

Is the 'end of ideology' nigh?

THE OUTCOME of the British general election confounded the experts and not least the pollsters who consistently put the Labour Party neck and neck with the Conservatives and two points ahead during the last few days of the campaign. This fuelled speculation about the prospect of a 'hung' parliament with no party achieving an overall majority and raised Liberal Democrat hopes of a deal with Labour to form the next government.

Yet to the delight of the bookmakers and the consternation of media pundits (not to mention Mr Neil Kinnock for whom this election was make or break time) the Conservatives won a fourth term with a 21 seat majority. This is more than enough to sustain a government until economic recovery provides a platform for another test of electoral strength and a vindication of the claim that the Conservatives are the 'natural party of government'.

Why — against all the odds — did Labour lose? After all, the election was fought in the trough of a severe economic recession characterised by a mounting tide of bankruptcies, house repossessions by building societies, and an unemployment figure well over the two million which has stubbornly refused all attempts at reduction.

Major derided as a 'nice guy' lacking charisma

After thirteen years of office, cabinet ministers appeared tired and jaded with their leader, John Major derided as a 'nice guy' (but they always lose, don't they?), lacking charisma and banal in style and substance. Indeed, his flat, trite comments, invited derision from the chattering classes, e.g.: "Some vegetables I'm fond of . . . peas I'm relatively neutral about"; watching dog food being transferred from a lorry to a railway truck in a cold, dank Melton Mowbray, he remarked: "This is a very exciting use of old marshalling yards."

And if it is the case — as some political scientists have argued — that British elections are essentially popularity contests between rival brands of prime

JACK SPENCE REVIEWS THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE LEFT OF THE RESULT OF BRITAIN'S GENERAL ELECTION

ministerial leadership largely created and projected by a relentless and unending stream of television imagery, then Neil Kinnock should have won hands down. His party — it is claimed — won the campaign and by implication according to a self-obsessed media should, therefore have won the election. That it did not says a good deal about the common-sense of the average voter and the capacity to make rational choices based primarily on economic self interest, and remain unimpressed by the slick professionalism, the half truths of campaign presentation. 'Nice guys' can and do win, therefore, despite the best efforts of Conservative Central Office (appalled as they were half way through the campaign by the 'failure' of their candidate to 'project' himself) to suggest that their leader could indeed 'mix it' rough and tough with the best of them.

Confusion over taxation policy

The explanation for Labour's defeat must, therefore, be sought elsewhere. One reason was the confusion over Labour's taxation policy. Despite denials to the contrary by the Labour leadership, some 60% of the electorate (according to exit polls) believed that a Labour government would increase the tax paid by those on average earnings. Accordingly, the Conservatives targeted the great mass

of voters earning between £10,000 and £20,000 a year. More important, those who *aspired* to earn more and, therefore, remembering the past record of Labour governments, felt vulnerable to Labour emphasis on redistribution as a way of ensuring a fairer society and rectifying the damage allegedly done by Thatcherite policies to the National Health Service and the state education system.

Hence the electoral significance of 'Essex Man' who to Labour's acute discomfort was found alive and well and living in highly marginal Basildon. Here were to be found the so-called C2 class of voters — the skilled workers, the first-time owners of small businesses, many of them hard hit by recession.

Norman Tebbit, a former cabinet minister and the epitome of self-made man was their spokesman: uncompromisingly right wing, brutal in debate (not for nothing did Michael Foot dub him the 'Chingford strangler'), and contemptuous of those who whinged and whined in favour of the nanny-state. Yet paradoxically, they returned their Conservative MP to parliament albeit by a small majority. As the result flashed across the TV screens on election night, Conservative spokesmen instinctively knew that the polls had been wrong, that their leader would remain in Downing Street.

