

**Unemployment is seen as easily the most important issue in Britain today. . . but Mrs Thatcher rides on in the opinion polls**

## Christopher Husbands Unemployment and Politics



In December 1981, according to the estimate calculated by Tebbit's recently changed and controversial method of measuring unemployment, the official number of unemployed in Great Britain was 2,662,900, a rate of 11.6%. In January 1982, according to the Gallup Poll, 72% of the electorate thought that unemployment was the most urgent problem facing the country; at the same time electoral support for the Tories stood at 27.5% and that for Labour at 29.5%.

In December 1982 the official number of unemployed in Great Britain was 2,984,700, a rate of 13.1%. In January 1983, according to the Gallup Poll, 79% of the electorate thought that unemployment was the most urgent problem facing the country; at the same time electoral support for the Tories stood at 44% and that for Labour at 31.5%.

There are other paradoxes about the recent relationship between the level of unemployment and government popularity. In January 1982 76% thought that the government was not doing enough to stop unemployment rising; in November 1982 the percentage was 70%, only marginally lower. In January-February 1982 89% of the electorate felt that reducing unemploy-

ment was an extremely important issue; 10% felt that the Tories were particularly good on this matter, a far larger 42% felt Labour was, while 34% did not know. By November 1982 an equivalent 88% thought that the reduction of unemployment was an extremely important issue; a slightly increased 18% thought that the Conservatives were particularly good for this, 41% thought Labour was, and—as at the beginning of the year—about a third (32%) did not know. Further, one has to go back to the middle of 1980 to find a time when the issue that is supposedly the Tory government's 'success story'—the control of inflation—was seen by the public to be a more urgent problem than the reduction of unemployment, the issue upon which this government has demonstrably failed.

### Received wisdom

For a long time it was received wisdom among political scientists and econometricians that there was a close relationship between the rate of unemployment and the popularity of a government. One of the most unequivocal recent assertions of this relationship comes from Frey and Schneider,<sup>1</sup> who concluded from an analysis of quarterly data between the last quarter of 1959 and the

final one of 1974 that an increase in unemployment by 1% reduced the government's lead by about 6%. If one applies this estimate of the effect of unemployment to the current economy and electorate, it means that an increase of about 227,000 in the number of unemployed would lead to a net switch of about 950,000 voters from Conservative to Labour—many more, it should be noted, than the number directly afflicted by the increased unemployment.

Of course, whatever the situation of the 1960s and early 1970s—the period upon which Frey and Schneider base their conclusion—the more recent relationship between unemployment and government popularity has ceased to be so simple. The parallel nature of this relationship began to break down in the early 1970s, during the 1970-74 Heath government, and it departed emphatically from its earlier pattern during the 1974-79 Wilson-Callaghan government.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bruno S Frey and Friedrich Schneider, 'A Politico-Economic Model of the United Kingdom', *The Economic Journal*, LXXXVIII (June 1978), pp 243-253, esp pp 246, 250.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Husbands, 'The Politics of Confusion', *Marxism Today* (February 1982), pp 6-12, esp p 9.



In fact, trends in the cost of living became much the most significant determinant of government popularity during the 1974-79 period and, perversely, the popularity of the Labour government over its whole term of office actually tended to be greater when unemployment was higher! It was during the last part of the Labour government's term, when the rate of unemployment was indeed higher but when Labour had recovered somewhat from the depth of its mid-term unpopularity, that larger proportions of the electorate—although still only around 25% to 35%—were mentioning unemployment as the country's most urgent problem.

### The Thatcher government

There is evidence of the effect of unemployment upon voting in the May 1979 general election, in particular among that minority of the electorate who had had direct experience of it. There was a national Conservative-to-Labour swing of 5.2% on that occasion but among those who had experienced unemployment during the previous two years (or whose family had) the figure was 14.5%,<sup>3</sup> meaning at a minimum that about 300,000 voters may have turned against Labour in 1979 specifically because of this.

