

Distant encounters of the Heath kind

Mr Edward Heath campaigned for the Conservatives yesterday in the Croydon North West by-election, and said nothing.

For Mrs Thatcher, it could have been a lot worse. He might have said something. But it would be an error to assume that his visit was unnewsworthy. On the issues, Mr Heath silent is as interesting as Mr Heath talkative, as well as easier to understand. His seminal silences yesterday on the subject of Mrs Thatcher were the most definitive public statement so far of his position on the matter.

Mr Heath appeared in support of Mr Butterfill who sounds like a crunchy item of confectionery advertised disgustingly on TV, but is in fact the Conservative candidate. They had lunch in a pub and then advanced through the saloon bar for a Meet the People tour.

Some lunchtime drinkers called out. Mr Heath pressed on towards the street. As always, he preferred an Avoid the People tour. Mr Heath is not at his best with people. A TV crew asked him to turn back and engage the citizen in conversation. He agreed.

"What are your policies?" said this voice of the people at the bar. "Yes", Mr Heath replied slowly—or rather, "years". The average citizen repeated his question. "He's the candidate. It's him you're voting for", said Mr Heath, placing a hand menacingly on Mr Butterfill's shoulder. "I thought we were voting for the Government", said the typical voter. "You vote for them as well", Mr Heath replied. He made the "them" sound like the title of a horror film—them as in *The Thing!* ("vote for *Them*" says Ted). But it was the most wholehearted endorsement Mrs Thatcher was to get all afternoon. . . .

We left the pub and advanced on the rest of the electorate. Mr Heath and Mr Butterfill wandered up and down the High Street for a while in the middle of a tight pack of cameramen. A couple of times they all piled into a small grocery shop. Other times they would waylay passing housewives. Considering the difficult situation in which he found himself, Mr Heath was good-natured, showed none of his fabled quick temper, and even seemed at times to enjoy the proceedings. And there was no doubt that for him it was a difficult situa-

tion. He believes this Government to be disastrous, but the remorseless rituals of the Conservative Party, with its emphasis on unity, compel him to put in at least a token appearance at this by-election.

None the less he managed to convey an impression of distance from it all—as if, in his cashmere coat, arms at his side like a Burton's dummy, he was simply being borne along, possibly against his will, by the tide of cameras and microphones. A passer by would recognize him and shake his hand.

The talking would then be done by Mr Butterfill, whom Mr Heath would introduce as "the candidate". This was just as well. So distant did Mr Heath seem, so impatient is he with verbal nuances at the best of times, that any attempt at the exact name would have been bound to come out as Mr Butterscotch, Mr Buttermilk, or Mr Butter-Mountain, a fellow-European.

Eventually we found ourselves in a Betjemanesque suburban idyll called Briar Avenue. We all charged up and down a couple of gnome-infested front gardens shaking hands with convinced Tories. A woman said she was voting Conservative because of Mr Ken Livingstone, the hated left-wing leader of the GLC whose name parents use in these parts to frighten disobedient children. "I must say, Livingstone's a great help", Mr Heath observed as he moved on. "Where did they find him?"

Another woman hurried out of Number 33 with an autograph book for Mr Heath to sign. She had an SDP-Liberal poster in her window.

"I'd vote Conservative if they got rid of Mrs Thatcher", she said. Mr Heath had no alternative but to reply that he was not interested in personalities but in issues, and that in any case, while he had his differences with the Prime Minister over certain matters, there was no question of, as the woman put it, "getting rid of her".

After an hour and a half it was time for Mr Heath to go. He turned and waved to the photographers. One pressed forward in the hope of getting an exclusive silence. Instead, he observed that Mr Butterfill was a good candidate, "very good on the doorstep". Was Mr Heath predicting a Tory win on Thursday? "I don't make predictions", he said as he lowered himself into his car which made off away from the clamour of the hustings.

Frank Johnson in Croydon.

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