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MARIO AND THE MAGICIAN

THE UNITED KINGDOM was promised a Heritage General Election from the very beginning of the year 2001.¹ So determined was New Labour to stage it that nothing was to be allowed to get in its way. Until, that is, the virtual shut-down of the British countryside by the epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease, from March onwards. Even this was at first impatiently disregarded. But things got so bad, with so many indications of voter resentment and apathy, that Prime Minister Blair found himself unable to hold the show in May, as at first hoped. A short postponement to June was agreed, with extreme reluctance, and against great opposition from within his Party. Meanwhile, funeral pyres and pits notwithstanding, British voters found themselves ushered back into the old election-time Music Hall—obliged to take their seats for the traditional ‘swingometer’ Pantomime, as the orchestra tuned up, and the reassuring chink of glasses resounded from the interval bar. Although nobody thought New Labour would lose, the Magus declared war against ‘apathy’ early on, letting it be known he was impatient, and eager to consummate the Third Way. His entire court clearly feared that, in tune with New Labour’s general obeisance towards things American, British voting abstention might slump down to US levels, thus undermining his spell.

Once settled in their places the public was to be treated to another session of stage mesmerism, something like the one unforgettably described by Thomas Mann in *Mario and the Magician* (1929). Mann was evoking 1920s Italy, through an old-fashioned pier-show and its sinister star, the Cavaliere Cipolla—he could not have imagined *Big Brother* or *The Weakest Link*:

While [the magician] still practised some rhetorical circumlocutions, the tests themselves were one long series of attacks upon the will-power, the loss or compulsion of volition. Comic, exciting, amazing by turns, by mid-

night they were still in full swing; we ran the gamut of all the phenomena this natural–unnatural field has to show, from the unimpressive at one end of the scale to the monstrous at the other . . .²

Mann noted that the Italian public knew, or half-knew, how the vile hypnotist was at once leading and humiliating them, and yet remained quite unable to do other than conform. Even at the mercy of the uncanny, they felt compelled to let ‘nature’ take its course.

In part the election’s unreality could of course be traced to the immediate prior collapse of so much of Britain’s fabric. The acrid smoke of Polling Day could not make voters forget all the shames of yesterday. The Passport Scandal, BSE, CJD, the grim farce of the Asylum-seekers, the tale of The Dome, the continuing slide of the Health Service, the state of H.M.’s Prison Service, British Railtrack’s collapse, the Fuel Crisis, the Hinduja brothers: Britannia Music Hall was in sensationally poor shape well before March 2001. But such unreality must derive from deeper causes. Last year the BBC’s Political Correspondent Andrew Marr brought out a book called *The Day Britain Died*, but his speculative conclusions remained rather mild—in effect adding a question mark to his title. There was no need for that. *Rigor mortis* was already advanced when the book appeared, and even at that time remedy was none. Now we are in 2001, and can sum up its state in a phrase: *Britain has actually ceased to exist*. Blair started operations four years ago with an impersonation of glad, self-confident morning; in 2001 we find him racing to outpace the shade of night. All that has really happened in the time between is that (so to speak) Britain has remorselessly turned into ‘Britain’, a realm of general impersonation and self-delusion. But while old Britain—the United Kingdom—was quite well understood, its successor is not. Yet ‘Britain’ has by now been long enough in existence (from the 1980s to the present) to evolve its own laws and customs, and assume the consistency of a distinct phase of UK affairs. These ‘laws’ are often wildly different from (or even contrary to) those of the erstwhile United Kingdom.³

¹ This essay is excerpted from *Pariah: Misfortunes of the British Kingdom*, forthcoming from Verso.

² *Mario and the Magician and Other Stories*, London 2000, pp. 145–6.

³ For a decreasing number of readers, some sense of déjà vu will be inevitable at this point. The underlying argument advanced has a forty-year history stretching from the early years of the *New Left Review* down to the present: that is,

How does New Labour's successor 'Britain' work? To avoid the inverted commas it may be simpler to use Ukania as a shorthand—provided the reader notes that the reference is not primarily to Royal or archaic features of the neo-British system. It is the structure of the beast we need to observe, rather than its pelt and uniforms. The best man to enlighten us here is certainly Blair himself. When he returned to report to the House of Commons on the Nice European Council last year, these were his words:

It is possible, in our judgement, to fight Britain's corner, get the best out of Europe for Britain and exercise real authority and influence in Europe. That is as it should be. Britain is a world power. To stand aside from the key alliance—the European Union—right on our doorstep, is not advancing Britain's interests; it is betraying British interests.⁴

Greatness is all, in other words. For a world-power régime, being 'in Europe' is neither successor nor alternative to the past. It is simply one amongst other ways of remaining Great. A Euro-UK may be alongside but will never be ahead of the Special Relationship to the USA, the Commonwealth, over-valued Sterling, and the Crown. For it to become more important would imply abandoning the treasured stigmata of Providence. It would mean downsizing, dilution, a retraction into the ordinariness of contemporary nationhood.

Changeling kingdom

Late or terminal Britishness has in essence been one prolonged struggle against that fate. The Ukania of the 2001 election and funeral pyres is the result. In that sense the 2001 election marks a farther slide into what is no longer simply 'decline'. Decline was the older, genteel form of putrefaction which prevailed until the close of the seventies. But from then on, a qualitatively distinct phase has taken over. Academic and

from Perry Anderson's 'Origins of the Present Crisis' down to and now through the 'crisis' itself. Once given hedge-baptism as 'the Nairn-Anderson theses' about the anachronism and decline of Great Britain, that gloomy prognosis is now being far eclipsed by events themselves. My argument here unavoidably uses absurd compressions and ellipses of what was a long-drawn-out affair, for which I must apologize. Readers anxious to catch up with the fuller history will find the greater part of it in Anderson's *English Questions*, Verso: London 1990, especially the introduction's concise narration of the 1960s, and the background to his 'Origins of the Present Crisis' (NLR 1/23, Jan-Feb 1964).

