

Regional Feelings Prevail

IN A remarkable analogy to recent trends in India, this week's "mini-election" in Britain has shown strong support for regionalism. The Wilson Government will now have to seriously consider decentralising Government within the United Kingdom if it is to withstand the rising tide of nationalist opinion in Scotland and Wales.

It is fashionable to attribute the Labour Party's failure in the Glasgow, Pollock election and the heavy drop in vote in the former Labour stronghold at Rhondda West to more mid-term protest voting. There was clearly an element of protest by disaffected Labour voters but it was surprising that in neither case the Communist candidates did well, since they were campaigning on the revulsion felt by section of Labour support for "Wilson's abandonment of socialism".

A big factor in the swing to both Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party has been the continuing discrepancy in the economic fortunes of the midlands and the south of England on the one hand and the outer British provinces on the other. Unemployment in the Rhondda has been running close to 10 per cent under the Wilson Government and the local nationalist candidate made much derisory play with the fact that Labour's much vaunted economic aid for Wales has produced a negligible increase in employment.

Voters were clearly thinking on much the same lines in Glasgow where the effects of the economic credit squeeze have been more harshly felt than in England. And also the wage freeze has been applied with a rigour which the nationalists have claimed amounts to discrimination as in the case of the refusal of a pay claim by Scottish local Government officers.

The feeling which has been largely dormant beneath the political surface in both Scotland and Wales for some years, that London-based economic power can never bring them parity of treatment with England, has now burst into life. It will take much more than increased propaganda for the Wilson Govern-

ment's economic and industrial programme for the regional development areas to reverse this trend. The fact now is that no seat in either Scotland or Wales is now safe from Nationalist raiding parties. In terms of the United Kingdom Parliament this represents a serious threat to Labour's majority which is heavily dependent on Scottish and Welsh seats.

It must also be said, however, that the Scottish and Welsh nationalist manifestations are not identical. It is true that the Welsh Nationalists stand clearly to the left of their Welsh compatriots in social and economic policy. The Scottish National Party's economic policy is if anything to the right of their great rivals, the Liberals, and has earned them the nickname of 'Tartan Tories' in the left wing circles.

The Plaid on the other hand has inherited some of the neo-Marxist and Libertarian traditions of an older generation of Welsh working class socialism. It is a fact that the Plaid's industrial policy was actually written by a group of sympathetic English anarcho-syndicalists although this clearly has had less vote drawing power than the party's appeals to Welsh Nationhood ("there are 30 nations smaller in size and population than Wales represented at the United Nations.") Both nationalist parties are more than vague about the form and degree of "independence" which they seek.

The effect of the two by-elections was also markedly different. In Glasgow nationalist intervention allowed the Conservative to reclaim the seat, while in Rhondda the Plaid not only slashed the hitherto impregnable Labour majority but also buried the Conservative candidates. He polled a mere thousand votes, smallest recorded for a Conservative candidate since 1945, and well below the Communist's vote.

If the nationalists also seem to put pay to the aspirations of the Liberals to be recognised as the automatic protest vote against the Labour/Tory hegemony in Scotland and Wales, there was some comfort for

them in the third by-election result in Nuncaton, near Birmingham. Here the young Labour successor to the former Labour Minister and leader of the left wing Transport Workers Union, Frank Cousins, managed to hold the seat with a majority reduced from 11,000 to 4,000.

The Liberals polled a respectable 7,600 votes—an increase on their showing in the 1966 general election. It seems where there are no regional or nationalist elements at work and where there is no recognised left alternative for frustrated Labour voters, the Liberals can still make ground. They recognise, however, that much of this sort of support is as fickle as was the temporary support they received from wayward Tories in the last days of the Mac-Millan Conservative Government.

Both the Conservatives and Labour face some soul-searching. The Conservatives can still point to no really positive swing in their direction in spite of two years of economic crisis under the Labour Government. Labour, on the other hand, must feel that the allegations of its left critics that if it loses its soul, it is in danger of losing some of its traditional support may be being borne out. One serious facet of this development is the dangerous loss of morale among Labour activities, especially the younger generation. This has developed particularly since the recent defence row in the Parliamentary Labour Party and the consequent rebuke delivered by Wilson to the left abstentionist MPs that "dogs may be allowed one bite only".

Wilson may take comfort from the fact, however, that this disillusionment on the left still can find no permanently satisfactory berth independent of the Labour Party. If one does emerge the Wilson leadership will have serious cause for alarm.

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