

## **Why the Left needs to get its priorities straight**

With the rise of Donald Trump, France's National Front and Austria's FPÖ, to name just a few, the question of what has happened to the voice of the political Left has been asked very frequently over the course of the last year. One of their most important problems was highlighted quite accurately by U.S. political commentator Bill Maher in his 'Real Time' show in January 2017:

"You know in 2016, conservatives won the White House, both Houses of Congress and almost two-thirds of governorships and state legislatures. Whereas liberals[,] on the other hand, caught Steve Martin calling Carrie Fisher beautiful in a tweet and made him take it down."<sup>1</sup>

It has become increasingly frustrating to watch those who would traditionally align themselves among the political Left sidetracked with, as Maher put it "lazy" discussions and attacks on "friends who are maybe not quite as evolved as you". To be clear, the author of this article usually agrees with the Leftist point of view on subjects ranging from organic foods to transgender toilets. Therefore this article should not be mistaken as an argument against political correctness and idealism. Rather, it is a call to re-prioritise how our idealistic energies should be employed. If we are to begin to win back power and prevent a further drift towards nationalism, we will need to shift our emphasis.

We should be talking, for one, about the continued accumulation of yet more wealth for a tiny group of individuals, along with stagnating wages and poor working conditions for a much broader proportion of the population. A recent example of such excessive accumulation was the news that Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, has now amassed a net fortune of over \$100 billion<sup>2</sup>. Just a few days earlier, the United Kingdom's *Mirror* published an undercover investigation into working conditions at the company's Tilbury warehouse in Essex, titled "timed toilet breaks, impossible targets and workers falling asleep on feet"<sup>3</sup>. The discrepancy between the astronomical sums collected by a few individuals at the top and the simultaneous lack of a sense of responsibility and gratitude for the workers, without whom this success simply wouldn't have been possible, has become the norm in 21st-century capitalism. Yet we have become so accustomed to hearing about extreme inequality that such stories are often shrugged off.

A further, similar issue is that of tax avoidance. In 2012, James Henry, the senior adviser of Tax Justice Network, published a report called 'The Price of Offshore, Revisited'<sup>4</sup>. This contained a conservative estimate of 'global offshore financial wealth', figured at a stunning \$21-32 trillion. In light of the recent Paradise Papers scandal published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, there has been no progress on the issue. And as recently as November

2017, Economist Gabriel Zucman wrote in *the Guardian* that ‘nearly 10% of the world’s wealth is held offshore by a few individuals’<sup>5</sup>. These citizens would be well advised to recall the words of Theodore Roosevelt, who claimed the wealthy owe “a peculiar obligation to the state” as they receive the most “advantages from the mere existence of government”. In an unstable society without law and order, even the rich wouldn’t be able to enjoy their wealth.

Clearly then, these two issues alone provide more than enough reason to revolt. However, the Social Democratic and Left-wing politicians have been unable to deliver optimistic alternatives in a form sparking interest and encouraging trust. This is especially important in the light of the threat we currently face from nationalist parties. There was, however, one positive example in 2017. If any political development stood out as a role model for the Left, it was the success of the United Kingdom’s Labour Party, whose proposals included the introduction of a new 50% rate of tax on earnings above £123,000, raising the corporate tax rate and the promise to “act decisively on tax havens”<sup>6</sup>. The Labour Party ultimately defied the polls in preventing a parliamentary majority for the Conservatives and gaining 31 seats. Admittedly, this success will have been helped by the hype around Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who fulfils all the classic hallmarks of a populist. But it also showed what can be achieved when given the opportunity to rally around a movement which encompasses concrete, left-leaning alternatives. If we follow this example, we have the capacity to reverse the tide of nationalism and elect governments which fight for our ideals. While complaints about Steve Martin’s tweets have their place, they mustn’t become our highest priority in the fight for social justice.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1702/10/se.01.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-11-24/jeff-bezos-fortune-hits-100-billion-on-black-friday-stock-surge>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/timed-toilet-breaks-impossible-targets-11587888>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.taxjustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Price-of-Offshore-Revisited-Jersey-Finance-Study-2014.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/08/tax-havens-dodging-theft-multinationals-avoiding-tax>

<sup>6</sup> <http://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/labour-manifesto-2017.pdf>