Editorial: After the Bomb . . .

"Business As Usual" was a particularly apposite phrase for Margaret Thatcher to use after she and her ministers had survived the bombing of their hotel at Brighton, for that was the slogan commonly displayed outside shops after an air raid during the last war. The message then was that, apart from a few gaps in the buildings and in human lives, capitalism would carry on. Nobody could expect to go into the shops and take possession of anything unless they could pay for it. Business—the buying and selling of wealth—would be as usual.

It would have been no different if the bombers had succeeded in wiping out all the Tory ministers in the hotel. A couple of days after the event Michael Havers, the Attorney General, outlined what would then have happened. Havers' job in the government is to ensure that the property laws of capitalism are operating as smoothly as possible and that the privileges of the ruling class are as secure as they can be made. To anyone who is concerned that things should continue in that way, he had a reassuring message.

To begin with the leadership of the government would have quickly been assumed by the deputy prime minister, whose first job would have been to rustle up another government. Quite a few hopeful politicians would have found themselves catapulted abruptly onto the Front Bench. Some of the people discarded by Thatcher — Gilmour? Prior? Pym? — may have been rapidly restored to favour. All of them would have described their unexpected elevation as a selfless response to a call to duty in the nation's hour of need, without thought for the peril to themselves . . .

The Tories would then have got down to electing a replacement for Thatcher. As he is a peer, Whitelaw would probably have stood aside from this contest, enabling front runners like Howe and Heseltine to battle it out. This would not have been an edifying spectacle; the battles within the Conservative Party are not fought as publicly as those within the Labour Party but they are no more gentle affairs for that. With the dust barely settled over the ruin of the Grand, the infighting would have begun. Politics, as well as business, as usual.

The chosen leader would have paid a visit to the queen, for the fictional ritual of her asking the leader to form a government for her approval. There would be a kissing of hands, a waving of swords, a making of speeches and the new government would have been in their seats. They would not have been looking to make the revolution. There would still be a privileged, owning minority living off the employment of the deprived, non-owning majority. Exploitation would have remained the stuff of life for tens of millions of people in this country — exploitation, poverty, slums, illness, stress, access to only inferior goods. All wealth would be produced in the cause of profit; everything would have its price, even things which are essential to human life and the legal and penal machinery would still be there to make sure that everyone conformed to the rights, restrictions and laws of property society. It would have been — as it had been, as it still is — Business As Usual.

But of course there would have been some changes, apart from the gap in the Brighton seafront. Wiping out most of the cabinet in a guerrilla bomb is unlikely to have blown a hole in the government's electoral standing. Certainly, it would have united the Conservative Party at large, which has recently been showing some signs of dissent over the plight of British capitalism, solidly behind the new leaders. There is no evidence that Tory popularity has suffered through unemployment, through their regular postponements, since 1979, of the great day of prosperity, through the murder of Argentinian and British workers in the Falklands, through the pressures of the coal strike. Indeed, it is likely that what has been called the Falklands factor — an upsurge of mindless patriotism —and the Scargill factor — a distortion of reality to the enduring benefit of the ruling class — have proved to be vote-winners for the Tories. To have added a Brighton factor could have won them even more votes, made them even more secure in power. Perhaps Thatcher will succeed in her declared aim of a third term of power, of becoming the grandmother of British
And if the Tories are more secure in power, what then? One reaction to guerrilla attacks in the past has been a backlash assault on civil liberties — partly through panic, partly through an assuagement of working-class prejudice and hysteria. The Birmingham bombs were an example of this, resulting in the Prevention of Terrorism Act, whose draconian powers were pushed through by a Labour government. The arguments used to support that Act — that what liberties the workers have should be restricted in the cause of resisting the guerrillas — have been used to justify many a ruthless dictatorship.

The perils of supporting a guerrilla movement can easily be obscured by the movement's reputation for romantic, clandestine brigandry. But organisations which aim to make their way through violence cannot be democratic. They must be built on a paramilitary structure which entails command, discipline and the brutalising which ensures that orders are obeyed without question. If they are illegal — as is usually the case — they must also be secret, with the knowledge of their plans and operations confined to an elite few.

These are not the characteristics of a socialist movement. At their most successful, the IRA can bring only a trivial readjustment of capitalism — the substitution of one style of coercive state for another. Socialism, by contrast, will be a stateless society in which human beings all over the world will cooperate for the communal good. The achievement of that society must be the democratic, conscious act of the world's working class and they will not need violence or coercion to introduce the fist age of human freedom, unity and abundance.

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