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Farewell to bowler hats, farewell to cloth caps

The landscape of British politics has been drastically changed, says RICHARD ROSE

WE CANNOT, of course, be sure of the number or names of the parties fighting elections in the 1990s. But one thing is certain: a party system based on the headgear of bowler hats versus cloth caps is no more.

For the first three decades after the Second World War, two parties—the Conservatives and Labour—dominated the scene. If a Liberal candidate stood, he usually lost his deposit. The two main parties won nearly all the seats in the House of Commons, and won nearly 90 per cent of the vote on average.

The 1951 general election, a hard-fought battle between Attlee and Churchill, was the epitome of a two-party system that most MPs and many writers on British politics continue to regard as normal.

The election was fought about major ideological differences: socialism versus "setting the people free". In nine-tenths of the constituencies, the MP was elected with an absolute majority of the constituency vote. Together, the Conservative and Labour parties took 96.7 per cent of the total vote. The Liberals collapsed, nominating only 109 candidates, and taking less than 3 per cent of the popular vote.

But the two-party system is not something that is guaranteed by the mechanics of the electoral system. In the 1920s three-way competition between Conservatives, variously denominated Liberals and Labour meant that Labour could take office with as little as 31 per cent of the popular vote, and the Conservatives could win a majority with only 38 per cent of the vote.

The elections of 1935 and 1945 appeared to end this transitional period of party competition, substituting Labour for the Liberals who had become a seemingly anachronistic second party of the middle class.

Socialist ideology made a two-party system appear natural for two antagonistic classes. "One nation" Toryism sought to build cross-class harmony, and the coalition governments that prevailed for most of the time from 1914 to 1945 supported the idea of government by consensus.

Since then, while the Labour and Conservative parties have continued to win elections, they have lost much of the confidence of the voters. Labour won two elections in the 1960s, but failed to produce the economic re-generation promised by Harold Wilson's rhetoric. In 1970, Edward Heath promised action not words—but he fell amid the darkness of the three-day week in early 1974.

Future historians are likely to date the breakdown of the classic two-party system from the two "Who governs?" elections that took place that year. In the first election the Conservative vote dropped to its lowest level since 1859. Labour won office with the least share of any governing party since 1929. The Liberals more than doubled their popular vote to 19.3 per cent and held the balance of power with 14 seats. In the second of the 1974 elections the overall positions were not much different with Labour again dependent on Liberal support for a working majority.

In the past four elections, the Conservative and Labour parties have between them won only 75 per cent of the vote on average. Labour has not managed to win two-fifths of the vote since it *lost* the 1970 general election. Its share of the vote in 1983 was its lowest since 1918.

Michael Foot's weakness as Labour leader was blamed for this debacle. But there had in fact been a long-running decline in Labour's fortunes. Those who concluded that, by changing the leader, you could raise Labour's vote were being too simplistic by half.

When Harold Wilson led the Labour opposition in 1970-74, Labour averaged 46 per cent in the monthly Gallup Poll. Under Michael Foot's leadership Labour averaged 34 per cent. As leader, Neil Kinnock has raised average support by only one per cent.

Equally, Mrs Thatcher's victories have masked a decline in Conservative electoral strength. In 1979 she won the general election with a lower share of the popular vote than Ted Heath had gained in 1970. In 1983 the Conservative vote again dropped; it was the lowest share of the vote since 1922 for a government with a working majority. Conservative support in monthly Gallup Polls since has averaged 36 per cent.

While the Alliance has yet to win enough popular support to be a major party in the House of Commons, it has made a strategic breakthrough in the mass electorate.

The Alliance is second in two-thirds of Government-held seats, so it is Labour that more often faces the "wasted vote" argument at the constituency level. In 1983 Labour lost 119 deposits, as against 11 lost by the Alliance. However by-elections show that Alliance candidates can cost the Conservatives seats, too.

WHATEVER the outcome on June 11, all parties face an insecure future. With three parties (or four, if the Social Democratic Party maintains an existence separate from the Liberals), the electoral market place is more competitive than a generation ago.

Neil Kinnock has sought to make Labour look less socialist. Concurrently, the Thatcher government has maintained high levels of public expenditure on welfare services. The Alliance is not so much offering new policies as a different mix of familiar policies, some consistent with Conservative views, others with Labour ones.

Voters today are far readier to float between parties than ever before. The Gallup Poll reports that three-fifths of the electorate do not feel close to any political party. The majority of voters have supported two of the three major parties at some time during the past Parliament.

Only one-third of the voters see themselves as definitely committed to vote for the same party at election after election.

There are three major reasons for the greatly increased volatility in the electorate.

First, because of social and economic changes, the majority of the electorate can no longer be fitted into stereotypes of middle-class Conservatives and Labour-voting manual workers. Trade unions have recruited many first-generation members from middle-class occupations, such as teaching and office work. Home-ownership has grown by the spread of owner-occupation among the offspring of council-house tenants.

Second, parties have adapted to attract new types of voters. Mrs Thatcher's populist Conservatism stresses self-reliance in the manner of 19th century Liberal doctrines. The 1987 Labour manifesto is a tribute to designer socialism, omitting many traditional Labour principles as well as incorporating pledges for the mobile middle class. The Alliance emphasises many policies acceptable to other parties, too.

Third, television has changed what the mass electorate hears about politics. Viewers no longer inhabit a political ghetto, in which talk always favours one party. TV is obliged by law to give a balanced picture. All party leaders seek to appear in appealing non-political contexts, cuddling their interviewer, if there is not a lamb, a cat or a kiddy to cuddle.

Often, TV exposes viewers to the full vigour of MPs attacking the other parties. John Stuart Mill believed that voters could be educated by prolonged exposure to public debates. But some voters are likely to be turned off conventional party politics by "Spitting Image", attacks on politicians as a class, and the real-life counterpart in "ya boo" exchanges broadcast from House of Commons at question time.

CHANGES in the electorate need not change the nominal character of the House of Commons. As long as the Alliance is often a second-choice party, the first-past-the-post electoral system will produce a Conservative or Labour majority. Only if the Alliance holds the parliamentary balance of power after two successive elections, could it be confident of securing proportional representation.

However, the substance of the British party system is now very different from a generation ago. The outward evidence is the decline in votes of the two established parties. Within the parties, the changes from the days of Attlee and Churchill are even more striking.

When one looks at the more educated, more affluent, and more socially fluid electorate of today, it is clearer still that there is no going back to the politics of bowler hats versus cloth caps. In a Marks and Spencer society, voters can change their party preference with almost as much ease as they can change their increasingly classless clothes.

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