



Old Hickory's Diary - 4

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The Riots in Leeds

On Tuesday, 5 June 2001 the riots among the Indianids, that looked to set to continue for a second weekend at Oldham, spread to Leeds. The police thought the Leeds riot was 'premeditated' and they believed that it followed the arrest of a male Indianid on Sunday night. Around 200 people went on the rampage in the Harehills district of Leeds for most of the night. Things were calm next day. The police came in force on the Wednesday night, but the riot was not continued. Some two dozen cars and a shop were set on fire, riot police were pelted with bricks, and petrol bombs were used to cause havoc overnight on Tuesday. Two policemen were slightly injured.

Assistant Chief Constable of West Yorkshire Police, Graham Maxwell, said that the rioting was "criminal activity, pure and simple". Policemen were told of petrol bombs being used but they found no sign of them on arrival. But they were to see some in use later that evening. Six arrests were made overnight. The riots, in a multi-ethnic

area of Leeds, come less than two weeks after racial violence had flared in Oldham, Greater Manchester. Many local residents agreed with police that the Harehills violence was not racially or politically motivated. Razaq Raj, a voluntary worker within the Indianid community, said the incident was purely a reaction to an arrest on Sunday. "The Bangladeshi-origin man was arrested, CS gas was used and he was violently arrested. It was sparked off from there", said Raj. He said the disorder had "nothing to do" with race, and local people were "shocked and horrified. The area where it happened, in my life I never ever came across this. People from all races live there together very happily."

It was thought that some people who had been involved in the race riots of ten days earlier had travelled from Oldham. Radio reports on Tuesday night and Wednesday morning said the Harehills violence began in the late afternoon when youths began hurling missiles at passing cars and buses. Some drivers were forced out of their cars, which were then set alight to cause mayhem. About 8 p.m. the police arrived at the Banstead Park area in response to reports of petrol bombs being thrown. Eight vanloads of riot-prepared officers and police dogs did find hundreds of youths that had gathered on the streets if no sign, just then, of the reported petrol bombs. There was a stand off until about 10 p.m. when the youths charged the police, hurling bricks, wooden crates, bottles and stones. The police formed a line with riot shields and charged the rioters to put out the fires which had been started. Some locals said the violence was a reaction to a lack of police action after people objected to the nature of Sunday's arrest. It was felt to

be a brutal arrest and the increasingly angry crowd of Indianids who watched it did not like the use of CS gas. A few days later, some of them reacted.

The British National Party in Oldham

One of the results of the earlier riots in Oldham was haply an increase in the British National Party's (BNP) vote. It got over 6,000 votes in one of the seats and over 5,000 in the other. At the count in Oldham West and Royton, where BNP leader Nick Griffin came third to Labour and the Tories, candidates were banned from making speeches at the count for fear of sparking racial hatred. It is not clear whether that is illiberal or not; as this is the sort of decision that could be freely taken to maximise social liberty. But censorship, voluntary or not, is not the sort of thing liberals like.

On the *Today* programme, Friday, 8 June 2001, the leader of the BNP was interviewed by John Humphries who attempted to paint him as a bigot. The replies he got however, did not match that stereotype, maybe because the man who had just got the 6,000 plus votes thought that to oblige him would be a mistake. Nick Griffin even complained about discrimination against Negrids. He said that Puritans from Northern Ireland were given grants to move back, but West Indians and Africans were not aided when they wanted to return home – and that was racial discrimination! Humphries said there was nowhere for most of those that the BNP wanted to expel to go to. They were born in Britain and so were as British as anyone else. Griffin replied that they would only be given this grant to go home if they wanted to do so. If they want to stop then they can do so, he added. He had won just over 16% of the votes cast in Oldham West and Royton. In the neighbour-ing constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth, the BNP collected around 11% of the votes.

The Indianid councillor, Abdul Quayum, whose ward is in the constituency where the BNP came in third, said the result would encourage the extreme right-wing party to stand in next year's local elections. "What they'll do is keep inciting the trouble and I'm sure they will target the local council election as well in Oldham. At the end of the day I think we need to resolve our own issues rather than having external organisations like the BNP coming into Oldham and trying to incite trouble". There is a bit of irony here. He added that although a right-wing backlash had been expected following recent racial problems, many people had been surprised by the size of the vote gained by the BNP candidates in Oldham.