Dominated by two contrasting fears

Vernon Bogdanor, an Oxford don writing in the *Independent on Sunday* (12 April 1992) provides the most telling analysis of the significance of 'Basildon Man' and it is worth quoting at length. He recalled George Orwell's comment fifty years ago that:

The place to look for the germs of the future England is in light industry areas and along the arterial roads. In Slough, Dagenham, Barnet, Letchworth, Hayes — everywhere, indeed, on the outskirts of great towns — the old pattern is gradually changing into something new . . . (the people



there) are the indeterminate stratum at which the older class distinctions are beginning to break down . . .

Bogdanor argues that:

The 1992 general election was dominated by the competition between two contrasting fears: fear of unemployment and fear of Labour. These fears often lie at subconscious level; they are unlikely to be vouchsafed to impersonal pollsters, but may be revealed to those prepared to wait to listen . . . for voters in the new England, a Labour vote reflects the background from which they have come, a background of organised trade unionism and collective provision. A Conservative vote, by contrast, expresses an aspiration . . . to a world in which they can make decisions for themselves, free from the paternalism of trade union leaders or local councillors. The Labour leadership may have understood this, but one suspects that most Labour activists have not . . . to anyone not blinkered by ideology, there is something profoundly moving about the process of upward social mobility which Basildon represents. The ideological bastions of the left, however, lie not in Basildon and Harlow, but in Hampstead and Cambridge which see the aspirations of Essex Man as narrow and materialistic and their political representative, John Major, as nothing more than a glorified bank manager or accountant. Yet for the voters of Basildon, the profession of accountancy represents a prospect of liberation unimaginable to their East End grandparents.

Banking on a change of leader

The question remains: can Labour recover sufficiently to win the next election? Some argue that reducing the Conservative majority from 84 to 21 suggests that 'one more heave' will do it. Others put their faith in a change of leader, pointing to the solid Scottish values of John Smith, the shadow chancellor or, alternatively, the claims of Brian Could, the clever New Zealander

REDEFINING THE LABOUR PARTY'S POLICY WILL PROVE A MAMMOTH TASK IN A WORLD WHICH HAS TURNED ITS BACK ON SOCIALISM AND THE EMPHASIS ON THE FORCED REDISTRIBUTION VIA TAXATION OF A NATION'S WEALTH

whose down to earth 'colonial' style and antipathy to European federalism might well strike a chord among those (and there are many) who distrust foreigners, especially Brussels bureaucrats. But whoever emerges as the leader will face the mammoth task of redefining the Labour Party's policy and role in a world which has turned its back on socialism and, in particular, the emphasis on the forced redistribution via taxation of a nation's wealth in the name of equality and fairness.

In the 1950's and 1960's, it was possible for Socialist theorists such as Anthony Crosland to argue that the inevitability of sustained economic growth could and would lead to redistribution of wealth and income without having to impose electorally unpopular punitive taxation. In other words, decent and efficient social services could be provided for out of the proceeds generated by growth. But as Peter Jenkins has argued, in the difficult economic climate that has persisted ever since the oil crisis of the early 1970's capitalist societies are faced with the problem of how to *create* wealth not once and for all, but repeatedly through boom and depression alike as inevitable ever increasing growth of the kind postulated by Crosland can no longer be taken for granted.

Once this premise is granted, the party with the best hope of economic and presumably electoral success is the one

which puts its faith in market principles before all others. This is precisely what the Conservatives have done in good times and in bad with results which are plain to see. The last Conservative government did not — it is true — pull Britain out of the recession, but the fact that in 1992 enough voters believed that only it could do so indicates the scope of the problem confronting Labour.

Yet if the Labour Party abandons its traditional beliefs in equality, publicly subsidised state provision of social services and an interventionist role for the state, what is there to distinguish it from its Conservative counterpart?

In search of 'a big new idea'

Or, as a Labour Party leader put it, where can Labour find a "new big idea"? Some commentators such as Godfrey Hodgson point to the success with which the West German Social Democrat party transformed itself after 1959 with the adoption of the Bad Godesberg programme. This, in effect, meant an abandonment of traditional socialism in favour of a "broad-left alternative to the Christian Democrats." But the SDP



Delimitation could enhance Tory chances

never won power in its own right: between 1969 and 1983 it shared power, first with the CDU and then subsequently with the liberal Free Democrats. The latter then switched its allegiance to the Christian Democrats and the SDP has been left out in the cold ever since.

