
Editorial Comments

THE GENERAL ELECTION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The General Election dealt a severe blow to the Left. The Tories achieved the biggest swing since 1945. Labour polled its lowest share of the votes since 1931. And the Tory majority of 43 is, in parliamentary terms, a secure one.

Clearly, the Left has got some difficult but crucial questions to ask. The debate has already started: what it all means, however, is going to take some time to sort out. It must and will be part of the struggle against the new Tory government—to make it as short-lived as possible.

The Tory campaign was one of the most political campaigns witnessed since the war. Thatcher sought to focus on a series of quite fundamental questions—including the relationship between the state and the individual, the merits of the market economy, law and order—and in the process *not only* to change the direction of British politics but *also* to challenge many of the central post-war achievements of the labour movement. The Tory campaign, indeed, underlined the character of the shift to the right that has taken place in the Tory Party with the rise of Thatcher and the “radical right”.

The Tory campaign struck a chord amongst many people. And the extent of the Tory victory confirms what many have argued, namely that a significant shift to the right has taken place amongst the British people. Its nature should not be oversimplified: the Tory vote cannot be reduced to a simple endorsement of Thatcher's policies. The motives were complex and mixed. But we must not ignore a key central fact: a mass, popular right-wing base of support is now being carved out in British politics. That is a new situation.

The Labour Party suffered a big defeat. After five years of Wilson-Callaghan government this was perhaps hardly surprising. The record speaks for itself—on unemployment, living standards, the social services and so forth. The consequences of right-wing leadership and policies are evident. But if we leave it at that, we will underestimate the dimensions of the political crisis now facing the labour movement after what is likely to prove an historic defeat.

Since the mid-sixties, the term of politics in Britain have—in response above all to a deepening economic crisis—been widened and transformed. New issues and new problems have developed: urban decay, racialism, nationalism, unemployment, etc.

Hitherto, neither the Tory Party nor the Labour Party have really looked like meeting the challenge posed by this new and complex political climate and mood. The erosion of the two-party system was one indication. The arrival of Thatcherism and the highly political nature of the Tory campaign suggests that this situation may now be changing.

Labour has, in contrast, conspicuously failed to respond to this challenge. Indeed, we have seen the steady degeneration of Labour governments over this period (let alone compared with 1945)—from the “white-hot technological revolution” to the almost “business as usual” appeal of Callaghan's latest campaign. This, moreover, has been accompanied by the decline of the Labour Party as a popular political force—in terms of its share of the vote, membership and public activity.

This process has not been allayed by the growth in influence and strength of the trade union movement over this period. Indeed, while the working class has, crucially, succeeded in resisting many of the economic attacks that have been made on it over the past decade or so, it has not, by and large, been politicised in the process: in fact, the opposite appears to be the case as the decline in size of the Labour Party and the Communist Party indicates.

The failure of Labour since 1964 has witnessed—indeed has been one of the reasons for—the growth in influence of the Left within the labour movement. While both the Communist Party and sections of the Labour Left have made big advances in both policies and perspectives. So far, however, the Left has failed to emerge as a major popular force and influence amongst the people. The election results bore this out. The Labour Left appears to have done no better nor worse than the Right and Centre. Similarly the Communist Party's own vote on average fell. The Left clearly therefore, has to ask questions about its own performance: “blaming right-wing policies” will not suffice.

The problem of how the Left can emerge as a popular political force—in the communities, on the estates, in the workplaces—is clearly a crucial one. At the moment, it remains too internalised within the labour movement, and too propagandist in its outlook. It has to find the ways of making popular interventions which involve people in struggle and which effectively counter the appeal of the populist right. The Left's alternative, it must be emphasised, is not just about policies, or resolutions, it must also, crucially, be about popular struggle and aspirations—on the gamut of problems facing the British people.

An important question which this raises is the all-round character of the Left's alternative. This still tends to be seen mainly as an alternative economic strategy. Yet one of the lessons of the Tories' campaign was its overall political character and appeal. On too many questions—like law and order, the problem of state bureaucracy, the crisis in the welfare state—the Left does not have much to say—and this also includes some key economic problems like taxation. For the Left to emerge as a popular force means elaborating an all-round political alternative. The development of the left along these lines is crucial to the future of the labour movement as a political force and central to the revitalisation of popular politics—around the Labour Party and the Communist Party—in the working class.

