

## Mixture as before—to 1984?

IN A week's time the British electorate will instal a new government which could, if returned with a sufficient majority, see the nation through to 1984. The three major political parties, Labour, Conservative and Liberal, each publish brief but comprehensive manifestos regrettably padded out with a tedious mixture of boasts and insults. Somewhere in their midst, however, we ought to be able to discern clear, separate strands of political thinking which differentiate the parties and which when viewed against the current economic and social background give a clear indication of the most appropriate party for the next five years.

What is this background? In the 1970s Britain's industrial production has barely risen at all, whilst that of other major industrialised countries has climbed—in difficult circumstances—by amounts ranging from 15% to 30%. In terms of gross domestic product per capita, 15 years ago Britain was closely on a par with many European countries and nearly a factor three ahead of Japan. Now most of Europe has left us far behind, and Japan is fast doing so too. Only in the inflation league has Britain shown its competitors (with the exception of Italy) a clean pair of heels. All of this has happened to a country not notably short of material and energy resources, and certainly not lacking in human and intellectual resources.

Many argue, quite reasonably, that Britain is still an agreeable country in which to live, that the people are civilised and not driven by the materialist urges that allegedly are rife in other countries. Why, it is said, worry about international growth, productivity and efficiency leagues in such a green and pleasant land? The answer to this must surely be that unless we exert ourselves to the full, competition from other countries will not allow us just to stand still—it will rapidly bring on irreversible decline and the emigration of large numbers of talented people.

With the coming of post-industrial society, in which a diminishing number of people are involved in factory-style production and a growing number in some sort of 'information activity'—teaching, research, entertainment, printing, health, journalism, banking and so on, it is particularly important that flexibility be emphasised. It is almost impossible to envisage what the world will be like in 10 years' time, but one thing is certain: that it will have undergone rapid change, and that unless strong action is taken, a lot of people—indeed whole nations—are going to be left behind.

The strong action must take two forms—first, to permit or even encourage declining industries to die peacefully without deceiving those associated with them into thinking that better times are just around the corner; second, to take much more vigorous steps to promote lifelong education and retraining, so that going back to school or college is seen not as a humiliating thing of last resort, but as a perfectly natural thing to do.

How much of this is hoisted in by the two main political parties—and how much are they prepared to act on it? The Conservatives are probably more capable than Labour of being ruthless with declining industries. But they do not show much sign of recognising the changes that need to be wrought in our educational system beyond stating "we shall review the relationship between school, further education and training to see how better use can be made of existing resources"—which could mean anything. On the whole Labour seems, in its manifesto, to appreciate the changes that are necessary—even putting in a reference to the impact of the silicon chip—but the party has largely presided over the years of industrial decline without doing much to arrest it.

The real source of Britain's dilatory industrial performance cannot be blamed on a scarcity of resources, nor on a lack of intellectual skills. It must be placed squarely on our apparent inability to work together without breaking up into isolated groupings—'workers', 'skilled workers', 'management', 'civil servants', 'academics' and so on, each finding difficulty in understanding the other and each either busy exploiting the others or accusing the others of exploitation. To the extent that the British are naturally sceptical of authority, lack of homogeneity is fine. But the divisions are much more bitter and unproductive than that. Both major political parties exist, indeed thrive on these dichotomies, and so are themselves part of the problem they should be trying to eliminate. This, then, should make the Liberal party an attractive alternative. Certainly the Liberal manifesto touches on many of the matters discussed above, and the party even makes a play for being regarded as the environmental party. Traditionally a vote for the Liberals has been regarded as wasted in the British system of representation. That must not be allowed to deter thoughtful people, worried about an ever-declining, ever-confrontational Britain, from looking very seriously at the Liberals. □