Yet, whatever the general relationship between unemployment and government popularity in the middle and later 1970s, the loss of support for the Thatcher government

in the months after its election seem attributable at least in part to the simultaneous and dramatic increase in unemployment, accompanied to be sure by a substantial rise in the rate of inflation. Unemployment had apparently come back into its own as one important determinant of government popularity, not just through its influence upon those directly afflicted but also more generally throughout the electorate, there seemingly being a threshold above which a large proportion of voters (even those not personally affected) were unwilling to see unemployment rise without delivering a condign punishment to the government. Until the early months of 1982 this was an eminently plausible interpretation; however, its credibility has subsequently been confounded by the later upward trend of Tory popularity and by its persistence at a higher level even months after the Falklands war.

### Why the change?

A number of explanations are on offer to account for the recent pattern. Among some observers, particularly in sections of the Left there is a predilection to favour the overdetermining effect of 'the Falklands factor', but others have sought to confront this question with an intrinsic explanation. For example, despite the size of the majorities in the data already quoted who believe that the government is not doing

enough to stop unemployment rising, various commentators have argued that the public is now fatalistic in its attitude to unemployment, believing both that this government is not to be held especially responsible for the recent rise in unemployment and also that, because of the inherent intractability of the problem, there is in any case very little which this or any other government can now do to reduce the current level significantly. Indeed, for many on the Left, two of Thatcherism's major ideological achievements are, first, its successful resort to beguiling homilies about being cruel only to be kind in order to win public exoneration of blame for the drastic rise in unemployment since 1979 and, second, its undoubtedly persuasive use of spurious international comparisons for sustaining the notion of intractability in order to excuse its complete failure to reduce unemployment.

### What people think

However, there *are* problems with both central pillars of this argument. First, a poll conducted by Marplan in November 1982 found that 23% thought the government mainly to blame for the prevailing level of unemployment and a further 35% thought it was quite a lot to blame—a total of 58% of the electorate unwilling to grant it absolutism.<sup>4</sup> Second, although Gallup has regularly found that about two-fifths of the electorate say they are willing to tolerate higher unemployment 'during a period of adjustment', solid majorities (58% in August 1982, 57% in November 1982) do claim to deny the inherent intractability of the problem, seeing it instead as something that a government can solve if it really tries to apply the right measures; 35% and 36% respectively saw it as a problem that no government can really solve. Thinking that a problem can be solved of course in no way precludes a simultaneous belief that any solution must inevitably be a long term one. Indeed, only 24% of Gallup's respondents in September 1982 thought any drastic reduction in the present level of unemployment would occur during the next five years, while 31% felt that five or more years would be needed. It is also true, however, that a substantial minority—as many as 29%—felt that there would never be any substantial reduction and 16% did not know.

One of the few pieces of evidence that is perhaps partly consistent with a qualified attribution of fatalism to the public is the generally low esteem in which most people hold the various purported policies for reducing unemployment that are currently on offer from the major parties. In their November 1982 poll Marplan found that

only a minority (30%) thought even Labour's policies would significantly lower unemployment; 49% thought they would not and 21% did not know. Attitudes towards the respective policies of the Tories and the Alliance were even more negative or uncertain. However, this reported attitude towards Labour's policies differs a little in its import from analogous Gallup findings quoted earlier—perhaps for technical reasons related to question-wording.

### The Thatcherite argument

In any case Minford and Peel, the former a well-known Thatcher apologist, have recently gone further than merely imputing fatalism to the electorate. They claim to have rebutted much of the earlier research on unemployment and popularity, that by Frey and Schneider in particular, by attributing to voters a sufficient understanding to be ready actually to 'reward' the government for the present level of unemployment because of a supposed awareness of greater negative consequences of alternative economic strategies.<sup>5</sup> Voters do not 'punish' Mrs Thatcher, so runs their argument, because 'they could have decided that this government's economic policy offers a better long run hope for dealing with unemployment,

### constituencies with especially high unemployment rates are already Labour held

perhaps because its inflation policies have worked'. Minford and Peel do also allow for non-economic issues ('the Falklands factor', 'Labour's drift to the left') but their interpretation still neglects an awkward question of why a sudden increase in voters' understanding of government economic policy apparently coincided with the Falklands war. Further, their argument is not immediately reconcilable with Gallup's finding in November 1982 that almost three-quarters of the electorate felt that the Government was not doing enough to stop unemployment rising.

