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The Collapse of
Democracy

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Introduction

The first chapter of this book is fantasy: a picture of what Britain might become ten years from now (or sooner?) transformed from a free society into the drab Utopia of a minor civil servant, a country Communist in all but name. Much of the remainder of the book is theory: an attempt to determine the conditions for a free society and the way that liberal democracy can evolve into mass democracy, to end up, perhaps, as no sort of democracy at all. But I have included enough facts—the thumb-prints of our own times as well as the memory of how other democratic societies have succumbed to totalitarian or authoritarian solutions—to show that the theory is relevant to the condition of Britain today, and that the fantasy is more than mere fantasy.

Only a very bushy-tailed optimist or someone who has been living in Majorca for the past ten years without access to the world press would say that there is *no chance at all* of my fantasy turning into reality. Not precisely, of course, in the way that I have imagined, but along recognisably similar lines. We can debate whether there is only a ten per cent probability that the breakdown will take place, or whether the odds have narrowed to say, four to one or three to one against. But surely the danger is real enough, even in this motherland of Parliaments, to make it essential for those who do not share the goals of the Minister of Equality in my fictional quasi-Communist government to look to their defences.

My argument proceeds from a number of assumptions that are likely to prove highly controversial, so it may be as well to state the more important ones briefly at the very beginning. The first is that democracy is not a particular form of society, and still less an ideology. It is a mechanism for appointing and removing governments through majority decision. It is, of course, a mechanism that is subject to constant redesign and alteration. It is also, as a distinguished British social democrat put it, 'a *method* of taking political decisions, of compromising

and reconciling conflicting interests'.¹ It is possibly the best method that has so far been devised for reducing political violence and for creating a broad social consensus within which conflict can be contained.

Now the mechanistic analogy is hardly a satisfactory one and should not be swallowed whole in a country like Britain, where political institutions were not invented in a flash, but evolved over a very long period.² The point I wish to make is that those institutions—the democratic mechanism—can be exploited by the advocates of many contending ideologies and of many different forms of society. No one can afford to remain ignorant of the fact that *democracy can be destroyed through its own institutions*. In 411 BC, during the hardships of the Peloponnesian war, the Athenian assembly was won over to the argument of the oligarch Pisander that 'what we have to think about is survival, not the form of our constitution'.³ The freemen of Athens voted to abolish democracy. The oligarchy that was then set up was quickly overthrown, but this classic example of how the enemies of democracy were able to use the opportunities provided by the system in order to destroy it has been repeated on several notable occasions in modern times—by the Nazis in Germany, for example, and by the communists in Czechoslovakia and Chile. The enemies of democracy understand very well that in an advanced and highly politicised society, they can win only if they preserve some of the democratic appearances. But we should also take note that we have supplied them with more opportunities than we can afford to keep open.

This leads on to my second assumption: that what is really at stake is the survival of the kind of society and the kind of public philosophy that make democratic institutions meaningful. The apparatus of elections and referenda is retained in many dictatorships. But only a few fellow-travellers of the most hypocritical kind would make out, for example, that the April 1975 elections in North Vietnam (in which most of the successful candidates won over ninety-five per cent of the votes recorded) were democratic. It is perfectly obvious to (almost) everyone that the existence of a political opposition is basic to democracy.

But the survival of democracy depends on the dispersal of power in a much broader sense, and it is when people try to

define just what that means that the real arguments begin. It seems to me perfectly clear that you cannot hope to enjoy political democracy for long if economic democracy—which, in its true sense, involves the maintenance of a strong private sector—is lost; if the press is gagged, or if a monopoly social pressure group is able to assert its own interests at the expense of the community at large. Nor can you hope to enjoy political democracy for long in the absence of a public philosophy, an underlying consensus about the values and purposes of society. As Walter Lippmann put it, 'liberal democracy is not an intelligent form of government and cannot be made to work except by men who possess the philosophy in which liberal democracy was conceived and founded'.⁴ The public philosophy is not something that is written out on a bit of paper by an inspired thinker: it is founded on the cumulation of social conventions and moral beliefs over many generations. The community as a whole is the guardian of these conventions—or should be. The problem is that in Britain, as in other places, disciplined minorities moved by radical ideologies and an equally radical contempt for the past have successfully overruled the conventions of the great majority. This will be a recurring theme in my book, together with the argument that social health will depend on finding more ways to reassert the will of the majority.

The idea of a public philosophy involves the idea of a tacit agreement about the *limits* of politics. Another basic condition for a free society is that those who succeed in politics must accept the idea that there are a large number of things that are *beyond* politics: for example, that a democratic government cannot properly set out to abolish democracy, or ban religious beliefs, or destroy the family, or (and here the list becomes more controversial) deny the right to own and bequeath property or to exercise individual choice in crucial areas of social life such as health and education. A government that sets out to interfere in such areas is a totalitarian government that may preserve the democratic mechanism - at least for a time - but will certainly destroy what is left of the free society.

My third proposition is that the threat from totalitarian movements and ideologies (which are not always recognised for what they are) is rapidly increasing, and that subversion—which is defined in a later chapter—must be counted as one of the

primary threats to democracy in Britain today. I would argue that the weapons used by those who set out to destroy the free society can also be used by those who wish to defend it—not only *can*, but in some cases *must* be used if the society under attack is to survive. Those who have passed through the inferno of revolution and totalitarian dictatorship understand this principle far better than those who have not. The Federal Republic of Germany, conscious of how Hitler came to power, made it a cardinal principle of its new constitution that there could be no freedom to oppose freedom. We shall have to explore what that concept means in a later section. It is enough for now to say that, while tolerance is one of the signal virtues of a free society, it can also prove to be a crippling weakness if it is not always remembered that totalitarian movements should be tolerated only *on sufferance*—that is, if they spread their wings too far, they will need to be clipped.

