

Economist magazine calls for soldier MPs to lead UK

Julie Hyland
18 September 2018

The Bagehot notebook in the *Economist* has urged the rise of a “new generation of soldier-statesman” as “politicians steeled in war are well placed to unite a divided country.”

The *Economist* was founded in 1843 to agitate for the repeal of the Corn Laws (import tariffs) and was described by Karl Marx as the “aristocracy of finance.” Its column is named after Walter Bagehot, editor of the *Economist* between 1861-1877, banker, journalist and British constitutional expert and is written in Bagehot’s name. Currently authored by Adrian Wooldridge, it is considered a must read on British politics.

The August 30 edition begins, “Whenever it has been confronted with crisis in the past, Britain has summoned up leaders worthy of the challenge. Yet today it faces the crisis of Brexit [British exit from the European Union] without any leaders who deserve the name.”

Prime Minister Theresa May has “dithered,” while Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has “been on the wrong side of most of the serious arguments in post-war history.” Boris Johnson, May’s likely challenger as leader of the Conservative Party, “is regarded by his friends and enemies alike as shallow, showboating and self-serving.”

It is not only the current crop of leaders that earn Bagehot’s disdain. Those like Tony Blair and David Cameron, “who slithered from Oxbridge to the cabinet while barely making contact with the public,” have compounded the “growing problem of trust in leadership in general,” he writes.

Bagehot does not examine the causes behind this state of affairs—the huge growth of social inequality, the monopolisation of all aspects of life by the financial oligarchy, and the resulting putrefaction and disintegration of bourgeois democracy. Rather, he holds out as an example to be aspired to, “John McCain, America’s great soldier-statesman,” whose death, he writes, “is a reminder that Britain has another model of leadership to turn to: politicians who experienced the real world in the sharpest way possible before going into politics, but who are temperamentally sceptical of political dogma.”

The WSWs has analysed the outpouring of “moral hypocrisy, cant and myth-making surrounding the death of Republican Senator John McCain” by the Democrat and Republican apparatuses. The elevation of one of the most vociferous proponents of US military aggression into a political secular

saint is bound up with the factional conflict within the US ruling class over foreign policy—especially against Russia. Its overarching objective is to overcome “the ‘Vietnam Syndrome,’ i.e., mass popular hostility to military interventions” to prepare the political climate for an even greater explosion of US violence.

The eulogising of the neo-con warmonger was also a phenomenon in Britain and for similar reasons.

In the final analysis, the Brexit referendum and the vote to leave the European Union expressed the centrifugal pressures tearing apart the capitalist world order and the turn to nationalist reaction by the powers-that-be to direct class tensions outwards.

Britain’s political class is at one another’s throats over the result and its consequences, but no faction—Leave or Remain—offers any progressive solution to this crisis. All are committed to austerity and war, with their differences over how best to pursue this—from within the European Union or directly against it.

Bagehot posits “soldier-statesman” as those best placed to overcome these divisions and unite the nation. They are in a unique position, he writes, “to solve the biggest problem facing the country: the growing social divisions between the elite and the masses, the provinces and the capital, and indeed, between Brexiteers and Remainers. This is not just because they have access to a language of patriotism that is denied to people who have not risked their lives in combat. It is because they are probably the only members of the leadership class who have lived cheek by jowl, day in day out, with people from every class of society.”

“Politics was defined by soldier-statesman for much of the post-war era,” he writes wistfully, citing Clement Attlee and Harold Macmillan (First World War) and Edward Heath and James Callaghan (Second World War), a “tradition [that] faded in peacetime ...”

That the tradition “faded” is due, in no small part, to widespread opposition to militarism, which had embroiled the globe in two world wars, and witnessed the horror of mass slaughter, fascism and the decimation of European Jewry.

However, Bagehot celebrates that the tradition of soldier-statesman is “now being renewed, after a succession of wars in

the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan.” He gives as an example the uptick in the number of former soldiers turned MPs, of which there are now 52 of the 2016 intake, the overwhelming majority in the Tory Party—48 Conservatives, compared to three Labour MPs and two Democratic Unionists.

