

Renegade Retrospective 2021

Ross: Welcome to Renegade Inc. It's been a busy 2021. So in this episode, we look back over the year and select choice cuts from some of our excellent contributors. Another year and predictably more poking of the Russian bear. Western governments fell over themselves over 2021 to continually castigate Russia as the bad guy to justify spending billions and billions on weapons in the name of defence.

Clare Daly: There has been a seismic change in the European institutions now for the first time in this budget going forward. We have direct public money being spent on defence and obviously with more and more billions being pumped into this, they need an enemy to justify us and clearly Russia has been made into that characteristic for that purpose. It's mad stuff, really

Ross: Pretty dangerous game, isn't it, Mick? Once you start poking the Russian bear, it's not like having a little military skirmish somewhere in the Middle East, with these superpowers, things can go badly wrong can't they?

Mick Wallace: I would argue that while the sanctions do have some form of impact on the Russian economy, I would think that the Russians are not actually lying awake at night worrying about the EU at the moment. And their statement that, you know what, I think we'll just deal with the member states rather than the EU institution as a unit. And of course, when they say that, what they mean is they mean Germany and France. And people need to remember that the European Union is run by Germany, for Germany and France would be the sidekick. So if Russia continues with a reasonably decent relationship with Germany and France, they won't be overly worried about a lot of the mindless anti-Russian rhetoric that's expressed, especially in the parliament. You can see that the Germans were not backing down on Nord Stream 2. Business is business, and they want that to happen. And despite a lot of pressure from the Americans, a lot of pressure from the east Europeans, a lot of pressure from so-called human rights defenders, they were going ahead with the project hail, rain or snow. And you're seeing something similar with the investment deal they did with China just before Biden came into office. The Biden administration contacted the European Union and said, Listen, please lads, hold off. Let's talk about this when Joe gets into office. But you know what? Germany's biggest trade partner is China. Germany is waiting for nobody.

Alex Krainer: Several days ago, we had a meeting in Brussels between the current NATO General Secretary, Stoltenberg, Antony Blinken, US Defence Secretary, and the Foreign Minister of Ukraine, doing much posturing about Ukraine rapidly joining the NATO, about pressuring Russia to stop its aggression, quote unquote and so forth. I think this meeting was more about posturing than any, any real moves, and I think that the objective is to get to provoke Russia into some kind of an aggressive act that might serve as a pretext to regain political pressure and to stop the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Ross: Why do they want to stop it so much?

Alex Krainer: This is a very good question, and I think it's not clear at all, but I would venture to speculate a little bit because for the last 25 years, one of my key focuses of my

work, I've been an energy markets analyst. And so one thing that is clear, even though it's not widely discussed in the media, is that we are facing an imminent energy crisis in the West. And when I say imminent, I don't mean starting tomorrow, I mean over the next 10 to 20 years. But the military and policy planners take this very seriously, and it's a matter of some urgency. So basically, what is happening is that our production of fossil fuels from conventional sources is rapidly declining, depending on who you ask it's between four and nine percent per annum. The British Ministry of Defence published a report in 2012, predicting that the price of oil would rise to five hundred dollars per barrel by 2040. And similar reports have been published by the U.S. military and by the German military, and they describe what could happen in really dismal terms. The German military's report basically predicts the breakdown of society in the West, famine, a breakdown of supply chains and infrastructure, and very severe social uprisings. And so I believe that the policy planners and the military planners in the West have a very high priority to bring about an energy transition. The transition, which includes transition to new renewable, sustainable energy sources, because the only regions, the only countries, that still have abundant fossil fuels to produce and sell are Russia, Iran and Venezuela. And we have not been successful in gaining control of those countries. So to not find ourselves dependent on them, to not find ourselves subservient to them, we want to shift away from fossil fuels and dependency on Russia and Iran and onto renewables like solar power or wind power, and I don't know other biofuels and so forth.

Ross: This year, it was all change in Washington. However, everything stayed the same. The Biden administration continued the policies of the Trump administration and predictably honoured almost none of the Democrat campaign promises.

