

# Comment

## *Ironies of History*

Mrs Thatcher was renowned for rarely taking holidays, recent events in the Soviet Union suggest that there was a certain wisdom in her cultivation of the air of diligence. Mr Gorbachev, like his predecessor Mr Khrushchev in 1965, was on holiday at his *dacha* in the Crimea when his colleagues moved against him. The August crisis in the Soviet Union caught most western politicians off guard. Many were forced to scurry back to their chanceries to be hastily briefed about how things would turn out. Most of them were equivocal in their condemnation of the illegal action of the Soviet plotters; few considered that Mr Yanaev and his fellow-conspirators could fail. Mr Mitterand was the least sanguine; French diplomats have long accepted that in the former Communist party of the Soviet Union, as in the British Conservative party, an unpopular leader, not directly elected by the people, is traditionally disposed of by a coup mounted by colleagues. Even President Bush, in his initial response to the news of the putsch, was working himself up to writing Mr Gorbachev's obituary. In the light of subsequent events American voters must be asking themselves if it is worth spending so much money on intelligence services if their President can be so badly briefed. Since then there has been no shortage of commentators willing to write off Mr Gorbachev.

The abiding image of those August days in Moscow will be of Boris Yeltsin, perched on a tank, calling the Soviet people to resistance. The attitude was no less courageous given that the probable alternative, had he not opposed the plotters, was prolonged obscurity at best and the gulag at worst. Yeltsin's seizure of the moment turned resistance into revolution. In a curious way Yeltsin, with his gift for opportunism, was following the path charted by Lenin and Engels before him. Lenin in one of his last notes, looking back over the course of the revolution, quoted Napoleon: 'On s'engage et puis...on voit'. (Engage the enemy and then see what is to be done). Engels, in a letter written in 1885, exhibits a similar enthusiasm for seizing the hour, whilst giving a salutary warning of the chaos that can ensue. "Once the the gunpowder is lit, once the forces are freed and the people's energy transformed from potential into kinetic....then the people who have lit the fuse will be thrown aside by the explosion, which will prove to be a thousand times stronger than they, and will seek egress for itself wherever it can, depending on the economic forces and resistances...- when 1789 comes to such a country then 1793 will not be slow to follow." Mr

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Yeltsin may find in Lenin and Engels uncomfortable prophets of his own fate. Recent events in the poorest and most consistently deprived areas of our own country, where principle has given way to opportunism in political debate, might prompt some of our own politicians to read up their Engels.

In this issue Gilbert Márkus suggests that one of the reasons poverty is a Bad Thing, 'is precisely that those who suffer it are deprived not only of material goods but also of cultural goods, of the right to participate socially, economically and politically, and so are correspondingly vulnerable to being manipulated by those in power.' The prime response of those in power to recent civil disturbances in the bleak housing estates that ring our cities has been coercive. Our political system is so conditioned by the narcissistic mendacity of the media, in which the fashion for the strong man is so marked, that leading politicians of all parties have been fearful of falling short of the resolute approach. Rioting, however appalling in its effects and often most harmful to those already oppressed, has served a purpose in the development of the British polity. It is the traditional means of the politically powerless to make those with power and wealth take notice and share what they have. It is a blunt instrument which is rarely used, because rarely necessary, in a politically sophisticated society.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the nineteenth century political theorist, observed that the health of a democratic country depends on a complex of basic, common convictions which express a vision about the essential values of human life. Where such a vision is lacking, where the tapestry of morality is unravelled, the only possible binding force is coercion. Freedom cannot be preserved by institutions it must spring from conviction. This is a lesson which could be learned outside the confines of the former Communist bloc. Clearly politicians across the spectrum, with an opportunistic eye on the coming election, have opted for violent condemnation of events in Newcastle and elsewhere on the grounds that this is the only language such criminals can understand; perhaps this is so, but how will they learn any other ?

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