⁴ *Hansard*, 11 December 2000, col. 351.

theoretical analysis has not yet adequately registered this shift: it tends to remain transfixed by a tunnel-vision retrospect shaped by the (admittedly) long anterior time-scale of Anglo-British statehood, from 1688 to the later twentieth century. While the origins of Ukanian downfall may be traced back far enough, to World War I and beyond, its acute phase dates mainly from 1979. 'Declining Britain' has been happening for a century or so; but *parody*-Britain is twenty-two years old. That was the year which saw a convulsion at the political level—the advent of a régime (not just an administration) much more self-consciously and radically committed to Redemption-politics than any before it. Mrs Thatcher said she would put the 'Great' back in Britain via a 'revolution', and she meant it. Wilson and Heath had certainly articulated some strands of the change back in the sixties and early seventies. But we can now see these were but feeble precursors of a more decisive drama at the century's end. By 1979, in the Winter of Discontent, Thatcher's New Conservatives had become rightly contemptuous of earlier failures, and of the wretched, stagnant 'consensus' they had fostered. Greatness was by then too visibly on the slide, and more determined steps were needed to restore it. Thatcher believed that a violent plunge to the economic Right was the necessary formula, plus decisive shifts in the ideal climate of both state and society. Such was her 'entrepreneurial culture'. It coincided with a climatic change in Atlantic capitalism, and was soon seen as exemplary in that regard. But Thatcherism should not therefore be simply merged into that broader picture. The UK state also had its own motives and trajectory—a specific history, which led in the aftermath to the specific collapse now being endured. Many real changes did come about from her efforts, but restored grandeur was not among them. After her overthrow in 1990, the Kingdom lapsed into the pot-hole of 'Black Wednesday' (the currency collapse of 1992) and then John Major's half-decade of miasmic torpor.

After which a farther 'revolution' was plainly required. It duly came in 1997. The 'Blairism' which followed sought to benefit from Thatcherism's economic convulsion, while orchestrating an even more startling shift of *mentalités* under the assorted banners of the Third Way—a speculative navigational chart intended to reconcile the Enterprise Culture with the remains of Welfarism. This nebulous concoction was seen as a growth-pod through which the essence of 'the British way' might be more soundly renewed. The fundamentals of the Westminster Monarchy and State (envy of the world, etc.) would now experience giddy re-

growth under a second magician's spell. The other vital difference Blair's Redemption-spasm has brought is confirmation of Britain's terminal phase *as a system*. More than one party or government is needed to speak of a 'régime' with quite distinctive (if probably short-lived) rules and tendencies of its own. These rules are in most respects corrupted descendants of famous ancestors: the 'undead' of historical Constitutionalism, as it were, clutching a soil and people which should have long ago been freed of them. Like Thatcherism before it, Blairism lays claim to an essential continuity with the 1688–1979 United Kingdom. This claim can be all too easily justified at one level of perception. The uniforms and mementos of former times continue to litter London, and Heritage displays are kept running both at Buckingham Palace and in the Palace of Westminster. Britain goes on asserting its 'presence' in the skies of the Balkans and the Middle East, and retains both nuclear deterrent and Security Council seat. The institutions of Great Britain go on reproducing themselves through another set of bearers or agents (or victims), as indeed they are bound to do until defeated, reformed or abandoned. Here, the crucial embodiment is the customary axis between the Royal Palaces of Westminster and Buckingham—the unwritten Crown Constitution.

The myth of greatness

Some historical perspective is needed to place the great 1979 shift. All things genuinely British were a fusion of empire and class. Between Victoria's accession in 1837 and the victory of 1945, the UK was ruled by a single, hereditary élite, complex enough to support different political parties.⁵ This one-class state achieved its astonishing domestic dominance primarily by a deployment of *external* resources and relationships. This is what really underlies the unshakeable obsession with being a 'world power'. The fact is that 'greatness', international weight and special influence, were never secondary to Anglo-Britain's characteristic state. They were not apprehended as a mere additions to Britain's political arsenal—like a bonus or a stroke of good luck that might eventually be put aside. Rather, they were essential for economy and state

⁵ The most definitive study of the matrix of Anglo-British statehood is Ellis Wasson's *Born to Rule: British Political Elites*, Stroud 2000. He shows how, up until late in the nineteenth century, 'the governing classes of the three kingdoms and principality in the British Isles never amounted in total to much more than about 2,500' (p. 159).

alike, and a class structure came to be crystallized around them. They engendered a unique form of rule, which for long embraced both the formal state and many features of civil society. One key result was a certain inclination of national identity. For well over a century, 'Little England' turned into a barred road—primarily a resort of the soured and disgruntled. The previous English state of late-mediaeval times, a product of Anglo-Saxon and Norman conquests, became 'greater' England in two phases: through subordination of the archipelago, then (more decisively) by overseas commercial and colonial development from the seventeenth century onwards. Hence the twenty-first century paradox: a 'nation' accounting for over 80 per cent of the population of 'the Isles', but with almost no separate political identity of its own—condemned (as it were) to be 'great' . . . or nothing at all. The poignancy of British collapse lies partly in this inevitable question mark: 'England' must be reinvented, not just belatedly but in a sense *posthumously*.

National insignificance

This uniquely false consciousness was the counterpart of a uniquely strong *extended* imperium. One striking fact demonstrated the power and nature of the resultant hegemony. Between 1915 and 1945, the world crisis was confronted primarily by 'National Governments' under which the British ruling class buried its many differences 'for the duration' (which turned out to be thirty years long). The Labour Party graduated into that original 'Establishment' in the later part of this era, and by the fifties had completely absorbed most of its world-view. Such assumptions are extraordinarily tenacious. Once institutionally embedded, they are like the 'deep grammar' of state-life, as it were, underlying the surface eddies of policies and events. But of course it does not follow that the reality of that former statehood still prevails today. On the contrary, from the fifties onwards the very foundations of the British *Weltanschauung* changed implacably—both externally and domestically. The territorial extensions of a commercial empire disappeared, leaving only its rump behind in the City of London. A state configuration had to perpetuate itself minus much of the 'navel' (or external force-field) that had both fed and justified its being.

At the same time (and partly as a result) the patriciate decayed and lost its old nerve at home. By 1979 it had lost its grip. There were quite a few *grandees* in Thatcher's first Cabinet, but the *class* of

Churchill was gone. Of those remaining, a few joined the opposition, some became centurions of the 'revolution' (like Nicholas Ridley and William Whitelaw), while the rest swallowed their pride as Heritage or fashion icons. The heirs of those who bestrode the globe are today defenders of 'the Countryside', notably fox-hunting. What the sociological changes of the sixties had begun, Margaret Thatcher's lower-middle-class crusade finished off during the eighties. This meant that the previous political formula was ruled out. The world of outreach greatness remained essential: 'who we are' as distinct from the land-bound Continental armadillos. But its home-class basis was breaking up. Farther emergency and decline could no longer be dealt with by 'National Government'. The parties were unable to combine in that old way, because the stratum-nexus underlying such alliances had vanished. Edmund Burke's 'great oaks that shade a country' were now tourist attractions for those that 'creep on the ground'—the subjects who 'perish without season and leave no trace behind us'.⁶ Like the Empire-Commonwealth, the domestic deference of the previous age had dwindled away. 'Class' was no longer a reliable buttress of the state. In fact a molecular, resentful sort of rebelliousness was gnawing at the foundations, and disabling the linked stabilities of class and Crown. And yet the longer 'emergency' itself, Britain's fall into insignificance, never ceased to intensify. A state and culture now deeply anachronistic were forced towards new stratagems of survival.