My final proposition is one on which I would ask the reader to reserve judgement until he has pieced his way through this book. It is that, in the event that a democratic society breaks down irretrievably, it has *two* alternatives to anarchy, not one: the choice is then between authoritarian or totalitarian rule. The semantic confusion characteristic of much public debate has often blurred the distinction between these two fundamentally different types of regime. The characteristic of authoritarian rule is that it substitutes the authority of a self-appointed (or hereditary) elite for the political process, without directly interfering in many areas of social, intellectual and economic life. Under an authoritarian regime, you are forbidden to engage in politics, but you may well be allowed to travel and marry as you please, to set up any kind of business, to live wherever you choose, and study courses in economics or political science indistinguishable to what might be offered in a democratic country (except at Marxist-run universities like Bremen). A totalitarian regime also substitutes the authority of a self-appointed elite for the political process. But here, politics intrudes on everything: there is no escape, in ideas, economics or life-style, from the politico/bureaucratic conformity imposed by the ruling ideology. This is a distinction we shall need to examine in later pages.⁵ It means that, if a society collapses, the subsequent choice of evils may genuinely be a choice between the greater and the lesser evil.

There may well be no return from the long dark night of a totalitarian dictatorship, short of defeat of that dictatorship in war. An authoritarian regime, in contrast, is likely to be less durable because of the liberties it leaves intact and may in some cases amount to no more than a holding operation: an attempt to pick up the pieces after a social explosion.

It is not a choice that will appeal to anyone who believes, as I do, that the only society worth living in is a society that values individual freedom. But it is hardly worth examining the causes of the collapse of democracy without also looking at the costs—and the prospects of building something from the rubble that would offer more to liberty and social creativity than the totalitarians have ever been willing to offer. A society confronted with disaster must spare a thought for workable ‘post-disaster systems’—to use Brian Crozier’s phrase. But the tremendous strength of the democratic tradition and the liberal cause is far from exhausted. Many of the fortresses that have been lost were simply abandoned; it will be necessary to do battle for those that remain.

It will be clear already that this book is not just about Britain, although a great part of it is addressed to Britain, and although Britain supplies a better contemporary example of some of its central propositions—about how democracies break down—than any other advanced western society with the sole exception of Italy. But I hope that readers elsewhere—despite differences in constitutions, party organisation, relative economic stability or the social power of groups such as the trade unions—will find that at least some of those propositions have a general application. My book ranges widely over time and space in the attempt to identify the conditions for the collapse of democratic societies. It is not suggested that there is any inevitability about such breakdowns; there are no general laws. But there are certainly general lessons to be drawn. It is clear that situations can develop—a hyper-inflation, a prolonged campaign of terrorism and subversion, or the rise of a totalitarian movement with a mass following, for example—which provide a severe test for democratic institutions. It is clear that a society that expends its energies in redistributing wealth instead of creating it will succumb to stagnation and eventually fail to satisfy the very expectations of wealth without work that it has encouraged. In such situations, the

notorious tendency of routine politicians to flatter the electorate with the notion that there is always a soft option will damage a society's chances of survival. And there is a still more pervasive danger: that egalitarian socialism of the kind that has swayed recent governments in Britain can, if it goes unchecked, eventually knock away the bases for a free society. Bureaucratic conformity will take the place of originality and inventiveness; power will be concentrated in the hands of increasingly unrepresentative minorities. Britain today can indeed be seen as a singularly depressing example of the abuse of democratic institutions by the enemies of the free society.

Britain is remarkable among the advanced industrial democracies in at least two respects. The first involves the extraordinary power that is concentrated in the hands of a single social pressure group, the industrial trade unions. This is particularly marked because of the absence of effective organisations to defend the interests of other economic groups, although there have been recent efforts to create bodies to defend ratepayers and the self-employed, and suggestions that industry might show its 'muscle-power' through a tax strike. The situation is made worse by the disproportionate influence of communists and others who are openly dedicated to the overthrow of the free society within the British trade union movement—and by the special links between that movement and the Labour Party. It was hardly an exaggeration to say that, at the time of writing, every major economic decision made by British politicians was being taken *in fear of the trade unions*. The feeling that a confrontation with the unions must be avoided at any cost—especially in view of the way that the Heath government was said to have been 'defeated' by the miners in February 1974—induced otherwise rational men to acquiesce in decisions that distorted the whole structure of the British economy.

The other singular feature of British political life is the equally exceptional power that is vested in a single political assembly, the House of Commons. In practice, this is qualified only by the countervailing force of the trade unions. It seems to be possible to do almost anything by a simple majority vote in the House of Commons, in the absence of a strong upper house, a written constitution with an entrenched Bill of Rights, and a Supreme Court to rule on the constitutionality or otherwise of

new legislation. Any serious programme to resolve the 'British problem' will therefore need to involve (i) an attempt to reassert the rule of law in industrial relations, to reform trade union election procedures and to return the trade unions to their original, and necessary, role in free collective bargaining, which is something different from the relationship between a highwayman and a stagecoach; and (ii) a new constitutional settlement, which should certainly involve an entrenched Bill of Rights. If both are 'politically impossible', as we are frequently told, then you can tell the bookies to lower the odds against the fantasy in Chapter 1 coming to pass.

John Middleton Murry published a book in 1932, in the midst of another great ideological upheaval in Europe, in which he argued the *necessity* of communism in Britain. It would not be the same as Russian Communism. 'Every country', he thought, 'gets the communism it has deserved.' In Britain, communism would not necessarily entail bloody revolution—unless (and he thought it unlikely) a relatively gentle and peace-abiding middle class decided to make armed resistance. It was perfectly plausible, as Engels had suggested, that the social revolution would come about in Britain by entirely peaceful and legal means, through the capture of parliament by a Socialist party that had resolved 'to be on the winning side'. It would proceed to destroy capitalism and the middle class by economic means, and above all by taxation. The short-term effects of its economic programme would appal the economists. 'That they will *appear* disastrous to "economists"—even to Labour "economists"—who cannot free their minds from the unconscious assumptions of economic individualism, is perfectly true. But the mind that cannot free itself from these assumptions is a mind from which we have nothing to expect, and ultimately, nothing to fear.'⁶

Middleton Murry was prescient about many things. Whether he was prescient in his final prediction—that, at the end of the day, the revolution had 'nothing to fear' from the liberal order—is something that the reader will have to decide for himself after weighing the arguments in this book. But surely even the most carefully-contrived democratic institutions are only as strong as the social consensus that underpins them and above all the willingness of those who believe in liberty to fight for it. Parliaments are only painted boards if a society loses its

cohesion and its moral courage—and, indeed, the memory of Germany in 1933, of Czechoslovakia in 1948 and of Chile in 1970 is a sufficient reminder that the enemies of democracy can strut before those boards as well as its defenders.

