

Off The cuff

DON MILLIGAN'S

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Stop Carping!

YESTERDAY I was astonished when George Monbiot made me laugh. He doesn't do that often. He did it by saying that "The worst possible people are in charge at the worst possible time." This thought was instantly wrecked by the image in my mind's eye of Jeremy, Diane, Emily, Dawn, and John, being in charge. What a Carry On that would be!

George's absurdity was then followed by a blatant lie: "In the UK, the US and Australia, the politics of the governing parties have been built on the dismissal and denial of risk." This appears to be true of Trump's White House, and the administration in Canberra, but it is not true that Boris Johnson's government is "floundering in the face of this pandemic." Or that our Tories "are called upon to govern, but they know only that government is the enemy."

Monbiot, like many of those to his left are plainly in denial. They appear not to see or hear Boris Johnson when he says, that if the state is asking people to take extraordinary measures to beat COVID-19, then it is only reasonable that the state should *will* the means. This government, just like Tory governments during the middle of the last century is perfectly prepared to mobilise all the state's resources to deal with serious and unusual threats to the society at large. Our carping radicals are blind and deaf to Rishi Sunak's efforts to pump as many billions as he can into the economy to help prop up companies, large and small. The government's pledge to prohibit evictions, or to defer mortgage payments, pass them by; ditto the cancellation of regular Job Seeker's Allowance interviews with Jobcentre Plus. Similarly, the orders going out from the Chancellor's office to insurance companies, instructing them to honour all (interruption of business) claims, have slipped below the notice of those committed to attacking the Tories, whatever they do.

Paul Embury, of the 'Blue Labour' school of thought, has struck an entirely different posture. Expressing support for those on the Tory and Labour back benches who are demanding comprehensive employment protection measures for workers with the payment of wages by the state throughout the crisis, regardless of contract. Only this can prevent mass redundancies and millions on the dole. Former Chancellor and Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has thrown his weight behind these demands. The imperative for him is to ensure that when we finally

emerge from the recession brought on by the pandemic we are not faced with an uncontrollable slump, a slump worse than that of 1929, with all the political and military consequences which would follow in its wake.

The Tory MP, Greg Clark, former secretary of state for business has called on the Government to act as the “insurer of last resort”, and pay workers’ their wages. Ian Blackford of the Scottish National Party has, along with Liberal Democrat members of Parliament, raised the demand for a temporary universal basic income to be paid to everybody whose livelihood has been threatened by the partial collapse of the economy. Rishi Sunak has pledged to work with all parties, and trade unions, to discuss this idea, and a number of others, which aim to protect jobs by ensuring that workers are paid throughout the COVID-19 shutdown.

These are uncertain times and we all find ourselves in uncharted waters. Nothing at all can be gained by those who allow their visceral hatred of Boris Johnson in particular, and Tories in general, to disrupt the need for a national effort and national solidarity. I have noticed many people on the left talking about solidarity and social cohesion as if they invented the concepts. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Two weeks ago, a young woman in my building emailed an offer of help with shopping and anything else I might need. On Monday of this week, three days before some leftist leaflets urging positive social activity popped through my letterbox, a COVID-19 help and social group, was formed by people from 33 flats in our building – that’s almost fifty per cent of the apartments in our block. I know this sort of thing is happening in neighbourhoods all over the place, spontaneously, without any commitment to overthrow capitalism, to *raise people’s consciousness*, to make another world possible, or to prevent the return to “business as usual” when we’re through the worst. The charitable impulse is a resolutely social impulse. It keeps hospices open, lifeboats afloat, rural fire

services on call, air ambulances at the ready, cancer research in funds, and a host other services on an even keel. It's the charitable impulse that will help, along with resolute and massive action by the state, to get us through this nightmare.

The Government, together with Chris Whitty (Chief Medical Officer), and Sir Patrick Vallance (Chief Scientific Adviser), have, I've no doubt, made mistakes, and they will not get everything right in future either. However, they are to be congratulated in relying largely on voluntary compliance, rather than imposing draconian supervision by police and soldiers. It is true, of course, that the authorities have today passed a law giving the government extensive emergency powers of repression, and compulsion, but these are reserve powers, and we have to hope that the Government gets by without implementing them.

We will also be able to cheer if Boris and Rishi listen well to Gordon Brown, Paul Embury, Ian Blackford, Greg Clark, and others, because they can help make sure that as few people as possible die, and that we can come out the other side recovering from recession rather than plunging into a catastrophic slump.

This is not the time to hope for the collapse of capitalism. The collapse of the system in the present circumstances would unleash terror and misery on an unimaginable scale. An alternative to the present system can only come about when the majority of working people are won over to the need for economic democracy, when the majority of people insist upon taking an active part in running their own workplaces and the economy as a whole. We are very far from this being the case, and loose talk about making revolutionary gains out of the present crisis is contemptable.

The carping must stop, and everybody should give *critical support* to the Government, and concentrate on developing positive ideas that can reduce the death toll, and shore up the wages and businesses we all rely on.