This is surely why, as crisis deepened, each party has from the seventies onwards sought to *become the state and nation*. The end of Empire felt like insignificance, not normality—a disowning of divinely designated greatness. All administrations since then have been compelled to be (or pretend to be) 'National' in the old, reverberant sense. And since 'Britishness' was an external orientation rather than an ethnic root, there appeared no alternative to either prolonging or restoring the deep grammar of that former state and economy—an inheritor of the Burkean realm, only 'modernized', and with something new to say. Even in stumbling retreat, such a strong institutional complex is fated to reproduce itself. A state-nation like 'Great Britain' is likely to do so more determinedly than a nation-state, simply because there is in the end so little natural about it. For such a long-term by-product of conquest and class artifice, the last ditch holds little comfort. Combat alone will keep it

⁶ *The Portable Edmund Burke*, Isaac Kramnick, ed., London 1999, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

‘surviving’ there (and not always military). From the seventies down to the present no in-comer to Downing Street has escaped these pressures of Redemption—the need to be far more than a mere administration, or a new package of policies. Nowadays a more self-conscious sense of Providence is bestowed along with the badges of Office. Nor should it be forgotten that from the forties up to 1979 both main British political movements had indeed taken their turns at redressment in lower-level policy terms. The complacency of those days was so great, and so undisturbed, that politicians still felt policy shifts alone might ‘turn round the ship’. As long as the core-apparatus of grandeur remained unchallenged, it was tempting to believe that ‘touches to the helm’ might suffice, alternately from Left and Right. But the seventies put an end to these delusions. This is why much more drastic therapy began to appear indispensable. Salvaging Greatness now came to demand a ‘régime’, a Revolution, or a ‘Project’. Since forced-march Redemption remains the motor of the imploding realm, there can be no escape: everybody has to be drummed into these pantomimes—Thatcher’s neoliberal Enterprise Culture after 1979, and then Tony Blair’s Third Way Project. We do not yet know what Hague or Portillo will follow on with in 2005 or 2006. The New Conservative (Mk II) leadership is still busy mounting another ‘Great-again’ recipe. But there seems little reason to doubt that they will eventually manage the trick.

Oscillating revivalisms

It is worth pointing out here how very misleading the metaphor of ‘decline’ has proved in the United Kingdom. This is a term which conveys a sense of graduated loss or slippage, with a half-implication of indeterminate duration. Now, that there has been British ‘decline’ in that sense, no party, leader or serious historian would deny. However, the concept carries within itself an enticing but potentially deadly counter-meaning: *revival*—the salvation, even the renaissance, of whatever remains. After the disasters of Heath and Callaghan between 1970 and 1979, it is this revivalist mentality that rose to the forefront—a ‘make or break’ ambition under which leadership was forced towards daily emphasis upon advances, ‘radical’-seeming hopscotch, and transformations of the soul. In other words, it is bright-eyed schemes of regeneration which have dominated the actual ‘decline’ (one can now say ‘collapse’) of the UK’s *ancien régime*. No earlier prophecies of imperial slide or decay took this into account. In the strange fall into oblivion

which really occurred, 'Radicalism' was appropriated as the *Leitmotiv* of the foundering process itself. From 1979 onwards, different leaders have wielded contrasting policy recipes and ideal vistas, of Left and Right, Europe or USA-oriented—but all invariably 'radical', in the sense of would-be thorough and decisive, settling matters for good. This striving for reinstatement has consistently been counterfeited as drama-filled release, a leap forward. Hysterical countermanding by the reigning will has sought to screen the melancholia of retreat.

Everything has had to be transformed and re-transformed, not (in Count Lampedusa's famous phrase) to let them 'go on as before'—but so that they can be immensely, improbably better. The psychology of bankruptcy is very close to that of the con man, or Thomas Mann's hypnotist—a projection of bedazzled betterment and rejuvenation, of traditions undergoing stylish cure by 'modernization', with élan and up-to-the-minute techniques. Never has prestidigitation been so powerful. The public's attention has to be distracted from the collapse of the stage itself, by the futurological fireworks being enacted upon it. Yet could it be otherwise? Since the tradition being served is in essence so extraordinary, its Salvation *must* be no less spectacular. The latter's proper manifestation can reside solely upon the plane of wars, historic initiatives and exemplary vanguardism. It means placing oneself at the forefront (or 'the heart') of this, that and everything. Like Thatcher before him, Blair in turn announced no less than a *revolution* in 1997. And indeed this is why reluctant electors had to be so abruptly hustled into polling stations in 2001. To outsiders, a 1688 cadaver may have appeared to be tottering into a family mausoleum, itself visibly disintegrating. Alas, the surviving family members have been conditioned to perceive things quite differently. They file on regardless, like Cipolla's seaside public of eighty years ago, deluded (or maybe now only half-deluded) by the promise of a totally brilliant afterlife.

If the *ancien régime* favoured the alternation of parties as a way of maintaining stability, the most prized virtue of the old nineteenth-century state, its deformed inheritor has transformed evolutionism into a periodical oscillation between Salvationist crusades. Within the new constraints, both defeat and victory have wholly altered their meaning. Nowadays, the government of Ukania is only worth having as the power to change . . . well, practically everything. In truth very little may change. But the *power* is really one over souls—and the obverse

of this is that defeat no longer signifies simply a few years of oppositional retreat or re-thinking: it has come to represent soul-death, a wilderness of worthlessness, and decade-long struggles for revival. Once ejected from the Salvation business—necessarily by some uncontrollable surge—a UK political party no longer has any recognizable meaning or doctrine to defend.

How can it? The party either is the state-nation—Greatness *redivivus*—or it is not. Suffering the latter fate means being unmasked, discarded—not merely defeated. Many years are then needed to concoct some pseudo-meaning under which the Great-British banner may again be seized. But this can only take place when the current witch-doctorate has in turn been exposed. Such was the fate of Labour after 1979, and then of the Tories after 1997. It does not seem to occur to the New Labourites that the pitiable system which they now embrace so ardently must in time—and now probably quite a short time—force them in turn out on to this frozen wasteland of disgrace and ridicule. Redemption has turned out to have its own rules; and so does the inevitable Fall from Redemption. Euphoric bedazzlement *can* end only in savage disappointment, as a disappointed people feels the daily slippage from Grace, and the mounting stench of careerist sleaze. A visceral, nauseated reaction then starts up; ‘apathy’ is the current phase, which from the start menaced the 2001 election. Governments of parody-Britain have learned how quickly this can turn into hatred and rejection. And within the new system-parameters, the sole possibility is a lurch over into whatever ‘alternative’ version of Redemption-lunacy has, in the meantime, elbowed its way on-stage.

