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The Conservative Party

The Conservative Party, which for at least the last twelve months has been firmly united under the leadership of Mrs Thatcher, has for some time been in the happy position of - almost without trying - picking up support right across the board in England from an unpopular Labour Government and a Liberal electorate, doubtful about its party's recent deal with Labour. This movement of support to the party has been most clearly reflected in their sweeping victories at almost all recent by-elections as well as in last May's local government elections. If the swing to the Tories on these occasions were to be repeated at a general election, it would mean their return to power with an overall majority well in excess of a hundred.

At the same time, and whatever their attitude in the past, there is little or no complacency in Tory ranks at the moment about the outcome of the next general election. The reasons for this are not hard to find. The performance of the Shadow Cabinet, both in parliament and in the country, has been consistently poor and it still, for example, looks decidedly less weighty and less impressive than a Labour team which in the recent past has lost both Roy Jenkins and Tony Crosland. It is arguable also that if the Tories had been seen by the city, the media and public opinion at large to be poised effectively to take over the reins of government from, and offer a dynamic alternative to, Labour last March, the Liberals might not have felt able to enter into a pact to keep the Government in power. A great worry therefore for Mrs Thatcher is that, over the last two years, in the most unfavourable political and economic circumstances for the Government, her Shadow Cabinet has failed to show conviction and authority and, more importantly, to take full advantage of the Government's undoubted unpopularity in the country and their minority position in parliament. She may yet have cause to rue the missed opportunities of this period as, with a forecasted upswing in the economy for later this year and for 1978, and substantive spin-off from North Sea oil, the Prime Minister seems to sense that he can go to the country in the Autumn of '78 or the Spring of 1979 with a fighting chance of success. The odds still seem to be stacked against him succeeding but, if the Tory leadership continues to fail to carry conviction and the doubts about the Party's ability to work effectively with the unions are not put at rest, the contest could well turn out to be a very close one.

Northern Ireland Policy

Mrs Thatcher has not to date made a major speech on Northern Ireland nor has she given very much indication either in public or in private about her views on the situation. She would undoubtedly believe strongly in the Union, which is the starting-point for Tory policy on the North, and one suspects that she has also a certain instinctive sympathy for Ulster Unionists of the straightforward (Harry West) variety, though this may well have been undermined to some extent by the present understanding between the Unionists and Labour. The Ambassador, when he called on her in June last, found Mrs Thatcher to be very friendly and amiable. Apart from the Strasbourg case, which she feels strongly about, she did not touch on any controversial matter. Likewise when the former Foreign Minister Dr FitzGerald, called on her last October, to express disquiet about remarks by Airey Neave, which suggested a weakening of Tory support for partnership government, he received a positive response and indeed the party's position was firmed-up a short time later. (Mrs Thatcher, it might be added, is very close to Neave; he conducted her campaign for the leadership in 1975 and is also the head of her private office).

Elected Provincial Council

Both Airey Neave and John Biggs-Davison, the party's two front-bench spokesmen on Northern Ireland, have consistently expressed the view that "direct rule is no substitute for a constitutional settlement in Northern Ireland" (House, 30th June) and that, at the least, an interim elected body should be established in the Province. They believe that it is the Government's responsibility to take an initiative to this effect and (given in particular that there are eight separate political parties in the North) have described Mason's view that it is up to the politicians to reach agreement among themselves first as "balderdash" (Neave, 13th August). Neave went on to say on that occasion that, "unless it wants to continue direct rule for reasons of narrow parliamentary advantage, the Government has a clear duty to present for discussion a programme of steps to devolved government. The Government should consider a plan for an elected provincial council incorporating certain local government powers, and safeguarding Catholic rights as the first of these steps".

While it is not clear what precise terms of reference Neave's proposed Council would have, he did suggest in the course of a meeting with the former Foreign Minister on the 25th April last that it should have a function in the Westminster legislative process for Northern Ireland (about which the Tories are very unhappy at the moment) but at what stage he found it difficult to say. It might, he thought, report to a Committee of the House which could be set up to deal with legislation for the Province.

Apart from the above, there are only minor differences between the approaches of the Tories and the Government to the political situation. The Tories agree with the Government that, as Neave put it in the House on 30th June, "the restoration of a full devolved legislative system must be acceptable to both communities". He and Biggs-Davison would probably ideally like to see some form of voluntary partnership government operating in the Province but what their attitude would be to an Irish dimension in such, or any other, circumstances is less clear. Recent speeches by Biggs-Davison, however, in which he has referred dismissively to the "stale slogans of enforced power-sharing, Irish dimension and old Stormont", would suggest that they have little or no sympathy for the concept.

Security

The main thrust of the speeches on Northern Ireland from Neave and Biggs-Davison has been on the security questions, so much so in fact that at times it appeared that both had a one-dimensional view of the Province and its problems. In some of these speeches in the past, Neave has clearly hinted that the Tories, if returned to power, would consider the reintroduction of detention, with a view to putting away the 100 to 200 "god-fathers" who "masterminded crime and outrage" and employed young men and women to do their killing. Recently, however, he has been more circumspect in his remarks. In the House on 30th June, for instance, he said that he supported the Mason line on detention and the decision to retain it as a last resort but "like them we are in no way committed to its introduction. This is a bipartisan matter".

With the recent new security measures announced by the Government, there are no significant differences in the approach of the two parties to this question.

Cross-Border Co-Operation

In the House on the 30th June, Neave said that his party looked forward to talks with the Taoiseach and his Ministers "because there is a great need for cross-border co-operation to continue and, indeed, for co-operation in other areas too".

Bipartisanship

The bipartisanship approach to Northern Ireland of the Labour and Tory parties has not been under very much strain since Merlyn Rees was replaced at the NIO by Roy Mason. Neave was bitterly critical of the Rees approach to security and, in particular, of his refusal to discontinue the talks between his officials and the Provos. There are still of course areas of disagreement between the two parties, most notably over the failure of the Secretary of State to take an initiative to restore at least a partial form of devolved government to the Province.

On security, on the other hand, the Tories are by and large happy with the present situation though Neave in private is resentful of what he sees as Mason's lifting, without attribution, of many of his security proposals over the past few months.

The Labour-Unionist understanding seems not to have affected the bipartisan approach (the Tories would no doubt have acted in much the same way in similar circumstances, as indeed witness the Ted Heath telegramme to Harry West after the February 1974 election), perhaps because it has not so far impinged on policy except on an issue like increased representation, which the Conservatives are happy to support. On the other hand, it has resulted in a considerable cooling of the relationship between the Tories and the Unionists, a development which might be helpful in ensuring that the Tories maintain a balanced approach to the Northern issue, if returned to power.