

Tensions rise over Mick Wallace's and Clare Daly's views


Discomfort grows among fellow left-wing MEPs about the Irish pair's recent behaviour

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Naomi O'Leary

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 Tensions within the Left group in the European Parliament over Mick Wallace's increasingly radical positions on Russia finally broke out into open  disagreement in the spring.

 Dutch MEP Anja Hazekamp spoke passionately about Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, a passenger flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur shot down over a part of Ukraine held by pro-Russian forces in 2014.

It killed 298 passengers and crew, 193 of them Dutch, and remains an open wound between Russia and the Netherlands, where a trial of four suspects in absentia is ongoing.

Discomfort had been growing with Wallace and Clare Daly for months, according to multiple MEPs and parliament sources, as Wallace tabled amendments on behalf of the group seeking to water down resolutions about Russia.

In one, he described the Ukraine's 2014 Maidan revolution as a "US-orchestrated coup", as Moscow sees it. In another, he sought to delete a note that the parliament "continues to condemn the illegal annexation of Crimea".

In speeches, both Wallace and Daly accused the European Parliament of being "anti-Russian", with Daly asking why MEPs were so worked up about the arrest of poison-survivor and opposition figure Alexei Navalny.

Ambassador
Sadiq
Alrikabi
receives
Mick
Wallace at
the
embassy of
Iraq in
Brussels, in
March
earlier this
year.

He is, she claimed, a "vicious anti-immigrant racist", before asking where was the outcry about the recent arrest of anti-lockdown protesters in Brussels. Her speech was republished by Russian state media.

But Flight MH17 brought the rift between Wallace and Hazekamp into the open, though Hazekamp declined to comment for this article. In a February amendment, Wallace sought to delete from a parliament resolution a mention that a Dutch-led investigation "confirmed that Flight MH17 had

been downed with the use of a Buk surface-to-air missile supplied by the Kursk-based 53rd anti-aircraft brigade of the Russian Ground Forces”.

The discussion in the Left group was described as robust, and starkly divided. “Some members don’t feel that we are represented by the statements of Mick Wallace,” a source said.

Sanctions

The recent sanction of Wallace and Daly for unauthorised election observer trips to Ecuador and Venezuela reflects the growing discomfort of fellow left-wing MEPs, and in other groups about the two.

Their use of their European Parliament platform to champion views shared by various authoritarian governments has caused bemusement, but sharp criticisms, too, across nationalities and political groups in the parliament.

Equally, it has strained an unspoken gentlemen’s agreement between Irish MEPs to avoid criticising each other outside of election time, as they frequently co-operate on pan-Irish issues.

During debates, Wallace and Daly are distinctive ever-present figures, requesting to speak when debates finish early thus multiplying the time they would usually have as members of the parliament’s smallest group.

Wallace has made more plenary speeches than any other Irish MEP, according to aggregated Parltrack data, with Daly not far behind.

Their trip to visit an Iranian-backed militia group in Iraq in March caused one colleague to gasp “What!” when he heard. Both MEPs appeared on a promotional video for Hashd al-Shaabi, which is locally accused of running extensive smuggling networks, intimidating civilians, which includes forces accused of sectarian attacks.

Praise

Presented as speaking on behalf of the European Parliament in the video and dressed in a long black conservative khimar, Daly praised the “egalitarian nature” and “inclusiveness” of the so-called Popular Mobilisation Forces.

On her return, Ms Daly spoke on the pair’s podcast about her experience in Iraq of passing through multiple checkpoints of armed men. “You’d have the different army and police and different militias...

“They’re everywhere, with tanks, with guns. But actually their demeanour and their interaction with you and the people is lovely,” she said, recalling a friendly interaction she saw between authorities and two young men on a moped. “In France the police would probably beat them up!”

She explained how the militia figures she had met had stressed their gratefulness to Iran for its support in combatting Isis, and noted that the Iraqi parliament had voted to ask US forces to withdraw.

“I think the priority for a number of the politicians we met is that the Americans must leave... the parliament voted for them to leave and now they're an occupying power, so in that sense they're fair game. Under international law they're a legitimate target,” she said.

Syria

This past weekend, Wallace tweeted that he was enjoying the Italy-Austria match from Damascus, Syria. “Wonderful city, a wonderful people,” he wrote. “In a #Syria that is illegally occupied by #Israel #US #Turkey in total breach of International Law.”

In a parliament hearing days earlier with special assistant to president Joe Biden, Amanda Sloat, he argued that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad had defended his country from “genocidal extremists”. Compared to US policies in the region, he inquired of Dr Sloat, “I ask you which is the more authoritarian?”

Particularly when it comes to atrocities in Syria, Wallace's interventions have caused fury. In April, he confronted the director general of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Fernando Arias, during a committee meeting.

There, he put forward the conspiratorial claims championed by Syrian president Assad that western forces staged a chemical attack on civilians for which Assad is blamed.

Those truly to blame were the White Helmets, Wallace claimed – a frequently smeared Syrian volunteer rescue group which has extensively documented attacks by Assad and Russian forces in opposition-held areas.

The committee chairwoman, Nathalie Loiseau, broke in: “I would like to apologise to Syrian human rights activists who I have met, to the NGOs who work in Syria who I have met, to doctors in Syria who I have met, for what we have just heard,” she said.