We are in danger of witnessing the same kind of usurpation in Britain. This reflects a serious failure of political leadership. But, contrary to the conventional arguments of the elitist critics of democracy (see Chapter 2) the solution will entail more, not less, public involvement in political decision-making. It is the bureaucratic hold of unrepresentative minorities over much of the trade union apparatus and over the Labour movement as a whole that has exposed Britain to its present economic plight and constitutional danger. This has come about, to a large degree, because of the apathy or blank incomprehension of the great majority, and the failure of those who have their eyes half-open to devise an effective organisational weapon with which to resist. We require a new spirit of 'referendum-mindedness': a greater willingness on the part of ordinary citizens to take an interventionist attitude to the political process. John Stuart Mill's warning to those who elected to live under a representative government is more timely today than when he wrote:

A people may prefer a free government, but if, from indolence, or carelessness, or cowardice, or want of public spirit, they are unequal to the exertions necessary for preserving it; if they will not fight for it when directly attacked; if they can be deluded by the articles used to cheat them out of it; if by momentary discouragement, or temporary panic, or fit of enthusiasm for an individual, they can be induced to lay their liberties at the feet even of a great man . . . in all these cases they are more or less unfit for liberty: and although it may be for their good to have had it even for a short time, they are unlikely long to enjoy it.⁷

It is a problem of ideas as well as organisation. One of the basic fault-lines in the current debate within Britain, and within the Western societies as a whole, is between individualism (which also involves the defence of the family) and collectivism. This is so obvious that it should scarcely need to be restated. And yet the conventional shorthand of politics, and above all the frequently bogus distinction between right and left, has served to obscure it. The ever-advancing frontiers

of state intervention in the economy and in society generally give rise to genuine doubts about the future of pluralist democracy. The connection between economic pluralism and political pluralism is as familiar to Marxists as to classical liberals; it is a symptom of the debasement of much contemporary political discussion that socialists have so often been permitted to brush it aside as irrelevant. The danger is that if Britain carries on much further down the road it is now on, it could be left with a dismal choice between contending forms of socialism: the one that, carried to its logical extreme, can only be called communism and the other that tends towards corporatism (which is what a significant minority of Labour leaders in Britain, if they are honest with themselves, are moving towards).

The one area, ironically, where the power of the state has been dwindling instead of expanding is precisely where it should be strongest: in the realm of defence. And this at a moment when the Western sphere of influence in the world is shrinking fast, and the strategic threat to the European democracies is unparalleled since the rise of Nazi Germany.

'Fear and I were born twins', said Thomas Hobbes, who was born in the year that the Spanish Armada set sail for England, escaped into exile from a regicide civil war and survived to found a bleak but compelling philosophy of politics on his sense of the innate depravity and anarchic tendencies of man.⁸ Our age is another of fear and uncertainty, after a quarter-century of peace and prosperity—at any rate for those lucky enough to live in the extreme north-western corner of the Eurasian land-mass or in the continents of Australia and North America. Now our horizons have been abruptly foreshortened. The retreat from empire by the European powers has been followed by a still more rapid retreat from world hegemony by the United States. Events over great swathes of the map—and the control of formerly secure sources of raw materials—have spun out of the control of the Western powers. The Soviet Union has achieved strategic parity with America, and is bent on more than parity. The appeal of pluralist forms of government has waned throughout the developing world, which has been quick to substitute politburos or juntas or down-at-heel one-party socialist systems for the models bequeathed by the departing

colonial powers.*

Britain's problem cannot be detached from this shifting balance of power, even if Britain's leaders, growing more insular from day to day, choose to avert their eyes from it. At a polite dinner-party in London in the spring of 1975, a Vietnamese girl whose family had fled from Hanoi two decades before, only to be trapped as the Communist forces closed in on Saigon, turned on the guests and said: 'The question that all of you now have to face is whether the philosophy of the West can survive an enemy who is so much more ruthless and sure in his own beliefs than you.' The issues that were at stake in the Vietnam war, and the rights and wrongs of both the American involvement and the American withdrawal, will be endlessly disputed. The triumph of North Vietnam's war machine, supported by a society fully mobilised by leaders convinced that history was on their side, has encouraged some people to revert, in new phrases, to the old argument that might is right. The failure of South Vietnam's leaders, and the rout of its army, has produced the corresponding argument that the Americans were mad to attempt to try to prop up an alien conception of democracy with such unpromising material.

The spectacle of those sad columns of refugees, fleeing southward and eastward from Hué, Danang, Kontum and Pleiku in a hopeless bid to outpace the invader's army showed that, for the Vietnamese themselves, the issue looked rather different. Hanoi radio put out the story that they were being driven south by the South Vietnamese authorities, just as Hanoi's sympathisers had claimed, during past offensives, that the refugees were running away from the American bombers. But there were no bombers to run away from this time round, and no government authorities with the time or manpower to tell the refugees which way to go. At the end of a war that, in its several phases, had dragged on for nearly three decades, a large part of the population of South Vietnam was still voting with its feet for the possibility of a free society. It was a vote more impressive than any ballot or referendum that

*Although one should not underrate the western legacy. The de facto one-party states characteristic of east Africa and the Indian sub-continent have espoused a kind of redistributionist Socialism that Daniel Moynihan has identified, in a perceptive recent article⁶, as characteristically British—the gift of Harold Laski and the London School of Economics of his day.

had taken place, but a vote that could in no way determine who was to govern South Vietnam.

The words of a Vietnamese exile, which strangely echo those of successive waves of refugees from the East—Russians, Czechs, Hungarians, Cubans—may be shrugged off as the unreliable evidence of 'professional anti-communists'. Who are they to discuss the 'philosophy of the West' anyway?

Well, there are lessons to be drawn from such 'far-off places', and some of them may help to determine the truth or otherwise of a remarkable prophecy that was made by one of the epigones of post-war British socialism, the late Richard Crossman. In an article written for a popular tabloid in 1965, Crossman suggested that 'the second half of the twentieth century will see the West go into a peaceful decline, while the world is united under communist leadership'.¹⁰ With a quarter of the century still to run, it might be premature to dismiss Crossman's view of the future as a silly rhetorical extravagance. Over the decade since he wrote, the West has suffered a series of notable reverses. America's failure in Indochina and the initial inability of the Nato alliance to prevent one of its smaller members, Portugal, from being sucked into the Soviet sphere of influence are perhaps the ones that will have the most enduring effects. But, more generally, there has been a process of turning inwards, first perceptible in Western Europe after Suez, now equally apparent in the rebirth of isolationism in the United States.

