

Britain: Documentary reveals plan for coup against Wilson Labour government—Part 1

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This is the first part of a two-part article reviewing the BBC 2 documentary “The Plot against Harold Wilson.” Part 2 was published on April 20, 2006.

For the past 30 years rumours that the security services were plotting against the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson and that preparations were being made for a coup have been dismissed as a paranoid fantasy. The general tenor of press comment has been that Wilson was already in the grip of the Alzheimer’s disease that eventually killed him when he made his allegations of a plot against him. But a recent BBC documentary has confirmed that the security services, top military figures, leading businessmen and members of the royal family were conspiring against Labour governments led by Wilson in the 1960s and 1970s.

The programme was broadcast on March 16 to coincide with the anniversary of Wilson’s resignation in 1976. It was based on interviews that BBC journalists Barry Penrose and Roger Courtiour conducted with Wilson and his private secretary Marcia Williams shortly after he resigned. The tapes were made secretly and have never before been broadcast or made public. Despite their considerable historical value, they have remained in Penrose’s attic ever since. Only a small portion of more than 70 hours of recording were dramatised in the documentary.

Various rumours were circulated to explain Wilson’s sudden resignation—as the result of threats by the security services to reveal evidence that he was a Soviet agent, that he had compromised himself by having an affair with Marcia Williams, or more prosaically that early stages of Alzheimer’s disease had convinced him that it was time to go. But the documentary made clear that Wilson wanted to expose those who were seeking to discredit him and wanted the activities of the security services investigated. He invited Penrose and Courtiour to his house with the specific intention of telling them about his suspicions and gave them valuable leads that would enable them to pursue their inquiries. Far from being afraid of exposure, Wilson wanted the case brought out into the open.

Wilson attempted to impress on the two reporters the need for investigative journalism. The Watergate scandal had forced President Richard Nixon to resign only two years before. “What I have to say to you,” Wilson told them, “is of the utmost seriousness. Democracy as we know it is in grave danger. Prominent people are coming under attack. I think you as journalists should investigate the forces which are threatening democratic countries like Britain. The dirty tricks that have been going on against myself and also my government.”

He warned them of “Business groups and other antidemocratic agencies, these people are putting our whole idea of democracy at risk.” This was, as Penrose said in the documentary, “Mind blowing stuff.” Wilson was offering himself as their “Deep Throat.” Unfortunately, it was not an offer that Penrose and Courtiour were able or willing to take up. They allowed themselves to be increasingly diverted into investigating the scandal surrounding Liberal Party leader Jeremy Thorpe. [1] As a result, the extent and seriousness of the antidemocratic measures that powerful forces were

taking in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s continued to be obscured by rumour and have remained so until the present day.

In the intervening years various aspects of the events of those years have emerged, but official spokesmen have generally denied claims that there was a conspiracy and the media have ridiculed the very idea that there was ever a serious plan to carry out a coup. What became apparent from the documentary was that senior civil servants, government ministers and journalists are now prepared to admit that a conspiracy took place.

A key piece of evidence was a brief interview with Lord Hunt, who was cabinet secretary from 1973 to 1979 and conducted an official inquiry into Wilson’s claim that the secret services were bugging 10 Downing Street. Hunt confirmed that the security services thought Wilson was a Soviet agent and were working against him and his government. A top civil servant has never made such a statement in public before. Hunt’s report was not released to the National Archives when other documents from the period were made available and is clearly still regarded as highly sensitive.

Hunt attempted to excuse what the security services had done. All he said was, “I don’t think they [the security services] were people who were in any sense evil. They were people who, on the whole, followed a train of thought that the Russians used to try and entrap everybody. They must have tried with him, [Wilson]. They must have succeeded.”

When Peter Wright, the former assistant director of MI5, attempted to publish his memoirs detailing these events the British government banned the book and the cabinet secretary at the time, Sir Robert Armstrong, went to Australia in an attempt to prevent its publication there in 1986. It seems that cabinet secretaries have become a little less “economical with the truth” on this matter since then.

