

TEBBIT TURNS OFF POOR VOTERS



CONSERVATIVE Party Chairman Norman Tebbit has produced a new argument in favour of Margaret Thatcher's desire to abolish the property tax. The British Prime Minister has campaigned for 10 years to persuade her supporters to get rid of the rating system. Now Mr. Tebbit says that local elections are unfair on the Tories because the results are "slanted" by poor people who have votes but do not pay rates.

Ministers want to limit rate rebates to make even the poorest people pay part of the cost of local services. Asked if this meant that he thought the local elections results on May 8 would be unfair on his party, Mr. Tebbit declared: "The result will be slanted in that some people vote secure in the knowledge that they won't have to pay for what they will vote for."

In the event, Tory aspirations were destroyed as they lost large numbers of seats to Labour and Alliance candidates. Two parliamentary elections were also held on May 8. One seat switched from Tory to the Liberals; the Tories clung to the second



• Norman Tebbit

'Pay no rates' jibe

seat by under 100 votes. Undeterred by this electoral catastrophe, however, Mrs. Thatcher says that she remains resolutely behind her policies, despite the continuing rise in unemployment. The government, for the sixth time, has again altered the basis on which unemployment is measured.

The seasonally adjusted figure for March is 3.19 million. Labour critics, however, point out that the Conservative administration has altered the way the figures are collated on six occasions since they came to power in 1979. They argue that the real level of unemployment is more than 3.8m.

The first major cut in the count came in October 1982, when Mr. Tebbit was put in charge of the Department of Employment. He sliced 190,000 off the total by announcing that instead of signing on at Job Centres, the out-of-work would in future be counted only as those receiving benefits.

Unemployment appears to be an intractable economic and political problem. Despite this, however, the government has failed to produce a sophisticated critique of the property tax to show how changes could help to achieve higher employment levels. In a reformed state - by untaxing buildings, and raising revenue by a higher tax rate on site values - the rates would create new jobs.

● The Tory Party swept to power in 1979 with a Saatchi and Saatchi advertising campaign that focused on the level of unemployment under the Labour Government. Large hoardings showed queues of unemployed workers. The inference was that, under the Conservatives, they would be able to get work.

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