



Britain in Between

“Europe’s most stable capitalist power is becoming the center of anxious attention. Savage cuts in social and welfare expenditures have already contributed to the ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ which is the curse of British social psychology. The lean years have begun.”

George Orwell once likened Britain to “A family with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. It has rich relations who have to be kowtowed to and poor relations who are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income.” Most upper and middle classes identify their own survival and prosperity with the existence of “civilization as we know

it,” but the British are unique in being, for once, unhypocritical. Our Establishment really *believes* that culture and civilization are dependent on its continued hegemony: perhaps that is because, unlike other and younger elites, they can decently forget where they got their money in the first place.

“As we know it” in Britain, bourgeois civilization is more or less decomposing, and there is an increasingly

shrill and hysterical note to the response of our “betters.” Something very like traditional class hatred is fermenting at the top, and in early May we were privileged to have a glimpse of it in microcosm. The underpaid and unorganized stablehands at the Newmarket races had the audacity to ask for more money. Their few pickets were set upon with whips and fists by a mob of well-fed racegoers

by Matthew Blaire

Richard Kalvar/Woodfin Camp & Assoc.

and aristocrats, whose faces in the newspapers betrayed a bilious mixture of hatred — and fear. One was reminded of Lionel Trilling's comment on Eton College suits: "So elegant in conception and yet so shabby in execution." Thus the British upper crust when rattled.

They have, of course, a great deal to be scared about. At every turn, the economy shows all the distinguishing marks of stagnation and decline. The Stock Market bubbles occasionally, but nobody really associates it any more with economic activity. Inflation is nearing 25 percent and shows no sign of slowing down. Bankruptcy and liquidation, with calls for state subsidy, have come from all the best-known industrial brand-names: Rolls Royce, British Leyland, Ferranti. Foreign competition has screwed down the motor industry to the point at which it is possible to imagine a situation where no serious manufacturing activity is carried on in Britain. The external debt to foreign creditors has reached a point where five percent of every pound is borrowed from overseas. An unusually high dependence on imports, expressed as an imbalance of trade with Western Europe, has made the country especially vulnerable to the fluctuation in world trade and commodity prices. Unemployment, which will in more and more cases be permanent rather than cyclical, moves upward every month, now approaching the million mark. And the smoldering war in Northern Ireland continues to take a steady toll of lives with no sign of any result other than increased sectarian polarization.

These are the jagged points of the dilemma. They are economic for the most part, but the real crisis is a political one. The extent of confusion and bitterness among the traditional governing classes arises from the fact they can no longer make the rudder answer the helm. Unemployment has not succeeded, as it is supposed to, in depressing Labor's demand for high wages: we have a pre-Keynesian situation of combined spare capacity and inflation.

The ten year effort to get Britain into the European Common Market has succeeded, but nobody claims any longer that it will make life any better, and only dubiously that it will stop

things from getting worse. The electorate refuses to trust any major party, polls sluggishly and fitfully: voting against the incumbent administration rather than for a chosen program. In Scotland and Wales, more and more younger voters are opting for nationalist movements which demand the end of the Union and regional Parliaments with real power over finance and resources. In Scotland, where the Scottish National Party has almost swallowed the Tory vote and threatens the Labor one, the dominant issue is oil and who is to have it.

Since it was discovered over a decade ago, the oil deposit in the North Sea has looked to many people like a redeeming *deus ex oceania*, almost as if the legendary King Arthur had returned at the hour of his country's extremity. Not so. Transnational corporations were the only ones able to develop the oilfields, chiefly employing their own skilled labor and technicians. Lumpen workers are, of course, recruited locally to do the construction work or endure the hazardous life out on the rigs, but the hoped-for effect on unemployment in declining regions has been minimal. Worse, it was discovered that the British Steel Corporation had been too incompetent and undercapitalized to supply even the pipes needed to bring oil ashore; these will now be supplied from Japan. In the face of all this, the British government caved in last February and imposed a generously low rate of taxation (lower than the Norwegians) on oil company profits. The first million tons are to be exempted and the proportionate effect on profits will *decrease* as the North Sea Field is opened up. The fear that these enterprising giants of exploration would move away if offended proved too much. The era of the banana republic had arrived.