Hunt’s oblique remark tacitly accepted that the security services had been attempting to undermine the government of the day. The implications of his admission are enormous. If the security services thought Wilson was the agent of a hostile power they would not have been doing their duty if they had not tried to topple his government. Under those circumstances they would have turned to the military, to the press, to politicians and to prominent businessmen to assist them. The lineaments of a wide-ranging plot begin to take shape. Evidence of such a plot has long existed, but Hunt’s statement puts it on a firm historical basis for the first time.

It should be said that no evidence has even been produced to indicate that Wilson was a Soviet agent and the idea that he, or someone close to him, was is not entirely incredible. The UK intelligence services had themselves been penetrated by Soviet agents and since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern European regimes the existence of other agents has been revealed, but no evidence has ever emerged to suggest that Wilson or any of his staff was a spy or agent of influence. It is difficult to believe that some enterprising historian with anticommunist views would not have published such evidence had it existed.

Nonetheless, for a large part of his career and throughout his time as prime minister from 1964 to 1970 and again in 1974-76 Wilson was the object of a smear campaign that emanated from the British security services and the CIA. They fed material to the press that appeared to substantiate the view that he was a Soviet agent who had been put in place after the KGB had supposedly murdered Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell. In the course of the documentary, the *Daily Express* defence correspondent Chapman Pincher unapologetically admitted his part in spreading those rumours.

Some members of the security services may have come to believe their own fabrication, but essentially the smears against Wilson were part of the plot against him, not the cause of it. To understand why Wilson became the victim of such an elaborate campaign and why powerful figures plotted to carry out a coup against him it is necessary to look at the political character of the period.

The background to the Wilson governments

Early in his career Wilson had been associated to some degree with the left of the Labour Party. By the time he became prime minister in 1964 he was on the right of the party, although he was still capable of using demagogic attacks on the Tories to win popular support.

Nevertheless, he headed a government that had come to power under conditions of a political crisis for the Conservative Party, and with the support of a militant working class that was demanding social change. Labour's youth movement, the Young Socialists, was dominated by the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League, forcing the party leadership to carry out witch-hunts and expulsions. On the industrial front, many trade unions were led by members of the Communist Party and there was a powerful shop stewards movement as a result of rank-and-file disaffection with the union tops.

Wilson's government attempted to introduce anti-trade union legislation to prevent strikes and imposed the largest package of spending cuts that had ever been seen. In other words, he did everything he could to resolve the crisis that British capitalism faced and to place the burden of that crisis on ordinary working people. But he still became the focus of political fears in ruling circles that Labour in power was only a stepping stone to revolution.

The CIA was particularly alarmed at developments in Britain. The belief of James Angleton, the head of counter intelligence, that Britain was becoming ungovernable was cited by the documentary's makers. Angleton also believed that Wilson was a Soviet mole on the basis of testimony from the Soviet defector Anatoliy Golitsyn. Interviewed on the documentary, former Tory minister Jonathan Aitken described how Angleton told him of his suspicions about Wilson.

Angleton is often thought to have been clinically paranoid, but his suspicion of Wilson was an expression of the more general political paranoia within ruling circles. During the Cold War it became impossible for men like Angleton to see the movement of the working class as anything other than the work of Soviet agitators and agents.

The worst political fears of these layers of the possibility that the UK government would lose control of events seemed validated by the revolutionary eruptions that developed in Europe and internationally between 1968 and 1975. It was in this period that the smear campaign against Wilson dramatically broadened into preparations for a coup. It was carried out by forces that saw the military coup that took place in Chile against the social democratic government of Salvador Allende in 1973 as the correct response to the threat posed to bourgeois rule by the working class.

The documentary compressed a great deal of material into a short space and failed to distinguish clearly between the different episodes and incidents it described. It presented evidence that related to a number of distinct conspiracies widely separated in time. All these different events were combined in the programme as though they were part of one

generalised coup plot that was hatched over a brief space of time. Generally, the coup plot is portrayed as an aberrant response by a few members of the security services who let their paranoia get the better of them. However, ultimately, good sense and wiser counsels prevailed.

