

Honecker out, Zhivkov out, Ceausescu out . . . now Thatcher?

by Mark Burdman

During his meeting with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on April 13 in Bermuda, President George Bush would do well to draw the lessons from what is going on now in Britain, and what is happening to the erstwhile "Iron Lady," who has now become the Western world's leading "lame duck." As has become obvious since the weekend of March 31-April 1 in particular, Britain has entered a period of mass-strike political ferment, the likes of which have not been seen there in a very long time. This is the most immediate spillover into the West, of the 1989 democratic revolutions in the communist world, and could be a harbinger of things to come in North America during the next weeks and months.

What is catalyzing the British mass-strike process, is the national revolt against the hated Thatcher poll tax policy, which went into effect on April 1 in England and Wales, after having been experimentally tried out on a hostile Scottish population during 1989. The poll tax, devised by London's Adam Smith Institute, imposes a tax for community services on a "flat-rate" basis, in contrast to the previous standard, where taxes are imposed on the basis of ability to pay. It imposes the same flat rate per resident within a locality, such that a street-cleaner pays the same tax as a titled duke, earl, or lord with vast wealth. The poll tax is monstrously undemocratic, unfair, and financially oppressive for poorer layers in Britain.

On March 31, a crowd of 100,000 to 200,000 demonstrated against the poll tax in London, the largest peaceful demonstration there in over 100 years.

The anger at the poll tax policy intersects, and feeds, a growing rage against Mrs. Thatcher's leadership. For years, Mrs. Thatcher has played the political-psychological role of a "nanny" to Britain's population. But the nanny is now being rejected.

Beyond all this, Britain's economy is characterized by mortgage rates nearly 16%, interest rates of 16%, inflation rates approaching 9%, and collapsing infrastructure.

Political observers in London and continental Europe now forecast a "prolonged period of mass instability" in Britain, as years pent-up rage boils to the surface.

The most likely consequence of these factors will be the

near-term political demise of Mrs. Thatcher herself. How she leaves office, and whether she goes so gracefully or not, remains to be seen. Certainly, if the Tories do badly in local elections scheduled for early May throughout Great Britain, pressure on her to step down will increase.

The writing is already on the wall. From March 29-31, in Cambridge, there was the annual meeting of the prestigious Koenigswinter Group, which brings together top-level British and German influentials. One of the participants exclaimed with a chortle, "Honecker, Zhivkov, Ceausescu . . . Thatcher, you are next."

Thatcher, George III, and George Bush

Mrs. Thatcher's political downfall would have profound political repercussions, particularly in the United States, which has been on a Thatcherite "free-market" economic course throughout the Reagan-Bush years.

In an April 5 column in the *International Herald Tribune*, Jim Hoagland drew attention to the effects of a collapse of Thatcher in the U.S. He compared Thatcher to Britain's King George III, and likened her tax policies to those of the administration of another George, namely George Herbert Walker Bush. Characterizing the poll tax policy as a "political disaster," Hoagland stated: "British rulers beginning with George III have discovered that tax policy is a dangerous way to go about defining Us and Them. To continue her remarkable run at 10 Downing Street, Mrs. Thatcher needs to demonstrate that it is a lesson she has absorbed. . . . Philosophically, the poll tax suggests that the time of nation-building as a common social endeavor has passed in industrial societies like Britain and the United States. The Thatcher approach is an advanced version of the current effort in Washington to push the burden of new taxation out to the states and cities."

In recent days, U.S. congressional candidate Lyndon LaRouche has likened Mrs. Thatcher to George III, against whose policies the American colonies mounted the War of Independence.

Aside from LaRouche, French President François Mitterrand has pointed to the devastating effects of Thatcherism in both Britain and the United States, in comments made during an interview with France's TF-1 television March 25. He

stated: "Laissez-faire liberalism has exhausted itself. I don't want to upset the British government, but it is clear how the ultra-free market experiment of Great Britain is falling apart. In addition, look at the United States. There are 50 million poor people. It is obvious that the difference has become too great within these societies between rich and poor, such that you have a rich society and a poor society within the same country. This all justifies my conviction that while communism is collapsing, economic liberalism is fully exhausted. It is therefore urgent to correct the effects of free-market economics."

Blame it on Thatcher!