Ben Norton: It's pretty shocking how quickly the Biden administration did a total 180 on all of its major campaign promises. Now, of course, in terms of its foreign policy, nothing has changed. Basically, all of the policies of the Trump administration's foreign policy have stayed exactly the same. But even in terms of domestic policy, which is usually the only real difference between Democratic and Republican administrations, it's been much more continuity than change. The Biden administration promised \$2000 cheques for adult Americans, and that number was instantly whittled down to 1,400. The Biden administration claimed that it would raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. Right now, it's just over \$7 an hour, which is not a living wage. And even though the Democrats have control of the House, even though the Democrats have a very slim majority in the Senate and they have the presidency, so they have the control of all of the important chambers of power, they have voluntarily not fought for a \$15 minimum wage. In fact, it was members of the own Democratic Party caucus that were against the raising of the minimum wage. So every single stage we've seen a total betrayal of the constituency of the people that voted for the Democratic Party by the Biden administration. And of course, when we're talking about policy vis-a-vis Venezuela, vis a vis Iran, vis a vis China and Russia, it has been exactly the same as we saw under Trump.

Ross: America's chaotic withdrawal of Afghanistan gifted the Taliban an emphatic victory, coupled with billions of dollars of military hardware. The Afghan loss is the catalyst for transforming geopolitics in the Middle East or as it's fast becoming, West Asia.

Scott Ritter: We lost because we lost. I mean, you know, in 2001, you know, we had special operations teams running amok in Afghanistan, 12 strong guys on horseback, however you want to couch it, dropping bombs and slaughtering the Taliban. And we did. We annihilated them. It was a massive defeat for the Taliban and we drove them out of power and we drove them pretty much out of Afghanistan. And that's what victory looks like. Twenty years later, Afghanistan belongs to the Taliban. That's what defeat looks like. You have to be on hallucinogenics to think that somehow what has occurred here is anything other than an absolute utter defeat.

Sharmine Narwani: I mean, obviously, the anti Taliban elements in Afghanistan still and those who are for it. That internal battle will continue. I think the Taliban today is trying very hard, at least the Taliban leadership in Kabul, are trying very hard to show that they can be dealt with, that this is a new incarnation for them. And the Taliban has now had 20 years of experience in various mediation rooms around the world and have learnt what is expected of them. And they obviously have, you know, their closest neighbours have a set of rules they expect the Taliban to live up to sort of, you know, to to have a government that has the participation of different elements of society, minorities, et cetera. The other thing that's important is a war has stopped, right? So the country's resources and attention can go to nation building. And Afghanistan has a lot to offer. I mean, it's got the largest deposits of rare earth minerals in the world - copper, iron. These things have not been mined, have not been taken advantage of to build the nation's wealth. With the American occupation of the country, Afghanistan has essentially not been able to have normal relations with its neighbours, and those borders will now open for trade, commerce, diplomacy and many other things that are critical to regional states. So this is a huge game changer for the region, and it's a very exciting one because Afghanistan sits between West and Central Asia and is potentially a critical part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. But importantly, it gets an unhelpful U.S. presence out of the region and demilitarises a central part of Asia.

Ross: The promise was that with US hegemony in decline, we would get a multi-polar world. In reality, the world is becoming bipolar. And as the US sanctions more and more countries that it doesn't like, it hasn't realised how counterproductive these measures really are. Countries are now creating different partnerships, building their internal capacity and their economies.

Michael Hudson: You mentioned unipolar versus multipolar. It's not so much that China, Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, along with Kazakhstan, Iran and all the other groups are pulling away, it's the United States trying to force them to follow the US neoliberal model by imposing sanctions and special penalties and military threats, not to mention ISIS terrorism. And so the United States is driving Europe, Asia and now Africa as well into a unified consolidated unit outside of itself. It's very self destructive. And it thinks like George Soros that only if we stop investing in Asia and other countries that that will force them to knuckle under to the U.S.. But what it's doing is it's driving them all together into the Belt and Road Initiative. And so what China is doing is extending a precondition for creating a profitable industrial economy over a large area that we can benefit from and its participants can. You're going to need transportation, you're going to need ports, you're going to need roads, you're going to need pipelines and is focusing on the inner connections, on the infrastructure. America doesn't build infrastructure unless it's monopolised. And this is the political fight going on in the United States now. President Biden has an infrastructure plan

that he's scaled down from six and a half trillion to three and a half trillion. And essentially the bulk of the Democratic and Republican Party said if we can't privatise infrastructure and make it a rent extracting monopoly, we're not going to do it and we're going to block the government from doing it. So in the United States, we're going to have high priced infrastructure, high priced health care, high priced education and China is going to have low priced transportation, low cost infrastructure, free education, public health care. And you're going to have a very, very high cost United States really unable to compete with the rest of the economy, and all it can do is make military threats or financial threats. And if it tries to impose sanctions, as it's imposed on Russia, China and other countries, these sanctions are going to serve as protective tariffs for their countries. When President Trump put sanctions on agricultural exports to Russia, it was a windfall for Russia. They developed their own agriculture and Russia's now the largest grain exporter in the world. So what Senator McCain in America characterised Russia as a gas station of atom bombs, meaning it's a gas station with the largest farm sector in the world, developing an industrial integration with China and the rest of Asia. And it is a Eurasian world island, as Mackinder had called it a century ago.

