

The British Election

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IT USED TO BE a commonplace of the textbooks that one of the great boons which the absence of a written constitution conferred upon the British was a free choice in the timing of their general elections. We were not tied down by any legal obligation to have a dissolution on any specific date; our politicians did not have to adjust themselves and their parties to the exigencies of an electoral battle always timed for a Tuesday after a first Monday in any month of any year. Among the many benefits alleged to flow from this happy emancipation was a merciful brevity in our electoral campaigns; Parliament would continue the even tenor of its way until the Prime Minister made the announcement of an impending dissolution; this would allow about three or four weeks for Parliament to wind up its business and another three weeks or so for the actual campaign itself. Upon this basis was erected one of the most characteristic features of British elections (at least since Gladstone's reforms of 1883), namely the strict regulations governing election expenses. The limits of expenses which candidates or their supporters may incur are strictly drawn and strict-

ly enforced—but always on the assumption that the area to be policed, the zone, so to speak, of electioneering, is the comparatively brief period that is denominated in these pronouncements. And just as the problem of administering the electoral law was simplified by this brevity, so the distracting influences of the campaign itself were kept to a minimum. The public mind was not incited to fuss and fret about candidates, programs, tactics and gambits until the starting gun was actually fired. Until that moment it was business as usual, the business of governing the country; only in the intensive four to six weeks of campaigning were the sovereign people encouraged to focus on the crude stuff of competition for power and office.

The British often cast a pitying eye at their friends across the Atlantic. They, poor creatures, were condemned by a constitutional provision as inexorable as the movements of the heavenly bodies to cast their electoral runes at fixed, appointed times, irrespective of public or private convenience. No matter whether foreign wars or domestic strife might be endangering the life of the republic, the elections must

be held; no matter whether there are any real issues of difference or any dissatisfaction with the administration, still a contest must be contrived. Furthermore, since the date of consultation of the sovereign people is known in advance the election always casts its cloud before it; scarcely is the Congressman back in Washington when he has to begin thinking of re-election; lucky is the President who can postpone electoral cares until the fourth year of his term. Over the whole of every leap year falls this shadow, darkening counsel on a wide range of issues and obliging not only the United States but nowadays a large part of the free world to wait for crucial decisions until the Ides of November have come and gone.

The contrast was always a little too flattering to the British political system to be entirely true; this year it bears all the marks of a spurious, outworn bit of academicism. The United States has given a display of resolution and decision in a presidential year which few countries could equal. Painful issues have been faced and intensely controversial decisions have been taken, at both the Presidential and the Congressional levels. Nor can America's allies, from Vietnam to Berlin, complain that on issues that matter to them the onset of the elections has meant hedging or delay.

What, on the other hand, has been the department of Britain? Have we reaped the boasted benefits of our flexible system? Alas we have not. In many respects we have been getting the worst of two worlds. We have not known, until comparatively recently, even the approximate date of our general election; at the same time the tide of electioneering has overflowed from the hustings into Parliament and even into government. It has worn the nerves of M.P.s ragged, it has led ministers into any number of silly gaffes and schoolboyish

exchanges, and, worst of all, it has affected both legislation and administration.

What are the reasons for this? They are partly political, partly personal and partly institutional. The Conservative party has now enjoyed thirteen continuous years of office, the longest in this century, the longest indeed since the death of Lord Liverpool in 1827. It would be surprising if even this tenacious and resourceful party, ruling for so long in such a time of change and tension, did not show signs of exhaustion and raggedness well before its permitted tenure of office under the Parliament Act had been reached. Much of the indecisiveness, the clinging on to indefensible positions, the refusal to re-examine realistically policies known to be impracticable—much of this is a straight reflection of weariness in office. The healing benison of a spell in opposition is long overdue.

But why has the Tory party not sought the obvious cure for these ills, the one which the flexibility of the Constitution so readily supplies, a dissolution before its full parliamentary term has run out? Here politics and personalities must combine to take the blame. No government, if it is free to choose the time for an appeal to the country, will willingly select an unfavorable moment. It will try to ride back on the crest of some favorable *coup*. Harold Macmillan built his hopes alike of electoral success and of historical endorsement (and let no one underestimate in our time the desire of politicians in all countries to get themselves right with history) upon the Grand Design of a British entry into Europe; it was to be at one and the same time an economic fillip (the stimulus of a common market), a harmonizing of Britain's two main areas of concern, the North Atlantic and Western Europe, and finally a crucial stage in that wider pacification of East and West upon which Macmillan's heart, like Churchill's before him, had

