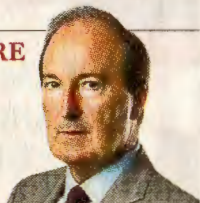


Silver-tongued Tony Blair won't spin this one

CHARLES MOORE



One of Tony Blair's greatest political skills was what he called "triangulation". The idea is to take up a position that seems equidistant between Left and Right, thus winning a majority and perplexing political opponents.

Yesterday he was trying to triangulate about immigration. He wants Britain to introduce much stricter immigration controls of EU citizens in order to reverse the result of the referendum. "Paradoxically, we have to respect the referendum vote to change it," says Mr Blair.

I don't think the old magic will work this time. After all, David Cameron tried it before the vote last year. He begged EU leaders for concessions over free movement. They effectively refused. The British duly voted Leave.

Now that we have actually legislated to get out, how could we be persuaded to remain by anyone, no matter how silver-tongued, who promises to stop what he himself started? Once we had crawled back into the EU, unrestricted immigration could start all over again. We would be powerless to prevent it. Mr Blair is offering not a triangle, but a vicious circle.

◆ I am all for feting distinguished authors, and John le Carré is one

such. His latest book – the last about George Smiley – is just out, and he is rightly given airtime to talk about it. It does not follow, however, that his remarks should go unchallenged.

Last week, on Radio 4's *Today* programme, le Carré said that this had been a "terribly difficult time" to write his book, because of Brexit, "which I detest" (and because of Trump "which I also detest"). He revealed that the fictional Smiley is also upset by Brexit because "everything he was doing was for Europe": "If he had a dream, it was to see a Europe unified." Le Carré complained that "democratic rule

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as we understand it is being assailed from both sides of the Atlantic".

I admit I have not re-read the Smiley novels to check how often the hero refers in glowing terms to the EU, but I remember no such remarks. In the Seventies Le Carré advanced the year in which Smiley was recruited for the service to 1937 (which makes him roughly 100 years old), so he had already been in it for 20 years before the Treaty of Rome was signed. He must have left well before the European Union (as opposed to Community) was invented in 1993. Throughout his time – as today – espionage was not an EEC matter, but a sovereign one. Our only

really important intelligence ally in the European theatre was the United States of America. He spent his life "defending the flag", says his creator. Yes, the British one, not the EU one.

Having invented Smiley, le Carré is entitled to turn him into a centenarian Remoaner if he wants, but is it artistically satisfactory?

Any decent person wants a Europe united in peace. The argument that you must therefore support Britain's membership of the EU is the sort of illogic that encouraged many of us to vote Leave. We considered that what le Carré calls "democratic rule as we understand it" was not what we understand by democracy at all.

✦ Some have supported Jacob Rees-Mogg's freedom to oppose abortion. Others have attacked it. Few have stopped to consider whether he might be right.

Abortion is a difficult issue, partly because any prohibition on it can be presented as an oppression of women by the law. The history of moral ideas shows, however, that it is inattention to the rights of *all* those involved that perpetrates the greatest injustice. Slavery once flourished in many apparently civilised countries because slaves were thought of as property, not people. "Am I not a man and a brother?" was the plangent slogan of the anti-slavery movement.

In a couple of centuries' time, might not our generation look strange for refusing even to consider the thought that foetuses are human beings

too? Might not there be statues erected to Rees-Mogg to stand beside those of William Wilberforce, who also, in his time, was much mocked for being a serious Christian?

◆ A friend sent me a picture of a sort of first-day cover for a special stamp that commemorates the 20th anniversary of "the Stationing of the Chinese People's Liberation Army" (what we call "the handover") in Hong Kong. The stamp depicts ranks of smartly dressed Chinese soldiers marching in in 1997.

The slogan on the stamp hymns "The Mighty and Civilised Forces" of the PLA. To the modern Western ear, the phrase jars. We have become allergic to any automatic linkage between mighty forces and being civilised. Certainly it is a stretch to see the PLA as the defenders of civilisation.

But the truth is that history is against us. Few great civilisations have flourished for long without mighty forces, even in free countries like Britain. The PLA HQ building (shown on the gift copy) was previously, after all, the Prince of Wales HQ. Now that our forces are no longer mighty, our civilisation cannot defend itself.

It is much too late to complain about the might of the Chinese forces. Our only hope is to encourage them somehow to be civilised. I cannot say the stamp makes me feel optimistic.



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