

Margaret Thatcher's second huge election win belies two ingrained ~~to~~ political myths. (One myth) is that society has a deepseated prejudice against women -- women are thought to be inferior leaders -- people will not choose women statesmen -- a party is unwise to endorse women candidates. Her win contradicts that sexist view. It also contradicts socialist feminists who, to argue that women are discriminated against, must concede that Mrs. Thatcher's policies are even more popular than the election result seemed to show.

The (second myth) is that elections are only won by those parties which straddle the middle ground on most issues, giving a little to as many interest groups as possible offending as few as possible. Neither the pursuit of the middle nor the patronage of interests is compatible with a clear sense of direction. In trying to give each something that he wants the party inevitably denies itself the chance to offer goals that almost everybody wants. One of these is purposeful leadership itself.

Thatcher's victory is evidence that, far from being a handicap, purposeful leadership is a significant electoral asset. The British voter knew the cut of the Thatcher government; not only had they experienced it for four years but its style was distinctive. Because they were recognisable her policies were easy to quarrel with. Many did quarrel vociferously, but many of those must still have voted Tory.

So far Thatcherism has not given the British voter any material comfort; unemployment stands at 12.5% and gross product now is only 2% higher than in 1977. These poor statistics cause many outside the U.K. to marvel at her victory. How could a rational voter vote for that economy ?

Surely the answer is that they did not vote for that economy but for the hope that it would get better. All parties offered the electors a brave new world, as political parties do, but enough people saw the Conservatives as the best bet to give them a mammoth Commons majority. Labour Party and S.D.P/ Liberal Alliance offers were not as easy to believe. It is not that the average British elector

is now a convinced monetarist, nor can he now accurately draw a demand curve for labour predicting unemployment. Even four years of Maggie's nagging has not achieved that degree of understanding. However, he knows in his bones, that though things are crook (or is it poorly) that the Conservative Party under Thatcher has a clear strategy from which it will not be diverted by passing fads, special pleading, or even elections. He does not know that it is the best strategy but he has become very doubtful that the traditional election time parcel of goodies, promising easy options, is a strategy: he has been seduced by that before. He will wait for results,- not for ever, but much longer than he would have waited ten years ago. These are the same people who waited for victory when Churchill asked it of them: Churchill also had a goal and a strategy and they knew that in their bones then. They dropped Churchill very smartly when his goal was gained and they may drop Thatcher too when her goal is gained. In the meantime they want a purposeful leader.

Two other explanations of Thatcher's extraordinary success are being proffered by those who for one reason or another find the purposeful and consistent leadership explanation difficult to accept. One is the very poor, almost way out, leadership of the Labour Party; the other, the Falklands war. The first has some substance. Even though, in general, people vote for or against governments rather than oppositions, Labour's disunity and extremism must have been a Thatcher asset. The second 'excuse' for Thatcherite success doesn't sound a very likely story to me. Who, before the event, would have said that the way to win an election was to lose the lives of 255 British servicemen and 6 ships for a small territory that most voters could not have placed correctly on the globe? Who would have said with confidence that a political leader could survive a major departmental blunder leading to war and the sinking of the General Belgrano outside a declared no-go zone? Thatcher polled well for other, much better, reasons than the Falklands war, though the war did give her the chance to demonstrate resolve that will be needed over much longer time to manage her economy.

On the supply side economies change slowly. It has taken the British eighty to one hundred years to reduce the most productive economy in the world to its present state. The Brits know that it will not now be made well over night.

For good or ill investment in plant, buildings and skills last a long time. Many years are needed to shift resources out of obsolete and over-manned steel mills, engine plants and coal mines into more productive use. Big capital items, when new, often have a life expectancy of twenty years; workforce skills are only slowly changed; trade unions and public sector monopolies do not give up power easily; attitudes change but gradually. But what has been changed will not easily be undone.

By 1988, when the next British elections are due, some early rewards from productivity gains and reduced union authority should be flowing to the public. How the Tories fare then will be determined by public assessment of what is still needed as well as assessment of their record.

The most important lesson to be gained from the British election is that a Democratic government can earn the respect of its people by governing for the long term. That is good news for liberal, conservative and socialist alike and should have a beneficial effect on Free World governments.