

Axis of Idiots • Eamon Murphy

IN August 2017, the *Washington Post* reported that Texas ‘megachurch pastor’ Robert Jeffress – one of President Donald Trump’s ‘evangelical advisers’, who preached the morning of his inauguration – had released a statement saying the president has the moral authority to ‘take out’ North Korean leader Kim Jong- Un.

“When it comes to how we should deal with evildoers, the Bible, in the book of Romans, is very clear: God has endowed rulers full power to use whatever means necessary — including war — to stop evil”, Jeffress said. “In the case of North Korea, God has given Trump authority to take out Kim Jong-un.”

The previous week, President Trump made his now infamous statement that if North Korea continues to threaten the United States, or its allies or territories, it will be met with “fire and fury like the world has never seen”.

This is typical Trump rhetoric; off the cuff, bombastic, and at odds with the narrative coming from the more moderate elements of his administration. (his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, has maintained that the U.S. is open to diplomatic negotiation with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK, as North Korea officially refers to itself).

In June, Mark Bowden (author of several books, including *Black Hawk Down*) published an article in *The Atlantic* magazine on ‘How to deal with North Korea’. It begins with an alarmist and attention-grabbing statement, though one that is probably not so far-fetched: “Thirty minutes. That’s about how long it would take a

nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launched from North Korea to reach Los Angeles”.

In the article, Bowden presents four options for dealing with the hermit state and its nuclear ambitions. They are:

1. *Prevention*: A crushing military strike to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear and conventional arsenals, take out its leadership, and destroy its military.
2. *Turning the screw*: A limited conventional military attack, or series of such attacks, from the air and sea.
3. *Decapitation*: Removing Kim Jong-un and his inner circle, potentially by assassination.
4. *Acceptance*: Consenting, implicitly, to North Korea developing and holding whatever weapons they wish to possess, while continuing efforts to contain and frustrate them.

None of these is a good option. But it increasingly looks like acceptance is the only realistic possibility. As noted by Bowden, for sheer boldness, the prevention option would appeal most to the current occupant of the Oval Office. It would also play well to elements of his support base (some campaign posters for Trump boasted “Finally, someone with balls”).

Such a strike would require the greatest American military attack since the Korean War, almost 70 years ago, and would surely result in thousands and thousands, if not millions, of civilian fatalities. However, it is certainly possible that, by Trumpian logic, that cost might be acceptable “if the war remains on the other side of the world” (this is something that ought to keep South Koreans and Japanese awake at night. The definition of ‘acceptable losses’ usually depends heavily on which people are doing the dying).

Such an attack would need to be executed so swiftly and decisively that North Korea would have no time to respond. This is a fantasy:

Bowden believes that an American preemptive strike would likely trigger one of the worst mass killings in human history, if only because complete annihilation of the DPRK arsenal is probably impossible, and with only a few of its more conventional weapons, North Korea could kill millions of people within hours. Seoul is less than 50 miles down the road, while the DPRK has missiles capable of reaching Tokyo, a metropolitan area of nearly 40 million people.

Let's just say that the first option is out.... What if the United States aimed to hit at the Pyongyang regime without provoking a full-on war, leaving Kim Jong-un in power and the North Korean state still intact, though without its nuclear arsenal?

Such an attack would need to inflict significant damage to North Korea's capability for military aggression whilst being small enough to avoid being perceived as the beginning of the afore-discussed preventative strike. The goal would be to leave Kim in power, but force him to abandon his pursuit of nuclear ICBMs. But this in almost equally as problematic as the first option, as North Korea would have no way of immediately knowing that the attack was not an all-out assault, and would therefore have no reason to hold back in launching a full counter-offensive – nuclear weapons and all.

The option of decapitation – assassinating Kim Jong-un and replacing the leadership with a more moderate and open regime – is something that is almost certainly being considered. And it has at least one public backer. According to Jeffress, the aforementioned pastor, the biblical passage Romans 13 gives American government authority to deal with the situation. “That gives the government ... the authority to do whatever, whether it's assassination, capital punishment or evil punishment to quell the actions of evildoers like Kim Jong-un”.