The retreat of American power and the reluctance of West European governments to contemplate a world role and even to pay for their own defences cannot be explained by any supposed lack of resources, technology or manpower. The explanation must be sought in a creeping paralysis of the will. Despite its present difficulties, the West retains a permanent economic and technological lead over the communist world—which has only been narrowed by the suicidal transfer of technology to the Soviet Union. It has been shown convincingly, by Professor Anthony Sutton and others, that totalitarian systems, by their very nature, are not inventive and that the Russians, over the entire period since the Bolshevik revolution, have had to import ninety per cent of their technology from the West. The economic inefficiencies of the communist command system have also been abundantly

demonstrated.

The communist dictatorships have succeeded in only one area: in harnessing huge populations and borrowed technologies to the requirements of a colossal war machine. Russia is a superpower in only one sense, the military one. The past expansion of Soviet influence has been related to the abdication of Western leadership and the continuing appeal of communist ideologies in countries that have not yet experienced the rigours of a communist system. The future expansion of Soviet power is likely to be bound up with the calculated threat of force—which may well involve gunboat diplomacy in a literal sense in oceans where the Russian navy has been allowed to gain supremacy. The Russians remain fully conscious of the fact that great power diplomacy is always bound up with the use, or threatened use of force, at a time when the Western powers appear to be in some doubt about just what issues they would be prepared to fight for. The continued Soviet military build-up, at the expense of the consumer and of normal economic priorities, cannot be supposed to be purely defensive. The aim is to achieve overall strategic superiority, or, failing that, to be able to stare down the Western powers in a future confrontation over an issue that may be felt, even in the jaded capitals of Western Europe, to be more vital than Portugal or that small country in Asia. The watershed may well be a move to pull Yugoslavia back into the Warsaw Pact after Tito's death.

The prospects for communist expansion in Europe appear to be more auspicious than at any moment since the immediate aftermath of Hitler's war, when the Red Army paved the way for the definitive 'liberation' of Eastern Europe. It is the relative lucidity and self-confidence of East and West, as well as the military balance between them, that has changed since then. The nature of the conflict has also been changing; its focal points are now *inside* Western societies, and inside the Atlantic Alliance as a whole. There are few signs, unhappily, that the challenge has elicited the necessary response. Portugal is the most immediate example. Like a man heavily drugged, Western opinion blinked under the naked light of a communist *fait accompli* in Lisbon, and crawled back into its dreary private nightmare of relative wage claims and household accounts.

Yet the attempt to transform Portugal into the Cuba of

Western Europe (which is analysed in a later chapter) is the most striking demonstration that the ideological battle in Europe is being fought exclusively on *our* side of the divide. The status quo in the communist dictatorships appears to be permanent, accepted by all and sundry, and our politicians are regularly invited to append their names to pieces of paper acknowledging that this is so. God help the democrats in Moscow, Prague or Budapest, because nobody else will. If a country comes under communist sway, that is that, and anyone who thinks otherwise must be a dangerous lunatic.

Things are ordered somewhat differently in our neck of the woods, in that poorly-attended but still pleasant club of countries that can reasonably be described as belonging to the 'free world'. (It is a sign of our semantic confusion that while some Western politicians regularly refer to the Soviet bloc as 'socialist', they are coy about mentioning the fact that some societies still stand for freedom.) There is no 'Brezhnev doctrine' for the West, stating that no member of Nato will be allowed to adopt communism. How could there be, while there are powerful Communist Parties in a number of Western countries that could perfectly legally come to power through the ballot-box? The battle-fields are all located on *our* territory.

It is within this framework that we must examine the crisis of structures and beliefs that now afflicts Britain, as well as other democratic societies. I have already suggested that the external threat, and the genuine challenge of communist subversion within Western societies, are not the only, or even the principal reasons for misgivings about the future. The communists are able to exploit our failings, but the origins of those failings must be sought in economic mismanagement, the way we have allowed some of our institutions to evolve, the absence of decisive leadership, and the apparent crisis of faith in the values and purposes of a liberal society. As in Constantine FitzGibbon's parable—*When the Kissing Had to Stop*—in order to be defeated, we must first disarm ourselves. FitzGibbon rightly perceived that moral decline and the pursuit of false idols are what start to lower the boom. We should hardly need reminding, as a recent Russian commentator put it, that 'the struggle between the bourgeois and communist ideologies is, in the last analysis, a fight for

influence over the masses, a fight for men's minds'.¹¹ What can happen if that is lost is the theme of the fable that follows.

Letter from London 1985

Outside the Ministry of Equality (formerly Buckingham Palace; it was renamed when the Royal Family moved to New Zealand) a couple of sleazy-looking individuals had just caught sight of a likely touch. One of them sidled up to the solitary American tourist and addressed him with the inevitable, 'Pssst. Got any dollars?' The official exchange rate was frozen at £48 to the dollar when the Working People's Government was sworn in a year ago. Since then, the black market rate has crept up to nearly £500. The penalty for a British citizen found in possession of gold or foreign currency is ten years' imprisonment, but this no longer seems to deter anyone. There is a story of a woman pensioner who lived for six months on a \$20 bill smuggled in by a nephew from Canada.

The Knightsbridge Barracks is now the headquarters of the Volunteer Constables, a new mobile police force. Its nucleus was drawn from the factory militias that appeared in the north of England during the General Strike a few years back. The defence chiefs objected strongly to its formation—one of them even offered his view to a now-defunct newspaper, that Britain would soon be ruled by 'communist thugs'.

However, it was difficult for the generals to respond. In successive budgets, the socialists had reduced the Army to 60,000 men, and cut back overall defence spending to a level comparable with Iceland. And then the armed forces had suffered the further humiliation of being deployed in the unsuccessful attempt to maintain vital services during the General Strike. The present Government's decision to issue the Volunteer Constables with automatic weapons was the last straw. The Chief of the Defence Staff resigned (together with the chiefs of all three services) and was replaced with a junior brigadier who was said to have been a member of the Anglo-Soviet Friendship Society in his university days.

