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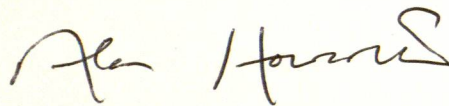
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18th March 1980

THE PRIME MINISTER
THE CHIEF WHIP
THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARTY
THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER
THE PAYMASTER GENERAL
MR. HOSKYNS
MR. STRAUSS
MR. REECE
MR. GOW

The State of Public Opinion Mid-March 1980

I attach herewith a paper on the state of public opinion in the country as at mid-March 1980.



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The State of Public Opinion Mid-March 1980

The by-election result in Southend East ought to be considered in the context of the national picture of public opinion and the major trends between the General Election and now. Southend East is in the south east of England, a part of the country where the Liberals are relatively strong. In any case by-elections tend to produce caricature results. It is worth recognising that the Southend East result is out of keeping with the general movement of opinion to date.

Public support for the Conservative Party, as measured by voting intention, has to an extent fallen away since the General Election. The following figures give an idea of the movement:

	<u>May 3</u> (Election Result)	<u>Jul 4-9</u>	<u>Nov 7-12</u>	<u>Jan 9-14</u>	<u>Mar 5-10</u>
Con	43.9%	41½%	39%	36%	37%
Lab	36.9%	45%	43½%	45%	46%
Lib	13.8%	11½%	15½%	16%	14½%

These figures need not give cause for alarm. While it is true that they represent a level of support below that experienced by most previous post-war Governments at the equivalent stage in the Parliamentary cycle this is hardly surprising in view of the economic predicament of the country. It is noteworthy that support for the Government has held steady for the two months of the steel strike and that Liberal support shows some small decline in the same period. If the atmosphere in the Party and the national media has been somewhat febrile at times since the New Year it is encouraging to note that the public have remained relatively phlegmatic.

There are however two features of the movement of public opinion since the General Election which we should note with some concern:

- (i) The main swing away from us has been among those voters whose swing to us gave us the General Election victory: C2 voters (skilled and semi-skilled workers and their families), and notably first-time and women voters. For example, among the C2 group, 41% supported us and 41% supported Labour in May 1979 compared to 29% and 53% respectively at the beginning of March 1980.
- (ii) This adverse swing among the C2s was precipitated by the Budget last June. There was a substantial gap between the attitudes of middle class and working class electors to the Budget. Broadly speaking it was the middle class electors - and primarily those living in owner-occupied houses in the south of England - who were most sympathetic to the objectives and achievements of the Budget, whilst working class voters, trade union members and council tenants were most hostile. While a majority of electors recognised the Budget as being tough but necessary and in accordance with

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the Conservative programme at the Election, the Budget was also seen as being divisive in terms of social class. It was widely seen as favouring the well off and penalising the less fortunate. Electors failed almost totally to remember the various measures designed to help the less well off, such as increasing pensions and raising tax thresholds.

A survey of the Party's image carried out just before Christmas showed certain perennial problems persisting. We were seen as being too much influenced by big business and out of touch with ordinary people. On the positive side we were seen as being able to stand up to the unions, strong minded, capable of following through policies even if they are unpopular, able to face up to the realities of the situation and respected abroad. Labour by contrast were seen as disunited and too much influenced by the trade unions. On the other hand Labour had a more sympathetic image, being seen as paying attention to ordinary people and caring for them as well as for the less well off.

In June 1979 45% of the electorate regarded prices as the most urgent problem facing the country, - compared to unemployment 19%, other economic problems 8% and strikes 6%. By early January 1980 30% regarded prices as the most important problem facing the country, 24% strikes and unions and 15% unemployment. In early February 1980, with industrial problems much in the news, strikes were regarded as the most important problem by 31% of the electorate followed very closely by prices 28% and unemployment 13%.