

# Bubble bath election

Cian O'Neill unravels the election as it unravels

Yes, the Election has finally been called, they are off, etc., ad V.I.V.M.M.X., and if you struggle to find anything to enjoy in politics but the occasional daydream of Sammy Wilson playing conkers for chips, then this is that special period where Debbie really does Do Dallas. Forget 'Honest' John Major and his soapbox, for in 2010 everyone has to drop their keys in the jar by the door and proceed to the campaign pit where all bets and boots are off and the bubble-bath is dispensed liberally. Those faint of heart should look away.

Or, look to the billboards, where for possibly the last time big money is being spent by the parties, though particularly – this speaks of the age of their core vote, perhaps – the Conservatives. What with M & C Saatchi providing them with a new campaign poster redolent of their 'Labour's tax bombshell' classic of 1992, and the old Big State/No State debate dominating proceedings, this is in a sense the first retro-revival General Election in the UK: a sort of political 'Ashes to Ashes', if you will, only with all the attractive women taken out.

The Conservative agenda was only reluctantly revealed over recent months and is one of nationwide service-shrinking/cutting as they tried out in Hammersmith Borough over recent years. They cut council tax bills by introducing charges for recycling, meals on wheels and homecare services, closing down the mobile library service and a youth club and effectively firing all council staff in 2009 in order to then re-hire them on contracts with increased duties and obligations and lesser worker protections and rights. Many of the council staff noted on their new con-

tracts that they had signed 'under duress', which raises the spectre of future employment tribunal entanglements and even strike action. Despite this, the Tories have made much of their 'success' in Hammersmith and it was seen by the party as a laboratory for national policy on public service provision. Indeed, in their election manifesto they promised to freeze council tax nationwide by 'reducing spending on government advertising and consultants'. This would mean the state delegating responsibility for the running of schools to parents, which sounds quite like privatising education only without the structural safeguards, professional human resources and accountability.

Non-interventionist, small-state Thatcherism is back – and George Osborne has promised to magic away the deficit by making recourse to 'efficiency savings'. That the analysts call this pure fiction matters little, what with all those soapy, smiling bubbles everywhere. And perhaps Middle England doesn't mind the idea of massive public sector job-cuts if this would stave off the rise in tax which – the analysts say – is inevitable, and even allow for a cut in inheritance tax on estates worth £1m – a mimic in its non-egalitarian populism of George W. Bush's 2001 abolition of the 'death tax' on estates.

Credit for the efficacy of the new Tory poster fearmongers with classic tabloid language about a 'Jobs Tax' could go to the agency or to Andrew Coulson, the ex-*News of the World* editor who was respondent in a recent £.8m tribunal payout for workplace bullying, has a phone-tapping 'blind spot' and has been incredibly efficient as Head of Tory Communications to Dave the former TV PR man who hired them all.

Yet success has many fathers and there shall be many to line up and share credit for – the great roll-back election of 2010, when the ruling classes finally came back to govern the England that they largely still own. The 50p tax rate is still a stone in the slipper of Stuart 'M&S' Rose and co., and it is really for this that there came the protests made by himself and others in recent weeks about a rise in NICs as would only cost such a huge high-street retailer as he a modest £17 a month per average

employee. They would revenge New Labour's small slights of redistribution, then, and no doubt but these children of Ploutus would not have acted so, did they not smell victory on the noisome air.

Such revenge may be near, and perhaps fittingly, Labour launched their manifesto in a hospital reception area. The 'Broom sported a collar that seemed almost symbolically to divorce his head from his torso, but both collar and politician performed quite well. The three television debates are probably the last test remaining for the Labour Leader. While Mr OnCamera was the favourite to come out of these better, Nick 'Horsefly' Clegg has made many friends, if only because the Liberal Democrats seem rather endearingly averse to talking gubbins about, well, anything really. And if Vince Cable be the most trusted man in politics, Clegg is his front man.

These three ways may be decisive in making available the prospect of a coalition government with Labour; which is the only means to continued employment available to those Labour apparatchiks not quite ready for the wilderness, or a career in lobbying on behalf of firms invented by Channel Four's Dispatches.

Not so if Murdoch has his way. He will relentlessly and ruthlessly deploy his huge media might to crush any Lib-Lab consensus and so ensure a Tory administration, because it is part of his longer-term business plan. The Tories have agreed with him to change UK monopolies law to allow him to take over the terrestrial ITV channel, and to transfer a chunk of the BBC licence fee to ITV. They are planning to simultaneously give Murdoch a huge stake in UK public sector broadcasting, cripple the BBC – his only real competitor, and a 'Liberal' bane of the Tories – and so allow this non-UK citizen to siphon off money paid by everyone who legally uses a television in the UK to further his goal of utter domination of both the commercial and public sectors of UK broadcasting. No bad thing, unless you value fair-competition in the marketplace, free speech and/or egalitarian democracy in which money is not the only value and we are all on our own.