



### THE AMERICAN POLITICAL CAROUSEL

The British Left has usually been content to mix indifference and puzzlement in its attitude to political events within the United States, especially the country's electoral politics. While an event like Watergate roused an atypical interest, the motive was largely *Schadenfreude* that Richard Nixon finally seemed to be receiving his just deserts. On the other hand, the apparently endless series of primary contests that lead to the American Presidency tends to be seen merely as a contrived method of allowing one of several rich men with similar views and backgrounds to emerge as the winner of a dubious prize. However, such perspectives are short-sighted and perverse. Even the zaniest sections of the American Left (see, for example, Hunter Thompson's reportage of the Nixon-McGovern contest in 1972) know that — even if the existing political system cannot produce the optimal candidate — it does matter who occupies the Presidency. The office does permit very considerable independent initiative, most obviously in the field of foreign policy, and even in domestic policy a moderate President has veto power over illiberal congressional initiatives, even if his chances of any truly radical domestic policy formulations are likely to remain restricted by a more conservative Congress.

The current primary campaigns in the

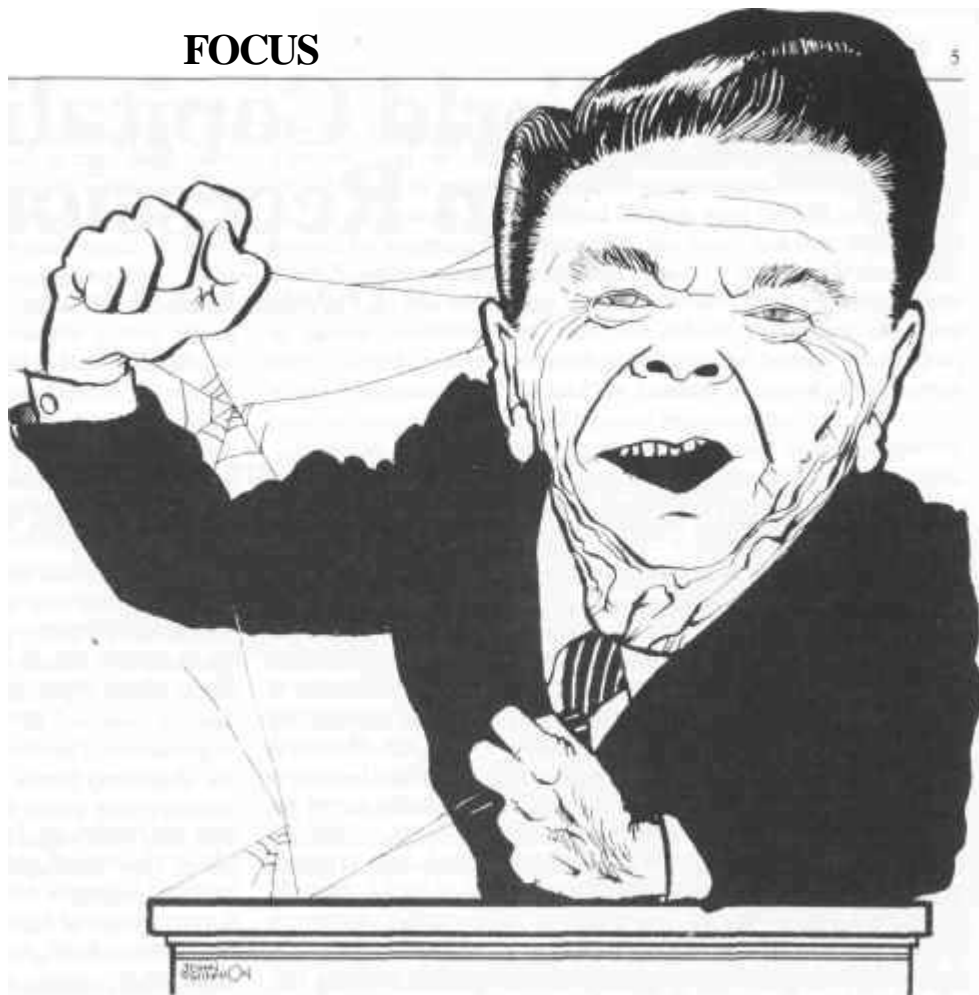
United States are therefore important because success and failure in the primaries are going to be the mechanisms by which the successful candidates emerge and the unsuccessful are left by the wayside. The motive behind the dramatic increase, especially since 1972, in the number of direct Presidential preference primaries was largely local boosterism, since states with presidential primaries gain a period in the national limelight, though one indirect consequence of this mushrooming of primaries was that great personal wealth has become a *sine qua non* of presidential ambition. Still, wealth was always a prerequisite for success in national American politics and it remains true nonetheless that there are sufficient differences of viewpoint and policy among at least the major Democratic Presidential contenders for the British Left to show an interest in the outcome.

