

# Comment

## *A Close Run Thing*

According to the Duke of Wellington the battle of Waterloo was a close run thing. The same might be said about the various significant votes counted during this month of November. Although Governor Clinton's victory over President Bush seems substantial, when the popular vote is counted it seems to lose some of its lustre. Mr Clinton won 370 electoral college votes to Mr Bush's 168, but his share of the popular vote was a mere five points ahead of the incumbent President's. This election was the closest fought since 1976. Mr Clinton's energy and drive seems to have secured him the edge in the end, despite the widespread distrust of him allegedly felt by many voters. One of them observed in an interview, 'I guess we have to choose the best of the worst'. Widespread cynicism with the democratic process is clearly felt on both sides of the Atlantic.

While Mr Bush was recovering from the disappointment of failing to secure the late surge which might have promised a different result, Mr Major was anxiously biting his nails at the real prospect of a government defeat over the 'paving' bill to ratify the Maastricht treaty. Relentless, and some would say, unscrupulous pressure was applied by the government whips to press as many waverers into the government lobby as possible; by all accounts it was a very dirty fight. Yet, some concessions were wrung from a demoralised and disordered administration. It might be said that in recent weeks this government has climbed down so often that it is almost disappeared from sight. Neither is it presently by any means clear who is running the main government departments, since Mr Major appears, amongst other things, to have taken to making up foreign policy on the hoof without consulting Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. We might recall that complaints at this kind of behaviour were levelled against Lady Thatcher before the putsch that toppled her from power.

Some of the spice might have been taken out of the government victory by the realisation that the whole thing was largely unnecessary. Even if Mr Major had lost the vote in the House of Commons he could still have brought the bill back at a later date. As the Labour party realised, and the Liberal Democrats did not, what was at stake was an issue of confidence in the government. This view was confirmed by Conservatives, after the government had scraped home by three votes,

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when they hailed it as a testimony to confidence in Mr Major's leadership. Such confidence, according to the opinion polls, is not shared by the majority of people in this country.

What the country now faces, as a result of the various misfortunes that have befallen the government recently, is a regeneration of the habit of political debate. In the past few weeks the House of Commons has become, once more, a significant place. The slap of firm government permitted by unassailable government majorities is not possible in the present circumstances. Back benchers, somewhat to their surprise, have discovered that they now have the chance, if they can resist the government's political patronage machine, to do what their constituents sent them to Westminster to do. What Mr Bush learned the hard way, and what Mr Major is slowly learning in the same hard school, is that public opinion does count.

There is a wide degree of disquiet in the country at the prospect of further moves towards European unity, and the government, if it is to win its case on Maastricht, is faced with a massive public education campaign. Before the American election Mr Bush proved vulnerable to charges of indifference over the economy. He was thought to be far too taken up with foreign policy issues as being more eye-catching and glamorous. However, it does not make a lot of sense to seek to go down in history as the President who won the Cold War at the price of reducing many of your fellow-citizens to penury. Governor Clinton, and Mr Major and his colleagues, have a similar task before them: how to persuade the citizens of their respective countries of the validity of their policies. Unfortunately, neither seem to have any very clear policies at the moment, which makes their task all the more difficult.

Meanwhile, the General Synod of the Church of England has voted to admit women to the Anglican priesthood. Before the vote the result seemed too close to call. In the end the Synod seems to have been conscious of what it was doing, even though the result might mean further schism within the Anglican Church and the shipwreck of ecumenical relations. Considered comment on all of this must be postponed to a later date. However, the question as to the accommodation of genuine doubters of the new orthodoxy within the Anglican Church is pressing. The recent debate was very much taken up with the practicalities of women's ordination, it will be interesting to see how some of the resulting ecclesiological conundrums will be solved. Votes sometimes create as many divisions as they heal.

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