

The West is a mess ... but Europe is where the real troubles are

Fraught political landscapes have created considerable uncertainty as to who may be leading some of Canada's NATO allies come September

by Conrad Black



It is high summer and vacation time, including for me, as this will be my last column here until Labour Day. It is hard not to wonder what the political geography of the West will be like when we are all back at our workplaces like happy little elves in September. The other Western G7 countries, apart from Canada, are in the midst of fraught political landscapes and events. The cyclonic American President Trump, magnificently disdainful of all opinions except those of his followers in

his own country, is enjoying every moment in his great office and tumult more than serenity. The British prime minister, Theresa May, has staked everything on a compromise over Brexit between remain and leave. If her proposal is rejected by the European Union, that will dispose of her as prime minister, but its substantive acceptance will not only strengthen her fragile mandate but open the European horizon by the creation of a two-tiered Europe: a common market for all and political integration for only those countries that wish it. This flexibility of options and more accountable government from Brussels have always been the two missing ingredients in a successful European co-operative framework. Unfortunately, Trump may be accurate that there is no middle option between membership in the European Union and complete departure from it. To save Europe from the amputation of the U.K. and incidentally the demise of May, the German and French leaders will have to dictate to the dull, authoritarian gnomes in Brussels.



U.S. President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Theresa May talk at Chequers, the prime minister's country residence northwest of London, on July 13, 2018. Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

The life of the German chancellor is almost as complicated as Theresa May's. In accepting over a million desperate refugees from the Middle East and Africa over the past several years, she has earned the moral homage of all and must surely have gone some distance to expunging whatever remains of the guilt and shame of the German people, which they should logically have long outgrown, for the unspeakable crimes of the Third Reich. It is a magnificent humanitarian feat, but as was foreseen, and was regularly stated, it has rendered the four-term chancellor's political position very precarious.

Her coalition could crumble from week-to-week, but is not enduring the hourly state of suspense that May is. Trump rightfully exposed the German chancellor's hypocrisy this week

in spending only one per cent of Germany's GDP on defence while putting itself in the hands of the Russians for the provision of a large percentage of its energy requirements. Germany is Europe's greatest power and the world's fourth-largest economy and should devote at least two per cent of its GDP to defence, and it is scandalous that Chancellor Merkel's predecessor, Gerhard Schroeder, is padding around Europe as an agent of the Kremlin and Russian oligarch-controlled Russian national natural gas monopoly.



Police officers separate counter-protesters from those taking part in a "demonstration for the future of Germany" called by the far-right AfD in Berlin, on May 27, 2018. Odd Andersen/AFP/Getty Images

Though Trump did not publicly mention this, Merkel has amplified her own problems by buckling to the German Greens and shutting down the German coal- and nuclear-powered energy sources, thus strategically submitting mighty Germany to the unlikely mercies of the Russian dictator. Vladimir Putin and his cronies are riveted on the backs of shambling Russia, whose GDP is smaller than Canada's. Trump hit the jackpot with Merkel. Germany owes its growing respect, position in the Western Alliance, the Alliance itself and its reunification to the United States. For 20 years the German left has threatened to drift into neutrality. It is only the unutilized geopolitical potential of Germany that has prevented American leaders from laying out as clearly as Trump now has, the need for Germany to be a whole-hearted American ally, or an outright, waffling neutral. Neither Germany nor probably Britain can indefinitely suck and blow at the same time.



French President Emmanuel Macron speaks on the second day of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels, on July 12, 2018. Ludovic Marin/AFP/Getty Images

France's president, Emmanuel Macron, is secure in his five-year mandate, but is the first French leader since Charles de Gaulle to try seriously to rein in the public sector and

nationalized industry unions. He has carried public opinion up to now, but in a tense confrontation, replete with extremely inconvenient demonstrations on the great boulevards of Paris and other French cities, and almost unannounced national rail stoppages. Italy is now led by an incomprehensible coalition of the quite far left and populist Five Star party inspired by a disreputable and vulgar comedian, and the conservative regional party, the Lombard League, with little in common with its coalition partners. Incredibly, still in the wings and exercising a Mephistophelean influence, is the octogenarian scoundrel billionaire Silvio Berlusconi. Italy, as always these 2,500 years, is an important country, but one that has been difficult politically to take seriously, other than under the original Caesars and in the Imperial Peace of the second Century AD.



Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the U.K's opposition Labour Party, centre, walks through a Labour festival in London on June 16, 2018. Luke MacGregor/Bloomberg

When I return to this place in September there is little doubt that the presidents of the United States and France will still be in place and working on their present challenging agendas, and a likelihood that the Italian government will still be toiling at its tasks, but there is some uncertainty about who may be governing in Berlin, and considerable doubt about the leadership of the British government and its relations with the European Union. In the background at all times is the British alternative – the Labour Party's Jeremy Corbyn, an outright Marxist, who generally sides with Putin, including on the matter of the attempted murder a few months ago of a former Russian agent and his daughter in England. The elevation of Corbyn would be nothing less than the demise of Britain as a serious country after 500 years as a co-founder of the concept of the nation-state.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau speaks at the NATO summit in Brussels on July 12, 2018. Marlene Awaad/Bloomberg

This brings us back to Justin Trudeau, one of the principal slackers that Trump denounced at this week's NATO meetings for failing to pull his weight in the alliance. To Trudeau's credit, he kept a low profile on that issue and was very unambiguous in declining to share the alarm expressed by some of the European NATO leaders about President Trump's meeting with Russian President Putin on Monday, and said that he considered the meeting was an undoubtedly positive development. We can hope that this heralds an approach to trade discussions with the United States in which he and his colleagues put a recognition of the correlation of economic forces between Canada and the United States ahead of the temptation to fill the open domestic political goal with free shots of "not being pushed around" by the U.S.A. That's a crowd-pleaser but the economic consequences could be disastrous. Routine sanctions such as the U.S. is imposing now can easily be countered by the traditional Canadian expedient of reducing the value of our currency, but inciting Trump to serious interdiction of Canadian imports would quickly back into half the homes in Canada. Someone in authority in Ottawa must be aware of that.

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When we all return in September, we will be only a year away from our next federal election campaign. If this government manages the American relationship carefully, and appears actually to be building the Kinder Morgan pipeline (not caving in to every native and environmental complainant), and moving to emancipate Alberta from its shameful persecution by Green-socialist British Columbia, aggravated by Ottawa's purposeless perversity on energy matters, the Liberals' re-election chances, albeit with a much less positive and hopeful climate than in 2015, and perhaps without a majority, will remain

fairly good. One or two false steps, and continued excessive preoccupation with gender, eco-wacky, and misdirected Indigenous policies, and Trudeau's prospects could be as cloudy as Chancellor Merkel's, though not quite as unsettled as Prime Minister May's. A pleasant summer to all.

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