long been set. It was not an ill-conceived or unworthy design—indeed no one else has produced a practicable alternative. It was not of course a Tory design. Not only had the Liberals an earlier patent on the idea; however domesticated, it still contained much that was alien to traditional Tory habits of thought. It involved not only a certain rewriting of the concept of the Commonwealth (the party, in greater part, was ready enough for that); it involved associations strange in substance and form with countries for whom one felt no instinctive attachment; it meant voyaging on strange seas of thought—in company, and strange company at that. Nevertheless Macmillan achieved the near impossible, of selling the idea to the party in their own despite, and it was not his own Little Englanders who defeated his Grand Design, but General de Gaulle, who had a Grand Design of his own. For the party the effect was baneful. They had bought the idea of entering into Europe in large part because it would put an end to Socialism—not merely in the near future, when Britain's capitalistic eggs would be scrambled into a European capitalist omelette, but in the here and now, when the Tories would be swept back into office by a country exhilarated at the thought of a shining new future inside a new and outward-looking Europe. The turn-down of January 14th, 1963 put an end to all that; it might not mean a permanent exclusion from Europe—Generals are only mortal, it was argued; but it certainly meant that the European ace was not available for winning the electoral trick. You cannot ask an electorate to vote for you because you have been out-manoeuvred by the French.

Thus 1963, which should have been the ideal election year, with ample time still available for homing in on the tactically ideal target date, was wrecked by this strategical failure. It became necessary to

wait for the dust to settle and then to make a more orthodox appeal along the conventional lines of Life being Good with the Tories, Don't let Labour Ruin it, etc. Unfortunately the scandals of 1963, in retrospect not much more intrinsically important than many scandals that great parties weather and shrug off, assumed dimensions of horrendous significance; they made it impossible to play for time under the same leader and equally impossible to present the familiar image of Tory affluence in an attractive and convincing light. Macmillan's illness was an almost Freudian accident that made the imperative even more urgent; a successor had to be found immediately as well as a new policy, or at least a new image.

The successor was found in Lord/Sir Alec Douglas Home, but the expeditiousness of the operation left its own scars. They are seldom now flaunted but they are nonetheless unhealed. And the selection of a peer, indeed a fourteenth earl, intensified the difficulty of acquiring a new image and making it stick by election time. Sir Alec was well chosen for erasing the memory of the defeat at Brussels; he was not in command at the battle and he has been notably silent on the European theme ever since. But the preferred alternative, which seems to be the theme of "modernization", comes hardly from him. This not because he has not loyally adopted it; he threw himself without reserve into its first manifestations, the schemes for rehabilitating down-at-heel areas in Scotland and North-East England. Nor is it necessarily because a fourteenth earl preaching modernization is a little like Arthur at the Court of Connecticut; the long history of British Toryism has seen stranger sights than this. It is rather that the language of economics and technology, the language indispensable to any convincing discussion of this theme, is not a language that comes convincingly to

his lips; he is not at home in it and his listeners can tell that he is not at home. The task of educating Home has thus been superimposed upon the job of creating a new party image to replace the Common Market one that got spoiled. The whole operation requires time, as does the dying down of Profumo. Consequently every consideration dictated as late an election as possible.

The traditional objection to a last-minute election was that it exposed the government to whatever hazards an ugly world might choose to develop at that time—as, for example, Suez developed for Eisenhower in 1956. To this a partial answer has been provided which may have a significance outlasting 1964 and may mark an institutional development of profound significance for the future of British politics. The answer is the bold claim of post-Keynesian economics to guarantee to a government which will use it the ability to control the economic environment, at least for most purposes and for a limited time. It is the ability to turn on the taps which control purchasing power and employment and to arrange that they will flow when they are most needed—before general elections—and that the ultimate problems of inflation and of balance of payments, even though their effect cannot be evaded, will be retarded in their impact, until those elections are safely out of the way. If the economic regulators are really as manageable as this then the government will be able to go to the country in October on a crest of high employment and spending power which must surely assist its chances—and any future government will be able to do the same. Whereas in the past a government, under the British system, might let the economically favorable moment dictate the timing of dissolution, it will henceforth be able to determine the timing of dissolution on other grounds and arrange

the economic climate to fit in with it. At the moment of writing no one can deny that Mr. Maudling's regulators are working wonderfully; if they continue their present behavior for another couple of months they will have demonstrated a new, and as many will think a dangerous, weapon in the armory of governments, as well as having made a signal contribution to the government's success at the polls.

