prices, to buy US food and goods for Europe. Distributed equally, each European would have got about \$49, or \$293 at today's prices.

Africa has had around a trillion dollars in aid in the last 50 years, or about \$5,000 for every African living today if distributed evenly at today's prices. Although there have been successful aid projects, and some countries on balance can be said to have used aid constructively, it tends to be the poorest countries that are the least able to absorb aid funds. Hence, funds that cannot be absorbed by local economies have a tendency to end up in banks outside Africa (whose overseas holdings were estimated by the President of Nigeria some years ago at about \$150 billion). Those African countries that are doing well enough economically, like South Africa, Botswana and Mauritius, do not really need aid at all. Those that are living in the direst poverty cannot absorb it. There may be cases in between where aid can be useful, but they need to be carefully distinguished. And the negative side needs to be weighed, namely that years of financial aid, sometimes even amounting to half a country's national budget, make an African government far more accountable to aid donors than to its own citizens.

So increased aid is not the answer. Debt relief? It is hard to argue against this in those cases where a debtor government has shown its seriousness about pursuing economic growth and a degree of social equity. But what of countries like Nigeria and Angola, with large debts but also with substantial incomes from sales of oil? Both countries are notoriously corrupt, and in both cases there is little evidence that the people in power are really serious about using state revenues to help alleviate poverty or even to provide the common goods – security, infrastructure, an educational and health system – that many people would regard as basic. Why should they also benefit from debt relief?

Africa's most fundamental problem is a political one, in the broadest sense. I do not mean by this that all Africa's problems can be laid at the door of its politicians, although they must take their share of responsibility. What I mean is that many of Africa's difficulties stem from the historic manner in which Africa has been

inserted into global currents and in which power has been formed. This process goes back even as far as the 16th century, with the beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade, although it will not do to regard the slave trade as an original sin from which there is no escape. In many respects relations between African traders and princes and their European or Asian partners and interlocutors remained quite evenly matched until the 19th century. In any event the legacy of the slave trade, like all historical legacies, is not immutable. It can be used politically in a great variety of ways, both creative and destructive.

More specifically, the manner of Africa's insertion into global structures of power as well as global markets over a very long period has often been marked by what the French writer Jean-François Bayart calls *extraversion*. He means by this the use of external resources to build domestic power. In the time of the slave trade this classically took the form of African potentates acquiring guns and other goods from their European, Arab or Asian partners and using these to build a domestic constituency. The patterns can still be detected today in the relationship between aid donors and aid recipients. One of the consequences has been that rather few parts of Africa have a long tradition of taxation as part of a social and political compact, whereby the citizens' payment of tax is regarded as giving those same citizens certain rights over their governors. Historians and sociologists tell us that these conditions arose in Europe particularly in the context of ever-more expensive forms of warfare, notably from the 17th century. The point is that not all political entities are based on the same methods, and Africa's history in this respect is notably different from that of Europe.

One of the attractions of the idea of *extraversion*, from an analytical point of view, is that it enables us to use a substantial body of data compiled in past decades, namely in the form of dependency theory. Briefly, for those not already familiar with it, dependency theory was the name given to a school of thought in politics and economics especially, often Marxist-tinted, which held that what we used to call the Third World had been deliberately made subservient to the capitalist core of the world. This theory was widely held in the academy in the 1960s and 1970s and is attractive to African politicians and intellectuals even to this day. One of the weaknesses of the theory was that it presented the Third World as powerless to the point of having no real influence over its own fate, whereas that is clearly inaccurate. However, the concept of *extraversion* stands dependency theory on its head, by showing how dependency has often been desired by African entrepreneurs, who have even helped to build dependency as a means of acquiring wealth and power for themselves and their immediate clientele.

Extraversion also has the merit of illustrating a truth that is often overlooked: that power in Africa has been a joint venture for a long time, today as much as ever. Hence, whatever errors or crimes are committed by African politicians, whatever outrages are perpetrated by multinational companies or Western or Asian or Middle Eastern powerbrokers, Africans and non-Africans are not on two different sides, to be praised or blamed collectively according to taste. They have interacted to get where they are today, and they will need to interact to go wherever tomorrow will lead.

Clearly, my observations cannot be taken to absolve from responsibility the leaders or the people of powerful countries that, historically, have shared in Africa's history. But to attribute to a British prime minister or even an American president a unique power to mould Africa's future would be wrong, as it would imply that Africans themselves were incapable of meaningful action. This is the logic of suggesting that Africans and others need to think together about how to improve the continent's situation: whether such will emerge from this year of Africa, I cannot say. But what would be most desirable would be an opening of markets in rich countries to African goods, including manufactured goods in the few cases where these are capable of attracting customers, and agricultural goods. This needs to be combined with a lifting of subsidies to European and American farmers and an end to dumping European and American agricultural products. Regarding HIV-AIDS, it implies making antiretroviral drugs available at low prices. It also implies a joint role for African and non-African countries in ending conflict, and it should be said in this context that the UK has played a most interesting and constructive role in Sierra Leone. It should mean thinking about immigration policy not just in terms of the interests of British or European citizens, but also of the many Africans who come to Europe in a commendable attempt to improve their lives, in this case by moving to where the jobs and the money are.

Let me use the time available by raising the subject of Africa's fair number of dysfunctional states, or so called failed states. Major international state-fixing efforts are taking place in Africa at present: in Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, all of which are homes to major United Nations missions. A large UN mission is in preparation for Sudan. Even on a sunny assessment, none of these experiments is likely to result in the emergence of a state able to prosper or even to reproduce itself without major international assistance, nor is any of them likely to provide a business-friendly environment any time in the foreseeable future.

The UN and its agencies, often working with a range of multilateral and non-governmental organizations and with the aid administrations of donor governments, have developed a standard approach to fixing failed states like those in Africa. The orthodox response to a failed state is to create security, bring in administrators to restore physical and bureaucratic infrastructure, hold elections, and then depart, leaving behind programmes on post-conflict reconstruction, typically including a truth commission.

