

After the Brighton bombing: Who will end Britain's political paralysis?

by Laurent Murawiec

On Friday, Oct. 12 at 02:54:00 hours, 20 pounds of explosive shattered the Grand Hotel in Brighton, England, where one half of the British cabinet was resting during the Conservative Party's annual conference. Mrs. Thatcher narrowly escaped death, her unofficial second, Trade and Industry Minister Norman Tebbit, was wounded, and four died in the rubble. The IRA claimed responsibility.

Since then, questions have accumulated rather than answers: Is the IRA really in command of the sophisticated technology—a long-range timing device—that was used? why did the bulky explosive go unnoticed? If the IRA dispatched some of its most skilled explosive and demolition experts to Brighton several weeks before the bomb went off, why did no “alarm bells” ring at the police and intelligence agencies in charge of keeping tabs on the murderous, Soviet-backed terrorist organization?

Quiet discussions in London have included the hypothesis that the IRA received on-the-ground back-up and logistical support from Soviet military intelligence (GRU) *spetsnaz* units. That one half of the British cabinet could have died, including the Prime Minister, is probably the best indication of the *strategic stakes* in the present international situation.

One further indication was given, hours after the blast, by Mrs. Thatcher herself. Visibly shaken, she told the Conservative Party congress, “This party is a pro-American party” which would resist any attempt from any quarter to crush its commitments to the Atlantic alliance, including the stationing of American missiles.

Whether Britain will be able to face the challenge implied by the Brighton bomb is another matter. In fact, a degree of confusion is apparent in the day-to-day situation, with the government showing an increasing loss of grip in the face of domestic and international events.

The strike launched by the National Union of Miners (NUM) and its “communist” leader Arthur Scargill 34 weeks ago is still under way. As Britain veers into winter, the shadow of the 1974 miners' strike, which toppled the Conservative government of Edward Heath and plunged Britain into the dark, is lengthening. A disastrous extension of the strike to the mine-pit safety staff was narrowly averted a few days ago, to the visible relief of the government. “Flying pickets” of the NUM have repeatedly harassed, assailed, and

even ambushed police, imposing by dint of physical terror a situation where non-strikers have been stopped from entering the pits, while political and financial support has been flowing in from the Soviet “trade unions.”

Mass demonstrations, mass violence have been the hallmarks of the conflict. The Tories' own pet-legislation, prohibiting “secondary picketing” and regulating strikes, has been openly violated by the NUM and Scargill. The law has not been enforced, and National Coal Board head Ian MacGregor has had to retire from the negotiations and appoint a “mediator.” The purported object of Scargill's strike, to prevent the closing of coal mines, while his friends on the left are doing their best to stop nuclear energy development in Britain, has turned into outright political destabilization.

The government's response has been to stay on the sidelines, or maintain the fiction that the National Coal Board was handling the whole matter. Worse, Treasury Secretary Nigel Lawson has undertaken a pathetic public relations campaign on the theme, “We care,” in an attempt to alter Mrs. Thatcher's “image” as a grossly indifferent, reckless monetarist. Evoking the imagery of Dickens, Lawson and the Tory chorus now try to “look nice” and “show compassion” to the country's 3.2 million unemployed—a figure that remains obstinately high amid the government's reported “recovery,” a report which the NUM strike is shooting down in flames.

In turn, the real support enjoyed by NUM from the Trade Union Congress and various Labour Party quarters stems from the total inability of the Thatcher government to offer a mobilizing enterprise to the British population badly hit by stagnation, deindustrialization, and lack of perspectives. “Class struggle” can be made by the likes of Scargill to have some specious sort of appeal under these circumstances.

The plummeting of world oil-market prices has compounded the difficulties. The British National Oil Corporation's recent decision to lower the price to \$28.65 per barrel while trying to maintain the volume of output struck the City like a thunderstorm: the *Financial Times* 30-share index underwent its sharpest one-day drop ever—3.3% or 6.8 billion pounds wiped off total capitalization—and “petro-currency” sterling took a nosedive to an historic low below \$1.20, provoking some capital flight and forcing the Bank of England to intervene in support of the pound. Interest rates

soared on the money markets. Suddenly, the entire economic “strategy” of the Thatcher government stood in jeopardy. Sterling has now lost about 10% of its value as of January 1984. Coming on the heels of the collapse and emergency rescue of Johnson Matthey (JMB), one of the City’s oldest and most respected financial institutions, with many other suspected rotten financial apples waiting for their turn to drop on their shareholders, the loss of confidence is very tangible.

Where is the ‘elite’?

