

British Parties Huddle Round the Centre

Derek Ingram writes from London

The British Election

As the election campaign in the United Kingdom enters the final stage, one guess about which party will win the race on April 9 seems as good as another. True, a number of opinion polls have given the opposition Labour an edge over the incumbent Tory administration. However, the consensus appears to be in favour of a photo-finish, the kind of close race which Britain has seen a few times in the past. Not surprisingly, therefore, sources close to both the Conservatives and the Labour have spoken up against setting up coalitions with third parties. The very reference to the possibility of a coalition by party stalwarts suggests that both the organisations are just as conscious as the electorate of the closeness of the race.

Popular sentiments in Britain touch on several other issues. As in so many other countries, in the industrialised West or in the developing world, neither the ruling party nor the opposition in the United Kingdom has provided convincing answers to the immense problems facing the world — the West in particular — in the post-Cold War era. Prime Minister John Major has certainly gained in stature in past one year, no longer overshadowed by the most prominent back-bencher of the party, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. However, the lingering recession which Labour describes as the longest in 50 years is inherited by Mr Major, one to which the government's answer remains couched in platitudes and rhetoric. Some of the unpopular measures, such as the poll tax, have not been abandoned either.

It is the Labour which has made about-turns on a number of issues partly out of conviction and partly to placate the public opinion whose overall rejection of socialism, old or new, can be ignored only at the party's peril. For instance, the party leader Neil Kinnock has made it reasonably clear that if elected, his government would not repeal many of the legislations of the Thatcher years that cut the organised labour unions to size. Mr Kinnock thus distances himself from a political force that his potential middle class voters regard as an irritant. Again, having once denounced the European Community as a club of rich capitalists and criticised the United States on issues ranging from Washington's handling of problems of Latin America to its lack of concern for the poorest of the poor within its own national frontiers, Mr Kinnock has now emerged as an ardent supporter of European unity, a believer in a special relationship with the United States and an advocate for the private sector. In short, a socialist of yesterday is talking in the language of a social democrat, moving into the mainstream of European politics dominated by such partners of Britain as France, Germany, Sweden and Spain. Whether this kind of about-turn raises questions about the party's credibility is a different matter. It is all about winning the election on April 9.

Whichever party wins in the race, the basic framework of Britain's relations with countries in South Asia, including Bangladesh, is likely to remain unchanged. Dhaka has had good mutually-beneficial relations with successive Whitehall administrations. The immigration issue often posed problems, but never a major crisis. Perhaps more can be done in such fields as education and housing for Bangladeshis settled in the United Kingdom. A possible increase in the number of ethnic Asians in the House of Commons and in local councils would help in dealing with the issues facing non-white immigrants in a national perspective, rather than in narrow sectarian terms. The process is already on. The coming election should give it a new welcome boost.

Stopping Defoliation

With every ton of paper that we misuse and fail to recycle we lay waste several tons of trees by weight and at least four hundred tons of good quality water. So is the story with buildings and constructions. In the brick kilns using wood, 25 maunds of fuel is needed to burn only a paltry 1,000 brick.

Think of the small cut-off district called Sherpur having 15 brickfields; and each of these fields burning 30,000 maunds of wood everyday during off-season. The consumption doubles in peak season. The Sherpur brickfields may be burning at least seven crore maunds of green life to produce its small share of country's output of bricks. We shall all shudder at the thought of how many billions of tons of trees are eaten up by brick-making kilns alone.

The problem is not unknown to any on the level of both policy making and controlling. Burning wood has been duly banned as a result. But the ban is restricted to files and papers. The kilns are required to burn coal or, if there is a pipeline nearby, gas. A very small part of our land has access to gas supply — and as such almost all the brickfields are supposed to do their firing work with coal.

The brickfield owners, however, tailor their abidance by law to the needs of how to line their pockets with galloping rates of profit. In Sherpur, for example, the local authority emphatically maintains that all over the recent past there had almost been a glut in the coal depots of Sherpur. The brickfieldwallahs would not simply buy coal, for wood comes so much cheaper for them.

