Comment

Confronting the Thatcher theology

It is true, of course, that British general elections are not likely to enthral our many overseas subscribers, and, as far as our home subscribers are concerned, the election of 11 June is now long gone, and the voting itself was, in any case, pondered on in last month's *Comment*. Nevertheless, that election, returning Mrs Thatcher to power for a third term, raises questions about which there is still plenty for us to say. As was remarked in this column just after the election, the fact that she has a majority in the House of Commons that could keep her in office until 1992 signals the continuation of certain changes in British culture and society which are bound to concern a Christian journal such as this. But how, precisely?

The first thing to note, for home as well as overseas readers, is that, for all her 'landslide victory', Mrs Thatcher does not govern Britain with the consent of the majority of the people. Voting is not compulsory in Britain and only 75% of the electorate actually went to the polls. Of those who did vote nearly 14 million supported Mrs Thatcher (42% of the votes cast)—but nearly 19 million electors voted against her party. Counting the abstentions, then, Mrs Thatcher has the active support of just under a third of the British electorate.

Of course there is nothing odd about this in British politics. In Wales and Scotland, as it happens, the electoral system worked greatly to Mrs Thatcher's disadvantage. With over 700,000 votes cast in their favour, for example, the Tories were left with ten MPs in Scotland, while Labour, with less than twice as many votes, won fifty seats.

Such data should persuade any rational person of the need for electoral reform, but, as we all know, it will not come for many years. The present system has been workable, more or less comfortably, because governments have tacitly allowed for the strength of the indifference and outright opposition to their cherished policies. The other major party has long been treated as being capable of providing the next government. For all the undoing of one another's legislation on various matters, changes have seldom been attempted that would enrage and estrange great numbers of people. On the whole, governments have kept to the convention of pacing and modifying policies to pacify those sections of the community who never agreed with them in the first place.

It is this custom of listening to the people who disagree with you that seems to have broken down. One problem is the difficulty that people have in seeing how the non-Tory majority in Britain will be in a position credibly to provide the next government even in 1992. Mrs Thatcher's declared itch to 'go on and on' (she will only be seventy five in the year 2000) may have seemed an incautious admission to her advisers at that stage in the election campaign—but, in retrospect, it is far from clear that she need have concealed her ambitions. The main reason for the accelerated collapse of the consensus that has held the political system stable for so long is, however, that Mrs Thatcher has introduced a new

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religious fervour into politics. 'The mission of this government is much more than the promotion of economic progress', as she said in 1979: 'It is to renew the spirit and solidarity of the nation'. She put it more succinctly in 1981: 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul'.

Of course political parties always have some conception of the Good Life and thus some more or less overt theology. Mr Kinnock, in an interview during the election campaign, said that he and his wife were not sure enough in these matters even to call themselves agnostics (he may have been joking or, more likely perhaps, just aligning himself with a generation for whom religion has simply never been an issue). Nobody could have listened to his speeches, however, without hearing a very clear value system—and a quite different one from Mrs Thatcher's. Oddly enough, she who objects to criticism from religious leaders on the grounds that they should keep out of politics herself goes in unstoppably for preaching and moralizing. During the Jimmy Young show, that privileged locus of her self-revelations, she came out with this pronouncement: 'Choice is the essence of morality. It is the essence of religion. If you are to take away so much in tax that people don't have choice ... I would say that is the immoral route. And, as I understand it, the right to choose is the essence of Christianity'. Thus the call for lower taxes goes with a conception of Christianity as centred on the individual's freedom of choice. Whether one agrees with this emphasis, and obviously the possibility of real choice is somewhere at the heart of Christianity, the point is that Mrs Thatcher's political aims are inextricable from the theology which she preaches. What she says plainly invites theological discussion. Some people might be inclined to say, for example, that, if you had to choose one thing, *love* is the essence of Christianity (a conservative enough idea). They might even be willing to pay higher taxes if they went to support the disabled and the disadvantaged. But the politics here cannot be separated from theological argument.

The decline in the moral standards of public debate cannot be blamed on Mrs Thatcher, though she goes on representing the prejudice and servility of most of the national newspapers as 'freedom of the press'. Many Tories must have been embarrassed by the second-rate comedians who volunteered to warm up the crowd with smutty jokes for her appearance at the final Tory rally in London on the Sunday before election day (Mrs Kinnock—'so sexy she could warm up a gay Eskimo' and the like). The leader herself may be able to trot inviolate across the morass of sleazy morals and media prejudice and keep on indefatigably preaching about the traditional family values. But, there again, this concern to maintain such virtues which she so often expresses invites us to consider how far her policies promote them. If the object is 'to change the soul', then we have to ask what vision of the Good Life Mrs Thatcher has—and Christian argument about Thatcherism has hardly even begun.

As she said herself, in reflective mood, in 1980: 'If a woman like Eva Peron with no ideals can get that far, think how far I can go with all the ideals that I have'. It is liberation theology that Britain needs.

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