Britain: Documentary reveals plan for coup against Wilson Labour government—Part 2

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This is the conclusion of a two-part article reviewing the BBC 2 documentary "The Plot against Harold Wilson." Part 1 was posted on April 19, 2006.

The media have always dismissed the formation of private armies in the 1970s as the work of a few retired military men, disgruntled with the modern world, who were little more than figures of fun. The reference to Lord Mountbatten immediately links them into a wider pattern of conspiracy that stretched over a longer period and gives them a greater significance than they would have as isolated acts.

The fact that the hostility towards Labour leader Harold Wilson was only a specific expression of more general political fears of the danger of social revolution played itself out in the events following the election of the Conservative government of Edward Heath, which replaced the Wilson government in 1970.

In the next years Heath's attempts to crush the power of the organised working class met with fierce resistance that eventually brought his government down in 1974. During this period and that of the incoming Labour government, again led by Wilson, the threat of a military coup was at its most advanced.

Retired senior military officers such as General Sir Walter Walker, NATO Commander of Northern Europe in 1969-72, and Major Alexander Greenwood began to organize private armies. They feared that the cuts which Labour and Conservative governments had imposed on military spending made it impossible for the armed forces to respond to a revolutionary upheaval without support from unofficial support.

Greenwood explained to the documentary team how the situation had seemed to people of his background. "I came back from a cruise down the Rhine to discover to my horror that interest rates were 15 percent for one month certain, I discovered that the unions were striking again, the IRA were dropping bombs around. It was no longer a green and pleasant land, England. I thought the BBC would break down for one thing. I thought the trains would fail to run. London airport would not function anymore. The ports would be stagnant. There would be complete chaos in the land. You know the people who work in the City of London were not liking it and people who work as stockbrokers usually come from the best schools and a lot of them have titles and they weren't liking it at all.

"I know the Queen—she wasn't very happy with Mr. Harold Wilson—but there wasn't much she could do about it at that time. And Lord Mountbatten rang up Sir Walter Walker one evening and said, 'If you want any help from me will you let me know.' Sir Walter Walker had prepared a sort of speech, which the Queen might read out on the BBC that asked the people to stand behind the armed forces as there was a breakdown of law and order and the government could not keep the unions in control."

Official preparations were also being made for that situation. In a brief shot the programme showed a previously unseen government document which confirmed that the Conservative government of Edward Heath had been making plans for emergency rule. It listed measures including the requisitioning of television and radio stations and the post office, the call-up of a volunteer labour force, the requisition of transport and the preparation of food depots with supplies for four weeks and the stockpiling of fuel.

Heath was prime minister for just four years, but in that time he declared five states of emergency. [3] When we consider that emergency powers were only invoked 12 times during the whole period between 1920 and 1982 the intensity of the crisis is evident. Workers' leaders were imprisoned for defying the anti-trade union laws. The government ordered industry on to a three-day week to conserve fuel when power workers went on strike. Unemployment reached record levels. In Northern Ireland paratroopers shot dead unarmed civilians. In January 1974, when the Heath government was in dispute with the miners, the army was deployed at Heathrow.

Marcia Williams recalled this incident in her interview with Courtiour and Penrose. "I still believe that operation they mounted at the airport—the one where everyone was so secretly briefed—which was this is how you deal with terrorists—that wasn't an operation to deal with terrorists." She went on, "It was a rehearsal, nothing more. There was all the terrific mobilisation, the alert was on, there was—all through Whitehall—along the airport road, up and down, landing and getting out."

There were a number of troop mobilisations that year under the most fraught political conditions. It is still not known who authorised them. Wilson knew nothing about them in advance. Nobody had warned him the manoeuvres were about to take place.

Williams described how she and Wilson had speculated that this might be the beginning of a coup. At one point she joked grimly about how they "would discuss it often in the stateroom at the back [of No. 10] that the guns would be trained on us from Horse Guards Parade."

Operation "Clockwork Orange"

There is now evidence that the military was preparing a coup in 1974. In February, Heath called an election believing he could win a mandate to crush the miners. He failed to win a majority, but did not concede defeat. He remained in Downing Street for four days. 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 a very political general who was acutely aware of the danger of a confrontation with the working class. He also revealed before he died in 2001 that Quinton Hogg, Lord Chancellor under Heath, suggested that it was legal for the army to shoot unarmed civilians. In a Channel 4 interview in 1994 Carver 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

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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." [4]

Carver presented himself as a moderate voice in an atmosphere of growing hysteria. He was probably being more than a little disingenuous. One 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. It is more likely that he opposed the turn to violent confrontation because Heath did not have the whole of the ruling class fully behind him. The prospect of a Labour government that would give the Tories a breathing space seemed to some to be more realistic than a head-on collision.

Wilson ultimately came to power leading a minority government, but the political tensions were by no means dissipated. Troops were mobilized again in June, July and September. In October, Wilson secured a majority in the second election that year. In both elections MI5 officers fed material to the press claiming that Wilson was a Soviet agent.

A key part of the disinformation against Wilson was the operation code named "Clockwork Orange," which was run by the Information Policy Unit that worked out of the Army Press Office in Northern Ireland in conjunction with MI5. Colin Wallace was a Ministry of Defence press officer who was involved in "Clockwork Orange." He was later framed and imprisoned for manslaughter when he attempted to expose this operation. Wallace told the documentary team how the Information Policy Unit briefed the press with false information that linked Wilson and other Labour MPs to Soviet intelligence and the IRA.

