

Discussion

Thatcherism - a new stage?

Paul Olive



Andrew Gamble was clearly right (*Marxism Today*, November 1979) to point out the difficulties Margaret Thatcher was to face in her attempt to shift the Tory Party onto a path different from that it has taken since the 1940s.

But his article could be read as arguing that her new direction did not make as wide an appeal as has been argued elsewhere; and that her General Election victory is therefore rather fragile.

The Government's harsh economic policies are certainly making many Tory MPs nervous for their future, as well as turning her lead in May into a Labour lead in the opinion polls earlier in the parliament than usual.

Some of the evidence Gamble gives, when looked at more closely does not back his contention that Margaret Thatcher's May 1979 victory represented less electoral support than the Tories won in the 1950s.

He argues that the 1979 election represents only a partial return to Conservative domination, and compares it with the 1955 election. He says that in 1979 the Conservative Party won 43.9% of the vote, compared with 49.7% in 1955. (That was the year of the highest Conservative vote since 1935, and thus very favourable to his argument; but that is by the way.)

In using these figures he, like *The Times*

Guide to the House of Commons, includes Ulster Unionists as Conservatives in 1955 but counts all Irish votes as non-Conservative in 1979.¹ This is not comparing like with like.

To arrive at his 1979 figure of 43.9% he also includes the Irish votes in the figure he uses as a divisor. Dividing the Conservatives' vote by the total cast only in those countries of the United Kingdom where they stood, increases their percentage.

Excluding Northern Ireland entirely on both occasions, and using figures for Great Britain only, gives the Conservatives 49.3% in 1955 and 44.9% in 1979. This is a difference of only 4.4% compared with Gamble's 5.8%.

Of course it is true that the loss of the Ulster Unionists is a setback for the Conservatives, but Gamble already refers to this elsewhere in his article.

The loss of a geographically distinct ally (which is what the Unionists have always essentially been) is not the same as a loss of votes for the core of one's own party. The political complexion of the Protestants of Northern Ireland has not shifted from reaction to neutrality.

Different processes would be involved in regaining the lost ground, and Thatcher could attempt a rapprochement with the Unionists without altering 'Thatcherism' one

iota. The Government's proposal to give extra Parliamentary seats to the province may be a straw in the wind here.

The Liberals

The second respect in which Gamble's comparison of 1955 with 1979 exaggerates the Conservatives' relative popular success in the former year is his ignoring of the changed scale of the Liberals' contest.

In 1955 the Liberals stood in only 110 constituencies, whereas in 1979 they stood in 576. (In neither year did they stand at all in Northern Ireland.)

Their 1955 vote was only 2.8% of those cast in Great Britain. If they had stood in a further 466 seats, they would have won at least some votes: they averaged 15.1% where they contested, so perhaps it is safe to allow that they could have reached 5% in another 466 seats. This would have given them a further 3.8% of the Great Britain total.

It is often argued that in the 50s and 60s the Liberals took two votes from the Conservatives for every one they took from Labour. To be safe, let us suppose that this 3.8% split 2.2% Conservative, 1.2% Labour.²

Thus, in order to attempt to compare like with like, we should reduce the Conservatives' 1955 vote by 2.2%, to 47.1%. This is only 2.2% greater than the 1979 figure.

Since popular support for a particular orientation is only crudely represented in electoral statistics (the first-past-the-post system, for instance, leads to the support for all minor parties being much understated) this difference seems of little significance. The voting figures, for what they are worth, do not therefore suggest that Thatcherism in 1979 has a narrower appeal than 'Toryism' in 1955.

¹ *The Times Guide* contains many errors, witness the double-sided sheet of errata insert into my copy.

An analytical article in it states, for example, that the Tories suffered a swing against them in Scotland of 0.7% last year, whereas in fact there was a swing in their favour of the same size, as a table two pages earlier makes clear. In his article Gamble repeats this error, which seems likely now to become part of the mythology of the Thatcher election.

² Note that this point is not at all the same as arguing that Tory votes lost between 1955 and 1979 have gone in increased support for the Liberals. If I were arguing that, a fair reply would be that wherever the votes have gone, they were no longer cast for the Conservatives.

My point is that if election figures are to be used to estimate changes in popular support, some adjustment must be made to the crude figures to make them comparable.