Here, he ignores the more pacifistic Romans 12, which says, “Do not repay evil for evil”. Asked whether he would want the president to embody the Sermon on the Mount, referring to the moral teachings of Jesus, he replied “absolutely not”. Quite the Christian attitude! “Some Christians, perhaps younger Christians, have to think this through,” Jeffress said. “It’s antithetical to some of the mushy rhetoric you hear from some circles today. Frankly, it’s because they are not well taught in the scriptures.”

Yet, given the intense security surrounding Kim (much of the military might of the North Korean state exists, essentially, to ensure his safety), it would be incredibly dangerous, not to mention likely suicidal, for anyone to attempt to carry out an assassination. Neither is there a guarantee that what replaces him would be any better.

This leaves the final, unpalatable proposition of acceptance. Unless Kim Jong-un is killed and replaced by something better, or some miracle of diplomacy occurs, or some incredibly costly military conflict occurs on the Korean peninsula, North Korea will eventually build ICBMs armed with nuclear warheads. In the words of one retired senior U.S. military commander: “It’s a done deal.”

Indeed, Bowden commented in a recent interview with Sam Harris that he has yet to talk to anyone near the top of the American military command who would seriously consider a preemptive attack on the DPRK. It may be wise to hope that it is such reservation and acceptance that prevails, and Trump ignores Jeffress – a man who once said that former president Barack Obama “paved the way for the Antichrist”, and drew controversy during the 2012 Republican primaries for calling Mormonism a cult.

Indeed, acceptance is likely because there are no good military options where North Korea is concerned, and because as frightening as it is to contemplate a Kim regime with nuclear weapons,

accepting such a scenario means living with things only slightly worse than they are right now. Pyongyang has long had the means to destroy Seoul and kill tens of thousands of American soldiers stationed in South Korea. But Kim has been constrained by the same logic that has stayed the use of nuclear arms for some 70 years; that their use would invite swift annihilation.

While during the Cold War the term used was MAD, or mutually assured destruction, in Kim's case it is simply 'assured destruction', as any launch of a nuclear weapon would invite annihilation while, even though its missiles might hit North America, North Korea cannot possibly destroy the United States. Acceptance is a terrible proposition to consider, but Americans lived with a far, far greater threat for almost half a century.

Once a nation commits itself to such a goal, it is next to impossible to stop it acquiring a nuclear weapon. The deal to halt Iran's nuclear program was achievable only because that country had extensive trading and banking ties with other nations. North Korea's isolation means that no country besides China can really apply meaningful economic pressure.

The DPRK has, in the past, displayed an occasional willingness to halt its nuclear ambitions. With the right inducements, Kim might possibly decide to change direction. But for now, it's likely that acceptance is how the current crisis should and will play out.

One must hope, most of all, that the actions of Trump in this situation are guided by logic, reason, and advice from knowledgeable people in close quarters, and not by citations from the Bible. This author believes that Trump's appeal to the evangelical lobby is purely a pragmatic one. He himself seems to have no real religious belief, and I doubt he pays any real attention to Jeffress or his ilk, except in so far

as something might arise that might help him appeal to his evangelical support base. Let's hope, for the sake of humanity, that I'm correct.

SEX AND GENDER • Roger Kelly

SEX and gender definitions have become increasingly confusing and complex, especially between feminists and transsexuals. There appears to be a growing intolerance and antipathy between trans women and radical feminists who are being labelled as TERFS (trans exclusionary radical feminists). They are said to incite violence against trans women by refusing to accept them as women.

While there is an intense debate ongoing between radical feminists and trans women, there are concerns among socialist and trade union groups that proposed changes to the law on gender self-identity could have major implications for all of us. Anyone raising concerns and challenging the proposal is being deemed as transphobic, which is similar to the no platforming for speakers with differing views on transgender issues. This does not help in debating the issues involved which are vital for any social, political or legal change.

