

Editorial

A new General Election is upon us, and may well have taken place by the time this issue goes to print. As the opinion polls, and common sense both suggest, the Conservative Party looks set for a third term under Mrs. Thatcher's firm, if controversial leadership. The opposition parties are in disarray, with Labour in particular in a crisis which many believe may be the prelude to lingering death. The party is virtually a spent force in Southern England, and may start to lose its grip on the working class constituencies of the North which have so far prevented its total collapse. The Liberal-S.D.P. Alliance seems set to become the main opposition party, though its peculiar position of coming second to both Conservatives and Labour may prevent it from exercising much influence in the House of Commons.

Where a Christian can or should stand in all of this is hard to say. It is probably true that the old image of the Church of England as the Tory Party at prayer has vanished, at least as far as the clergy are concerned, though it is strong still among the laity—particularly among the sort of laity in a position to influence episcopal appointments, as the recent election at Birmingham demonstrated. On the other hand, there are few churchpeople, either clergy or lay, who are generally sympathetic to Labour. As the offspring of Nonconformity, now largely secularised, it has little appeal to the average Anglican. The exact content of Mrs. Thatcher's Christianity may be open to dispute, but she does identify herself with the Church in a way which is quite foreign to Mr. Kinnock and his supporters.

Religious issues and interests are undoubtedly more prominent among Conservative politicians than among Labour, at least at the present time, but there is an ambiguity in the Conservative position which should not be forgotten. Mrs. Thatcher had a strict upbringing and is evidently sincere in her profession of faith, but that did not stop her from advocating the introduction of Sunday trading—an issue which saw the Church and the trade unions in an unfamiliar alliance of deeply held conviction. Recently Dr. Rhodes Boyson, minister for local government has joined with Dr. David Samuel of the Church Society, to issue a statement calling for a return to traditional moral values, but the Conservative party is the one which boasts the M.P.s who do most to flout these. It is there, after all, that most of the recent sex scandals (to go no farther) have broken out, and the guilty parties have not really been subject to effective party discipline. One is tempted to conclude that Conservative Christianity, though it may be quite sincere as far as it goes, does not really go very far or sink very deep.

The position of the Liberal-S.D.P. Alliance is perhaps the most

ambiguous of all. Dr. David Owen maintains a fairly loose connexion with the Church of England, and David Steel is a son of the manse—though out of favour with most Christians for having been the sponsor of the 1967 Abortion Act. It is probably fair to say that both men regard religion as a private matter to be settled between the individual and his God, and in this sense they belong to much the same world as Mrs. Thatcher.

Unfortunately however, Christianity can never be a private affair divorced from general society. A reluctance to be involved in politics, which characterised the Church for so many decades, may have been replaced by a series of rash intrusions into matters of which prominent churchpeople have been too little informed, but neither of these things justifies a complete abdication of responsibility for the welfare of the nation as a whole. Britain is not the sort of country in which ideological political parties stand much chance of being elected, so a specifically 'Christian' party, of the kind found on the Continent, is ruled out from the start. In any case, as the Continentals have increasingly found in recent years, it is not always easy to decide what a specifically 'Christian' political stance should be.

It is the genius of Western Civilisation to have evolved and maintained the principle of the two powers—one secular, the other spiritual. These powers have not always been separate, nor have they always been equal. When things have gone wrong in the one, it has often been the other which has risen to correct the imbalance. Thus, at the time of the Reformation, it was the state which intervened to overturn the dictatorship of the Papacy in the Church. Today, as in Eastern Europe and in many Third World countries, it is the Church which offers the most effective opposition to a dictatorial state. The lesson of history would tend to suggest that that is the way things should be. The Church must retain a distinctive voice which is not tied to any particular party programme. It must always be in a position to be able to criticise any leader or party, and to advocate a return to the path of righteousness for God's Name's sake.

At the same time, the Church must not interfere in secular affairs, nor attempt to take over the state as it did in the Middle Ages. We have a heavenly city to which we are heading, and whose ambassadors we are on earth. Reminding the state, and the nation, that there is a priority greater than that of secular wellbeing is perhaps the greatest challenge we face today. May God guide us all as we seek to make this priority a reality in the lives of our contemporaries at the end of the twentieth century.

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