There is now strong evidence that this approach doesn't generally work. I believe this is because the notion of 'failed states' is based on a false analogy. The very concept of 'failed states' is based on a mechanical metaphor, in which a state is compared to a machine that no longer functions, like a car, for example, that will

not start. The solution is to call in a mechanic who can fix the problem before handing back the keys to the vehicle's owner, which in this analogy is a national government.

What is needed instead are new forms of joint venture, and if the Year of Africa were able to illuminate this point, and generate some enthusiasm for it both in Africa and in Europe, it would genuinely have achieved something. Against this stands the consideration that many African intellectuals and politicians remain captive to their own nationalist myths, and Europeans to their own introspection and obsession with consumption. In any event I am glad that there will be attention given to Africa.

The Lisbon Strategy, the future of the cohesion policy and the local development policies: is the Italian claim founded?

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Introduction

In July 2004 the EU Commission released the proposal for the new general regulation of the cycle of programming of Structural Funds covering the years from 2007 to 2013.

According to the proposal, some reforms are likely to be introduced.

The new cycle of programming has to take into account the impact that the recently occurred enlargement of the European Union had made on the EU policy-making.

Therefore, the contents of the regulations – and not only those regarding the cohesion policy – is being modified.

This has brought about a debate on the consequences that the new regulation will produce on the local policy making, as it appears that some of the principles that were previously stated and that in some ways shaped over time the local policy-making are now disappeared in the new regulation.

This paper is going to analyse the reasons why the new regulation has taken this form, in the light of the recent enlargement.

Then it will analyse the debate arisen in Italy, in which the author is being an active participant.

Finally, it tries to draw some conclusions on the way that local economies, now former Objective 1, should take or should have taken if they had really learnt the lesson of the development, in the light of the now recalled Lisbon Strategy.

1. The current regulation

The current regulation (Reg. 1260/1999) provides general rules on the implementation, the management and the assessment of the structural funds. In this paper is the case to call to the attention the principles that are now debated.

The first of them is the territory: after the failure of the top down policies, the territorial dimension of the regional development of Europe was gradually discovered. The territory plays an essential role as a factor of development: local communities, local institutions, local firms all settle in a specific territory, which therefore carries peculiarities that cannot be found in other realities.

This is the main feature of the local development: it is territory-specific, so that it is not possible to “export” a local policy from one reality to another without taking into account what the territory offers (Bellandi, 2001: 189-210).

The second principle that the regulation provides is the partnership. It refers to the cooperation between individuals and groups in the pursuing of a common goal and the production of a common good (the development in this case). The academic literature refers to it as the “social capital” and refers to “trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam, 1993: 167).

Thus it takes the form of informal relations among individuals and of associations and local institutions.

In the Regulation 1260/1999 it means the involvement of the civil society in all the stages of the development policy –making, from the planning to the management.

The third principle is the integration: it is strategic form of local planning that tries to bring different sectors not only of the economy, but also of other fields (like training and education or infrastructure) together in the same, consistent project. The reason why this principle has been included in the Regulation is to avoid over-concentration of financial resources in one sector only and to create again a form of cooperation between sectors.

All these elements over time resulted in the gradual articulation of the administrative structures in sub national levels.

2. The debate in Italy

In the proposal for the new regulation, all these three elements have been removed and no alternative are mentioned.

On 10 February 2005 Fornez and some executives of the Italian Treasury Ministry discussed on this issue. The main point of the Italian complaint are the missing reference to the three above mentioned elements and the conclusion seems to have been that now the development of Objective 1 regions is undermined by the changes made in the regulation, and the Commission now removes things that have been consolidated for a while and which are essential ingredients for a successful local development policy. Should a new approach be introduced, it would be a problem in terms of how to organise and manage the local policies.

3. The impact of the enlargement in the new proposal

My point in the following. The new proposal must be related to the time and the conditions of its setting up. This means that, while the current regulation heavily reflects the achievement made in the past, which also include the local dimension, the proposal now perhaps reflect the impact of the recent enlargement.

It is the case to remind that the new member states are going through a transition process from the communist regime to the market economy and the building of democratic institutions. Part of this process has been accomplished, but a debate on the speediness required to comply as soon as possible with the *acquis communautaire* had taken place in the past (Grabbe 2002), underlying the impossibility that some member states had to fulfil all the conditions imposed with the Copenhagen criteria.

Some of them are just the three elements mentioned. Some of the new members do not have yet a proper sub-national level of government, while in general they do not have the concept of “territory – specific growth”. This could easily result in a troublesome management of the huge financial amounts they would be beneficiaries. The ISPA and PHARE *ex post* evaluations refer just these shortcomings.

Provided that they are the poorest EU members, it is not surprising that some have suggested to give them the full access to the Structural Funds and to grant the financial support to national governments and not to the regions (Sapir Report, 2004: 146-150).

Therefore, this might explain why the proposal for the new regulation has now this form.

4. Back to the Italian complaint

In my view, the Italian complaint is not founded. They are claiming for the wrong aspects and my personal impression is that they did not learn anything from the past experience.

After several cycle of programming the national and sub national administrations should have internalised the ingredients for development, in particular those they are claiming for being re-included in the new regulation, and been therefore more proactive in pursuing the goals of growth.

I mean that they should be able to carry out a policy stimulating growth even in absence of a regulation that tells what should be done. In other words, mechanisms stimulating development should operate automatically.

If Italy still requests this, it still suffers from a form of culture of dependence and still believes it is legitimated to request financial aid to the European Union.

If this is the attitude, therefore lasting development has never taken place, and factors that help keep the achievements so far made have never been generated.

