

A Short History of British Military Coups and Conspiracies

By [Adeyinka Makinde](#)

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[Adeyinka Makinde, Writer](#) 22 September 2015

Preamble

Recent comments in a recent edition of the Sunday Times attributed to a serving British army general contained the not so veiled threat of mounting a military rebellion in the event of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government getting close to exercising the levers of power. The anonymous general painted a scenario which would involve “mass resignations” by high level officers in the British armed forces in what he claimed would “effectively be a mutiny.”

Although a source for the Ministry of Defence sought to dampen the remarks by issuing a condemnation of the comments, they have caused much alarm.

The comments come in the midst of a concerted media campaign aimed at discrediting the leader and proposed policies of the Labour opposition party. While there is some room for treating words expressed anonymously with some caution, events in the recent political history of Britain suggest that they should not be readily dismissed.

There is much evidence that elements within the British military and the security services have acted against serving governments which the Establishment have viewed as threatening the interests of the United Kingdom as they perceive it. Targeted were the Labour administrations headed by Harold Wilson in the 1960s and 1970s. Threats of coups and efforts geared towards destabilising Wilson’s government have been credibly corroborated over the years.

It was also reported that Tony Benn, the late Labour figure whose Left wing positions inspired great revulsion on the British political Right was threatened with assassination in the event of his ever assuming the leadership of an elected Labour government. The source of that threat is said to have emanated from the late Airey Neave, an Establishment figure in the Conservative Party who was well-connected to the British military and the security services.

Those who are aware of the manner in which state intelligence organisations can feed information to the public for the purpose of creating alarm as well as carving out what the powers that be perceive to be a threat to the well-being of society, may conclude that recent media activity seeking to discredit Labour’s lurch to the Left culminating with the threat of a military rebellion, bear the unmistakable hallmark of the implementation of a ‘strategy of tension.’

This is an excerpt from a wide-ranging essay that I wrote in early 2013 entitled ‘Democracy,

Terrorism and the Secret State' covering plots which were engineered by the military and security services.

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In Britain the 'secret state' was active during this era of the communist threat, reaching the stage where at two distinctive points in history, the possibility of a military takeover of the country became mooted and later heightened to the extent that plans for action were substantively laid out.

Both coups were to have been directed against the socialist administrations led by Harold Wilson, the first plot occurring in the late 1960s and the second, a culmination of intrigues perpetrated by Right-wing operatives in British military intelligence and the domestic security service, MI5.

The latter part of the 1960s witnessed certain events and trends which caused certain members of the British elite to be alarmed at the direction in which the former imperial power was heading.

One key event was the devaluation of the pound in 1967, a symptom of the continuing perceived 'degradation' of a waning nation-empire still traumatised by the humiliation of the Suez debacle of 1956.

Another was the deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland, where the burgeoning civil rights movement of the Roman Catholic community was being transformed into a militarised struggle led by a revived Irish Republican Army (IRA).

There was also the perception of Wilson and the Labour Party being tolerant of the 'Ban the Bomb' movement and a drift towards a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Furthermore, fears about the increasing power of trade unions and controversies related to the uneasiness felt about non-white immigration may have added to the sense of a nation in perpetual crisis.

In 1968, meetings were held at the instigation of the newspaper baron and M15 agent, Cecil King who took the lead in an enterprise which proposed that the army would depose the elected government and install a military alternative with Lord Louis Mountbatten at the helm.

Wilson's electoral victory in 1964 signified a lurch to the Left, a direction in which elements in the United States government looked upon balefully. The CIA's 'spy-hunter', James Jesus Angleton, believed that Wilson was a Soviet-plant. The thesis went along the lines that Wilson had been compromised years before by Soviet agents when as chairman of the Board of Trade, he made several trips behind the 'Iron Curtain'.

What is more is that the sudden death in January 1963 of Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell, came to be believed by Angleton and some in the British intelligence community to have been engineered by the KGB in order to pave the way for Wilson to succeed him as the leader of the party.

