



### SCARLET OR BLUE?

The County Council elections are over and the consensus of most commentators seems to be that — with the possible exception of a performance in London that was less impressive than many had expected — Labour has done very well and, on the basis of their success, should be a shoo-in in a forthcoming general election? How justified is this interpretation? How well do Labour's results compare with those of May 1979's general election, which are a more realistic basis of comparison than are those of the previous set of County Council and GLC elections in May 1977? It will doubtless be recalled that Labour's performance in that year was so appalling that an improvement this year was almost inevitable; in the parlance favoured in American politics to describe electoral disaster, in 1977 Labour 'lost dog-catcher'.

The source of the Labour government's midterm lack of popularity had been its failure to control inflation and the cost of living. In the middle period of the last Labour government's office living standards declined absolutely, a decline that coincided with the deepest unpopularity of the Callaghan government. When the rate of wage increases began to exceed that of the cost of living, the popularity of the Labour government improved, despite the fact that the rate of

unemployment advanced more or less steadily upward during the 1974-79 period. In fact, opinion poll data collected between these dates showed that the public was usually much more concerned about the cost of living than it was about unemployment. It became something of a cliché among political commentators at the time that increases in the rate of unemployment were not a source of government unpopularity because, even if the rate increased, most voters were not themselves unemployed and had no real fear of becoming so. An extension of this argument was that, in any case, the employed had little sympathy for the unemployed, often suspecting the latter of being 'work-shy'.

Whatever the facts on the matter in the past, this seems no longer to be true and the change is one that ought to be beneficial to Labour. A mid April poll revealed that 72% of the electorate felt unemployment to be the most important problem facing the country today; only 11% of those sampled mentioned the cost of living in this respect. Moreover, as many as 71% of these interviewed felt that the Government was not handling the economy properly; 17% thought the opposite and 11% did not know. Only 24% of the electorate approved of the general performance of the Government and a slightly higher figure of 30% were satisfied with the job Mrs Thatcher was doing as Prime Minister. Did Labour's electoral performance in May this year really measure up to the expectations to be derived from this political situation?

The answer concerning London must surely be a negative one. True, Labour won the Council but they certainly cut it rather fine. The Tories had a majority of 36 in 1977 when they won during the Labour government's period of unpopularity. Labour could manage one of only eight. The next general election will almost certainly be fought in London on a reduced number of constituencies with different boundaries but the outcome over the whole of London of a general election fought on present boundaries (which undoubtedly favour Labour marginally) is unlikely to be very salutary. On the basis of the two-party swing from May 1979 to the recent GLC contests, Labour would win back only eight of the nine London seats won in October 1974 and lost by May 1979 (Woolwich West and Ilford North were lost in by-elections and not regained in May 1979). In addition, Labour might gain Hornsey but it would lose Norwood if the exceptional swing against Ted Knight in the GLC contest were to be repeated.

The net outcome in London might be a return to something worse than the October 1974 situation and, if the anticipated

redistricting of present constituencies in London has taken place, Labour would be further disadvantaged. Moreover, some of the recoveries by Labour would be very narrow ones on the basis of the 1979-81 two-party swing in its favour. Ealing North, for example, ought in a general election to return to Labour on a swing of only 1.3%; in the GLC contest the swing to Labour compared with May 1979 was a modest 1.9%. Fulham would revert to Labour on a swing of 1.9%; the 1979-81 figure was 3.4%. In Lambeth, of course, Labour had a particularly difficult campaign, hurt by the media's attacks on Ted Knight in Norwood, a ratepayers' revolt concentrated in the south of the Borough and the intervention of 'spoiler' Social Democratic Alliance candidates in Lambeth

Central, Norwood and Streatham. The 1979-81 two-party swing against Labour was 10% in Norwood and 7% in Streatham, the Vauxhall figure of 3% to Labour was well below the inner London average, and the pro-Labour swing of only 1% in Lambeth Central was one of the lowest among seats where the Labour vote was not being simultaneously squeezed by a successful Liberal campaign, as was the case in Croydon South, for example. Indeed, if the swing against Labour in Norwood were to be repeated Borough-wide in next year's Lambeth Council elections, the outcome in terms of seats would be something like a dead heat between Labour and the Tories.

There are a number of disconcerting aspects about the spatial distribution of pro-

*Many Tory election posters were altered by persons unknown with stickers carefully matched for style and colour.*



Labour swing since May 1979 throughout Greater London. According to one school of 'swing theorists', measures of absolute percentage swing should be numerically larger — assuming uniform gain — in constituencies where the party favoured by overall swing has less support. Thus, if Party A is in general ascendancy throughout the whole electorate but at the start of the contest has only 20% of the votes in a particular constituency, it has scope to 'convert' among the large residue of 80%. Say, it holds all its earlier vote and then 'converts' a tenth of this 80%; this is 8% of the total electorate, giving Party A a new level of support of 28% of the constituency total and a swing of 8%. The same logic for a starting point of 80% of a constituency electorate would produce an absolute swing to Party A of only 2%. This scenario entirely collapses in the case of the 1981 GLC results. The big pro-Labour swings, while doubtless encouraging to see, were in places where they would be of little use for the purpose of winning seats from the Tories. The safest Labour seats, particularly in the east of London, where Labour suffered large vote losses in 1979 without actually losing (eg, Barking, Dagenham, Stepney & Poplar, and Hackney South & Shoreditch) had 1979-81 swings to Labour that often dramatically exceeded the Greater London average of slightly over 5%. In seats in east London north of the river this swing approached 9%. In places that are to be seen as marginal on the basis of the 1979 results the Labour swing more or less equalled that of Greater London as a whole, whereas Labour's gains were very small in the safer Conservative seats, even those where the Labour vote was not being simultaneously squeezed by a strong Liberal challenge. Clearly, the electorate's response to the unpopularity of the Conservative government is not uniform; instead, the results suggest very considerable class polarisation in present London voting patterns.