These factors are just the above mentioned social capital, together with the learning capacity and the autonomy. The recipient of the policy has to be also the maker of that policy, must be willing to learn from mistakes and to cooperate (Mura, 2004).

The terms of the Italian complaint shows that these factors do not exist.

Conclusions: What should be done?

The Lisbon Strategy offers the solution to this problem. In the Italian debate it was recalled as concerning only the cohesion policy, in particular as a reason for increasing the budget allocation to 1,27 of the European GDP devoted to the Structural Funds , instead of the 1% that some countries are now requesting¹.

This interpretation has been misleading, does not take into account the Lisbon Strategy is European integration-based, that is to say, it will influence all the principles of the European policy-making: not more only efficiency, but also sustainability and knowledge economy.

Therefore, it is going to affect policy areas like the European Policy for Research & Development, the Social Policy and the Environmental Policy. As a consequence, budget allocations devoted to them will increase.

If regions now claiming the reformulation of the new regulation had really developed, now they should be able to understand that new opportunities will come from the above mentioned areas and they offer even more opportunities in terms of competitiveness.

The outcomes of the debate seems to be a bit disappointing , provided that the EU cohesion policies should have taught to regions and local economies how to stand on their own two feet.

¹ If this latter proposal was welcomed, regions that exit the Objective 1 would not get any funding. In terms of economic growth this is a real problem, as even a small funding has proved to be useful in supporting the development process.

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INTERVIEW WITH MARIO NOVELLI

By Michelle Lambe

Editors Note:

On Tuesday 30th November 2004 a debate took place between the Colombian Solidarity Campaign and the Colombian Embassy for the first time ever to publicly debate the on going human rights issues in Colombia.

I interviewed Dr Mario Novelli (Researcher, Centre for Studies of Globalisation, Societies and Education – University of Bristol, & a founding member of the Colombian Solidarity Campaign) to ask his opinion about the debate, the motion to remove the sale of Coca Cola on campus passed at the AGM, and to discuss recent developments in Colombia.

Michelle Lambe: How do you feel the debate went?

Mario Novelli: Since we launched our campaign in 2001 when the Colombian Solidarity Campaign was created, we've had a range of contacts with the Colombian Embassy mainly informal meetings, but that's the first time we've had a public platform. I think for both sides in that debate it was a new experience. Overall I think that we managed to give light to a lot of information, which is often not available certainly not from the Colombian government, related to the human rights violation in the country. Having the chance to do that face to face with representatives of the Colombian government, I think was good for the audience. Whether either side learnt anything new is another matter. At least the audience managed to see both sides of that debate and particularly about the question of state terror, which is a key issue.

ML: What was your main argument?

MN: Well essentially our main argument is that the human rights situation in Colombia, particularly over the last 15 to 20 years, has worsened, and when we understand human rights, we are not just talking about political and civil violations, torture, assassination etc although those are important, but also economic, social and cultural rights. What we have seen over this period is a massive deterioration in the economic and social rights of many communities. Poverty is now at 60% of the population, inequality has increased dramatically and as a response to that there has been a range of resistance across the country and repression against that resistance has meant that on average we've seen between 6000 and 8000 political assassinations each year. There have been over 4000 trade union leaders and activists assassinated since 1986. That situation, despite its gravity, is not well enough known so that's our main argument.

ML: The Colombian Embassy didn't accept any responsibility for any human rights violation. How can any progress be made until they do?

MN: The objective of our campaign is not necessarily to change the minds of the Colombian government but to change the actions of the Colombian government. For that what we need to do is to exert pressure on the Colombian government through the production of evidence and information. The Colombian government like any other government exists within an international community, and the international community has certain norms and regulations. The Colombian government has signed up to a whole range of international human rights agreements and it has an obligation to fulfil those. Because of that, it needs to be accepted within the international community so when evidence is presented; it has to review those facts. Our aim is to raise awareness amongst the international community that this is what's going on in Colombia, that there is state terror, violence and collusion. We aim to place that evidence in the public domain so that national governments from different parts of the world, community organisations, lawyers etc can then pressure the Colombian government to alter its behaviour, which is our rationale. It is not that if we present the Colombian government evidence that its been involved in murders that suddenly its going to stop them, but that the pressure from a range of mechanisms will help. The international side is only a small part of that and that process has been taking place and is taking place in Colombia every week, and every month with a range of organisations. The Colombian government has been taken to the Inter American human rights court and found guilty on a range of cases where it is not protecting the human rights of trade unionists and has been forced now to provide many

trade unionists with protection, body guards, bullet proof vests, means of communication etc. All of these cases, where the government has lost the case and been proved that they have not protected the human rights of Colombian activists, provides strength to the case we are building. But it is a long process, which takes place both in and outside Colombia.

ML: At the recent University of Bristol AGM the motion to ban coke on campus was passed. What are your opinions and is this a good thing?

MN: I think its very good that Coca Cola an iconic organisation around the world is being questioned about its behaviour not only in Colombia but also in India, as the motion was based on environmental damage that's taking place in India and Coca Cola's involvement with the assassination of trade unionists in Colombia. I think its brilliant that students are acting on that and trying to pressure Coca Cola to reform its behaviour in Colombia and other parts of the world. I think that a vote in a student AGM is only the beginning of that kind of pressure. Now the students need to raise awareness of what coke is doing amongst the whole of the student body, so that people realise what the relationship is between Coca Cola and these human rights violations.

ML: The President of Columbia – Alvaro Uribe and of Venezuela - Hugo Chavez, met last week to discuss a recent kidnapping of a known leader of FARC, which is reportedly sponsored by Columbia. Do you think the situation will improve or worsen between the two countries?