Gaitskell was on the Right of the Labour Party, and he had proposed the then radical measure of ditching Clause Four of the party's constitution on common ownership. Wilson, on the other hand, was identified with the Left-wing of the party.

What followed was a dirty-tricks campaign mounted by British intelligence operatives. Code-named 'Operation Clockwork Orange', its remit was to smear a number of British politicians including not only Wilson, but significantly, Wilson's political rival from the Conservative Party, Edward Heath.

Heath's brand of 'One Nation' Toryism and perceived weakness in his handling of the increasingly belligerent trade unions did not meet with the approval of members of the Establishment who wanted a more Right-wing leader and agenda from the Conservatives.

This sort of thing was not without precedent in British political history. The infamous 'Zinoviev Letter', a 1924 forgery which came by way of an asset of MI6, was purportedly a communication from Grigori Zinoviev, the president of the Comintern, enjoining British communists to stimulate "agitation-propaganda" in the armed forces.

Thus, four days before the British General Election, the *Daily Mail* had as its banner headline the following: "Civil War Plot by Socialists' Masters: Moscow Orders To Our Reds; Great Plot Disclosed."

The Labour Party lost the election by a landslide.

The early part of the 1970s, a period which on the European continent was marked by an intensification of the ideological polarisation of the political Left and Right with malcontents on the Left favouring the use of urban violence in favour of the 'ineffectual' results of mass street demonstrations, saw the birth in Britain of an organisation calling itself the Angry Brigade.

The Angry Brigade, an anarchist group, temporarily provided Britain with a taste of continental-style guerrilla warfare which involved targeting figures of the state such as government ministers and judges as well as the bombing of foreign embassies and establishments of those states which its members considered as 'imperialist' or 'fascist'.

The "law and order issue" became the short-handed appellation of choice in referring to the battles between the radicalised forces of the Left and the apparatus of state authority which permeated the political and cultural discourse.

The question of how these deep-rooted tensions were going to be resolved were framed in terms ranging from a revolution which would profoundly alter the status quo to that involving the state preserving its authority through the implementing of extreme measures.

The sentiments representing one version of a possible resolution to society's discordant drift, namely one providing the template of the 'strategy of tension', even made its way into the public eye through the realm of popular entertainment.

In 1971, the ITV network aired an episode of the TV series, *'The Persuaders!'* entitled 'The Time and The Place' wherein the playboy heroes stumble upon a plot to carry out a coup d'état by members of the British establishment which is being co-ordinated by a member of the aristocracy.

The idea is to have the prime minister assassinated during a live TV debate on a contentious law and order bill, which according to its opponents and proponents represents either a "death to democracy" or a "return to sanity".

The assassin, who appears to be a subdued and detached figure nestled in the audience, is to be activated Manchurian Candidate-style with a gun hidden in the compartment of what on the outside is a book. The murder would then present itself as the justification for a takeover of the government and the imposition of martial law.

As one of the foot soldiers of the eventually failed conspiracy explains, “the public will be outraged, and when Croxley (the Lord leading the coup) makes an impassioned plea for strong action, the people of this country will not only approve of a new government, they’ll demand it.”

The aforementioned fiction from early evening light entertainment nonetheless did reference one consistent aspect of the prevalent understanding among the mass of Britons about the nature of their governance: namely its alluding to the existence of the Establishment; a group of powerful people who although unelected and unseen, consistently influence the direction of the country.

It also followed that any plan to effect any radical change in society such as by a military coup would find its conception and execution from persons belonging to such Establishment.

Traditionally, the British Establishment referred to those of high-born status and usually with an old school tie/Oxbridge background, who along with others in high government positions of the judiciary, the armed forces, civil service, courtiers within the royal family, the police and security services, have a tendency to form coteries within the exclusive enclaves of gentleman’s clubs.

The fictional Lord Croxley meets with establishment figures in the grandiose settings of a club to finalise the details of the coup which bears traces of reality to the claimed influence of the real life Clermont Club at which some argue that a plot to overthrow the Labour government in the 1970s was hatched.

It is useful to note that the Establishment does not necessarily merge with the concept of the ‘Deep State’, i.e. the ‘state within a state’ of which the Turkish *derin devlet* is considered the standard.