Bagehot name-checks Tories Tom Tugendhat (Iraq/Afghanistan), Adam Holloway (Iraq), Johnny Mercer (Afghanistan) and Rory Stewart (Iraq/Afghanistan), along with Labour’s Clive Lewis and Dan Jarvis (Afghanistan).

“Perhaps the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq will help to produce a new type of one-nation politics that can bring Britain back together after the shocks of the financial crisis and Brexit,” he opines.

The fact that these were illegal ventures, commissioned by war criminals and that they were opposed by millions of people is not referenced, and for good reason. The British equivalent of “Vietnam Syndrome” is the 2003 Iraq war. The outright lies and scheming by Tony Blair’s Labour government, in concert with the military-intelligence services, to justify the US-led invasion had such an impact on political consciousness that parliament was forced to veto military intervention against Syria in 2013.

This has not prevented covert British military action, but this is insufficient under conditions in which Brexit risks not only Britain’s position in Europe and, with it, its principal use-value for Washington, but the undermining of its role within NATO, i.e., the essential mechanisms through which it maintained a global political and military clout in the post-war period despite the loss of Empire. It acquires greater urgency given that the target of British and US aggression is no longer only largely defenceless, semi-colonial countries in the Middle East but Russia and China, both nuclear powers.

Bagehot’s political concerns were amplified in his subsequent column, September 6, on “Britain’s equilibrium of incompetence.” It was previously “common for one of Britain’s great parties to be in crisis when the other is in clover,” he notes. Today, however, “Britain is currently witnessing something unusual: both its main parties are in crisis at the same time, divided over their future direction, racked by factional fights and worried about leadership challenges.”

“The two main parties are incompetent as well as divided” and “The cabinet and shadow-cabinet are stuffed with hangers-on.” With the UK set to quit the EU on March 29, 2019—just six months away—options are dwindling.

With an eye to plans by sections of the Tories and the Labour right to form a new so-called centre-right party committed to preventing a government led by Jeremy Corbyn and dedicated to overturning Brexit, Bagehot warns, “The British system makes it difficult for a new party to get off the ground.”

The right-wing split off from Labour in 1981—the Social Democratic Party— “won enough votes to shore up [Margaret] Thatcher,” he writes, “but not enough to win significant representation in parliament.” Efforts to emulate it today would

still mean Britain “leaving the European Union without a plan or a parachute.”

For Bagehot, the turn to solidier-statesman raises the possibility of overcoming “the problem of partisanship by instinctively reaching across party lines.” His August 30 column specifically cites how Conservative MP “Tugendhat points out that he has a personal bond with [Labour’s] Mr. Jarvis, with whom he served in Afghanistan, that transcends political divisions.”

In 2016, Tugendhat and Jarvis were promoted as the two “Afghan veterans” who—despite representing supposedly opposing parties—were once again fighting side by side in favour of Remain in the Brexit referendum. Both made NATO and the war drive against Russia central to their support. Jarvis said that a vote to quit the EU would be a “gift to Putin,” as “NATO plays a big role in our national security” and would be “weakened if Britain leaves the EU.” Tugendhat argued that Britain’s position in the EU was critical “for the security of our allies.” “Today, under pressure from growing Russian expansionism, our friends are again under threat,” he wrote.

Tugendhat is a rising Tory star and serves as chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, in which capacity he has demanded a stepping up of British action against Russia and has condemned supposed British “inaction” in Syria as opening the way for Russia and Iran to intervene. Just days ago, the *Spectator* ran a flattering interview with the former lieutenant colonel under the heading “[T]he next Tory leader should be from my generation,” in which he was clearly speaking of himself.

Jarvis opposed Corbyn in both Labour leadership challenges and voted in favour of military air strikes on Syria in 2015. In April, he announced he would run for the position of Sheffield city mayor and would retain his parliamentary seat if he won. He faced down objections to his “unfair and undemocratic” pronouncement, winning the backing of Labour’s National Executive Committee. He won the mayoralty. He is part of the “Spirit of Britain” group, alongside the likes of Stephen Kinnock, who has played a lead role in the attempts to remove Corbyn and who is now promoting the values of “localism, community, patriotism, pragmatism” as an alternative to the “Hard Left’s” criticism of NATO and capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact