

## BRITAIN

## Labour and Tories running dead even

By Mervyn Jones

LONDON

**T**HE LATEST BY-ELECTIONS, held on July 13, prove what most shrewd observers expected them to prove: that the Labour Party will need to fight hard to win an October general election, but that victory isn't out of the question.

At Moss Side, a sprawling slice of Manchester—half poor and half more comfortable—Labour was relieved to hold the seat with a reduced majority. The swing to the Tories, regarded statistically, would produce a dead heat between the parties, or perhaps give Margaret Thatcher a wafer-thin majority if it were reproduced on a national scale.

At Penistone, the result was more worrying. It's also a more significant pointer because this electoral district in Yorkshire is a rather representative part of England, with steelworkers, miners, farmers and middle-class commuters among the voters. The steelworkers are numerous enough to make the seat safe for Labour in all but disastrous conditions, but their loyalty may well have been weakened by the plant closures and dismissals now wreaking havoc in their industry. For this reason or others, the Labour vote dropped by 8,000, the Tory vote rose by 2,000, and Labour's majority was slashed from 15,000 in 1974 to 5,000. The swing, if repeated in a general election, would give the Tories a handsome victory.

**Labour will appear cautious.**

Labour's strategists were not compelled to hold the by-elections at all. The new MPs will attend Parliament for only a few weeks before the summer recess, and nobody would have complained if the seats had been left vacant until autumn. The idea, however, was to provide a test of opinion and thus enable Callaghan to decide whether to call an October election or soldier on into 1979.

The Prime Minister, alas, is no longer able to consider these options with Olympian calm. The government's near-defeat during the budget debates was a rude shock. Only by frantic last-minute haggling were the 14 Liberal MPs persuaded to abstain, and the Labour-Liberal pact is now definitely a thing of the past. If the present House of Commons is assembled for another session, it's more than likely that the Liberals will join the Tories to defeat the government in a vote of confidence and thus force an election at a time not of Callaghan's choosing.

It would be far better, most people argue, to hold the election in October and forestall such a nasty experience. In any case, political expectations acquire their own momentum and the prospect of an October election has become an almost universal assumption. The date generally forecast is Oct. 12 and there seems to be nothing against it (except that it is Yom Kippur and a lot of strictly religious Jews won't vote).

The election will be a strange one because the traditional postures of the big parties will be reversed. Labour, in theory the party of reform and social change (or, according to its opponents, of dangerous risk-taking) will appear as the party of caution and stability. The relaxed, avuncular figure of Jim Callaghan contrasts with the more nervous and "pushy" personality of Margaret Thatcher. Callaghan is often compared with Stanley Baldwin, the Tory leader of pre-war years who refused to read political papers on weekends and whose prize pigs appeared to be his major interest. Baldwin fought one election with the slogan: "Safety First" and this has been suggested as fitting for Callaghan. But, as a matter of fact, Baldwin lost that election.

**Thatcher unpopular.**

The "safety first" appeal may suit the present English mood, which can't be called radical or adventurous. The snag



Margaret Thatcher hopes to lead the Tory party to victory over Labour in the upcoming October elections.

is that it doesn't suit the outlook of the Labour activists who will be needed to do the election work. They are not so badly disaffected as in the election of 1970, which Labour lost because of a virtual sit-down strike by its activists, but they're not exactly inspired. In any case, the Labour record isn't one of achievement, nor is the present situation a happy one. Prices are still rising, if at a reduced rate, and unemployment remains at what ministers regularly call an "intolerable" level.

For the Tories, the problem is how to counter suspicions that they are likely to open the way to upheavals and appalling risks—to embark on "radical Right" policies and, in particular, to start a confrontation with the unions that would lead to big strikes and general chaos. Thatcher is leading her party from a doctrinaire, right-wing position, which is ideal for inspiring the activists but risks alienating the middle-of-the-road voter. From now to October, she can be expected to make efforts to project a more conciliatory and statesmanlike (that should be statespersonlike) image.

Except among her committed supporters, Thatcher isn't popular. How far this is because she's the first woman to aspire to the post of Prime Minister, it's hard to say. Anyway, she is regarded as arrogant, sharp and "bitchy"—every schoolboy's picture of the hated teacher. Too much weight, however, shouldn't be attached to this factor. British voters realize that

they aren't electing a President, and the choice of party bulks larger than the leader's personality. Heath, Thatcher's predecessor, was equally unpopular, and this was why Wilson was sure he'd won the 1970 election—but he lost.

**Liberals hold balance.**

The hidden anxiety for Labour is built into our electoral system. The simple-plurality system is suitable where there is a virtually unchallenged two-party situation, as in the U.S., but where there are minor parties of any size it leads to serious distortions. It would be quite possible for Labour to poll as many votes as in 1974, or even more, and nevertheless lose the election.

