

FULL OF SOUND AND FURY -- THE ELECTION 2005

Alfred Sherman. *The Salisbury Review*. Summer 2005

The 2005 General Election will bring little comfort to conservatives. With few exceptions, the campaign was fought by all main participants along traditional post-war **Butskellite** lines — what government could do for people — as though **Thatcher's** aspirations and achievements had never existed. The Conservative party's campaign turned its back completely on **Thatcher**, her ideas and her person, though she had come from behind to win three elections in a row. One of the most striking figures of modern British history was 'unpersonned'. They are thereby a party without a history; what future does this presage? Though government spending, taxing and borrowing are squeezing the public till it hurts, all the Conservatives could promise was not that the **gadarene** rush would be reversed, but that its rate of increase would be marginally slower than that planned by Labour. The Party's deputy chairman, a successful businessman, was sacked and de-selected as parliamentary candidate for answering in response to a planted question that Conservative plans for cutting state expenditure might eventually be more ambitious than the four billion promised by the Conservative leadership, well within the margin of error.

True, the Tory leadership raised the question of immigration control, but persevered with the myth that immigration had been good for Britain and that it might continue only provided that it were controlled. The thought that mass third-world immigration had been a disaster from the outset, which a large part of the indigenous population senses, was outlawed. As a result, Labour was able to promise comparable immigration control without specifying what, if anything, this would mean in practice. Tones and Labour alike discussed immigration in economic terms only, totally excluding the consideration that the integrity of the British nation is under threat. No one raised the question of the nation which had exercised generations of Conservatives, up to and including Margaret Thatcher. Fear of attracting accusations of racism limited intellectual boldness on this issue.

Apart from promises to improve public services, a concept rarely defined, the major issue in the election campaign was the Iraq war. Since the Conservative leadership with honorable exceptions had jumped on to the war bandwagon and found no way of dismounting, the fall-out of anti-war feeling was shared by the Liberal Democrats, the Labour-Left

and Moslem activists. There was no definable Conservative voice on this issue, or on foreign and defence policy, or on the European question, which had traditionally loomed large in Conservative exchanges. **UKIP** belied its earlier promise, and indeed contributed to the size of the Labour and **Libdem** majorities. Small wonder, then, that the election campaigns generated little heat or light. The forty percent of the electorate, who had abstained twice, including a couple of million who had previously voted Thatcher, did so again, in spite of the innovation of mass postal voting with its overtones of fraud, particularly among Asians. With a working majority of over sixty, Labour is in a position to plan its third term, with in-fighting and a swing to the Left.

The Conservatives have more fundamental questions to ask: what do they stand for in the twenty-first century? The election did not materially alter this situation, elections do not create ideas but display those that already circulate. One might well begin with the electorate, which constitutes that environment within which the parties operate at any given time. Socialism makes socialists, that is, dependents. While the State directly consumes forty percent of the **GDP**, and controls even more than that, this means that many electors are in a relationship of direct or indirect dependence on the State. Ten per cent of the electorate are members of third world minorities, mostly **bom** labour supporters. Conservatives have been divided for over half a century on how to relate to the domination of the socialist State. For most of the time, a majority has favored huddling close to Labour on the apocryphal middle ground, which as experience shows tends to move to the Left. A minority has sought to place 'clear blue' water between them and Labour. So whenever Labour changes course, the two Conservative phalanxes scurry in opposite directions. The election reproduced **this** syndrome.

As **Thucydides** remarked long ago, when people and policies conflict, words change their meanings. The euphemism 'one nation conservatism', which has nothing to do with the British nation and little with conservatism, has given way to '**modemisers**', which seems to mean 'back to 1945'. Under Howard, the majority of Conservatives sought a distinctive Conservative stance, albeit not too Conservative, while a minority sniped against Howard from the rear. His half-hearted admonitions against

uncontrolled immigration, whose malign effects are visible to the public, was denounced anonymously by colleagues as 'nasty', or worse.

The election campaign highlighted the consideration that though Howard had made great strides towards fitting the Conservatives belatedly for the tasks of opposition, they are far from impressing as an alternative government for the early twenty first century and a period of Labour ascendancy. Howard is not to blame. **Thatcher** was followed by an interregnum, which calls for strong original leadership to supersede. This could not be achieved in the **mn-up** to elections; it is a major undertaking. For better or worse it will coincide more or less with the choosing of a new leader, which may be fraught.

What kind of Britain do we want? What should the role of the State be? Our membership of the EC is a divisive issue, but can we afford to continue shirking it? What do we do about ethnic minorities who are in effect privileged? What does 'British' mean, and what should it mean. Can devolution be halted half way? Must we reconcile ourselves to de-industrialisation? Is heavy government assistance for lame ducks, like British **Leyland** and its successors, good or bad? Can we sustain a **welfariat** of its present size without serious economic, social and political consequences? For a long time, major questions were shirked. That was a luxury which we can no longer afford. When Howard raised the matter of immigration, the socialists and unpatriotic establishment attempted to shout him down with accusations of racism or negativism, aided by anonymous voices from inside the citadel. The conflict was fought to a draw. The issue survives the elections and must be fought to a finish, making the Conservatives spokesmen for the patriotic silent majority. The issue of national identity must be argued out; it can no longer be left to be taken for granted, as it was.

Since the end of the Second World War, the issues of job creation and immigration have been the target of confusion, some of it deliberate. Governments have simultaneously spent vast sums of money directly and indirectly in job creation and job saving, while importing or encouraging the immigration of

labour on grounds of labour shortage. This is nonsensical, but critics have been silenced by accusations of racism. The issue was dealt with **tangentially** during the election campaign; it deserves to be argued out rationally, and conclusions applied. Can we keep uneconomic industries going at the expense of healthy taxpayers? Does this overcrowded land need yet more people? Have not successive governments bitten off more than they can chew in the way of managing the economy?

Almost the only foreign policy issue raised during the election was the Iraq war. But it must be seen as a sub-set of a much wider issue: what should be the criteria for British foreign and defence policy in the early twenty-first century? Should we take on the role of world policeman? Should we spend men and money in Cyprus and Sierra Leone? Do we need a European army? To fight whom and why? Should we allow either Washington or Brussels to order our armies into battle, to kill and be killed?

All participants talked about crime, but no one has said anything. Is penal policy the main issue? Why do people commit more crimes? How does penal policy affect crime? What has made our society less civic, and can we do anything about it? Until recently, socialism was a major issue dividing the nation; it now divides the Labour Party. The Labour party has grown a new persona; the Conservative party in turn is torn in two directions. Labour's strength lies in the fact that it is a movement first and party second. The Conservatives began as a cabal, then became a party. For most of their existence they knew what they were against, and that was sufficient. It no longer is. The lesson of the 2005 general election is that conservatives, with upper or lower case, must explicitly spell out what we stand for. We have the time and the will to do it.

Sir Alfred Sherman 's book Paradoxes of Power:

Reflections on the Thatcher interlude was published last month (Imprint Academic)