decision was a brazenly political one, but the losers accepted it. They concluded that their best option was to wait to get their revenge at the ballot box, which they did in 2008. A civil war was never really on the cards.

There is significant empirical evidence that once societies reach a certain level of material prosperity – usually estimated at around $6,000 per capita GDP – democratic political institutions are very unlikely to be challenged by force. However much citizens in these societies may dislike the results of an election, they dislike even more the prospect of violent disruption to their peaceful lives. This threshold has only been passed relatively recently in many places that now look very stable. New Zealand, for instance, fell perilously close to it during the global recession of the 1970s. It seems hard to imagine a violent coup in 1970s' New Zealand, but it's not impossible. There were regular mutterings in Britain about the army having to take over during the dark days of the mid-1970s, though in retrospect the threat seems slightly farcical. (The plots we know about planned to install Lord Mountbatten as a de facto head of the government, which is more P. G. Wodehouse than *Mein Kampf*.) Per capita GDP in Britain in 1970 was around $10,000. Today it is $38,000. Even in present-day Greece, despite the vicious contraction of the Greek economy since 2008, per capita GDP is around $21,000 (a decline of nearly a third since its peak five years earlier). Greece is a society in deep trouble, with nasty pockets of violence. But it is a long way from civil war.

So are we safe? It would be complacent to think so. The problem stable political societies face in the twenty-first century is that we don't know what failure is going to look like. There are simply no historical precedents to go on: we have no examples of prosperous, secure, successful societies, used to the levels of comfort and material benefits of today's Western democracies, going into reverse. That doesn't mean it can't happen. It is easy to conjure up apocalyptic scenarios, such as the one portrayed in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, where an unspecified disaster reduces the United States to something even worse than the Hobbesian state of nature, complete with terrifying violence, utter lawlessness and cannibalism. (The film version was shot in parts of Pittsburgh, though by most accounts Pittsburgh is not such a bad place to live these days.) Much harder is to imagine what non-apocalyptic failure is likely to entail. This is the irony of the world Hobbes created. The success of the Hobbesian project – our emancipation not only from the state of nature but also from the threat of civil war – means that we don't really know what the alternatives are.