



**2026-02 March - York Conference**

# **INTERLIB**

**Journal of the Liberal International British Group**



**Ming Campbell, Lord Campbell of Pittenween**  
**US/Israel-Iran War Türkiye Chagos Islands**  
**Russia–Ukraine War**

# EVENTS

13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> March Liberal Democrats Spring Conference, York.

8<sup>th</sup> June LIBG Forum on Iran & the Middle East – by Zoom

September Liberal Democrats Autumn Conference, Brighton

3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> November LI Congress Bangkok

5<sup>th</sup> November travel to Taipei

6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> November LI Congress Taipei

*For bookings & other information please contact LIBG at*

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**Deadline for Conference Reports 6<sup>th</sup> April**

# York – the international bits...

## Friday 13 March

**15.00-17.00 Thriving Economy Consultation Session** - paper has the international elements (trade relations with China, Europe and USA, more specially, on resilience on these markets, tariff, dumping of cheap goods into our market...)

**17.30-18.15** Choral Evensong, York Minster

## Saturday 14 March

**11.00–12.30 Consultative session: International Security** - **Lendal Room, Barbican** Chair: Dr Ben Jones

**12.50 Lunch break and fringe**

**13.00-14.00 Q & A session on international affairs** with Callum Miller and Jeremy Purvis **Lendal Room, Barbican**

**14.55 Policy Motion F10: From Local Roots to Global Reach: A Liberal Vision for Universities** – *Universities are a vital part of Britain's soft power; a number of sections are related to international affairs.*

**15.40 Speech F11:** James MacCleary MP (Spokesperson for Defence)

**Fringe early evening session 18.15–19.15**

**18.15–19.45 Consultative session: Defending Democracy** - *there are a few sections related to international affairs: foreign interference; donations (crypto and foreign donations); and mass media (press with foreign backing).*

**Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine Complicit: Britain's Role in the Destruction of Gaza** A conversation with Peter Osborne, former chief political commentator at the Daily Telegraph and Spectator, about his new book: *Complicit: Britain's Role in the Destruction of Gaza*, published October 2025 by OR Books. **Hilton, Bootham Room**

**Fringe mid evening 19.45–21.00**

**LGBT+ Liberal Democrats Standing up for Trans Rights Across the Atlantic** Trans rights are under attack in both the UK and the USA. Join queer politicians from both sides of the Atlantic to explore how we fight back. **Novotel, Meeting Room 3**

**LibDem Friends of Ukraine - Corruption in Ukraine: the facts and the spin.** Russia and America decry corruption in Ukraine to dissuade others from aiding Ukraine and believing in the possibility of victory. While it's an issue, real progress is being made but more is required for Ukraine to join the EU. **Hilton, Walmgate Room**

**Saturday late evening**

**Glee Club (starting at 22.00 until late)** Join us for the ultimate end-of conference celebration! Pick up your copy of the Liberator Songbook and come raise the roof! **Novotel, Fishergate Suite**

**Sunday 15 March**

**09.00–09.30 F15** Emergency motion

**10.15–11.00 F18** Policy Motion: Trump and the Wider World

# An Appreciation of the Life of Menzies ('Ming') Campbell (1941-2025)

'Ming was undoubtedly the best Foreign Secretary the United Kingdom never had.' These were words repeatedly said, by political friend and foe alike, of Menzies Campbell – Lord Campbell of Pittenween CH CBE PC KC – throughout his long parliamentary career and after his death on 26 September 2025 at age 84.

Winning the North East Fife seat as a Liberal from the hitherto unassailable Conservatives at his third attempt in 1987, he combined a career at the Scottish Bar with the work of an accessible and assiduous constituency MP whilst also making his mark at Westminster. There is no doubt he sacrificed a distinguished legal career to continue to serve his constituents & party and turned down an offer to be appointed a Judge on at least one occasion.

He became party spokesman on sport where his previous Olympic athletic success and lifelong love of many sports made him a well-informed voice. He held the Great Britain 100m record from 1967-1974.

A subsequent appointment as defence spokesman (his constituency included RAF Leuchars) led in time to him succeeding David Steel as foreign affairs spokesman in 1992. As an authoritative voice of sanity and liberal internationalism, he was sought constantly by the media for his intelligent and well-informed views, especially before and during the Second Gulf War which the Liberal Democrats under Charles Kennedy had strongly and bravely opposed as lacking international legal legitimacy and political rationale.

He was Leader of the UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of NATO from 2010-15, and served with distinction as Vice President of the Assembly, Chairperson of the Defence and Security Committee's Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Defence and Security Cooperation and Chair of the Political Committee during his 17 years on the Assembly.

In a keenly-fought leadership contest following the resignation of Charles Kennedy, Ming emerged victorious however, at the very moment of his election, BBC Live posed the question of whether he was too old for the job. He led the party with courage and determination until he too was forced to suddenly resign as leader due to constant negative media coverage that focussed on his age and appearance rather than the policies he and his colleagues espoused. He may have worn conservative dress but that concealed a radical liberal heart.

During his period as leader, he promoted younger and women MPs and strongly supported the party's position on the environment, climate change and Scottish Home Rule as well as maintaining its distinct position on international affairs. He stood up to his friend Gordon Brown when the latter sought to co-opt two Liberal Democrat peers to his government. It is believed that he was offered the ambassadorship to Australia but chose to decline the offer.



**Ming at the Halo Fringe Meeting, Bournemouth 2023**

No recollection of his life would be complete without reference to Elspeth Campbell, his wife of 53 years who pre-deceased him in 2023. Invariably at his side in the constituency, in London and at conference, theirs was a formidable partnership. Together they enjoyed enduring friendships across and beyond the political world. After stepping down as MP, he continued in his role as Chancellor of St Andrews University and as a member of the House of Lords. With his own health in decline, Elspeth's passing affected him deeply.

At the 2007 Federal Spring Conference in Harrogate he faced a motion proposing that Trident be scrapped and not replaced at the end of its life. This position was widely supported within the party and amongst some MPs. Conference was stunned into silence when he was called to the stage in the debate and gave what many saw as the best speech of his career, arguing passionately to delay the decision to focus on renewed efforts to promote multi-lateral nuclear disarmament. After a close show of hands, he won narrowly by 454–414. A staunch but not uncritical Atlanticist, it is not difficult to discern his views on the damage to both European and American interests being done by the Second Trump Presidency.



**Ming Campbell with John Barnett & Iain Smith**

Ming's wisdom and knowledge on international affairs and defence was recognised and respected across the political spectrum. It often seemed that he was invited onto political and news programmes for his acknowledged expertise as much as his political contribution. His was a voice of reason and liberal values that is so badly missed in these troubled times.

He was a longstanding member and supporter of Liberal International (British Group) for which he participated in countless fringe meetings and events.

*Iain Smith (MSP for North East Fife, 1999-2011)*  
*John Barnett (Convener North East Fife Liberal Democrats, 2004-2008)*

## Watson's World View

### Sir Graham Watson

Half a century ago, on 5 June 1975, the UK electorate was asked whether it wished to remain in the European Economic Community on the renegotiated terms of membership presented by Harold Wilson's Labour government. At 19 years of age I was motivated to join the campaign for a Yes vote.

The world looked very different from today. A nuclear arms race pitted the capitalist 'west' against the communist 'east': China, then the world's most populous state, was a country still incapacitated by the 'great leap forward' under Chairman Mao which broke both its legs; Africans and most Asians lived in dire poverty with little access to sanitation, education or health care while their agriculture produced cash crops for the markets of their former or continuing colonial oppressors. E.F Schumacher had only recently published 'Small is Beautiful', arguing for ways other than measures of raw economic growth to determine human well-being, and discrimination on grounds of gender or sexual preference was still commonplace. Since operating an early computer required the learning of a language called Cobol, Pascal or Basic, the internet (then the Arpanet) founded six years earlier was rather slow to develop.

To my 19 year old brain, being part of the emerging political Europe increasingly sharing ideas of best practice across frontiers was associated with human progress and freedom from oppression. A year later, when I joined the Scottish Young Liberals and through them the Scottish Liberal Party - because Liberals were the only people arguing for EEC membership, environmental concern and an end to abhorrences like apartheid in South Africa - I began in Scotland a fifty-year journey in UK and European politics.

In those fifty years the EU has become a major force in global politics, the Berlin Wall has fallen, China has risen and the anglo-saxon world - with Brexit and Trump - has diverted from its course at a radical tangent.