The rundown of the armed forces made it impossible for the Government to respond with force when Scotland proclaimed

its independence. Minesweepers from the British (ex-Royal) Navy, backed up, according to Scottish press reports, by Soviet submarines, were used, however, to maintain English control of the North Sea oil rigs. This action seems to have been undertaken largely for prestige reasons. The world glut of oil around 1980 that sent prices crashing, the collapse of three drilling platforms built by the Ministry of Power after the foreign corporations were driven away, and the soaring foreign exchange cost of imported materials had made extraction unprofitable. The British Government's official line towards Scottish independence was that the whole operation had been hatched by right-wing British exiles in Edinburgh in collusion with the Americans.

Foreign visitors are often surprised that the English continue to fly the Union Jack, although the official name of the country has of course been changed from the United Kingdom to the Republic of Britain. Scotland was not the first part of the union to break away. Protestant leaders in Northern Ireland issued a unilateral declaration of independence when the British Government withdrew its troops from Belfast and recognised the IRA as a legitimate police authority in Catholic areas. Britain now operates a total ban on all trade between Ulster and the mainland, under the terms of a resolution adopted by the Socialist United Nations (renamed after the exclusion of the United States). Only Wales is left. This, no doubt, has something to do with the presence of a number of well-known Welsh politicians in the Working People's Government, and the subsidies that are still being paid at their behest to keep antiquated Welsh coal mines and steel mills alive.

But few Englishmen seem to know much about what is happening in any part of the island these days. You need a special pass, as well as the identity card that must be carried at all times, in order to move between the six regions into which England and Wales have been divided. Some British economists, now in exile in Chicago, maintain that this is the logical conclusion of the immobilism that overcame the British workforce in the early 1970s. Low-rent council housing (and the near impossibility of finding a second council house) made people want to stay put in their own areas, regardless of the jobs that were locally available. The socialists soon solved the

job problem anyway by making it plain that they would print money to keep men employed in whatever business they happened to be working, and at whatever wage they thought they should be paid.

For the sake of economy, the Government has reduced the number of newspapers to two dailies and one Sunday: *The British Times*, *The Morning Star* and *The People's Mirror*. This decision caused heavy redundancies and was bitterly attacked by the printers' unions and by the Trotskyist leaders of the National Union of Journalists, who had themselves been responsible in the late 1970s for the sacking of hundreds of 'reactionary' reporters and the bankrupting of several major Fleet Street dailies in the course of strikes to ensure that newspapers echoed union policy, or that two men were employed to do one man's job in the printing shops. There are also a number of theoretical journals representative of different strands of opinion within the Working People's Government, the British Assembly, and the Trades Union Congress (also known as the Upper House). These include communist, Trotskyist and socialist publications, as well as a monthly called *Corporate Britain* which is representative of an influential group of trade union leaders whose ideas—especially on government by 'economic interest groups'—appear to owe something to the Italian socialist, Benito Mussolini. Since China and Russia signed the non-aggression pact, the Maoist *People's News* has also reappeared; it was formerly banned, allegedly at the request of the Soviet Embassy.

It is difficult to gauge the mood of the times from these organs, although their editors are mostly people who were prominent in Fleet Street or the provincial press even before the General Strike. Television is, if anything, worse. The news documentary has disappeared completely—which is ironic in view of the fact that it was through this particular medium that the leaders of the present Government were able to present their version of events during the political storms of the late 1970s. Hours of prime time television were then occupied by Trotskyist directors and script-writers who depicted every strike as a blow against capitalist exploitation. Sport, old horror films, the Bolshoi ballet and historical sagas—many of them re-runs of serials popular in the 1970s—are now the order of the night. There are also the late night blue movies on BBC-2

which, rumour has it, were introduced to divert those insomniacs who might otherwise be thinking about politics.

The control of foreign newspapers is still far from complete. There is little concern, for example, about foreign-language publications; the abolition of most examinations, and the sacking of headmasters who believed in old-style schooling led to a situation in which fewer and fewer Englishmen had the ability, let alone the desire, to read in any language, including their own. It is the English-language press, and above all the Scottish and American papers, that the Government really worries about. The fact that the people who get hold of them, if caught out, are dealt with much as drug-traffickers used to be is still not an effective deterrent; copies of the *Glasgow Herald*, and *Scottish Express* (which has been acquired by a junior member of the Beaverbrook family in exile) and the *International Herald Tribune* are smuggled over the border each day. However, things will get more difficult for the suppliers if the Government goes ahead with the scheme to build an electrified fence along the whole length of the border—a sort of new Hadrian's Wall. (This, of course, would be designed to stop the flight of refugees rather than the entry of newspapers.)

A recent issue of the *Scottish Express* which has been xeroxed and widely circulated in London contains what purports to be the text of a confidential memorandum prepared by the present Minister of Equality when he was serving in the former socialist government. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of this document, which appears to have been submitted to a certain foreign embassy. Prepared soon after the General Strike, it is now of course somewhat out of date, but it does throw a remarkable light on the events that created the present situation. The title appears to refer to the successful plan to remove the former Prime Minister after using him as a front man to 'legitimise' the seizure of total power. There is room here only for some of the more salient passages:

PROSPECTS FOR OPERATION BRUTUS

The satisfactory outcome of the recent events is well known to you. It has now been convincingly shown that neither a Conservative nor a Labour Government can resist the weapon of industrial power that is now firmly in our hands. My real fear, two years ago, was that the Conservatives

would find the nerve—and the public backing—to pursue their two-point programme. As you will recall, this involved (i) the promise to restore the sovereignty of market forces so that if, for example, it was found necessary to give in to a large wage demand, it would immediately be translated into higher prices and unemployment; and (ii) the pledge to bring trade unions back within the law through a new Industrial Relations Act. Some Tory thinkers at the time thought that the device of the referendum could be used to provide a mandate for (ii). They were of course right. Any serious attempt to involve the community as a whole in a bid to reduce trade union power would have exposed our supporters' isolation and lack of mass support, due to the limited political education of the British working class at this stage. Fortunately, the referendum was not used for this purpose. Amazingly, one of the criticisms that the bourgeois ideologists used against it was that it would limit 'parliamentary sovereignty'. Nothing could have better illustrated the bankruptcy of their ideology: sovereignty already lay with us, in the factories and streets. Under these conditions, the extraordinary constitutional power of Parliament—which allows it to do almost *anything*, in theory, through a majority vote in a single house—was something only *we* could employ.