All this, for the moment, boils down to the simple question of enforcing the ban. First through persuasion and agreements and then, if need be, through punitive measures. We are lucky that the question seems an easy one over there in Sherpur. If only the personnel in control there prove somewhat less vulnerable to graft, this should prove no insuperable problem. We cannot conceive what sight the green little beautiful blob of a place called Sherpur would present if this our small piece of optimism comes to naught.

It is not everywhere that coal supply is perennial — it breaks down every now and then. Then what? We want very strongly to say that coal or no coal, wood shall not be allowed to burn in brick-making kilns anywhere anymore. Our building activity cannot be let to outstrip what our land can afford and strip it bare. It must be limited not to threaten the physical existence of the land.

How to make this work? Can the officials be depended upon for all of it? Perhaps not. It is easier to straighten a lamb's hair than to make officialdom free from corruption. Plundering of the true wealth of the nation can only be stopped through the same people's power that brought about Bangladesh and ousted Ershad. A people fully alive to the dangers of defoliation and motivated to stop it, can stop it.

THE British general election will be a cliff-hanger to the last. Almost exactly 13 years after Margaret Thatcher swung five per cent of the votes her way and took power from the Labour Party the Conservatives are struggling to stay on top.

They are doing so in a new arena because as prime minister Thatcher was remarkably successful in Permanently moving the opposition goalpost while failing to do the same for her own party.

Today the Labour Party stands far nearer the centre than at almost any time since it was founded last century, while the Conservative Party, having moved sharply to the right for a few years, now finds itself turning back towards the centre ground it occupied in the Fifties and Sixties.

The third political force, having passed through traumatic years and now calling itself the Liberal Democratic Party, is really the same old Liberal Party in new clothes.

The net effect of Thatcherism has thus been to huddle the parties together closer around the centre, bringing Britain a step nearer the situation in the United States where both parties are committed to a conservative society and the left is marginalised.

Despite this — perhaps because of it — a bitter election lies ahead as the parties fight on much narrower ground. Many of the great dividing issues of the past, such as state ownership and membership of the European Community, are no longer there. Labour is now more committed to the Community than many Tories and it accepts privatisation, as

Some say the April 9 general election will be the most significant in Britain since World War Two. Others say it will change nothing. Almost certainly it will have a photo-finish. And this time the third party, the Liberal Democrats, will be a greater focus of attention than for many years. This is an election full of imponderables.

Thatcher cleverly called denationalisation, in most areas and will undo little Conservative legislation.

Yet there are limits to Labour's changed position and it totally rejects what it sees as creeping privatisation of the health service and the turning over of such institutions as the railways and postal services to private operators.

The two leaders, Neil Kinnock and John Major, are both vulnerable to charges that they are turncoats. Kinnock started on the left wing of the party and ended up virtually destroying the left in his party.

Major served Thatcher in the economic holy of holies, the Treasury, and has emerged to undo her monetary policies, though it could be said that as First Lord of the Treasury and then as Chancellor of the Exchequer this had already begun to happen when she was still prime minister.

This election is full of imponderables. One joker in the pack is Scotland. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) held only four seats at the dissolution, but it has enjoyed a sudden revival with independence for Scotland a live issue again. The Conservatives hold only

nine seats in Scotland out of 72.

All parties could suffer by SNP gains, but for Labour any losses there could make the difference between victory and defeat. On the other hand, Labour are tipped to pick up some of the Tory nine — posing an enormous problem for the Tories if they win overall, since they will have absolutely no mandate left in Scotland.

In certain circumstances the Northern Ireland seats could prove critical. There 13 of the 17 seats will be held by the pro-Tory Unionists of different hues. In a parliament with no overall majority they could make demands on Kinnock or Major a condition of their support.

The neck-and-neck race has brought on to the campaign agenda as never before the issue of proportional representation (PR). It has been hovering in the background for decades, but now people are more disenchanted with the two big parties than ever before and the demand for an end of the first-past-the-post system is growing.

For the Liberal Democrats, who would gain enormously from such a change, this has always been a major objective.

Neck and neck again?