Throughout March, anti-poll tax ferment had brought the usually docile British population onto the streets. The Thatcher government's attempts to discredit the anti-poll tax mobilizations as orchestrated by Trotskyists, skinheads, and terrorist elements have only further alienated the British population, since in fact the vast majority of demonstrators have been workers and their family members, as well as hard-hit groups like pensioners. The poll tax was the single issue in the March 22 mid-term election in the Mid-Staffordshire electoral constituency in the town of Lichfield, in which the Tories lost a usually safe seat to the Labour Party by 16 points. Polls taken since then, have shown Thatcher trailing Labour by 23 to 28 points on a national basis.

On March 31, Britain entered a qualitatively new era of political mass mobilization. While 25,000 were demonstrating against the poll tax in Glasgow, Scotland, an estimated 100,000-200,000 people were gathering in London's Trafalgar Square. Toward the end of that rally, a group of a few thousand went on a rampage, burning down shops, smashing shop windows, looting, rioting, and attacking policemen. Observers drew comparisons to scenes in Belfast and the Middle East. Thatcher and her loyalists seized on the rampage, in a cynical attempt to discredit the anti-poll tax ferment as a whole. It cannot be excluded that the Tories might have had some agents provocateurs mixed in with the ragtag assortment of anarchist, Trotskyist, and Maoist groups that was visible on the night of March 31. But the violence also reflects a political-psychological reality of Mrs. Thatcher's Britain: the enraged mood of those who have now rejected Thatcher as their "nanny" and are throwing a fit.

Jonathan Aitken, a leading British political commentator, wrote in the London *Guardian* April 2, that people are being brought onto the streets to protest against "unpopular legislation," and if there is violence, it is "to be blamed on Thatcher. The poll tax is her tax and no one else's." He labeled the poll tax a policy of "fiscal vandalism" against Britain's municipalities. Stressing that the violence only occurred "at the rag end of the biggest peaceful demonstrations ever," Aitken denounced the Tories for conducting a smear campaign to paint the demonstration as an anarchist uprising.

In any case, the March 31 violence was not an isolated

incident. On April 1, a prison riot began at the Strangeways prison in Manchester. As of April 5, prisoners were still in control of part of the prison, and at least one inmate and one prison guard had died in the unrest, and there were unconfirmed reports of many other deaths. Prisoners complained of horrendous conditions in food, lodging, and other facilities, as well as of overcrowding. Independent observers sent to Strangeways confirmed the validity of these complaints. During the week of April 2, there were also outbreaks at several other prisons.

Further unrest expected

The manifestations of mass instability can only increase in the coming days and weeks. There are several different aspects of this. First, there will be continuing, and expanding, ferment against the poll tax itself. According to the London *Independent* April 2, British government ministers and senior Conservatives "are bracing themselves for further outbreaks of civil unrest as a result of the poll tax." The paper reported that special measures are being adopted to protect poll tax collectors and city councils from the wrath of the constituents.

Second, there will be growing rage at the economic mess, particularly among homeowners.

This involves a third and related factor. Labor unrest, which has been boiling to the surface in the latter Thatcher years, can be expected to explode. On April 4, there was a one-day strike by teachers across the U.K., who were protesting against poor pay and poor conditions in the schools. Thousands of teachers have quit in the last few years, citing intolerable stress, violence in the classroom, and other factors. Said Fred Smithies, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Women Teachers: "The only way in which a schoolteacher in England and Wales has been able to escape from a state of serfdom, has been by finding a different job."

A fourth factor, and a completely nonlinear situation in and of itself, is Scotland. The Scots are already seething with anger, over the fact that the poll tax was first implemented in Scotland. They are resentful at having been treated like "guinea pigs." This only reinforces a growing mood of wanting to be free from English dominance. As the April 1 *Sunday Times* of London headlined a letters-to-the-editor column filled with angry letters from Scots, "Scot 'guinea pigs' prefer independence." The latest poll taken in Scotland shows Mrs. Thatcher having a measly 15% preference rating, 39 points behind the British Labour Party.

The fifth factor will be the continuing self-imposed disintegration of the Tory Party. A post-Thatcher leadership struggle has already begun. It is no secret that former Defense Minister Michael Heseltine has the ambition to be the next Tory standard-bearer and prime minister. Nominally to head off Heseltine, former Tory Party chairman Norman Tebbit has declared his willingness to stand as standard-bearer.