

Thatcher suffers a 'Waterloo' defeat

by Mark Burdman

On Oct. 18, the voters in the southeastern English district of Eastbourne, in Sussex, gave Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party a stunning defeat. Eastbourne is a place where the Tories usually win handily; in the last electoral contest there, the Tories won by a comfortable 17,000-vote margin over the nearest candidate. On Oct. 18, however, the Liberal Democratic candidate won by 4,550 votes over the Tory candidate, in an important mid-term election.

Britain's *Sunday Correspondent* editorialized on Oct. 21 that Thatcher should "listen to the voters" and begin to think of an early retirement. The paper noted that her political future looked very dim, barring the outbreak of a war in the Persian Gulf, which "may forestall a change for now."

The Eastbourne result was more embarrassing than the bare numbers show. The Liberal Democrats are usually an also-ran party, often coming in far behind the Tories and the main opposition Labour Party (which gained a miserable 5% in Eastbourne), and sometimes even coming in behind the Green Party. Eastbourne was the district where Thatcher family intimate Ian Gow had been the serving parliamentarian, until he was assassinated by the Irish Republican Army earlier this year. Hence, there should have been a "rallying round the flag." But in fact, a Tory campaign to depict the Conservatives' opponents as de facto sympathizers of the IRA, backfired miserably.

'Gung-ho free-marketeering' discredited

The vote was a massive protest against Thatcherite economics, which has brought Britain inflation rates of nearly 11% (even before taking into account the effects of the Gulf crisis on the world economy), interest rates of 14-15%, and high taxes. Even in Tory country, the mood is one of anger and disgust. As the London *Economist* wrote in its Oct. 22 issue, in the same southeastern England which had been the site of the touted 1980s Thatcherite boom, "bankruptcies have been booming," and "small, overborrowed companies that started up there throughout the past decade have been disappearing in droves."

Writing in the City of London's *Financial Times* Oct. 22, columnist John Plender suggested that the signal sent by

the voters of Eastbourne was that "the era of gung-ho free-marketeering is finally at an end." He went on: "That fashionable policy nostrum of the 1980s, financial deregulation, made a king-sized contribution to the credit boom and subsequent inflation that have now been followed by interest rates that find no favor in Eastbourne or anywhere else. Who said the British middle class were gluttons for punishment?"

According to Plender, "Most important of all, what the electorate appears to want most in the 1990s [are] public goods, which tend to be best provided by, or in combination with, the state: health care, education, transport, and . . . environmental protection."

On Oct. 20, two days after Eastbourne, the first major protest against the Thatcherite "poll tax" (a tax levied per head, irrespective of income) took place in London. Several thousand protesters marched peacefully, until a ragtag group of the anarchist and "class war" stripe started a violent protest, in order to discredit the anti-poll tax mood as a whole.

'The Lady must go'

The lessons of Eastbourne were quickly drawn by the pro-Tory press. The Oct. 19 London *Daily Telegraph* had a banner headline in its late edition: "Conservatives crash to humiliating defeat." The paper called the Liberal Democratic victory "spectacular," and said there would be now a "huge electoral hurdle" for Mrs. Thatcher, as she pursues a fourth term in office in early-1990s elections. The *Daily Mail* called the election a "devastating blow" to Thatcher's reelection hopes.

The pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* commented that the Eastbourne result was a "clear message to Thatcher: 'Your time is up!'" This was echoed by the liberal *Independent on Sunday* Oct. 21, which stressed that if the Conservatives wished to win the next election, "the Lady must go. . . . She is now a source of division." The paper advised that she "resign gracefully," in order to give her successor "time to prepare for the next election."

In this perilous conjuncture for herself, Mrs. Thatcher can only hope for a war in the Gulf, to re-create the so-called 1982 "Falklands effect," when her neocolonialist adventure against Argentina rejuvenated her political fortunes. So, it is no accident that one of her mouthpieces, former Trade Minister Nicholas Ridley, wrote a bloodcurdling guest editorial in the Oct. 21 *Sunday Express*, entitled, "We must act fast to stop Saddam." The same Ridley who ranted against the new "German Fourth Reich" earlier this year, now raved against "appeasers, compromisers and faint hearts" who are trying to prevent war in the Gulf. The same shrieks were emitted by the *Telegraph*, in a lead editorial the next day, entitled, "The dangers of delay."

As the *Independent* commented in diplomatic language Oct. 23, Margaret Thatcher "on a personal level, is more inclined to raise the scenario of a war against Iraq" than most others on the international political scene.