Thus has a former élite indifference to ideas and abstract notions been replaced by the ideological vertigo and style-obsession of today’s Ukania. Stability has metamorphosed into lurching instability—periodic tidal-wave lurches from one zealotry to the next in line. The phlegm of old Britain has dissolved into a ceaseless contest of brain-storms, like Thatcher’s Poll Tax and Blair’s Millennium Dome. These produce in turn a cumulative popular cynicism, occasionally vented in riots or the ‘fuel protests’ of last year. That climate of menace in turn exacerbates both the populist mania of the rulers (a substitute for democracy) and their dependence upon a notorious tabloid press and a dumbed-down TV. The mentality of this precarious élite grows more susceptible both to personal relations in its court (including personality disorders) and to

conspiratorial *coups d'état* like the one which evicted Thatcher in 1990.⁷ The bizarre sub-plot of Peter Mandelson has illustrated this most famously in New Labour's first term, but there are many others: the unforgiving feuds of a synthetic 'extended family', without which neither Party nor Government can now carry on.

The post-imperial asylum

The arrival of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK was of course accidental. But what matters politically about such 'natural disasters' is their impact upon the pre-existing political system—what it shows up and implies for the future. Ukanian commentators were not slow to make this point about (for example) the earthquakes in Turkey two years ago. In *After Britain* (2000) I made a satirical comparison between the UK and the last phase of the Habsburg Empire in Central Europe. Alas, crueller and more recent analogies are also possible. Realms of look-alike impersonation have appeared in the wake of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Republic as well. When these undemocratic polities ceased being sustainable, they also have been characterized by chest-beating rhetoric (military or political, or both, but invariably strident). There also, intense think-tank activity and piecemeal 'reforms' were undertaken to prop up the greatness of Russia and Serbia. Whatever the majority of Russians and Serbs thought, their ruling strata found the relinquishment of grandeur intolerable. They felt that they ('the Nation') simply could not go on existing without a standing-tall, effective identity in the world, and an accompanying '*rayonnement*'—somehow the French term is best, no doubt because it was patented in Paris.

This patent-makers' view of Redemption has recently been expounded in a slim volume called *Les Cartes de la France à l'heure de la mondialisation*, by French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine. The hand which France still has to play in globalization times turns out to be weirdly similar to Blair's. Paris also retains world-power delusions and vanity, and thinks itself entitled to a 'special capacity' for intervention or pres-

⁷ The 'courts' of Thatcher and Blair have been able to perform as simulacra of the former ruling class only by the formation of weird synthetic 'families' or quasi-kinship networks where personal relations and rivalries can assume fulcral significance. The most riveting account of how this has worked in Blairism is that given by Andrew Rawnsley in *Servants of the People: the Inside Story of New Labour*, London 2000.

sure. Sometimes this is assisted by membership of European Union. Yes, Europe can be quite useful to grandeur. Far from dying off, in the post-Cold War climate such exceptionalism may actually be reviving. This is a chilling thought. We find it expressed here more clearly than in the orations of Blair, or those of his own Védérine, Robin Cook. The latter has invented a supposedly ethical foreign policy, but so far without pseudo-philosophical framework. However, an evident parallelism persists in practice: that of ex-imperial states attempting not just to keep the accumulated loot, but in small ways to regain their former leverage and (the favoured UK expression) their 'clout'. The unkind way to put Védérine's theory is to say that the disintegration of the 'hyper-powers' (the USSR and American-led NATO) leaves increasing room for such manoeuvres by the post-imperial recidivists. The great thaw in the world is liberating not just small-timers like Ireland or Norway, but the former state-nation gang-bosses as well. These are down on their luck but not quite out of business. They still have nuclear arms—the 'ultimate coinage of modern state power' as Michael Ignatieff has put it⁸—Security Council standing, and powerful busybody instincts. Such resurrected mobsters cannot help feeling they may now be in a position to pull a bit more rank over the ordinary and despicable. The latter include most existing members of the United Nations, who in the Védérine optic turn out to be either 'mere states' or 'pseudo-states': totally lacking in clout and culture, in fact, the majority of them with hardly a shred of grandeur to their names. In addition, they are all too inclined to go for English as their *lingua franca*. The Scandinavians are particularly culpable here: far too concerned with social justice and equality, and not nearly interested enough in *l'Europe-puissance*.

The resurrection of the London and Paris *mafiosi* could be especially dangerous for European Union, as last year's Nice conference and treaty made clear. A new Entente Cordiale against ordinariness might be the condition of fuller UK participation, and (as the 2000 Danish vote against the Euro showed) might lead to mounting disaffection among the continent's many prosperous nonentities and 'mere states', mainly of the North and East. These are no-chancers who think that democracy is more significant than clout. In any great-power perspective (however decayed) this clearly represents the road to insignificance. The UK's Leader claims to foresee a Decision coming on the matter

⁸ 'Bush's First Strike', *New York Review of Books*, 29 March 2001.

of the Euro-currency after his renewed 2001 mandate, but it may not happen. Solidarity among state-nations is notoriously difficult of attainment, and these are (after all) élites which have heartily detested one another for centuries.

In the April 2001 number of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, a grave verdict was delivered from a somewhat different perspective by its Editor upon the matter of Britain: '*Angleterre, crise totale*'. Ignacio Ramonet observes rightly enough that the current 'plague' manifests something wrong with the country in which it is occurring: a 'latent cruelty' and previously hidden 'perversions of the spirit' among politicians and people alike. He goes on to list the now familiar symptoms: disasters, another winter of even profounder discontent, the palpable failure of privatizations, spiteful Europhobia and intolerance of the foreign and intrusive, redoubled servitude towards the USA. No one can contest his diary of pestilence and futility. When he turns to explain the pattern, however, an undue simplicity is at once in evidence. We find that slavish 'neoliberalism' is alone responsible. Hence Blair and the New Labourites have 'changed nothing'. Their variant of Thatcher's (or Reagan's) gospel has merely extended its appalling consequences, increased the rich-poor divide, lowered the public sector's share in GDP, let medical care slide towards the bottom of the European league (and so on). It is time the European Left drew much sterner conclusions from this tableau, by treating the heir to 'British Socialism' as a pariah too. Instead of which (he concludes bitterly) the Euro-Socialists look quite likely to elect Robin Cook as their President at a forthcoming conference in Berlin.