MN: I think that the situation between Colombia and Venezuela is a reflection, a microcosm, of what's more broadly going on in Latin America. In a sense it seems to me that there are two very different paths, one that the Colombian government is taking which is very much tied to the interests of the United States, very neo-liberal in its economic perspectives and promoting a form of development that is very much based on the interests of trans-national corporations and private capital. On the other side with the Chavez government what you are seeing is an attempt to create an alternative economic development model based on redistribution of wealth and land, higher taxation that is being put into the education and health systems. Over the last 5 years the Chavez government has increased spending on education 500% and they have done that through increased taxation on oil and natural resources.

If you contrast these two countries it is a reflection of what is going on across Latin America, so it is not just about Chavez but Lula in Brazil and the possibility of other more social democratic leaders coming up as an alternative to Uribe and other neo-liberals in the region. The tension then is not just about Colombia and Venezuela, but a broader one taking place across the region relating to different development paths. The conflicts along the border between Venezuela and Colombia may well spill over into bigger situations, and the tension has got worse over a range of issues. Most recently was the kidnapping in Caracas of one of the international representatives of the Revolutionary Armed forces of Colombia but there was also another tension a few months before where over 100 mercenaries were caught just outside of Caracas. Colombian mercenaries that were apparently planning the assassination of Hugo Chavez, the assassination plan was unravelled and it was found that there were several meetings in Miami and that behind this there were many powerful forces. In a sense the tension has been going on for several months it just happens to have come to a head with this particular incident.

ML: You mentioned the US have a major influence on Colombian government policies, what role do you think US economic interests and multinational corporations play in this ongoing problem?

MN: I think that the role of the US historically in Latin America has been very strong but particularly after the 2nd world war, when the US emerged as the most powerful economic nation in the world taking over the reigns of Britain and France. The US has attempted to control its strategic interests in a range of different ways and Latin America has seen that influence in what has been known as counter insurgency policy and the US has been massively involved in that for many years.

In terms of the role of the US military in Colombia it is very clear. Colombia is now the third biggest recipient of military aid; several billions of dollars go into Colombia from the United States so it is clear that there are big interests in Colombia for the United States. The question is whether it is just the interests of the United States or also the interests of Europe and what role the US plays in that. The US has clear oil and geo-strategic interests for example the US now directly funds a Colombian Military battalion that guards a particular pipe

line in the north of Colombia, which allows petrol to be transported out of the country. So the relationship between the military and the raw material of oil is evident. There are also a range of multinational interests and what's happened over the last ten years has been that regulations have been changed, as in many other parts of the world, to allow foreign direct investment and foreign corporations to buy up public services, state industries, and get more involved in mineral extraction etc so those regulations have allowed the inflow of powerful financial interests. It would be unfair to say that it is just the US that is involved in this, because what we have seen particularly over the last ten years is massive presence of major European corporations in Colombia as well, for example the Spanish have been involved in purchasing a lot of the banking sector in Latin America. In Colombia you can see all those forces at work, European multinational corporations, British corporations such as British petroleum and US corporations. So the US plays a very complex role in Colombia on the one hand trying to promote its own national interests and the interests of its multi-nationals corporations, but also ensuring the conditions for all of those different foreign corporations to invest in Colombia. As a product of that there is a complex relationship between the political, economic and the military. It's the military and the violence, which is probably the most worrying situation. Plus we are talking about Colombia where nearly 40% of the territory is disputed between armed guerrilla organisations, far right paramilitary organisations linked to the Colombian government and the Colombian military, one can see how messy investment, mineral extraction and the role of businesses can be in that kind of conflict situation. We have seen this in different parts of Africa where minerals, business and war often get mixed up and it is difficult to see who is involved exactly where and when.

ML: The recent arms deal between Venezuela and Russia raised eyebrows amongst the US and Colombian government as they were concerned the arms would fall into the hands of Colombia's two left wing groups. How likely is this?

MN: I think highly unlikely. Chavez is a national popular leader but there is no evidence that he is a sympathiser of either the FARC or ELN which have very different political trajectories so the idea that both of them would benefit from this government anyway is debateable. I think the real question is, is it possible to have an independent foreign policy in a world so dominated by one major superpower the US? Hugo Chavez has been in trouble for a range of reasons in terms of their foreign policy. One of the things he has tried to do over the last years is to revitalise OPEC as a force in terms of oil production and the other thing is to try to build bi-lateral relationships with a range of different countries. That doesn't appeal to a US who sees its role as completely controlling all economic, political and military alternatives in the contemporary world. The fact that the Venezuelans are buying weapons for national defence from Russia is for Chavez a question of the right of national independence and the right of national defence in a country that incidentally has survived a serious military coup where there was clear evidence that the US, if not actively involved in the execution of the military coup, was involved in the planning. The fact that Hugo Chavez doesn't want to buy weapons from the US and looks elsewhere is hardly surprising after both Condoleezza Rice and George Bush have accused Chavez of being a destabilising force in the region. Whether Chavez can survive is a different matter because we have seen many governments try to stand up to the US and the next thing we know there are a range of interventions, which take place. I think that we need to reframe the debate and ask the question of why does the US have the right to control everybody else's foreign policy in a world of so called independent nation states? The fact that Chavez is prepared to go to different places to try to defend his nation, I think that it is not a threat to the US.

ML: What do you think the next steps for the Columbian government and the Columbian Solidarity Campaign are?