### Labour seats and unemployment

Riddell has presented a set of data whose implication is that Labour may have very little electoral advantage to gain from the current high unemployment because constituencies with especially high rates are already Labour-held, whereas those that it might hope to win tend to have lower rates.<sup>6</sup> There is some initial plausibility in this perspective. There are not all that many Tory-held marginal seats with particularly



high rates of unemployment, and even fewer where the number of votes needed to overturn a present Tory majority is less than the likely number of unemployed Tory voters of May 1979 who are available for conversion. One of the few seats that fits this latter description is Paddington, with a Tory majority in 1979 of 106 and, according to the 1981 Census, an unemployment rate of 13.0% among its economically active population.<sup>7</sup> Labour's task will in any case be that much harder because, at least in London, the unemployed are less likely to be registered<sup>8</sup> and perhaps also to vote than are the electorate as a whole. Clearly, when the effect of unemployment upon voting is assessed from the perspective of individual's direct experience of it, it is unlikely to be a significant vote-winner for Labour.

### Unemployment as a general issue

However, this is not always the correct viewpoint to adopt when analysing the effects of a political issue, even one such as unemployment of which only a minority of

individuals in the electorate have personal experience at any given time. It is appropriate now to recall what was said earlier about the conclusion of Frey and Schneider concerning unemployment and government popularity—that a change in the former may lead to switches of vote among a far larger number of voters than those directly

<sup>3</sup> Ivor Crewe, 'Why the Conservatives Won' in Howard R Penniman (ed), *Britain at the Polls, 1979: A Study of the General Election* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1981), p 279.

<sup>4</sup> David McKie, 'Dominant political issue is jobs — poll', *The Guardian*, 23 November 1982, pp 1, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Minford and David Peel, 'Why the voters still love Mrs Thatcher', *The Guardian*, 12 January 1983, p 17.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Riddell, 'Jobless levels match party areas', *Financial Times*, 4 January 1983, p 24.

<sup>7</sup> Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, *Parliamentary Constituency Monitor, South East (part), Greater London* (London: Government Statistical Service, 1982), Tables E and F, pp 10, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, *Electoral Registration in 1981* (London: OPCS 1982); see also *The Times*, 17 December 1982, p 2.

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affected. In fact, one can distinguish at least three levels on which an issue such as this can have an electoral impact. The lowest, and usually the least electorally significant, is of consequences occurring only among those directly and personally affected.

On the second level, an issue may affect voters not so much because of their own experience but because they see it and its associated consequences among their immediate family or friends, or in their locality or area of residence. There is some potential for unemployment to have effects on this level. Gallup reported in January 1982 that, while 13% of their respondents were 'directly affected' by unemployment, a further 18%

were in a family where another member was so affected; a total of 35% thought that they or a member of their family would be affected by the rising unemployment. In Gallup's November 1982 poll the respective figures were 11%, 19% and 40%. The most general, and most electorally significant, level of impact is of consequences from an issue that largely transcends voters' experience, either personal or at second hand, and has electoral effects far beyond those individuals affected by it or close to it.

**The Left's task**

In the past unemployment has clearly been an issue with an impact at this most general

level. At the moment 'the Falkland factor' is, regrettably, of the same sort. Labour's task then is to work to expand the electoral significance of unemployment beyond that minority of the public with personal experience of it—in other words, to seek a return to the situation on this issue that prevailed in an earlier period of the Thatcher government. This will not be easy. Labour—and the left more generally—has to convince the electorate not only that unemployment is a major political issue but that it can do something about it. Popular campaigning — including the forthcoming Peoples March for Jobs — is obviously crucial to this.