

A question and reply on the 1974 Heath government in Britain

Ann Talbot
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On “UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw rants against Trotskyism”
Hi,

In your report on Jack Straw of November 29 you mention that, “Sections of the ruling elite were fully conscious of the extent of the crisis and, when the Heath government fell in 1974, considered declaring a state of emergency and overthrowing parliamentary rule.” I was just wondering where this information came from, could you please point me towards a text that mentions it as it is a portion of history I have not heard mention of in any of the texts I’ve read.

Thanks in advance,

Philip Repper

Dear Philip,

Thank you for your email. Your question is very relevant because the full extent of the political and economic crisis that the British political elite faced in the mid-1970s is not widely appreciated and has never been made the subject of detailed historical analysis.

Reading most of the history books that cover the period will not give an adequate impression of the events of those years. The issues that confronted the Heath government may have ceased to be a subject of political debate because with Thatcher’s defeat of the miners strike in 1985, the ruling elite believed they had resolved the political and economic problems that had dogged them until then, but that does not explain why historians should ignore the subject. Their failure to examine the evidence that preparations were being made for a military coup in these years tends to suggest that it is more of a live issue than might at first seem and that this remains an area of extreme sensitivity for the British political class.

The suggestion that there was discussion of a military coup in 1974 appears to have sunk without trace but has never been refuted. One of the main sources that I used was a pamphlet, now out of print, called *Britain’s State within the State*, produced by New Park Publications and drawing on articles originally in the *News Line*, the paper of the Workers Revolutionary Party, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Some of the material is also discussed in Andrew Glynn and John Harrison, *The British Economic Disaster* (Pluto Press, 1980). But I have found no thorough historical analysis of the subject. It remains an area waiting to be explored and the release of the cabinet papers from the period offers the prospect that this kind of serious historical analysis is now a real possibility.

My original article stressed the importance of the crisis in this period because it is only when we understand the seriousness of the situation that it is possible to appreciate the role that Bert Ramelson and the left trade union leaders played under conditions of sharp class conflict. The Heath government invoked the Emergency Powers Act no less than five times between 1970 and 1974 as the corporatist consensus that had characterized the relationship between the state, the employers and the unions reached the point of breakdown. When we consider that it was only used 12 times during the whole period between 1920 and 1982 the

intensity of the crisis is evident. Heath faced strikes by dockers, power workers and in 1972 the first national miners’ strike in Britain since 1926. This was a period of intense class confrontation with mass picketing, clashes between police and workers and the arrest of activists such as the Pentonville Five. Richard Thurlow, *The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century* (Blackwell, 1994) offers an account of Heath’s use of the Emergency Powers Act.

Heath was forced to back down and grant the miners a 21 percent pay rise that breached his attempt to hold down wages. In the face of this humiliation he entirely revamped the emergency procedures and introduced a new system to deal with civil unrest. He removed responsibility for emergency powers from the Home Office Emergencies Committee that had been shown to be inadequate by the miners’ strike and established a tightly knit group of civil servants in the Cabinet Office under the control of a cabinet minister—the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU). It was characteristic of Heath’s period of office that unelected civil servants and advisers assumed much greater political predominance than ever before.

The CCU operated from a “doomsday” operations room in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room sometimes known as COBRA. From here the CCU could communicate directly with the regional officers who were responsible for imposing emergency rule and the chief constables. It was this emergency machinery that was put into motion in December 1973 as the Heath government faced another confrontation with the miners over the third stage of its Prices and Incomes Policy. Writing in the *Sunday Times* in 1976 journalists Stephen Fay and Hugo Young publicly revealed for the first time what had gone on in government during this period.

“Nobody knew at the time,” they wrote, “but in December 1973 Edward Heath’s Conservative administration alerted the alternative government that takes over the running of Britain in an extreme national emergency. The anonymous figures which command the military and the Civil Service to keep essential services going—known as the regional commissioners—were put on standby. And the regional seats of government, the secret bunkers from which the country is run after a breakdown of Parliamentary government were prepared for action” (*Sunday Times*, February 22, 1976).

One official told them that they were preparing for a state of chaos “resembling that which would follow a ‘minor nuclear attack’”. They anticipated a total breakdown of the power supply over Christmas and sewage to flood the streets of London. To conserve fuel in readiness for the crisis industry was put on a three-day week from January 1. Ministers saw this as a decisive confrontation in which the future of the country and class relations would be determined. Their mood was apocalyptic.

John Davies then minister for Europe recalled, “We were at home in Cheshire and I said to my wife and children that we should have a nice time, because I deeply believed then that it was the last Christmas of this kind that we would enjoy” (*Ibid.*).

Home Secretary Robert Carr later said, “I thought about it and quite

suddenly I felt a sense of doom, as though a Greek tragedy was about to be acted out" (*Ibid.*).