Despite its failings, the EU has become the principal global advocate of the rules-based international order for which Canada's PM Mark Carney so eloquently argued at January's World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. It is on the cusp of metamorphosis into a wider body of concerned medium-size powers - including countries like Canada, South Korea and perhaps Taiwan - which may in time allow the UK back into structured co-operation with its neighbours.

This month's report by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 'Building a UK-EU Strategic partnership fit for the future' justly criticises UK government policy for lacking 'definition, direction and drive' in its policy re-set with the EU. Rejoining ERASMUS, for example, has been overshadowed by failure to join the Security Action For Europe (SAFE) programme for technological military co-operation. Yet the new direction of travel after the Conservatives' Brexit vote and eight years of pursuant mayhem is as clear as it is welcome. Re-joining is not back on the agenda: getting back on board to help create a shared future is within our grasp.

This year's LI Transatlantic Liberal Legislators' Dialogue, which I co-chair with Canada's Senator Art Eggleton, is likely to be held in Iceland. Discussions are expected to centre around the building of a coalition of medium powers for a rules-based international order. Since last June the EU has been discussing with Canada enhanced co-operation in R&D, environmental protection, education and cultural exchange and combatting crime, building on the successful EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement of 2016. Similar trade agreements with South Korea, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay could be developed in similar ways. Opportunities for further progress towards coherent global governance under UN auspices exist: Liberal Democrats must promote them.

As I put down my pen - for this will be my last *interLib* column as Chairman of the British Group of Liberal International - I picture a 19 year old in Iceland campaigning for a Yes vote in their country's referendum this summer to resume the EU accession negotiations they abandoned in 2013, destined to enjoy but yet unaware of her/his future as an Icelandic Member of the European Parliament in a European Union at the heart of a wider common front for democracy and the rule of law.

*Sir Graham Watson was the first UK Liberal Democrat to be elected to the European Parliament and the longest serving. His 20-year tenure included two and a half years as Chairman of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee and seven and a half as Leader of the Liberal Democrat ALDE Group. On reaching the age of 70 in March he will stand down from all committee and board positions he currently occupies, including the chair of LIBG, to concentrate on other pursuits.*

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### ***Sir Graham Watson***

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# Trump's Pledge to Bring Hell to the Middle East — Will It Fire Back?

## Mohammed Nossier

War often appears to be an easy option for the United States; one only needs to look at recent history. This notion has clearly been applied to Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen, with the exception of the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, which had a clear UN mandate. The US administration does not always respect its own constitutional requirement of obtaining Congress's approval prior to going to war, nor does it consistently comply with international law under the United Nations. Moreover, being a superpower does not necessarily mean being able to win every battle.

The United States is living under the illusion that the world operates in its favor and acts accordingly. Some policymakers seem to believe that striking a sovereign nation such as Iran would advance the efforts of Iranian protesters, even if such attacks result in the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians. While a military strike might weaken the Iranian regime, it is unlikely to substitute it—especially given the unrealistic notion of grooming the son of the former Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who has lived in exile in the United States for nearly half a century, to potentially rule the country.

We are living in the era of Trump, who often appears unconstrained by either law or morality, while paradoxically believing that his personal moral framework should apply universally. Whether the United States wins or loses a war with Iran is a fluid matter, as its objectives may shift depending on the evolving status of the conflict. The U.S. president, who faces limited immediate accountability for such decisions, could bypass Congress's authorization when engaging in war and determining its consequences.

The United States often prioritizes hard power over soft power, justifying wars by claiming they are meant to eliminate terrorism and establish democracy—a mission that has frequently proven unsuccessful. Bringing war to an already volatile region risks expanding instability among millions of poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised citizens who may come to believe that violence is the only language governing international relations. The United States must also consider that its military interventions may themselves contribute to the escalation of terrorism.

Although there is no such thing as a completely effective anti-missile defense system, this conflict has demonstrated the vulnerability of Gulf nations to Iranian attacks. Iran appears to be sending a message that it could easily draw its neighbors into the same conflict, despite their advanced military equipment purchased from the United States. Iran also understands that missile strikes that threaten energy infrastructure could drive global energy prices higher—something Western nations would prefer to avoid. Once the war ends, it would not be surprising if the United States expects Gulf states to bear the financial burden of a conflict they did not initiate.

Israel, which remains in conflict with much of the Arab world, is often perceived as an expansionist state seeking to weaken its neighbors in order to dominate the region. This reality was superficially obscured by the Abraham Accords, which created the impression that peace was spreading throughout the region, even while Israel continued occupying territories in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestinian lands. The present invasion of Lebanon has also displaced hundreds of thousands of Lebanese citizens, many of whom now wonder whether their homes and assets will be destroyed to create an Israeli's buffer zone.

Meanwhile, the stability and growth of Middle Eastern economies depend largely on three pillars: energy exports, global trade, and tourism. In the past year, Egypt received a record number of tourists, Lebanon finally managed to form a functional government, Iraq was moving toward establishing a new government, and Saudi Arabia has been undergoing a major modernization transformation. All of these developments have strengthened the United States' position in the region—gains that could be undermined by a war with Iran.

Moreover, Western mainstream media are often accused of applying double standards. For example, Russia is said to “invade” Ukraine, while Israel is sometimes described as merely “crossing into” Lebanon. Similarly, attacks on Iranian civilian targets—such as the bombing of a girls' school that reportedly killed 180 students—receive far less attention, highlighting accusations of selective coverage that amplifies U.S. and Israeli losses while downplaying Iranian casualties.

Prior to this conflict, the United States appeared to be in a relatively strong position in the Middle East, sometimes exaggerating the threat posed by Iran in order to justify expanding its military presence and arms exports in the region. Historically, Washington has often preferred dealing with unified autocratic states governed by a single ruler rather than fragmented political systems where multiple sectarian actors shape policy. This approach frequently involved turning a blind eye to domestic repression in exchange for political stability.

The Middle East largely lacks robust political representation, and increasingly the region's political sentiment is expressed through social media. This environment reveals a growing dissatisfaction with the United States, a trend that could potentially backfire at any moment. The possibility of deploying U.S. ground troops into Iran would be particularly dangerous and could lead to a major catastrophe. In the meantime, Gulf states would be well advised to work together to avoid becoming entangled in an unnecessary war with Iran.



*Mohammed Nossier*

## **US and Israel's Illegal military action against Iran must be condemned.**

### **Guy Harris**

Make no mistake, the Iranian Theocratic regime is not the UK's friend. British soldiers, indeed, the local party's own members, have been on the receiving end of Iranian-made rockets and IEDs. Now UK expats are in the firing line.

However, whilst we do not support the brutal regime in Tehran, we feel great sympathy for the ordinary men, women and children of Iran, who wish, like us, to live in peace. And war with no discernible aim or exit strategy is no way to achieve peace...

Accordingly, we express our opposition to the attacks made upon Iran by the US and Israel, which are flagrantly in breach of international law. Whilst promising nuclear negotiations were underway with Iran, and during the Holy Month of Ramadan, no credence can be given to the suggestion that these attacks were defensive or pre-emptive.

Thus far, the Government has acted without clarity or courage, seeming to ignore international law whilst cynically casting attack as defence. Many of us recall Iraq. Many of us marched against British involvement in Iraq. Today, members are determined that a dithering Labour Prime Minister should not once again take us into an illegal war by stealth or by political cowardice or indecision.

We welcome the PM's assertion that the UK will not participate directly in unlawful attacks upon Iran, but we question why we should facilitate them by granting permission to use UK air bases. The PM's rapid capitulation to Trump has immediately seen RAF Akrotiri subject to Iranian attack. Our service personnel have been placed at risk though there is no clear advantage for Britain in participating as combatant or as water carrier alongside supposed allies, who appear to disdain us as much as they disdain the laws which protect us.

Conflict with no 'day after' plan will leave Iran broken and potentially ungovernable, prey to renewed authoritarian brutality and to sectarian conflict. Moreover, its contested or ungoverned spaces may become a harbour for terrorists.

We demand the Government state clearly why ordinary people in Hastings and Rye should support Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war - a war which will put British civilians and service personnel in harm's way, further erode international law and impel migration, increase energy and food bills, fuel inflation and likely delay further reduction in interest rates.



Uncomfortable lessons may already be drawn from the unfolding scenario, however. Though there was no mention of it in the Chancellor's Spring Statement, Britain needs to budget for urgent rearmament. The attack on RAF Akrotiri has exposed our vulnerability. Furthermore, the likelihood of painful energy price shocks underscores Britain's need to migrate quickly away from fossil fuels and toward cheap renewable energy. A hike in the global price of oil doesn't help UK families and businesses, it helps the big oil producers, among them, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

Whilst building resilience in energy and defence, this Labour Government should also have the courage to keep our communities and families out of this ill-conceived war. Sir Keir Starmer might not be Winston Churchill, but neither is this The Battle of Britain.