Marketolatry and Clintonesque servility have indeed marked, and disfigured, both the body and the soul of *Angleterre* (i.e. 'Britain'). However, it is inaccurate to blame these so completely for the present fate of 'Britain'. Ramonet fails to acknowledge the substantial (if often hypocritical) part played by anti-marketism in the Third Way rhetoric itself, and also in Chancellor Brown's economic stewardship. Crooks are undoubtedly at work, but they are not (or don't start up as) mere *vendus*. No selling of souls has taken place, either at the outset or later. Instead, those responsible have edged sideways into ignominy, under a range of pressures which this style of critique fails to recognize. The typical disposition of Ramonet's great newspaper is to assume that most sin emanates from failure (possibly wilful) to acknowledge

the set of transnational abstract verities so infallibly broadcast by *Le Monde Diplomatique*. But in reality, the contemporary fall of Britishness derives from a quite positive *national* project—that inherited set of still inescapable ‘dominant traditions’ or structures, in Tocqueville’s sense, which were simply re-hatched in Blair’s self-conscious ‘Project’ of 1997. However deplorable, the latter is in a deeper sense not so different from those of the Fifth Republic. Uneven development has produced a variation of tempo, naturally. In their middle period (the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) the British state-nation was much stronger than its cousin over the Channel. Today the opposite is true. Mitterrand (for instance) felt that in his own lifetime the balance had been reversed: the shame of 1940 had been replaced by the great ‘second revolution’ of the Fifth Republic, and notably his own Presidency. However, this should not blind us to the deeper resemblance: post-Cold War France and Britain are both grappling with forms of state-nation redemption, in a shifting European context. Both remain founded on eighteenth-century templates, and both are attempting to stave off the death-throes of down-sizing and dependency.

Unlike De Gaulle’s régime, the UK statist identity made the mistake of rushing into neoliberal affiliation from 79 forwards, and now finds it hard (maybe impossible) to right the balance. But that impetus arose out of the reproductive necessities of a failing state, rather than simply from Free-Tradery, or from intellectual resistance to corporate Europeanism. It was more than refusal of *L’Europe-puissance*, whether in President Chirac’s vision, or in the loftily left-of-centre configuration preferred by Pierre Bourdieu and *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Refusal to acknowledge the UK’s specific dilemma is a way of ignoring an equivalent specificity in France. That configuration is of course itself related to Hubert Védrine’s institutional world-view, mentioned earlier. One penalty of ‘globalization’ seems to be that each state generates its own take upon the universal blessing/curse. Great-nationalist optics are not so easily discarded, and normally cross any Left–Right spectrum. There are substantial sectors of both British and French opinion which remain unable to perceive either Europe or the world except through their own post-imperial spectacles. The French pair has been restored a lot better than its Anglo-Brit equivalent, and gives much clearer focus and political coherence. This is why there is a French Left, as well as a Right, still capable of imagining only a centralized, major-power Europe built out of what Védrine calls the ‘genetic code’ of Frenchness—political as

well as linguistic, anti-American, social-democratic and 'republican' in an unmistakably Gallic sense.⁹

A Girondin confederation

The same imagination shuts out the other indisputable British change brought about by 1997: 'Devolution'. The latter may be a failure from the point of view of Ukanian régime restoration; but it marks nonetheless a great inadvertent shift—one not accomplished by any of the Fifth Republic's decentralization measures. Advances can come from absence of mind, sometimes more readily than from all-seeing technocracy. The UK constitution may be farther damaged by it, or even demolished. However, a new archipelago may also be surfacing through it—contradictions may also be points of growth, towards some new, looser association of peoples and states. This is the kind of outcome Norman Davies suggests in the conclusion to his encyclopaedic work *The Isles* (1999), a book which no Unionist can stand. It suggests that the 'break-up' of the United Kingdom state may turn out to be part of a far wider European trend—'the most positive aspect of the EU', as he puts it. This has nothing to do with the European Central Bank or the balance of trade. It lies in the way Europe 'gives a place in the sun to Europe's smaller and middle-sized nations'—and by implication, a diminished place to the post-imperial big cheeses. Such a climate of ordinariness would have a different Europe inherent within it—anti-puissant, Swiss rather than Great, devoted to cultivation of its own assorted gardens. In the vistas of Greatness and *rayonnement*, however, this sort of change tends to go unregistered.

Happily, in *Les infortunes de la République* (2000) Jean-Marie Colombani has given both French and European analysis a very different and much more serious spectrum to work with. What his 'misfortunes of the Republic' depicts is a France not so much alternative to as evidently parallel with the anachronistic structure and statist attitudes of late 'Britain'. Although Editor of *Le Monde*, France's most important newspaper, Colombani also perceives his adopted country as a Corsican. He is unsparing of the Republic's insensate centralizing conceit and rigidity. The 'Corsican problem' is in truth the problem of France (he states

⁹ This has recently been ably anatomized by Larry Siedentop's influential *Democracy in Europe*, London 1999. The author underlines both the attraction, the influence, and the futility of this conception of European Union.

firmly at the beginning of his book) and reflects the central élite's will to maintain at all costs a grandiose early-modern role—

France . . . as the bearer of a grander idea, rather like the United States. It has always conceived its political construction not as a pragmatic means for cohabitation and adaptation to changes, but as a privileged access to universality, a building block of the universal Republic, a wonderful machine for forcing individual wills into legal conformity. We may not be better than anyone else. But our ideals must always be greater than those of our neighbours.

Hence the unshakeable conviction that 'republican France has something to tell the world', preferably (but not indispensably) via a Europe previously galvanized by '*le projet français*'. This conviction in turn entails the utter necessity of keeping Corsica, Brittany, Alsace, and all other possibly restive provinces in place. 'Losing Corsica would be the beginning of the end', as the neo-Republican Jean-Pierre Chevènement has put it—echoing, to British ears, the diatribes of Tam Dalyell, Peter Hitchens, and so many others. And indeed, inability to keep '*voire petite Corse*' (as apparently President Mitterrand enjoyed saying) within France's Project might throw doubt on vehicle and destination alike. The majority of individual French men and women might be unconcerned by the 'loss'—just as most English folk would be about Scottish independence. But this is unimportant. What counts is that less-than-Universal status would then become a definite possibility for the *élites of the Republic*. That would lead to loss of Centre charisma, crippling doubts about Presidential autocracy, mounting 'regional' ambitions, and the disquietude of a country which remains (Republican mythology notwithstanding) the most diverse in Western Europe.

