

Now Is The Time

by Steve Hall

Normally, at election time, it does not take a very large percentage of votes one way or the other to swing the balance in favour of a specific Party. A 28% swing would need some explaining, however.

An A|NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

The Prime Minister of Euthanasia was disturbed. His fleshy moon of a face (which had earned him the nick-name Jovial Jack) was creased into deep furrows of worry, and his thick, dark hair was rumped out of its customary neatness. He stared bleakly down the length and across the breadth of the long table before him at his assembled Cabinet colleagues, and spoke.

“Gentlemen, I can delay the announcement of the election date for very little longer; our mandate from the people has only a few months to go. I need hardly remind you, however, that the fortunes of our great Rabidist party are at their lowest ebb in many years.”

The Premier adjusted his spectacles and lowered his gaze to a paper before him.

“The latest public opinion polls carried out by our research section show that our opponents have a clear 12% lead over us in the people’s favour; the precise position is that 42% are for us, 54% for the opposition, while the remaining 4% are undecided or would vote for splinter parties.” He paused for a moment, then went on, “You will all appreciate the gravity of the situation which confronts us, and what that 12% will do to our position in the Mansion.”

Heads nodded gravely around the table but no-one spoke. All were content to leave the conversational ball at the P.M.’s feet until they had to take their turn at kicking it.

The heavy-featured man laid his heart bare. “Gentlemen, the future is in our hands—what do we do with it? What *can* we do to ensure that it will be ours? I invite your comment.”

The Minister for Space Research cleared his throat.

“Prime Minister, we must appeal to the younger generation, catch their imagination—I advocate an expansion in our proposals for outer space...”

Across the table, his cabinet colleague for Health rumbled explosively: “Nonsense—the conquest of disease should have first priority!”

Dissenting voices spoke up in turn, the baton of argument passing to and fro between them in a verbal relay race.

“Higher pensions should be our gambit!”

“Bigger and better schools—a new deal for education!”

“Social security and full employment!”

“More houses!”

The flood gates of controversy were open.

The P.M. rapped the table with his gavel and turned to the one man who had not spoken.

“Gentlemen, our colleague from the Department of Science has said nothing, shall we invite his opinion?”

An incoherent mumble rippled around the cabinet table.

“Very well,” said the Prime Minister, taking no overt objection to signify approval. “Mr. Minister, have you any comment.”

The thin-faced man, whose physical appearance was the exact antithesis of the P.M.’s nodded curtly, coldly, and said in dry, precise tones: “In my opinion, it is merely a matter of mathematics as to which policies will best appeal to the electorate, and once a problem has been reduced to an exact equation, it can be solved.”

“Go on,” murmured the Head of Government scenting a possible solution.

“I propose that we submit all the facts to an intellect capable of analysing them and advising us on our best line of presentation.”

“And where,” queried the Secretary for Overseas Affairs, silkily, “do we find such an enlightened, impartial paragon of humanity?”

Heads swivelled automatically towards the Minister of Science awaiting his reply.

“No paragon of humanity *has* the ability,” he said, smiling a thin, arid smile. “But we do have a giant, impartial intellect at our command at N.E.L.”

To some of his listeners the initials meant nothing, and they contained their ignorance until the Minister for Space Research commented enthusiastically: “Of course! The giant computer at the National Electronics Laboratory. Why didn’t *I* think of that?”

The Minister of Science regarded him caustically, and came within an ace of answering the rhetorical question put by a scion of the aristocracy. While he hesitated, the P.M. spoke again.

“*Can* the machine do it? It wasn’t designed for such a purpose, was it?”

Science No. 1 nodded. “It can solve any problem provided that it is posed in the computer language; it’s as simple as that.”

The P.M.’s eyes travelled around the table.

“Has anyone anything further to say?”

A rubicund face representing the Bureau of Agriculture puffed an objection. “I don’t like the idea of putting ourselves in the hands of a machine, I don’t trust it.”

“Why not?” queried Science, with rapier-like logic. “You do it when you fly, travel the oceans, go down a mine—you’ve *got* to trust machines.”

“Shall we take a vote, gentlemen?” intervened the P.M. his face now a smooth full moon in all its glory. “Those in favour, please show...”

There were no votes against, but there was one abstention.