### ***Guy Harris***

*Guy Harris contested Hastings & Rye at the 2024 General Election and has worked in Iraq, experiencing the aftermath of another illegal war. Hastings & Rye Liberal Democrats published this piece on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2026.*

*See page 25 for a late extra from Iranian Kurdistan*

## **LI CJC warns U.S. repeal of Greenhouse Gas Endangerment Finding undermines global climate action**

The Climate Justice Committee of Liberal International expresses its deep concern at the decision of President Donald Trump and the United States Environmental Protection Agency to revoke the 2009 endangerment finding. This unprecedented action dismantles the central pillar of federal climate regulation in the world's second-largest greenhouse gas emitter, at a moment when accelerating climate impacts demand urgent, science-based leadership. The international community must act together, weakening climate safeguards sends a damaging signal to partners and developing nations striving to meet their own obligations.

President Trump's decision removes the legal basis for regulating emissions from the biggest polluters with direct consequences for public health. It's a retreat from federal responsibility at a moment when climate impacts are intensifying. Those least responsible for emissions, including the poor, young people, and many in the Global South, will bear the heaviest burdens of inaction.

We affirm that the scientific evidence showing the dangers of greenhouse gases remains strong. These conclusions are supported by decades of research, multiple U.S. scientific institutions, and repeated legal affirmation. Overturning this record weakens environmental oversight at the very moment the world faces record-breaking heat, extreme weather, and mounting climate-related losses.

Liberal International calls on President Donald Trump and the United States government to restore evidence-based policymaking, reinstate robust protections against greenhouse gas pollution, and reaffirm its obligations under international climate agreements. In the face of retreat by one government, our resolve must strengthen. The Liberal family stands with scientists, civil society, and all who work to preserve a liveable planet.

The Climate Justice Committee also encourages the international liberal community to remain firm in its advocacy. The global fight for climate justice does not end when one government retreats. We must continue to insist on policies that protect public health, uphold scientific facts and advance the shared global responsibility to limit further warming.

26/02/2026

# LIBG Turkey Forum

## Sir Graham Watson

I was for a period, around the turn of the century, particularly in the run-up to the opening of Turkey's candidacy in 2005 a champion of Turkey's membership of the European Union.

And the reason I was a champion is that Turkey has always had, fundamentally a Western orientation.

You can go back to the 1830s, when liberals in the United Kingdom were fighting for democratic reforms, and find that Sultan Mahmoud II was starting to reform Turkey. There were big reforms in 1839. You can go back to the turn of the last century, in the early 1900s, when we had a great Liberal government under Campbell Bannerman, and you can find the Young Turks movement in Turkey forcing the introduction of constitutional reforms in that country.

In the 1950s, Turkey was a multi-party democracy, and, even despite the regular intervention of the military, the attitude was one of Western integration, involvement in NATO, and so forth. And so, it seems to me that we have a lot in common, and a lot of shared values, and a lot we can work together for. In recent years, we saw an opening at the beginning of this century for Turkey becoming a member of the European Union. Sadly, it did not happen.

Why did it not happen? Well, I blame, first of all, the Christian Democrats, who were the majority party in the European Union, and particularly the German Christian Democrats, who failed to see that what the AK party represented at that time was not fundamentally different from what the Christian Democrats represented in Germany.

They were religious people broadly. But they were socially progressive and the Germans failed to recognise that Islamic Democrats could be essentially the same as Christian Democrats.

As a result of that, Turkey was spurned by the European Union, and Erdogan started to go off in a different direction. And that different direction took us down a path which we all know well now, but which has taken Turkey quite a long way from democracy.

We are in a situation now, where Turkey could potentially fit within the European Union's Global Gateway programme, it could potentially fit within the European Union's Black Sea Synergy Programme, and it is failing to do any of these because it is choosing not to.

It's not that it is choosing to go closer to the BRICS countries, or to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in a decisive move away from Europe. But it appears to lack strategic direction in its world affairs, to treat countries as neighbours rather than allies, and in the case of Russia, it gets the same back in return.

Where are we now? We're in a situation where we have a Cyprus presidency of the European Union for six months, a presidency which has declared itself open to greater cooperation with Turkey, for example, but not only, in finding a solution to the problems which have gone on for far too long on the island of Cyprus, and don't require great imagination to overcome.

We've seen no sign that Turkey is willing to be open to any initiatives. What we've seen instead is a fusion of Islamist and Nationalist discourse in Turkey and a personalisation of foreign policy, in particular, in the way that Trump seems to be personalising America's foreign policy. It's not been a logical progression.

Where are we now? Where does that leave us, or take us?

Well, there is much that could be done. Turkey could help with Europe's security in a world of changing priorities, for example, and thereby enhance its own.

Indeed, recent moves have seen some indications that it will. Turkey has an ageing fleet of F-16s. It's already agreed to replace some of those with Typhoons that it's buying from the United Kingdom.

From where I sit in Edinburgh, there are at least 1,000 jobs within a couple of miles dependent on that kind of cooperation. Turkey is also talking to Germany about possible cooperation on Eurofighters, and so on.

But we are seeing not only a lack of commitment, or an apparent lack of commitment by Turkey, but also a lack, or apparent lack of interest on the European Union side. We ought to be seeing a European Union committed to trying to find areas of joint investment with Turkey, in areas of common interest, like Cyprus and the Black Sea.

find, or hope to find, a European Union more interested in visa liberalisation or engagement of Turkey in a reformed customs union, which is now needed. Or perhaps in engagement of Turkey within the SAFE framework of defence and military procurement.

We in the United Kingdom cannot criticise this. The United Kingdom itself is not involved in this programme, though thankfully Canada is. People like Mark Carney are talking seriously about what middle powers could be doing and achieving together.

One can conceive of Turkey - under a different government, admittedly - as being one of those middle powers working together to try to stabilise international affairs, to try to return to a world rules-based order.

It might yet happen. In March of 2024, the opposition CHP won the local elections. Of course, this led to Mr. Ekrem Imamoglu being arrested; but that in turn it led to great protests at that time.

Erdogan cannot go on forever, and at some point the opposition will win. And I think we need to be looking at what could happen then. I think it quite ridiculous that Ekrem İmamoğlu has been accused of being a British spy by President Erdogan. As Imamoglu himself said, he might as well be accused of being the person responsible for the burning down of Rome. But we live in the political culture that is currently in Turkey.

I do see opportunities in the near future for much greater cooperation between the European Union and Turkey, and between the United Kingdom and Turkey. But of course, it does require Turkey to return to a democratic path so that we can build a trust-based cooperative relationship, which Turkey needs just as much as the European Union and Britain and the other parts of Western Europe.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey closed the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to warships, thereby denying Russia full naval control in the Black Sea.

There are still other areas where we can see this kind of co-operation happening, if we can find the political courage, the institutional creativity and the renewed commitment to democratic development on both sides.

The situation at the moment in Turkey for Democrats is grim. Far too many of our friends are still behind bars in prison. Far too many of our friends in the media are not allowed to publish or are in jail for publishing things critical of the regime. But I am still somehow optimistic that we might see a change in the next 10 years, and the chance to build, once again, a much greater cooperation.

*Sir Graham Watson,*

**Chair, Liberal International British Group**

**LIBG Turkey Forum 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026**

# Turkey

## Bülent Keneş

Let me begin by briefly situating my remarks in a broader historical perspective, because without that context it is difficult to make sense of Turkey's current trajectory.

Turkey has never, at any point in its history, possessed a fully consolidated democracy or a genuine rule of law. When we speak of "Turkish democracy," what we most often mean is an uneven and fragile process of democratisation. This process has been shaped more by external pressures than by internal dynamics. From the Ottoman period to the present day, democracy, the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and fundamental rights and freedoms—such as freedom of the press and expression and equality before the law—have largely come onto the agenda as a result of external conditions, demands, and international pressures.

The fact that these processes have not been autochthonous or authentic has led to their failure to be internalised by broad segments of the political, administrative, and economic elites, most notably the security elites.

On the contrary, these values have often encountered open or implicit opposition. Indeed, since the declaration of constitutional monarchy in 1876, these fragile democratisation initiatives have been interrupted repeatedly; these interruptions have most often taken the form of military interventions and coups. Military interventions, with the support not only of state and business elites but also of significant segments of society, have constructed a tutelary order capable of continuously intervening in politics and social life.