Colombani's recommendation in *Les infortunes* amounts to the frank abandonment of manic Republicanism. He argues for a retreat from Jacobinism to a flexible 'regionalism' which he associates with Tocqueville and the traditions of the pre-1792 Gironde.¹⁰ A Sixth Republic

¹⁰ The Deputies from the Gironde region of France gave their name to a short-hand version of the revolutionary position opposed to the unitarist centralism that continued the Absolute core of France's *ancien régime* and came to the forefront of affairs during the revolutionary wars. Farther reinforced by Napoleon, it has remained there down to the present, even attaining a new peak under the Mitterrand Presidency.

is required, in other words, within which a self-governing Corsica could become a model, rather than a harbinger of loss and decline. France as just another European country, in fact, an increasingly plural small-'r' republic, rather than the navel of creation. But his book also conveys vividly the difficulty of advancing such a view in France. There is a powerful bloc of reactionaries utterly devoted to the maintenance of Republican élitism—not just their own jobs, but what those positions mean (or are supposed to mean). However contrasting their recipes may be, Left and Right can remain united on the matter of *grandeur*. Giving up on that certain (inherited, institutional) 'idea of France' would mean subordination and the same kind of defeat as dropping the metaphoric 'Great' out of 'Britain'. A spectre of prostration is then unleashed: the ascendancy of Germany, or America, or of an unrestrained capitalism ready to fall upon a divided or 'regionalized' Europe.

In short, the misfortunes of Jacques Chirac's Republic are not after all so profoundly different from those of Tony Blair's Kingdom across the Channel. There are common European themes here, which merit far more attention than those which have recently surfaced in hypocritical debates about the Euro-currency. Chancellor Brown's 'Five Conditions' for UK participation have largely been a deliberate distraction from the political problems of European Union. The distraction was necessary because no 'British' end-phase state can possibly consider a democratic Union where smaller states prevail, indifferent (or even hostile) to grandeur and Leadership. This divergence over the direction of Europe goes back to its origins in the fifties. The French and British strategies over it are of course very different—direct political take-over versus economic exploitation and manipulation from a 'wider world' stance. But both are wholly distinct from the positions of the defeated post-1945 states and the smaller or non-imperial countries which came to *identify* national projects with the emergent European polity—like Ireland, Italy, Finland, the post-Cold War East, or the aspirations of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party.

Watchdogs of the Union

The cross-Channel equivalent of Colombani's Sixth Republic would naturally be a de-unitarised archipelago—a confederation of polities including England, either as 'little England' or as a collection of farther divided countries, or regions. The SNP's long-established formula for

this is an 'Association of British States'. But here, as in France, such notions encounter an army of determined reactionary opinion. 'Britain' may be in poor shape, but its institutional apparatus of political and administrative watchdogs is still capable of a fight, and still commands plenty of resources. A 'Save the Union' movement has long been in formation in the UK, and appears likely to assume ever more ostentatious forms as New Labour failure and demoralization take their course. Among the assets of Great-British retro-nationalism are the cadres of state, a substantial part of the intelligentsia, most of the media, the personal goodwill of one nationality towards another—still widespread in the archipelago—and a very important body of opinion in Northern Ireland. Another crucial sector of opinion is that of immigrant minorities (largely in England)—not really 'pro-British' in the Unionist sense, yet unwilling to oppose it either, for fear of 'something worse', ethnic mayhem of a post-Yugoslav or Indonesian kind. A further watchdog asset is the very low historical profile of constitutional reform in Ukania. The latter of course does not apply at all in France, where in the past crises have given permanent salience to constitutional formality and the definition of citizenship. But in Ukania constitutionalism has begun to assert itself in earnest only through the problems and after-effects of devolution. And it has not yet gained enough ground to challenge the current New Labour slide back into Unwritten reverence, preservative helmsmanship and 'modernized' Monarchy.

Deindustrialized labourism

New Labour's second term in office, from 2001 to (probably) 2004 or 2005, is intended to deepen and sanctify this lapse. Observers have often noted how the 'campaign' for Blair's return to office started up on May 2nd, 1997, the day following his 'landslide' triumph. The same is certain to happen again in 2001, in farther emulation of Mrs Thatcher's extended era of power. As landslide turns in stages towards incipient débâcle, possibly aggravated by economic recession, party and media may well lose faith in Blair himself and look for alternative leadership. Chancellor Brown is the most quoted candidate, for quite evident reasons: the perfect man to 'Save the Union'. It was his adroit footwork which produced the new alignment between UK capitalism and Labour government immediately following the 1997 election, and so removed the old bone of contention between the Treasury and the City. By awarding control of interest rates to the latter, Brown ensured his government

would benefit from the continuing conditions of expansion that marked the whole 1997–2001 period. The cost of this was abandonment of Labour’s former policy of weak-kneed support and subsidy for British manufacturing and extractive industry—effectively, final capitulation to the commercial and financial interests of the City. But as a student of history Brown knew very well how futile and inconsequent such support had always been, and calculated that surrender was the better bet.

Another result of the shift was to make New Labour much more decisively a party of the English South: ‘Middle England’ became the euphemism for this, an adjustment towards heartland norms (actual or imagined) which entailed some withdrawal from the Labour Party’s old power-base in the North and the periphery. Swimming with the tide, instead of floundering ineffectually against it, promised a more solid hegemony. However, the mutation had to be ‘covered’ and justified for such a route-change to work: put more crudely, the North had to be given time to die off decently, while the New Labour authority-structure put down more durable roots in the ex-Tory South.

Elite support for simple-majority elections has long been associated with imagined ‘Sovereignty’, overwhelmingness, the accoutrements of Greatness and institutional Nostalgia. But there is another and more sordid reason for New Labour’s clinging to ‘first-past-the-post’. The party still depends upon it, above all at the level of local government and city politics. Throughout the Northern conurbations (including the Scottish industrial belt) Labourism had long been a ‘one party state’ thanks to its control and manipulation of the old electoral order. That dominance was incompatible with proportionality, or (as London was to show) with the direct election of Mayors. And the fact that these areas are now in retreat (partly on orders from Westminster) does not lessen the importance of Labourite control. Eventually the City-led strategy of post-industrialism will presumably bring a graveyard quietus to these ex-industrial zones. Until then, however—while New Labour’s successor ‘Britain’ is finding its feet—it is if anything more essential that ‘Old Labour’ stays in charge. Think-tanks and nebulous idea-projectionists may have become invaluable servants of Redemption. They alone cannot make things stick, however. The unspeakable also requires plumbers—agents of despatch and delivery, capable of pushing things through. Brown’s centrality to the Project is the way that he (unlike Blair) conjoins a smartly ignominious broad strategy with deep sensitivity to the needs of his party *mafiosi*.

A 'man of the Party', in fact, as well as of the Union. The steeds of the Undead come together naturally in his reins. Could there be a better Leader of reaction, once Project-impetus has slackened, resources have to be mobilized and enemies rounded upon?

