



Column

THEY SAY that people were bored during the election, and that two in six months was altogether too much of a good thing. But for me at least elections still retain something of the excitement of the first one in

which I ever participated, which was at the age of 11 in the great Cardiganshire by-election of 1921. A remote Welsh rural constituency for a moment held the fate of Lloyd George and his government in its hands, and the eyes of the entire world were upon it. I cannot have enough of elections, and often wish I were a citizen of the United States, which seems to have elections of various kinds almost every day. What I find boring is not elections themselves but the televised version of them; for me, television is a kind of vampire, sucking all the blood and life out of the electoral process, and leaving only the dry bones behind.

Indeed, I found this last particular election more than usually fascinating because of the seriousness, complexity and difficulty of the issues involved, and most of all perhaps because of the almost insoluble problem of how in the end one ought to cast one's vote. Fortunately, almost at the last moment the matter was decided for me. On the eve of the poll I was walking home, when out of the gathering dusk, thickened by a slight mist from the river, I heard a voice monotonously repeating: "Vote for Peter Walker! Vote for Peter Walker. Peter Walker is against the Common Market! Peter Walker is against the Common Market!"

It was the loud-speaker van of the Labour Candidate in my constituency and, as in a sudden moment of illumination, all my doubts and hesitations were swept away. So crude, so peremptory, so negative an appeal to the most primitive instincts of the electorate disqualified any candidate, it seemed to me, from discharging the duties and responsibilities of a Member of Parliament, and left me no choice except to vote against Mr Walker. Even so, my hand trembled as I marked my ballot paper in the morning; but the memory of that voice in the darkness resolved my doubts, stiffened my sinews, and brought me to the sticking point.

On this occasion, Mr Walker was defeated, but only by the narrowest of margins. I like to think that his eve-of-poll appeal made all the difference. Perhaps when in the distant future the time comes for Mr Walker's obituary to be written, it will be

sufficient to inscribe on his tombstone as a compendium of his political beliefs:

He was against the Common Market

PEOPLE LIKE MYSELF, who as long as they have voted at all have voted consistently and almost automatically for the Labour Party, do not easily change their allegiance. But I would hazard the guess, having no opinion poll on the subject to guide me, that last month more people did, both ways, than in any previous election. Nor could anyone be blamed for being confused and perplexed. The prospects before us, if contemplated in a calm moment, are so bleak that no single party can safely be entrusted with our future. Perhaps that is why at the last moment Mr Heath played the card of "National Unity", and it very nearly took the winning trick; but he played it too late, and in any case he was unable to tell us what we should unite about. What was worse, the form of unity he offered us was one which, by their own wish, excluded the trade unions, and this was the kind of unity which nearly everyone, thinking of the winter ahead, wished to avoid like the plague. It might have been quite different if the winter was over.

Mr Heath also suffered from a different kind of handicap. Throughout his political career, his public image has been essentially that of a combative, aggressive character who knows his own mind and is determined to have his own way at all costs. "Tough" and "abrasive" were the adjectives journalists liked to apply to him. Indeed it was for these very qualities that he was elected to the leadership of the Conservative Party; it was felt that he was the kind of man who had the weight of armour to engage in mortal combat with Mr Harold Wilson and come out undamaged. But in this election he chose to emerge as the conciliator and moderator, the man who could reconcile conflicting purposes and interests; and the reversal of roles was too sudden and too much for him.

It was not the implausibility of the change that mattered. We have come to expect our politicians to be men for all seasons. It was quite simply that Mr Heath possesses none of the tricks of the actor, which enable him to play one part just as well as another, however different, and which have become even more essential to the politician since the invention of television. Mr Heath is totally lacking in those arts which are part of an actor's stock in trade: timing, sensing the mood of the audience, convincingly fabricating emotions which he does not have. In the role of the Great Conciliator he was singularly unconvincing, as if Harold Lloyd had been cast as Hamlet.

In any case, the role itself was misconceived. In British politics, policies of "National Unity" are not a successful means of reconciling sharply

opposed views, such as today divide Conservatives from Socialists or Liberals, or all of them from Nationalists or Ulster Unionists. They succeed only when divisions of opinion have become irrelevant in the face of some simple common purpose, which preferably can be expressed in a minimum number of words whose meaning is clear to everybody, such as *Save the Pound!* or *Down with Hitler!* or *Chamberlain Out!* There is no such issue on which the country, or a large majority of the country, is united at the present time. For *Fight Inflation!* is not yet a slogan which suggests a clear and simple idea to anyone, least of all those who are supposed to know about the subject. There are even large numbers of people, organised in large and powerful unions, who suspect, perhaps rightly, that inflation may be a very good thing for them at the moment, whatever it may cost their neighbours.

MR HEATH, THEREFORE, not only suffered from being a bad actor; he also suffered from having a bad part, and under such circumstances what is remarkable is not that he failed, but that he came so near to success. One doubts very much whether his successor, whoever he may be, will come anywhere so near.

