Poll position
You might think that a general election represents manna from heaven for Britain's newspapers. In fact the reverse is almost certainly the case.

Newspapers feel they have a duty to report in detail the activities particularly of the campaign leaders and the minutiae of the opinion polls which appear on virtually a daily basis.

But what newspapers are about are selling more copies, and detailed reports of general election campaigns do not necessarily have that effect. Indeed, they can have a reverse effect.

Robert Worcester, the guru of opinion pollsters, makes some unexpected points in a brilliant new book *Explaining Labour's Landslide*, which is a detailed and fascinating account and analysis of May's general election.

He points out that if newspapers insist on telling their readers what they do not want to hear, they will find they do not remain their readers for long.

"A politically crusading campaign may be morally satisfying but it can dent the circulation, as witness for example the Daily Mirror's anti-Iraq War campaign.

"Most successful editors will be far more concerned to follow their readers than to lead them..."

And, indeed, at the end of the day, there is no guarantee that newspaper readers will be influenced at all by the fare that is offered them.

As Worcester points out: "The influence of the media does not necessarily depend on the audience believing what it sees or reads, let alone being prepared to be directly swayed by the editorial pronouncements of its newspaper of habit."

A sobering thought.

Especially when you read that the *Daily Star* tends to put on readership sharply during general election campaigns by avoiding reporting them altogether if at all possible.

The book also points out that on election night both Lord Hattersley and Kenneth Clarke attacked the exit polls, which in the event turned out to be precisely accurate.

This book should be read by everyone who needs the facts, all the facts, of that campaign at his disposal.

Top of the pop
The late Alan Clark hated it. "Eton was an early introduction to human cruelty, treachery and extreme physical hardship," he wrote.

Many people -- but certainly, not all, I am glad to say -- who went to Eton seem nowadays to want to hide their education under a bushel. I have never been able to fathom why people should be so reluctant to say that they were educated there.

Is it because it is much more trendy these days to proclaim that you were brought up by a single mother in deprived conditions? And why should people be outwardly ashamed because their parents may have made a considerable sacrifice to ensure they had a good education?

"Now, with David Cameron standing for the Conservative leadership there could be a possibility -- if he has survived the first two ballots -- that for the first time for 41 years, the Conservative Party could be led by an Old Etonian.

But what is certain is that the old 'magic circle' of Old Etonians, controlling the Conservative Party, will not recur -- whether David Cameron takes the helm or not.

Those shadowy figures in suits who used to cause Tory leaders to emerge have gone for good.

Chris Moncrieff