Although it may appear as a major contradiction, I cannot refrain from pointing to a striking fact. Despite all these coups and interruptions, Turkey long preserved—at least at the level of discourse and appearance—a Western and European orientation. The Turks’ orientation toward the West is not historically a new phenomenon. It is almost an inclination embedded in their genetic code. Beginning from very early periods in history, the migrations of Turkic tribes were predominantly westward; their conquests and areas of expansion likewise primarily targeted the European geography. Over the past two centuries, the source of inspiration in the search for reform, prosperity, modernisation, and democratisation has again been the West.

So much so that until very recently, in textbooks and in political and social discourse, “Westernisation” was used almost interchangeably with “modernisation.” In short, what I would like to say is this: both in positive and negative terms, until the very recent past, Turkey’s fundamental orientation has essentially been toward the West.

At this point, I would like to note that these introductory assessments I have shared so far are, in fact, largely a repetition of arguments I have made previously. Indeed, I articulated these same arguments at a panel held in the House of Commons in 2009, moderated by Jeremy Corbyn, and subsequently at another panel organised as part of the Liberal Democrat Conference in Birmingham in March 2010. While I sincerely hope that these observations still retain their validity within a broad historical framework, it is nevertheless necessary to state clearly that today we are facing a qualitatively different Turkey—one whose strategic, political, and normative orientations have largely shifted away from the West and toward the Middle East and the East.

#### **Bülent Kenes**

In 2001, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan founded the AKP together with figures drawn from a relatively broad political spectrum, publicly conveying the message that they had “taken off the shirt of political Islam.” During the party’s first two terms in power, liberal and democratic reforms of a kind rarely seen in Turkey’s political history were implemented. This process brought Turkey closer to the West and was crowned in 2005 with the formal launch of accession negotiations with the European Union.

The momentum generated by the EU accession perspective accelerated reforms; the economy was revitalised, foreign direct investment increased, and a strong sense of hope for the future emerged, particularly among younger generations. Let us recall those years: Turkey was being described internationally as a “rising star.” To be sure, structural problems such as the Kurdish issue, Alevi rights, the situation of non-Muslim minorities, and the headscarf question had not been fully resolved; nevertheless, for the first time in a long while, the country gave the impression that it was moving in the right direction.

During this period, Turkey’s international standing increased markedly. Within the framework of the “zero problems with neighbours” policy, more constructive relations were being developed with Cyprus, in the Aegean, and with neighbouring countries, while Turkey positioned itself as an actor exporting stability to both nearby and distant regions through its roles as mediator and facilitator. Despite highly alarming developments that coincided with this period—such as the liquidation of major media groups like Uzan, Sabah, and Çukurova, and the transfer of their media assets, along with other companies, to circles close to the government—the overall picture continued to foster the perception that the country was on a broadly positive trajectory.

Indeed, this process culminated in the AKP receiving the support of nearly 50 percent of the electorate in the June 2011 elections. However, looking back today, I think we must openly acknowledge the following reality: we were seriously late in recognizing that this very process was, in fact, laying the groundwork that would, in a very short time, enable Erdoğan to establish a one-man regime.

This delay was not limited to liberal and social democratic intellectuals, academics, and journalists in Turkey. The same blindness was largely present among political and institutional actors in the West as well. Democratic circles, both in Turkey and internationally, had been swept up by the powerful aura created by the discourse of democratisation and reform. This atmosphere made it more difficult to assess developments with critical distance.

Yet, when we look back from where we stand today, we can clearly see that the foundational stones of the authoritarian Erdoğan regime that now dominates Turkey were laid precisely during this period. Reforms pursued under the banner of democratisation produced genuine advances on the one hand, while on the other hand enabling the gradual dismantling of institutional checks and balances by the ruling power. Unfortunately, we failed to identify this dual process—that is, the simultaneous progression of reform and the concentration of power—in a timely and sufficiently forceful manner.

At that time, I too—and I must say this today with complete candour—was among those who believed that the Turkish case demonstrated the possibility of Islam and democracy complying and coexisting. I argued that Turkey, as a Muslim, secular, democratic, and pluralistic state governed by the rule of law, could serve as a unique bridge between the West and the East, thanks both to its geopolitical position and its socio-cultural permeability.

In particular, I maintained that Turkey could assume an exceptional carrier role in transferring the norms, values, and institutions of the European Union to the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Broader Middle East, and Africa. I believed that the walls of prejudice that many European countries have struggled to overcome in these regions due to their colonial pasts could be more easily breached through an actor like Turkey, which was relatively less burdened in this respect.

I strongly emphasised that Turkey—in as much as it oriented itself toward the West and the European Union and thereby became a source of inspiration for Muslim societies—should be supported as a bridge for carrying European values into these regions. Frankly, this was not only my perception at the time; it was also largely shared by many domestic and international intellectual circles.

For instance, frequently cited indices produced by organisations such as Freedom House, Transparency International, Reporters Without Borders, and Amnesty International, as well as comparative academic studies, also clearly reinforced this positive perception of Turkey at the time. Turkey was widely viewed as a rising country in terms of its democratic performance.

However, looking back today, I believe that the real rupture occurred with the June 2011 elections. At that point, we can see that Erdoğan—under the influence of radical Islamist theological reference circles, particularly figures such as Hayrettin Karaman—effectively abandoned the claim he had publicly made in 2001 that he had “taken off the shirt of political Islam.” In a sense, he returned to the very radical Islamist position he had claimed to have left behind; there was, so to speak, a reversion to radical Islamist “factory settings.”

From 2011 onward, Erdoğan abandoned the role of a democratic and libertarian leader. If we recall his oft-quoted remark from the 1990s—“Democracy is like a tram; you ride it, and you get off when you reach the appropriate stop”—it would not be an exaggeration to say that in 2011 Erdoğan decided he had reached the “appropriate stop” and stepped off the democracy tram.

Nor can we ignore the structural conditions that made this choice possible. By that time, the military’s tutelary role over politics had largely been dismantled. Following the 2010 referendum, the judiciary was removed from military tutelage but had, this time, largely come under the influence of Erdoğan and the AKP. A strong pro-Erdoğan hegemony had been established in the media and in what was presented as civil society. Business circles close to Erdoğan had, over the previous decade, accumulated extraordinary economic and political power. And the nearly 50 percent of the vote secured in the 2011 elections effectively opened up an unobstructed highway before Erdoğan.

We had hoped that this highway would be used to advance further democratic reforms, to strengthen the European Union accession perspective, and to move decisively toward full EU membership for Turkey. Instead, Erdoğan chose the opposite direction. He viewed both the concentration of power at his hands and the Arab Uprisings unfolding at the same time as an opportunity to construct a *strongman* role positioning himself at the centre not only of Turkey but of the entire Islamic world. The hubris produced by this accumulation of power further reinforced this perception.

From 2011 onward, Erdoğan began openly taking steps to establish a one-man regime—first within his party, and then across the country. Democratic circles that had supported him during his first two terms, and even in the 2011 elections, began to realize that Erdoğan had abandoned the EU perspective and the democratization agenda, yet they hesitated to withdraw their support. At this point, I and the newspaper I founded, *Today’s Zaman*, together with *Taraf*, constituted notable exceptions.

My newspaper and I had strongly supported Erdoğan during his reformist phase—his efforts toward democratisation, EU membership, the “zero problems with neighbours” policy, and integration into the global economy. Of course, we had many criticisms; however, those criticisms did not outweigh the elements we believed deserved support. Yet as Erdoğan increasingly diverged from the democratic path after 2011, our criticisms also intensified. Before long, we found ourselves struggling to keep up with the

up with the volume of developments that warranted criticism, while being unable to identify almost anything left to support.

During this period, Erdoğan's rhetoric and actions completely detached from the language and conduct expected of a leader of a country aspiring to EU membership. In relation to Iraq, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and especially Syria, he moved away from a trajectory compatible with democratic leadership and instead adopted a sectarian, radical Islamist, jihadist, and proxy-war-based strategy characteristic of the Middle East. In Syria and Iraq, he did not refrain from supporting radical Islamist terror organisations—or from attempting to create them where they did not already exist. In doing so, he placed Turkey at the very centre of regional proxy wars.

Media reports have since reflected that al-Qaeda and ISIS-like jihadist terror organisations received covert or overt support. Turkey was transformed into a transit corridor for global jihadist networks; militants were trained, the wounded were treated, and thousands of trucks carrying weapons, ammunition, and logistical supplies were sent across the border. To finance these illegal and illegitimate activities, corruption and irregularities reached unprecedented levels.