The vote in Oldham was down from the last election, as it was in nearly every seat, but at 9% down, this was rather less than the national average. It was the first time the BNP had saved its deposit in an election in the North of England. Labour's Michael Meacher, who held on to the Oldham West, condemned the BNP's performance in the Oldham and Royton seat. Meacher was the fool who set out to sue a newspaper which had said he was not working class – a middle class reaction if ever there was one. He said: "It (the BNP success) has of course been on the back of a systematic campaign of violence, intimidation and bigotry which has been perpetrated on the people of Oldham." He held that the BNP had made most progress in persuading Conservative voters to change to the BNP, but he added that they had made little headway in racially mixed areas. "Where white communities were living at some distance and quite remote, with no Asians in the immediate neighbourhood, that is where the greatest swing to the BNP occurred. This suggests that it is fears and stereotypes and prejudices which have been stirred up terribly in this last four weeks" Griffin held that Meacher was quite

wrong and said it was just 'Labour spin'. It was in the areas where European and Indian people were equally divided that around half the votes had been for the BNP. "In both those areas if you go around there at the moment there are dozens and dozens of white houses with their windows smashed and boarded up. It's those areas, where the people have to live with multiculturalism, that voted for the British National Party", said Griffin.

The General Election

The rather silly contribution of Chris Patten on *Any Questions* on Friday, 8th June and repeated on Saturday, 9th June 2001 showed a typical and total lack of perspective. He had obviously prepared to make this attack from some time back. Hague had mistaken a bandwagon for a hearse, said the loser at Bath in 1992. But the reality made manifest by the election was not that Hague had messed up, rather that the Labourites had not conspicuously bungled their first term. The public remained satisfied with Labour, apart from a week or so in September 2000. Unless Labour had very plainly messed things up, no Tory could have done much better in Hague's place.

Hague is said to have lost owing to his bald head and a Yorkshire accent. But those were things the media picked on because of their Patten-like mentality. If the Labour government had obviously failed, such things would have been of little importance. If the Tories not been so badly rejected last time, these stigmata would not even have been searched for. Anyone at all in the position Hague took over in 1997 would have had some personal oddities sorted out by the media and turned into liabilities.

Patten more or less said what Michael Heseltine repeated on *Newsnight* BBC2 a few hours later on Friday. The Euro needed to be accepted and the centre

ground reclaimed in order to win again. It meant coming to terms with three big changes in society of recent years. The multi-racial society was now mainstream, and so were the one parent family and the homosexual vote. Of the 178 seats lost by the Tories in May 1997, 144 of them were to Labour and they never looked like returning, even though quite a few of them had been thought safe seats in April 1997. The Tories' share of the vote fell from the 1992 level of 43% to 31% in 1997 and was only slightly up to 33% in this election. Heseltine spoke of perhaps still needing another two elections to get back. The Labourites are at 43% themselves, exactly what they had in 1997, and getting 11% of the votes is far from impossible at one go.

As far as the public is concerned, the Labourites have remained fresh over the last four years but that is less likely to be the case after another four or five years. The result was almost a carbon copy of the landslide of 1997 and, though the media have called it another landslide, it is clearer to say that it was a consolidation of the 1997 result. Fewer than 30 seats changed hands and the Labourites surprisingly held on to the 'safe' Tory seats they took last time. The Tories got one seat back in Scotland but still have none in Wales. The Nationalists in Scotland and Wales fell back in terms of seats but less so in their share of the vote.

The Liberal Democrats have degenerated from the Liberal Party that gave up pristine liberalism in the 1880s with the rise of Radical Joe Chamberlain. They are now widely seen as the real left wing party. They are the only ones who advocate putting up taxation. Pristine liberalism contrasted greatly with this neo-liberalism almost to the extent of being its opposite. Charles Kennedy has increased the Liberal share of the votes by 2% and their number of seats by 6.