The possibility that Britain could become another Sicily, a backyard for the world market, has been raised by a series of other developments, too. The City of London may have lost a lot of its former glories, but it still remains a splendid service station for liquid "wild money." The Saudi Arabians won't keep their cash in New York, which they regard as being the capital of Israel, and the Swiss are not (yet) ready to service such short-term ac-

counts. So London remains the receptacle for petro-dollars, ensuring that the pound and its value are dependent on any tremor of confidence among the sheikhs.

Meanwhile, the government spends more and more of its time conciliating with the Shah of Iran (grovelling is the word most often used in conversation), who is also prepared to splash his reserves about in return for technical advice and export-import deals. He is angling for an interest in British Petroleum and may even buy the Concorde if it ever gets off the ground. (One fallout of this relationship has been the exceptional harshness with which Iranian dissidents in London have been treated by the authorities. A recent token occupation of the Iranian embassy in protest against the murder of political prisoners led to the denial of bail and bringing of charges of conspiracy to trespass — a sharp contrast to the lenient treatment accorded to Ukrainian nationalists who did exactly the same thing to the Russian embassy three weeks before).

And, of course, there is the total subservience to Washington in foreign policy. The Federal Reserve deals with the pound not as a busted currency but as the totemic symbol of "an ally." Harold Lever, economic advisor to Prime Minister Wilson, boasts of the way in which he reassures Washington financial managers about the uncreditworthiness of the U.K., reminding them that Britain must be shored up as a force for stability in the West. And, true to form, British governments have been positively toadying in their support for American adventures abroad: last off the raft in Indochina and as solidly pro-Kissinger in European affairs as they dare. The relationship between Foreign Secretary James Callaghan and the exploded Secretary of State reminds one of the old gag about Harold Wilson and LBJ: "People often say my relationship with the President is tongue in cheek. It's just that I couldn't get any closer." The self-appointed task of holding the bully's coat suffered a slight reverse last August, when all the British guarantees to Cyprus under a 1960 treaty were abandoned and trampled upon to suit Kissinger's maneuvering between Ankara and Athens, with results so catastrophic that even hardened Foreign Office

men were disgusted. But the pound is the pound. Fortunately, domestic pre-occupations have kept public attention off foreign affairs, and the sell-out of Cypriot independence was never a public issue.

["LAW AND ORDER"]

A similar paralysis affects political attitudes to Northern Ireland. The general view from the public bar is "we should leave the fucking Paddies alone, to slit each other's throats." But such opinions are, as yet, very casually if widely held. In Ulster itself, however, the population cannot afford to be so light-minded or so patient. Since the huge revolt of Protestant loyalists which destroyed the local administration by strike action early last year, the London government has pursued a sleep-walking policy between military repression and political horse-trading. Men imprisoned without trial are offered their freedom if their respective communities will give a guarantee of "good behavior." The army, which dare not antagonize both populations at once, is regarded in Catholic areas as an openly partisan force. A recent book on the events of last year, by Catholic leader Paddy Devlin, virtually accuses them of a politically motivated refusal to break the loyalist strike with its attendant sectarian intimidation.

An ominous slip of the tongue was made the other day by Northern Ireland Minister Merlyn Rees. The liberalism of his policies (yes, liberalism) toward the relief of detainees had been publicly attacked in a speech delivered by General Sir Frank King, officer commanding the Northern Ireland forces. "Sir Frank" said Rees in an effort to play down his mutinous rumbling "is one of the least political generals I know." Normally, the anodyne statements of Rees about "light at end of the tunnel" are passed over in scornful silence. But this piece of information crystallized all the fears about Ulster becoming, as it has in the past, a testing ground for repression. What can the other generals be like? Rumors abound concerning the political ambitions of senior officers in the province, some of whom, like Brigadier Frank Kitson, have published books envisaging an army role in "civil

unrest" on the mainland. The torture of prisoners, and the development of "dirty trick" squads for counter-terror, has certainly hardened a generation of military men, who see no other route to promotion and combat experience short of involvement in Irish affairs.

But government policy exists almost disembodied from this process. They have now tried everything on their first and last colony: a reform strategy, a military crackdown strategy, an involvement with Dublin strategy, a direct rule from London strategy, and an inter-sectarian power-sharing strategy which collapsed in May with the election of an ultra-loyalist majority in the new Assembly. The distance between fiascos has shortened to almost nine months; confidence in ultimate success has fallen to sub-zero in any quarter. The fact that British armies no longer require conscription may be a saving grace, but it does not prevent soldiers on leave from voicing their disillusionment. Nor does it prevent the IRA from conducting operations in the rest of the U.K. whenever it likes, though it still observes a shaky truce at the time of writing. I may not be melodramatic to envisage a British withdrawal, leaving power to a hard-line Protestant majority upon whose policies the Republicans would have to declare war, and into which quarrel the Southern Irish government might have to intervene. At any rate it is now clear, as 700 years of history might have taught at least some Labor politicians, that there are no British solutions to Irish problems.