The excessively harsh response to the Gezi Park protests in June 2013 crystallised the repressive character of the Erdoğan regime with striking clarity. Legitimate, environmental, and peaceful demands were portrayed as a coup attempt. This was followed by the December 2013 corruption investigations. Erdoğan suppressed these proceedings—based on concrete evidence—through force and pressure, branding them as a “coup.” The judiciary was instrumentalised, and anyone perceived as an opponent was turned into a target.

My newspaper and I, too, were subjected to dozens of investigations, detentions, and lawsuits during this period. I, as editor-in-chief, began spending several days a week at police stations, prosecutors' offices, or courtrooms.

Finally, following the controversial July 15, 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan found the opportunity to construct—at lightning speed—the one-man regime he had been aiming for from the very beginning. More than fifteen universities, thousands of schools, and approximately 200 media outlets were shut down by a single decree. Hundreds of thousands of public servants, members of the judiciary, and academics were dismissed from their positions; terror investigations were launched against millions of people; and hundreds of thousands were detained or imprisoned. Dozens of elected Kurdish mayors have been imprisoned, with government-appointed so-called “trustees” installed in their place. Erdoğan's political rivals—including former presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş and Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu—have also been imprisoned. Today, the regime treats the Republican People's Party (CHP), the founding party of the Turkish Republic, as if it were a terrorist organisation. This system of repression not only persists but has become a defining feature of the current political order.

In short, what has unfolded since 2011 shows us the following: the authoritarian regime in Turkey was not established overnight. On the contrary, it was built step by step by Erdoğan, often in full view of all of us, eventually resulting in a populist authoritarian regime that later served as a source of inspiration and a model for populist radical-right figures across Europe such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

When we turn to the security dimension, it is necessary to recall one point very clearly: NATO's purpose of establishment and its *raison d'être* are defined with great clarity in the Alliance's founding documents. Yet today, as is also clearly reflected in international indices, where does Turkey under the Erdoğan regime stand within this framework? The issue has long since gone beyond the question of whether Turkey is a reliable partner for transatlantic security. When the founding principles are taken as the benchmark, Turkey under Erdoğan's rule—through the policies it pursues, the threats it generates, and its destabilising actions—has drifted into the position of an actor against which protection is required and, when necessary, resistance must be mounted.

One of the most striking examples of this was observed during the NATO accession processes of Sweden and Finland. In this period, the Erdoğan regime acted almost like a “Trojan horse” for Russia within NATO, choosing to use the NATO platform not to strengthen the Alliance's collective security, but as a tool of pressure. Even more troublingly, NATO was turned into a platform for exporting authoritarianism and repression to western democracies.

During this process, a series of legal and political changes introduced in Sweden solely to satisfy Erdoğan have caused damage to Swedish democracy—damage that remains the subject of serious debate. This picture shows us very clearly that long before Trump, Erdoğan had repeatedly demonstrated that he is a leader whose commitments as an ally cannot be trusted. What we are witnessing today is not an aberration, but the natural outcome of a trajectory that has been unfolding for a long time.

There is, of course, much more that could be said to illustrate just how repressive and autocratic the Erdoğan regime has become today—from the systematic weaponisation of the judiciary and the near-total eradication of freedom of expression and press, to transnational repression and large-scale international disinformation operations; from support for jihadist terror networks to efforts aimed at influencing and infiltrating Western democracies through so-called Muslim- or migrant-origin political parties, PONGOs, and GONGOs.

Taken together, these developments show that Erdoğan has not only dismantled the achievements of the first nine years of AKP rule—years that did see meaningful progress—but has pushed Turkey into a far worse condition in terms of democracy, fundamental rights and freedoms, transparency, accountability, checks and balances, and the rule of law.

If Turkey's current credentials were assessed today, it would not qualify for NATO membership. It would not have been accepted as a founding member of the Council of Europe, given its systematic disregard for European Court of Human Rights rulings. Nor would it ever be considered a credible EU candidate, particularly in light of steps such as its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.

It is deeply painful to observe that in recent years virtually no meaningful actor—including the European Union—has continued to invest seriously in democracy, the rule of law, or human rights and fundamental freedoms in Turkey. On the contrary, Erdoğan has benefited from substantial internal and external support that has allowed him to further entrench his autocratic rule and make it increasingly resilient to any democratising pressure. Taking advantage of this permissive environment, he has moved beyond mere regime consolidation toward overt dynastic ambitions, openly preparing his son, Bilal Erdoğan, as a potential successor.

**Bülent Kenes,**

Turkish journalist, Executive Director of the European Centre for Populism Studies

**LIBG Turkey Forum 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026**

## Release Jimmy Lai

Jimmy Lai, 78-year-old Hong Kong pro-democracy activist and a defender of the city's freedoms, was sentenced to 20 years in jail under the Beijing-imposed National Security Law (NSL) on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2026.



Pakkin Leung @ Rice Post. CC BY 4.0.  
via Wikimedia Commons

LI Human Rights Committee strongly condemned the Hong Kong NSL appointed judges in conducting this show trial. This is the harshest sentence since NSL was imposed in the city. The Court operates outside the rule-of-law and common law framework as promised to the people of Hong Kong under the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

Given Lai's deteriorating health, his family has raised concerns. Human Rights Watch called court's decision "effectively a death sentence".

LI HRC considers this as an intentional attack on freedom of expression, press freedom and justice. Hong Kong authorities must unconditionally and immediately release Lai.

Since the LI HRC statement, Jimmy Lai has won an appeal against an earlier sentence of 2022 but Lai's daughter Claire described the ruling on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> February as "nothing more than a PR move by the Hong Kong authorities".

**The Liberal Democrat Friends of Hong Kong will be at Stall 12 in the York Conference Exhibition.**

# The Chagos Agreement will secure the Chagossians' right of return.

The Liberal Democrats must support it.

**Peter Harris**

The agreement<sup>1</sup> between Britain and Mauritius over control of the Chagos Islands has become one of the most controversial topics of this Parliament. This is a sorry reflection on the state of UK politics. In more normal times, the Chagos deal would be viewed as a diplomatic success story – an example of two states working together to uphold the rules-based international order for the benefit of all concerned.

But these are not normal times. Ever since the government of Liz Truss announced<sup>2</sup> in November 2022 (with the backing of the Biden administration) that it was opening negotiations with Mauritius, critics have scoffed at the idea of “surrendering” the islands to a foreign power. In recent weeks, the accusations of treachery have reached a fever pitch – stoked in no small part by Donald Trump<sup>3</sup> and his friends on the hard right<sup>4</sup> of UK politics.

The Liberal Democrats have a critical role to play in ensuring that the Chagos agreement goes through. The legislation needed to implement the treaty, the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill<sup>5</sup>, is currently in its final stage of the legislative process. Having cleared its third reading in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, all that remains is for MPs and peers to iron out the final text of the legislation so that it can receive royal assent.

In the Lords, however, the Labour Party cannot do things alone. It depends upon the cooperation of others. The purpose of this blog post is to ask the Liberal Democrats to offer such cooperation at this all-important juncture.

I have studied the Chagos Islands for 18 years<sup>6</sup>. From my perspective, the rights of the indigenous Chagossians have always been the most important dimension of the Chagos dispute. Having lobbied many of your elected representatives and peers over the past two decades, I know that the Liberal Democrats feel the same way. Why, then, do I support the Anglo-Mauritian agreement when so many Chagossians seem to oppose it?

The key thing to remember is that the Chagossian community is divided on the issue of sovereignty. This should not be surprising given that the Chagossians and their descendants number in the thousands and are spread across several countries. They have conflicting interests, identities, and ideas about their homeland – just like any other large group of people.

The largest Chagossian group – the Chagos Refugees Group, based in Mauritius – supports<sup>7</sup> the agreement as a step in the right direction. This is for the simple reason that Mauritius has offered to facilitate a resettlement of the Chagos Islands whereas Britain has blocked the islanders' right of return for the past 50 years. Many Chagossians in Britain also support the agreement for the same reason. I think it's important that we listen to these Chagossians.

Of course, there are several UK-based groups that oppose the deal. They wanted to be involved as participants in negotiations over the islands. Some demanded a veto over the outcome. Rightly or wrongly, London and Port Louis were unwilling to grant these demands.

There is no sugarcoating the disappointment of the anti-treaty islanders. But we must ask whether torpedoing the present agreement will help their cause. My view is clear: it will not.