April
9

The British general election on April 9 will be 14th since 1945

In power since 1945			
Labour	1945-51	Conservative	1970-74
Conservative	1951-64	Labour	1974-79
Labour	1964-70	Conservative	1979-

Neck and neck

1950 Labour won by 8 seats
1964 Labour won by 5 seats
1974 (Feb) no overall majority
(Oct) Labour won by 3 seats

House at dissolution			
Conservative	367	Social Democrats	3
Labour	227	Uk. Dem. Union	3
Liberal Democrats	22	Independent Lab.	1
Ulster Union	9	Sinn Fein	1
Scott. Nationalist	5	Social Lab.	1
Plaid Cymru	3	Uk. Pop. Union	1
SDLP	3	Speaker & Deputies	4

Votes cast in 1987 election

Cons.	Labour	Lib Dems
13,780,583	10,029,807	7,339,912

The two main parties would never look at it. Now, responding to the public mood, their tune is changing. Major still rejects the idea, but his party's guidance to candidates indicates a more open mind on the subject. Kinnock has now pledged to take a look at alternative systems and this could stop Labour voters deserting to the

LDP. Now that PR is a more fashionable issue the Liberal Democrats, under their charismatic leader Paddy Ashdown, stand to gain support in an election which may produce no overall majority. If they hold the balance of power, reform of the electoral system will be the price for joining any coalition.

The reign of Margaret Thatcher, whose stridency alienated voters of the centre, highlighted the undemocratic nature of the first-past-the-post system. She won three elections in a row, but she always polled much less than 50 per cent of the vote.

The Tories scored 43.9 per cent in 1979, 42.4 in 1983 and 42.3 per cent in 1987. These produced majorities of 44, 144 and 101 seats respectively. In 1983 a 25.4 per cent poll for the Liberal Alliance produced only 23 seats while the Tories won 387.

The fact that Thatcher remained in power for 11 years when six out of 10 people did not vote for her has stirred the issue among the electorate.

The stock argument against PR is that the present system produces firm and stable government while PR would produce permanent coalitions. This carries little weight with people who point to successful coalition governments all over mainland Europe.

And if the April election produces no overall majority the country faces a period of unstable government anyway.

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Syed Mahbub Murshed — A Tribute

by Justice KM Subhan

ABINDRANATH has said that it is possible to find a person worthy of seeing, but it is not easy to find a worthy place to see him. I realised the truth of it in a wedding in 1938. I was then a student of class tea. I saw the groom, turbaned and donned in a light cream shawl under a 'choga' embroidered with real silver work. Tall and erect, bright eyed and slightly tanned complexioned — that was the first sight I had of Barrister Syed Mahbub Murshed. I saw him in the worthy place. I had then such an age, when in the rich juvenile imagination, I was trying to find his resemblance with those who always flashed. The first that came was 'Indranath' of 'Srikanta' but Indranath had a few marks on his face. He had a perfect unblemished face. I got it — it was 'Shibnath' of 'Shesh Prasna'. Yes, Shibnath has donned the groom's dress. Or, maybe, it is 'Othelo' — tall, dark and handsome but his eyes lacked the hardness of a soldier. His eyes are electrified.

After about four decades, in remembering him, I am asking myself why is it so important to talk so much about his looks? It was probably necessary because unknown to myself I accepted him as my hero — who later became my idol in my professional life. I was and still an enveloped with his profound influence. To imitate him would be an audacity because he was an imitable. About

two decades after I saw him again, I accepted him as the only person in my professional existence. In 1943, when I was a student of Calcutta University Law College, I was lucky to be present in the courtroom where a murder trial was on and the counsel for the accused was cross examining the prosecution witness. Those days little did I understand the pointing questions. A few other barristers, young and old, were sitting in the courtroom — one of whom said 'the questions indeed are worthy of a barrister'. The prosecution witnesses were tumbling. The judgement was delivered. The accused got a clean acquittal. I saw him after this in a few other cases. His questions were equally pointing. The witnesses dared not look at him straight. Still then I was not very sure if I would take up legal profession — but the more I saw him the more I was convinced that if there was any worthy profession, it, till then, saw him from a distance.

