

By Kingsley Amis

# Cheers, Mr. President

LONDON—Whether he likes it or not (and in many ways he probably doesn't much) the President of the United States is also the President of the United Kingdom. I don't just mean that the British look to the Americans for protection against the westward march or gradual encroachment of Communism, though they certainly do; more of this later.

No, the tie felt from this side pulls a good deal closer than that. Anybody who was here when John Kennedy died must have noticed a feeling of shock and grief that was national and yet personal at the same time; and, during Robert Kennedy's last hours, a London paper carried the headline "He's Still Unconscious." No need to say who: the man we were all thinking about.

This doesn't mean that the British are passionately pro-American, though they're more that way inclined than their press might suggest — just as some of us know that Americans are more pro-American than a lot of their press would suggest. And, from here, the workings of the United States electoral system are in general a mystifying bore. Nonetheless, quite a few of your transatlantic cousins (an excellent hackneyed metaphor) are remarkably interested in the outcome Tuesday.

Who's favored by the ordinary bloke, the man in the pub? Mostly, Nixon. He's been around the place a long time: he's been doing the job already without screwing things up too much; he's stopping this Vietnam war and sort of winning it too; he's got a lot of millionaires behind him, true, but it's the same with all the politicians over there, and anyway he's going to get in, isn't he?

What about McGovern? Who? No, he'd be too soft on all this violence and drug-taking, and he wouldn't stand up to the Communists—wasn't there something about his wanting to take his troops home? He'd let everyone down, especially us. And he's got that chap Teddy Kennedy working with him; remember the case? (Few Americans appreciate the damage done their collective reputation abroad, not by



Roger Law

the Chappaquiddick incident in itself, but by Kennedy's subsequent continuance as a public man, as an identity, let alone as an aspirant to leadership.)

The sophisticate, the who reads more than the newspaper front page and sports section, will see matters less crudely and less clearly. Our press, whose ownership is capitalist but whose writers mostly incline to the left—any resemblance there to your press, I wonder—has tended to support McGovern from the outset, often to the point of showing him in a light so favorable as to be unearthly. I mention some examples in the hope of arousing a few jeers or snarls of recognition.

McGovern, we learn from the usually conservative Daily Telegraph, is renowned for civility in a political fight—after all, to go round accusing

Nixon of fascism, greed, corruption, etc., is no more than pointing out the obvious. McGovern appeals to the generosity in the American character, Nixon to the selfishness.

The Democratic convention was a spontaneous festival of sweetness and light, the Republican a carefully staged performance rehearsed down to the last hand-clap. In particular, the McGovern campaign film was called "Brilliant," "beautifully made," projecting him as "a man of honesty, integrity, physical courage and prescience." (Prescience! If he's got that, why hasn't he gone fishing?) The equivalent Nixon film was written off as lying propaganda, slick, cheap and all that.

After rolling around in this warm bath of impending Utopian fulfillment, the fellow who has taken it all seriously gets a sudden dousing of ice-

cold water in the form of a tiny paragraph saying that Nixon's lead is up as much as 29 per cent, down to as little as 24 per cent. What does it mean, such wild divergence between radical opinion and conservative fact? English experience suggests an answer: most people like facts and are conservative, the radical few have the opinions, and the two interests are irreconcilably opposed. McGovern is a man of opinions, or he likes such men, and so he might as well go home right away.

Where do I stand, or can you guess? Oh, I like opinions too, but only while they stay this side of fantasy and ideology. If I had a vote it would go to hard-headed Dick: as it is, I'll be drinking his health on the day.

Kingsley Amis is a British essayist and novelist.