These, of course, are only some of the questions raised by the General Election. And these can only be very partial responses. As suggested before, one of the key problems is for the Left over the next period to confront what went wrong, why it lost, what it all means. Already, before the Election, *Marxism Today* has been attempting to tackle some of the underlying questions. In particular, it is worth recalling Eric Hobsbawm's article on "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" (September 1978) and Stuart Hall's article on "The Great Moving Right Show" (January 1979). We will now need to look at a whole range of issues raised by the Election. We intend over the next period—hopefully commencing in September—to carry a series of articles attempting to do just that.

THE RHODESIAN ELECTIONS

Even before the holding of the April elections in Rhodesia, much of the aura had disappeared from the fact of them being the first in which the Africans were voting in the

country's history. For there was no hiding the fact that, being the child of the internationally-condemned March 3, 1978 agreement, the elections were nothing but a further attempt on the part of the internal settlement leaders to entrench minority rule.

Many of the claims that the elections were "free and fair" not only ignore the fundamentally unchanged nature of the oppressive regime, but seek to base themselves on the much-talked about 64 per cent voter turn out. However, close analysis of the factors surrounding the elections reveals the artificiality of that percentage. It is known for instance that before polling took place, the Rhodesian Ministry of Information circulated a document briefing employers on how to get their black workers to vote. Secondly, the mechanism for preventing multiple voting was capable of being circumvented and Reverend Sithole, one of the internal leaders, has alleged that some people not only voted more than once, but that others started voting before polling was declared open.

Thirdly, non-indigenous agricultural workers, coming from the neighbouring countries, who form the majority of the agricultural labour force in Zimbabwe, were asked to vote only in the April elections and not in future ones. Finally, the existence of martial law over 92 per cent of the country lightened the burden of Rhodesian troops and private armies of compelling people in areas not yet under the control of the liberation forces to vote. All these factors were manipulated to produce a result conducive to the continuance of white minority rule. The emergence of Bishop Muzorewa surrounded by Chief Kaiser Ndiweni, at the head of an ethnic group, and Reverend Sithole, disgruntled at the election results, ensures that the future pattern of politics will rage around tribal and personal lines giving the white minority the crucial influence and power of a peace maker. Unanimity among the 72 black members of parliament is thus virtually ruled out, but in the unlikely event that it is achieved, the white-dominated bureaucracy could always find ways of nullifying whatever decision has been handed down.

The United Nations Security Council recently voted 12-0 (France, UK, USA abstaining) declaring the Rhodesian elections null and void and calling on UN members to accord recognition to the regime in Salisbury. However, the prospect of a British-sponsored recognition has been improved by the arrival

of a Tory government under Margaret Thatcher. The new Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Lord Carrington, has said that he intends to show more sympathy towards the Rhodesian regime than the former Labour government. This change of attitude could largely hinge on Lord Boyd's report which might provide the rationale for precisely this change of policy on Rhodesia.

However, the Tories' insistence on the six principles suffers from a fundamental defect. It is an undeniable fact that in the whole exercise, the African people were denied the opportunity, granted to the white population in a previous referendum, to say whether or not they accepted the constitution under which the so-called Zimbabwe-Rhodesia will function. The white population voted overwhelmingly for the constitution and the reason for their action is not difficult to ascertain. Virtually all the 12 chapters and other provisions of that constitution are entrenched, requiring cumbersome and complicated procedures to change them. This near-impossibility of altering them is directly linked to the fact that the constitution as a whole ensures that power will continue indefinitely in minority hands. One of the mechanics of specifically ensuring this is through the provision of commissions and public offices contained in chapter 6. Appointments to such sectors of state and government machinery as the judiciary, statutory corporations, public services, prison services, police force, defence forces and others are to be made on the recommendation of these commissions which are established for specific sectors. The members of these commissions are selected and in making their recommendations, will proceed in accordance with criteria which few Africans can satisfy owing to the historical effects of racial discrimination. It is thus not difficult to understand why the African people were not asked to say whether or not they accepted the constitution. The issue was presented to them in the truncated form of choosing the 72 black members of parliament.