The recurrent paranoia generated on the Left by the Irish conflict is by no means all unjustified. Already the activities of IRA bomb squads have provided the atmosphere and the excuse for police and security officials to demand several infringements of political liberty in the rest of the U.K. The Prevention of Terrorism Act, rushed into law by Home Office Minister Roy Jenkins last December, contains sweeping powers of arrest, confinement without trial, and deportation. Special tribunals can hear evidence in secret; the accused is often not told the nature of the charges. Several people have already had nightmarish experiences and then been released without a word. Others are deported to

Ireland in equal bewilderment. And traditional supporters of civil liberty are afraid to speak out for fear that they will be tarred with the "terrorist" brush. So it was all the more surprising when Lord Justice Scarman, one of the foremost lawyers and judges in the kingdom, came out with a strong call for a Bill of Rights that would prevent Parliament from infringing liberty by panic legislation. So far, his appeals have fallen on deaf ears, but they point up very clearly the weakness of the British liberal consensus.

The Irish issue has also helped pull together a motley assortment of cranks and fascists, often ex-army men or harmless country squires, but often men with records as mercenaries and killers, in a move to develop private armies of "law and order." This aspect of the panic among middle class elements, which in another incarnation has made Margaret Thatcher the leader of the Conservative Party, is worth studying. Its leaders include General Sir Walter Walker, former commander of the Northern Land Forces of NATO, and Colonel David Stirling, founder of the crack Special Air Service regiment. They busy themselves in drawing up lists of subversives, and also lists of good chaps, so that in the event of social confrontation they will be ready to supplement the regular forces. Impelled by vague feelings that "the country is on the rocks," and stirred to action by recalcitrant trade unions and militant Irishmen, they have a certain appeal to the *Wildgeorden Kleinburger*, the petty-bourgeois run amok, who find themselves ground between organized labor and the credit squeeze.

So far, they represent only a mood, and often a farcically British one, but they could turn nasty, and they bear watching. In particular, they afford cover to more sinister outfits like the National Front, a neo-Nazi group campaigning mainly against black and brown immigrants, but also developing links with extreme Protestant forces in Belfast and Scotland. (The recent murder of a black worker in Glasgow was traced to protection money collectors, ostensibly rattling the can for the Ulster Defence Association, but also carrying NF membership cards.) These elements hope that unemployment will give them a chance to blame social

evils on the blacks, and though they are marginal so far there has been more activity of this kind than at any time since the 1930s.

["THE DUNKIRK SPIRIT"]

All of these straws in the wind, all of this crisis atmosphere, and in particular all of the current indecision of the ruling class, stems from one basic fact. They have been quite unable to restore order at the point of production. The toughest Conservative government since the war was brought down in ruins in February 1974 because of its failure to defeat a coal miners strike, and ever since that time there has been a near vacuum of policy. Labor in power fears to return to the attack; the Tories, having purged the disastrous Edward Heath, are still getting used to the more ideological and rightist Margaret Thatcher. The trade unions, meanwhile, sense their own strength and press for more and bigger wage claims to recoup inflation and taxation.

Employers are literally frantic at the failure of government to arrest this process and restore profit margins, and at the same time are bereft of solutions and unwilling to invest capital while the uncertainty persists. They are furious and resentful at the way in which bankrupt or ailing firms are taken into state ownership by the verbally left wing Tony Benn, Labor's Minister for Industry, but they are powerless either to stop it or present alternatives. And, which they fear most of all, the appetite for workers' control is growing all the time and being fed by the number of workers' cooperatives being set up in bankrupt or insolvent plants.

Almost the stock response to layoffs or closure these days is workers' occupation, a demand for government subsidy, and a re-starting of production. The Scottish edition of Sir Max Aitken's ultra-reactionary *Daily Express* has suffered this fate, to become the country's first-ever mass circulation daily paper under workers' and journalists' management. Similarly, the prestigious Standard Triumph plant at Meriden, which ran into cashflow problems making motorbikes for export, has now re-emerged as a workers co-op with a direct grant-in-aid from

the government. And there are many others of varying size. The long term prospects for their survival as enterprises can't be rated very highly, but they have definitely injected a new dimension into workers' resistance, and greatly outraged the Conservative newspapers.