This other aspect of the secret state; that of a parallel government manipulating events in the background without the knowledge of the incumbent, visible elected power, has, unlike in the case of Turkey and Italy, never been specifically identified in the British context, although her majesty the Queen is once believed to have alluded to the “powers at work in this country about which we have no knowledge.”

However, what is not disputed is the existence of an influential establishment alongside at least a sizeable element of the secret service which plotted against the Labour government in the 1970s with the aim of destabilising it. Wilson himself had made intimations to the reporters Barrie Penrose and Roger Courtiour of “dark forces threatening Britain.”

There are historian-experts in the field such as the author Rupert Allason who assert that the intelligence services in the United Kingdom, unlike some of their European counterparts such as in Italy, is not composed overwhelmingly of individuals of a Right-wing bent. Those with Leftist tendencies, he has argued, were always represented.

While the personnel of the British secret service have tended to come from the elite of society, they did, after all, produce the notorious Cambridge set consisting of the likes of

Burgess, McClean, Philby and Blunt, who indoctrinated earlier in their student days by the communist ideology, would later turn traitors against their country.

By the mid-1970s during Wilson's second tenure as prime minister, the nation had already been through a three-day working week during Heath's confrontation with the powerful miners union. Militant unions and a Left-wing agenda which could compromise Britain's commitment to the free market economic system as well as to NATO was a cause of great concern.

Thus it was that in this noxious atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia of the existence of pro-Soviet subversive elements within the political classes, the intelligence services and the powerful labour unions that a group of MI5 agents led by Peter Wright, the author of *Spycatcher*, "bugged and burgled" their way across London, he claimed, "at the behest of the state."

Harold Wilson was convinced that he was being watched and that insidious information about him was being disseminated from sources within the security services; part of the executive branch of the government which he was supposed to control.

Apart from the troublesome spooks who were lurking in the shadows, he was also of the mindset that waiting in the wings were high-ranking figures of the military, both serving and retired, who were ready for the signal to overthrow his government.

Not since 1648, when Colonel Thomas Pride strode into the august precincts of the English legislature one December day to bring an end to the 'Long Parliament', had anything of the semblance of a military coup d'etat taken place in the 'mother-nation' of democracy.

It seemed then to be a most unlikely development.

But Wilson, who privately complained of being undermined by the security services, also took note of a "ring of steel" mounted by the army around London's Heathrow Airport, first in January and again in June of 1974. The first occurred on the eve of the February general election in which Labour was returned to power after a narrowly contested result.

Although explained as security measures in response to unspecified terrorist threats, Wilson considered these manoeuvres to be clear warnings pointed in his direction.

Warnings came from elsewhere. General Sir Walter Walker, a retired former high echelon figure within the command structure of NATO, expressed dissatisfaction over the state of the country and wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* calling for "dynamic, invigorating, uplifting leadership...above party politics" which would "save" the country from "the Communist Trojan horse in our midst." He was involved with Unison (later renamed Civil Assistance) an anti-Communist organisation which pledged to supply volunteers in the event of a national strike.

Another military figure, Colonel David Stirling, the founder of the elite SAS regiment, created 'Great Britain 75'. Composed of ex-military men, its task would be to take over the running of government in the event of civil unrest leading to a breakdown of government functioning.

These two, however, were red herrings according to Peter Cottrell, author of *Gladio: NATO's Dagger at the Heart of Europe*, who claims that these public utterances were a distraction

from “what was really going on.”

But the Rubicon was not crossed. There would be no tanks rolling down Whitehall along with the probable modus operandi of solemn martial music preceding the presumed clipped upper class tones of a lord or general proclaiming a state of national emergency and the establishment of a junta.

In the end, however, the British Right won. Wilson abruptly resigned in March 1976, thoroughly exhausted by the campaigns directed at him, while Edward Heath lost the Conservative Party leadership to Margaret Thatcher, the choice of the Right.

Adeyinka Makinde is a law lecturer with an interest in security and intelligence matters.

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