We need to be straight with the islanders: Britain will never grant their right of return. As Liberal Democrats, you know this all too well. You tried to do right by the islanders when you were in government. Vince Cable and others were strong supporters of the Chagossians, pushing for a feasibility

study into resettlement. It wasn't enough; the right of return went unrestored despite your best efforts.

The truth is that British governments of all persuasions – Labour, Tory, and Liberal Democrat – have failed to support resettlement even when the Cabinet has included sympathetic figures. There is no evidence that this will change if the Chagos agreement falls through. Rather, an historic opportunity will have been missed for no good reason.

For anyone who cares about the Chagossians' right of return, this ought to be the smoking-gun argument that persuades them to back the deal: the Anglo-Mauritian treaty will facilitate a Chagossian right of return whereas the status quo ante did not and will not. For the first time in more than half a century, a pathway exists to secure the Chagossians' most fundamental human right. If there is anything about the deal that should excite parliamentarians, it is this. Failure to follow through now would be cruel and catastrophic.

One common refrain is that Chagossians want to remain British. But this has nothing to do with the Chagos agreement or the bill currently before Parliament. Anyone born in Chagos before 1973 is already a UK citizen. Their direct descendants also have the right to apply for citizenship via the Nationality and Borders Act 2022<sup>8</sup>. In short, any Chagossian who wants to be British can remain British, and so can their descendants. It is distressing that this fact has been distorted in media coverage.

It is a similar story when it comes to the issue of compensation. Some Chagossians want the UK to pay more in financial restitution. This is a reasonable ask – but again, it has nothing to do with the issue of sovereignty.

When the broad contours of the Chagos agreement were announced, I called it a “win-win-win-win” in the sense that it serves all parties' core interests and jeopardizes none. The treaty's provisions mean that Britain can conform with international law, keep supporting the US base on Diego Garcia, and play an honorable role in facilitating the Chagossians' resettlement of their homeland. For its part, the United States gets to not only keep its military base, but put that base on sound legal footing for the first time in its history. Mauritius achieves its long overdue full decolonisation<sup>10</sup>. And the indigenous Chagossians secure their right of return, albeit to the Outer Chagos Islands and not Diego Garcia at this time.

If the treaty is not ratified, however, then none of these benefits will be realized. This would be a tragedy – one that the Liberal Democrats can help to avoid.

*\* Dr. Peter Harris is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Colorado State University, a Non-Resident Fellow with Defense Priorities, and a Research Fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point. He is a dual UK-US citizen and previously volunteered with the UK Chagos Support Association. He is not a member of the Liberal Democrats.*

<sup>1</sup> Mauritius No. 1 (2025) Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Mauritius concerning the Chagos Archipelago including Diego Garcia, London and Port Louis, 22 May 2025

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-63498137>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-blasts-keir-starmer-diego-garcia-deal-hours-chagos-after-us-backed-it/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/22/nigel-farage-accused-of-maga-stunts-chagos>

<sup>5</sup> <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/4004>

<sup>6</sup> [I have studied](#) - cites 93 articles Google "peter harris" "Chagos"

<sup>7</sup> <https://thechagosrefugeesgroup.com/chagos-in-news/crg-affirm-support/>

<sup>8</sup> [Nationality and Borders Bill: Chagossian nationality factsheet](#) , [Important information for Chagossians](#) ; On 28 April 2022, the Nationality and Borders Bill received Royal Assent and is now known as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

<sup>9</sup> <https://theconversation.com/freedom-for-chagos-islands-uks-deal-with-mauritius-will-be-a-win-for-all-240590>

<sup>10</sup> <https://theconversation.com/why-britain-should-immediately-withdraw-from-mauritius-chagos-islands-195830>

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# Four years of war has forged Ukraine into a lynchpin for European security

## Rosemary Thomas

Today marks the fourth anniversary of the second phase of Russia's war on Ukraine. Phase one started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas – Putin's response to ordinary Ukrainians' refusal to disavow their European future. Now is a good time to remember why we are supporting Ukraine; not just because it is right but because we must if the liberal order and the rule of law on which it is based is to survive.

It is also time to recognise Ukraine as central for Europe's security and prosperity in an increasingly unstable world. We need Ukraine as much as Ukraine needs us and until Ukraine is lifted out of the grey security zone to which previous failed peace agreements have consigned it, there will be a persistent threat to European security.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia could have chosen cooperation with Europe but settled on the path of confrontation, sowing instability in its "near abroad" to maintain control over its neighbours. As at home, so abroad. Putin propped up Syria's murderous regime to the very last while his Africa Corps supports autocrats and military juntas in exchange for resource concessions and ousting Western partnerships in Africa.

Chaos is not a glitch but a defining feature of Russia's foreign policy. We feel its effects increasingly in Europe where Russia's long-running campaign to disrupt, sabotage and sow unrest has intensified since 2022. The immediate purpose is to weaken our resolve to support Ukraine, but the underlying goal is the demise of the global liberal order.

Russian meddling may have affected the outcome of US elections as well as the the fine-edge Brexit vote which materially damaged the security and economy of the UK and the unity of Europe. Neither theory can be proven, but plausible deniability, like chaos, is a feature of Russian foreign policy.

Trump has rightly forced Europe to take responsibility for its own security. But now the US is not only jeopardising its mutually beneficial security partnership with Europe, but actively working against Europe's own security interests which now revolve critically around Ukraine. Ukraine's stubborn determination since 1991 to adhere, however imperfectly, to its democratic values has thwarted Putin's imperialistic dream. Should he succeed, this would constitute a direct threat to Europe. Meanwhile, the US is hampering the flow of arms purchased for Ukraine and bullying Ukraine into territorial concessions which favour Russia. Ed Davey has rightly said that forcing Ukraine to give up vital defensive territory is a price we cannot allow Ukraine to pay. Czechoslovakia in 1938 looms large before us as a warning.

In an increasingly lawless and competitive world both China and the US use economic measures to blackmail other states in pursuit of their goals. Ukraine as an EU partner is an attractive proposition in this regard. With its enormous agricultural sector and its reserves of rare earths and other vital resources and its mastery of IT and innovation, Ukraine would bolster European resilience and help modernise our economy.

Unmanned weapons have revolutionised warfare in a way most of us struggle to comprehend and we are



far from ready for it. Ukraine is already helping us adapt to this new reality but much more is possible. Ukraine is rapidly rebuilding its formerly strong military-industrial complex which is already producing weapons for Europe. Ukraine's membership would give a much-needed boost to NATO, but the US is pressing Ukraine to give up its NATO aspirations as part of its "peace" proposals.

We cannot know how and when this war will end, but we must be ready for at least two more years of war or another pretend peace agreement – the third in 12 in years – that will only pave the way for another wave of Russian aggression. We must strive to avoid this. Ukraine will fight on because it must and we in Europe must continue and intensify our support. If changing borders by force becomes acceptable, the outlook for global security is bleak. EU membership would lift Ukraine out of the grey zone and bolster our security. Alas, the UK no longer has a say in this, but we do have real power to push for Ukraine to be embedded as full and equal partners in Europe’s security architecture. As Polish PM, Donald Tusk, recently said, Ukraine does not have to be grateful; we should be grateful to Ukraine. It’s time to show it.

***Rosemary Thomas***

*Rosemary Thomas, OBE is a former diplomat specialising in Eastern Europe and is Chair of Liberal Democrat Friends of Ukraine (to join contact: LDFriendsofUkraine@outlook.com).*

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# Liberal Democrat Friends of Ukraine at York

We will be on Stand #17 so please come and see us. There will be updated news on Visa extensions and some research into children’s education plus psychological issues we can share with you.

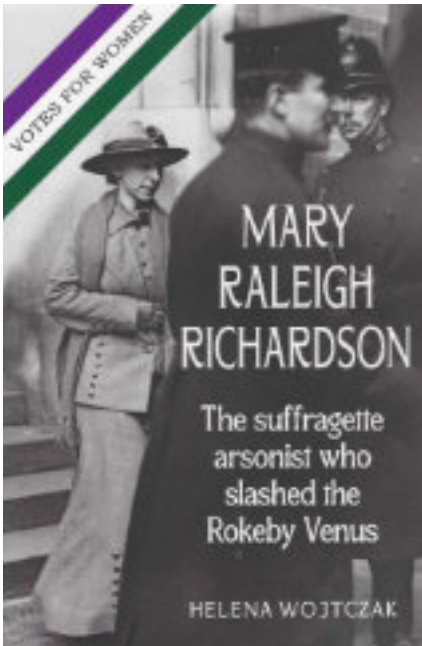
If you would like to pop into our Social Evening after the Rally on Friday you will be most welcome – details to be confirmed.