That the SDP was able for some 13 years to share power was because of an electoral system based on proportional representation and also because it had leaders of talent in the shape of Willie Brandt and Helmut Schmidt who for a variety of reasons impressed a significant chunk of the German electorate. Moreover, the German economy flourished throughout this period and the Social Democrats could rightly project themselves as efficient partners in the task of managing the economy.

Hence, in the current British context, the call for a revision of the electoral system in favour of proportional representation or, in the short term (i.e., the period before the real election), an electoral pact between Labour and the Liberal Democrat parties. But the Conservatives will not concede the first option while the electoral consequences of a Lib-Lab pact are unpredictable: some 66% of the electorate voted against the Labour Party in 1992 and many of those supporting the Liberal Democrats might desert if the price of a pact was the return of a Labour-led coalition to office.

There is a further difficulty: jettisoning traditional values might help the Labour Party win seats in the critically important south-east; indeed, Ken Livingstone, a left wing Labour MP argued that Labour's tax proposals damaged the

party's prospects among potential middle class supporters in that area. Yet Labour remains strong in the north-east, Scotland and Wales, where orthodox Labour ideology still holds sway.

It is by no means certain that their supporters in those areas would be easily reconciled to an abandonment of traditional attitudes in favour of a platform which stressed that Labour's fitness for office rested *solely* on its capacity to manage a capitalist economy more effectively than its Conservative rivals. But this may be the price which the Labour Party will have to pay for electoral success in a world which has seemingly accepted the thesis that 'the end of ideology' is nigh.

On a more mundane level, changes in the delimitation of constituencies via the mechanism of a Boundary Commission before 1995 are likely to increase the chances of future Conservative success.

Finally, a comment on the role of the polls and the intrusiveness of television in the campaigns. The two are connected if only because poll findings determined

years away from any real contact with the voters who when they did appear on our screens were incessantly shuffled about by their minders to provide sound bites and photo opportunities.

Who was manipulating whom is a good question, but the impression of an unholy alliance between the media and the politicians gathered strength as the campaign progressed.

In the event, one wonders whether the highly charged televisual nature of the rival campaigns made any difference to voters' choices. The voter did what he/she always did, that is mark the ballot paper in the privacy of the voters' booth and succeeded — either by accident or by design — in misleading the prying questions of those who organised exit polls. As E.M. Forster remarked "Two cheers for democracy!"

The Conservatives won 43% of the vote, the Labour Party 35% and the Liberal Democrats 18%. The polls failed to register this crucial difference probably because the swing between the parties they did detect was not uniform across

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the day to day electoral strategies of the parties. (A good example of this tendency was the emphasis during the last week of the campaign on the prospect of a hung parliament which the polls predicted, thereby compelling the politicians to spend hours debating the merits of such an outcome to the exclusion of key policy differences between them).

Invoked at the daily party press conferences, poll findings on the party's current standing and the electorate's attitude on key issues set the agenda for what appeared to be an exclusively media discussion. The politicians seemed light

the country. In fact, the swing often varied considerably between one constituency and another, between one region and another. Thus, as one observer put it: "The polls may well have been an accurate reflection of the views of the samples interviewed, but not of the electorate as a whole".

The politicians and the pollsters will in future do well to remember G.K. Chesterton's lines:

"Smile at us, pay us, pass us;
but do not quite forget.

For we are the people of England,
that have never spoken yet."

People's education

possible, rather than merely gargantuan. NEPI must juggle the imperative for quick results with the need for depth of research into both practical and philosophical areas; quick fixes all too often rest on shaky foundations.

If the process takes too long its deliberations may become irrelevant; if it is too shallow its policies will not hold

up in the long term. Too much emphasis on values might mean too little on their practical application; too much emphasis on economic factors could mean "People's Education Inc." "People's education" should not be lost in the stampede to table policy proposals; at the same time, the concept requires resolution before it can serve as a basis for policy.

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