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The Lesser Evil

UNWANTED by more than half the nation, the Conservatives were returned for a third term on October 8. With 49.4 per cent of the total vote they secured 365 of the 630 seats in the Commons—an overall majority of 100. The Liberals, with almost twice as many candidates (217) as in 1955 (110) more than doubled their vote. But the first-past-the-post electoral system prevented them from increasing their parliamentary representation. They held five seats, lost Torrington and won adjoining North Devon. Mr. Jeremy Thorpe assumes the place on the Liberal bench vacated by Mr. Mark Bonham-Carter. Neither gentleman is known as a supporter of the policies we advocate.

The composition of the new lower House and the votes polled are shown in bold type in the following table. The italic figures relate to the 1955 General Election.

	Cons.	Lab.	Lib.
Seats	365	258	6
	<i>344</i>	<i>295</i>	<i>6</i>
Votes	13,750,935	12,216,166	1,640,761
	<i>13,310,891</i>	<i>12,405,254</i>	<i>722,402</i>
Percentage of votes polled ...	49.4	43.8	5.9
	<i>49.74</i>	<i>46.36</i>	<i>2.7</i>

There is also one independent in the new House—Sir David Robertson (Caithness and Sutherland) who resigned the Conservative whip during the last Parliament.

The figures reveal the glaring injustice of the British electoral system. The Conservatives have roughly 50 seats more than their proportion of the votes warrants, and the Liberals have 30 too few. It is safe to say that there must be at least as much support for the Liberals in the two-thirds of the country which they did not contest as in the one-third where they did stand. On that reckoning, the party has not more, and probably much less, than one-twelfth of the parliamentary representation which is its due.

The Conservatives' net gain of 27 seats and four hundred thousand extra votes is no landslide. Nor is it a popular endorsement of Tory policies. Rather is it a rejection of

Labour's plans to extend nationalisation. Twelve years' experience of state industry has convinced the majority, including some members and many supporters of the Labour Party, that it benefits neither employees nor consumers and imposes a heavy burden on taxpayers. Intensive propaganda campaigns conducted by the threatened industries and by business generally drove the lesson home.

The state-owned railways are not so outstandingly successful as to encourage enthusiastic popular support for proposals to renationalise road haulage. Nor could voters see any point in exchanging government control of iron and steel for state ownership, particularly in view of the good labour relations in the industry.

Equally unappealing was Labour's plan to "municipalise" rent-controlled housing. Those who own their homes and Council tenants—together forming the majority of householders—would have had to pay more in rates and taxes without gaining any of the benefits which the scheme was said to offer. Those directly affected included many who would do anything rather than suffer the stigma of being Council tenants. Snobbery and a hatred of bumbledom are powerful political forces. Moreover, after modernisation and improvement, the rents of municipalised dwellings were to have been increased—to "fair" levels.

The Englishman's home may be his "castle" but after years of rent restriction and Council housing he begrudges every penny he pays to his landlord. Recognising this, and throwing principle to the wind in a bid to retain power at all cost, the Conservatives disarmingly pledged that they would do nothing in Parliament to increase rents. Whether those who interpreted this as meaning that the present level of rents will be maintained for the next five years were misled (as we believe) remains to be seen.

All through a glorious summer the poster hoardings in every town and village have proclaimed: "Life is better with the Conservatives". A forest of television aerials and traffic jams on the roads to the coast have lent verisimilitude to the carefully chosen wording. The posters did *not*

claim that it was *because* of the Conservatives that life is "better" nor did they say for whom or disclose the base date chosen for the comparison. (Before the war bus drivers, policemen, postmen and Government clerks were able to buy their own houses, *and* run a small car, *and* have seaside holidays, *and* pay school fees without sending their wives out to work and without the aid of family allowances. How many of them can do *any* of those things on a single pay packet today?)

The posters added the warning plea: "Don't let Labour spoil it." Since, apart from nationalisation, the Conservative and Labour home policies were almost indistinguishable, electors saw no reason to gamble what they have for what they might have had from Labour.