For many trade unionists, relaxing the legal definition of what is a man or a woman could render sex discrimination law meaningless. The right to define one's own 'gender' will undermine the legal characteristic of 'sex' and could lead to serious implications for women and their ability to fight sex discrimination and oppression.

The demand for self-identity, which has become a campaigning issue for the trans community, has serious implications for all of us and how we are defined.

Unfortunately the growth in identity politics is becoming an atomising force, creating division among progressive women's groups.

The controversy centres around the term 'women' in that it is defined in several ways. For the majority of women it is still determined by biology; for trans women it is determined by a strongly held belief of 'knowing' Natively born women are now referred to as 'cis', 'non-man', 'non-trans women', 'vagina owners', and 'menstruators'.

Another trend is the casual substitution of 'gender' for 'sex'. This is worrying and a misrepresentation of the law, under which 'sex' is a protected characteristic because of the discrimination and oppression which women face.

Sex is biological and the fight for feminists which goes back decades if not centuries has been to challenge the assumption that one's sex should determine one's options or behaviour.

Within the transgender community many believe that sex is a social construct and that binary does not exist. To accept this is to ignore the biological reality of billions of women. It does not challenge our social expectations; nor does it help women deal with the oppression they face. Women who suffer FGM, sexual harassment or rape cannot identify out of these attacks. Women who live in poverty cannot access education or equal pay at work. Sex data on issues as diverse as pensions and pay or domestic violence become harder to collect and use as part of the battle for women's equality.

Women's rights are an ongoing struggle for universal access to reproductive rights, services or abortions. Look at the current mess in Northern Ireland regarding this and the ridiculous moralising from Boots over the morning after pill.

Another strange demand being made by non-binary trans women is that abortion rights groups should use the term ‘pregnant women’, but surely this term obscures the struggle by women globally to assert control over their own bodies.

It seems to me that the excessive terminology that trans women are insisting that feminists use could ultimately be counter-productive and alienate many women from participating in important political issues for the advancement of women's rights.

There needs to be an open debate around the politics of gender identity without accusations of transphobia being flung at progressive trade unionists and feminists who are actively involved in progressing and defending women’s rights.

APPRENTICESHIPS? OR HIP REPLACEMENTS? • Shelley Leggett

Pensions Minister Guy Opperman caused outrage lately when he suggested in a Westminster Hall debate that women in their 60s, who have had their pension age put back by up to six years, could go on apprenticeships. The hall was packed with many having to stand, and cries of ‘Shame on you!’ could be heard from the gallery, which contained at least a few WASPIs (Women Against State Pension Inequality). One MP interrupted ‘Did the minister just say that women of 64 could go on apprenticeship courses?’. Of course, the situation was ripe for lampooning, and wits were quick to take to Twitter with comments like, “Did he say apprenticeships or hip replacements?”, and “Were they shouting ‘Shame on you’ or ‘Are you sane?’”.

Mr Opperman also claimed the government had put in place 34 ‘Older People’s champions’ to help older people back into work. 34.

For 3.5 million women never mind the men. And inquiries to Jobcentres for these champions has produced puzzled looks but not one champion.

Some women have been reporting on Facebook and Twitter that they went and asked about apprenticeships at their local Jobcentre only to be told the apprenticeships were for 16 – 24 year olds and only paid £3.50 an hour. This has left women already retired, sometimes because they were encouraged to do so to let younger people in at the other end, having to prove they are spending 35 hours a week looking for work so they can claim £65 a week Jobseekers Allowance. Many of these women, who have worked upwards of 40 years, often in low paid, part-time work so they could be there for their children, now have to suffer the indignity of being told how to dress for an interview and how to write a CV by ‘the 20-somethings’ who work in the Jobcentre. For jobs that don’t exist or wouldn’t employ women in their 60s anyway.