MN: At the moment it seems very clear that there is a worsening of the conditions in Colombia: the economic conditions and the possibilities for social organisation, social movements to operate. Part of that is the product of the more general shift in state/society relations that has taken place in the world in terms of the war on terror etc. Many governments can now get away with much more repressive measures than they could and in a sense the post September 11th world allows governments, and that includes our own British government, to persuade politicians and the public to accept more repressive measures. Therefore it is much more difficult for activists to operate in Colombia. I think the important thing here in Britain is for us to keep pressuring the European parliament, and for European governments not to support and give further military and economic aid to

Colombia until it fulfils the United Nations recommendations. In early February there was a meeting in Cartagena, of the international donors that have been giving money to Colombia. This followed a meeting that took place in London in 2003. In that meeting the European Union argued that there was a big problem at the moment with the demobilisation process that's taking place in Columbia, that many thousands of paramilitaries are being demobilised but actually there are many atrocities still taking place. During this peace process there has been over 1700 deaths that are directly attributed to paramilitary organisations yet supposedly they are in a ceasefire. The second question is that there have been a range of massacres that have taken place over the years in Colombia and it is important for the victims of the families and for the people that these crimes do not go unpunished and there is not an amnesty for these atrocities and in these 'peace' processes these things appear to be up for negotiation. It is very important that the EU does not allow all of these crimes to go under an amnesty as happened in Chile and Argentina and that's really where we are focusing on now. The question of paramilitary demobilisation and true reparations for the victims is crucial and we must not allow a political amnesty to take place for these, which we see as directly linked the Colombian state. If you look at the emergence of paramilitary organisations they were directly linked to the strategies of the Colombian state and we don't make a separation between the two and for that reason we find it very hard to agree that actually there is a process of negotiations going on when we see this as a family squabble rather than two organisations having very different interests. So at the moment we are trying to raise awareness of that. This month in march there are many Colombian politicians coming to this country such as Alexander Lopez, a member of Colombian congress, and the governor of the southern region of Colombia, plus there will be a range of things around Britain to try to raise awareness about the situation and to bring another perspective on what's going on in Colombia.

Pride and Prejudice

by *Sebastien Dieuaide (Lecturer in the French Department at Bristol University)*

Il y a de cela quelques mois, je finissais de dîner dans un banal restaurant du sud-ouest de la France quand j'ai entendu un client au fond de la salle se plaindre bruyamment de la qualité de son café qu'il jugeait bien trop fort, comparé à ce qu'il avait l'habitude de boire dans son pays. Et à en juger par son accent, il était non seulement anglophone, mais sans aucun doute américain, et j'oserais même avancer qu'il était du Texas ou des environs vu qu'il portait, outre une tenue quelque peu inhabituelle pour un Français moyen, un chapeau de cowboy comme on aimerait ne plus en rencontrer...

Et le voilà donc qui se plaint de son café, de NOTRE sacro-saint café noir que son palais raffiné ne saurait supporter ! Parce qu'il faudrait que la France adopte non seulement les visions géopolitiques des Etats-Unis, mais également les goûts de nos meilleurs ennemis d'outre-atlantique, et que nous buvions ce liquide noirâtre qu'ils appellent café - ou plutôt coffee, sic !? Ce comportement est tellement américain, pensais-je en soupirant...

En effet, c'est une des raisons principales pour lesquelles nous avons, nous, Français, du mal à accepter l'attitude des Américains, à savoir pour leur impérialisme, un impérialisme qui se manifeste à tous les niveaux, de l'insignifiant café qu'on devrait boire à leur manière (c'est-à-dire insipide) à leurs conceptions politico-militaires au Moyen-Orient, à leur position vis-à-vis du commerce international, ou encore à leurs théories environnementales. Ce qu'on reproche aux Etats-Unis, c'est de toujours vouloir imposer leur volonté au reste du monde, et plus encore d'y parvenir si facilement et si systématiquement. Les Européens ont contribué à créer un grand nombre d'institutions internationales comme l'ONU, L'OTAN et tant d'autres, et leur autorité est quotidiennement bafouée par la surpuissance américaine, "qui n'en fait qu'à sa tête", comme on entend souvent.

Mais soyons réalistes... Pourquoi les Européens, et, il faut bien l'avouer, les Français en tête, se plaignent-ils autant de l'attitude impérialiste américaine ? Pour un motif aussi simple que triste, me semble-t-il, à savoir la jalousie. Certes, il paraît parfois légitime de s'offusquer du fait que les Américains ne tiennent aucun compte de l'opinion internationale. Mais si nous en avons la possibilité, c'est-à-dire le pouvoir, nous ferions sans doute de même ! Et ceci en souvenir d'une suprématie internationale presque incontestée il y a encore près d'un siècle, malgré la concurrence britannique toujours présente.

Il semble en effet que la France n'ait jamais supporté le processus de déchéance qu'elle a vécu au cours du XXème siècle. Il n'y a qu'à se rappeler les déclarations de de Gaulle et de son digne héritier, notre Président de la République, Mr Jacques Chirac, pour réaliser que les autorités françaises ont la nostalgie de l'idée d'une France qui gouvernerait le globe. Mais cette France-là, a-t-elle jamais existé en réalité, cela reste encore à prouver...

Et la jalousie éprouvée par les Européens à l'égard des Etats-Unis va au-delà : en effet, France, Allemagne et Espagne en particulier ont développé un complexe d'infériorité par rapport à leur voisin lointain d'outre-atlantique. Comment ne pas être irrité quand on réalise que, dans le domaine des nouvelles technologies, l'Europe a un retard d'une dizaine d'années quand ce n'est pas plus, et ce retard ne se limite d'ailleurs pas à ce domaine, puisque même dans le champ scientifique, elle est à la traîne, et voit, impuissante, ses cerveaux s'expatrier dans cet eldorado de la recherche (d'ailleurs, le phénomène est tellement important que le mot américain pour y faire référence est passé dans le langage courant en français, à savoir le "brain-drain")?

Un autre fait marquant de la deuxième moitié du vingtième siècle et de ce début de millénaire met à mal l'ego souvent surdimensionné et le chauvinisme de la métropole conservatrice : l'invasion du pays par la culture américaine, une invasion semble-t-il inévitable, d'autant plus qu'elle est généralisée sur la majeure partie du globe. Il est en effet possible et fréquent en France de vivre "à l'américaine", par exemple en allant manger à McDonald's puis en allant regarder la dernière grosse production de Spielberg au cinéma - cette dernière activité pouvant être facilement remplacée par une immersion totale dans le pays de l'Oncle Sam en passant une après-midi à Disneyland Paris.