In the end, the Conservatives (caught up in a pathetic family feud) and the electorate shied away from confrontation with us on ground where they could win. We were left to face a confrontation on ground where, as it turned out, it was easier for us to win—the struggle against new wages controls.

A quite remarkable number of people thought that this time round, a wages freeze could work. The opportunist in No. 10 Downing Street* had tried it before (not very successfully), and this time, he had the bulk of the Conservative Opposition on his side. It is, indeed, extraordinary how many Tories were delighted to have the Socialists back in office again because of the naive belief (proof, if any more were needed, of how effete the British middle classes have become) that Labour men are 'better' at dealing with trade unions. When you remember that, even at this stage, 3-4 million trade unionists were still voting for the Conservatives, you will be fully conscious of just how defeatist these Tories had become. Compare their influence

*The home of the British Prime Minister before the move, for security reasons, to Windsor Castle.

in trade union structures with ours—and yet the Communist Party of Great Britain was still pulling in only 30,000 votes in the country!

So we went back to the wages freeze. The government propaganda was not bad. 'This is the answer to inflation', television audiences were told. Appeals were made to the self-sacrificing character of the British people, to the homespun heroism of the old girl sitting by a paraffin lamp during the blitz. And I must confess that I thought that the Prime Minister, who has as many lives as a cat, had escaped again when he picked his target: the rubbishmen. Their job is simple, and can easily be done by troops or blacklegs. No one is overjoyed with their performance, and they don't excite the same sympathy as miners. It looked like a very easy way to demonstrate that the Government could stand up to strikers.

Then, of course, things went awry. That picket who died trying to stop soldiers taking over his rubbish cart really got the ball rolling; I managed to hush up the inquest, showing that he died of natural causes. You know the rest: how we set in motion a wave of sympathy strikes, started occupying more factories in the North, and finally called a General Strike when troops were used again to hold the power stations. Then six cabinet ministers and twenty junior ministers resigned from the Government together. The old weasel's nerve was broken. He was urged to set up a National Government with the Tories, but he was scared of what he described as 'doing a Ramsay MacDonald'. He accepted our terms, and I believe that we are now in a position to dispense with him as soon as he has outlived his diminishing usefulness. . .

As this memorandum makes clear, however, the effect of the General Strike was only the culmination of a very long process. A later section concludes that

the bourgeoisie and the entrepreneurial class clearly never believed that we were for real. Occasionally some reactionary politician would get up (more often in the House of Lords than in the House of Commons) and raise the subject of communist infiltration—in the unions, the media, and Parliament itself. It was even suggested from time to time that there might be 'sleepers' in the senior ranks of the socialist government. We were able to brush this all aside, even when there was all that fuss about the revelations of those Czech defectors, with a well-orchestrated chorus of

calumny. We were even able to 'frame' one or two of our best-informed opponents on charges of business fraud or contact with the Americans. Every time the activities of your embassy were brought up, we managed to manufacture a new exposé of the CIA involvement in Britain. . .

The mid-1970s, of course, saw the rise of a number of Poujadist movements among ratepayers, farmers, the self-employed, and a number of conspiracies involving retired officers, businessmen and right-wingers, some of them half-baked, others quite serious for us. I would like to thank you again for all the help your people gave us in keeping tabs on these organisations, and also for the invaluable assistance that Colonel Zhivkov later gave us in setting up the new security service to deal with them.

In my opinion, there were three reasons for the failure of the Poujadists and the 'private armies': (i) The middle class never managed to develop the strike weapon as a *credible* pressure on government; no doubt you remember that occasion when managers in the engineering industry went on strike and we organised workers' 'self-control' committees to take over from them. Production dropped and some plants were wrecked, but we had again showed who was the boss. Similarly, the taxpayers' strike fell apart when we jailed the ringleaders. If you aren't prepared to face going to jail for your beliefs, you will never be able to stand up to a disciplined revolutionary movement. (ii) We succeeded in infiltrating the so-called 'patriotic' movements, exposing what was going on and inventing, where necessary, the 'evidence' that enabled us to suppress the dangerous ones; by this means, we were also able to purge potentially unreliable elements from the police, the armed forces, and a certain department of the Home Office. (iii) The truth of Lenin's profound observation that the capitalist will sell you the rope with which he is hung.

You remember those people in the industrialists' association who supported our electoral campaign; I think they actually believed that they could domesticate us, turn us from predators into house-cats. It was the apathy and fatalism of the capitalist elite in this country—their willingness to compromise with the processes that were bound in the end to destroy them—that made our victory easier than any of us had ever dreamed. Look at the way the press barons meekly accepted the closed shop and did not lift a finger as our people took over the editorial policy of their papers. . .

The Minister was particularly caustic about those who had failed to comprehend what he describes as the 'battle on the economic front'. He observes that well into the 1970s (despite the example of the Allende regime's tactics in Chile, which he considers highly relevant) the consensus was still that Britain's vulnerable economic position, and particularly the need to control inflation, to restore foreign confidence and to maintain a competitive position for exports would somehow restore economic 'sanity'. He quotes the words of a Chilean communist—apparently one of the thousands of Marxist revolutionaries who were granted asylum in Britain in the 1970s—to the effect that 'what is an economic crisis for the exploiting class is not a crisis for us, but a tremendous opportunity'. Maybe that is why the Government rejected the IMF's terms for that emergency credit and seemed to have viewed the flight of foreign capital with relative equanimity. The Minister goes on to explain what foreign economists have since studied in detail:

Inflation was used to destroy the middle class. The fact that inflation appeared to get out of hand was not an administrative blunder, but a conscious political strategy. We understood, and it is the very essence of Marxist-Leninist teaching, that economic power is the key to political power. You start by curtailing the private sector; you carry on with the redistribution of wealth by progressive income tax, then wealth tax, gift tax and so on; you proceed to confiscate land and encourage workers' occupations of firms on whatever pretext falls to hand; you make sure that the inflation that you unleash damages your social enemies and not your own supporters, and you end up with *control through the stomach*. We are already approaching the stage when, as Trotsky said, opposition will be a form of slow starvation . . .

