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GAME ON! GREAT ELECTIONS WE HAVE KNOWN

It has become fashionable to regard those interested in 'politics' as rather odd, no longer part of society, when at the same time almost everyone has opinions on 'issues'. I find this distinction a bit surprising, as people interested in politics do not come from a different planet, but are simply your friends and neighbours who care and talk about their communities, their safety, their job opportunities, what things cost, how they travel around, where their children go to school, where their mum goes to hospital, those poor people caught up in that disaster on the news last night – and have a view on what might be made a bit different in each case.

As I have written in the Advertiser before, I have always seen politics as a natural extension of everyday life and current affairs, in which involvement and participation is normal. Elections are simply another part of life. They matter, though some turn out to be more exciting than others, and they have changed a bit in style over the years. Let me run through some of these.

I was too young for 1945, though there will be plenty with memories of a significant landmark in British history, when returning forces and the horrors of war produced an energy for a fresh start. We talk of popularity and celebrity today – who would have thought that the country would put out a man now voted as the greatest Briton of all time, whose will and determination had changed the course of history, Winston Churchill? But the forces of change did for him.

Those years, and the fifties and sixties were of huge public meetings, of hecklers and hilarious put downs, of speeches from the back of wagons outside factories employing thousands of people. Harold Wilson and George Brown, Macmillan, Quintin Hailsham and Jo Grimond.

Slowly but assuredly we saw television begin to replace some of this. Why go to your local draughty village hall to listen to your own candidate, when party leaders were nightly on the TV? Why ask local hopefuls a question, when Robin Day put Jim Callaghan on the spot? As mass factory employment dwindled, leafleting and advertising took over from the face to face contact.

Landmark elections continued however. The cliff-hangers of 1970, and 1974, when I first became engaged by working as a very fresh young Conservative in my marginal home town northern seat – succeeding by just 300 votes in returning our Conservative

MP. 1979, when the country voted for change at the end of the 'winter of discontent', then 1997 when Mr Blair promised much by way of change himself, only to end his time with a sense of disappointment, getting out perhaps just before the going got really sticky and the pigeons came home to roost.

Throughout all this elections continued to change. Polling, which used to be an amusing distraction, assumed greater and greater importance, and have become ever more sophisticated. Who now leads whom? The pollsters or public opinion? And the TV debates of the leaders will change things further, apparently emphasising the importance of individuals still more.

I don't know. The local still matters. Your opinions, privately gathered, will decide my future, and the nations. In most of the elections I have know, the public have got the answer right for the nation. I do feel a wind of change for the country, and, I am sure like all the candidates here, will give you our very best to help your decision and our nations future.