For, after all, in the election Mr Heath was not fighting anything so abstract as Inflation. He was fighting something much more tangible and identifiable, in the person of Mr Harold Wilson, who must now be accounted one of the most formidable personalities ever to appear in British politics. Ducking, crouching, weaving, side-stepping, he is as hard to hit as Muhammad Ali at his best; and to this he adds the killer-instinct of a Jack Dempsey. When Harold attacks he goes for the jugular, unless it is to deliver some devastating blow below the belt, for where he is concerned politics are strictly a no-foul contest, in which nothing is barred. I can think of no politician in Britain who could go three rounds with him, except Ted Heath himself, whose record stands at one victory and two narrow defeats on points.

But to this impressive armoury the Prime Minister also adds other qualities which are no less valuable. He is, for instance, as Mr Heath is not, by nature a conciliator and mediator; no one who was not could hold the Labour Party together as he has done. One might even say he is a trimmer, always a sure guide to success in politics. But he prefers to conceal this under the guise of a man of principle and of dogged, bulldog tenacity. *Fortiter in modo, suaviter in rem* is his motto, and it has served him well. For Mr Wilson has precisely what Mr Heath lacks, all the gifts of the actor to whom any part is easy and welcome. He

can be a clown as well as a tragedian, the Man of Destiny as well as the wise elder statesman, the cautious pragmatist as well as the bold revolutionary. There is not a character in his widely assorted Cabinet which he could not play better than the original. During the election, he added one more role to his repertoire, as Team Manager and Coach, who likes the boys and girls to show their paces, himself in the background, smiling, benign, and encouraging. And all these parts he plays to perfection, with an evident enjoyment of his own performance which somehow makes him endearing even when he is most odious. Only rarely does the mask slip, as when Mrs Shirley Williams blurted out that she would leave politics rather than take us out of Europe; and for once we were privileged to see Mr Wilson disconcerted and at a loss. Something had gone wrong with the stage directions. But it was only for a moment and he made a quick recovery. The show must go on; and did.

This is the Protean, Janus-headed, quicksilver character whom Mr Heath's successor will have to contend with. I do not give him much of a chance. But then, it is not so much his enemies as his friends whom Mr Wilson has most to fear; or if friends is the wrong word, his colleagues and associates. And even they are not so much a danger to him as the objective facts of the appalling situation in which he now finds himself, and we with him. For while Mr Wilson has always shown an unsurpassed mastery in handling the personal aspects of complicated and difficult political situations, he has been notably less successful in resolving the concrete social and economic problems in which they have their origin. He is a superb manipulator of personalities. Brute facts seem to resist, even resent, his magic touch.

IT WOULD, OF COURSE, be absurd to discuss the election in purely personal terms, though in some ways nothing could be more personal than British elections. That is part of their charm, and why opinion polls find it so hard to get them right. And there was all the more temptation to view the last election in terms of personalities because the most serious issues facing this country, including of course the European Market, were largely excluded from it. It was as if the election were played out on an artificially restricted stage, on which the protagonists for that reason loomed all the larger.

There was, for instance, the temptation to think that if only Mr Wilson, on the basis of the so-called Social Contract, could persuade the unions to exercise wage restraint, then all would be well; at the very least, we might stay warm through the winter. This was in fact the basis of

Mr Wilson's campaign, and perhaps the most alluring and deceptive promise which he held out to the electorate was that the election of a Labour government would be followed by a period of "peace and quiet", in which the electorate might go happily about its own business without bothering any further with the dissensions of bickering politicians. I myself have no doubt whatever that this was precisely what the great majority of the electorate wished to hear, and that such a promise, however veiled and vague, did more than anything else to win Mr Wilson his majority.

There is, however, equally no doubt that this is a promise which cannot be fulfilled. Indeed, probably no one except Mr Wilson would have the effrontery to make it. For the truth of the present situation is that Britain at the moment is faced not by one crisis but by two, of which one is domestic and is to a limited degree under our own control; and the second is external and is the result of factors on which we can, on our own, exercise no influence whatever. Of the two crises, the second is by far the most urgent and severe. It faces the bourgeois-capitalist world, to which after all we belong, with the threat of a total collapse of its monetary arrangements, with mass unemployment on a scale not experienced since the Great Depression of 1929-33, and a progressive restriction of its access to the sources of raw materials and energy on which the system

depends. What is more, the immediate world crisis is only a pale reflection of the even greater pressures and strains to which the system will in the long run be subjected as a result of the explosive growth of world population and the additional demands this imposes on the natural resources of the planet. Such pressures have already made themselves evident in large areas of Asia and Africa, in which starvation is no longer a threat but a reality, and in all probability a continuing one.

It is a sign of the insular parochialism of British politics today that such problems were not allowed to play any part in the October election. So far as they were, it was in the form of a promise by the Government that within a year we should be offered the choice at the ballot box of retreating even further into Isolationism, and it is significant that no party cared to make of this a vital electoral issue. Perhaps this was due to an underlying feeling that since we can do no more about the world crisis, and its consequences, than (say) Abyssinia or Bangladesh, we might as well not think about it. But if this was so, it was yet another mark of how far we have declined from any aspiration to be a world power, either on our own account or in association with the peoples of Europe, who by now offer us our only chance of exercising any kind of effective control over our own future or the world's.

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