HERE WE GO AGAIN

Martin Upham says we ain’t seen nothing yet

THUNDERING DENUNCIATIONS of Labour staff appointments in the Telegraph, Privy Council behaviour fantasies in the Sun. Red-faced generals angry they might lose their toys. With the grouse shooting season ending a Right-thinking chap needs new targets, and who better than Jeremy Corbyn? Within the Party, New Labour licks its lips. Disloyal to its rotten core, it hears reinforcement of its message that Corbyn brings Labour “unelectability”, (Mandelson), “economically illiterate populism” (Hunt), needs a “heart transplant” (Blair). The Two Rights combine to signal that by choosing a leader who believes in change Labour members has doomed itself. Presumably they think that if they keep it up for long enough we’ll all change our minds. Here we go again.

On 2 August 1914 Keir Hardie was called a coward on the floor of the Commons for suggesting Foreign Secretary Edward Grey should have taken a German peace overture seriously. Cameron came pretty close to saying this about Corbyn in his October Tory conference speech. Ten years later the first Labour government was rocked, and eventually unseated, by the infamous ‘Zinoviev Letter’. This M15 forgery (“Moscow orders to our Reds” – screamed the Daily Mail) smeared Labour as under Soviet instruction. Labour’s second administration of 1929-31 faced outer hostility and inner treachery from the outset. Left wingers like John Wheatley were shut out of the Cabinet.

As the world economic crisis mounted Labour’s own Right combined with the Tories to replace it with a National government.

In 1964, immediately on taking office, Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson faced blackmail from the Bank of England Governor who demanded he jettison his radical (in reality quite modest) programme. 1968 saw the Tory Press and Right of the Party plotting to replace him with his Chancellor Roy Jenkins. Both Rights loathed Wilson. When he returned to office in 1974, the plotters were out in force. This time the hostility was broader-based, embracing union-haters, the embryonic SDP and deranged colonels. An unauthorised military occupation of Heathrow took place, widely interpreted (even, later, by the BBC) as a warning to the Labour government, even a coup rehearsal. Some within M15 believed Wilson a communist and his phone was tapped. One spook later admitted “we bugged and burgled our way across London” (Thatcher later sent a flunky all the way to an Australian court in a futile attempt to suppress his memoirs).

Only two Labour governments have not faced subversion from press proprietors, spies, military and a Fifth Column. One was Attlee’s in 1945-51. He had a mandate few could argue with, remaining popular to the end, never even losing a by-election. Some have argued Attlee did the bare minimum that might have been achieved in the circumstances. There is no doubt, however, that he had promised real change and achieved it. Churchill’s feeble campaign attempt to smear Labour as threatening “a new Gestapo” gained no traction against a popular landslide: reactionaries went into retirement, for a time.

Blair’s 1997-2007 government did not face subversion either, but for the opposite reason. His appeal, unlike Attlee’s, was based on continuity: nothing much would change but at least the odious Tories would be gone. With comparable support to Attlee, Blair could have established a new politics but he preferred office to power. His eye-of-poll plea to the voters – “Britain Deserves Better” – revealed his lack of ambition. Afterwards he reassured established interests: “we won as New Labour and we will govern as New Labour”. This is the precedent today’s New Labour plotters want us to follow. They pretend it is impossible to win an election any other way while privately fearing a new 1945.

Nothing under the sun is new. Today’s Britain is a giant money factory: in place of public services, markets; for manufacturing, casino financial services; for necessary defence, an unusable nuclear ‘deterrent’. A lot of awful people have got an awful lot to lose. The powerful fear radical change. A Labour government planning to leave things as they are won’t bother them very much. But September’s leadership vote shows the Party is serious. Now is the time to realise that the Right is serious too: we are in for a bumpy ride.