Ross: Welcome back to Renegade Inc. One of the mega trends this year has been inflation. Ironically, after printing so much money, central banks have been blindsided by it. Commentators often talk about hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic and liken it to what's coming down the road. But is this comparison helpful?

Richard Werner: It doesn't hurt to keep it in mind. But also, it's relevant because if you'd analyse the Weimar period, you'd be aware that this was a policy decision. It was the policymakers. It was the central bank deciding to do this. And so that's something we should always keep in mind that central banks and other central planners and governments and policymakers, you know, they make those policies and sometimes they lead to disastrous outcomes. That's why we need the scrutiny. And that's why it's welcome that the House of Lords is examining what central banks are doing and those policies. We always need that scrutiny because even in the Weimar period, it was a policy decision. It was like, oh, suddenly hyperinflation happened by accident. No, it was manmade and there was a rationale behind it. That is certainly the relevant part we should look at. But otherwise, I don't think the Weimar era is really the great comparison, because what really happened last year, 2020 from March onwards, is something that's much more akin to Stalinist Soviet Union type scenarios. That's what we need to compare it to because what we have is massive intervention by the government in the economy by introducing restrictions on so many parts of the economy as we've never seen before in the UK. It's never been done before, ever in the UK. There's other countries where it has been done before like, you know, Russia, Soviet Union, Germany, East Germany and also, you know, earlier periods in Germany. So in other countries, there are precedents. But in the UK, it is unprecedented and we have to compare it to Stalinist Soviet Union type of drastic across the board interventions and then think about inflation. Because that is a different scenario, namely, the central planners will introduce all sorts of further central planning measures if they want to, if inflation becomes a problem. I mean, the parallels are there - big queues, well, that's also what they had in the central planning Soviet Union, big queues everywhere. People not allowed to do certain trades because the government is forbidding them. Well go to Stalinist Soviet Union. Price controls come next. Of course, as the COVID agenda smoothly sort of morphs into the climate change prevention agenda, and we've got these 2030 targets for all sorts of things, CO2 emissions, we have a problem whereby, you know, we're supposed to switch all the cars to electric cars,

but the electricity supply in the world is not large enough to do this. Well, that's not a problem if you look at the right comparison. And it's not Weimar Germany, it is Stalinist type Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, they had cars, but not everyone had cars. If you were a member of the Politburo and the party cadre, then you had a car. If you were an ordinary person, well, public transport is good enough for you, isn't it?

Mitch Feierstein: If you look at the way that the inflation is calculated, obviously it's in the Bureau of Economic Statistics here. It's in their interest to keep the inflation numbers low. So the basis for calculation for payouts like Universal Credit or whatever the welfare payment system mechanism is in the pension funds, they don't adequately adjust for the real costs of the economy. They use what's called substitution. So it's a disingenuous way of calculating the inflation numbers so it appears that inflation is not as bad as it is.

Ross: What do you think is the real world number or figure is for the UK?

Mitch Feierstein: High teens to 20 percent. How about this, look at petrol costs. If you look at oil prices, they're up over 76 percent since last November. So look, to produce petrol, you need oil because it's the main component. So what's petrol up? 40 percent? 50 percent? How many people need to drive a car? But oh, I forgot. Because now that Sadiq Khan has come out with a dictate saying no more petrol cars after October or diesel cars before a certain time period. So you can take the bus or take the tube and, you know, that's it. Only the elites like myself can ride in style. So, you know, these factors all have to be looked at when you assess this and the government needs to fund things because they printed tons of money. So they have these smart highways that will now give you a ticket if you're one mile an hour over the speed limit. So nobody voted for this. What we have now, and it's really draconian what's going on, we have Carrie Antoinette running number 10 Downing Street and Boris just sits there and nods and you know, you can't believe a word that comes out of his mouth. And this is a gigantic problem because what we have, as well as a media that's supposed to be a check and a balance on our system of government, they don't call it out. Instead, what they are, are political activists who support the narrative and push that narrative forward. A fearful public is an obedient and submissive public, right?. And this is what they're trying to achieve. And what they have now, they have suppression of free speech with censorship. Like Twitter censors me and they shadow ban me. And so when that happens and you start censoring thought and free speech, you are sowing the seeds of a totalitarian dictatorship. And that's the direction we're headed in, and it's very dark. And I think what people need to do is speak out, put their heads above the parapet and not vote for the same people that keep lying to you.