“What’s the next move?” asked the Prime Minister.

“I will prepare a programme tonight,” said Science 1, “and give it to the computer myself tomorrow—we can trust no technicians in this matter.”

“What about the head of N.E.L., won’t he be surprised at your using the machine.”

“Not if I have your letter saying that the matter is top secret.”

“Which it is,” said the P.M. “so I can give you the authority with a clear conscience.”

Not very far away in the same city, the leader of the main opposition party addressed his colleagues in a less formal meeting. He lit a small, thin, carefully unostentatious cigar, puffed at its fragrance for a second or two, then pushed back the errant blond forelock so carefully trained to immediately fall back down again.

“They’re on the run,” he said with satisfaction. “Just like a fox with the hounds in full cry. And they can’t run much farther—the end of the trail is in sight—and *we’re* going to be there waiting for them.”

The curved lock of hair flip-flopped as he turned to the man on his left.

“How are our preparations coming along, Lew? Is everything set to go once the date is announced?”

Party secretary Hemlock nodded and began to reel out information like a vocal card index.

“Local agents up and down the country are well-stocked with copies of our manifesto; candidates have been selected and briefed; rallies and meetings arranged; scripts and films have been completed for our television broadcasts, and we are holding a team of our top propagandists in readiness to tackle anything topical which comes along. The precise details of speakers for meetings and television broadcasts are as follows...” His voice droned on with the precision of a Swiss watch.

An hour later, the opposition group finished their drinks, patted their leader on the back for the last time, and departed for home hoping that he would remember them when he had received the Sovereign’s formal request to form a government. All of them were convinced that the portals of power lay open in the immediate future ahead of them.

Precisely twenty-four hours later, the Science Minister lived up to his promise. He arrived at the Prime Minister’s residence carrying a bulging brief-case. His thin frame leaned forward a little tiredly as if some physical hinge had weakened at waist level, and there were extra lines of fatigue around the eyes, but overall, there was an indefinable but unmistakable air of quiet satisfaction. Evidently he did not consider that his labours of the day and night had been in vain.

The P.M. himself opened the front door, and ushered in the late but expected visitor.

“Come in, come in,” he enthused, steering the mathematician into a sound-proof room where a cheerful log fire, wine, and cigar awaited their presence. When they were seated and the room door secured against intrusion, he continued. “What luck?”

Science 1 stretched his long legs and patted his precious burden.

“If I might coin a phrase, ‘it’s in the bag.’”

The P.M.’s face broke into the cartoonists’ smile of Jovial Jack. “Excellent—now if I could see it in detail?”

The two men bent over the papers, the P.M. commenting from time to time: “Yes, yes... I’m not sure

about *that* one... *That's* a bit daring..."

The logs in the grate flared their last and were relapsing into charred grey and red embers before the two men had finished their examination of the computer's verdict, then the Premier's pointed questions really began.

"You are satisfied with the reliability of this programme?"

Science 1 nodded. "All factors have been taken into account—there can be no doubting the accuracy of the findings."

"What is the prognosis of electoral swing?"

"At least 30%"

"As much as that?" The P.M. sounded delighted but incredulous.

"As the gamblers say," remarked the thin man, "we're working with a stacked deck—and the result of the game, therefore, could hardly be otherwise since we did the stacking."

"A steam-roller majority," mused his host, "I won't forget this day's work in a hurry."

The next day the Prime Minister surprised the Mansion of Representatives by announcing that the election would take place in three weeks.

The Opposition scented a rat, and cast about trying to locate it, but no dead rodent could they find. And so the battle of words began via the mediums of vision and sound broadcasts, the opening salvo being fired by a government spokesman four days after the Premier's disclosure of the date for polling day. It was the ruling party's right to make the first presentation to the nation, and the speeches would alternate between the campaigning factions until the final appeal would be made by the main opposition speaker on the eve of the poll.

Political commentators sharpened their pencils, polished their microphones, and stood poised ready to rend the unwary from any quarter. The public in general wondered what would be said, what case would be put before them; while the Opposition in particular were ready to jeer and rip that programme to shreds.

Science No. 1 was no orator, he did not have the voice, the personality or the showmanship required for that appellation—nevertheless his precise, tightly-reasoned arguments created a tremendous impression in the minds of all who saw and listened to him—and left not the minutest chink open for the ingress of criticism.

