

## What Is It All About?

**D**ECIDING which way to vote at the coming General Election will be no problem for the majority of voters. Roughly half of those who go to the polls on March 31 will vote Labour (broadly the "working class" and trade union vote) and almost all the remainder will vote Conservative.

Because of our peculiar form of "democratic" voting, however, the seats gained by each of the big political parties will not be in proportion to the votes cast for them. Millions of votes will be "wasted" in safe-seat constituencies where the results are virtually a foregone conclusion.

Because of the almost even balance of seats in the last Parliament the deciding factor in this election will be the number of un-safe or marginal constituencies that can be persuaded to change their allegiance. This, in more precise terms, means how many voters in these constituencies, not dogmatically committed to any of the Parties, can be won over by election manifestoes, speeches and public appearances on television of the leading contenders.

In terms of capturing political power, the fight is between the Labour and Conservative Parties—the Liberals being non-starters in this regard. Thus, not only are the major parties bidding for the uncommitted votes in the marginal seats, they are hoping to win over previously-committed Liberals, whom they tend to regard as a special section of floating voters. This is a broad, if over-simplified picture of the political situation, remembering, among other things, that even committed voters sometimes change their minds.

But what are the issues at this election? Do they differ much from those of the last General Election of eighteen months ago? The mixture is much as before, except that Labour has now given a much wider picture of



its socialistic intentions, including the nationalisation of steel and various back-door nationalisation schemes euphemistically described as Government participation in industry. It also intends, if returned to power, to introduce legislation for the compulsory sale of leases to occupying lease-holders and to provide financial aid for those with mortgages on their own homes, carry on with plans for a Land Commission and pursue a prices and incomes policy.



There are references in the Manifesto to housing targets, social security, education, rate-relief (transferring part of the rate burden to the Exchequer), supported with the familiar meaningless patter of which the Labour Party has no monopoly.

The Conservative programme contains the customary concessions to the need for social reform and it covers very much the same ground as Labour's, except that the Conservative reforms would be implemented "within a free enterprise framework." Looked at within the context of patchwork reform, it presents a more cautious approach. The Conservatives are less in favour of blanket welfare handouts and propose that those most in need should get the most help. They intend to tackle the problem of trade unions -- to some degree -- aiming at the elimination of restrictive practices. Like Labour, they have an incomes policy, which they say they will make really "effective," without stating how. They also have plans for assisting would-be home owners with their mortgages, and a plan to transfer part of the rate burden to the Exchequer. They also have their housing targets, clichés about welfare, schools and crime; and a "fair terms" form of leasehold enfranchisement. They would maintain rent control "where there is a shortage of houses."

Conservatives favour entry into the Common Market at the first favourable opportunity, and — something new — a reduction of tariffs where protection is encouraging inefficiency. These main proposals are supported by a variety of platitudinous hopes for the future. Nowhere in the Conservative Manifesto does there appear any policy for land, in spite of the claim by some Conservatives that they lost the last election because they did not have a land policy.

The Liberal Manifesto is a disappointment, in spite of the welcome references to site-value rating and the cutting of tariffs. Most of the proposed reforms in the domestic field are but variations on the same themes that characterise the Labour and Tory election prospectuses. What is distinctive (other than site-value rating) is not fundamental.

Liberals, too, have an incomes policy, but it is "positive." They propose cuts in direct taxation and the shifting of the burden to inherited wealth and gifts; a form of co-ownership in industry with more active participation of employees in the running of companies in which they work, giving workers the same status as shareholders and the right to elect directors to the Board; more

"managed markets" in agriculture and mortgage help for home owners, etc.

Their "free trade" proposals are tucked away in the middle of a single sentence on prices. "The effective way to bring down prices is to increase competition by cutting tariffs," which is not a great deal better than the 'Tories' "and cut tariffs whenever it can be shown that competition from abroad is needed to deal with monopolies."

The last and most telling comment in *For All the People — the Liberal Plan* is the reference to the Liberal Party's political independence. "The unique position of the Liberal Party enables us to bring new thinking and a fresh objective approach to Britain's economic and social problems . . . because we have no vested interest in protecting one group or another." With new and fresh thinking on *fundamentals*, the Liberals could offer a real challenge to the other two parties.

Whichever party is successful — and at the time of writing a Labour victory is strongly indicated — we can be assured (according to the promises made) of all kinds of legislation that will in one way or another make our lives happier, easier, etc., and our sanction is being sought to achieve this end by modern Robin Hood methods of redistributing wealth.

Whether it be in the field of housing, rates, welfare services or taxation, governments of today seek to redistribute wealth with Act after Act of complex legislation, with no principle other than that of political expediency. "Philanthropy unguided by an intelligent apprehension of causes," observed Henry George, "may palliate or it may intensify but it cannot cure." And in looking at the history and progress of our Welfare State we can find ample testimony to this truth. But not only do such methods fail, they often bring in their wake unforeseen evils, for "the pathway to hell is paved with good intentions." Not only have most welfare measures and state economic planning been inadequate in their effects, particularly on those who most need help, but they have been inevitably accompanied by the erosions of our liberties in many spheres of our lives, the logical and ultimate consequence of which is the well-fed human battery hen.

Unobserved, neglected or deliberately avoided, is the economic phenomenon that in spite of all the factors that



contribute to the greater production of wealth — increased population and the division of labour, inventions and improvements, increased trade, developments in knowledge and education, etc., there are still millions of people who would fall well below the poverty line were it not for state

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aid. We observe that the rent of land inevitably goes on rising—an ever increasing charge upon production and living space. With the growth of welfare aids for the poor there has grown also welfare aid for the privileged—subsidies, government grants, quotas, tariff protection, licences and subventions of all kinds, which have created a huge burden to be borne by the consumer in taxation and high prices.

In the history of practical politics we can observe how the significance of land has been but partially comprehended by reformers—and too well comprehended by those who would preserve their privilege.

Economists preoccupied with palliatives, and politicians preoccupied with expediency, have produced a tangle of ill-conceived and half thought-out legislation which does no more than pay lip service to honest principles.

The price of artificially-maintained full employment has been the debasement of the currency, exchange control, increased tariffs and naive attempts to control prices and incomes. Thus we are confronted with armies of civil servants, battalions of economists and office blocks full of bureaucrats, who run our lives. There is no easy way out. Voting at general elections will solve little. We cannot expect quick change. We cannot expect comprehensive changes. The fight for real justice among men and the right method of achieving it must be made an issue at all points and at all levels.