What the Pinochet affair shows about Britain

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When lawyers representing the former Chilean dictator, General Augusto Pinochet, return to the House of Lords on January 18, seeking to uphold the October 28 High Court verdict granting him "sovereign immunity" from prosecution, they will do so with the backing of substantial layers of the British establishment.

The Conservative opposition, big business, the Church of England and much of the British press have rallied to the general's defence. Former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has been the most vocal advocate of his release. In a letter to the *Times*, the Baroness wrote that the general "was a good friend to this country" and warned that any interference in "Chile's transition to democracy" would be "at our peril". When Home Secretary Jack Straw gave Spain's extradition warrant authority to proceed, she declared that Pinochet's release was in "the national interests of both Chile and Britain".

Pinochet came to power in 1973 in a military coup that had been prepared through years of subversion in collaboration with the US intelligence agencies. He overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Salvador Allende's Socialist Party. Then began a systematic campaign of terror in which tens of thousands of his left-wing opponents in the Socialist Party, Communist Party and other radical groups, intellectuals, workers and peasants were rounded up, held in concentration camps, tortured and killed. Later the notorious Operation Condor was mounted, during which Pinochet collaborated with other Latin American dictatorships--such as Brazil and Argentina--to hunt down refugees, kidnap and murder them. His victims included Britons, Americans and other foreign nationals and his crimes extended as far as Washington, the site of the assassination of Allende's Minister of Defense and Foreign Affairs, Orlando Letelier.

Despite this, Thatcher and company have not felt it necessary to make any apology whatsoever for their defence of this despot, nor to make even a gesture towards the revulsion felt by millions at these crimes. Her position can be summed up in one sentence: "What do you expect?" The implications of this should be carefully considered. Can anyone doubt, based on Thatcher's own words, that, had the British ruling class at any time felt threatened to the same degree as their Chilean counterparts, they would have been prepared to act in a similar manner?

Britain has a long history of support for dictatorships in other countries, and even installing a few of its own. It should be remembered that substantial layers of Britain's elite supported an alliance with Hitler prior to World War II, while more recently it functioned as a major backer of regimes like that of Suharto in Indonesia. Only when its own foreign policy interests are served, as in the demand for the prosecution of Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic or Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, does the ruling class recover its democratic sensibilities. Whenever its interests have been seriously challenged at home, it has not been bound by democratic norms when dealing with its opponents.

Within this context, however, there is a particular significance to the British establishment's open defence of Pinochet. Thatcher, and those who benefited from her policies, have come to the general's defence because they saw his victory in Chile as a key strategic question. The years from 1968 through to the mid-1970s saw a series of explosive class struggles throughout the world. Beginning with the French general strike, a strike wave swept through the European countries of Germany, Italy and Britain itself. This militant upsurge produced the collapse of military/fascist dictatorships in Portugal and Greece, while the United States was the scene of workers' struggles, civil unrest and mass protest against the Vietnam War.

Faced with a very real possibility of social revolution, not just in Latin America but also in Europe, Pinochet's British supporters argue that his actions were necessary to defend the country from the "Marxist threat". They cite as justification for Pinochet's release the fact that, as a former head of state, he should enjoy "sovereign immunity" for his actions. The former dictator's legal defence also argued in court that mass murder conducted for political, rather than racial, motives is not genocide.

There was none more forthright in sanctioning Pinochet's coup at the time than the British government. The Tory administration of Edward Heath was one of the first to recognise the military junta. In January 1974, two top-level delegations representing the Chilean dictatorship visited Britain for secret discussions with the government. One month later a delegation of Chile's air force officers met with aircraft manufacturers in London to discuss speeding up Britain's supply of military hardware to Chile. Its armed forces have been substantially equipped by Britain ever since. That same year representatives of the junta met with the Queen.

This support for Pinochet was substantially motivated by domestic considerations. Between July 1970 and August 1972, four states of emergency were declared in Britain as militant actions by workers escalated. At the time of the Chilean coup, Heath had declared yet another state of emergency largely in response to the national strike by miners and the threat of this spreading to other sections of workers.

In January 1974, this was strengthened by extending the Emergency Powers Act, enabling the Tory cabinet to rule through the unelected Privy Council and House of Lords. There was

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serious discussion within the army top brass about the possibility of imposing military rule. Heath secretly placed the civil service, the police and the Ministry of Defence on an alert procedure, nominally reserved for a "minor nuclear attack".