That was very much the impression that Lord Hunt and some of the other interviewees on the programme wished to convey. Lord William Waldegrave, a minister under the Conservative Thatcher and Major administrations, described the "sense of despair. Tension over Vietnam. The collapse of the economy. The sense of all the institutions ... none of them working. Britain forever sliding down every league table you could think of."

Waldegrave indicated the hostility with which ruling layers viewed Wilson's government. "Taxes [were] at unimaginable levels now. The top rate of income tax was 98 percent."

Something had to be done. He freely acknowledged, "There were people talking about coup d'états. Lord Mountbatten was going to become head of some sort of junta that was going to rescue us, and so on. Where was this going to end?"

A coup was avoided, Waldegrave argued, because "in the end the democracy produced the counter-weight which produced the new policies that produced some kind of solution." This blue-blooded aristocrat, who can trace his ancestry back to the Stuarts, knows the value of preserving the forms of parliamentary rule rather than risking the open class confrontation that a military coup would have entailed.

Lord Mountbatten and the formation of private armies

However, the evidence suggests that the plot against Wilson was one small part of a larger picture that involved a protracted period of planning and involved a number of different, but interconnected, sections of the British ruling elite, with the assistance of the South African security service BOSS and elements in the CIA.

This was not a moment of madness, nor was it the work of a few, isolated hot-heads who were responding ineptly to the political tensions of a particular historical conjuncture. The conspiracies of the period were determined by a complex series of historical processes that can be traced back to the first decades of the twentieth century when Britain began to lose its position of hegemony in the world. Fuelled by the Cold War, they reached a peak between 1968 and 1975.

The conspiracies alluded to in the programme can be traced from at least 1965 when, in response to the unilateral declaration of independence by the white-minority regime in what was then Rhodesia, the Earl of Cromartie and a group of Scottish aristocrats with SAS connections planned to set up a government under Lord Mountbatten. The following year, Mountbatten was involved in discussion with another group of conspirators who wanted to replace Wilson. *Daily Mirror* press baron Lord Cecil King planned what he called an emergency government or national government. King had initially approached Denis Healey, then chancellor of the exchequer, as a potential prime minister of a government that was to include Conservative politicians and leading businessmen. The proposed presence of a Labour politician may have given the plans a less sinister appearance, but at the same time preparations were well advanced to use the remote Shetland Islands as an internment camp. [2]

The Earl of Cromartie plot was merged with these later episodes in the BBC documentary in a confusing way. But one useful piece of information did emerge from the programme when, in the course of an interview with Major Alexander Greenwood, it became clear that Mountbatten was also involved with the private armies that various ex-military men were setting up in the mid-1970s.

Mountbatten emerges a significant figure in the plots against the Wilson Labour government. He seems to have been the point at which many of the different networks of conspirators intersected. In part this was due to the record of his own career. He was the last Viceroy of India and responsible for implementing the division of the subcontinent that resulted

in bloody massacres and lasting communal antagonisms. As chief of defence staff from 1959 to 1965 he had contacts with all sections of the military. In addition, he was a member of the royal family—a great-grandson of Queen Victoria. As such he might have been capable of playing a constitutional role himself, or at least had privileged access to the Queen. The extensive and ill-defined role of Crown prerogative in the unwritten British constitution could conceivably allow a military coup to be carried out in perfect legality, since all members of the military take an oath to the monarch, not Parliament, the government, or the constitution. In most cases, Crown prerogative works to the advantage of the government of the day because it allows the prime minister to act arbitrarily—as in declaring war. But should significant sections of the ruling elite be hostile to the government, it could easily allow an elected government to be overthrown with the backing of the monarch.

To be continued

Notes:

1. In 1978 Jeremy Thorpe was accused and acquitted of hiring a hit man to kill his alleged former lover, Norman Scott.
2. The conspiracies against Wilson are traced in Stephen Dorrill and Robin Ramsay, *Smear! Wilson and the Secret State*, (Harper Collins, 1992) and in David Leigh, *The Wilson Plot*, (Heinemann, 1988).



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