

Britain's Conservatives on verge of split

Editorial Board
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How the mighty have fallen. The Conservative Party's 115th Annual Conference in Bournemouth, England this week was a marginalised and fractious affair. After holding power in Britain for almost two decades, prior to the election of the Blair government in 1997, this 'unstoppable electoral machine' and 'natural party of government' has been reduced to an ageing, divided rump and condemned as irrelevant by one of its former leaders.

Labour's victory was won in the Tory marginals as a large section of the middle class deserted the party of Thatcher and Major in droves. The Tories lost 100 rural seats and some 4 million voters. One government minister after another fell amidst cheers and jubilation at their fate. So severe was this rout that the right wing was forced to back William Hague as the new party leader, because its preferred candidate, Michael Portillo, lost his seat.

Opinion polls published last week showed that the party had not recovered any of its lost support. Significant numbers of voters do not know who leads the Tory party or who its front bench members are. The so-called 'middle ground' of electoral politics has been monopolised by Labour; just 5 percent of the British electorate consider themselves right-wing enough to support the Tories.

In contrast to last month's Labour Party conference, business interests largely stayed away from Bournemouth. They did not consider the £7,000 charge to be a worthwhile investment. The Tories were also reduced to grubbing around for some international recognition, but to no avail. Foreign embassies were absent or only sent token representatives. Even the Mexican ambassador, who had attended the Liberal Democrats' conference, did not deign to appear.

An article appearing in Monday's edition of *The Sun* was an indication of just how severely the party's fortunes have changed. This once fanatically Tory tabloid proclaimed Tony Blair Thatcher's true offspring, and portrayed Hague as Monty Python's dead 'Norwegian Blue' parrot. Its front-page headline screamed that the Tories were an 'ex-party', and that the cause of death was 'suicide'.

Despite the sensationalism, the broader political considerations shaping the attitude of the Murdoch press are serious. The denunciation was occasioned by the actions of the pro-European wing of the party against the Hague leadership. Prior to the conference, Hague had conducted a membership ballot to determine the party's line on European Monetary Union (EMU), effective from next year. Hague has ruled out Britain's membership for at least 10 years. A membership turn-out of nearly 60 percent produced an overwhelming mandate for his position--84.4 percent in favour.

Hague's intention was to silence his pro-European critics led by former ministers Michael Heseltine, Kenneth Clarke and ex-prime minister Edward Heath. This was to be reinforced by the imposition of a 'loyalty pledge' to be signed by each candidate endorsing the new orthodoxy. New Tory chairman Michael Ancram told the leading dissidents to shut up, and warned that if they rocked the boat they would find themselves cast as pariahs. Hague described his opponents as 'Big Beasts' who, to use a Texas saying, had 'big hats, but no cattle'.

In response, Heseltine, Clarke and Heath queued up to inform the press they would not be silenced. The image of Heath glowering behind Thatcher's back, while she applauded condemnations of the pro-Europeans as 'yesterday's men', epitomised the event. Fringe meetings became a battleground between the warring camps. The pro-Europeans complained of a 'right-wing' agenda, which would make the Tories unelectable. Ruling out adoption of the euro did not make economic sense and would jeopardise Britain's interests, they argued. Thatcherite right-wing support for Hague was a poisoned chalice that would only result in his replacement by Portillo at the earliest opportunity. Heseltine cautioned, 'Already the Eurosceptics are moving the goalposts. Mr Portillo is self-evidently now putting himself at the head of a campaign, called The Nation State, in order to move the Conservative Party to a position of 'never'.'

Rumours abounded of Heseltine and Clarke joining New Labour or forming a new party. Clarke has been

involved in secret discussions with Labour representatives on a pro-European, cross-party campaign in next year's elections, and during the conference Blair appointed Heseltine to lead a Chinese-British Forum. One Tory MEP defected during the conference to the Liberal Democrats.

Whatever Hague's personal fate, he nevertheless succeeded in establishing the right wing's near-total control of the party. And the conference proper did set out the direction in which he intends to lead it.

In a series of rabble-rousing speeches, MPs and shadow ministers demanded further attacks on welfare, the privatisation of health and education, stiffer sentencing and a clampdown on immigration. Striding up and down the platform, Ann Widdecombe, shadow Health Secretary, demanded that the barriers between private health care and the National Health Service be lifted, with tax breaks for those opting out of the state-run system. The public must accept that the rationing of health care 'is a reality', and the Tories must lead the way, she insisted. Delegates bayed their approval.

Sir Norman Fowler, shadow Home Secretary, said Labour was wasting money on illegal asylum-seekers whilst cutting down on police officers. The vast majority of asylum seekers 'are bogus', he said. Fowler also demanded strengthening unlimited sentences for certain crimes. Roger Gale MP said there could be social unrest if immigration were not curbed. He complained of seeing 'our social security system, hospitals and schools used by those whose chief ambition is to spin it hard at the taxpayers' expense while others in greater need have to go without.'

In his speech, Hague presented the Tories as the true party of 'British character' and 'instinct', mentioning the country more than 80 times. He invoked previous Tory leaders such as Wilberforce, Churchill and Thatcher who had fought, and won, the battle against slavery, foreign tyranny and the trade unions respectively.

Upholding 'the previous traditions and freedoms of our island home', he attacked Labour's devolution programme for threatening the 'integrity of the United Kingdom'. In the face of these constitutional changes the Tories would have to demand some of their own. Playing to nationalist sentiment in England he said there should either be restrictions on the voting rights of Scottish MP's in Westminster or the creation of an English parliament.

Hague accused Blair of betrayal by retreating on welfare reform. Labour used Tory language, but it was squandering the 'golden legacy' of Tory rule. The 'Berlin

wall' between the private and public sectors must be torn down, he said, calling for 'small government and big citizens'. Regulations on business must be lifted further and Labour's plans for limited union recognition and a minimum wage shelved. The vision of a 'closely integrated federal Europe' was one thing at the end of the Second World War, but 'does not meet the needs of our continent today', he continued, arguing that 'the British Way is to be in Europe, but not run by Europe'.

The Tory party is stuck between a rock and a hard place. It is broadly despised, while its traditional support has deserted to New Labour--at least partially as a result of Blair having stolen many of its policies. Big business considers the Tories ineffectual. One millionaire, Paul Sykes, has announced the creation of his own anti-European party to run in next May's European elections.

The Tories' response is an attempt to once again put 'clear blue water' between them and Labour, offering Newt Gingrich-style rants against 'big government' mixed with equal measures of xenophobia and chauvinism. They are staking their all on the failure of EMU and the expectation of a backlash against Europe's social democratic governments. Leading right winger Alan Clarke said that the euro would 'go belly up' in two or three years' time and the party must be in a position to 'take advantage of this'.

There can be few occasions in history when the traditional party of the British bourgeoisie has pinned its hopes so fervently on the development of an economic catastrophe. Reversing Madame de Pompadour's famous statement, 'Après moi, le deluge', the Tories' perspective can be summed up as 'After the deluge, us!'



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