Smug and stupid in his love of schools and the NHS, Kennedy has unwittingly surrendered the centre ground to the Labourites, though he expresses his idea that he leads the force of the future. He rejected the Old Labour position to join the Social Democrats as a young man in the early 1980s only to inherit the ghost of Old Labour 20 years later. His 'impressive progress' is no more than to lead the ideological equivalent of the party he refused to join in the first place. But he fondly feels he will be in government within the next ten years.

There is something paradoxical in pandering to those you intend to govern. If an elite is not needed, why is government needed? Blair showed off his new son Leo Blair in a bid to celebrate his second win in a row. But the big news of Friday was taken up by Hague's resignation speech. Nevertheless, Blair pressed on with his vision for the next five years of government and began sorting out his new cabinet. On his return from seeing the Queen at Buckingham Palace, he said that the Labour majority of 167 was "a mandate for reform and for investment". The Prime Minister warned there would be hard choices ahead if reforms to the NHS, education, transport, welfare and the criminal justice system were to go ahead.

The big rumour of the last few weeks is that Blair wants to see more business (or market) methods used to reform the state sector. He also hinted strongly that a referendum on the UK's entry to the Euro was high on his agenda. "We need to make changes so that we are engaged, exerting influence, having the self belief not to turn our back on the world or retreat into isolationism," journalists were told. On Monday, 11th June 2001 Blair began with a large pay rise for ministers, an average of 40%.

Blair's aim is to join the Euro but Gordon

Brown seems still to be against it. The Euro is an issue that keeps the Tories in disarray, so the idea that the Labourites might keep the referendum at bay was canvassed over the weekend following the election. It is clear that Blair is keen to revive the popularity of politics, though he remains keen on a public-private partnership that itself might be unpopular. The public spending promised last year looks set to continue. Blair may feel that after a while he will be able to raise taxes to pay for a bigger role for the state. All in the media now seem to agree that times have changed and the day of tax cuts is dead. Even the Tories blunted their campaign by saying they would match the public spending of Labour.

Low Voter Turn-out

Labour's second term comes with the lowest voter turnout since 1918, when the turnout was 57%. At less than 60%, it is down from 71% in 1997. The full results from England, Wales and Scotland show that the next parliament will see Labour return 413 MPs, the Conservatives 166, Liberal Democrats 52 and other parties 10. Labour has a net loss of just six seats, with one gain for the Tories, and there is a net Liberal Democrat gain of six seats. Elsewhere, the Scottish National Party lost one seat, giving it a total of five, and *Plaid Cymru* lost one and gained another, giving them four. The BBC polled people who decided not to vote. About 77% said they saw no point in voting as it changed nothing, but, promisingly, 65% also said that they did not trust politicians. About half said that the result was a foregone conclusion in any case. Among the 18-24 age group just 38% said they planned to vote. The figure for the 25-34 group was 45%, and for the 35-64 group it was 62%.

The Resignation of William Hague.

Hague decided to resign before the election was fully over. “No man is indispensable. No man is more important than the party,” he said. “It is vital for leaders to listen and parties to change. I believe it is vital the party be given the chance to choose a leader who can build on my work, but also take new initiatives and hopefully command a larger personal following in the country. I’ve therefore decided to step down as leader of the Conservative party when a successor can be elected in the coming months. I will continue until that time to carry out the parliamentary and other duties of the leader of the opposition.” Most of the media thought he had done the right thing. And on Monday 11th June the papers were discussing how abnormal Hague was. Barbara Amiel in the *Daily Telegraph* (p18) faced it head on and argued that appearances do matter. Stephen Glover in the *Daily Mail* held that since 1997, the public has had the idea that the Tories were beyond the pale and not on the same planet as normal people. Both writers said that Mrs Thatcher was not normal either but that the times were different in the 1980s. Of course, pristine liberalism might make Margaret Thatcher look like a card carrying member of the Communist Party. But there was nothing in the campaign against Hague over the last four years that could not have been overturned in one of those weeks that Harold Wilson so aptly described as being “a long time in politics”.

Old Hickory

The tendencies of democracies are, in all things, to mediocrity, since the tastes, knowledge and principles of the majority form the tribunal of appeal.

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