It may be regrettable although it is perfectly understandable, that the ordinary voter takes comparatively little interest in questions of colonial and foreign policy, where the difference between the two parties is most marked. As a result, Labour talk (echoed by the Liberals) about Suez, Cyprus, Nyasaland and Hola made little political impact. This little was more than offset by the cleavage in the Labour Party over the H-Bomb and sedulous Tory propaganda that Mr. Macmillan's visit to Moscow had led to the present apparent thaw in east-west relations.

Mounting public concern about the trade unions undoubtedly contributed to the Conservative victory. There have been reports of union tyranny and victimisation, as well as a long succession of strikes, both official and unofficial. During the week before the Election, tens of thousands of men in factories throughout the country were rendered idle by an unofficial stoppage at British Oxygen. Conservatives are timorous in their dealings with organised labour but, so the uncommitted voter may have reasoned, better that than a government in the pocket of the unions. Labour's ill-advised claim—in the party manifesto—that the unions could not be expected to behave themselves except under a Labour Government "ready to use the necessary controls" ought to have swung a sizeable wad of votes towards the Tories. The Englishman dislikes blackmail threats.

The choice on October 8 was between "evils" and it is some satisfaction that the electorate had the wit to choose the lesser of the two. Departing from our normal political neutrality we confess disappointment that the Liberals failed to increase their representation. Parliament and democracy would have been revitalised and strengthened by the presence of even half a dozen more Members, free to speak and vote without fear of the whip.

So far as the paramount economic issues are concerned, the Liberals' misfortune makes not a scrap of difference. The party leadership is at best lukewarm about free trade and even includes some who want Britain to seek membership of the highly protected Common Market. It is completely indifferent to the even more vital question of whether the community at large is forever to be deprived of the rent of land which it creates by its presence and activities. Even the lesser, related question of whether local taxation should continue to fall, with disastrous con-

178

sequences, on buildings or should be switched to the value of the sites they occupy appears to have no place in the thoughts of those in command of the Liberal Party. In the main the Liberals who came nearest to victory peddled the tawdry wares pre-packed by party headquarters. There should be rejoicing, not tears, that they were defeated. The election has shown that—for a Liberal—silence about the land monopoly does not automatically ensure a seat in the Commons.

The two defeated parties have to do some serious "re-thinking". Labour must either drop discredited nationalisation and unwanted controls or slowly disintegrate in the political wilderness. Scarcely a week after the election cautious voices were raised within the party urging the first course. If that view prevails, the Labour Party will have to rewrite its constitution. And, unless, it is to play Tweedle Dum to the Tories' Tweedle Dee, it will have to abandon protection and once again espouse land-value taxation.

The policy "re-thinkers" might be well-advised to look up a file copy of the Manifesto issued by the Labour Party in 1923. In that year, Mr. Baldwin, Conservative Prime Minister, went to the country to secure a mandate to institute Protection as a cure for unemployment. The Conservatives were defeated, the Labour and Liberal Parties having a joint majority of 85. The Manifesto included these passages:—

"The Labour Party challenges the tariff policy and the whole conception of economic relations underlying it. Tariffs are not a remedy for unemployment. They are an impediment to the free interchange of goods and services upon which civilised society rests. They foster a spirit of profiteering, materialism, and selfishness, poison the life of nations, lead to corruption in politics, promote trusts and monopolies, and impoverish the people. They perpetuate inequalities in the distribution of the world's wealth won by the labour of hands and brain...

"The Labour Party proposes to restore to the people their lost rights in the land, including minerals, and to that end will work for re-equipping the Land Valuation Department, securing to the community the economic rent of land, and facilitating the acquisition of land for public use."

The Liberals, too, will have to decide whether to bring their policy into line with their Constitution or vice versa. In part this states that the goal of the party at home is "to create the positive conditions which will make a full and free life possible for all citizens—liberty under Free Trade to buy, sell and produce... access to land and an assurance that publicly-created land values shall not be engrossed by private interests... These are the conditions of liberty, which it is the function of the state to protect and enlarge."

The vogue for "re-thinking" may even encourage Conservative dialecticians (the Bow Group, perhaps) to attempt to reconcile Tory talk of a property-owning democracy with Tory support for a property-destructive rating system.

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