

# Resilience of the Greek spirit keeps the country's heart ticking



## Richard Pine Greece Letter

Ping-pong between Greece and Turkey over asylum seekers will run and run

"This is the first case of the kind that has come up before the Dáil. It is a case in which we are charged with a very heavy responsibility, because the action we are taking now sets a precedent for future cases. It may be, I hope it will not be, the case that charges of this kind – charges of graft, corruption, jobbery, whatever you like to call it – will become commonplace in our politics."

That was Independent TD Bryan Cooper speaking on the setting up of the Irish State's fledgling broadcasting station in 1924. He added, "We cannot keep the public in the dark indefinitely", and urged the uncovering of what he called the "secret history" of its gestation.

And so the culture of the tribunal was born, along with that of the "secret history". Seventy years later, the

Moriarty tribunal was bound to follow – a perfect example of what goes around, comes around.

In Greece, the ongoing row about the awarding of four television licences has followed a similar path, with the opposition claiming that we are being kept "in the dark" not only about the government's choice of licensees but also about the method of awarding the licences. Somewhere there is a "secret history" waiting to be told.

The circularity of political behaviour is ubiquitous. Seldom has a world war, a civil war or a revolution disturbed the course of predictable history, because politicians are like any other animal: they follow their biological path to stay alive and breed the next generation.

Looking at the year since my

book *Greece Through Irish Eyes* was published, it seems that a lot of water has flowed under a lot of bridges, calling perhaps for a new edition. Not so. I submitted samples of this water to the laboratory, and hydrologists are unanimous that it is simply the same water constantly being recycled. One scientist went as far as to say that if this is the effluent of Greece's recent past, it is a miracle of what you can do with wastewater.

Life is a continuous stream of predictability. Newspapers continue to call for "a tangible and realistic blueprint" for reform, a "narrative" that everyone can subscribe to. This is precisely what cannot be done, because it would mean translating impossible aspirations into achievable goals.

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are doing, and kick for touch for fear that what they might really do would be even worse than what they pretend to do. Former prime ministers, finance ministers and their advisers continue to publish books (five at the last count) exonerating themselves from the crisis their parties created.

The posturing over Greece's relations with its neighbours is unchanged: windy words leading to empty actions. With Albania, it's border disputes and the victimisation of ethnic Greeks in southern Albania; with Macedonia, the vetoing of the name that the former Yugoslav republic wants to adopt; with Turkey, ownership of the eastern Aegean and the partition of Cyprus.

The refugee crisis continues to be critical because there is no political will to assimilate or accommodate the displaced

people, and no possibility whatever of ending the Middle East conflicts that make them homeless. The ping-pong game between Greece and Turkey over the treatment of asylum seekers will run and run.

In fact, nothing much has changed in the public domain over the past year. Unemployment stands at 25 per cent, and at 55-60 per cent for school-leavers and graduates. The results of the Greek equivalent of the Leaving Cert show a continued decline in academic standards. Retail outlets continue to close; one in four, and rising.

The EU continues to chastise Greece for its porous borders, and to insist on controlling aspects of Greece's regional development. The International Monetary Fund continues to prevaricate on the issue of debt restructuring.

Constantly reinventing not just one wheel but all the wheels that drive the anxieties of state, in economics, geopolitics and social issues, has become a national sickness.

It's actually surprising that life continues at all, since the heartbeat seems to have gone out of the country. But it is the resilience of the Greek spirit, and its resistance to external pressure, that keeps that heart ticking over, even imperceptibly.

One can only conclude that this is not a brave new world but a global pandemic of fear-driven entropy. To paraphrase Seán Ó'Casey, observers can confidently say: "The whole world's in a terrible state of stasis." To paraphrase Seamus Heaney, politicians can safely adopt the maxim: "Whatever you do, do nothing."

# In a party of few alternatives, Merkel considers running for fourth term



## Derek Scally Analysis

Decision time nears for leader who has dominated German politics

Long before Angela Merkel became chancellor in 2005, she already had her eye on the exit. Before German voters showed Helmut Kohl the door in 1998, she said that her mentor, who had been in power since 1982, risked overstaying his welcome.