Mais il ne s'agit là que d'une vulgarisation des apports culturels américains en France, qui sont innombrables et permanents aujourd'hui. Et il est fatigant d'entendre toujours les mêmes pseudo-intellectuels nous avertir du danger de la perte de notre identité : la culture n'est pas une entité figée, elle mue avec le temps et s'enrichit de la diversité des populations et des influences qui traversent le pays. Les apports extérieurs ne remplacent pas une culture, ils la font juste évoluer.

Ce serait donc non seulement un problème de justice et de légitimité internationale, mais aussi une question de jalousie et d'orgueil, qui généreraient cette haine de la France envers l'Amérique... Cependant, peut-on réduire une histoire si complexe à ces seuls sentiments ? Rien de moins sûr. En effet, il semble bien qu'il y ait dans l'hexagone un mépris pour "l'Américain". Mais qu'est-ce donc que cet Américain ? C'est tout d'abord cet écervelé qui non seulement élit Bush une première fois, mais en plus le réélit quatre ans plus tard, après avoir eu tout le temps de se rendre compte de sa bêtise ; cet homme au cou de taureau qui va à la gym cinq fois par semaine et se nourrit aux hormones ; cette femme qui procède à sa douzième opération de chirurgie esthétique car elle trouve qu'elle ne ressemble pas encore assez à Marilyn Monroe.

Les préjugés et les idées toutes faites comme celles-là ne manquent pas en France, il faut bien l'avouer. Mais ces raccourcis bêtifiants sont peut-être les réponses, certes peu subtiles, à l'image que les Américains (et tant d'autres pour dire la vérité) ont encore de nous, à savoir des arriérés portant un bérêt et une baguette de pain sous le bras, ce qui n'est d'ailleurs pas toujours faux, mais ces vestiges du dix-neuvième siècle semblent se cacher au fin fond de la campagne française ces temps-ci...

Alors soyons un peu sérieux : cessons de stigmatiser les Etats-Unis ; cessons de rejeter par principe tout ce qui peut venir d'outre-atlantique, et battons-nous plutôt pour restaurer ce prestige qui a été le nôtre il y a seulement quelques dizaines d'années, pour rivaliser avec la super-puissance en politique mais aussi en ce qui concerne la culture, et peut-être ainsi serons-nous plus crédibles lorsque nous caricaturerons une Amérique qu'à bien des égards nous envions.

Democracy, Dictatorship and the Devil's Excrement:
Venezuela's Guerra Fría

EDITOR'S NOTE: As Venezuela's President complains of American-led assassination attempts and media conspiracies, Emma O'Driscoll wonders whether the crumbling relationship between the two countries is really another poorly disguised attempt by the US to control the world's oil supplies.

Hugo Chávez has accused the US Government of many things over the years, but his recent allegation that George Bush himself is plotting the Venezuelan President's assassination is on another level entirely. Relations between the two countries have been sour ever since Chávez stormed to power in a landslide election victory in 1999, and the shameless mudslinging over the recent diplomatic row with Colombia suggests that the storm is far from over. Despite bringing the house down at last year's Rio Group summit, the hero of Venezuela's working classes is continuously slated in the American press in what he describes as "a campaign from the United States to isolate and discredit the Venezuelan government." As anti-Chávez sentiments in the US begin to echo McCarthyist dogma, how justified is the American Government in its relentless opposition of the Chávista regime?

To the average American citizen reading his morning paper, President Hugo Chávez Frias must seem like the most dangerous and contentious figure in Latin American politics. A tyrannous dictator in the making, he is ruthlessly forcing his unwilling fellow Venezuelans towards Cuban-style communism, while spreading his anti-American propaganda to neighbouring States. World affairs editorials are peppered with photos of furious protesters brandishing anti-Chávez slogans, yet their oppressor stubbornly refuses to stand aside in favour of a President who would uphold good old-fashioned American principles, such as democracy and equality. He refuses to accept the will of his people, fixing every referendum in order to perpetuate his unwelcome presence at the top of the Venezuelan food chain. Not even the more left-wing papers offer a contrary viewpoint, so how can this image of Chávista Venezuela be anything but true?

In order for the sceptical American to satisfy his inner devil's advocate on this issue, he would have to leave the land that gave birth to freedom of speech and travel across the pond to Europe. Here he would pick up a newspaper to find that, while 100,000 Venezuelans protested against their President in June 2002, over 200,000 joined the pro-Chávez march that took place at the same time. Furthermore, while the *New York Times* was happy to announce Chávez' voluntary abdication during the two-day coup d'état in April 2002, no evidence beyond the word of his captors has ever been put forward to confirm this. In fact, the American press announced the success of the opposition-led coup almost before it had happened, with newspapers all over the country echoing the *Times*' assertion that "Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator." 'Democracy' was instead to be upheld by the American-backed chairman of *Fedecamaras*, Venezuela's largest corporation, who took up his new presidential role as Chávez was forcibly removed from Caracas by armed soldiers.

The more astute reader may then compare the photos and profiles of the protesters marching for and against the Chávez government. Opponents of the President are overwhelmingly white, upper middle classed descendents of the original European settlers. They control Venezuela's immense oil fortune, and have done ever since the discovery of this black gold made their country one of the ten richest in the world (for all of ten minutes). Pro-Chávez demonstrators, on the other hand, count among their descendents the victims of the African slave trade and the indigenous populations driven from their land by the Conquistadors. They have seen their rights disregarded by a series of military dictators and power-hungry Presidents, who were only too happy to declare 'emergency rule' and ignore democratic principles whenever the disgruntled population demanded change.