"The intelligence community," Wallace explained, "believed that the government of the day was unable or unwilling to take the necessary measures to deal with the threat—with the scale of the threat. They believed they were the guardians of the United Kingdom. They felt that the political machinery was incapable of giving them support or introducing the policies that would enable them to deal with that threat."

He went on, "The information that I received was related to political unreliability. It was quite clear that this information was designed not just to discredit him in a general sense, but bearing in mind that we were in a period running up to a general election, that that information would, most likely, have had a fairly major impact on how the public viewed him."

As in so many other respects the British occupation of Northern Ireland became a focus for the most reactionary forces in UK society and measures developed there came to be employed in Britain itself. The security apparatus that was designed to combat Irish republicanism was directed against British workers too.

What emerged from the documentary was that Wilson already knew about Wallace's activities in 1976. He told Penrose and Courtiour to speak to him, but they failed to follow up the lead. Had they done so, Wilson's suspicion that the security services were attempting to smear him would have been confirmed.

As Wallace pointed out, "One of the main by-products of the disinformation campaign of 1973-74 was the dramatic growth of paramilitary organisations in the United Kingdom." The efforts of Walker and Greenwood were complemented by those of former intelligence officer Brian Crozier to liaise with serving officers.

When Crozier was asked by the interviewer if he had spoken with top brass of the military, he replied, "Well, at the risk of making myself unpopular, they were [top brass], but they didn't want—for reasons that you and I can understand—they didn't want any of that to be made public."

Lord Chalfont, who was a Labour defence minister and Foreign Office minister, confirmed this. He said, "If you're talking about people who had a serious idea of a military coup, yes, they would be fairly senior people."

Many questions remain unanswered

The BBC documentary has done something to revive the question of the conspiracies against the Wilson government, but it was an unsatisfactory programme which raised as many questions as it answered—not least of which is the question of what happened after Wilson resigned. It cannot be imagined that the ruling elite ceased to operate in this way once Wilson had left the scene, since he was only part of the problem. The real issue was how they should discipline the working class in a period that had a pre-revolutionary character.

Wilson's resignation shifted leadership of the Labour Party to James Callaghan, a man with impeccable credentials as far as the intelligence services were concerned. It was under Callaghan that Labour was to ditch its commitment to Keynesian-style welfare measures as it lurched ever further to the right. It was eventually brought down by the working class following the 1978-79 "Winter of Discontent."

During its period out of office, forces within the Conservative Party grouped around Margaret Thatcher developed an entirely new strategy based on a monetarist economic agenda and a determination to rectify Heath's failure to make a decisive reckoning with the working class.

The BBC documentary did not explore to what extent the forces that were behind Thatcher were the same ones that had been involved in the plans to carry out a coup. Crozier, who admits to discussing a coup with senior officers, was among her advisers. One revealing comment about the connection between Thatcher and the right-wing forces that had planned to oust Wilson came from Jonathan Aitken, who described how in the mid-1970s CIA head James Angleton had enlisted him to get a private message to Thatcher about Soviet penetration in the UK.

However, the programme did not go on to examine the military and security preparations that were being made behind the scenes during Thatcher's confrontation with the miners in 1984. In many respects Thatcher's government represented the fulfilment of the aims of the earlier conspiracies. Indeed, her attitude to what she described as the "enemy within" was identical to that of the coup plotters of the 1970s.

A military coup proved to be unnecessary because the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour leaders were able to direct the militancy of the working class into a purely syndicalist struggle that did not raise the question of political power. Elements of the ruling elite may have feared that they were facing a revolution, but workers themselves were left in ignorance of the depth of the crisis.

The only socialist organisation that attempted to warn workers about the secret preparations for military rule and the danger they faced was the Workers Revolutionary Party, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. It produced a pamphlet entitled "Britain's State within the State" based on articles originally in its newspaper, the *News Line*. None of the Labour politicians who had themselves been the subject of smears and political attacks saw fit to expose the conspiracy against the working class. Radical political parties ridiculed the WRP's warnings.

The full extent of the right-wing conspiracy did not become apparent at the time and is only being revealed decades later. It is now evident that the state within the state was working against an elected government which had the support of large sections of the working class. The political implications are immense and are not confined to the past. Parliamentary democracy is often thought of as the inevitable and unassailable form of government in the UK. Westminster is regarded as the "Mother of Parliaments" and Britain reckoned to be a mature democracy. Its political class is considered well used to dealing with crises that elsewhere would result in some form of military or authoritarian rule. That kind of thing is not supposed to happen in Britain.

In fact, parliamentary democracy is far less stable than the official history of post-war Britain would have us believe. The loss of empire, the decline of manufacturing industry, the devaluation of the pound, and the revolutionary upsurge of the working class in the late 1960s and early

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1970s were not managed as smoothly as the ruling elite would like to pretend. Britain came close to joining the military dictatorships of the period. The evidence contained in the documentary serves as a warning against the complacent assumption that parliamentary democracy was written into the DNA of the British ruling class with Magna Carta.

Today, British parliamentary democracy is no more stable than it was 30 years ago. In fact, it has become far less viable as social inequality has increased and the mass of the population has become effectively disenfranchised from the political process. Thirty years ago retired army officers and aristocrats could plot to overthrow an elected government; today a tiny elite, who have become stupendously rich from globally mobile capital, are no less arrogant in their political presumptions and no less lacking in democratic sensibilities.

Concluded

Notes:

3. Richard Thurlow, *The Secret State: British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century*, (Blackwell, 1994).

4. British Irish Rights Watch www.birw.org/bsireports/51_70/report59.html and Tony Geraghty, *The Irish War*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

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