

Comment

Newcastle upon Tyne is certainly putting on a brave face. The piazza now surrounding the Grey Monument – itself erected to commemorate the Reform Bill of 1832 – makes an unusually human-sized centre for a redesigned English city. In fact, the Dobson/Grainger architecture of the 1820s has come quite well out of the ambitious reconstruction of the 1960s (T. Dan Smith and all that). It is a pleasure to walk round the streets of inner Newcastle – more than can be said of many comparable towns now. The yellow Metro is very stylish. The whole city is amazingly pervaded by lush trees and great stretches of public grass, not to mention the many handsome private gardens. (Well, they have had rain for weeks on end.) The Greek restaurant in Shakespeare Street has given way to a French one. There seems to be a flourishing trattoria on every corner. An out of work man could easily spend his week's dole on a single meal in some of these places. Somebody certainly has the money. But many of the shops are boarded up, and the silent cranes along the river are a melancholy sight.

Away from the prosperous swathe that the Bristol/Cambridge crescent cuts across the land, the decline of heavy industry in Britain is perceptibly accelerating. The immense human cost of the Industrial Revolution is being matched now by the suffering that 'de-industrialization' brings in its train. It is an appropriately ugly term for the phenomenon that the majority of the working people of this country have evidently determined to accept. Whether their resignation is rooted in apathy or in stoicism, there is no real sign that the widespread destruction of jobs, and thus of human lives and communities, is yet generating much more social unrest than the State can easily contain. The fatalistic sense of the inevitable with which thousands of men let themselves be led to slaughter on the Somme has come to the fore again, in one more episode in the long blind conflict between capital and labour.

The Thatcher Government has returned to power, with a greatly increased majority in the House of Commons, notwithstanding that fewer people voted for it than in 1979. In fact, of all those entitled to vote on 9 June only some 31 per cent actually voted in favour of the Conservative Party. It does not follow that extra-parliamentary pressure should be increased for the introduction of some form of proportional representation. It does not even mean that, for 'representative democracy', the Thatcher Government is not very representative of the will of the People. Had there been compulsory voting in Britain, it seems very likely that the thousands who could not be bothered to vote would either have spoiled their papers or come out for Mrs Thatcher. But, on any calcula-

tions, at least half the electorate remains firmly opposed to Thatcherism. Away from the Bristol/Cambridge crescent the majority against the Conservatives is quite substantial. The facts are well known. They will need to be repeated again and again in the next five years to prevent the spread of the sedulously cultivated myth that Thatcherism has a 'mandate' to do what it likes with the country.

But the anti-Conservative majority in the country is in deep confusion. The internal conflicts within the Labour Party since 1979, at least as the media exposed and celebrated them, obviously undermined confidence. The chances of Labour's forming a government in the foreseeable future have incontrovertibly been diminished by the emergence of the SDP: the evidence lies in the number of marginal seats that their intervention enabled Conservatives to win. Then, again under the cruel glare of the media, Michael Foot simply never looked like a plausible Prime Minister to hundreds of thousands of electors whose votes he needed. But, for most of these same voters, it was surely the main *policies* of the Labour Party that lacked credibility – at least as these policies were *perceived*. Once again the malicious presentation of the popular press must have had some influence, but from the Manifesto onwards the Labour Party seemed incapable of explaining its policies in ways that would make them believable. Perhaps Party activists took too much for granted, but it is sad that Labour's policy of unilateral disarmament was so widely perceived (in what is, after all, a deeply patriotic and militaristic nation) as out and out pacifism. Similarly, very few people understood how withdrawal from the EEC would halt the collapse of British industry. But, as the political analysts are all saying, electoral support for the Labour Party has been declining steadily since 1951. Perhaps, as some would argue, social democratic government never was viable or desirable in Britain. Five, or anyway ten, more years of Thatcherism, on this view, would no doubt bring the apocalypse of the long awaited British Revolution. In the meantime a lot of people are getting very badly hurt. The Wilson Government showed that the Labour Party as we have known it all along never intended to make Britain socialist. Perhaps a Healey Government would only have been Thatcherism with a human face. With capital punishment back on the agenda one may be allowed a certain nostalgia for the *civilisation* that has traditionally marked the Labour Party. But a good deal of extra-parliamentary activity is now required, if the anti-Conservative majority in Britain is ever to come to power through the ballot box. After all, Grey would not have had that Monument but for a great deal of extra-parliamentary pressure to secure changes in the law.