Thus it has come about that Britain has been electioneering for about the last eighteen months, and that parties have been working to a fixed target date in October ever since Sir Alec Douglas-Home made his announcement on April 9th—the longest notice of dissolution in English history. It cannot be said that the experiment has been a success. Sir Alec's tenure of the premiership has not been long enough to enable him to work out a fresh legislative program; at the same time something has had to be found to keep Parliament occupied. The result has been a stopgap budget and a spatter of minor measures—with one notable exception, the bill to check Retail Price Maintenance. This highly desirable measure has in fact failed to live up to expectations, for the simple reason that it too has been the product of electoral pressures. It has been Mr. Heath's substitute for the Brussels breakdown, an attempt to inject more competition into the British marketing system by devices short of an outright anti-trust law. The act is meritorious, but, like Brussels, it suffers from insufficient preparation; in both the Board of Trade and the Cabinet it has had hard sledding and Mr. Heath, though he has thrown himself into the battle with great energy, has had to make concessions which, in part at least, reflect the infirmity of purpose of a government that knows its mandate has run out. The same symptoms have exhibited themselves at the administrative level; two departments in

particular, the Home Office and the Ministry of Aviation, have been involved in the type of minor scandal—and one or two not so minor—which are the sure index of a government hanging on to office after its vitality is spent.

Besides the wrong decisions there are the non-decisions, the ones that get put off until after the elections. There are too many of these. The most obvious is one which affects everybody who drives a car or rides in a public vehicle—the crucial need for a national transport policy. Any such policy involves making choices that some will like and others will hate, but if the choices are not made by design they will be made by events, and chaos will be confounded. The second is the need to revise our defense policy, to decide on how Britain's limited resources can be put to the service of her national interests; this involves making painful decisions about everything from the Multilateral Nuclear Force to the future of British overseas bases. Finally there is the pressing need for a design—if not a Grand Design then *some* design—to fill the gap left by the failure of the Brussels negotiations. By the time the election takes place these decisions will all have been piling up for at least twelve months, in some cases for longer. It is too long for good government.

Another consequence of Britain's American-style long-term electioneering is the ironical one that it involves us in virtually synchronizing our election with yours. It can never be a good thing for the West to have the two principal leaders of the alliance simultaneously entering that Sargasso sea of politics which seems to be the inescapable renewal point of democracy's Gulf Stream. We ought to be able to avoid getting becalmed together. This year it is particularly unfortunate. Even though all Britons believe that Senator Goldwater cannot win, his nomination as Republican

candidate cannot fail to have its repercussions here. Though everyone respects the American people's right to make their own choice, of candidate as well as president, the fact that one of the two major parties could nominate a man who seems to them so totally out of touch with the world in which America's allies live (to say nothing of America herself) must impose fearful strains upon our relationship. For both Britain's leading parties this will present problems; to the Tories it will indeed present a new justification for their emphasis on the "independent deterrent," but at a price they can hardly want to pay, since the American alliance is, after all, the sheet anchor of their foreign policy; for Labour's radicals it will provide fuel for the always latent fires of anti-Americanism, but this will bring no comfort to Labour's leadership who have constructed their whole opposition to the "independent deterrent" upon the argument that the alliance can always rely on America—an argument constructed when Kennedy ruled and Goldwater was just a synonym for unthinkability.

So much for the national interest. But after all, elections, in the short run at least, are fought by parties and for parties. How will our experiment in Americanization affect the principal contenders? The experiment was the Conservatives' choice, so presumably they stand to gain most from it, for the reasons listed above. It has given them what they thought they most wanted, time. The opinion polls seem to confirm the soundness of their calculations in this respect, the horrendous gap of last autumn and this spring having narrowed to a point when cautious gamblers place hedging bets. Whichever side he favors, no sensible observer can now regard the election as a foregone conclusion. So much, from the Tory point of view, is pure gain. But there are drawbacks too. The desire for

a change, always the most potent ally of the "outs," has intensified during these months. Boredom with the government has mounted. The general impatience with the prolonged capers of electioneering has worked mainly against the incumbents who are judged responsible for the prolongation.