SPECIAL PATROL GROUP

The death of Blair Peach, and the injuries suffered by scores of anti-racists from the truncheons of the Metropolitan Police Special Patrol Group, deserve total condemnation. The failure of the then Home Secretary to set up an impartial public enquiry into the causes of the Southall violence, was all too typical

of a Labour government which on too many occasions pandered to a media-inflamed "law-and-order" lobby. When coupled with the first major act of the new Tory government—the second substantial pay-rise for the police in a year—Merlyn Rees' inaction seems to have set the tone for one of those regular bouts of police adulation which sometimes fill both editorial and letter columns of the right-wing press.

Yet the Southall affair—vicious though it was (and unique in some respects in the post-war period)—needs to be put into perspective. Not just because of the particular nature of the provocation offered by the National Front, in an area already sensitised to racist attacks, but also because it may be misleading to read too much into that action by the SPG, in treating it either as a one-off attack by a bunch of uniformed thugs or, alternatively, as the thin end of the wedge on an increasing tendency towards police violence.

It is probably fallacious to regard the SPG as representing any fundamental change in police organisation. The growth of such units has been associated with police responses to the crises of the late sixties—ranging from Vietnam protests to concern over the level of street-crime. What basically happened in that period was for local police chiefs to standardise and, more importantly, (shades of Sir Robert Mark!) publicise, existing operational units. While the key initiative taken by police commanders was to provide them with more technological apparatus and an increased freedom from centralised control.

Historically, such units have always been available to police chiefs. Long before there were flying columns of pickets, there were flying columns of police, ready for action in whatever quarter industrial and political dissent broke out. The Liverpool and Metropolitan forces were especially notorious for their willingness to send special squads of police officers to other police districts. What has changed over time are the titles of such units. For example, recently, primarily because of internal criticism, the Merseyside Police Task Force was abolished (its Superintendent transferring directly to head Police Community Relations!) and an Operational Support unit formed in its place—but with an equally ill-defined and roving commission.

Again, at Southall as at Grunwick, one must recognise the internal contradictions within policing and the hostility of many

rank-and-file police officers and a substantial number of senior officers to special patrol groups.

In other words, in considering how to combat the present role of such units, we must recognise that police forces are not monolithic in structure. On some occasions, it is true, public protest is the only vehicle. When Thompson in the *Secret State* recounts the resignation of Sir Charles Warren of the Metropolitan Police in 1889, he emphasises the importance of the public uproar that arose after the "Bloody Sunday" in Trafalgar Square where Warren's police had savagely crushed a demonstration.

On other occasions, protest against police action can only succeed when based on a tacit, if unacknowledged alliance between fractions within the police and outside groups.

Those contradictions, which clearly should not be exaggerated, offer some hope of making police actions more responsive to democratic pressures. In provincial areas, electoral control over the police is negligible in substance if not in form. In the Metropolitan area, the police have always functioned as a direct arm of the state, without any intervening democratic master.

Yet basic to policing in mainland Britain is not coercion but consent. Where inequality is embedded in legislation, police actions which draw attention to those hidden relations, threaten the basis of that consent.

Actions by the SPG let the side down. Violent behaviour by other police officers, during the course of a demonstration, can be explained away as resulting from occupational strains. But violence stemming primarily from one particular unit is less easy to justify—even to a favourably disposed press—and senior police officers are aware of this threat to their consensual image.

Given Whitelaw's prospective law-and-order campaign, little can be expected of the state. But public protest does not necessarily fall upon stony ground within the force—if only for self-interested reasons. The death of Blair Peach is a vast over-payment for such a result but, given sufficient public pressure, the SPG is hardly likely to escape from the affair totally unscathed.

LIVELY COMMUNIST CONFERENCE

A lively and highly successful international theoretical conference on "Revolution and Democracy" was held at Tihany, in Hungary, from April 25-27. Organised by the Central

Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and *World Marxist Review*, it was attended by some fifty comrades from 39 Communist and Workers' Parties in Europe, Asia and the Americas.

The proceedings were organised differently from most previous international meetings. They were calculated to promote the fullest and freest debate around the themes of the conference. No main report was either delivered or circulated. Each participant was invited to submit a paper in advance to be distributed but not read to the conference.

After the opening of the conference by Miklos Ovari, of the Political Bureau of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the gathering divided into two commissions. The first, chaired by Sandor Lakos, director of the Hungarian Party's Institute of Social Sciences, dealt with the internal aspects of the subject. The second, concerned with the international ones, was chaired by Ib Norlund, of the Secretariat of the Danish Communist Party.

