

# nature

Volume 248

March 8, 1974

## No-one wins

WHAT did the general election in Britain mean—and what does it portend? British readers, worn out with journalistic analyses, will have to bear with us for a week for the sake of our overseas readers.

Hardly anyone in the political world can be very pleased by the present indecision. Mr Wilson heads a Labour Party whose number of seats falls short of the 318 needed for an absolute majority. Mr Heath, having gone to the country early to seek a strong mandate to deal with threats to his counter-inflation policy, found the country unresponsive to him. Mr Thorpe, having done wonders in making a Liberal revival look credible and worth voting for, gets 20% of the popular vote and only 2% of the seats in Parliament.

The campaign has been surprisingly moderate and serious in character. The central issue on which Mr Heath called the election was the deadlock between the government and the miners' union over pay increases, and it is clear that Mr Heath originally hoped that the country would see him as a moderate, fighting off union extremism. His motif has been 'firm but fair', repeated so often and so similar to the motif 'frei aber froh' of Brahms' Third Symphony that one was surprised Mr Heath, a cultured man, did not use the opening of that symphony to herald his electioneering appearances. Words become codewords in elections and 'firm' clearly was meant to signify 'tough on the unions' so here was an opportunity for a bitter, divisive election reviving all the class conflicts that periodically wrack the country. That this did not happen appears to have been due to two factors: the two major parties perceived that a doctrinaire battle would have allowed the Liberals to take the middle ground where the real majority always lies, and Labour was able to broaden electoral issues to the whole economic scene. Neither major party has been very explicit about what it would do for the miners, but it could be inferred that whatever the result, miners would get substantial raises, through some quasi-judicial process from Mr Heath or through some great emotional gesture from Mr Wilson.

What do the results portend?

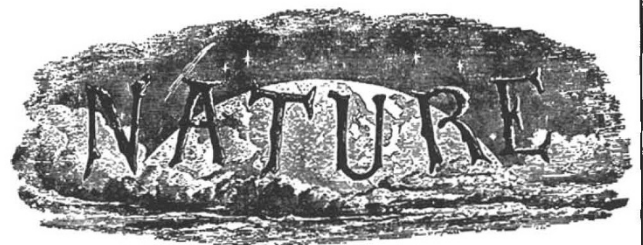
The parliamentary system is about as close to deadlock as possible. Suddenly the much vaunted British system for maintaining two party democracy has creaked, for no leader can now ignore the Liberals and other parties which have led a shadowy existence for so many years. Liberals and Nationalists are at least relatively attractive partners for a coalition, less so the eleven Protestant Ulstermen dedicated to bringing down the tentative attempts at cooperative democracy in Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, the national skill for compromise is poorly exercised in putting together coalitions. Labour

in particular still has bitter memories of the thirties when a coalition nearly annihilated the party. Both major parties have been hurt by the swing to the Liberals, but Mr Wilson can soldier on for maybe a year or more with the grudging support of the Liberals and Nationalists, and then turn to the electorate with a good chance of gaining an absolute majority. This Mr Heath must have perceived for he initially refused to resign and has attempted to put together a government of his own by courting the Liberals.

Much, however, must now change politically. The Liberals could well force electoral reform. The Nationalists could well force devolution of power on many issues to regional parliaments. Most important, if the grip of the two major parties, both so clearly identified with class distinction, can be loosened, it is possible that in the next fifty years Britain, still grossly class ridden, can develop a more equitable society. Neither party is able to achieve that at present.

## 100 years ago



In a recent number we intimated that the Perthshire Society of Natural Science had interrogated the Parliamentary candidates for the county and city of Perth as to their opinions on the questions of State help to Science, a responsible Minister of Education, and the promotion of Scientific Exploring expeditions.

Answers—favourable, we are glad to say—were returned at the time only by the two Conservative candidates, one of whom, Sir W. Stirling Maxwell, is now M.P. for Perthshire. We are now glad to give place to the somewhat tardy reply, addressed to the secretary, of the Hon. Arthur Kinnaird, Member for the City of Perth:—"I, Pall Mall East, 18th Feb. 1874.—Dear Sir,—I was surprised to find copied into a London paper from a Scotch journal the questions put in your letter of the 29th January last, with the statement that they had not been answered by me. The fact of my being, as I believe I am, one of the patrons of the Perthshire Society of Natural Science should have been, it appears to me, a sufficient guarantee of my approval of the objects of your institution; and my active co-operation with Capt. Wells in his efforts during the last session of Parliament to obtain the sanction of Government to a proposed grant for the furtherance of Arctic exploration, further approves my appreciation of the objects you advocate, in my willingness to support State expenditure for well-devised schemes of scientific research and educational purposes.—Yours truly, A. Kinnaird."

From *Nature*, 9, 350, March 12, 1874.