Labour, on the other hand, has suffered from the delay. The sharp irritation with the government's performance, the backwash of Macmillan's last months, reflected in the by-election results and Labour's gains in the local government elections of the Spring—this has undoubtedly worn off. Some of the impetus of the Labour attack has been lost and without doubt they would have fared better had they been able to go to the public in the early days of Home's premiership. In a more tangible way too, Labour have been the losers by delay. They are the poorer party, their war chest is the first to feel the strain. Thus early in the year, when Home might have precipitated an election at almost any time, Labour had little alternative but to indulge in some precautionary publicity and extra staffing, in order at least to keep pace with their opponents. But this became a costly, because premature, investment when the real battle was postponed until the autumn. Thus, to conserve their funds, the socialists in May had to cancel all their newspaper advertising until August and went easy on other forms of expenditure as well. The Tories, on the other hand, have been able to keep to a steady, long-planned publicity campaign; it may be that the narrowing of the gap in the opinion polls reflects the success of this.

Thus the Americanization of our electoral campaigning has brought us up against the difficulty which the United States has long faced, of controlling the influence of money on elections. Once the Victorian mould of a neat, self-contained

three to six weeks campaign is broken, what criteria, what controls can be applied to guarantee a fair field for poor and rich contestants alike? Smarting under this new disability, Labour has demanded that the Tories publish their accounts, and that business firms declare their party contributions to the Inland Revenue and pay tax on them. If Labour win, they threaten to introduce legislation to this effect. The bill will be hard to frame, if it is to avoid all risk of victimization—the object which dictated the Ballot Act a hundred years ago. But the problem is greater than this suggests. It is the problem of what one might call "perpetual electioneering," the fact that elections no longer begin with the dissolution, or even with the expectation of a dissolution, but are a continuous aspect of the whole political process. This is reflected, for example, in the new importance which attaches to party success in local government elections, in the obsession with public opinion polls, in the employment by both party machines of the techniques of modern advertising, as much between elections as during them. How can you devise rules for a game which is played all the time, in which anyone can participate and in which the only ultimate referees are the players themselves?

For some time now, and markedly in the months of Suez and the ensuing years of "Macwonder," it has been contended that the British parliamentary and cabinet system was moving towards a presidential style of operation such as that of the United States. How far this is true depends no doubt upon the base point of one's comparison, and it would be rash to make a precipitate pronouncement upon an issue which is still so hotly debated amongst the constitutional authorities. But when one looks at the way the autumn's electoral campaign has shaped up in Britain, one can hardly deny some force to the

presidential analogy. Though lacking the full range of histrionic skills that Macmillan deployed, though still new and modest in office, Sir Alec Douglas-Home has already shown that he means to set the tone of his party's campaigning himself and raise a very personal standard for the party to rally to. Nor, I think, do I need to explain to an American reader why Sir Alec's frank employment of a speechwriter (a correspondent of *Newsweek*, incidentally) is perfectly compatible with this—though not all Britons are equally ready to embrace the superficial contradiction. Mr. Eldon Griffiths, the speech writer in question, has also displayed himself as a skilful campaign biographer, and the private charm of Sir Alec the informal country-lover has been evoked to buttress the public image of the guardian of Britain's might to a degree unknown since Stanley Baldwin—*absit omen!*

On the other side, Mr. Wilson has had both an easier task and a greater problem. An easier task because he heads a shadow cabinet in which his colleagues are doubly shadowy—both by being out of office now and of having been very junior in the days of Labour's last government. They are thus doubly unknown by comparison with their leader, who attained cabinet office at the age of thirty, attracted publicity by skilful fencemanship in opposition and of course came into the spotlight on his election as party leader to succeed High Gaitskell. At this moment, Mr. Wilson *is*, for most voters, the Labour party—with perhaps George Brown as a likeable but unconvincing bit player. For better or for worse, Mr. Wilson personifies the whole of Labour's appeal. The program on which the party fights is of his tailoring, and it fits him like a Saville Row suit. Socialism and Science—what better combination could there be for the nonconformist grammar school scholarship winner and university teacher

of economics? The blend of puritan principle and computerized utilitarianism is a natural. Wilson's own classlessness—he has never pretended to a horny-handed, cloth-capped kind of socialism—remains still a good sniping point from which to attack the pretensions of the Peers' party, while his assured command of the language of counting house and laboratory conveys the impression that whatever else his socialism may be it will be efficient. The question that persists, however, as one watches Mr. Wilson's one-man band energetically campaigning, is whether a personality so little personal, a leader so little capable of inspiring devotion, can possibly evoke that element of abandon, of unreasoning enthusiasm which most political campaigns require for their success.