So almost 100 years after women got the vote – albeit only women over 30 who were householders – women in 2017 who have partners or husbands who are working are being told they have to live off them rather than receive benefits or the pension they were lead to believe they would receive at 60. Will we ever achieve true emancipation, i.e. be able to keep ourselves despite having had time out to look after family? For those who suggest having children is a choice a woman makes I would have to ask do men not have children? Of course they do, and yet their pension pots do not reflect that in the way a woman’s does.

Peter Stefanovich, lawyer and campaigner against government deceit, says many do not fully appreciate the injustice 1950s women have had inflicted on them largely because the issue has been ignored by the mainstream media. He also says the UK has one of the worst records for gender equality at work and quotes a TUC

analysis that shows many women still earn considerably less than men today.

Some women left work to nurse spouses or partners who were ill only to find the pension they thought would support them at 60 had been moved back to 66 leaving them no income at all, while others have had to leave their homes, and rely on the kindness and handouts of family or friends. Some took on childminding duties to help their own offspring continue working, but with so many on zero hours contracts and minimum wage they can't pay them either. What about same sex marriages between women? No other income to rely on for them. Many in this generation of women are doomed to live the rest of their lives in poverty.

I know those of you who already have your pensions, or who are younger and have just found out you will have to work to 68, and possibly later if this government stays in much longer, are bored with this issue. But what if it was your mother, sister, wife left as age and death approach with a choice between no income or the humiliation of the job centre? And haven't you realised what's happening yet? First they came for the disabled, then they came for the junior doctors, the firemen, the police, children, 30% of whom are now classified as poor and two thirds of them from working families (Patrick Butler, *The Guardian*, 16.3.17), and women. 90% of single parents are women, and the Changing Lives charity says the impact of 'welfare' cuts is now so severe outreach workers are coming across women who have 'taken to the streets in desperation' (Frances Ryan, *The Guardian*, 16.3.17).

But you weren't any of those things, so you said nothing. The government is now no longer working for us. All other parties in the UK are protesting at austerity cuts and the effect they are having on women and children in particular, but the government has consistently refused to meet with interested groups including

WASPI. More than a few of them will not live to see their State Pension. The core group of WASPI in NI has seven members of which I am one. One member has finished treatment for cancer and another has just started. The government claims we are all living longer so need to work longer, but recent studies show that life expectancy depends on where you live in the UK, and in some areas it hasn't increased at all. Is increasing the age at which we can claim our State Pensions to an age that will mean many will not live to see it not a way of culling the poor?

This government is dismantling society. To those who call the WASPIs 'Graspis' – you should be supporting us. It's not our meagre pensions, the lowest in Europe, that are preventing the young from buying a house or making them share one low paid job with three other people so that the government can claim unemployment is at an all-time low. The UK is the fifth richest economy in the world with apparently more people working than ever before, yet pensions are being held back, services are being cut, and our beloved NHS is in crisis and can't continue much longer in its current state.

Where is all that saved money going? While we bicker amongst each other about whose fault it is that we can't get an appointment with the GP, or have to wait years to have a hip replacement, or work until we drop, that money is being siphoned out of the country and into the bank accounts of off shore companies that pay no tax in this country. That is why there is no money for us – those that worked for it. So whether you are older than the WASPIs or younger we should all be supporting each other to end this theft of everything we've paid for from our hospitals to our industries and transport systems. We paid for the NHS. What right has the government to sell it off to the highest bidder? It has no right, of course, but half of the companies behind NHS privatisation have

links to Tories (source: National Health Action Party). Isn't that a conflict of interest?

A welfare state

demands we all look out for each other, young, old, immigrant or disabled, and the state's job is to find ways of financially supporting that. They are supposed to work for us. How dare they refuse to meet concerned groups? What if the government next comes for those – say over 75 and decides euthanasia is necessary as the country can no longer afford pensions for those who are no longer economically productive? Will there be anyone left to say anything? Just saying...