

Comment

Time for a change?

A higher proportion of voters than ever before determined months ago that they would take no part in the British general election. According to reports, nearly half the first-time voters regard it as 'cool' not to vote at all. Hundreds of thousands who dropped off the registers over the Poll Tax have not returned. People who no doubt support New Labour and Mr Blair nevertheless claim that they expect no change in government policy. At a recent conference in Edinburgh the keynote address on 'The Future of Welfare' was given by Bishop David Jenkins. In the discussion afterwards, in a characteristic aside, he remarked that a different government would make no difference — and the respondent, Campbell Christie, of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, showed no sign of dissent. For very different reasons, no doubt, sophisticated as well as desperate people have become deeply cynical about politics and politicians in the United Kingdom.

But which party is in government in Britain surely does make a good deal of difference. For one thing, committed Tories were certainly expecting the collapse of the economy, the subjugation of Britain to the bureaucrats of the European Union and effectively to Germany, and the break-up of the United Kingdom. For another, one need only consider what would not have happened if the neo-liberalism of the Thatcherised Conservative Party had stopped in 1992. The job-seekers allowance would not have been introduced. British Rail would not have been sold off at vast public expense in legal fees and in such a crazily fragmented fashion. Market principles would not have spread inexorably into the education system and the National Health Service. The Maastricht Treaty would have been signed, without the opt-out on the social chapter. Sterling would no doubt still have been forced out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism, though the newspapers would have done their utmost to persuade us of the unparalleled incompetence of the Labour administration. Would there have been VAT on fuel? Would the coal pits have closed? Would free eye tests for the over-sixties have been abolished? BSE would presumably have been shown to infect human beings and the beef cull would still have been required, though perhaps with less acrimonious exchange between Britain and the European Union. Nearly one in four hospital beds has been lost

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since the introduction of the internal market. And so on.

There certainly seem to be far more beggars in city streets than since Victorian days. Anyone who does not travel by official limousine or private helicopter and live within a security-gated enclosure must have daily glimpses of increasing social instability, violence and resentment, and the squalor and poverty of many people's circumstances. It is a bleak outlook if no electable government can make any difference to that in what is, after all, one of the richest and stablest societies anywhere in the world.

The problem all along has surely been that, despite the landslide victories in 1983 and 1987, and the re-election in 1992 on the promise of no new taxes, the Conservatives have never won the consent of the majority of the British electorate. In Wales and Scotland, and again in Northern Ireland, they have governed against the will of most of the people. Even in England, however, there have always been more electors who voted for some alternative to the Conservatives or for no one at all. The trouble is, of course, that they have never been able to unite in their opposition. The idea of tactical voting in marginal constituencies is one of the more hopeful signs of political maturity, though not enough to counteract the prospect of widespread disengagement among the young. There is no need to panic. Deplorable as sleaze is, corruption in British political elites is laughably insignificant compared with what goes on in some of the other states of the European Union, let alone elsewhere. Similarly, what Quintin Hogg once called our system of 'elective dictatorship' needs a good deal of overhaul and repair; but the United Kingdom is not about to collapse into fascism or anarchy. Perhaps this all means that the first past the post system of electing representatives is the first constitutional change that should be contemplated. What it certainly means, if the social fabric is not to fragment further, is that any party in power, even after a 'landslide', needs to respect the people who voted for some one else. If it is time for a change, it will be largely because Britain is not a one-party state.

F.K.