Labour therefore looks unlikely on the basis of its recent London performance to manage a working parliamentary majority. What chance then is there that it can more than recover from this by making disproportionate gains elsewhere in the country? Despite the devastating nature of Labour wins in some of the County Council contests, the gains in support relative to 1979 are not always sufficient to justify total optimism. Some of the highest pro-Labour swings relative to May 1979 were, as in London, in seats held by Labour in 1979. The three Manchester constituencies of Ardwick, Blackley and Central, for example, had swings of 9 to 10%. In the east and west Midlands swings were also quite substantial

in many Labour-held seats; eg, around 7% in the two West Bromwich seats (complicated by Liberal successes in the East constituency) and 6 to 7% in the three Leicester seats. However, the results were not always so encouraging in those constituencies that Labour would want to win back to attain any sort of majority or in those safer Tory ones that it would also want in order to have a good working majority. Thus, Labour would certainly win back Birmingham Northfield and Yardley as well as, though less comfortably, Selly Oak (all lost in the May 1979 trauma). However, on the basis of the County Council results, Labour would not regain Audrey Wise's former seat of Coventry South-West. Among the safer Tory seats in the Birmingham area Labour would be a long way from winning Hall Green (which would require a two-party swing of slightly over 10%). Manchester Withington, needing a swing of less than 5% for a Labour win, looks a far from certain gain on the basis of the County Council results.

A few, though only a few, of Labour's poorer performances can be laid at the door of interventions by a variety of 'Social Democratic' candidates, even if they were supposedly not 'real' Social Democrats with the imprimatur of the Jenkins-Owen-Rodgers-Williams cabal. The Social Democratic Alliance, for example, won 10.6% in Lambeth Central, 15.0% in Norwood and 14.9% in Lambeth Vauxhall, all contests that included Liberal candidates who were well beaten into fourth place. The general success of Social Democratic candidacies is more difficult to gauge: the winning of a seat on East Sussex Council by a well-known personality in Brighton's Hanover ward was in a no-Liberal contest. There are examples of Social Democratic intervention against the three conventional parties where the upstart achieved some success: 10.6% in Hall Green ward in Birmingham, or 23.2% in Lichfield's Burntwood Chase ward — one a solid Tory seat and the other a Labour gain. Still, recent opinion polling has recorded a substantial decline in hard-core Social Democratic support from the artificially high levels discovered at the time when the new party was launched.

The Communist Party, as far as Greater London is concerned ran sixteen candidates in the ninety-two constituencies. The most successful results were in Southall (2.7%), Hackney Central (3.8%) and Hackney North & Stoke Newington (2.6%). The Southall constituency was not fought in 1977 and in Hackney Central the Communists' percentage in that year was only 1.9%. The Communist candidate fighting the barren terrain of the NF heartland in Hackney

South & Shoreditch managed 2.2% of the votes cast. The Communist Party did not fight this constituency in 1977.

On the far Right, the NF and three of its disputatious progeny, the New NF, the Constitutional Movement and the British Democratic Party, ran various candidates — in some cases, as in several London contests, against each other. In general, their support was small, but the NF still managed over 1,000 votes (6.3% of those cast) in Newham South and in The Abbey ward in Leicester, a long-time NF stamping ground, the two-candidate BDP slate including Reed-Herbert averaged over 6%.

What must surely come from the results as far as Labour is concerned is the party's continuing 'image problem' among much of the electorate, of which the Norwood result was only the most conspicuous demonstration. The fact remains that, given the Tories' unpopularity and the electorate's general disapproval of the Government, Labour ought to have done rather better. The 'running-in' period of Michael Foot's leadership is now past, but only 21% of the electorate in mid-April were satisfied with his performance as Leader of the Opposition, a smaller figure in fact than approved of Margaret Thatcher's performance as Prime Minister. On the other hand, 60% felt David Steel to be doing a good job as Liberal leader. Further testimony to the power of the media to shape the electorate's perceptions of the political parties is that 87% saw the Labour Party as 'divided' but — despite months of comment and discussion in the more informative sections of the press about Cabinet splits, 'wets', possible 'U-turns', and so on — only 48% thought this of the Conservative Party. If the Tories' lack of popularity continues to deepen, Labour should reap future electoral dividends. However, if — as is not unlikely — the mid-term trough of the unpopularity of this Government has been reached or has bottomed out, Labour will be in trouble. An unpopular government still has a number of options to restore itself to some semblance of favour and, even if Mrs Thatcher is stalwart enough to adhere to her policies to the point of political perdition, large sections of the Tory Party may not share her single-mindedness. A U-turn, a modest reflation of the economy by the Government or, if Mrs Thatcher shows herself unwilling to move in this direction, a judicious leadership coup in favour of a Macmillian-style Tory, could still see the Tories returned at the next general election.

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