Ghosts of PR

The stage has been set for second-term zombie come-back by a crucial first-term victory of the old Guard: the subordination of the Liberal Democrats. The Liberals were kept 'on-side' by specious assurances about 'Centre Left' common ground and an eventual, possible, timely, thoroughly considered (and of course popularly ratified) change to the way Britishers vote. In the period 1996–97, when the Blairites were anything but confident of outright victory, a different tone had prevailed. The possibility had then to be envisaged of a 'progressive' alliance with the Liberal Democrats, in case this turned out to be the sole avenue to office. Paddy Ashdown's Liberal Democrat party had been demanding electoral reform for decades, as a precondition of government—and also, as an opening towards wider constitutional changes, including even a 'federal' structure for the United Kingdom. Any such alliance would have rendered some central shifts unavoidable—that is, shifts towards democracy and the 'normalization' of both constitution and administration. 'Devolution' might then have had more principle built into it, and resembled more closely (for example) the systems already functioning in Spain, Belgium or Germany. In the most calmly balanced assessment of Blair's government so far, it is noticeable how this failure is presented. The authors, Polly Toynbee and David Walker, admit how hard it is to draw up a balance-sheet in terms of policies alone. They point out in *Did Things Get Better?* (February 2001) that in so many areas the picture has been one of hyper-activity yielding indeterminate results which (as in conventional House of Commons debates) can be 'read both ways'. By contrast, the strategic architecture of New Labour's first government leaves them no room for doubt. The objective of constitutional change via a long-term alliance with other Centre Left forces had seemed initially to be the most important element of 'the Project'—'making the twenty-first century safe for progressive forces'. But this did not fail. *It was junked* (p. 238).

Worse than that, the Liberal Democrats were unable to rebel against their fate. The supreme insult came in the run-up to the 2001

Pantomime, when Blair solemnly announced that the Project was not dead, merely in hibernation. Like joining the Euro-currency, it lay somewhere up ahead, in the haze of . . . 2003. A referendum *might* quite possibly be held then or later, on the weakest conceivable form of proportional representation. This might not be successful (given that a majority of New Labour MPs now oppose it). Or of course, it might just be junked once more, in recognition of how little Middle England appears to care for that kind of thing. The new Leader of the Lib-Dems, Charles Kennedy, was unable to do other than ‘welcome’ this pledge, albeit with trembling upper lip and many reservations. But what had made that aspect of the Blair Project instant history was of course the ‘overwhelming’ result of May 1st, 1997. An excited Redemptionism at once invaded every tissue of the ancient polity, firing new life into Crown and festering Northern pocket-burgh alike. The Old–New Party could continue to overwhelm Glasgow, the English North-east and Merseyside, as the Blair–Brown court embarked upon its re-enchantment of Westminster and the metropolis. The Liberal Democrats found themselves marginalized, and often despised, as powerless fellow-travellers—has-beens, unable to oppose the Coolness of the self-proclaimed ‘revolutionaries’, yet quite lacking in purchase over either policy or developing strategy. A futile Commission was set up under Lord Jenkins to ‘plan’ the most innocuous version of ‘P-R’ that could be unearthed . . . for possible implementation via referendum, at some inscrutable future date (etc.).

At the same time, as The Movement’s watchdogs observed events in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and (worst of all) London, an implacable campaign of resistance swelled up among them to any change of that kind. Under the leadership of Brown and John Prescott, this has become a classical campaign of reaction. Unionists who have had experience of ‘thus far’ with devolution, are if anything more determined on ‘no farther’ than was Lady Thatcher back in 79. The rules of ‘Britain’ would seem in any case to prescribe a Majorite phase for New Labour. That is, the period of bedraggled exhaustion during which High Office falls back on steady-as-she-goes, sleaze multiplies, and popular hatred of ‘Them’ again builds up towards explosion level. However, 2002–2007 will differ from 1992–1997 in a number of ways. The delay (and finally the counter-movement) over reform of the state, devolution, indecision over Europe and the likelihood of economic downturn are all injecting new toxins into an already staggering and inconsequent system. After

such a catalogue of atrocious failures and shames, its watchdogs will be forced into sterner counter-actions and reprisals—as the post-election period will surely reveal.

Last-ditch Britishry

Among the more noticeable assets of the Chancellor of the Exchequer must be counted his nationality. Not only do Scots play a disproportionate part in the New Labour government, they seem certain to have a leadership role in its reactionary turn, and in the last redoubt at present being assembled. They will without doubt be foremost in any battle to restrict, or even roll back, the devolved parliaments which many of them did a great deal to create. Why is this? It is important to remember a very general point here: the representatives of small (and often repressed) nations have almost invariably played a significant part in building up greater multinational states. Indeed they have often given them both voice and political leadership. There is no particular mystery about this. Immigrants normally have a mixture of distance from and enterprising curiosity about their host country, which can give them certain advantages. They can perceive and exploit aspects of the new home culture more readily than many natives—for whom this matrix remains taken for granted, a matter for instinct rather than access and manipulation.

Important in commerce and business, the immigrant edge probably counts most for intellectuals—and hence, in modern times, for politics as well. From the seventeenth century onwards an interface developed between ideas and political life, and grew especially important at all moments of disruption and rapid change. Revolutions and counter-revolutions were the junctures of choice here—those times when a dislocated or reformed society felt conscious need of different visions and choices. In the formation of Great Britain, this was strikingly true in and following the revolutions of the era 1640–1707—nor did it cease to hold throughout the eighteenth century. The latter would later be nostalgized as one of equipoise and stability; but in reality it exhibited (as Karl Marx observed so powerfully) a constant and ruthless upheaval, which in no sense ‘settled down’ until far into his own nineteenth century. The shaping influence of Scottish and Irish intellectuals upon that process is one of its most famous features. Empiricist philosophy and Political Economy were among their contributions to the evolving British (before long simply ‘English’) *Weltanschauung*, as in the work of Hume

and Adam Smith. After 1789, the most lasting formulation of what it now meant to be British came from the Irishman Edmund Burke. Later, the Welshman David Lloyd George was the British Empire's battle-hero of 1915 to 1922; the Georgian Joseph Stalin became the chieftain of Russia in its Great Patriotic War; Eamon de Valera was a half-Spanish American before becoming Leader of Irish nationalism; the Austrian Adolf Hitler thought he embodied the German Race; and it was a Montenegrin, Slobodan Milošević, who made himself the spearhead of Great-Serb nationalism.

