

UNDER COVER

The British Election & the Politics of Dignity

British politics is no mirror of the American future. In 1935, Stanley Baldwin and the Conservatives won in Britain, which encouraged the American opponents of the New Deal, who went on in 1936 to lose every state except Maine and Vermont. Allowing for such refractions, however, it is possible for Americans to learn something from Britain's recent elections.

Part of the lesson is a familiar catechism of democratic politics: In winner-take-all elections, third parties make a mess of things. A clear majority of the British electorate voted for candidates to the left of center—or at least to the left of Mrs. Thatcher—and the Conservatives won their parliamentary majority only because their opponents were divided. The supreme commandment of party politics in elections of this sort is "coalesce or perish."

In America that imperative is more inescapable than it is in Britain. After the returns were in, Roy Jenkins and other leaders of the Social Democratic/Liberal alliance called for some form of proportional representation that would enable their party to win its "fair" share of seats in parliament. The proposal has no chance of success, since it is counter to the interests of Conservatives and Laborites alike, but it is at least feasible. In presidential elections in the United States, however, winning and losing is a matter of either/or, not more or less. If Mr. Reagan's opponents hope to unseat him, they must submerge their other differences in that common antipathy.

Coalitions are hateful, of course. Inevitably they require toning down or giving up proposals and principles, just as they demand cooperation with allies one despises; and such compromises make sense only when the alternative is worse. Consequently, the logic of coalition politics deals a stronger hand to the political center. British voters who favored the alliance could rationally conclude that Mr. Foot's left-wing policies were as unacceptable as Mrs. Thatcher's rightist dogmas. By contrast, Mr. Foot and the Labor party could not really argue that there was no difference between the alliance and Mrs. Thatcher, any more than liberal Democrats will be able to deny that they find Senator Glenn's policies more congenial than the president's. A left-of-center coalition would have been possible in Britain only if Mr. Foot and his supporters had been willing to woo the alliance and pay its price, something they were unwilling to do.

Their intransigence had a point: Since the Left can never argue rationally that it prefers the Right to the center, if leftists are to have any bargaining power in their dealings with centrists, they must sometimes act irrationally. Such fits of moral passion, and the heady rhetoric they permit and inspire, are not easily restrained. Indulgence can lead to addiction, and in the case of the British Labor party, the habit may prove fatal.

It is not clear that the American liberal-Left can resist its similar temptations. Unity with the centrist wing of the Democratic party will be possible only at a high price: The Left will need to moderate its position on foreign policy

and to content itself with a platform that is silent on many social issues. Yet there are reasons, apart from the all-but-sufficient desire to defeat Mr. Reagan, that could make the coalition seem worth the sacrifice.

The British election has a moral as well as a tactical point. It hints at a future in which the *politics of dignity* will be the mainspring of public life. The Falklands war was a great asset to Mrs. Thatcher, even though it was, and continues to be, almost ruinously expensive. It matters a good deal, of course, that the Falklands campaign was successful and that it cost relatively few British lives. Nevertheless, British opinion seems, on the whole, to have defied the categories and the logic of the utilitarians and the economists. More than anything else, the appeal of the Falklands war comes down to the fact that it demonstrated that Britain still counts for something and that the waning of power need not mean a decline in skill or a weakening of moral resolution.

Americans yearn for that sort of affirmation of dignity, but Mr. Reagan has no equivalent of the Falklands in his campaign chest and is not likely to get one. Britons have been ready for great sacrifice because their honor is at stake; the Reagan administration cannot expect a similar response when, as in Central America, it uses dishonorable methods in support of dishonored regimes. In foreign policy Mr. Reagan is reduced to the reasonable hope that Democratic blunders will conceal or cancel his own, and the weakness of his position is magnified in domestic life.

Mrs. Thatcher was opposed by a considerable majority of British voters in spite of her success in the Falklands. The vote against Thatcher's policies, it seems to me, was cast against her *concept of prosperity*. Thatcher's notion, like Reagan's, accepts permanently high unemployment and discounts it by hopes for growth in the GNP, per capita income, and other measures of material wealth.

Even if one ignores the very unequal way in which well-being is distributed in this sort of "recovery," here or in Britain, one is left with an economy that at best will *provide* for millions of its people but sees no *contribution* they can make. An economy so organized is a constant assault on the dignity of every citizen because it threatens the work of those who are still employed by its easy tolerance of unemployment. Full employment is the moral foundation of industrial civilization. Casting it aside, Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Reagan become the active agents of moral decay. British voters, to their credit, were not willing to settle for Mrs. Thatcher's promise of variations on *panem et circenses*, but their political leaders—out of dogma and vanity—denied them the opportunity to make their voice effective. Perhaps American political leaders can profit from the example of their counterparts across the sea.

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