The papers submitted by Bert Ramelson and Monty Johnstone, representing the Communist Party of Great Britain, which reflected the conceptions of the revolutionary process and socialist democracy found in *The British Road to Socialism*, gave rise to very keen discussion in the first commission. The debates there centred around methods of bourgeois rule, the extent to which bourgeois democratic institutions can be transformed before capitalism is overthrown, the question of socialist pluralism and the assessment of existing socialist countries. The position taken by the British Communists, along with many other Western Communist Parties, on the right of capitalist opposition parties to exist within the law was particularly strongly disputed by some participants and equally strongly defended by others.

In the second commission, there were lively debates on the relation between international conditions and specific national roads to socialism, including problems concerning the Common Market and the EEC elections. Whilst present Chinese foreign policy and particularly the invasion of Vietnam were unanimously condemned, there was controversy over the assessment and characterisation of the present regime in China.

Extracts from the conference discussion will shortly be published in *World Marxist Review*. It is also intended to publish the full stenographic record in book form.

A New Look at China

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The "one hundred and eighty degree" turn which the Chinese once accused the Russians of taking has been performed in Peking, in every significant area of domestic policy, since the death of Mao Zedong. Of this I have no doubt after visiting China in October-November 1978 and looking closely at the most important of these areas (particularly education and labour relations). The general reader will, I imagine, have gained much the same impression from what has been reported—often quoting directly from the official New China News Agency—in the Western press.

This does not answer the question "What is happening to socialism in China?". It could be, as the Chinese now officially claim, that they are correcting a fundamental distortion which occurred during the Cultural Revolution. (This is blamed exclusively on the "Gang of Four", led by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, (Chiang Ching) although it is clear that the whole Cultural Revolution—and indeed the entire period since the Great Leap Forward is now viewed very negatively). Or it could be, as a few friends of China outside the country have claimed, that we are now witnessing a "Great Leap Backwards" from the clear course for the socialist transition which was charted by Mao (even if there were some "shortcomings") during the Cultural Revolution¹. My own view is that to take sides—either side—is merely to add to the already considerable mystification of the real situation. An attempt is being made in China, and has been made for many years now, to build a form of socialist society under extremely difficult conditions which were largely created by Western imperialism. Both the difficulties which already existed and the distortions which have since arisen are numerous. Some may appear inevitable; others less so. At all

¹ See particularly the arguments of Charles Bettelheim, *China After 1930* (Monthly Review Press 1978). Bettelheim, the renowned Marxist economist who had been vastly impressed by the Cultural Revolution, resigned as President of the Sino-French Friendship Association after the new course was adopted by Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping.

events, anyone who is genuinely committed to a socialist future in Britain or anywhere else in the world should study the Chinese experience patiently and undogmatically to see what light it throws upon problems of the transition which are not by any means exclusive to China.

The "180 degree turn"

A quick summary of the main changes in policy since Mao's death (September 1976) is necessary to provide the background. The effect of these has been to reverse almost all the achievements claimed for the Cultural Revolution which the ultra-left "Gang of Four" faction had earlier labelled as "newborn things" that should, on the contrary, be carefully nurtured.

(a) The system of reward for labour during the Cultural Revolution had virtually done away with all forms of material incentives (eg quotas and bonuses) except for the basic variations in the wage scale—an eight-grade scale for workers in state industry. Piece-rate payment was also replaced throughout the state sector by wages calculated purely on time. In collective agriculture, where the "production team" or other unit of collective account shares out the profits of its own labour, the trend was towards less recording of detailed "work points" for each individual member, and more mutual, periodic assessment by the group as a whole.

In autumn 1978, after some hesitation, bonuses were restored to Chinese industry with quotas being set either for the individual worker or for the small work-group. About 30 per cent of the Chinese labour force (excluding agriculture), engaged in heavy manual labour or in the production of hand-made goods, returned to piece-rate payment. A system of "penalties" for poor performance was under discussion, and in some cases fines were already being levied on individual workers who were persistently late or had damaged equipment, and on enterprises judged to suffer from poor management.

(b) The "revolution in education" which had been the first purpose of the Cultural Revolution has