Ross: No end of year round up show is complete without talking about the mechanism of inequality that is the housing market. Asset price inflation has again skyrocketed all over the world, leaving many unable to access shelter, which is ruining cities.

Leilani Farha: If we keep allowing financialization to go on and on and on in this way, we're going to have impoverished cities. We're going to have cities where the people who work to make cities vibrant and function, won't live there and can't live there because they can't afford it. We already are seeing this in San Francisco. Try find an Uber driver in San Francisco who lives in San Francisco or a barista who lives in San Francisco. Impossible. The logical conclusion is a lot of human misery, a lot of homelessness, unsustainable cities. That's the

impact of all of this. And that's why it's so important that we solve it. I don't really care about Blackstone and the money they make and whatever their world domination. But what I care about is the impact they're having.

Ross: The COVID crisis revealed that governments did have a magic money tree, after all. So what if a progressive government decided to implement targeted spending on sectors in the real economy that added real value?

Darren McGarvey: I think that we have seen what is possible in terms of state intervention. We have to remember that the pandemic came within the context of 10 years of austerity, an ideological response to a financial crisis caused primarily by financial deregulation and the greed or overoptimism of very wealthy privileged people, often in collusion with politics. And so when we began to see that the amount of what the politicians would call generosity in terms of furlough's and self-employment grants and this that and the next thing. This comes 10 years after being told there is no magic money tree. This comes after 10 years of being told that local authorities have to have their budgets cut by 25, 30 percent, which has real impacts, long lasting impacts on the ground. So I think in that sense, the public hasn't twigged on yet, that when the interest of over mortgaged households are threatened, then the magic monetary as infinite, you know, because I certainly received a lot of non means tested financial support during the pandemic, I wasn't having to jump through hoops. I didn't have to wait six weeks. I didn't have to take phone calls from people asking me, how did I spend my money? And so you see not just the level of support that's become available, how quickly it was administered, how effectively it's been administered. But you see that kind of partnership between the state and and the private sector when it's sensibly undertaken can deliver results on problems really fast. History shows us that we only get social change when the people in power feel that they have no other option. And sometimes they will make concessions when they feel that their instincts or power is threatened. And I think that the pandemic really did bring that into sharp focus, not just in terms of the economic response to the crisis, but also some of the other social activism that we've seen throughout the pandemic, particularly in relation to Black Lives Matter and George Floyd. So it's a tricky paradox where when society is relatively stable, then there's less chance of radical reform. But when society becomes unstable, new options become available.

Ross: The mantra of the neoliberal lobby that has been used over the last 40 years, the two words economic growth. We've been told that endless economic growth is good, even though we live on a finite planet. The one word that was noticeable by its absence at COP26 in Glasgow this year, was the word degrowth, which is what progressive governments should now be pursuing instead of banging the drum for yet more consumption.

Jason Hickel: Right now, the existing plan, such as it is, is to grow the entire economy, all sectors of the economy all the time, regardless of whether or not we actually need them indefinitely, right?

Ross: People will look back on us as a race and think, what were they thinking?

Jason Hickel: It's too much. It's irrational, especially in areas like ecological breakdown. So we need to be more rational. And what does that look like? Let's think about what we actually

want to improve. Let's think about, you know, if we need better public health care, better public transportation, you know, whatever it might be - renewable energy, education, you know, wind power, etc. Clearly, we need to expand these sectors and improve that that kind of provisioning. But obviously, there are also clearly sectors that are destructive and socially unnecessary or less necessary and need to be actively scaled down, SEV production, private jet production, the commercial airline industry more broadly, industrial beef, fast fashion, advertising, planned obsolescence, the military industrial complex. There are clearly huge chunks of our economy that are organised around elite power, elite accumulation and the interest of capital, not around human needs. So we should be able to distinguish, please. This should not be so difficult. You know, my hope is that this call sort of enlivens the left to recognise the role that it can play in the 21st century building a society that is more just but also more ecological. And the justice side and the ecology side come hand-in-hand. There's no ecology without justice, and there is no justice without ecology. So we must be clear on that. And that is, I think, the direction for progressive movements in the 21st century.

Ross: That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. Join us next week for a very special guest who's helped Boris Johnson steer us effortlessly through the Corona years. But until then, stay curious.