

Britain: Second vote by Conservative MPs to choose new party leader

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Conservative MPs are to hold a second ballot today to choose two candidates for party leader to be put to an all-member vote, after Tuesday's poll ended too close to call.

Five candidates are in the race—Michael Portillo, Iain Duncan-Smith, Kenneth Clarke, Michael Ancram and David Davies. The election was triggered by William Hague's sudden resignation as leader, immediately following the June 7 general election, in which his party failed to significantly revive its support.

Under revised rules for the election procedure, the party's 166 Westminster MPs vote first to choose two contenders, who are then put to a vote by more than 300,000 Conservative members in a postal ballot—the result of which is to be declared on September 12.

Tuesday's confused result is indicative of the state of the party, which is deeply demoralised by its second electoral defeat and is riven with differences concerning the Tory's future orientation and Britain's adoption of the European single currency the euro.

Portillo had been expected to easily head the field after the first ballot, but whilst he came out ahead, his 49 votes were below the numbers he had previously declared were supporting him. Portillo had been the first to announce he would stand after Hague's resignation, but his candidacy has polarised the party. A former hard-line Thatcherite, following his electoral drubbing by a Labour unknown in the 1997 general election, Portillo has tried to project a more "compassionate" image. By the time of his return to parliament in 1999 in the safe Tory seat of Kensington and Chelsea, he had quit the rightwing *No Turning Back* group, been disavowed by Thatcher as "that Spaniard" and had admitted to having homosexual experiences as a young man.

Portillo has sought to present himself as a moderate

who will listen to both wings of the party. Although opposed to British adoption of the euro, he describes himself as a "pro-European in the wider sense" and has stressed the need for the Conservatives to win support from among all ethnic groups, genders and sexual orientations. In a speech in Baroness Thatcher's former Finchley constituency, he said that the Conservative Party's revival depended on the next leader being able to appeal to the next generation.

This has earned Portillo the enmity of the Thatcherite right. The politician viewed by many as closest to Baroness Thatcher herself, Lord Norman Tebbit, attacked Portillo in 1999 at the time of his attempt to secure the Tory nomination for the Kensington and Chelsea by-election. In a letter to the *Spectator* magazine, Tebbit accused Portillo of failing to tell "the complete truth" when he said he had "homosexual experiences" in the past, when "we now know his deviance continued for almost a decade". As soon as the current leadership election was called, Tebbit praised his successor as MP for Chingford, Iain Duncan-Smith, as a "remarkably normal family man with children", who has "done something outside politics".

Duncan-Smith, who polled second place with 39 votes, is an unashamed hard-liner who is rumoured to be Thatcher's personal choice. A monetarist, who is anti-abortion and pro-capital punishment, during the campaign he has also put the hardest line against the adoption of the euro. He and his campaign manager Bernard Jenkin are the two current shadow cabinet members to have voted against the Maastricht Treaty during John Major's leadership of the party, and he has ruled out Britain ever joining the euro should he become prime minister.

Ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke came in third with 36 votes. Although part of the

Thatcher cabinet during the 1980s, Clarke is chairman of the Tory Reform group, the One Nation caucus, and describes himself as a “classical liberal”. He is strongly pro-euro and joined Prime Minister Blair on a public platform to launch the pro-single currency *Britain in Europe* campaign.

This, together with his vocal opposition to the strident, rightwing populist campaigns conducted by Hague, has made him extremely unpopular amongst many MPs. According to the pro-Thatcher *Telegraph*, which conducted a survey of 400 Tory members, “many respondents said they would leave the party if Mr Clarke were elected”. The survey, which the *Telegraph* admitted was open to manipulation, showed a rightwing bias in the party membership—the average age of which is 65. The most popular choices in the survey for leader were Iain Duncan-Smith and David Davies, who tied jointly in fourth place with former party chairman Michael Ancram with 21 votes.

Davies, another Thatcher favourite, has a strong following amongst Tory MPs. The son of a single mother who lived for a time on a London council estate, he is considered the right’s epitome of the “self-made man”. His lack of any profile amongst the broader public seems to have counted against him in this ballot, though there is no doubt he is considered future Tory leadership material.

Ancram, whilst highly regarded within the party, was never considered the man who could lead the Tories to victory. He had deliberately positioned himself as the “unity” candidate, competing with Clarke for the centre vote and avoiding any divisive position on the euro. It is this, as much as his aristocratic background—he is the heir of the 12th marquess of Lothian, which appears to have ruled him out of the running.

Since Thatcher was ousted as Tory leader in 1990, the party has been forced to rely on two caretaker figures—John Major and William Hague—in an effort to avoid a damaging split. If anything can be drawn from the first, failed ballot, it is that the Conservative Party is not so inclined to make any compromises between its two halves.

Whilst Portillo is still considered favourite to reach the short-list, his run is by no means as smooth as some had predicted. Mired in allegations of financial irregularity during his time in government, which he has rejected as a Labour smear, he is one of the least

favoured in the party membership, where he is regarded as, at best, hypocritical and two-faced. Although Clarke came in as the most popular Tory “big hitter” in a poll of the party membership in 1997, his pro-euro views, which are out of step with 85 percent of the party, and low standing amongst MPs could be enough to keep him off the final list presented for a party vote.

Commentators forecast several weeks of horse-trading, as MPs leaving the weaker candidates are feted by the three front-runners. One particular scenario gaining ground is that the Davies/Ancram votes will find their way to Duncan-Smith, enabling him to emerge as the frontrunner and pip Portillo at the post.



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