Secret public opinion soundings conducted by both sides the next day on carefully selected cross-sections of the populace revealed the creation of a 9% swing to the government, mostly among the floating voters—the king-makers who revivify or revile the rulers.

Hurried, mid-afternoon meetings took place in both party headquarters; in one there was jubilation; in the other sarcasm, recriminations, and a good deal of disquiet. "Old Napier's Bones has done well," was one acid comment, and there were many more remarks about swallows and summers—but there was a strong undercurrent of fear, too—if the Minister of Science could produce such a reaction, what might his more effective colleagues do when their turn came to speak?

The first retaliatory broadcast was bold in tone but totally ineffectual as far as the public was concerned, and the relative state of the parties remained unchanged until the government fired another

broadside with more devastating results, and another 7.5% of the electorate got off the fence to the side where the grass bid fair to be much, much greener.

Two more speeches from government spokesmen punctuated by increasingly more desperate efforts on the part of the opposition speakers, brought further desertions to the ruling party's camp of 6.1% and 5.2% respectively.

Then there was a temporary lull for two evenings while tiny, minority parties sang their too extreme songs, but only their convinced and fanatical adherents thought anything of their promises.

Jovial Jack's smile widened more and more as the public's opinion swung to where he wanted it and stayed there, and he bustled around his home constituency and former marginal ones shaking hands, patting heads, kissing babies—and became known, now, as Jolly Jack, the man whose policies were right on the beam for the nation.

Cromwell, the opposition leader, toured his own neck of the woods and was made aware, by the many silences which greeted him in many places, that even he had lost a good deal of his personal following. Grim-faced, he returned to party headquarters for another round-table with his colleagues. Grave faces confronted him, faces which had lost all hope of attaining cabinet rank—many were doubtful, now, of their ability to even continue as elected representatives—not all seats were unassailable.

He spoke first to Lew Hemlock.

“How bad is the party's morale?”

Hemlock was blunt, there was no point in being otherwise. “The consistent swings to the other side have virtually demoralised nearly all of our representatives in the Mansion, while in the country, although our followers do not know the exact position, obviously they have sensed that the tide is flowing strongly against us. If we are to retrieve the position, it must be done quickly and decisively.”

Next to be interrogated was Rutherford, the party's treasurer.

“What's the financial situation, Gordon?”

This time the story was brighter.

“Our cash available is everything that it need be. I can finance any project within reason.”

“Plenty of money,” muttered Cromwell, “but what do we do with it?”

He pondered, conscious that all eyes were upon him, waiting for a magic solution to their troubles. He knew, too, that if he failed to produce an effective answer and the election went against them, as it inevitably would, he would be swept from leadership and cast into politics' backwoods.

There came a touch at his elbow and a whisper in his ear.

“May I speak to you privately?”

“What is it?” asked Cromwell, turning to face the young, fresh-faced speaker, a protege of his and the shadow Minister for Space Research.

“I'd prefer to get away from the others for a moment, if you don't mind.”

Cromwell made his excuses to the meeting and led the way into an adjoining room.

“Well?” he said, a trifle abruptly, as the door closed behind them.

Julian Clements was rather diffident. “I don’t know how to put this,” he began, “but the government’s recent actions smell to high heaven.”

“They must smell like an odour of success to them,” grunted Cromwell. “What do you mean exactly?”

“They couldn’t have been in a worse position a couple of weeks ago,” pointed out Clements. “Just think back: they’d been disastrously wrong abroad, and nearer home, things were even worse—everything pointed to them stalling until the last possible moment before holding an election in the hope that a miracle would turn up to help them out of the mess they were in.”

“They’ve produced a series of miracles,” argued Cromwell. “Look at the swings there have been.”

“Agreed,” said the younger man becoming more confident. “*Produced* is the operative word—I think they *knew* they were going to produce these changes *before* they announced the election—that’s what decided them to do it, they *knew* what was going to happen.”

“Go on,” said Cromwell, shortly. “*How* could they know?”

“Just one thing more,” said Clements, “have you noticed that the biggest change in public opinion came first, then each additional one was slightly less?”