Describing Wallace's intervention as “fake news”, she said: “I cannot accept that you can call into question the work of international organisations, and that you call into question the words of the victims, in the way you have just done.”

Neo Nazis

Ms Daly, too, has aired much-criticised claims. After Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko forced down a Ryanair flight in May to arrest dissident journalist Roman Protasevich, she condemned the incident.

However, she said: “It would appear that the young fella they were bringing down had developed links with Neo Nazis in Ukraine. Doesn't justify the action, but by all accounts a very unsavoury young fella.”

Such allegations about Protasevich had emerged quickly in Russian-language media, but news agency Agence France-Presse quickly debunked photographs that purportedly showed Protasevich in Nazi garb.

The EU fact-checking project EUvsDisinfo categorised the claims as deliberate disinformation, linked to broader efforts by Russia's Vladimir Putin to portray the Kiev government, which leans towards Europe, as fascist.

Wallace has spoken about Ukraine, too, saying it is facing “a serious problem with far-right extremism and violence” and wanted to add the words “neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups” to an EP resolution about the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine in February.

Barry Andrews, a Fianna Fáil MEP, said authoritarian regimes were deliberately using disinformation against liberal democracies, adding that just 20 per cent of the world now lives in free countries.

“Liberal democracy is something that has to be guarded with each succeeding generation. We can't be complacent about it, and disinformation presents a real threat to the way we operate our democracy,” he said.

Wallace and Daly did not respond to requests for comment.

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The truth behind the false idea that the Brexit talks have dragged on and on

Europe Letter: Boredom with the talks and indifference to the outcome benefits Britain



Wed, Dec 16, 2020, 20:00

Naomi O'Leary Europe Correspondent

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It's not true that the trade talks between Britain and the European Union have dragged on interminably. This is a false idea that has widely taken hold in public discourse, informing attitudes and media coverage. It's not a politically innocent notion.

The truth is that the talks have been conducted at unprecedented speed on a hugely compressed timetable. Trade deals often take the guts of a decade to work out. In this case, the first negotiating round in the trade talks was only held in March.

Where has this false idea of interminable talks come from?

Firstly, it's due to confusion between the deal that was reached in October last year and what negotiators are trying to agree now.

Last year, the talks were focused on only the "terms of the divorce", under which Britain would exit the EU. There were three major issues: the rights of EU citizens living in Britain and visa versa, what Britain owed the EU in outstanding budget contributions, and the infamous Irish border question.

These were settled in the withdrawal agreement, allowing Britain to leave the EU in January this year. Since then, it has been in a transition period, during which the previous trade and legal arrangements between the countries have been temporarily extended while the new future relationship is worked out.

This future relationship is what has been under discussion since March, and it's a far more complex and wide-ranging subject than the relatively simple matter of the divorce. It covers every aspect of the economy, from chemicals to insurance, and every kind of interaction and co-operation.

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How can cross-border flows of electricity be managed? On what basis can police co-operate in investigations? What will EU aircraft security certificates be replaced with? The topics are vast and technical, and much more diverse than the small fraction that we hear most about, the contentious areas of governance, level playing field and fish.



... The confusion between the two agreements has been deliberately cultivated by prime minister Boris Johnson for narrow political reasons. Johnson won his election campaign on a promise to “get Brexit done”, capitalising on the weariness that had already set in over the issue and a widespread desire for conclusion.

His government has deliberately cultivated an idea that the divorce agreement was the definitive deal, and celebrated the UK’s exit from the EU in January as the fulfilment of the election pledge.

Glossed over

The existence of a transition period was glossed over. It’s understandable that this has led to confusion about why talks are still continuing, as well as a deflated sense of urgency among businesses about the need to prepare, since Brexit seemed to have “happened” already without apparent change.

With talks now running up hard against Christmas, boredom with the talks, distraction, impatience for a conclusion, indifference to the outcome, also suit Johnson politically.

The Brexit referendum was narrowly won. And whatever deal may emerge will reflect an extreme interpretation of Brexit that was a fringe position even among the Eurosceptic camp, which once insisted Britain would not leave the single market or customs union. It took hold as an idea of the “only true” Brexit only over the course of negotiations, at some economic cost and at the price of barriers between Britain and Northern Ireland.

It suits the British government that any such deal is rushed through without too much opportunity for anybody to get upset or think again, counting on a disengaged public and an opposition that doesn’t think arguing about it is a vote-winner.

Both the perception of lengthy talks and the reality of the curtailed timetable were created by London. The British government declined its last chance to extend in July, citing reasons of sovereignty. For the past seven weeks, negotiators have worked through every weekend, trying to get the hundreds of pages thrashed out.

The EU preferred a much more lengthy process, and openly hoped Britain would agree to allow more time for the talks particularly in light of the fact that the 19 broke out. Infections have twice forced planned talks to be held over video conference.




Businesses need a sudden jolt to their practices this January as a pandemic like a hole in the head. The UK civil service needs to adjust. Border infrastructure in Northern Ireland and a truck

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lorries will await checks in Dover are not yet fully built, and there are serious questions about the readiness of customs IT systems too.

-  If you find yourself thinking “I’m bored of this, can’t they just decide one way or another? I don’t care anymore” – ask yourself in whose benefit is it that you have that idea.
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