The reason for this is the collapse of the Liberal vote. It is a highly fluctuating vote, ranging from two million (7 percent) at a low to six million (20 percent) at a high. The two million are people who really believe in Liberal policies. Most of the other people who from time to time vote Liberal are, in normal allegiance, Tories. They vote Liberal when they are passing censure on a Tory government which, in their view, has failed; this is why the Liberal vote touched an all-time high in 1974. But in 1978 they will be passing judgment on a Labour government—and on the pact that, being basically Tory in outlook, they naturally didn't like.

In the six by-elections held this year in England (things were even more disas-

trous in Scotland) the Liberals polled a total of 24,433 votes. In the same districts, they had polled 55,029 votes at the last general election. Opinion polls tell the same story. In the coming general election, the Liberal vote is likely to be much closer to its minimum than its maximum—and the Tories will be the beneficiaries.

Let's glance at just one dicey seat: Rossendale, in Lancashire. The 1974 figures were: Labour 16,156; Tory 15,953; and Liberal 8,693. Labour's plurality was 203.

You don't need a computer to see that if the Liberal vote drops to around 5,000 the Tories will win Rossendale, even if the Labour vote is intact. Although this is an extreme case, the same general picture is valid in 27 constituencies. That would be quite enough to give Thatcher a majority in Parliament. One has to add that the Scottish National Party is losing support in the same way as the Liberals—and there, too, the Tories stand to benefit.

At this writing, the only thing that can be said with certainty about the coming election is that the outcome will depend on the campaign. It isn't lost in advance for Labour, but it is yet to be won. One effective broadcast by Callaghan, or one frightening broadcast by Thatcher, could turn the scale. Money may be decisive. The readiness of party activists for hard and devoted work may be more decisive still. I'm expecting, as the Duke of Wellington said of Waterloo, a damned close-run thing.

## Dissidents stand trial in Moscow

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sky's association with *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Robert Toth, who had been expelled last year for soliciting "state secrets." (Some American State Department officials admitted privately that Shcharansky may have inadvertently provided Toth with what in Soviet eyes is sensitive information.)

**Detente deteriorates.**

By striking at Shcharansky, Soviet authorities seemed to be hitting several targets with one blow. Human rights dissidents, Jewish "refusenik" activists, aggressive foreign correspondents, fighters for the rights of national minorities were all symbolically in the dock with Shcharansky. They were also trying to shortcircuit the line connecting journalists and dissidents that is so important to the human rights campaign. Toth's expulsion was preceded by the ouster of the Associated Press'

George Krinsky. More recently, *New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun* correspondents have been hauled into court for allegedly defaming Soviet television broadcasters. How Soviet authorities intend to intimidate Eurocommunist journalists who have also given wide publicity to dissidents and repression is a fascinating question.

But perhaps there was another aspect to the busy season in political trials in the USSR. The recent wave of arrests, trials, expulsions, and internal exiles have emerged against a background of deteriorating relations between Moscow and Washington.

The Carter administration's early and openly announced support for Soviet human rights activists may not have been intended as a deliberate attempt to sabotage detente, but it certainly had the effect of angering Soviet leaders. Since then, snags in SALT, American fulminations

about Soviet involvement in Africa, a decline in trade, and Washington's dalliance with Peking have brought detente to an impasse.

This is not a situation likely to help dissidents and human rights in the USSR. Nor are moralistic postures by the White House going to assist anyone in the USSR except those who want to get tough with the Americans and the dissidents. The best Carter and Brzezinski can do for Soviet dissidents is to keep their mouths shut.

But others should speak out. As the English *New Statesman* put it, "The present Carter strategy probably has very little life left in it—but socialists will have to carry on the battle whoever is in the White House....the real test will come when a new generation of opposition arises.... The left must be ready to throw them a line."

Louis Menashe writes regularly on Soviet affairs for *IN THESE TIMES*.



# THE LEFT HAND OF GOD

Is there a special message for us?



Richard Stromberg

## TRUE RELIGION IS ALWAYS DANGEROUS & SUBVERSIVE

**Charles S. Slap** **K**ARL MARX denounced religion as the "opiate of the masses." ¶ The belief in a universal father, "who art in heaven," Sigmund Freud considered an infantilism, a group neurosis. ¶ Last year, the editor of a journal wrote to me, "I'm happy you are interested in writing for us on religion. ...Though I have left it behind me, I know the importance of my religious upbringing in shaping my sense of right and wrong, as well as other aspects of my basic personality."

"I have left it behind me." In agreement with Marx and Freud, many of the most politically active elements of society today view religion as a crutch, a soporific, an infantilism. The people active in the major reform movements of our time are not, in general, the people you find in America's churches on Sunday morning.