President Chávez has incited so much hostility in his American opponents precisely because he insists upon upholding that most fundamental of American values, equality. In an attempt to redistribute the immense wealth afforded to the country by the oil industry (which accounts for 80% of the country's exports) Chávez has passed laws that limit the capacity of private business and thus put the economy more securely in the hands of the government. He then enacts legislative reforms that channel government resources into far-reaching, ambitious welfare schemes designed to benefit the poorest Venezuelan citizens (67% of Venezuelans live

below the poverty line, and Caracas is no stranger to the shanty towns that afflict so many South American cities).

One such reform, the 2001 Law on Land and Agricultural Development, proved to be the straw that would break the back of Venezuela's private businesses, leading to the 2002 Coup that almost removed Chávez from office. Prior to the enactment of this law, Venezuela had an extremely unbalanced land ownership system, with 5 percent of the population owning three-quarters of the agricultural land. This meant that most of the rural population were left poor, landless, and unable to support themselves. Chávez reformed this system by introducing a cap on the size of landholdings and by providing for the distribution of land to peasants. He then set up the National Land Institute in January 2002 to supervise the gradual redistribution of land and wealth. Much of the land in question was empty or already under the control of the government, meaning that the reforms did not significantly affect the landowning classes of Venezuela. Whether you see Chávez as a Guevara-style hero of the Latin American socialist movement, or as a Stalinist dictator-in-the-making who is attacking private property, the evidence on the issue of land reform speaks for itself: by the end of 2003, the government had signed 9,000 *cartas agrarias* providing about 60,000 peasant families with more than 5.5 million acres of land, and rural development initiatives have allowed many *ranchito* (shantytown) dwellers to return to the countryside with the opportunity to farm land that was previously unavailable to them.

It is understandable that the allusions to Castro-style communism inherent within such a dramatic land reform policy, coupled with the limitations placed upon private enterprise, would leave a bad taste in the mouth of a neo-liberal American. However, an aversion to quasi-communist principles doesn't explain the sudden rash of anti-Chávez propaganda in the States. Nor does it explain the assertion of George Friedman, chair of the intelligence organization, Stratfor, that Venezuela is "next on Bush's military agenda". The Cold War is over, the Soviet threat a distant memory, and many Americans enjoy perfectly comfortable holidays in Havana unperturbed by any conflict with their capitalist principles. Furthermore, how could a small, essentially third world country like Venezuela possibly pose any danger to the world's only superpower?

If Chávista policies are so offensive to American democratic principles, surely the rest of the Western World ought to be equally opposed to his rule? Yet as I mentioned before, the European media provides a far more balanced approach to the situation, one which more often than not tips in President Chávez' favour. In *Le Monde Diplomatique* (October 2003), French journalist Maurice Lemoine interviewed a Venezuelan peasant who insisted that the land reform was "a magnificent development", and BBC journalist Greg Palast has openly spoken out against America's 'sloppy reporting' of the issues in question. Chávez has even been portrayed as an icon for other southern nations facing economic crises and political instability.

It has become heavily clichéd and evocative of conspiracy theories to suggest that the US government is only interested in a country's domestic policies where they pose a threat to potential oil supplies. However, would so much attention be focused on Venezuela, at a time when concerns in the Middle East and elsewhere seem far more pressing, if President Chávez had not threatened to cease trading in oil with the States if any attempt should be made to oppose or discredit his authority? Would fears over links with Cuba and the spread of communist ideas abroad really be quite so pertinent if Venezuela wasn't America's third largest oil supplier? Chávez was democratically elected by a landslide victory and has since proven his popularity with the Venezuelan people on several occasions. He has arguably rescued his country from a bitter cycle of corruption and military rule, and he has kept alive the dreams of the greatest Latin American revolutionaries without compromising Western principles such as liberty, equality and the sovereignty of the people. The US government has no legitimate reason to oppose his rule. Should Venezuela be the next target on Bush's hitlist, he would be shooting himself in the foot, as any attack on Venezuela would confirm what everyone already knows, that the War on Terror is nothing more than a glorified goldrush, an attempt to gain complete control of what remains of the world's oil reserves.

Poll-watching in the Gobi desert

On Sunday 27th June 2004, the Republic of Mongolia held its fourth democratic parliamentary elections. I was in the capital, Ulaan Baatar, at the time, and following a conversation during a pub quiz a few weeks before the elections found myself with a job. I was to be an FEO – foreign election observer – for the International Republican Institute, an American government-funded organisation.



The provinces of Mongolia, with Dundgovi circled

Firstly, a little background information. The Republic of Mongolia is also known as Outer Mongolia, in contrast to Inner Mongolia, which is firmly under Chinese control. Following a war of independence against the Manchus, the Mongolians had little choice but to follow the lead of their Russian allies and become the world's second Communist nation in 1924. The fortunes of those two countries were closely linked from that point on, to the extent where Russian Cyrillic script was adopted in Mongolia along with many other cultural changes. Purges against Buddhist lamas and other perceived threats to the regime in Mongolia also came close behind Stalin's genocide in the 1930s. In 1990 the Communist system collapsed after demonstrations in Ulaan Baatar, and the first democratic parliamentary election took place in 1992. Despite much support for change in the urban population, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) still enjoyed loyalty in the countryside, and was the only Communist party to maintain power democratically in any of the former USSR countries and allies.

The next four years were extremely difficult, with huge unemployment and poverty, leading to a surprise victory for a democratic coalition in 1996. Alas, this group of aspiring politicians were somewhat discordant, and were not helped by corruption scandals and determined efforts from the MPRP to undermine them. They got through four prime ministers in as many years, so it was perhaps no great shock when they lost in a landslide in 2000. Thus in June, it was with 72 of the 76 seats in parliament held by the 'ex-Communists' that the next election occurred.

