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978-0-521-10773-0 - The Politics of Economic Decline: Economic Management and Political Behaviour in Britain since 1964

James E. Alt

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JAMES E. ALT

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For Elaine, Rachel, and Adam

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Preface

Over the decade I have spent in Britain, I have come to be struck by the similarities between the British economy and British weather. Neither one seems to perform as well as most people would like, people talk about both almost incessantly, and, of course, no one ever seems to do anything about either. The last is not for want of trying: during the last ten years the British economy has been unprecedentedly managed, or tinkered with, by successive governments. The result has not been a breakthrough into rapid economic growth, but rather a protracted period (with brief exceptions) of increasing unemployment, high rates of inflation, and continuing uncertainty about the balance of payments and the value of the currency. A decade like the one through which Britain has just passed, with its political obsession with economic management on the one hand and economic failure or decline on the other, is an uncommon opportunity to look at the connection between economics and political behaviour.

There are two sides to that connection. One side deals with the behaviour of governments in economic management, and the other with the behaviour of the public as it is affected by, and reacts to, economic change. This volume has more to say about the second, on which in general less research has been done. Essentially, it charts the interconnections between economic policies and developments, popular perceptions and expectations of these economic trends, popular preferences among conflicting economic goals and policies, and a range of electoral considerations like partisanship, support for the political system, and social and political attitudes. In this way it should be of assistance both to economists formulating models which actually involve the perceptions and expectations of individuals and to electoral analysts concerned with the role of the economy in election outcomes. Themes which recur include the importance people attach to economic problems, the realism of popular economic expectations, the absence of a partisan connection in many economic attitudes, and the tendency for economic decline to undercut generous social and economic policy attitudes. This covers a lot of ground, and readers will doubtless notice that some of the themes are better supported than others. I have tried to provide a warning wherever interpretation and speculation take over from analysis, but at the same time tried to present any evidence that might be relevant.

This volume deals with Britain. Three books, Tuftes (1978), Rose and Peters (1978), and Hirsch and Goldthorpe (1978), which will appear before this one,

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provide a comparative context for many of its conclusions, and can well be read in conjunction with it. The importance to this book of the work of Butler and Stokes (1969) – and of their assistance in supplying and permitting free analysis of their election studies – should not be forgotten, despite occasional criticisms of their analyses. I myself will be quite pleased if this book stimulates someone else to continue the study of politics and the economy as much as theirs did me. The support of the Social Science Research Council for all the election surveys – and the cooperation of everyone involved in carrying them out – on which much of this book is based should also be acknowledged. I also acknowledge the support of the Social Science Research Council for my position as Chief Research Officer for the surveys of the 1974 elections, and my gratitude to the Directors of those studies, Bo Särilvik and Ivor Crewe, for the unfettered access I have enjoyed to the data resulting from those surveys. I also appreciate the permission to reproduce and analyse large amounts of data appearing in the *Gallup Political Index*. Some of the data were supplied by the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research. The use of the statistical packages SPSS, TSP, and FAKAD is acknowledged.

For helpful suggestions and encouragement I would like to thank, among others, Michael Parkin, Douglas Hibbs, Ian Budge, and Richard Rose. The intellectual debt I owe to Brian Barry is evident at a number of places. My doctoral examiners, Peter Pulzer of Oxford and William Miller of Strathclyde, scrutinised an earlier version of this book and raised many awkward questions, in spite of which I am very grateful to them. Many thanks also to Anthony King, who read a later version with meticulous care. Two friends in the Economics Department at the University of Essex, Mike Wickens and Alec Chrystal, put up with many of my questions, and read and commented on large portions of the manuscript. I would also like to thank the referees, and the editorial staff of the Cambridge University Press for all their assistance. I appreciate their help enormously, and absolve them, and all the others, from any responsibility for such errors as remain. The manuscript was typed and retyped by Jacqueline Bayes and Desne Harrington, to whom I am abjectly grateful. For reading the manuscript, criticising it, and shouldering the burden of the effects of having done so, I give my humblest thanks to my wife Elaine.

J.E.A.

Wivenhoe, Essex
May 1978