The "progressive" attitude towards religion is, if not cynicism, a reduction of religion to ethics. Religion, like the flag, has been abandoned by the left. Religion and the flag have been coopted by the political right for purposes that only can be called idolatrous.

I have considerable sympathy with the irreligion of the left. For what is at the base of irreligion is often a protest against "trivial or perverted religion," the religion of White House prayer meetings, Rotary Club prayers; the religion of piety and government sanctifying each other, Billy Graham and Richard Nixon.

Yet irreligion is also the Achilles' heel of the left, a weakness of which it is not even aware, a wound that is hurting, individually and corporately.

For by dismissing the religious endeavor, by reducing religion to the observation of moral precepts, we leave ourselves without a grounding, without a rootedness in the ultimate sources of life.

Eric Fromm tells us that our religion

is what gives us a frame of orientation for life and an object of devotion, some ultimate concern, some basic value. Without an examined frame of orientation, without a recognized ultimate concern—without religion—our ethical precepts fail to achieve depth, we find ourselves entwined in a hodgepodge of activities and causes that are not grounded in any basic affirmation.

To live life without a religion of our own is to miss life's vertical transcendental power. It is to rush from meeting to meeting with no sense of priority, no way of telling what is truly important.

There is a tragic irony here. For by discounting religion, by considering it something left behind, we also cripple the social commitments that we seek to substitute for religion.

Religion can be evil, as in the Inquisitions and the Crusades, as in the Irish terrorism. Religion can be neurotic.

But religion can also be magnificent, inspiring people to place their lives and fortunes in the cause of justice and compassion.

Religious commitment can be good or bad, but it is always powerful. When any cause finally makes the connection with a religious rooting, that cause is almost unstoppable.

The failure to root itself in religion, has been the quicksand of many progressive causes. Without religion there is no passion, no grounding in the ultimate

source of power. On the basis of reasoning alone, we reach conclusions, on the basis of a religious faith, we make decisions.

True religion is always a subversive activity. True religion goes beyond flag and country, beyond church and dogma, beyond law. This was the central message of Jesus—religion seeks always the sustaining and transforming source of life.

Moses, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Gandhi—each one was a law breaker, each a subversive, each dared to judge their society, each took upon himself the role of servant. "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. ...He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth...." (Isaiah 42.)

This is the paradox of religion. While it may indeed serve as the opiate of the masses, religion can also be the most subversive of forces, serving as the strength of oppressed people and the foundation of their liberation.

This self-perception of the religious community as suffering servant, as the transforming community, gave form to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. As was brought out in a recent issue on religion of the journal *Southern Exposure*, the black church served as the nurturing institution for the new mass movement. "Its structures were used by meetings, freedom schools, voter registration drives and community centers. Its members were often the foundation upon which local movements were built and sustained. Since the time black people were brought to this country under slavery, the church has been the one institution they have controlled and used as a tool for their own liberation."

The black churches translated into action the belief that suffering itself may redeem the larger society. The black churches were never a passive imitation of the white churches. On the contrary, they were—and are today—an active force that stimulated their people to emancipation.

The American Indians also have found in their religion a defense against oppression as well as an escape from it. As Vittorio Lanternari informs us in *The Religions of the Oppressed*, "In the

struggle of the American Indians against the white invaders, religion played a far more significant role than is commonly believed. ...Frequently, it was a religious drive which inspired and sustained their desperate efforts to rise up against the foreigners who had taken their land. One of their most eminent chiefs, Sitting Bull, acquired fame and authority among his own people less as a military and political leader than as the apostle and prophet of the Ghost Dance, a...religious movement which gave Indians the courage and strength to carry on the struggle for independence. ...The Ghost Dance promised redemption and liberation at a time when the Indians were ready for rebellion, and provided the motivating force for uprisings such as that of the Sioux...."

Today in California religion provides the drive behind Cesar Chavez's effort to emancipate his people. A true suffering servant, with the active support of the Catholic Church, he has taken upon himself the yoke of the migrant farm worker.

Many churches burst into religious flame during the Vietnam War. With true religious passion, they resisted an imperialistic war. Many churches became at least symbolic sanctuaries of resistance.

The test of a religion is how subversive it is. Where does its ultimate loyalty lie—with the powers and establishments of society or with the transforming power of love and justice. A subversive religion affirms the moral obligation to direct one's efforts towards the establishment of a just and loving community.

"The 'holy' thing in life is the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice," the theologian James Luther Adams reminds us. "A purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion; it is one that exempts its believer from surrender to the sustaining, transforming reality that demands the community of justice and love. This sham spirituality, far more than materialism, is the great enemy of religion."

A subversive religion unabashedly seeks power, seeks incarnation in history, tries to shape history towards justice, Adams reminds us. "Any other faith is thoroughly undependable; it is also, in the end, impotent. It is not a

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