

The west plays Gaddafi's game



Christopher Caldwell

Whether or not Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi considers himself a Leninist, there are plenty of capitalists eager – as Lenin predicted – to sell him the rope to hang them with. It is the government of Gordon Brown that has suffered most since Kenny MacAskill, the Scottish justice minister, authorised an early release for the ailing terrorist Abdelhaset al-Megrahi. A Libyan intelligence operative, Mr Megrahi was convicted eight years ago of involvement in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, which left 270 dead. It seems unlikely the decision would have been made without the intercession of business. In July, the Libyan British Business Council, chaired by Lord Trefgarne, warned Mr MacAskill that the prospect of Mr Megrahi's dying in prison was of "grave concern".

You would think Col Gaddafi would be under a cloud. But no. He is now celebrating the 40th anniversary of the coup that brought him to power and preparing to visit New York as a Libyan takes over the presidency of the UN General Assembly. The Swiss daily *Le Temps* recently described Mr Gaddafi as a "master of manipulation". But western politicians and businessmen are not being outsmarted by Col Gaddafi. They are caving in to him.

Over the past fortnight, Switzerland has subjected itself to a humiliation at Col Gaddafi's hands alongside which Britain's pales. Fourteen months ago, the colonel's son Hannibal was arrested in Geneva on suspicion of beating two of his servants in the Hotel President Wilson in Geneva. He has been in similar trouble before. In 2005, he was arrested for brandishing a 9mm semi-automatic pistol at police in the Intercontinental in Paris. Libya has generally extricated him by claiming diplomatic immunity.

Hannibal was released after two days, but his sister Aisha Gaddafi promised "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". Libya stopped oil shipments to Switzerland, harassed Swiss businessmen and arrested two employees of ABB, the engineering group. That was more than a year ago. In August the president of Switzerland's federal council, Hans-Rudolf Merz, travelled to Tripoli to extend his "apologies for the unjust arrest of Libyan diplomats by Geneva police" – apologies which have no basis in any police misdeeds. In exchange for the return of the hostages, Mr Merz signed an agreement to submit the case of Hannibal Gaddafi's arrest to arbitration and left open the possibility of pressing charges against the police officers – an astonishing surrender of sovereignty. Then Libya reneged on the part of the deal that involved returning the hostages. Switzerland imports about 40,000 or 50,000 barrels of Libyan oil a day.

It consoles us to focus on what is most clownish about Col Gaddafi. At an African Union summit in February, he praised Somali piracy as a development model. At last

week's ceremony, the Libyan government reportedly proposed that the Italian air force's stunt-flyers, the Freccce Tricolori, blow green smoke (to honour Islam) rather than their trademark Italian tricolour of green, white and red.

Much of the discussion of Britain's release of Mr Megrahi has focused on non-issues, such as the erosion of the US-UK special relationship. While the US public is indeed furious over the release of Mr Megrahi, the Obama administration's criticisms are probably pro forma. From his apologetic speech in Cairo to the Ramadan dinner he held at the White House last week, Mr Obama has placed good-faith gestures at the heart of his Middle East policy. It is almost as if he believes that the west's tensions with the Muslim world involve an accounting of manners. We have run up a big deficit of slights, which must now be paid down with courtesies. Letting Mr Megrahi go is consistent with that. Susan Rice, America's UN ambassador, described the US as "offended by the reception accorded to Mr Megrahi in Libya upon his return from the UK". That is not a criticism of

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the Brown government.

Yet the west has a big problem with Col Gaddafi. There is a standard Gaddafi method that was visible in both the Swiss and Scottish cases. Right and wrong are put to one side, and only bargaining chips remain. After Libya's prosecution of Bulgarian nurses in 2004 on the absurd charge of infecting local babies with the Aids virus, Col Gaddafi negotiated their return with French and other diplomats. His son, Saif al-Islam, claimed that an arms agreement was negotiated as part of the deal. The very same Saif said recently that Mr Megrahi's release was always "on the table" whenever Libya discussed oil contracts with Britain. Revealing such details would seem to risk killing the goose that laid the golden egg. But Col Gaddafi is after something bigger than wringing money and technology out of the west. He means to sully its good name and expose its corruption, which is part of what he and his fellow officers professed to be revolting about in 1969.

In this he has succeeded. He has revealed that there are exceptions to the "norms" of international law. What is the legal principle under which Chilean generalissimos and Balkan strongmen get hauled before European courts but Col Gaddafi can travel to Italy for the G8 and to New York for the opening of the UN? He has revealed that there is impunity under Swiss law for certain playboys, that Scots nationalism is either a sign of British weakness or an avenue of diplomatic corruption, that the UK government, confronted with questions about terrorism, can go two weeks without giving a straight answer – in short, that reintegrating Libya into the international community is likely to be done on Libya's terms.

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