

THE BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION OF 1987

The British General Election of 1987

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Preface

The British General Election of 1987 is the thirteenth in a series starting in 1945 and is the fifth study written jointly by the present authors. We have tried to follow a format which has evolved over the years. The book covers the salient events of the parliament, the planning of the parties' campaign strategies, the election campaign itself and the treatment of the campaign by the mass media and opinion polling agencies; it also provides an extensive and analytical statistical appendix. To the best of our knowledge, no other country has managed to establish such a series of election studies, or to provide a comparable set of election data and analyses.

Writing a work in a series imposes constraints since data has to be presented in a form that allows long-term comparison. Yet each election campaign has its own distinctive character, arising from the mix of personalities, issues, events and immediate past history. 'No man can jump twice into the same river. Both the man and the river change'.

Some analyses of election campaigns may err in seeing the decisions and manoeuvres of the winning party and those of the defeated party as contributing, almost inevitably, to the eventual outcome. *Post hoc propter hoc*. 1987 is not quite like that: the majority verdict has been that the Conservatives fought a poor campaign and won, and yet Labour a good campaign and was heavily defeated. The historian also has to avoid being wise after the event. Mrs Thatcher and the Conservatives gained an historic third successive election victory in 1987. The party and its leader have dominated British politics in the 1980s. Yet it is worth remembering that for much of 1986 Labour led in the opinion polls and informed talk was on the likelihood of an election outcome in which no party would have a clear majority.

There are dangers in abstracting an election campaign from the events and trends that occur in earlier years.* For example, the panic in Downing Street on so-called 'Wobbly Thursday', in which the

* Two works of virtually 'instant' history on the election were published in July 1987. Des Wilson's *Battle for Power* described the Alliance campaign and Rodney Tyler's *Campaign* portrayed the Conservative effort. Both books added to post-election controversies in the Alliance and Conservative parties respectively. The authors were close to some events of the campaign and wrote from an inside and probably inevitably one-sided perspective.

different teams of ministers and advertising agencies competed for control of the final stages of the Conservative campaign, is described on pp. 106–12. But the disagreements over strategy and advertising, and the tensions between Mrs Thatcher and Mr Tebbit, cannot be properly understood in isolation from the flow of events over the previous 18 months. We explore the background in Chapters 1 and 2. The seeds of the Alliance differences over the dual leadership, as well as over defence and strategy, were laid in the months before the election, particularly in David Owen's deep-seated reluctance to engage in anything but the most minimal form of co-operation with the Liberals. Labour's problems over taxation and economic policy did not just surface in the last week of the election. The party's plans were, in the words of one participant, 'half baked to begin with' and Mr Kinnock and Mr Hattersley never saw eye to eye on the policies. An election campaign is not merely a matter of media hype, photo-opportunities and advertising slogans. The intense focus of the campaign does serve to highlight potential weaknesses in policies and personalities, as well as in party images and organisation.

As usual we have drawn on a wide range of sources, but mainly on the comprehensive press and broadcasting coverage, and on our interviews with key participants which started in early 1984. During these conversations we were reminded again of the many-sided nature of truth and of how events are subject to differences of recall, interpretation and evaluation. To a greater extent than in any previous Nuffield election study we have been assisted by participants providing us with access to relevant documentation – particularly strategy papers, memoranda and private opinion polls. Candidates from all parties kindly found time to reply to our post-election questionnaires about the campaign in the constituencies. On the public mood we have relied on the record number of surveys conducted by opinion pollsters. For a more detailed assessment of the electorate's attitudes we await the results of the British Election Study under Anthony Heath. We have also been helped by comments on earlier versions of our manuscript from some of those most closely involved. We are deeply grateful for all this assistance, some of it necessarily anonymous.

There can never be a final word on this or any other election. Though this book was swiftly written, it is intended for a long-term readership. We have tried to capture some of the essentials of this particular exercise in democratic decision-making, but in the words of R. B. McCallum, who conceived and wrote the 1945 Nuffield

study, we are content to 'seek immortality in the footnotes of other authors'.

We are indebted to many institutions and individuals for help in bringing this study to fruition. We thank Byron Criddle, John Curtice, Martin Harrison, Martin Harrop and Michael Steed for their contributions; our colleagues in Nuffield College and the Politics Department at the University of Nottingham for much tolerance and advice; the Economic and Social Research Council for financial assistance; the indefatigable Audrey Skeats and April Gibbon for typing; Clive Payne, Martin Range and others for producing the statistics; our conscientious research assistant Peter Wells, and Kevin Swaddle, Peter Cozens, Helen Fawcett, Roger Mortimore, Susan Scarrow and Jane Kavanagh for other help; Vernon Bogdanor, Michael Pinto-Duschinsky and Peter Morris for commenting on our manuscript; and finally our wives and our children who showed much forbearance throughout the enterprise.

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