August, 1946 — in the great Calcutta killings — I had my first chance of getting little close to him. He was then one of the leading barristers of Calcutta High Court — a terribly busy practitioner. A relief committee was organized which was located at ground-floor of the Congress Exhi-

biton Road residence of Khan Bahadur Ataur Rahman Khan in Park Circus. The drawing room of late Mr Ismail — a reputed industrialist was used as the office. Syed Mahbub Murshed used to reside then in a flat at the second floor of the building. Within a few days, legal complications cropped up concerning those who were arrested during the riot and concerning property and families of these persons. I was entrusted to contact Syed Mahbub Murshed as I was the only one in the committee who had something to do with legal affairs. I was then a law student waiting to take the law final examination which was postponed because of the riot. After much of hesitation, I picked up courage to meet the legal luminary in his flat but before I could finish, he came down with me to the office. The other members — late Mr Ismail, late Mr Sayedul Hasan, Poet Golam Qudus and few others who were present —

On the occasion of the 13th anniversary of death of Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed, today, April 3, the author recalls his association with the personality in a deeper perspective of events.



were puzzled over the situation and were eager to know the proper procedure to be followed in the matter. Very briefly and within a short time he clarified the situation and told us what to do. I saw him, that day, to frankly discuss with us the problems and give as much time as needed although he could hardly spare that. He helped us voluntarily and ungrudgingly. I witnessed his concern for the affected people — his sympathy and help for the people who lost everything during the riot. In a short time he became a respectable leader. His success went beyond the legal matters. Later I saw him as judge of the Dhaka High Court. In every

case it was wonderful to see how he applied legal principles to facts. His way of looking at facts and the application of law stood out from other honourable judges. He could fathom even a difficult case in the shortest possible time. His interpretation and application of legal principles were subjects of envy. The sub-ordinate staff found a father figure in him when he became the Chief Justice of East Pakistan.

The first blow was struck at the autocratic regime of Ayub Khan by the Dhaka High Court and Chief Justice Murshed was the author. He excelled himself in analysing and setting the constitutional issues that were raised before him. His rich language intermingled with the interpretation of law — it was like the admixture of the Padma and the Jamuna. His superior power of interpretation of legal principles and fearless disposition of constitutional matters once prompted Ayub to say, 'Pakistan was rightly proud of two things — the cricket team and the judiciary'. A wonder if knowing Syed Mahbub Murshed, Ayub echoed with Shylock, 'A Daniel come to judgement! Yea, a Daniel!' He was the author of most of the constitutional case that settled the rights of the citizens, the human rights and established the supremacy of the rule of law.

One gets overwhelmed with emotion in writing about him. The country is deprived of his unrivalled personality, his scholarship which was not only confined only to jurisprudence but pervaded to world literature, music and socio-political philosophy and economics. Whenever he broached a topic he appeared to know more than the others as he just finished talking. He was free with any subject of conversation. His genius lighted up anything he touched.

I pay him my homage with deep sense of gratitude and respect and close it with the words of poet Nirmalendu Goon 'With these reminiscences come the melancholy, dew drops on the pages.'

Venezuela: A Coup to Start Other Coups?

Noting the motives and circumstances behind the recent failed coup in Venezuela, analysts in the region warn that the incident could spark off similar military rebellions in other Latin American countries. Abraham Lama of IPS reports from Lima.

POLITICIANS and analysts in Latin America are pondering the lessons of the recent military attempt to oust Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez, warning that the incident could trigger a series of similar adventures in the region.

They say the coup attempt in Caracas, which was reportedly provoked by the harsh economic adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Venezuela, could also happen in Argentina, Brazil, Peru and other Latin American countries where people are suffering due to the same strict economic programmes.

'What happened Venezuela could happen again in another country, with worse consequences,' said the Sandinista daily newspaper, Barricada, in Nicaragua.

'What happened in Caracas is a warning for us... a lesson we should learn fast so we can prevent similar incidents.'

said Peruvian lawyer Alberto Ruiz Eldredge, a former diplomat and international affairs expert. Said Brazilian analyst Newton Carlos: 'This is not an isolated phenomenon. This is an extension of the social unrest in countries beset by an economic crisis, where the military soldiers have low salaries, old weapons and nothing much to do.'

The Venezuelan military rebels did not only want to take over the government, said Carlos, they were also fighting against the 'low morals' in the government.

Retired Col. Horacio Ballester, vice-president of Argentina's Military Centre for

Democracy (Cemida), said that while he did not approve of the coup attempt in Venezuela, he respected some of the supposed motives of the coup plotters.