Rationing, in the framework of a siege economy, was already in force at the time the Minister drew up this document—rationing, and all that goes with it. Today, when friends visit each other for dinner, they bring their own food. With a thousand per cent surcharge on most alcoholic drinks, these are out of the question (apart from home-brewed spirits or bootleg Scotch smuggled in at great risk). The issue of ration coupons is

in the hands of local 'supply committees' which are, in effect, a political arm of the Working People's Government. If you fall out of favour with your local committee, you could, indeed, go hungry, unless you have enough money (or barter goods) stashed away to buy on the black market.

The final passage in the Minister of Equality's memorandum is by far the most interesting. By now it has only an academic interest, but it does serve to remind us of the curious complacency with which most people continued to view 'the British question' in the 1970s. If Britain's symptoms had been ascribed to, say, Italy, the pundits would all have predicted either a right-wing coup (which is what actually happened in Rome) or a communist takeover. But the same people stubbornly regarded Britain as 'different'. Britain was, after all, the mother of parliaments. Juntas and politburos were peculiar to places where people ate funny food and shouted at each other in strange languages.

The British people seemed to be engaged in an act of collective self-hypnosis, which some psychologists blamed on television. All the world's horrors came and went on the small screen in the front room, and left the British populace unmoved. Britain had become the model of a *demobilised* society, in which all the major decisions were left to more or less unrepresentative elites—and increasingly, to the men who were to create the Working People's Government. Pericles' famous summation of Athenian democracy—'We consider anyone who does not share in the life of the citizen not as minding his own business but as useless'—would have been greeted with blank incomprehension in this inert polity that had once declared itself to be the Athens of the modern world.

So many things were happening that should have aroused the British and yet did not seem to. After all, they were (until Northern Ireland was abandoned) fighting a major internal war and, in addition to that, traditions of non-violence were obviously breaking down throughout Britain as a whole with the upsurge of armed terrorism, race riots and criminal violence of all kinds. The strategic threat from the Soviet Union grew daily more immediate, and yet Britain's defences were run down to the point where one Tory critic (now in Canada) suggested that the Government might as well scrap everything and substitute a tape recording saying in Russian, 'Don't shoot,

we're on the same side'. The balance of payments deficit yawned wider and wider—producing the inevitable flight of foreign capital—while governments continued to spend as if there was no tomorrow. The monopoly power of those social pressure groups that are so peculiarly English, the industrial trade unions, distorted the whole structure of the country's economy and ensured that anyone who was not protected by the strongest among them (the lower-paid, the entire middle class and pensioners) would suffer most in an incipient hyper-inflation. The inflation itself, advancing almost unchecked, swept away what was left of traditional attitudes of financial probity and fair play; honest men came to regard tax evasion almost as a public duty, and saving ceased altogether.

Yet the British and their resolute admirers elsewhere continued to maintain that 'it can't happen here'—in other words that the system could fail to solve all the problems and yet survive. There was a blind faith in the docile character of the British race which, since the seventeenth century, had not been given to smashing up political institutions and lopping of the heads of kings. Yet it was precisely this attitude, this determination to muddle through rather than tackle problems head-on that contributed (as the last part of the Minister's memorandum reminds us) to the collapse of democracy in Britain:

We must not move precipitately, or else we may lose control of the weapons that are now in our hands. I find that some of our friends in your country are not sufficiently aware of the desperate longing of the British people to maintain the semblance of respectability and constitutional order in everything they do. If we had seized the Government by force during the General Strike (and it is possible that we would have succeeded) we would have forfeited the immense advantage of appearing to be a democratically-constituted force. This might in turn have at last dragged our enemies out of their sloth and provided them with the rallying point from which they could move against us. Even now that the Government is basically in our hands, there is a need to move cautiously. We will call it a socialist government for a little longer—perhaps indefinitely. We will not break with Nato just yet. We will hold a referendum on our terms, when the time is right, on a new constitutional

settlement. Above all, we will make use of Parliament. . .

I agree with you on the importance of creating another American scare. I have already suggested the names of the five people in the Socialist Party who should be implicated in the next CIA 'plot'. I think that this time round, we will be able to consider the banning of the Conservative Party. Certainly the American ambassador will have to be expelled.

I do not expect any effective resistance to Operation Brutus. The Prime Minister is vulnerable in ways that you know about, and I am sure that he will go quietly into retirement. The Chief of the General Staff is weak and confused, and lacks forces anyway. The potential leaders of a businessmen's backlash got out after the strike if they did not go before. Scotland is the one thing that worries me. . .

Above all, everything must be done with as much *decorum* as possible. We must never forget that this is a country of civil servants. They will do what they're told if they're given the proper forms. That's where Hitler was wrong. A country of shopkeepers is not all that easy to deal with. A country of deputy post-masters is.

Perhaps none of us was fully aware, even at this stage, of the colossal power that can be exercised through the House of Commons by a party with an effective majority. When Allende in Chile set out to do many of the things that the Minister of Equality and his friends succeeded in doing here, he had to contend with a real system of checks and balances: he could make use of the tremendous powers of the Chilean presidency, but still ran up against strong and, for a time, effective resistance from Congress and the Supreme Court. In Britain, once the Left had captured Parliament (by methods too multifarious to be remembered here, but often camouflaged by the badges and ensigns of something described at the time as 'social democracy') all things were possible. The executive and the legislature, in this situation, were one and the same, and there was no legal body to rule on the constitutionality or otherwise of the parliamentary votes. The House of Lords made a valiant attempt to impose some restraints—only to be silenced by a threat (which had been used before) to flood it with socialist peers. The British now realised the terrible vulnerability of their system, which lacked both a constitutional court and a strong upper house—in short, any effective

separation of powers—once the social consensus had broken down and a group had come to power which was committed to none of the principles of a liberal democracy.

