

Britain's establishment mourns Chilean dictator Pinochet

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The Conservative Party, big business, and sections of the British press mourned the death of Chile's former dictator General Augusto Pinochet last week.

Former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Pinochet's most vocal supporter, declared herself "greatly saddened" by his death. She had led the campaign for Pinochet's release after he was arrested in London in October 1998 following an extradition request from Spain on 35 charges of torture and conspiracy to torture, praising him as "a great friend of Britain" and the man responsible for "bringing democracy to Chile."

Thatcher's former chancellor, Lord Lamont, who once described Pinochet as a "good and brave and honourable soldier," added that the dictator prevented Chile becoming "communist" and altered the whole history of the Cold War.

Pinochet came to power in 1973 in a military coup that had been prepared through years of subversion supported by the US. He overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Salvador Allende's Socialist Party and began a reign of terror that saw thousands of his left-wing opponents, intellectuals, workers and peasants executed and tens of thousands imprisoned and tortured. Later, Pinochet's regime collaborated with other Latin American dictatorships—such as Brazil and Argentina—in Operation Condor to hunt down refugees, kidnap and murder them.

At the time of his death, Pinochet was facing some 300 legal cases related to the crimes carried out by his regime and stood accused of embezzling tens of millions of dollars in state funds and funnelling them into overseas secret bank accounts.

Under Pinochet's dictatorship, Chile was turned into a right-wing experiment for the Monetarist "Chicago" economic school headed by recently deceased Nobel Laureate economist Milton Friedman. High unemployment, low wages, high interest rates and a workforce compelled to labour at the point of a gun generated super profits for both domestic and foreign capital and helped produce a country that ranks today as one of the most socially unequal in the world. According to government statistics, more than 20 percent of Chile's population lives in poverty (although the real poverty rate is estimated to be closer to 40 percent).

That the 91-year-old indicted mass murderer died peacefully in his bed rather than ending his days in a jail cell can be laid at the door of former Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw. When the extradition warrant first landed on Straw's desk in 1998, Pinochet was an honoured guest at the head of a Chilean military mission in

Britain about to sign an £1 billion military contract.

Labour never wanted the dictator's detention. But the extradition request represented the first real test for Prime Minister Tony Blair's much-vaunted "ethical foreign policy." To have released him while calling for the overthrow of former Yugoslav dictator Slobodan Milosevic and Iraq's Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity would have compromised Blair's propaganda.

After a lengthy legal process, the House of Lords decided in March 1999 that Pinochet was not entitled to immunity from charges of torture. But in January 2000, Straw signalled his intention to halt the extradition proceedings on the grounds of Pinochet's ill health. In a statement, Straw claimed that Pinochet's health was such that he could not face "a fair trial in any country," enabling the former dictator to return to Chile in March of that year.

The government was muted on Pinochet's passing, with Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett stating only, "We note the passing of General Pinochet and want to pay tribute to the remarkable progress that Chile has made over the last 15 years as an open, stable and prosperous democracy."

Other commentators were more explicit in attributing to Pinochet Chile's supposed economic successes, even whilst acknowledging that it was built on the blood and bones of his victims. An obituary in the *Financial Times* said that there were "two sides" to Pinochet's legacy: "on the one hand he presided over what was undoubtedly a murderous regime; on the other he was the man who paved the way for Chile's economic miracle."

It continued, "Pinochet was instrumental in modernising the Chilean state and laying the foundations for sustained economic growth."

The *Times* obituary stated, "In nearly two centuries of independent history, Chile never produced a man with a more acute political nose.... It was only a rare hubristic error he committed in coming to London in late 1998 which brought about his arrest, confinement and consequent humiliation. This robbed him of the admiration for his skills that many practitioners of politics had, joyfully or grudgingly, for long harboured."

The implications of the British establishment's support for Pinochet warrants sober consideration. It indicates that when the British ruling elite feels threatened to the same degree as their counterparts in Chile, it will act in a similar manner.

As the recent BBC 2 documentary "The Plot against Harold Wilson" confirms, the security services, top military figures,

leading businessmen and members of the royal family were conspiring against Labour governments led by Harold Wilson in the 1960s and 1970s—the same period in which the coup in Chile was being hatched.

Although Wilson's government did everything it could to resolve the crisis that British capitalism faced by attempting to place the burden of it on ordinary working people, it still became the focus of political fears in ruling circles that Labour in power was only a prelude to revolution—fears reinforced by the series of explosive class struggles that erupted throughout the world in 1968-1975.

Beginning with France, a strike wave swept through Europe including Britain, the military/fascist dictatorships in Portugal and Greece collapsed, and the United States became the scene of workers' struggles, civil unrest and mass protest against the Vietnam War.

In the BBC2 documentary, Lord William Waldegrave, later one of Thatcher's ministers, 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 acknowledged, "There were people talking about coup d'états. Lord Mountbatten [former Viceroy of India and member of the royal family] 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?"

The Conservative government of Edward Heath, which replaced the Wilson government in 1970, faced the same economic and political unrest. Within two years, an unprecedented four states of emergency were declared. At the time of the Chilean coup, Heath declared another state of emergency—largely in response to a national miners' strike and the threat of this spreading to other sections of workers. The Emergency Powers Act was amended to allow the cabinet to rule through the unelected Privy Council and House of Lords. There was serious discussion within the army about the possibility of imposing military rule, and retired military officers such as General Sir Walter Walker, a former NATO Commander of Northern Europe, and Major Alexander Greenwood began to organise private armies.

It was the Heath administration that first recognised Chile's military junta and organised a meeting of representatives of the junta with the Queen.

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?" He lost to the Labour Party.

Thatcher herself came to prominence in the Tory Party as the staunchest critic of Heath's failure to deal decisively with the working class. She hailed Pinochet's "Chicago school" shock therapy 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 "Winter of Discontent." The incoming Thatcher Tory government, together with the Reagan administration in the United States, broke decisively with the social reformist policies of the post-war

period. 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.

Thatcher described the miners, during their yearlong strike of 1984-1985, as the "enemy within" and mobilised the full weight of the police and judiciary to smash it. The entire apparatus of Britain's security forces was reorganised to deal with the internal threat.

But the historical parallel between Pinochet and Thatcher is not the only factor motivating his defenders. This would not account for the way Beckett merely "noted" the dictator's death. After all, the Labour Party in 1973 condemned Pinochet's coup against Allende, a fellow member of the Socialist International, and Blair was elected in 1997 claiming to represent a new "humanitarian" approach to British politics.

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 super-rich from globally mobile capital, are just as arrogant in their political presumptions and no less lacking in democratic sensibilities.

Just listen to Neil Collins, the business editor of London's *Evening Standard* newspaper. In an article, December 14, alluding to Pinochet by means of a cynical pun and entitled, "Perhaps our economy needs a more *general* solution now," Collins complains that there is no political will to sanction "the short-term pain of the revolution [massive privatisation] needed in health and education." He says that Blair had a "golden chance" after the 1997 election but "has comprehensively blown it." Collins continues, "Spending has ballooned, productivity has collapsed while the unions (health) and the bureaucrats (education) remain entrenched for all the world as if Thatcher had never been in power."

He concludes by saying, "Perhaps we need our very own free-market General. Step forward, Mike Jackson."

Retired General Sir Michael Jackson, until recently head of the Army, publicly criticised the Blair government a few days ago for its lack of will in not properly funding the war effort in Iraq and Afghanistan.



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