'The coup was triggered by the inflexible adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF to obtain a surplus for foreign debt payment. The programmes impoverished most Latin Americans,' Ballester said.

He noted the Venezuelan public's indifference to the failed putsch, as if they 'believed they would receive the same treatment from both a civilian and military government.'

Most reports of the coup

said the military rebels had made their move at a time of great discontent with the Venezuelan government's policies.

In 1989, the cost of living in Venezuela rose by 89 per cent while salaries increased by only 30 per cent. This trend went on for the next two years. In February 1989, a 100 hundred per cent hike in the prices of goods provoked widespread looting of commercial establishments. Late last year, students clashed with the police during rallies to protest the increase in transportation fares.

Not all analysts think the Venezuelan military tried to topple Andres Perez to stop

his economic programmes.

'I don't think they launched the coup only because of the IMF programme. They also made national and institutional demands which have to be analysed,' said Carlos Tapia, a former Navy officer who is now an adviser to a Peruvian parliamentary commission.

Tapia said not all military rebellions are fascist in character.

'For instance, they say Aldo Rico, the head of the Caras Pintadas in Argentina, is an uncouth fascist fanatic. But in his protests, we find some concepts that need to be thought about,' he said.

Retired Gen. Sinesio

Jarama, who was part of Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado's revolutionary government in Peru in 1968, said: 'Only the naive can think the coup was due to the IMF programme. I think it was a moral pronouncement because people would support adjustment policies, no matter how stiff, if only they were fair.'

But if the programmes impoverish the majority and enrich only a few, then people get demoralised, discouraged and impatient.'

Not all military experts think there will be more coup attempts in the region, however.

'We have closed the chapter on coups d'etat in Latin America,' said Gen. Mauricio Vargas, second-in-command of the El Salvadorean armed forces.

'Democracies need to be understood more. The best way to make changes in our system is through the ballot boxes,' he said.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Weather reports

Sir, The weather reports published in the press are rather dry, and hardly provide any relief — from the monotony of the reports (and not from the weather, over which the met deptt. has no control). The presentation could be made more interesting and colourful in the press and especially on TV, with

satellite pictures, charts and graphs, and other electronic imagery. There is more to weather forecasting than the mere use of stock words such as 'remain dry', 'no change'. Graphical representation saves a lot of wording. During the recent hot and dry spell, when people were fretting for a change, the weather experts did not rise to the occasion to appease the hunger for more

information. The TV medium also is not being properly utilized.

Bored citizen
Dhaka

Old songs

Sir, Because of the advancement in the field of musical recording system, nowadays, producing and releasing of a personal or group song cassettes has become an easy task. Once it was very difficult on the part of even a reputed singer to get his/her song recorded on discs. In the early days, only the songs of outstanding singers of this sub-continent were recorded on gramophone records, mostly

on HMVs. Like elsewhere, almost every week new singers' cassettes are being released in Bangladesh. There are some cine magazines and newspaper sections which often review these cassettes. Lately, a number of new generation singers have been singing old popular Bangla songs and a good number of cassettes have also been released under the title 'Harano Diner Gan.' Some of these cassettes are really fine — the rendering of the old songs with modern orchestra is excellent and in most cases the originality has been well retained.

But recently, I purchased and listened to a cassette titled 'Duranta Gurnati' in

which some popular songs of Hemanta Mukharjee have been sung by W R Tawheed and Zareen A Seema. I do appreciate the initiative of the singers but I am afraid their effort to copy the celebrated singer Hemanta Mukharjee's songs perhaps has gone astray.

I think that new singers should take necessary rehearsals while singing celebrated artists' songs for releasing personal cassette in the name of old days' songs. Clarity and originality of the composition should be maintained at any cost.

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Post of Daftry

Sir, In every office previously Daftries used to keep stationary items of everyday use, bound files and registers. Moreover, they used to note the files of each table of each officer/employee, thus facilitating record and maintenance thereof.

At present there is no Daftry in Survey of Bangladesh — as the posts were dropped from the set up during the early years of the autocratic regime.

Thus, the post of Daftries may kindly be reintroduced in government offices.

M A Motin Majumdar
Survey of Bangladesh
Dhaka.