

Comment

'the secret of government is to command seldom.'

(St Philip Neri)

Government is least obtrusive where there is shared vision and a sense of common enterprise. If you demand obedience you are likely to get obedience; collusion and not co-operation. An excessive reliance on sheer force of personality in the exercise of leadership creates an illusion of security, but often fosters hidden resentment amongst those who feign conviction; coercion cannot create communion. Courtiers can do a passable imitation of true believers.

The result of last month's general election in Britain was a shock to almost every politician except Mr Major. His calm confidence in a Conservative victory must, in retrospect, bolster his image as being reliably steady under fire. An allegedly unsteady hand has demonstrated a remarkably powerful grip. The ruthless eviction of Mrs Thatcher from office eighteen months ago has proved to be a wise gamble. Against this background it is notable that one of the rallying cries megaphoned from Mr Major's designer-built soap-box was the need for strong government. The people of Britain could be forgiven for thinking that there had been no shortage of that during Mrs Thatcher's time in office; many of them did not like it very much. Amongst other things it has landed them in the longest recession since the 1930s which, to add insult to injury, has in large measure been government-induced. As Mr Major will shortly prove, despite public statements of regard and admiration, 'the Thatcher economic miracle' was an optical illusion based on huge borrowing and over-consumption, and not on Lincolnshire thrift and hard work.

A recent study in the *Financial Times* pointed out that during the twelve years of Conservative government economic growth averaged 1.7 per cent a year. This represented a marginal increase on the 1.4 per cent attained under the previous six years of the Labour government. Whereas until 1973 growth had averaged 3.1 per cent, in the years afterwards, growth has only been half as much. The Thatcher years did not halt the continuous process of British decline. Strong government offered the illusion of stability, security and prosperity. An illusion sustained by the rapid enrichment of a significant number of *entrepreneurs*. Yesterday's wealth-creators are today's bankrupts. Strong government went hand-in-hand with a vast increase in the powers of an already highly-centralised state. It was also identified with

a particular notion of Britishness which looked, to the bemused outsider, suspiciously like the apotheosis of Englishness. In a pluralist society the support of public confidence and institutional trust demands the successful protection of a corporate identity. An identity which provides the space for what sociologists call that 'civil inattention' or 'polite estrangement' necessary for the functioning of any stable society. When it came down to it, as the surprising late swing to the Conservative party showed, the people did not trust the Labour party to provide that vision.

We live in an age of disposable visions. The deposition of Mrs Thatcher, as well as Mr Kinnock's recasting of the Labour party, demonstrated that. One of the major shifts in the past twenty years has been the dilution of class identity. In a recent survey a majority of English people put themselves down as middle class. Only in Scotland is it still common for professional people to describe themselves as working class. The annihilation of manufacturing industry in Britain has reduced the extent of the working class. Labour politicians, who will now urge a return to the traditional recruiting ground of the party, will find that it has crumbled away along with the factories and tightly-knit urban communities that sustained and sheltered it. The Conservative party, having flirted briefly with dogma, will now, as a consumer-orientated party, seek to occupy the centre ground. The framework delineating the centre ground is economic. The disarming honesty of Labour's tax proposals worried a large number of new entrants to the middle classes not because they would have touched their pockets, but because they threatened their ambitions. The proclamation of a classless society suggests that anybody can 'make it' if they really try.

Mr David Willetts, a leading Conservative ideologue and author of *Modern Conservatism*, recently claimed that it is culture that holds community together. Culture, that is, as described by T.S Eliot and including all of the 'characteristic activities and interests of a people', amongst these he listed: 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the 12th August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table...19th century Gothic churches, and the music of Elgar'. It is to be doubted whether this vision featured very highly on the agenda of those Scots or Asian immigrants who voted Conservative. Culture undoubtedly plays a large part in sustaining national identity, but it is debatable if this particular vision fits the bill for contemporary Britain; its power comes from its appeal as fantasy. The next four years may see the Labour party facing a continued identity crisis, but the crisis in the Conservative party focused by the fall of Mrs Thatcher is not yet resolved. Liberation theology might yet take root in Essex.

AJW

251