On February 5 the miners went on strike again in support of their pay claim. From the government's point of view there could not have been a worse time for a miners' strike. The economic outlook was grim following the Yom Kippur war and the hike in oil prices. Two days later Heath called an election. Members of the government and senior civil servants believed that the miners "were not merely engaged in conventional industrial action in support of a bargaining position, but were out to smash the Government and, if necessary, the political system" (*Ibid.*). Heath and his cabinet colleagues had hesitated to call an election because they "had a real fear of its revolutionary possibilities" (*Ibid.*). They had visions of miners overturning the prime minister's car and Tory candidates being pelted with lumps of coal. There were proposals to recreate the Home Guard, the wartime militia.

Heath's biography records that his closest adviser Sir William Armstrong had come to see the conflict with the miners as a struggle against Communist subversion for the survival of the state. By January 1974 he was speaking in increasingly military terms and calling for the miners to be "smashed". Douglas Hurd remembers attending an Anglo-American conference at Ditchley Park with Armstrong on January 26-27 at which "The atmosphere was Chekavian. We sat on sofas in front of great log fires and discussed first principles while the rain lashed the windows. Sir William was full of notions, ordinary and extraordinary." His behaviour was, according to another witness, "really quite mad at the end." Armstrong was "lying on the floor and talking about moving the Red Army from here and the Blue Army from there." A few days later Armstrong was sent to Barbados, officially to recover from a nervous breakdown (Campbell, J., *Edward Heath: a biography*, Jonathan Cape, 1993).

Following his defeat in the general election of February 1974 Heath remained in Downing Street for several days. According to his biographer he was attempting to form a coalition with the Liberals. But Lord Carver, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, later admitted that discussion of military intervention took place. He told the Cambridge Union on March 3, 1980 that he had taken "action to make certain that nobody was so stupid as to go around saying those things." The discussions had taken place he claimed among "not very senior, but fairly senior officers". Lord Carver was probably being more than a little disingenuous. One of his protégés was Major General Frank Kitson who wrote the book *Low Intensity Operations* in which he advocated the use of the army in a civil war situation in Britain. Carver wrote a glowing foreword to the book.

When Heath emerged from retirement to give evidence at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry into the shooting of 14 unarmed protestors on January 30, 1972, he inadvertently threw an interesting light on the kind of discussions that were going on in ruling circles concerning military action during his government (See: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/feb2003/heat-f18.shtml>).

Most of Heath's evidence consisted of him claiming that he did not remember, but when he was asked whether the government had ever sanctioned the killing of civilians by the British army his memory became suddenly crystal clear. He said that it had been the opinion of Quinton Hogg, Lord Hailsham, that under ancient statute it was the right of the British Army to shoot civilians who obstructed it. Heath recalled that Lord Hailsham, who was Lord Chancellor from 1970-1974, had, "exploded in very Quinton-like way and said that we must realise that we could take this action, in fact we were under an obligation to take this action." But Heath claimed, "Nobody took any notice" of the government's most senior law lord "people just said, 'Well, that was Quinton' and we got on with it and certainly as a government, of which I was Prime Minister, we took no notice at all."

Lord Carver's memory of the event was somewhat different. In a

Channel 4 interview in 1994 he said, "It was being suggested that it was perfectly legal for the army to shoot somebody, whether or not they thought that they were being shot at. Because anybody who obstructed or got in the way of the armed forces of the queen was, by that very act, the queen's enemy, and this was being put forward by a legal luminary in the cabinet. And I said to the prime minister that I could not, under any circumstances, order a British, or allow a British soldier to be ordered to do such a thing, because it would not be lawful."

According to Carver, Heath told him, "his legal advisors suggested to him that it was all right, and I said, well, you are not bound by what they say. What I am bound by is my own judgment of whether or not the act of the soldier concerned would be legal, because it is the Courts that decide in the end, not the Attorney General or the Lord Chancellor."

These events are discussed at www.birw.org/bsireports/51_70/report59.html which has a summary of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry evidence, in the *Daily Telegraph* November 25, 2002 and in Tony Geraghty's, *The Irish War* (John Hopkins, 2002).

Lord Carver, who died in December 2001, shows himself to have been a very political general, who was acutely aware of the implications of the increasingly confrontational trajectory of the Heath government. While he presented himself as a voice of moderation in an atmosphere of growing hysteria it is important to recognize that Heath did not have the whole of the ruling class fully behind him. As Heath and his administration disintegrated the prospect of a Labour government that would give the Tories a breathing space became ever more enticing.

It should be said that the trade union leaders did not have any intention of overthrowing parliamentary rule. They showed themselves to be willing to compromise at every point and it was only the fact that the Heath government would not give them enough to bargain with that prevented them from doing so. Heath seems to have been intent on confrontation but proved to be incapable of carrying it through.

Labour came to power on the basis of an ostensibly left-wing programme that allowed it to dissipate the militancy of the working class and give the Tories chance to regroup. Ultimately this was the contribution of Bert Ramelson and the left union leaders he trained. To a great extent they were responsible for drafting Labour's programme, which became known as the Alternative Economic Policy. Ramelson and the other lefts put themselves at the head of a spontaneous militant movement that had arisen out of a systemic economic and political crisis, which had revolutionary implications. They succeeded in avoiding a decisive class confrontation and directed the workers' movement into bringing Labour back to power: A solution that resolved nothing.

Yours sincerely,
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