Back in 1977, two years before her first electoral triumph, Margaret Thatcher warned that British failure to regain historical initiative would make “Britain as shabby and stagnant, as drab and decayed as an Eastern European satellite.” Are there signs that Britain is willing to mobilize itself to overcome the rot?

The British authorities *know* who is responsible for the Brighton outrage. As mentioned above, the track of Soviet involvement has been actively pursued—but not allowed circulation in any form accessible to the public or even broad policy-making circles. The government has backed down from confronting the fact and its implications. Nor has it manifest, by foreign policy initiatives, any intent to stray from the course imposed by the Foreign Office, phrased earlier this year by Margaret Thatcher as aiming at “a new dialogue” with the Soviet Union—when British troops were being pulled out of Lebanon, when Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe was galavanting in Moscow, when Britain was party to European Community initiatives to interfere in the Central American conflict. The strenuous complacency displayed by the Foreign Office, the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House), and other policy centers of the British oligarchy concerning the mounting danger of an eastward drift of Germany, suggest strongly that Lord Carrington’s policy of appeasement still holds sway.

No word was to be heard from Defense Secretary Michael Heseltine after the recent NATO Nuclear Planning Group meeting in Stresa, Italy, where an historic offer was made to Europe by U.S. Defense Secretary Weinberger for full cooperation in R&D and deployment of beam weapon defense. Tentatively, this might be termed an improvement in comparison with Heseltine’s vociferous rejection of and attack on the Strategic Defense Initiative at last Spring’s Izmir meeting of the NPG. But while secrecy-shrouded Whitehall committees are “reviewing” the implications of the SDI, and while British weapon laboratories are intensively working at getting a handle on the technologies, the vast majority of informed policy-making opinion remains vehemently opposed to the SDI. A July 10 feature in the *Daily Telegraph*, an Aug. 18 editorial in the *Times*, and a few letters to newspaper editors, along with a small, end-july conference on ballistic missile defense, have remained the only isolated signs of interest in the issue that is now shaping all important international affairs.

Where is the British elite? Sir Basil Liddel Hart, in his *The History of World War I*, hammered away at the miserable quality of military leadership during that war (by no means limited to Britain) and the fact that the obsessive rejection of any conception of *flanking* had led to the senseless slaughter of several generations, including much of the British elite’s youth, as exemplified in the atrocious butchery of Passchendaele. The obsessive clinging by a majority of the British oligarchy today to a supposed “deal” with Moscow, whose self-conception they know to be the “Third Rome,” is performing the same disastrous disservice to the nation. The unwillingness of the British elites to at least behave like Churchills, their insistence on mimicking Chamberlain, leads to strategic disaster as surely as the British Labour Party’s hysterical advocacy of unilateral nuclear disarmament—a policy plank shared by the British Liberal Party, a conveyor belt for major currents of the oligarchy who pump ideas into the body politic through it.

The present political leadership is afflicted, at its middle-class level, by the same disease: The managers, technocrats, and politicians that dominate the Conservative Party have no vision, no sense of broader horizons, no experience of great affairs. Nowhere is this mediocre stubbornness better exemplified than in the obdurate adherence to the fiction of an “independent British nuclear deterrent.” To modernize the Polaris-missile submarine fleet, the Tory government decided several years ago to purchase from the United States the Trident II missile, whose cost has soared in the meantime to a low-range estimate of 9 billion pounds, with high estimates placing it at 14 billion. Only a decimation of conventional capabilities, naval, airborne, and land-based, could make the bill payable off the defense budget—while the advent of laser and beam defense would make the missile obsolete and purposeless!

But rather than resolutely turning to the future and mobilizing the country to face the challenge of the SDI and its technological spinoffs, it is the impassioned pleas for retention of MAD and thermonuclear terror that dominate the debate. While Britain still retains an obvious capability to mobilize itself—albeit for the wrong objectives, as in the case of the Falklands—this patriotic potential is not being efficiently tapped. Rather, sniper-bullets are straying along the political landscape, as when the Archbishop of Canterbury snidely compared Mrs. Thatcher to the ill-fated William Blich, Captain of the *Bounty*, in a speech calling for a revival of the “Nelson touch” in leadership. Or Byzantine in-fighting erupts, for instance, with the serializing in the *Sunday Times* of the latest book of investigative journalist Chapman Pincher, who charges that the late head of the MI-5 counterintelligence agency, Sir Roger Hollis, had been a Soviet mole since the 1930s.

The author may very well have a point. The extraordinary lack of will and leadership displayed by the British “elite” remains, however, the problem.