The parliamentary strength of this group was, I suppose, to be partly explained by steady Marxist infiltration into the Socialist Party over a prolonged period, as well as to that characteristically English phenomenon, public school socialism. (I am not aware of any other country where snobbery and egalitarianism have been so closely interlocked.) It had long been accepted that it was not sensible in Britain to join small parties or to form new ones. As one of the Minister of Equality's colleagues in King Street put it, 'We must work through the Labour movement, not in competition with it'. This strategy resulted in a bureaucratic triumph—the capture of the command levers in many major unions—which eventually brought with it the control of the key extra-parliamentary organs of the Socialist Party: the national executive and the annual conference, whose decisions were determined by union bloc votes, which in turn were decided by rigged ballots.

From here it was a short leap to the control of the nomination of most parliamentary candidates and the overriding of constituency parties. There were, it is true, efforts to resist the trend, but at the crucial watershed, when the party split in the midst of the General Strike, only a handful of socialist Members of Parliament left the party to join the new Social Democratic Movement. Party loyalty, or fear of the unknown (or the tested strength of the union left) held the others back. It was the same when the Prime Minister was finally pushed into retirement and an ex-communist who had not publicly identified himself with the party's Marxist faction for several years took over to apply an openly totalitarian programme. The stage was set for the eventual break with constitutional appearances—I hesitate to say with *legality*, because the Minister of Social Communications has repeatedly stressed that the Government always acted under statute law. The law lords living abroad have issued a detailed report refuting this view (which has been presented to the European Court) but I am not competent to judge its contents.

Of course, the Minister of Equality does not tell the whole story. There *was* resistance in the end. It is rumoured that the

Socialist Minister who was among those incriminated in the 'Grosvenor Square Plot' (which led to the expulsion of the American Ambassador) had actually asked for Nato assistance to prevent a communist *coup d'état*. Surprisingly, a number of trade union leaders who had participated in the General Strike opposed the Government's subsequent proposals for a new constitution abolishing the House of Lords and substituting the Trades Union Congress—expanded to include delegates of other economic interest groups. There was quite remarkable last-ditch resistance by farmers and small businessmen to the expropriation of their properties by inspectors from the Ministry of Equality sent out to enforce the collectivisation decrees. This resulted in a number of serious shooting incidents. There were also violent brawls when inspectors from the same Ministry went from house to house assessing, and often impounding, paintings, furniture, jewellery and other 'anti-egalitarian' possessions.

But by and large, the reorganisation of the country under the Working People's Government proceeded very smoothly. If there had been any residual thought of resisting the ban on the Conservative Party and other opposition groups, it was probably laid to rest by the arrival of a Russian fleet on a friendship visit the previous day and the display of spanking new armoured cars and automatic weapons by the Volunteer Constables and factory militias. And it is true that the Government was quite generous at the beginning about allowing citizens to emigrate: the problem was finding a country to go to, especially since nobody seems to believe that the British will do any work whatsoever. But more recently, passports have been withdrawn from most people and it is virtually impossible to obtain foreign exchange facilities legally.

I find that the only reliable sources of news, apart from the Scottish papers, which I see only infrequently, are Radio Free Britain, operating from somewhere in West Germany, and a number of underground news-sheets which are unlikely to survive much longer, given the vast improvement in surveillance techniques. (There have long been detailed files on every man, woman and child in Britain and the information has all been fed into a computer system that makes instant retrieval possible.) Some of the news-sheets emanate from libertarian communes

that are holding out in remoter parts of the country; one of these is said to include two former Conservative cabinet ministers who are now reduced to growing their own food—for as long as the Government lets them.

There is also Radio New Order, the English-language propaganda station which broadcasts by satellite from Johannesburg and specialises in relaying the views of right-wing exiles. A typical excerpt from today's programme reads as follows:

The liberal capitalists in America and Germany should take note of how the Reds came to power in Britain. There is no clearer demonstration of the degeneracy of the philosophy of Manchester and of its latter-day exponents. The pursuit of material gain in the name of 'economic freedom' and of permissive and anti-patriotic life-styles in the name of 'individual liberty' is what handed Britain over to Muscovy. In the face of the ideological menace from the East, Western civilisation must return to the sterner, simpler values of National Order. The class-war is a fiction. We aim to unite all those who work with hand or brain in the great community of the **Corporate State**. Americans and Germans, take note: **our philosophy offers** you the *only* way to divert the **inevitable Socialist** revolution into a Nationalist course. The alternative is Britain today: the drab Utopia of a minor civil servant, ruled from Moscow, where nothing works except the labour camps.

Substitute 'nationalism' for 'class-war' (and vice-versa) throughout this passage, alter an inflection or two, and you have a statement that is not all that dissimilar from the speeches that are made by members of the Working People's Government.

It is clear to me now, with hindsight, that the struggle in Britain was not, as it then seemed, primarily a struggle between right and left, and certainly never a struggle between fascists and communists, but between individualists and collectivists, between the Party of Liberty and the Party of Equality, between those who believed in a liberal order in which men would be allowed to make their own choices, and those who wanted the total state, a state that would make all the choices—in the economy, in education, in literature and the

arts—for us. But the liberals got themselves tied up in knots. They were too prudish to set about mobilising public opinion effectively, or to borrow weapons from their enemies' arsenal. They sat about like Victorian spinsters clucking at the mention of sex. It was not so much that they were defeated, but that they never really fought. They didn't understand that if the enemy is storming the battlements, you have to be prepared to pour boiling oil on his head. They were made of the wrong stuff: the fire that melts the butter tempers the steel . . .

Britain really isn't much of a country to live in any more. Anyone as old as I am is still shocked to be asked to pay £250 for a gin-and-tonic in a pub, although we know it's only paper. With the rationing and the import quotas, you're lucky to eat meat more than once or twice a week, although the Government says that that will improve when we enter Comecon. It's a relief not to have commercials on television, but that's because all the choices are made by little men in Whitehall, not the consumers. There are just three models of cars, for example, which are all out of date and which no one wants to buy, but we can't export them anywhere because real labour costs are three times as high as in Spain and North Africa, where Ford and Chrysler have moved all their plant.

I worry about the kids all the time. At school, English history seems to be all about peasant revolts, trade union martyrs and Marx's travails in the British Museum. The morning's work begins with an hour of 'social education'. Mind you, I suppose it was getting like that when you left ten years ago. Weren't they studying Marx and Mao Tse-tung, along with abortion and the pill, in religious education classes?

It is a cold world we have entered in the name of equality and peace, and I doubt whether there is any return from it, at least in our lifetimes.