Saturday sees our Fringe Event in the Walmgate Suite in the York Hilton 7:45pm to 9:00pm. We have booked some knowledgeable speakers on the topic of Corruption in Ukraine, what is fact and what is fiction? A number of our very well informed members (David Lewis, Steve Lacey with Jonathan Fink as chair) will be supplementing our Ukrainian main speaker, Victoria Vdovychenko, who has spoken throughout Europe on this topic and has also advised both the NABU and SAPO organisations set up in Ukraine to deal with corruption.

We look forward to seeing you in York,

**[Liberal International reaffirmed its steadfast solidarity with Ukraine in defence of independence and democratic values](#)**

# Reviews



**Mary Raleigh Richardson the suffragette arsonist who slashed the Rokeby Venus, by Helena Wojtczak.**  
Hastings Press 2025 £18.00 isbn 9781904109600

The author's closing note says it all really – A political activist from her 30s to her 90s, her achievements were modest. Her attempts to become an MP failed and although she held minor rank in the British Union of Fascists, she was expelled. As a suffragette she committed acts of destruction, Wojtczak questions whether she was 'motivated by a craving for adventure and excitement., and perhaps to some extent, longing to gain the attention... of the Pankhurst's'. This, she says, 'In no way depreciates Mary's bravery In committing criminal acts she knew would lead to imprisonment or her courage in repeatedly risking her life by hunger strikes and enduring the horror of force feeding'. Almost forgotten at her death, Mary Richardson is best known for slashing the Velásquez Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery. One cannot help but concur with Roger Fulford<sup>1</sup> In his assessment that the Suffragettes put back the cause of votes for women by a decade and that Richardson had a big hand in that.

Wojtczak is a commensurate researcher In her attention to detail, with a lively writing style. You will love her account of contests In Acton, as Labour candidate in 1922 garnering 26% of the vote, one of only eighteen women to take a second place. On holiday in 1923, She missed that election, whereafter her ego cut in and she split the local party, losing her deposit in 1924. It tells us much about the real strength of the Labour Party at that time, that she was considered for Bury St Edmunds and fought Aldershot in 1931, but as Wojtczak says – Labour excelled at putting up women in unwinnable seats to boost their credibility amongst them – 36 in 1931, none elected. By contrast 13 of the 15 Conservative candidates were returned, along with Megan Lloyd George, 1 of 5 Liberals and the redoubtable Eleanor Rathbone, an independent, for Combined English Universities.

Shortly after this, Richardson finds herself in Oswald Mosley's New Party and subsequently, British Union of Fascists. Wojtczak highlights the ambivalence of the early days of this movement and minimises Richardson's role in as less grand than other authors have claimed. The situation deteriorated quite quickly; Richardson defended the violence of the Blackshirts but also challenged Mosley on the (subordinate) role of women in the party, for which she was expelled. How does this square with Mosley's statement "Without the women I could not have got a quarter of the way"<sup>2</sup>. Shortly after Richardson was back in the Labour camp.

But what of the Rokeby Venus for which Slasher is most famous? Was this vengeance against the male gaze? Feminist art theory can look more favourably on the work as female empowering, as woman (a God) in command of her sexuality and look closely at the mirror, the goddess is watching you. Furthermore, though painted by an ensconced court artist, nudes are rare in Baroque Spain and this is the only such to have survived by Velásquez. Did the Inquisition round up the rest? Did Slasher slash the wrong painting? I can think of many examples where Art might be described as the pornography of the rich. There was a spate of copycat violence by Suffragettes, mostly forgotten until Wojtczak reminds us. John Singer Sargent's portrait of Henry James was one such... I don't specifically know the novelist's views on female suffrage, but his work can be said the focus on the right of women to hold property, rather than be treated as property. Another misplaced target?

109 years later we are faced with another incident of politically motivated art vandalism. The Rokeby Venus was attacked again by Just Stop Oil protesters on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2023 after the earlier incident of throwing soup at Van Gogh's Sunflowers in 2022. I note that one of the trials related to this was deferred, last January, for three years and suspect that the judiciary has the same trouble with deciding on this case as did poor old McKenna in 1914. The Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act 1913, in history as the Cat & Mouse Act, was probably thought to be a gesture of compassion for hunger-striking prisoners by the men who came up with it; whether some of them should have been prisoners and force-

feeding less compassionate is another matter. The criminal justice system never quite squares with the political dimension. Someone like Richardson had committed criminal acts and she acknowledged that. I come back to the author's closing notes; every life is of value and deserves to be recorded; there must be thousands of suffragists whose lives have vanished into obscurity but should be remembered.

Stewart Rayment

<sup>1</sup> 'Votes for Women: The Story of a Struggle, by Roger Fulford. Faber & Faber 1957

<sup>2</sup> Robert Edwards. <https://www.oswaldmosley.net/mosleys-men-and-women.html>

### **The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarianism, by Minxin Pei. Princeton University Press 2026 isbn 9780691223339**

When academia tried to analyse the economic and political situation in China, we focused mostly on economic data, or political system of the Chinese communist party regime. Little we elaborated was how the economic miracle revived the totalitarian nature of the CCP, particularly under President Xi. Minxin Pei's new book 'The Broken China Dream: How Reform Revived Totalitarian' may provide the answer on this void.

Pei started with explaining how the political dynamics during 1980s China resulted in successful economic reform (from command economy to market economy) and very limited political changes, how Deng Xiaoping temporarily lost control within CCP after Tiananmen Square massacre, and how Deng regained control and why the Deng's economic reform endured even in the post Deng era while the authoritarian nature in the political system reminded unchallenged.

Interesting, in chapter 6, Pei refers Xi's political ideology as Neo Stalinism, or more precisely, 'Stalinist bureaucratic totalitarian rule'; in contrast with Maoist 'antibureaucratic totalitarian rule'. He explained that the nature of Xi's policies, including self glorifying propaganda, self serving anti-corruption campaigns, abolishing remaining (yet fragile) mechanism inside CCP to contain his power, and the purges of political opponents, all shared the same traits of totalitarian regimes, which were largely contained or left untouched since the downfall of Chairman Mao.

Unlike most historians and academia with social science background, the style Pei elaborating the CCP history is more a telling a story instead of exhaustively providing hard historical facts such as archives or newspaper reports. Yet he is still able to give detailed observations on different aspect of the Chinese politics, society and economy, with selected collection of data as evidence. This made his book a rather easy read, particularly for someone with little knowledge on the history of post Mao China.

One major contribution of this book is that it provided an insight on how Deng's economic and political legacies helped President Xi's ascension to power, and how Hu-Wan's economic policies, such as debt driven policies to tackle financial crisis in 2008 changed the fiscal norms in the Chinese authorities. The rulebook was then copied by Xi when he faced the COVID crisis, so did his hardline approach towards domestic unrest and foreign policy crisis. This book is unique on elaborating the continuity of these fundamentals, including the authoritarian nature of Chinese Community Party, and the nature of Chinese economy, despite there were changes in the leadership throughout these years.

which could be very insightful for future research.



However, there are a few areas which could lead to potential further studies. This book followed the typical Chinese methodology on analysing Chinese History: a very heavy focus on the role of the central government, very little effort on analysing peripheral factors, such as provincial governments, business leaders, and other countries.

For example, one area was how the relationship of regional and central government which caused the economic crisis during the President Xi's tenure. This book had detailed accounts on the balance of power between the Shanghai gang led by former Chairman Jiang Xiemen and the Young faction led by Hu Jintao, but it mostly focused on the faction

politics within the central authorities rather than the dynamics between central and provincial authorities. There was also a brief mention on how regional government relied on land sales to raise revenue in the section of taxation reform, and how it contributed to the property bubble in later years. As I mentioned on other book reviews, the way CCP evaluated the provincial government officials, such as using GDP as one of the key performance indicators, had a major impact on the regional development programs, and contributed to the financial troubles and economic stagnation even before Xi took over the CCP leadership. How the flawed legacy of Deng, Jiang and Hu contributed to these problems can be an interesting area for further research.

When it comes to elaborating President Xi's statism policies towards private sectors, Pei analysed private business as a general block of economic unit, instead of owners of private businesses as individuals. According to Pei, the entrepreneurs under President Xi regime became targets of surveillance because of political ideology, but what he did not mention was that quite a lot of these entrepreneurs had an entrenched political and economic interest with former leaders within CCP.

