

The Bizarre State of Western Democracy*

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During the entire post-war period when it has been in existence in the metropolitan countries, democracy has never been in as bizarre a state as it is today. Democracy is supposed to mean the pursuit of policies that are in conformity with the wishes of the electorate. True, it is not that the governments first ascertain popular wishes, and then decide on policy; the conformity between the two is typically ensured under bourgeois rule by the government deciding on policies in accordance with ruling class interests, and then having a propaganda machinery that persuades the people about the wisdom of these policies. The conformity between public opinion and what the ruling class wants is thus achieved in a complex manner whose essence lies in the manipulation of public opinion.

What is currently happening however is altogether different: public opinion, notwithstanding all the propaganda directed at it, wants policies that are altogether different from those being systematically pursued by the ruling class. The policies favoured by the ruling class in other words are being pursued despite public opinion being palpably and systematically opposed to them. This is made possible by having most political parties line up behind these policies; that is, by getting a very large spectrum of political formations or parties backing these policies against the wishes of the majority of the electorate. The current situation is thus characterised by two distinct features: first, a broad unanimity among the bulk of political formations (parties); and second, a total lack of congruence between what these parties agree on and what the people want. Such a situation is quite unprecedented in the history of bourgeois democracy. These policies moreover relate not to minor questions concerning this or that matter, but to fundamental issues of war and peace.

Take the United States. The majority of people in that country according to all available opinion polls are appalled by Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinian people; they would like the US to bring the war to an end and not keep supplying arms to Israel for prolonging it. But the US government is doing precisely the opposite, even at the risk of escalating the war into one that engulfs the entire middle east. Likewise, public opinion in the US does not want a continuation of the Ukraine war. It favours an end to that conflict through a negotiated peace; but the US government (together with that of the UK) has systematically torpedoed all possibilities of peaceful settlement. Its opposition to the Minsk agreements, an opposition conveyed to Ukraine through British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's trip to Kiev, is what started the war in the first place; and even now when Putin had made certain proposals for establishing peace, it egged Ukraine on to launch its Kursk offensive which ended all hopes of peace.

What is significant is that both the Republicans and the Democrats in the US are agreed on this policy of providing arms to Netanyahu and Zelensky, despite public opinion wanting peace and despite the fact that any adventurism by Ukraine runs the risk of unleashing a nuclear conflagration.

This contrast between what the people want, despite all the propaganda they have been subjected to, and what the political establishment ordains, afflicts all

metropolitan countries; but nowhere is it as stark as in Germany. The Ukraine war directly impinges on Germany in a manner it does not on any other metropolitan country, since Germany was entirely dependent on Russian gas for its energy needs. The sanctions on Russia have caused a shortage of gas; and the import of more expensive substitutes from the US has pushed up gas prices to levels that strongly impinge on the living standards of German workers. An end to the Ukraine war is urgently demanded by German workers; but neither the ruling coalition consisting of the Social Democrats, the Free Democrats and the Greens, nor the main opposition consisting of the Christian Democrats and the Christian Socialists, is showing any interest in a peaceful resolution of the conflict. On the contrary the German political establishment is trying to whip up fears of Russian troops appearing on German borders, even though, ironically, it is German troops that are stationed at present in Lithuania on the borders of Russia!

In their desperation for an end to the Ukraine war the German working people are turning to the neo-fascist AfD which professes to be against the war (though one knows it will inevitably betray this promise once it comes anywhere near power) and the new Left party of Sahra Wagenknecht that broke away from the parent Left Party, Die Linke, on this very issue of war.

Exactly the same is true of German attitudes towards the genocide in Gaza. While the bulk of the German population opposes this genocide, the German government has actually criminalised all opposition to the Israeli genocide on the grounds that it constitutes “anti-semitism”. It even broke up a convention that was being organised to protest against the genocide, to which internationally-known speakers like Yanis Varoufakis had been invited. The use of the “anti-semitism” stick to beat all opposition to Israel’s aggression is pervasive in other metropolitan countries too. In Britain, Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader of the Labour Party, was hounded out of that party, ostensibly on grounds of his so-called “anti-semitism” but actually because of his support for the Palestinian cause; and US campus authorities have invoked this charge against the widespread campus protests that have rocked that country.

Such riding roughshod over public opinion is typically sought to be achieved by keeping these burning issues of peace and war off political discussion altogether. In the coming US presidential elections, for instance, since both the contenders, Donald Trump and Kamla Harris, are agreed on supplying arms to Israel, this issue itself will not figure in any presidential debate or in the presidential campaign. While other topics where they differ will hold centre-stage, the crucial one that affects people and where they hold a different opinion from the contestants, will not be an issue for debate.

One reason for the support of the political establishment for Israeli actions, which is far from being a negligible one, is the generous funding that such support gets from pro-Israel donors. According to a report published in the Delphi Initiative (August 21), half the cabinet of Keir Starmer, the newly-elected Labour prime minister of Britain, had received money from pro-Israel sources to fight the elections that brought them to power. The same number of the same journal also reports that one-third of the Conservative members of the British parliament had received money from pro-Israel sources for elections. Pro-Israel money in other words is available to both the main parties of Britain; this makes support for Israeli actions a bipartisan affair.

On the other hand what happens to those who stand with Palestine is illustrated by two cases in the US Members of the Congress, Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush, both black progressive representatives, who were sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and strong critics of Israeli genocide, were defeated by the intervention of AIPAC (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee), a powerful pro-Israel lobby, which poured millions of dollars into the effort. The Delphi Initiative of August 31 reports that 17 million dollars had been spent for Bowman's defeat and 9 million dollars for the Ad campaign against Cori Bush. Interestingly, the campaign against Cori Bush did not mention Israel's aggression against Gaza, as AIPAC knew that on that particular issue the public would have supported Cori Bush rather than her opponent, and hence frustrated its plans for her defeat. What all this means is that a fundamental decision on war and peace that affects everybody is being taken in the metropolitan countries against the wishes of the people by a political establishment that is financed by lobbies with vested interests.

In the metropolis there has thus been a transition from "manipulation of dissent" through propaganda, to the total ignoring of dissent, even dissent by a majority, that has proved to be immune to propaganda. This represents a new stage in the attenuation of democracy, a stage characterised by an unprecedented moral bankruptcy of the political establishment. Such moral bankruptcy of the traditional political establishment also constitutes the context for the growth of fascism; but whether or not fascism actually comes to power, the attenuation of democracy in metropolitan societies has already disempowered people to an extent that is quite unprecedented.

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