

Confused Alarms in the Congo and Oxford University

by Michael Curtis



In one of his essays Henry James asserted that goodness is very apt to be weak, that folly is very apt to be defiant, that imbeciles are in great places. His aphorism is fitting when considering contemporary figures on the chessboard of political and social events across the globe, in the Congo, in Norway, in Moscow, at Oxford University, and in Washington. D.C.

You may have heard of a Special Counsel investigation headed by Robert S. Mueller set up on May 17, 2017 to examine

possible links or “collusion” between the presidential campaign in 2016 of Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian government officials. At this point it cannot be said to be the glow that lights a star on the brink of political sagaciousness. After an inquiry of more than a year and a half it remains to be seen whether the conclusion will provide evidence of any “collusion,” or whether the whole operation was a “witch hunt” or a partisan hoax.

But whatever the verdict, and whatever the commentary on the U.S. election, and the time and resources spent on it, it is important to make clear that it is not the only example of an inquiry based on the implicit thesis that the election was carried out in questionable conditions or that it occurred in the context of intimidation, improper behavior, delays in processing of data, vote buying, voting machines not working accurately, of former political leaders being arrested or forced to flee the country, or experience premature deaths. Nor did it take place in a country that has 16,000 UN peacekeepers, but where the political authorities refused this international logistical support to ensure a free and fair election.

All this has happened in the country that in June 1960 became independent from Belgian control and the personal fiefdom of King Leopold II who had plundered the country, and in 1997 became the oddly named Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC, and held a presidential election on December 30, 2018. In spite of its name the regime is not a model of democratic rule, though there are nominally more than 50 political parties in a country in political transition towards a partly presidential system. More properly, it is an example of longtime corrupt political leadership and a leading family involved in privately held family business enterprises which control the production of minerals, diamonds, and dominate many enterprises, banks, hotels, travel agencies, and night

clubs.

The DRC is the largest country, 905, 000 square miles, in sub-Saharan, and has a population of 81 million. It is a mineral rich country, the world's largest miner, about two thirds of the global total of cobalt, essential for smartphones, and electric car batteries, and large producer of copper as well as gold and diamonds. It is also a country with a high rate of illiteracy, ethnic violence, and civil war 1997-2002 that killed 5 million.

The election on December 30, 2018 was supposed to signify the first democratic transfer of political power in the 59 years of independence. The long-time ruler Joseph Kabila had been in power 2001-2018 but was barred from seeking a third term. Three major candidates competed: Martin Fayulu, former Exxon Mobil manager for 20 years, businessman who became a full time politician in 2006, and leads the Engagement for Citizenship and Development party, formed in 2009; Felix Tshisekedi, leader of the largest opposition party, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress party, Congo's oldest party; and Emmanuel Shadary, former interior minister, and protege of Kabala. The present leader Kabala is alleged to have supported Shadary, but when he realized his candidate could not win, changed his tactics and made a deal with Tshisekedi.

The official report by Kabala's administration was that Tshisekedi had won with 7.0 million votes to Fayulu's 6.3 million, and Shadary's 4.3 million. But objective unofficial reports, especially by the Catholic Church, that deployed 40,000 election monitors, and other groups suggested this was untrue, and that Fayulu had won by a large margin, 59.4% to 19%.

On January 17, 2018 the African Union, set up in 2002, with 53 members, based in Ethiopia, which has both a decision-making assembly of heads of state or government, and a representative parliament, demanded that the DRC suspend announcement of the

final result of the presidential election, since there were serious doubts about the accuracy of the official provisional results. But a day later, on January 18, 2019, the DRC refused to suspend final results, and the dilemma continues.

The DRC Constitutional Court is expected to give the final answer. However, the Southern African Development Community, an intergovernmental group of 16 African countries, welcomed the release of and refused to criticize the official provisional result. In hypocritical mode, that Community could not refrain from being critical of the West for being critical of the provisional result, and “disrespecting,” the sovereignty of the DRC.

Hypocrisy and foolish political and social behavior is manifest not only in the Congo but elsewhere as the narrative of three ladies, different in capabilities, professions, and development, shows. In January 2019 Norway provided evidence of this by featuring a glamorous and influential former model turned physician and founder of Eat Foundation. This lady, now a billionaire, named Gunhild Stordalen, proposes to save the planet by people reducing meat consumption, limited their intake to small beef burgers and $\frac{1}{4}$ chicken breasts, two hundred grams of fruit, about the same amount of vegetables, two slices of whole meal toast and half a pint of milk. The immediate problem with this policy of other people eating less and thus saving the environment is that Stordalen jets in her private plane all over the world, in excursions to Costa Rica, Mexico, the Antibes, a substantial contribution to air traffic pollution.

Then there is the intriguing case of a glamorous 21 year old Belarusian model, named Anastasia Vashukevich, apparently interested in international fame, who claims she has proof, in audio recordings of a Russian billionaire, of Russian support for the Trump presidential campaign. In January 2019 she was deported from Thailand where she was giving a sex training course for tourists in Pattaya, a city resort where sex seems

the main profession, but was detained in Moscow airport. Her major claim to fame appears to be that she was the mistress of Oleg Deripaska, well known Russian oligarch, whose associates include Paul Manafort, and Yevgeny Prigozhia, personal chef of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

No doubt this young lady is enticing in various ways, but nevertheless, it is improbable that Deripaska, the billionaire whose business empire is estimated at \$5.3 billion, and the owner of valuable property in Washington, D.C., and is said to be close to Putin, is unlikely to be a bit player in the Mueller Russian saga, though Deripaska was sanctioned in April 2018 when his three companies, one a major aluminum company, were put on the U.S. sanction list.

And there is foolishness in higher education. In a statement that can illustrate unconscious inverted snobbery, and concern with social circles that may be spinning too fast for her, Baroness Royall, President of Somerville College, Oxford, since 2017, Labour politician who was made a life peer in 2014, and became Labour leader in the House of Lords, has contributed to "demystifying" Oxford. The lady may not be a tramp, but she does not go to Oxford in ermines and pearls. Royall is concerned in particular with changing the culture at Somerville, and in general widening access to Oxford of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds and state schools, rather than from elite private schools, and making it the college more welcome to all.

One of the assumptions of a university education was that it widens the horizons of students, and introduces them to new tastes, including food. But for Royall, octopus is not one of them. After receiving a complaint from a first year student, Royall asked the college chef to take octopus terrine off the menu. Gourmets recognize that cephalopod dish is delicious, but Royall believes it is not quite right for everyone because it might upset disadvantaged students, and should be replaced with a less exotic dish. Critics of this fashionable outlook

position may justifiably ask, do not university heads have bigger fish to fry?

Everyone, irrespective of social class and level of culture except perhaps demanding snowflakes, loves fish and chips and even Yorkshire pudding. Yet those familiar with the glories of “less exotic” British fare might not welcome possible alternatives to octopus: spotted dick, made with suet and dried fruit and often served with custard, bubble and squeak, jellied eels, or toad in the hole. The best that can be said at present of the snowflakes at Somerville is that they are not yet compiling a list of grievances, a *cahier de doléances* by the people which in fact was used to challenge the existing regime, similar to that compiled in spring of 1789, that heralded more extreme events. Surely Royall, in spite of her fashionable anti-elitism, is not the modern reincarnation of Delacroix’s 1832 painting *Liberty Leading the People*.