Lenin's classic conditions for social revolution were that the ruling class could not go on in the old way, and the oppressed classes did not wish to. So far, only the first condition has matured in Britain. The workers' movement, while strong and undefeated, is still of an extremely conservative and defensive disposition. On a few issues, like the imprisonment of pickets for conspiracy offenses, it has been prepared to strike and demonstrate over political questions against a union-backed Labor government, but even these fights are of a "don't tread on me" type.

The Left, meanwhile, is in a stagnant condition. Membership of organizations, circulation of papers and all other obvious indices of effectiveness are down. It persists in being very parochial about international affairs such as Cyprus, Ulster or Indo-China, and very conservative about questions of apparently "unorthodox" principle such as the position of women or the hardening public attitudes toward social morality. After a burst of growth under the appallingly treacherous 1964-70 Wilson administration, and the bloodily reactionary regime of Edward Heath that followed it, the Left has failed to come to terms with an ambiguously radical Labor government. A dismal isolationist campaign demanding Britain's withdrawal from the European Common Market has pulled an unhappy revolutionary left into doing fringe propaganda and leg-work for a fundamentally diversionary and often outright chauvinist movement, led by all the most opportunist elements in the Labor bureaucracy.

Unlike the United States, most left wingers in Britain belong, if they are activists, to organizations, and as a result the Left is dominated by a very intense factional life. Apart from the small and indecisive Communist Party, which has lost its Soviet faith and failed to find a revolutionary rationale, there is a choice of groups, most of the

influential ones having some adherence to the Trotskyist tradition. Here and there they have made inroads and succeeded in influencing the Labor movement, but are baffled at present by the unforeseen contingency of a revival of Labor's grass roots as a party. Huge tensions exist within the coalition that makes up that Party, but only a few visionaries can imagine an outright split. Harold Wilson has engineered many showdowns with his own left wing, and may provoke another if he tries to sack the radical Tony Benn, but it is very hard to see the left-wingers quitting a party machine which confers national influence on what would otherwise be a minority splinter group.

So at the end one comes full circle. The British bourgeoisie uses its political strength to offset its economic weakness. Everybody now realizes that tomorrow will be different from today, but they conceive the change in harsh and often conservative terms of sacrifice and austerity, even of the "national interest." The savage cuts in social and welfare expenditure which have already begun will contribute, or could contribute, to exactly that "Dunkirk Spirit" which is the curse of British social psychology. The resistance to it, which is fragmentary and confused, will inevitably be characterized as selfish and sectional, and like all good propaganda, this slander will contain a particle of the truth. Life will become narrower and nastier; conservatism will be the likeliest beneficiary of the privatized and competitive responses which will follow.

The climax of Britain's political crisis could come as one writes, or it may be postponed for months, but there is now a unique convergence of tendencies all of which press towards the breakdown of the old post-war balance between parliamentary parties and the consensus of corporate labor and boardroom groups. Europe's most stable capitalist power is now set to become the center of anxious attention. The Left was right in diagnosing this, but is in a poor position to take advantage of it. We may be at the beginning of the lean years.

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Grand Juries:



The American Inquisition

As the dust has settled from Watergate, it has become clear that the work of Nixon and his men has not been undone. One of the most shocking chapters in the history of the Nixon years must be the Justice Department's Internal Security Division (ISD) war on dissent, waged under the leadership of now convicted Watergate felons John Mitchell and Robert Mardian. Mitchell and Mardian are gone. But their favored weapon remains dan-

gerously intact: the grand jury turned into a devastating instrument of repression. Decades of neglect of the grand jury system and the authoritarian Organized Crime Control Act of 1970, passed overwhelmingly by Congress, have given the Department of Justice awesome powers, the dimensions and implications of which have still not generally been understood. Use of the grand jury as a weapon of harassment and repression — described

by Senator Edward Kennedy as “a dangerous modern form of Star Chamber secret inquisition” — has not been diminished by Watergate. The bitter irony and profound danger presented by the destruction of the Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination, and the warping of the grand jury from a protective body into its very opposite, have been buried only temporarily amidst the pomp and self-congratulatory smugness over the

by John Conyers, Jr.