Another area which could be better elaborated was on when Belt Road Initiatives in the New Cold War in chapter 8. According to Pei, Belt Road Initiatives is only part of Xi's initiatives on rebuilding the World Order. What he did not mention is its relationship with the excess production capacity of industrial/construction products. The excess production capacity had been mentioned on chapter 7, but he did not elaborate how the infrastructure projects in the Belt Road Initiatives helps to resolve the shortfall of its industrial policy.

All in all, Pei has provided a concise observation on how China achieved its economic boom in the 1980s to 2010s, and how Chinese Communist Party reinforced its authoritarian regime, and how President Xi exploited the weakness of the Post-Deng political order to regain the totalitarian executive power. If you expect a detailed analysis from a social science perspective, this book may not have those, but it provided a solid theory foundation on the Chinese socio-political situation in the 1980s to 2020s, which could be very insightful for future research.

*Larry Ngan*

**Threads of a Revolution, directed by Danny Mitchell and cinematography by Ross Domoney.  
Shadowgraph 2025**

For many years we have been excited about the democratic developments in Rojava, Kurdish north-east Syria, whose people formed the foot soldiers in the war against ISIS. Gratitude is rarely a quality in warlords, especially if they have come lately; Trump has removed US troops from the area. That will give Erdoğan the green light to attack Rojava, as he did the Kurdish enclave of Afrin.

When a map flashes up on the screen, Afrin merges into Türkiye; was this a conscious decision? I wonder if Syria will ever get Afrin back? I doubt it, in the wake of the invasion Türkiye began laying out infrastructure connecting it to their country. Ataturk had ambitions on Kurdish parts of Syria and Iraq, appealing to them as 'Mountain Turks, stretching down as far as Mosul. Preoccupied with the ethnic cleansing of the Greeks, Ataturk had his hands tied up on that front when peace broke out. Greedy Britain took Mosul. Meanwhile, ISIS fighters slip across the border into Türkiye where they are recruited into Islamist brigades, to what end? Some are already attacking the Kurds.

Janet Biehl, lover and partner of Murray Bookchin, as she states in the opening lines of the film, visits Rojava to see how his ideas are taking root in the women's movement of the area, particularly the YPJ the Women's Defence Units. Bookchin had some following amongst Young Liberals in the 1970s, particularly after the publication of his book *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* in 1971. Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan studied Bookchin's work in



Turkish translation whilst in prison and spread its message amongst the Kurdish community, where it has taken root. As the Syrian civil war developed after the Arab Spring, Kurdish Rojava became a beacon for the establishment of democratic practises. In the Middle East and beyond, most notably in the role of women in a notoriously patriarchal region (if you can limit the concept to that area).

Whilst the Kurds formed the backbone of the fight against ISIS, one wonders how they will fare now that Trump has withdrawn American support from the area. There has been talk of arming Kurdish groups in the wake of the US-Israel war on Iran, not surprisingly there is a lack of trust there, although some groups have links with Israel. As Trump will learn, ISIS has not gone away, indeed, to what extent does it or its



*Janet Biehl meeting members of the Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (YPJ)  
Ross Domoney & Danny Mitchell*

operatives, have sanctuary within Türkiye, the toppling of Assad being a case in point? The Kurds should know by now that your enemy's enemy is not your friend.

This, of course, is the problem. With a film, long production and related issues; this review was delayed by an embargo until the film was premiered at the London Kurdish Film Festival last year. One hopes that the situation for the women on the ground continues to this day, that they still dance and the future looks forward to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state based on Bookchin's principles – from the ground up, rather than the top down, that we still struggle with.

If you have access to an independent cinema or film society I would encourage you to seek out this film to spread the message – you can contact Ross Domoney at [ross\\_d@shadowgraph.co](mailto:ross_d@shadowgraph.co)

Meanwhile, the latest information from Shadowgraph, the production company, is that they are days away from landing a three-part commission, co-produced with The Real News Network, about the collapse of NATO, to be filmed in Finland, Ukraine, and Greenland.

***Saeed Rahman***

# International Abstracts.

## Liberator 433

Adam McQuire writes on Ukraine and the future of warfare; Rebecca Tinsley writes again on Sudan, whose troubles continue to slip away from the world's attention. There is also a letter from Jack Meredith on Deterrence. You'll love the cover.

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## USA

Minnesota Proved MAGA Wrong, by Adam Serwer. The Atlantic, January 26, 2026.

*Something to make ICE freeze over.*

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/01/the-neighbors-defending-minnesota-from-ice/685769/>

A Minneapolis Winter Like No Other, by Emily Witt. The New Yorker, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2025

*A photo record mostly, there is a lot of other coverage in The New Yorker.*

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/a-minneapolis-winter-like-no-other>

## Chagos Islands

The islands at the end of empire, Henry Mance. Financial Times. 28th February - 1st March. 2026.

*Broadens the context of Peter Harris's article within.*

<https://www.ft.com/content/a6d06630-95a7-4f9e-a30e-2713fc8dde96>

And a letter on 7th March - The reasoning behind the ICJ's Chagos ruling is 'very thin' from Jonathan Sumption, Former Justice of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom

<https://www.ft.com/content/00617222-982b-4a42-9a1e-feeb98859bf4>

## Iran/Middle East War

Iran and the war of unintended consequences, by Lawrence Freedman. Financial Times. 7<sup>th</sup> - 8th March 2026.

<https://www.ft.com/content/0b16e3e8-d52b-4b87-a212-bba90af39ceb>

Fear and fury, by Eugene Rogan. Financial Times. 7<sup>th</sup> - 8th March 2026.

<https://www.ft.com/content/ddb4a3fd-2f99-43a4-8ae6-330c6d29c14a>

*Both writers well-versed in the region.*



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## **What happens in Iran after the killing of Ali Khamenei? What should the Kurdish nation do? Arif Bawecari**

On 28th February 2026, a joint aerial force of United States and Israel carried out a military strike against Iran. The attack was highly precise and devastating. As expected, as a result of the strike, Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, along with several other senior regime officials, was killed.

### **How is a successor chosen after Ali Khamenei?**

According to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, when the position of the Supreme Leader becomes vacant an interim leadership council is immediately formed. The Council consists of the President of Iran, the head of the judiciary and a representative of the Guardian Council.

The main task of this Council is to administer the country until a new Supreme leader is selected by the Assembly of Experts.

The Assembly of Experts is composed of 88 clerics. This body has the authority to elect or appoint one person, or a leadership council to the position of Supreme Leader. In this system, the general public has no direct role in choosing the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We now know that Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of Ali Khamenei has been chosen.

### **The position condition over the regime before and after Ali Khamenei**

For a long time, suspicion and deep mistrust have existed among the senior leadership of the regime. Some officials secretly cooperated with foreign powers such as the United States and Israel. This situation enabled detailed intelligence regarding weapons facilities, nuclear programmes and the residences of officials and uranium specialists to reach these countries, allowing them to accurately identify and strike their military targets.

Despite all these internal conflicts and suspicions, Ali Khamenei managed to maintain a degree of leadership balance. However, there are three key issues that now pose serious obstacles to the selection of a new leader and may further weaken the process.

1. Can a consensus leader be chosen? Amid these deep divisions is the. Is it possible to select a leader acceptable to all factions of the regime? Or will power struggles and internal conflict push the regime towards further weakening and eventual collapse?
2. Can the current regime identify new secure locations for secret meetings, places not exposed to the intelligence of the United States and Israel. So as to avoid missile or drone attacks? This without doubt, seems extremely unlikely.
3. Public pressure and uprisings. During khamenei's era, Kurdistan, other oppressed nations and most Iranian cities witnessed major protests and uprisings. Will the new leadership be able to resolve the security pressures and economic crises? Or will conditions become even more favourable for broader and more nationwide uprisings, especially as public as public fear of a new and weaker leader diminishes?

### **The responsibility of a Kurdish nation at this sensitive moment.**

The Kurdish nation must prepare itself for these changes and developments. Unity and solidarity have long been discussed, but now there is an urgent need to establish a provisional government in exile. During a period of transition and power vacuum, responsibilities for protecting people's lives and security should be distributed among political parties, organisations and qualified administrative and security professionals.

Such a step can foster public awareness, calm and preparedness for a general and democratic election after tensions subside in the first months following the collapse of the Iranian regime. This path is among the minimum necessary solutions to safeguard the existence of a Kurdish nation. It can also attract international attention and support and present the region as a stable and reliable area for diplomatic missions and major global companies.

In the end, No matter how it is analysed, the regime is facing total collapse. It is now necessary to think seriously about practical self-preparation and concrete action.

### **Arif Bawecari**

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