

Looking at an Election by Terry Eagleton

There wasn't much heard about Christian belief in the recent British election campaign, in spite of occasional Christian appeals to the candidates' consciences; but then, with a renewed sense among Christians of the secular significances of the term 'moral', this lack of directly Christian discussion ought not to be too disturbing: we were, after all, electing a government, not a parish council. What can usefully be looked at, however, is the degree of moral emphasis, in a general sense, in the parties' programmes: how far was this a *humane* election?

The Liberal Party is important here, because it focusses a complex of attitudes which have been dominant in British politics over the past few years. At the peak of its form, Jo Grimond's party stood for an impatient, dynamic streamlining of society, a tough concern with efficiency; Liberalism was a force to disperse the cobwebs, and the cobwebs included talk of class-warfare and socialization of industry as much as Tory old-boyism and bungling. There was an attractive radicalism about this, and it won over a good many people who failed to see that dynamism and efficiency are morally neutral terms which can shove out the central moral issues and reduce politics to technique and organization. At the Liberal Party conferences the hall was full of young men rearing to get industry off the ground and eliminate wastage and failure; the talk centred on expansion and cutting through red-tape, progress was the key-term. This kind of emphasis in a major political party could pass muster because there was always the feeling that, somewhere in the background, all this dynamism had a purpose which could be referred to on questioning, that it could be linked meaningfully to human concerns, but the moral inspiration became more and more remote, the talk of hospitals and pensions more and more tenuously linked, in feeling, to the streamlining. A shade further to the left, Hugh Gaitskell also talked about efficiency, linked a little more firmly to ideas of equality and justice, but held up chiefly as an alternative to the idealism of his left-wing.

One of the reasons why Harold Wilson gained power on October 15th was because he felt the dualism of post-war politics and went a good way towards healing it. What he did was to harness the progressive concern with efficiency, the new philosophy, to the older socialist concern with moral values: industry would be galvanised into action to pay for higher pensions. In this way he took over the whole spectrum of possible left-wing attitudes and left himself largely invulnerable. In the abstract this was not entirely new: Home in Britain, as much as Johnson in the U.S.A., was fighting on a platform of morally purposive prosperity, and the straight materialism of the Macmillan era no longer functioned. But Wilson, more than anyone, could hold the two bodies of feeling, the moral and material, in convincing fusion: the emphases came across together, in an attitude or just a tone of voice. With Home, there was the sense of unequal emphasis, of prosperity dominating morality or morality tagged on

to the end: Conservative television broadcasts started with shots of stocked-up supermarkets and finished with ministers discussing hospitals. Wilson could talk about economic expansion with a kind of reflective, informal moral earnestness which was sometimes only caught in a colloquialism, a personal quality of feeling.

It was, on both sides, a more ideological election than in '59. In his manifesto, in interviews, Wilson was strikingly explicit: he rejected the 'venal' philosophy of the Conservatives, he called for sacrifice and work and service in place of 'moneyed materialism . . . dreary commercialism and personal selfishness', he declared that 'the morality of money and prosperity is a dead and deadening morality'. At Scarborough he had given the outlines of a new vision, a different quality of living, and he spent the campaign in filling these in, concretely, without blurring the overall emphasis. His attack was on the Beeching mentality of both Conservative and Liberal: he stressed the 'concern for others without which production is a meaningless technical exercise'. The moral quality of his campaign attracted the left-wing, the flexibility of his outlook kept revisionists in tow; his dynamism shook the Labour party free from most charges of being out-of-date (nobody called Wilson old-fashioned, only some of his inherited policies), but he preserved, in those policies, continuity with the socialist past.

But there were drawbacks. One way the Christian approaches an election campaign is to ask about the truth in each party's programme, the degree of sincerity. Wilson's programme, generally, was authentic, in the sense that it grew from his personality: he wrote his own speeches, developed policy in his personal idiom. But the genuine radicalism needed a vote-pulling counterbalance, and it was at this point that Wilson found the idea of the Commonwealth. He managed, skilfully, to sublimate radicalism into an acceptable and shady patriotism: the Labour Party 'offered Britain a new way of life which will stir our hearts, rekindle an authentic patriotic faith in the world today for progress, peace and justice . . .'. However that patriotism could be described, 'authentic' is hardly the term: it was difficult to fit this part of the programme into the emotional context of Wilson's personality, to harmonize it with the practical, urgent involvement: it stayed on the outside, as a hesitant gesture. In the same way, the radical stand on the independent deterrent was made by verbal ingenuity to slot into the Greater Britain line: Britain, Wilson said, must look to the Commonwealth rather than accept 'second-class status as a nuclear power', and the damage to language done here must be recorded as a major event in the campaign. The tension involved in the 'we're great but could be better' line, the balance of commitment and criticism, produced an intricate mixture of radical blow with patriotic parry, a delicate blending of language. Wilson attacked with one hand and fondled with the other: he stood firm on nationalization in the teeth of a Conservative assault, but told the *Observer*

that he took his socialism from the Boy Scout movement; he rejected Tory philosophy and then told the *Guardian* that there was no difference between the stated aims of the two main parties: it was, after all, a matter of technique. The *Daily Mirror's* information that the famous average-man rainmac was in fact a de luxe article of a kind worn by the Duke of Edinburgh, among others, began to take on darkly symbolic overtones.