"I would like to find the right point for getting out of politics," said Merkel in an unusually frank interview with German photographer Herlinde Koelbl in 1997. "It is much more difficult than I imagined it earlier. But I don't want to be a half-dead wreck."

After three punishing, crisis-packed terms as chancellor, Merkel likes to brush off questions of her future plans with the promise of a decision "at the appropriate time".

That time is now here. In four weeks' time, CDU leaders and delegates hold their annual conference and, in an indication of just how much the CDU depends on its leader of 16 years, just one item dominates the agenda: will she or won't she?

Merkel's close allies say they don't know for sure, but suggest that she will arrive at an answer using her usual method of breaking a big question into three smaller ones: am I physically up for it? Do I still have something to give? Does the job still stimulate me?

Seeing Merkel up close these days, it is impossible to ignore



how exhausted she looks. Yet, whether tackling the refugee crisis or Russian president Vladimir Putin, she still seems as engaged as ever.

### The numbers

Then there are the numbers. After a near-absolute majority in 2013, her CDU/CSU alliance is now below 30 per cent. Refugee frustrations and challenges linger, catalysing the rise of right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

Its steady, double-digit support – and the slow revival of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) – means the next Bundestag will be a crowded place with, according to current polls, just one majority

option: a third CDU-led grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The idea of that causes despair among most German journalists, tired of Merkel and looking for something new.

**66 In many CDU hearts a fear is growing that this party is Merkel's political hostage**

CDU officials, meanwhile, point to the booming economy and record jobless rate and say the party would be mad to disrupt a winning leader. In many CDU hearts, however, a fear is growing that their party

is now effectively Merkel's political hostage.

So if Merkel ran again, what of the theory that, if re-elected, she would hand over to a successor a year into her fourth term?

Those close to her dismiss the idea. She would feel duty-bound, if re-elected, to see her term through until 2021. Merkel may have little choice other than to do so. Her talent for routing internal CDU rivals secured her political longevity, but eliminated much talent from the party and left those behind "degraded".

With no high-profile challenger keeping her on her toes, the closest thing Merkel has to a John Major-in-waiting is Thomas De Maizière, her

competent interior minister who arouses as much passion among Germans as Margaret Thatcher's successor once did. So, assuming Merkel does run again – because she wants to or because she's left it too late not to – what will her sales pitch next year to voters be?

Lutz Meyer, mastermind of the 2013 CDU campaign that was "all about Angela", admits he faces a major dilemma for 2017. Meyer says that in next year's CDU campaign it would be best to push content over personality, yet even he struggles to avoid the indispensable Merkel.

"Merkel will have to be at the CDU campaign's heart," he said. "There really is no alternative to her."

■ Angela Merkel: likes to brush off questions of her future plans with promise of a decision "at the appropriate time". PHOTOGRAPH: TOBIAS SCHWARZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

# German commissioner's mocking of Chinese visitors sparks outrage

DEREK SCALLY  
in Berlin

European commissioner for the digital economy and society Günther Oettinger has become a figure of fun in his native Germany – and has caused fury in China – after mocking a "slitty-eyed" Beijing delegation to Brussels.

Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her "full support" for the EU digital agenda commissioner, poised to take on the budget portfolio next year, after a recording emerged of Mr Oettinger joking in Hamburg that Dr Merkel's social policy agenda would soon see Germany facing "compulsory gay marriage".

During his speech, posted to YouTube, he joked about an identically dressed Chinese delegation to the commission: "Nine men, one party. No democracy, no female quota, and no women... their hair combed from left to right with shoe polish".

His speech included swipes at gay marriage, gender quotas, and a proposed motorway

toll – issues he suggested Germany was prioritising at the cost of preserving its competitiveness in the world.

Mr Oettinger said they had been taken out of the context of a speech that had gone down well with his Hamburg audience. His remarks about the Chinese delegation were "somewhat sloppy... [but] meant in any way disrespectfully towards China".

While opposition parties attacked Mr Oettinger as a racist, homophobic embarrassment, one senior Christian Democratic Union (CDU) ally said the remarks were prime examples of Mr Oettinger's "very special form of humour". Oettinger allies in Brussels said the commissioner was a liberal and neither a racist nor a homophobe.

In Germany, hackers unimpressed with Mr Oettinger's grasp of the digital agenda bribe used the flap to issue report cards.

