

Outrageous – or a denial of harsh reality?

✖ President

President Trump's choice of Ted Malloch, a former Oxford Academic who speaks French and German fluently, to be the next US ambassador to the EU, has not gone down well in Brussels.

On the face of it, the trilingual Malloch appears very well qualified for the job. He is an experienced diplomat who served at an ambassadorial level in Geneva as deputy to the executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe. He also sits on the Institute of Economic Affairs' academic advisory council.

Professor Malloch's sin is to have given a harsh analysis of the current political climate. "Davos-man is dead," he declares. "Read the obituary. It is framed in the US election and all that Trump represents. The post-Berlin Wall globalisation consensus is over. Going around telling the locals that they are racists for opposing migration does not help. They are not racists, they are nationalists – and the reality is that just like homeowners they want to feel and see the benefits of home ownership or being a national. Building the country is now Trump's political and economic imperative."

More cuttingly, he also said "No longer do we need to have ultimate allegiance paid to corrupt international organisations." The gist of his argument is that the West is going through a seismic change on a par with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its attendant Marxist-Leninist ideology in 1989-91.

He could be right, although only time will tell whether his optimism is justified. After all, there have been plenty of false dawns in the past. Think of the like of Wordsworth's early euphoria about the French revolution (*"Bliss was it in*

that dawn to be alive") or Francis Fukuyama's book "The end of History and the Last Man" which naively predicted in the wake of the collapse of the USSR that liberal democracy would spread effortlessly across the world.

But whether or not we are living at a time when the tectonic plates are shifting, Malloch's comments about international organisations – and the EU in particular – have infuriated the leaders of the main political groupings in the European Parliament. Several have gone as far as to call for his nomination to be withdrawn. Manfred Weber of the Christian Democrat grouping and Guy Verhofstadt, who heads up ALDE, the liberals, wrote a letter to the EU Council President Donald Tusk saying that his "statements reveal outrageous malevolence regarding the values that define this European Union."

Malloch's strongest and most controversial criticism of the EU was his boast that "I had in a previous career a diplomatic post where I helped to bring down the Soviet Union, so maybe there's another union that needs a little taming." This has particularly upset the Germans, who are every bit as keen as Messrs Verhofstadt and Weber to block his appointment. Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's Foreign Minister, recently visited America and reportedly told his US counterpart, Rex Tillerson, "We are the new kids on the block." He counterposed "a confident and 'strong Europe'" to the new US president's "America first". Readers may recall that Barack Obama's last port of call on his last foreign trip before handing over the reins of office was Germany. Several commentators highlighted the symbolism of this act – a "handing over of the torch" – a recognition by Obama that Mrs Merkel in Berlin rather than his successor in the White House would be the standard-bearer for the particular "liberal" values he espoused.

But are the values of Obama and Mrs Merkel the values of the EU as a whole? In answering this question, one can see why Malloch's criticisms have evoked such anger among the EU's élite. Look eastwards from Brussels to Budapest or Bratislava and you will find, in Peter Osborne's words, countries that are "more bigoted than Trump's America."

Now whether or not you think that Trump's America is bigoted (and many people clearly do not) or whether you support Viktor Orbán's plans to build a massive fence and his claim that migrants are "a poison" that Hungary "won't swallow" – or indeed, whatever your views about the statement by the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico that Islam had "no place" in his country – it is indisputable that these men do not hold the same values as Barack Obama and, more importantly, Angela Merkel.

Poland is another headache for the EU. Jarosław Kaczyński, the country's *de facto* leader, has called for EU members to challenge what he called German dominance. "Merkel is the absolute No. 1 in the EU and that is not a healthy situation," he said. The governing Law & Justice (PiS) Party, which he leads, has been accused of breaking the rule of law and the country faces the withdrawal of its voting rights if it fails to conform. Since coming to power, PiS has passed laws giving it powers to appoint the heads of the state TV and radio stations and has interfered in the operations of the Polish supreme court. The party is also socially conservative, with close links to the Roman Catholic Church. It also supports returning power from Brussels to the member states – diametrically opposed to the "ever closer union" of the Treaty of Rome.

Can the EU really hold together when member states take such polarised positions over the issues which Professor Malloch claims are currently re-shaping the Western world? One person who has his doubts is Paul Magnette, the Minister-President of Wallonia, the French speaking part of Belgium. In a stark about-turn from the usual expansionist federalism of most Western European politicians, M. Magnette has stated that the departure of further member states from the EU would be "desirable". Slovakia isn't on his list, but Hungary definitely is, along with Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. Will we have to get our tongues round "Polxit, Hungrexit, Romaxit

and Bulgxit" before long?

Ironically, it's the economic issues rather than the ideological divergence which concern M. Magnette. The workers have migrated west while the money has move east – a far from ideal situation. He feels that a peeling-off of some member states is the only road to renewal. His observations about students' views on the EU contrast starkly and surprisingly with the UK's Europhile "snowflakes" who paraded themselves all over our newspapers in the wake of the Brexit vote. "When I speak to students", he said, "Europe doesn't mean anything any more. On the contrary, it symbolises the losers of globalisation, the cause of all (their) problems."

Europhiles on both sides of the Channel insist that any talk of the EU disintegrating is wishful thinking on the part of British Leave voters who hate the EU. "It is here to stay" claims Miguel Otero-Iglesias. But when a senior Belgian politician warns that it is going to disintegrate, it is possible that Professor Malloch's forthright euroscepticism may be nothing more or less than a statement of harsh and uncomfortable reality.