

## 4 An audience with Yanis Varoufakis

Interview **Chris Newlands** Illustration **Danilo Agutoli**



# “I know when to dress up”

The former Greek finance minister on what Corbyn and Thatcher have in common, and whether he will re-enter politics after a two-year absence

It is no surprise that Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of Greece, turns up to our interview without a tie. The 56-year-old famously arrived at Downing Street in 2015 for a meeting with the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, with his shirt untucked.

More surprising is that the left-wing economist, who led negotiations with creditors during the 2015 Greek government-debt crisis, is wearing a suit jacket.

The jacket is not for me, however. I meet Varoufakis almost immediately after he gives a speech to a room packed full of more than 500 people - a room not only made up almost exclusively of investment managers and bankers but one housed within Berlin's prestigious InterContinental Hotel, in a country where Varoufakis had become an arch enemy of the taxpayer for his role in the Greek bailouts.

“I know when to dress up,” says Varoufakis before swatting away my question about whether he had turned up at the wrong hotel, in the wrong country by mistake.

“No. I don't believe there is a right and a wrong place. I prefer to be among people who do not see eye-to-eye with me because the discussion is more interesting. What I hate is to be among the converted because that is very boring,” says the former academic, who is now a regular on the lecture circuit.

The motorbiking Athenian does not do boring. We meet just a few days after the UK election in which Theresa May led an inauspicious campaign

that left her short of a governing majority. Varoufakis, who counts opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn among his friends, has a glint in his eye.

“It was a splendid result. It was good for Britain and good for Europe. A hung Parliament was exactly what we needed,” says the father of one, who campaigned alongside shadow chancellor John McDonnell to try and persuade those on the left to vote against Brexit last June.

His hope is the election result and the following deal being struck between the Conservatives and Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party will derail a hard Brexit, and encourage May to seek “an off-the-shelf Norway-style agreement” for the UK.

Norway is not a member of the European Union, but is closely linked to the bloc through the European Economic Area agreement.

“A hung parliament gives May an excuse to retrace her steps,” says Varoufakis, who moved to the UK from Greece at the age of 17 to study mathematics at the then radical University of Essex (“It was the only university Margaret Thatcher wanted to close down,” he says).

“A hard Brexit can no longer go ahead, the DUP doesn't want it. May sought a mandate for a hard Brexit, didn't get it and should now seek a temporary Norway-style solution.

“That is something Brussels cannot deny her and something Angela Merkel would relish. An interim solution would give the UK some breathing space and would allow Merkel to pass the problem of Brexit onto the next German chancellor.”

On this Varoufakis is unequivocal: May should avoid negotiating with Brussels altogether. Negotiators want to give Britain a “bloody nose” over Brexit in a bid to halt a rise of Euroscepticism across the continent, he says.

It is particularly pertinent advice from a man who rarely backs away from a fight. Varoufakis was arrested in 1975 for political trouble making and his combativeness has made him a divisive figure. One delegate in the room in Berlin said: “He's full of crap.” Another said: “People were hanging on his every word.”

Varoufakis is aware of the love/hate relationship he elicits: “There is a great deal of polarisation. I have spent all my life as an academic and the two things I didn't want were fans who believe in what I say even if it is rubbish, and enemies who hate what I say even if it is good. I managed to acquire both,” he says.

He shrugs it off and returns to the topic of the UK, which he calls Europe's battleground. “There is no way Brussels will allow a deal that leaves Britain in a better place. Michel Barnier's negotiating brief is nothing more than a declaration of hostility.”

He says the EU's Brexit negotiator has sent a clear message to London: that the UK must commit in advance to everything the EU wants, without Brussels committing to giving anything back.

No government in Britain that can accept that, says Varoufakis, who has just published his book, *Adults in the Room: My Battle with Europe's Deep Establishment*, which is an account of his 162 days as finance minister.

We take a break from Brexit to find out who he admires politically. Donald Trump is quickly discarded: “I find him an offensive presence on the political scene,” he says.

Corbyn unsurprisingly comes in for praise. “I admire Jeremy a great deal because I watched him being completely unperturbed by the demonisation he's received in the press, as well as being unperturbed by his relative success now. He is exactly the same, a conviction politician.”

His next choice is more surprising: “This is also why I liked Margaret Thatcher. I disagreed with her as a leftie but she believed in what she was doing, and she had this view that she could convince the many she was right and they were wrong - this is very rare in politicians today. Jeremy and Thatcher are joined by that conviction.”

And so would he return to politics? “I never left politics. I was the finance minister of a bankrupt state. I had an office, I had a great deal of pressure, but I had no power. Do I miss that? Not at all. Do I regret doing it? Not for one second, but I certainly don't want it back. I will do it again only if it can be done properly and for public purpose.”

### CV

Born  
March 24, 1961

Education  
University of Essex, BA(Hons) Mathematical Economics, MSc in Mathematical Statistics, PhD in Economics

Career  
2015 Minister of finance, Greece  
2013 Visiting professor, University of Texas, Austin  
2012 Economist in residence, Valve

Corporation  
2006 Professor, University of Athens  
2000 Associate professor, University of Athens  
1995 Senior lecturer, University of Glasgow  
1990 Senior lecturer (tenured), University of Sydney  
1988 Lecturer, University of Sydney  
1986 Fellow and lecturer, Trinity College, University of Cambridge