At the time of writing, Senator Edward Kennedy's chances of obtaining the Democratic nomination look particularly uncertain. Ever since President Carter's emergence into the national limelight before the 1976 contest, the latter has managed the not inconsiderable public relations coup of passing himself off as some sort of latter-day Cincinnatus called by national exigencies to high office from an honest yeoman farmer existence. Perhaps the mildly facetious nature of the farm product with which he is associated has enabled him to do this; certainly the growing of peanuts is less immediately seen by the public as the agribusiness activity it really is than the cultivation of some other farm products might be. Kennedy, of course, is being forced to woo a very different sort of national electorate from that of his native Massachusetts, which — it will be recalled — was the only full state carried by George McGovern in the 1972 Presidential debacle. Within Massachusetts Kennedy has been able to draw together into a single personal Democratic voting bloc two major demographic groupings. The respect that Roman Catholic voters have for Kennedy and his family has stopped many of them from deserting his liberal Democratic candidacy to the extent that such desertions happened in other parts of the country. Furthermore, a large and (compared to the nation as a whole) relatively liberal middle class in Massachusetts has over the years approved of Kennedy's stands on issues such as the Vietnam war and the attempt to create a system of national medical care. In New Hampshire Kennedy's voters were particularly attracted by his positions on medical care, energy and inflation policy and

there is plenty of opinion-poll evidence that such issues strike a powerful resonance with the national Democratic constituency. On the other hand, Kennedy himself is widely distrusted for his supposed personal deficiencies and there is compelling evidence that the same national electorate has strong views on the sort of issue upon which President Carter has based much of his appeal: an aggressive defence posture by the United States, increased defence spending, the re-introduction of national service, and a 'no-nonsense' foreign policy. Kennedy, who has distanced himself from Carter, on such issues, is likely to face considerable difficulties against an incumbent President with the advantages of present circumstance that Carter has.

Brown of California, remains something of an enigma. The highly publicised spartanism of his life-style and his views on budget-balancing are not perhaps inconsistent and his biography is uncontaminated by office in large corporations. His governorship of California since 1974 has included controversial legislation on farm policy and the elimination of oil depletion allowances, which are a form of tax break to oil companies. In any case his campaign is a balloon being floated for the 1984 contest rather than a serious attempt for the 1980 nomination. He seems unlikely to emerge from the fray this year.

The difference between the two major contenders in the Republican camp are perhaps more subtle but are not without probable significance. Ronald Reagan's political odyssey from liberal democracy to the extreme right is well-known. In the latter part of his acting career he developed strong links with General Electric, whose sponsored television programme, 'General Electric Theatre', he supervised, hosted and sometimes acted in during the early 1960s. His current business interests include ranching and horsebreeding. His general orientation is clearly more traditionally isolationist and Cold War-inspired than that of his major rival, George Bush. At the beginning of the present campaign Reagan had obviously been nervous about repeating Barry Goldwater's 1964 experience of winning the nomination through the support of a highly conservative Republican primary-election vote, only to see his conservatism scare off the national electorate as a whole. However, Reagan's success in New Hampshire and the subsequent changes in his campaign staff have shown that he is now prepared to adopt a more extremely conservative stance in the short term in order to win the Republican nomination. The recent sacking of his campaign manager was



widely reported as a consequence of the disquiet and pressure of his aggressively right-wing supporters, the most public of whom is Senator Laxalt of Nevada. Reagan presumably hopes, if he actually wins the nomination, to be able at that point to trim his image to a more centrist one in order to woo the national electorate and avoid the fate suffered by Goldwater. One can only shudder at the prospects from this self-serving opportunism.

Still, misgivings are equally appropriate in considering his till recently successful opponent. Trading on Reagan's reputation as an extremist, George Bush sought to portray himself as some sort of moderate and to repress certain embarrassing aspects of his highly conservative political record and personal background. Bush was born in Connecticut and attended fashionable Eastern schools. His university training was in economics. Bush himself moved to Texas after World War II, though his father, a prominent investment banker, was Senator from Connecticut from 1952 to 1962. In the 1950s Bush held offices of vice-president and president of corporations engaged in oil extraction and petroleum production. These activities made him a millionaire. He was defeated in races for the United States Senate from Texas in 1964 and 1970, but from 1966 to 1970 he sat in the House for the state's highly conservative Seventh District in

Houston. However, in addition to his corporate background and his office-holding within the Republican establishment (he is a former chairman of the Republican National Committee), he has further facets that suggest he might pursue rather different foreign policies from those of Reagan. Bush's Presidency would probably see the overt resurrection of the principles of Kissingerism. Bush is most widely known as a former CIA director (in itself not without significance, of course), but he was also the United States Ambassador to the United Nations in the Nixon era and — perhaps a greater key to his likely foreign-policy posture — he was first chief of the American liaison office in the People's Republic of China from 1974. A Bush Presidency might well mean an overt return to Kissinger's type of foreign policy with respect to the Soviet Union and China that was based upon the premise that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', a principle whose consequences can be some often very perplexing international alignments.

*Contributors: Alec Gordon,  
Chris Husbands, Robert Walton*

#### **Apology**

In the March issue, Cathy Porter was spelt wrongly and so was the title of her just-published book *Alexandra Kollontai*.