"His self-esteem, particularly independent of own performance, corresponded with his talkativeness," noted one.

## Briefs

### Morocco

Prosecutions over death of fishmonger

Eleven people, including two police officers, are to face a judicial investigation over the gruesome case of a man crushed to death in a rubbish compactor, prosecutors in Morocco said.

The death of Mouhcine Fikri, a 31-year-old fish wholesaler, in the back of a rubbish truck on Friday night in the port city of Hoceima, sent tens of thousands of demonstrators on to the streets in some of the country's most serious protests since the Arab Spring in 2011 and prompted the personnel intervention of King Mohammed VI.

Fikri had been stopped by police with 500 kilos of swordfish – caught illegally out of season – and had been trying to rescue his merchandise from the lorry when he was caught in the crusher. – (Guardian service)

### North Korea

North Korean leader's wife not seen in public for seven months

Ri Sol-ju, the wife of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un, has not been seen at public events for more than seven months, prompting speculation that she may either be pregnant or have become embroiled in a faction fight.

In an analysis, the South Korean news agency Yonhap speculates that Ms Ri's disappearance may be linked to some kind of check on her activities by Mr Kim's younger sister, Kim Yo-jong, who is extremely influential as she is in charge of the propaganda and agitation department.

Ms Ri makes few public appearances – she disappeared from view for a long period last year too – and when she does make a public appearance, it is only ever in carefully stage-managed photo opportunities in the secretive communist enclave.

In February, a news broadcast on the North's Korean Central TV showed Mr Kim and his wife at a banquet to honour those involved in one



■ Ri Sol-ju: speculation she got embroiled in a faction fight

of Pyongyang's rocket launches, which the North said was a satellite launch but which the international community considers a test of intercontinental ballistic missile.

The last time she was seen in public was on March 28th when she accompanied Mr Kim on his visit to a newly built Mirae Shop and the health complex in Pyongyang.

Mr Kim married the woman known as "Comrade Ri Sol-ju" in 2012. She is said to be in her 20s or 30s, probably born between 1985 and 1989. CLIFFORD COONAN

# Orgreave families may seek judicial review of decision

DENIS STAUNTON  
London Editor

Campaigners have said they will consider seeking a judicial review into the British government's refusal to hold an inquiry into police conduct during a clash with striking miners at the south Yorkshire village of Orgreave in 1984.

MPs accused home secretary Amber Rudd of betraying members of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign after leading them to believe she was poised to approve an inquiry.

"It is utterly cruel to have given the campaigners false hope and misled them in this way. We will never give up this fight," Labour's Andy Burnham told the House of Commons.

The Battle of Orgreave in June 1984 was one of the most violent clashes of the miners' strike and is cited as one of the most notorious examples of police misconduct in recent British history. For decades, campaigners have called for a full inquiry into how the police behaved on the day, how they concocted evidence later and whether the confrontation had been deliberately set up by the authorities.

Ninety-five miners were arrested and most were charged with riot, an offence that carried a life sentence, but all the cases collapsed after police evidence was found to be unreliable. Many police officers signed statements which used almost identical language, and one signed a statement written in somebody else's handwriting.

Ms Rudd won praise from campaigners in September when she told them she was close to making a decision about an inquiry. However, she said on Monday that a review would not be in the public interest.

In a letter to campaigners, the home secretary said policing had changed sufficiently in the years since Orgreave to mean an inquiry was not merited, adding that "ultimately there were no deaths or wrongful convictions".

### New evidence

Barbara Jackson, secretary of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, told a crowd of former miners and their supporters in Barnsley that she was "shocked and devastated" by the decision. "As you can all tell, this is very difficult and very disappointing but there are options for the future; some of them we will be discussing with the legal people about the possibility of a judicial review," she said.

Other Labour MPs joined in the criticism of Ms Rudd's decision but Conservative Philip Davies provoked uproar when he claimed that the miners had been responsible for the violence at Orgreave.

"Unlike most of the people bleating on the Labour benches, I actually lived in South Yorkshire in a mining community during the time of the miners' strike and saw at first hand the bullying and intimidation from the miners that went on. People who did not contribute to the strike fund had their windows done in," he said.

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