

# POLITICS AND PEOPLE

Bret Woodward



PRESIDENT NIXON invoked the "silent majority" on behalf of his policies. Majorities can be invoked as long as they remain silent. If they spoke, there would be a multitude of minorities. But it is true that the majority do tend to go along with the person or party in power.

Politicians say they speak for "the people." Even those with diametrically opposed views claim to have insight into the will of the people. It is a good device because "the people" seldom talk back, and they may even be persuaded that they have such and such a will.

One of the advantages of being in office is that the person or party in power is credited with anything good that may happen, however coincidental. Within the past year, Britain achieved that mercantilist shibboleth, a "favourable balance of trade," and thereupon the Labour Party gained in popularity (or declined in unpopularity).

Unfortunately, this advantage is more than offset by the criticism politicians have to take when things go wrong. Since things more often go wrong than right, one of the chief roles of politicians is to be a target for abuse. James Joyce noted that, although Parnell was much criticized while he lived, the opposition resented his death because that gave his party the immediate advantage of having a martyr. Such are the rewards of being in politics.

These are the tendencies in the Western democracies, and they reach their climax in America where it is understood that any one elected to office is immediately and directly to blame for all the woes that exist. While in office, he is a devil; once out of office, or dead, he is canonized as a saint. The other extreme is in Russia where a leader is a saint while in office and a devil when deposed or dead. This latter tends to be the case in dictatorships. When President Nkrumah was out visiting his Communist pals, at home there was a *coup d'etat*; he was deposed and his statues were overturned. Stalin was wise enough not to go travelling, but when he died his

statues came down anyway.

Why bother to have politicians? Perhaps the best system is that of Switzerland where scarcely anyone knows who the President is at any given time; he is simply an administrator elected to carry out the details of matters the people have already decided upon. Would this system work in a large country? It might if a good many other things were set to rights. It would presuppose a rather high and diffused standard of living; maturity to the point where the people felt responsible for the policies of society; a system where it was understood that good work brings good rewards and good rewards go to good work.

If this sounds too Utopian, it is at least on a more solid foundation than the Utopias we imagine every time a new politician is elected to office. "For one brief shining moment we saw Camelot." We are doomed to disillusion, and we go through the same sisyphian exercise every election time. It might prove more realistic to strive for the conditions that would make politicians relatively unimportant.