“You’re right,” commented Cromwell, “that’s not the normal way of things—support usually builds up more slowly from an uncertain start—this has been a land-slide. What’s the answer?”

Clements was frank. “I don’t know—I wanted to ask you if you knew of some master tactician in the Rabidist party, someone capable of thinking out such a programme—it’s masterly in conception.”

Cromwell bridled. “It’s a wonderful set of promises, I agree, but that’s all, they’ll never carry it out.”

“That’s not the point, it appeals to the electorate.”

The opposition party leader frowned wryly. “True, but I can’t think of any big-brain of theirs who could have designed this for them.”

Both men were silent, but there was an air of something realised about Clements.

“You’ve got a proposition, haven’t you?” probed Cromwell, shrewdly. “Well, out with it man, this is no time for beating about the bush.”

“I’d like to spend some money to find out how they did it.”

“Who’s going to answer the question for you?” asked the older man, beginning to move towards the door. “And what good would it do even if we did know?”

Clements dealt with the questions seriatim. “We can buy time on one of the commercial computers and put the problem to it, and who knows, maybe we’ll think of a way of getting around things then.”

“How much will it cost?”

“About a hundred a minute—and we’ll probably need an hour to set it up and get a result.”

“Six thousand,” whistled Cromwell. “All right, I’ll go along with you—but you’d better be right.”

Cromwell and Clements met again the following afternoon.

“There’s been another 3.9% gain by the government after last night’s speech,” said the older man bitterly.

Clements managed to look sombre and triumphant all at once. “The whole damned thing makes sense now—do you know how they did it?”

“No—you tell me—how did the computer add it up?”

“The government themselves used a computer to design their programme for them—*we’re competing with a machine intelligence.*”

“The cunning swine!” expostulated Cromwell. “Now where do we go?”

“I wish I knew,” the youthful face was beginning to show the strain of political set-back.

The time remaining before the election dwindled until it was measurable in hours rather than days, and political commentators were writing off the opposition for the next ten years.

Government circles sat back confidently, assured as they were of the massive support of 73.7% of the electorate.

With a scant twenty hours remaining, Cromwell racked his brains for some trump card to play in his concluding broadcast on the eve of the poll, and had a desperate idea. If one computer had mapped out the government’s winning scheme, he reasoned, couldn’t another computer provide a counterblast? That afternoon he sat alone before the microphone of the machine Clements had used and posed the question. Within two seconds, he had his answer in just three words.

Virtually the whole nation tuned in to Cromwell’s broadcast, curious to see how a politically dying man would speak on his public death-bed.

He began by reminding them of the government’s fiasco in the recent past and traced events right up to the impressive results produced by their election broadcasts.

“No doubt you have wondered how the government can have guessed so phenomenally right,” he said, “and so have I. And now I can tell you how it was done—the government miracle was produced by an electronic intellect, a computer, a machine intelligence—I leave it to you to decide whether you wish to be ruled by men or machines—for such is the choice. Think wisely and think well when you cast your votes tomorrow—goodnight.”

Twenty-nine hours later, Cromwell knew the nation’s answer. At 2 a.m. when three hundred and fifty two seats had been declared for the former opposition party and only ninety-one for the Rabidists, the Premier conceded the election; what happened in the remaining hundred and fifty-seven wouldn’t make much difference to anyone.

“We owe it all to you, Clements,” declared Cromwell. “If you hadn’t gone to the computer in the first place all would have been lost. There’ll be a high position in the Cabinet for you my boy.”

“But how did you conceive of telling the people?” asked a puzzled but happy Clements.

“Come, come,” chuckled the Premier-to-be, “success has fuddled your wits—I asked the computer, of course—and it said just that: ‘Tell the people.’ ”

Julian Clements’ face cleared for a moment, then paled rapidly.

“What’s the matter?” queried a suddenly solicitous Cromwell. “Are you ill?”

“What a joke,” replied Clements, “What a joke! Don’t you see what will happen now? The government bright boys will ask their computer how you discovered their duplicity, and they’ll be told that *you* used a computer to sway the people’s opinions, too, then where will we be? Because next *they’ll* tell the people of your duplicity!” Abruptly he broke into peal after peal of hysterical laughter. He was still rocking with crazy mirth when the Sovereign’s messenger arrived with the invitation for Cromwell to form a government.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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