

# Riding Two Horses

Glyn Ford



*Riding Two Horses traces the eventful life and career of Glyn Ford, Member of the European Parliament for 25 years and erstwhile leader of its European Parliamentary Labour Party. Ford's leadership coincided with a period when the Left was in the ascendancy across much of the globe. The influence of Europe's Left during this era is examined by an active participant with a unique standpoint: a frequent visitor to East Asia; frontrunner in pushing for anti-racist legislation in the European Union; practitioner of 'soft' power and balanced relationships with Asia and the USA; advocate of progressive science and technology policy; political representative and activist in pursuit of an accountable and democratic European Union. Looking ahead, Glyn Ford makes the case that any prospect of the UK rejoining the European Union will be neither easy nor early. Re-entry will be impossible without addressing the UK's democratic deficit, and will more likely follow the break-up of the UK than forestall it. Yet the UK as a medium-sized nation state is largely impotent without constructive engagement with Europe. We print two excerpts that will interest readers of The Spokesman.*

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The 1989 intake augmented both the Tribunites and the right with the Campaign Group standing pat. There was a new element with the 'Federalist Four' – Ken Coates, Peter Crampton, Henry McCubbin and Ian White – on the hard left, but strongly pro-European. Coates had

previously been expelled from the party and had been instrumental in setting up the Institute for Workers' Control (IWC). I knew him from my minor involvement in the IWC and a more active role as a founder member in 1973 of SERA. Despite being let back into the party, there is no way he would have been allowed to stand if Labour HQ had thought there was any prospect he might win. He wasn't the only one. Walworth Road's psephological naivety made for interesting times.

### Travels with Ken

The following year Ken and I were to be deported from Algeria after we joined Ahmed Ben Bella's entourage that accompanied him home from Barcelona to Algiers, ending his exile. The Algerian authorities allowed 'the president' to land, but decided the foreigners accompanying him were *persona non grata*. Having been detained for a few hours in the port, we were physically forced onto a ferry sailing for Marseille; one of the more recalcitrant was thrown bodily onto the ship's deck as it pulled away from the dock. Many of those expelled were stateless or had passports from countries requiring visas for France. Luckily, Stuart Holland was with us and he phoned French prime minister Michel Rocard's office. When the ship docked, we miscreants were taken off first, and a team of customs officials (arranged by Interior Minister Pierre Joxe) stamped passports on a production line, giving forty-eight hour transit visas to even those with the most dubious sets of papers.



*Ken Coates (left) and Ben Bella (right) arriving in Algiers by boat, 1990. Crowds visible behind with banners were estimated at 100,000 people.*

This was not my first experience of Ken's political peregrinations. I had travelled with him and Ken Fleet at the end of March 1988 to the Jerusalem District Court to attend the conclusion of the trial of Mordechai

Vanunu, who had blown the whistle to the *Sunday Times* on Israel's nuclear weapons programme and their hundred nuclear weapons at the Negev Nuclear Research Centre, where he worked as a technician. A classic Mossad honey-trap saw him lured from London to Rome by a female agent, from where he was abducted by the Israeli authorities and rendered back to Israel. His trial was held *in camera*. No one, let alone us, was allowed in the court. After Vanunu received his eighteen-year sentence, we travelled down to Shikea Prison in Ashkelon in an attempt to visit. The prison gates were as far as we got ...

### **Backward to Europe**

Labour sacrificed party for nation, hammering the last nail in its coffin in Scotland; it is unconscionable they could ever challenge the Tories as the party of union. There was a strong left case for remaining in the UK and Europe, but Labour never made it – a class case that pitched the interests of employees against employers, labour versus capital, which would conclude that the best interests of the labour movement were served by staying in both. For Labour supporters, opting for independence from the EU in 2016 would have left Scotland adrift in the North Atlantic with no guarantee Madrid would not abort any attempted rescue.

Four years on, coiffed to Britain's other nations, Caledonia has been cruelly dragged from a continental union in the interests of a middling nation state. The very idea that circumstances have not changed sufficiently to warrant a second independence referendum would be farcical if it wasn't so consequential. When the referendum comes, the money will be on leave – and it should be. From an economic and political standpoint, the choice of being an integral part of the EU – one of the world's three largest economic powers – or marooned as a peripheral appendage of 'Singapore on Thames' is not difficult to answer. Apart from the single-currency issue – which should not be understated – negotiations with Brussels for Edinburgh would be simple and quick.

As for Northern Ireland, May and Johnson between them welded the economies of North and South together while simultaneously pulling those across the Irish Sea apart. The surge in North–South trade in many sectors far exceeds any losses across the Irish sea. Northern unionism was politically sacrificed to 'Get Brexit Done', all at a time when Dublin has demonstrated over abortion, equal marriage and the rest that it is streets ahead of democratic unionism's reactionary instincts. 'Rome rule' holds few fears for the young and progressive today in the North. Now the economic benefits of a united Ireland add their voice. With Sinn Fein in

2022 the largest party in North and South, a Scottish vote for independence would see Dublin trigger the proviso in the Good Friday Agreement for a referendum on a united Ireland and the end of partition. Dublin would have to be very stupid to lose. The preparation of a comprehensive plan for unification with high levels of autonomy for education, policing and local government in the Six Counties would smooth an end to partition. Even better placed than Scotland – as German unification demonstrated – with the Northern Ireland protocol Belfast can slip smoothly back into the EU without negotiations. Wales has always been the laggard; Cardiff will never lead, but it may follow. With Scotland and Northern Ireland gone, England's last settlement may increasingly lack appeal, and there are seven EU member states with smaller populations.

Where do I stand? I accept Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have the right to self-determination. In 2014 the progressive vote in Scotland should have unquestionably been cast in favour of union and Union. The 2016 Leave vote changed the balance of benefit. It was both self-harming for the English – and Welsh – and injurious to Scotland and Northern Ireland. Now it's impossible not to counsel progressives in the colonies of the English Empire that their interests will be better served by Brussels than London. Some may self-servingly argue Labour can't win without Scotland. For me it's unclear whether there is any prospect of hearing the distant bugles of the Scottish cavalry coming to rescue English Labour's circled wagons any time soon. Even were it true, do we really expect the periphery to immolate itself for a centre that bears responsibility for their plight? That's seeking self-sacrifice of a heroic order.

It may in fact be the case that the best or only route back to the EU lies through the backroads of Scottish independence and the unfinished business of Irish unification – a broken UK glued back together within the curtilage of the EU; unity through community. Like the Panda's thumb, the proof of evolution after all lies in those adaptations that arise from improbable foundations. As Tom Nairn argued in *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977, revised 1982), it would be the very process of disintegration that would offer respite by finally destroying Britain's feudal state institutions and allowing a new politics and polity to be born from the ashes. The wisest choice might be to embrace the prospect and work to ensure Nairn is proved right.

### ***Riding Two Horses: Labour in Europe***

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