Against this must be balanced Wilson's overall authenticity. He fought the campaign reflectively, almost impersonally, as though he were genuinely anxious about Britain and his own future weren't involved. In early September, when the Tories were already up on the stage acting out the election drama, Wilson was still down among the crowd muttering the occasional sage comment, refusing to exploit the bad trade figures, reluctant to desert his position as an involved observer. Once he got on the stage he could certainly act, sometimes a little too well, but he wanted to keep things sober, statistical, non-histrionic. The Tory television broadcasts were stage-managed pieces using the full range of cinematic technique; the typical Labour broadcast starred a desk-sitting, grey-suited uncle (usually Christopher Mayhew) who jovially pointed out Tory blunders with the help of some charts, creating a solid commonsensical front between Labour and viewers against the alien rhetoric of the Conservatives.

But the Conservative appeal was more than a merely rhetorical one. Theirs, too, was an ideological fight: Home, a more thorough and unquestioning Conservative than Macmillan, took his stand on the basic tenets of Toryism with a singleness and simplicity which gave the appeal a direct, unified impact. He used the bomb to focus the patriotism which he placed at the centre of the campaign, and fought against a materialist platform: while his Central Office was putting out a television broadcast of breathtaking vulgarity, Home himself was genuinely convinced that socialism meant tyranny and used this moral conviction with effect. The Conservative manifesto announced that 'these pages are not an introduction to an easy or sheltered life: prosperity must be worked for'; Home declared that Britain was a compassionate, not a selfish, society and gave a list of priorities which highlighted his moral concern – education as an instance of free choice, moral standards, freedom from restriction, social services, patriotism. There was little complexity in Home's approach, little of Wilson's hard thinking: he looked around and genuinely couldn't understand how anyone could vote anything but Conservative on the evidence of sense-impressions. But the lack of complexity, the neat, simple vision, was at points hard to distinguish from a superficial and oversimplified approach which blended well with the genteel amateurism, the matchstick economics. Home was 'straight', as the posters said, but men who *really* can't understand how anyone can vote socialist are liable to underestimate the complexity of social issues. Some of Home's campaigning confirmed this

impression: phrases like 'I believe every man's ambition is to be a capitalist' showed an almost touchingly unquestioning assumption of questionable propositions. But what was most evident about the Conservative campaign was that, unlike Labour, it lacked a dynamic centre around which to organize itself: it took up the issues but failed to make the theme of purposive prosperity as imaginatively integrated and forceful as the Labour vision.

The Liberals, in spite of obtaining Honor Blackman for one of their television broadcasts, never got into gear. The ebbing of the Liberal revival had left them off-balance and a little bitter, and this came across in Jo Grimond: he still referred nostalgically to Orpington, hit out ritually left and right, was easily irritated by implications of failure. The manifesto title 'Think for Yourself' captured the main feeling: the independent mind free from 'vested interests' was also a mind in isolation, a kind of individualism which was almost anti-political. The dynamic, expansive party was becoming introverted, anxious, irrelevantly malicious: Frank Byers' description of Wilson as a 'puffed-up adder' was the sort of wearily correct caricature of a political insult which showed up the hollowness behind the activity. Liberal policy continued to consist of unrelated pieces of good, common-sensical legislation, with a few of the bigger ideas (co-ownership, more regional control) in the centre: the party was becoming an office for good ideas, and the television broadcasts, moving from minor point to minor point, stressed the fact. There was no unifying principle, no integration: people still said, untruly, that the Liberals had no policy, meaning that they had no ideology, and the way that the other two parties were feeling their way towards such a total definition of themselves made this more evident. There were some saving points – Grimond was the only man to stress penal reform as a significant issue – but the old ambivalence lay at the heart of the policy: public schools were a danger but nothing would be done about them, Frank Byers sat on the fence about an Ombudsman. Grimond was 'very unhappy' about television politics but declared himself willing to appear with anyone, any time.

The B.B.C.'s 'Election Forum' showed the three leaders in action and gave viewers a chance to assess their force and sincerity. Grimond was the entire politician, scoring on every point, alive to every overtone, quick, incisive and on the whole unevasive. Wilson talked long and involvedly, thinking hard, with some hint of tiredness and mechanicalness and a well-developed technique of evasion; Home was nervous, unsettled, without weight or the impression of deep involvement. Meanwhile, a series of events tapped the social pulse of Britain: the *Sun* came out and began rapidly setting, its pre-advertising reading like Conservative propaganda: '*The Sun* believes that the division of Britain into social classes is now happily out of date'. This was one instance of the new, smart 'radicalism', the fuzzy 'with-it' feeling, which

Labour's campaign, without its moral sense, could have dropped into. John Osborne's new play opened in the West End and indicated how far the early, explosive energy of post-Suez protest had changed: the original brilliance had slid into an almost wholly verbal energy, the anger into irritation. And while Wilson was fashioning his new, democratic Britain, hundreds of ordinary folk were waving flags and whipping themselves into patriotic fury in an orgy of cosy conformism and feeble humour at the last night of the Proms. Meanwhile again, somewhere on the Greek coast, the British crown prince, full of merry japes, was upturning a canoe containing some expensive equipment and getting covered by an official denial. The old Britain, unaffected by Mr Wilson, creaked on.

Back at home, the election campaign drew to a close with hardly any emphasis on education, and nothing about the necessity to share prosperity abroad. What did come across, however, in spite of this, was a developing moral sense, a reaction, if only slight, against the smooth materialism of the '59 election. That election had been won on the strength of a raw response to affluence; in the years since, the nation had had time to absorb the shock and grope towards new moral bearings in a changed situation. Its final decision was hardly definite: but the fact that, in an affluent society, pensions and unemployment were still shown by the opinion polls as persistent preoccupations, is perhaps an indication that the forces of evil have not wholly won.
