

Not Taking No for an Answer

by Michael Curtis



In his *Early Life*, published in 1930, Winston Churchill declared, “Don’t take “no” for an answer.” This aphorism may have inspired the young ambitious British politician destined to fame but it is also pertinent for those readers of Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller Report who are perplexed that the 22-month investigation did not find that the Trump campaign or anyone associated with it conspired or coordinated with Russia in its efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election. Still in search of the illusory “collusion” between Trump and unnamed Russian officials, some members of the Democratic party, particularly Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) and Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Cal) vow to continue investigations of the President and the 400 page Mueller report hoping to uncover any attempts to obstruct justice. They have got “no” under their skin, deep in the heart, and are not ready to wake up to reality.

The no-believers appear to follow the convention of classic Greek tragedy, *deus ex machina*, according to which some device will solve a seemingly unresolvable problem to bring about the

desired conclusion. Though it has not yet been fully revealed, the Mueller Report has not played that role in U.S. politics. Similarly, those in Britain refusing to take “no” over Brexit search for a device, revoking Article 50, “indicative votes,” in Parliament, second referendum, marches through the streets near the House of Commons, change of prime minister, general election, to end the political deadlock as a minimum.

Refusal of politicians in both the U.S. and UK to accept “no” has to be set in the context of political and intellectual change and issues becoming salient, after years of stasis and adherence to misconceptions or deliberate misrepresentation of reality. Some recent amusing incidents illustrate the point.

We know that the city of Bologna, city of *fatta grossa* and leftist politics, invented pastas of tagliatelle, tortellini, and lasagna. But some things are hard for “noers” to accept. However, can we doubt the validity of the statement by the current Mayor of the city, Virginio Merola, that the world suffers from fake news, and part of it concerns an internationally famous commodity. The Mayor holds that that the popular international dish, “spaghetti bolognese,” doesn’t exist in Bologna. It’s strange that a city is famous all over the world for a “dish that is not ours.”

Even more surprising and hard to accept or to appreciate, are sales on E Bay, as well as behavior that borders on the hypocritical. One is the sale of a tissue on which the actress Scarlett Johansson blew her nose. Intended to raise money for a hunger relief charity, the used issue sold for more than \$2,000. Another sale was of a cigar half smoked by film director Steven Spielberg on the set of the controversial 2001 film, *Band of Brothers*, which was sold on E Bay for over \$1,000 by a former assistant of Spielberg.

Are they misguided or cynically hypocritical? On March 6, 2019 British Prince Harry spoke in London to a crowd of 12,000 young people on the issue of climate change: “I know you don’t

sit back and wait for solutions. You take action and create them." Yet, two days earlier, he travelled the 125 miles from London to Birmingham by private helicopter, a flight that cost £6,000 as compared to first class train trip that costs £34 and produces 90% less carbon emissions. His wife, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, flew in February by private jet to New York for a baby shower party, the event estimated to cost \$500,000, and one that appears to be incompatible with saving the planet.

The same question, hypocrisy or animosity, can be asked of prominent members of the U.S. Democratic party, particularly at least eight presidential candidates, who refused to attend the annual AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) conference in Washington in March 24-27, 2019. To call these absences "Jexodus" by the Democratic party may be excessive, since House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer did attend and speak, but the absence of most of the Democratic presidential contenders for 2020, including Bernie Sanders (I-Vt), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass), Kamala Harris (D-Cal), Beto O'Rourke (D-Tex), and Cory Booker (D-NJ) was conspicuous. The implication is that they approve of the view of Move On that AIPAC is a partisan lobby group that has undermined diplomatic efforts for peace in the Middle East, even if they not approve of the use by Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn) of the use of antisemitic tropes.

It is heartening to witness three new attempts, one in UK, the other two in France, to overcome the biased "noers" like the current students, though not a majority, at Brown University in March 2019, who voted to separate Brown from companies that do business with Israel and its citizens, and others who approve of BDS, and the refusal of a number of members of U.S. Congress to deal directly with legislation to outlaw antisemitic hate speech and antisemitic tropes.

In Britain, a major independent inquiry into "institutional antisemitism," in the Labour Party is to be held by the

Equalities and Human Rights Commission to examine how the LP deals with antisemitism. Among other matters, it will examine the behavior of the leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and the allegations of antisemitism against him. The new inquiry will question the findings of a previous inquiry, the Chakrabarti report of 2016, that many regard as insufficiently critical of the LP. The new inquiry may result in new guidelines for the LP on the issue of antisemitism of some of its members, and its leaders.

In France, the government is dealing with the effects of the Holocaust concerning Jews in France during World War II. First, the French government is providing \$402,000 to each of 49 Holocaust survivors in reparations for the French trains that deported them to Nazi concentration camps. This is one result of a 2014 U.S.-French agreement in which France offered \$60 million in reparations for the deportations of Jews. In return the U.S. courts will dismiss any lawsuits against the SNCF, the French railroad system, and the French government. By the agreement France acknowledges that the Vichy war time government and French companies were not "nosayers," but were responsible for their participation in the Holocaust.

Secondly, the French government is creating a task force dedicated to returning art work now in national collections that were stolen from Jews by Nazi Germany. The country has about 2,000 artworks in its possession stolen or sold under duress during World War II. Restitution of the art will no longer be by the ministry of culture, but by the commission that will advise the prime minister on action.

The task is formidable. Estimates are that about 100,000 art objects, paintings, drawings, sculptures, were stolen by the Nazis or sold under duress. After the War, about 61,000 were returned to France, and 70 per cent were recovered by their rightful owners. The problem arises that the French state has 2,143 objects, and has held them because of their artistic quality. The Louvre alone is responsible for about 800 paintings, 500 of which are dispersed in museums in France.

Those museums are encouraged to display the looted art and their provenance details.

In both cases in France those in power are not taking “no” for an answer. The issue is forthright. It is not simply one of financial compensation and reparations for Holocaust actions, which is important in itself, but about positive acknowledge of those actions and adherence to the principle of justice. Will members of Congress learn this lesson?