It is of a piece with Mr. Wilson's whole approach to politics that ideology will occupy a back seat in his socialist advocacy. In this too one would have said a short time ago that British politics were taking an American road. The two parties were each becoming increasingly tainted with me-tooism, each showing an increasing disposition to try and appeal to both wings as well as the middle. However, since the nomination of Senator Goldwater ideology must be presumed to have returned to American politics with a rush and we shall have to turn elsewhere for our analogies. However that may be, the only ideologies that will be apparent in this election will be the ones which each party tries to fasten on its opponents, not any which it will sport for itself. Thus the Tories will insist upon the marxism of socialists and emphasize the doctrinaire elements in nationalization, but they will seldom chant the beauties of capitalism *per se*; their talk will be of "modernization" and how "Conservative planning works." Labour will play down the nationalization theme and stress the exhilarating empiricism of the new

scientific frontier; they will not even attack business as such, but only the faceless monopolies which squat on "the commanding heights" of the nation's economy. As one shrewd observer put it, "Harold Wilson stands for moderation, Douglas-Home for the middle of the road. If only we could find a compromise between these two extremes."

That there will be some "extremes" struck before polling day is nonetheless pretty certain. Too much is at stake for the battle to be fought to the end in the language of realistic reasonableness. For the Tories it is a chance to deal socialism a death blow and the last opportunity to save some key sectors of the economy from nationalization. For Sir Alec himself the election must be regarded as a crucial test of his ability to wear a mantle of leadership which, many think, was improperly won; if he loses the electoral battle his rivals will not relax until they divest him of it. Though as nice a man as ever came by the premiership, his path to office nonetheless lay across the bones of younger and some would say abler contenders and they will not spare him if he leads the party to defeat.

Mr. Wilson, on the other hand, might easily escape too harsh personal strictures if Labour loses. His elevation to the party leadership, though of course attended by inevitable passions and rivalries, was fairly obtained in open fight, and subsequent performances by his principal contender, Mr. George Brown, have only confirmed the wisdom of the party's choice. No, if Labour goes down, the blame is hardly likely to be Mr. Wilson's and his head is unlikely, in any immediate sense, to roll. The fault would lie in Labour's stars, no less. A defeat—any defeat, narrow or sweeping—would be read in the light of the events of the last decade, against the background of the last three lost elections,

of the steady decline of the manual worker element in the population, of the waning appeal of such traditional Labour policies as nationalization, of the failure of the trade unions so far to adapt themselves to a changing society. It would mean that a party which had risen upon a blend of socialism and trade unionism had outlived its usefulness and would have to transform itself into—or make way for—a party of reform, but of un-class conscious, non-dogmatic reform.

This, of course, is the Liberals' hope. At the moment, many would say, it is their only hope. The bright dawn of Orpington, the by-election victory of March 1962, which seemed to herald a Liberal new day, has not been fulfilled. The momentum has not been kept up, either in seats, or votes, or Gallup Poll percentages. The collapse of Macmillanism did not help them and the rise of Wilsonism, the new classless, scientific, non-socialist Socialism has definitely harmed them. Their decision to take up a radical stance which would be as much, if not more, anti-Tory as anti-Labour, has had the ironic consequence that their hopes for the future are intimately tied up with a Labour defeat while the weight of their campaigning is directed against a Tory victory. Thus their interests as a party are at odds with their policies. At such a moment few dispassionate observers would predict a bright outcome for the party in the election. They will be lucky, whatever happens to their rivals, to hold on to the seats they still have; they will be very lucky to pick up any more. If Labour loses, they could look forward to a new strength in a new alignment of political forces. If Labour wins, their hopes of maintaining an effective force in Parliament undoubtedly recede. Even if, as some hope but few believe likely, they hold a balance between even forces, their position will not be as strong as it looks. They held

this position twice before and it only paved the way to their decline.

However, whatever the outcome of the election, one thing is certain: Britain is embarking on a period of change. Whatever the party that assumes control, it will be committed alike by its own protestations

and by the facts of life to a program of reform. As surely as in the 1830's and 40's reform is in the British air. And this time both Labour and the Conservatives may have to do better than Whig and Tory—or else our contemporary equivalent of 1848, the Year of Revolutions, may not so indulgently pass them by.