

January 22, 2010

Andreas Whittam Smith: Don't be surprised if a protest movement flowers in Britain

British voters feel hostile towards the political class for a variety of reasons

That a Republican candidate can capture a seemingly super-safe Democratic seat in Massachusetts has resonance for British politics as well as American. As the reasons for the surprising loss of the late Senator Kennedy's citadel are studied, a read-across to our circumstances emerges. While we don't have anything comparable to the American "Tea Party movement" that played such a big role, we share the same disgust with what is perceived as a dysfunctional political system.

The Tea Party movement opposes wasteful government spending, which it sees as being derived from the unnecessary growth in the scope and scale of government. It disapproves of plans to stimulate the economy. It doesn't like high levels of national debt nor does it approve of tax increases. It has been created as if by spontaneous combustion and unites all those who oppose President Obama, who oppose the Democratic majority in Congress, and who reject plans to reform healthcare. The Tea Party movement took its chance in the special senate election in Massachusetts and succeeded magnificently.

In Britain there are also many reasons why voters are hostile to the political class. Heading the list, albeit muted for the moment, is public disgust with MPs' exploitation of expenses.

The two theatres of war, Iraq and Afghanistan, are lumped together as a cause of discontent. Voters see them as one incident, although they are logically distinct in numerous ways. Between them they combine needless loss of life, government deceit, poor planning and absence of vital equipment. Political insiders once believed public opinion would soon "move on" from Iraq. Yet four inquiries in six years have failed to achieve closure; hence the establishment of the Chilcot Inquiry now taking evidence. On this subject, too, the electorate remains extremely angry.

In addition, there is a general sense that the very competence of government, central or local, has deteriorated. In the past few days, for instance, we have learnt that Doncaster children's services department missed 31 chances to intervene in a situation that led to two boys being left critically injured as a result of sustained assaults with a sexual content by two brothers, aged 10 and 11. Doncaster has been subject to seven separate inquiries into the deaths of children since 2004.

Nonetheless, the Tea Party movement in the US has deeper roots than British exasperation with its political establishment. For there is a persistent distrust in the US of all forms of government that, while normally held at the fringe of politics, can come into the centre as it did with stunning effect in Massachusetts on Tuesday. There is no similar root-and-branch opposition here. Nor is there the same hatred of the so-called metropolitan elites that animates American protest.

As David Brooks put it in the New York Times a fortnight ago: "The educated class believes in global warming, so public scepticism about global warming is on the rise. The educated class supports abortion rights, so public opinion

For us the acid test is what makes people take to the streets, a comparatively rare event. Iraq and MPs' expenses have both had that effect. The first led to one of the largest protest marches in London ever seen. The second set off numerous local demonstrations. There are other straws in the wind, too. A Power2010 deliberative poll that took place 10 days ago had, as its second most popular demand, after the strengthening of Parliament, that voters should be allowed to mark their polling papers in a general election with "none of the above". Since then, Power2010 has put the propositions that found favour in the poll to all its supporters, asking them to select the five which they like the best. Some 14,000 people have taken part so far.

So, making all necessary qualifications for the differences between the two situations, can we have a Massachusetts moment? I believe it is possible. At the general election, there may well be shock results in individual constituencies. There is also just time, aided by the internet, for some sort of protest party to emerge that will put up candidates. The Tea Party movement is barely a year old and already it has captured a Senate seat. In politics nowadays, anything is possible. Stand ready for some surprises here.