The history of such transplant Great-nationalism may not yet be extinct. 'Britain' can still count on quite a sturdy transference-effect of the same sort—even though its results are now wildly different, or even opposed to that of such famous godfathers. Phony 'revolutions' like those of 1979 and 1997 have produced no new ideas (which in any case tend to arrive like thieves in the night). But they have shown a lusty appetite for pseudo-ideas. And just as (in the time of Edmund Burke) the rise of the British realm called for blueprints of advance or experiment, so its current disaggregation has a thirst for plausible mis-constructions, brazen apologias and a specious daily parade of business as usual in and around the Bunker. Defence of the unspeakable may need even harder work than speculation on Progress formerly did. The salience of Scots and Welsh bagmen among Blair's British choristers can of course also be accounted for quite mundanely. The long shipwreck of the eighties produced a disproportionate number of peripheral cadres, from those regions where Labourism survived better. This led to Welsh, then Scottish, leadership, under Kinnock and John Smith respectively. When at last New Labour was borne on the 'up' escalator, so were its many disciples and accomplices, including Gordon Brown. The inevitability of devolution was part of the same trend, favouring the national minorities over representatives of the English North or the newer immigrant communities.

But the *militancy* of the resultant tendency—its unrequited and aggressive passion for The Union—requires that another dimension be taken into account. When moving in to a host culture, immigrants sense its undiscovered potential—which in former times meant, above all, its potential for general progress or development. Individual advancement or careerism then found its place within such a perspective, as a contribution to the eclosion of (in the British case) an imperial state and ruling

class. Nowadays, what the incomers sense is a potential for the opposite: failure, latent fragility and growing disorientation. But added to this is a disconcerting lack of response (so far) from the majority. The English 80-plus per cent remains cocooned in an inherited complacency, and the style of deprecation which used to suit the United Kingdom so well. They are unwilling to take 'Little England' seriously. This gives an opportunity for identitarian preachers to step in—frequently from the periphery. Sermons on the need to Preserve the Union at all costs may sound better in a Scottish, Welsh or Ulster accent—especially now that no one would take them seriously in old-fashioned Received Pronunciation.

Psychopathologies of national life

Again, France does not have quite this problem. François Mitterrand could make his jokes about 'little Corsica', but never had to bother about 'little France'. Politically speaking no such country was conceivable. Last-stage Britishness, on the other hand, is increasingly regulated by a need to stave off Little England. The latter is a country not only conceivable, but now bearing down rapidly upon its inhabitants and knocking upon its own historical door, so to speak, in a way not likely to be long denied. When William Hague recently outlined his main ambition for the next Conservative government as being "To return this country to its people!", he was ostensibly talking 'Britain' but really speaking for England. The rhetoric remains statist and non-ethnic; but the denotation is of course angled towards an audience which has never made much real distinction between 'British' and 'English' at all.

Such insouciance is sometimes seen as healthy, or as demonstrating a sturdy indifference to narrow or racial matters. However, it has a weakness inseparable from that: what was formerly 'British' could very easily drift into signifying Englishness, without demanding much or any conversion process. Under a Hague or Portillo régime such an elision could come about via (for example) some extra Europhobia, with or even without some added resentment about devolution and Ireland. The semantic barriers between 'English' and 'British' are both low and slippery. The context is already being prepared for a general switch of this sort, by the fevers of collapse and disappointment. This has been amusingly underlined by Anne McElvoy in a recent *Independent* column. She points out that the foot-and-mouth episode abruptly revealed how hysterically ambivalent the self-esteem of 'Britain' has already become. The British

are either a Cool great power still cruising the *grand large*, or ‘the worst, the most depressed and self-abasing country going: a blasted landscape of bestial epidemics, rail disasters, fuel crises and the over-long winter’. She compares the Britannic roller-coaster with Russia (mercifully omitting Serbia from her frame of reference), as exhibiting how nervous post-imperial countries can become, as they lurch unstably from one stereotype to the other. Fate has decreed them either wondrous Great or Hell upon Earth—but never, well . . . ‘ordinary’. The latter is coming yet, for all that (she concludes):

Both [pessimism without hope of redemption and bouncy optimism] are distortions of our real situation, which is that of a medium-sized country, trying to make the best of the hand history, geography, temperament and climate have dealt us. *Live with it.*¹¹

No immigrant intellectual or politico from such thoroughly ordinary places as Scotland and Wales can fail to find all this familiar. The inferiority/superiority complex has been mother’s schizophrenia to most of them. Scotland and Wales have always been known as appalling dumps peopled by half-humans unable to ‘manage on their own’. Except (that is) when they were the greatest wee countries upon earth, responsible for nearly all inventions (including the British Empire) and capable of giving the occasional thrashing to the ‘old enemy’, on or off the sports-ground. The cringe and the chest-beating went hand-in-hand, and one was sometimes allowed to pretend this was itself an interesting way of life. But that complex also depended on believing that Britain was different—that *it* stood for durable escape from such dispiriting dilemmas of the native heath. Britishness was like the stable broader platform upon which migrants could lead sane, upwardly-mobile lives, punctuated by occasional returns to a native terrain roseate in retrospect, with a degree of distance. Now they find the platform itself collapsing—in other words, being taken away from them. Cringing and chest-thumping are spreading like foot-and-mouth. The English are ceasing to be reliably British and becoming . . . well, *English*.

This must be stopped. The logic then is that nationalism in the periphery must be arrested first, by tighter control of devolution. That will avoid what has come to be called the ‘backlash’—an unseemly and

¹¹ *Independent*, 13 April 2001.

irritated reaction from the majority. The latter is invariably imagined as a menace. The rules of 'Britain' of course inhibit any thought that Little England might be *better*, more democratic and generally more liveable than the inherited Hulk of Providence. Among peripheral Brit-missionaries this conviction tends towards the Jesuitical in its intensity. They are unshakeably convinced that Little England would be by definition narrow, powerless, despised and probably 'Anglo-Saxon' in that caustic quasi-racial sense so dear to the French. Also, it might well turn against *them*. Best banned from the drawing-room, therefore, until the Union is sufficiently revived, and the world again safe for folk-dancing. Meanwhile, revivalism must be guaranteed by ever louder proclamations and stratagems of loyalty, by the selective vindication of British achievements, snarling denunciations of 'separatism' and parochialism, and (in New Labour's case) the brutish imposition of party loyalism in the working-class ghettos.

In 1929 it was the working class, 'Mario', that rebelled against the vile hypnotist. After being impelled to kiss the fiend, in the belief he is a beautiful girl, Mario suddenly wakens up in horror and staggers off the stage. He spins round, snatches out a gun and shoots Cipolla dead. In the resulting commotion, the writer and his family leave as the *carabinieri* arrive: 'Was that the end, the children wanted to know, that they might go in peace? Yes, we assured them, that was the end. An end of horror, a fatal end. And yet a liberation—for I could not, and I cannot, but find it so!' Fortunately, in today's UK there are many Marios, of different classes and colours, all capable of political liberation from the degrading captivation of the British past, and without need of a gun.