That same year, the Annual Report of the National Council for Civil Liberties commented, "Parliament was dissolved in the midst of a red scare unparalleled in 30 years, with the declaration of a sixth state of emergency, the continuation of a joint police-military operation at Heathrow--despite its doubtful validity--and the admission by the Home Secretary, Robert Carr, that troops might be used in industrial disputes."

In the end Heath retreated from an open confrontation with the working class and instead called an election on the slogan, "Who rules the country--the government or the unions?" The Labour Party won and succeeded for a brief period in calming social tensions through wage rises and other reformist measures.

Thatcher herself came to prominence in the Tory Party as the staunchest critic of Heath's failure to deal decisively with Britain's labour movement. As a fellow disciple of the monetarist economic guru, Milton Friedman, she hailed Pinochet's success in imposing economic counter-reforms on the basis of the brutal suppression of democratic rights, and declared her intention to establish a "Chile model" in Britain.

By 1979 the Labour government was forced out of office, amidst record levels of industrial action culminating in the so-called "Winter of Discontent". The incoming Tory government, together with President Reagan in the United States, broke decisively with the social reformist policies of the post-war period. During her 13 years in power, Thatcher's government set out to destroy all the social gains won by the working class, such as welfare provisions and social services, which they identified as "socialist". The market was to be "liberated" from all forms of restraint. Democratic rights--including the right to strike and set up trade unions--were severely curtailed.

During their yearlong strike of 1984-85, Thatcher described the miners as the "enemy within" and mobilised the full weight of the police and judiciary to arrest and imprison hundreds of workers and put down the strike. The entire apparatus of Britain's security forces was reorganised to deal with the internal threat. A special department, F2, was established to target the labour and trade union movement, with a special focus on socialist groups.

But the historical parallel between Pinochet's course and that of the previous Tory administration in Britain is not the only factor motivating his defenders. This would not account for the stand taken by the Blair government. After all, the Labour Party in 1973 condemned Pinochet's coup against a fellow member of the Socialist International, and Blair was elected in 1997 claiming to represent a break with the confrontational approach of the 1980s and a "moral renewal" of British politics. Instead Labour has continued Britain's relationship with the general and has worked behind the scenes to secure his release.

The strategic interests of the British bourgeoisie defended by Blair remain bound up with the fate of Pinochet. Despite the constant assertions of the "end of socialism" and the class struggle, the ruling class remains acutely aware of the dramatic social polarisation within Britain. The gap between rich and poor is wider than at any time in history. All the democratic reforms promised by the Blair government have failed to materialise, while its social policies have benefited business at the expense of the majority of the population. This is a recipe for social confrontation.

In this situation, the Pinochet affair has served to expose the wafer-thin commitment of British officialdom to democratic rights and even parliamentary rule. By defending Pinochet's sovereign immunity, the ruling class is reserving its own right to act in a similar fashion at some future date.

The danger of such a development is heightened by the prostration of official liberal and reformist opinion in Britain. Though vague calls have been made for Pinochet's extradition, significant support has been given to the argument that a trial of the general would inflame political tensions in Chile, and endanger its "fragile democracy". A *Guardian* editorial late last year advised Home Secretary Jack Straw to "forget his earlier student activist self and avoid giving any impression of feeding what, unfortunately, has seemed like a blood lust on the part of former left wingers whose gods failed but whose appetite for Jacobin procedure is unabated. His obligations are now far wider".

The historian Eric Hobsbawm made the most open call for Pinochet's release. He wrote in the December 2 issue of the *Guardian*, "The considered view among leaders of the Chilean left ... is that the return of an inevitably discredited and humiliated Pinochet would do the least harm to the chances of democratic progress in their country."

Hobsbawm, a life-long Stalinist, prescribes the same brand of cowardice and conciliation with reaction that his Chilean counterparts practised 25 years ago and have continued to this day. In 1973 it was the refusal of the Allende government and its Communist Party allies to mobilise the working class in a revolutionary struggle, based on their claim that a peaceful road to socialism was possible in an alliance with the democratic bourgeoisie, that paved the way for the fascist victory. The subsequent transition to civilian rule, endorsed by Hobsbawm, was only permitted on the basis that the Socialist Party agreed to suppress the social and democratic strivings of the working class and ensured that the military regime remained essentially intact. It is in this perspective that the real threat to democratic rights lies, in Britain no less than in Chile.

See Also:
The Pinochet extradition

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