I found myself being sent to Dundgovi *aimag*, the Central Gobi province, with Nathan, a fellow volunteer. The area of the province is large but so sparsely populated as to have just two members of parliament. We would be based in the central town, Mandalgovi. The dividing lines between the constituencies handily runs through the middle of the town, so we would be able to see something of each. One was currently represented by one of the

very few non-MPRP members of parliament, a man called J. Narantsatsaralt. (Mongolians use their patronyms before the given name, and rarely in full.) The other was an MPRP man, R. Rash.



The motorway to Mandalgoiv...the second-best road in the Mongolian Gobi

We arrived on the evening of 25th June after a 6-hour drive along dirt tracks. The Saturday was to be spent orientating ourselves, which we duly did, looking as well-informed as we possibly could after two hours of training earlier in the week. The Democratic Party (DP) secretary was happy to talk to us, but we never tracked down his

equivalent in the MPRP. We also spoke with the Local Election Committee of each constituency, and saw the polling stations in Mandalgoiv. The local officials were very keen to discourage us from going to the polling stations in the countryside that day, obviously because they wanted to warn them that we were coming, and lack of time meant that we couldn't go anyway. Sure enough, the people in the two rural polling stations we visited the next day said they had been expecting us as of a phone call the night before.



Two of the many MPRP posters in Ulaan Baatar

Most infringements of electoral law tend to take place during a campaign, and as the only Europeans around Nathan and I were also conspicuous, so we were not expecting to witness anything blatant. Speaking to voters, most people seemed to have heard of incidences of bribery by the political parties. Generally people would have been given gifts of vodka or other small items. The DP secretary had also told us of

a volleyball competition organised by the MPRP where there had been cash prizes of up to \$180 – about 6 months' pay for the average Mongolian. In Ulaan Baatar it was reported by the independent press that the MPRP had abused their monopoly of power to spend large sums of state money on their own campaign, and forcibly appropriated up to 90% of the city's billboards. They were also endorsed by a suspiciously high number of celebrities.

The main problem we had been told to expect was large numbers of transferred votes. There is nothing in Mongolian law to prevent political parties from organising large groups of supporters living in safe seats to go and vote for them in a marginal constituency. And indeed there were very high rates of transfer. At the polling station where we watching the count, 243 votes out of 1150 had been transferred in. However, this apparently open-and-shut case was complicated by the fact that about 30% of Mongolia's population is still nomadic, and summer is the time when most people tend to visit family elsewhere. There was also the fact that 249 had transferred their votes away. There was no way of telling if this movement had made a significant different to the result of the poll. At another polling station we were approached by the DP poll-watcher, who wanted to say something about the MPRP and transferred votes, but he quickly changed his tune to 'No problem, no problem' when his MPRP counterpart and a TV camera materialised. That polling station did have over 200 transfers both in and out, but if the MPRP were indeed seeking to fiddle the result, they failed – Democrat Narantsatsaralt retained his seat in that constituency.

Other incidents were minor. There were policemen present at all the Mandalgoiv polling stations, which we were told regulations required. In fact it is forbidden, but they did not appear to be having any influence over people's behaviour, and were never near the polling booths. We witnessed some confusion over a woman who claimed to have been transferred but was not on any list, who was then allowed to vote. This incident was completely denied when we returned later and asked if there had been any problems.

In the most remote polling station we visited, a couple of voters - one an elderly woman and the other an illiterate man - had trouble filling out their ballot papers and were helped by relatives. Our driver managed to

get lost on the way back from that village, and spent about an hour apparently driving in circles across identical-looking countryside, asking for directions at each of the few *gers* (nomad's tents) we passed. The translator, an English teacher called Bolor, helpfully took this opportunity to carry out a couple more mini-interviews on the local population for us.

Having survived the experience, we took a break for a couple of hours, then headed off to re-visit some polling stations and then watch the count. This went smoothly although, as often happened in Mongolia, with a surreal moment thrown in. In this case it took the form of the appearance immediately after the count of a man who seemed to have been doing some fitness training outside. He introduced himself to Nathan as a half-Bulgarian Mongolian wrestling champion. Despite the fact that the ballot papers had not yet been completely packed up, no-one seemed bothered by his wandering in.

And the results? Both incumbents in Dundgoiv kept their seats, a situation unrepresentative of the country as a whole. The anticipated result had been a slight gain for the Democratic Coalition (MDC), with the MPRP remaining in power. However, as the results came in, it was apparent that Mongolian politics had sprung another surprise: a draw. At midnight after polling day, an MPRP spokesman appeared on television assuring everyone that all was well, and no cheating had taken place. By 7am the next day, as they realised what had happened, miraculous discoveries of electoral fraud were taking place left, right and centre.



The Mongolian Parliament building on the central Sukhbaatar Square in UB

Protests in Ulaan Baatar by MDC supporters followed, and an uneasy truce was called, with half the ministerial posts eventually going to each side. However, two seats were still being contested in the supreme court in February and the MDC has been unable to hold together effectively, handing the MPRP all the ammunition they need

to declare the joint cabinet invalid. In February an anti-corruption protest was held in the city, where some people voiced their discontent with the politicians for wasting the last six months arguing, and doing nothing to alleviate the poor standard of living most Mongolians have. While Mongolia is not on the brink of civil war, the election results were probably not good for anybody in the long run. Many 'swing' voters seem to have supported the MDC because they were fully aware that having one party with a total monopoly on power is not healthy; but they now have rather more Opposition than anyone expected.

Interestingly, UK law forbids independent election monitors from poll-watching. The Electoral Commission made a report on this situation in 2003 (available on their website) and concluded that such observers should be permitted. They allowed that public confidence is not a problem in the UK, and a change might suggest that it was. However, the inconsistency inherent in expecting less democratic countries to let both local and foreign election observers be involved while excluding them from our own voting process is obvious. British poll-watchers are often involved in other countries, so allowing it here would increase their credibility. It would also give people from both fully democratic and less developed countries, through organisations such as the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), the opportunity to witness the process in the UK. Such transparency is only problem if there is something to hide.

