Britain: Leadership contest threatens to split Conservative Party

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A spectacular reversal of fortunes in the ballot of Conservative MPs for party leader has seen former Chancellor Kenneth Clarke emerge from behind to win first place on the shortlist that will now be subject to a vote of all local party members. With the backing of 59 of his Westminster colleagues, Clarke's vote increased by 20 over the previous ballot.

In contrast, former Defence Secretary Michael Portillo, who had been considered the strongest candidate, ended in third place with 53 votes (up by just three) ending his leadership bid. Conservative Party members will now decide the future leader of their party in a secret ballot between Clarke and Iain Duncan Smith, who received 54 votes, up 12. The outcome will be announced on September 12.

Immediately after the result of the MPs' ballot was announced, Portillo said he was quitting the political scene. "I really do not think it is an option for me to serve in a shadow administration", he said. "Apart from anything else I would just get in their way."

Portillo's fate reflects the extreme factionalism that has gripped the Conservatives since William Hague resigned as leader following the party's second general election defeat in June this year. Portillo had sought to establish his credentials as the man who could make the Tories electable once again. A former rightwing hardliner and personal favourite of Margaret Thatcher, Portillo was considered a shoe-in as party leader in 1997, had he not lost his parliamentary seat in that year's general election, forcing the Tory right to line up behind William Hague. Out of office, he began to adopt a more liberal approach on issues of sexual orientation and other "lifestyle" questions. Above all, he had also sought to present himself as a unity candidate, which meant taking the heat out of the issue of Britain's adoption of the single European currency, the euro. The question of Europe, and particularly the euro, has divided the Tory Party with disastrous results over the last decade.

Although a Euro-sceptic, Portillo promised to represent the interests of both wings of the party and insisted that MPs should not mistake their own fanaticism over the euro issue with the outlook of those voters whose support it needed to woo. Hague had given the slogan "Save the Pound" centre-stage in the general election earlier this year, but failed to win popular support despite opinion polls showing the majority of people opposed to the euro.

Prime Minister's Blair's pledge to put Britain's adoption of the euro to a referendum would decide the issue once and for all, Portillo said, and would enable the Tory party to concentrate on developing the type of radical policies needed to defeat Labour. The decision facing the party was whether to "adapt or die", he warned.

For his part, Clarke, who is pro-euro, also appealed to what was once considered a vital element of conservatism and the secret of its longevity—its ability to remould itself in line with political and social changes. Clarke specifically referred to this tradition in his victory speech Wednesday. "My background is certainly more of a reforming Tory. It is two wings of the party that have coexisted as long as I have been in politics. What the electorate has to decide is which emphasis they are going to go for," he said.

Duncan Smith, who has not held any government office, hails from the Thatcherite right and is a committed opponent of the euro.

Ironically the fate of the loser, Portillo, and the victor, Clarke, reflects the fact that a sizeable section of the Tories have no intention of adapting, and are not particularly interested in party unity. Indeed, there is a section of the Conservatives that is far more concerned about stamping its uncontested right wing imprimatur on party policy.

In the days leading up to the final MPs' ballot, Portillo

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was the focus of a dirty tricks campaign by the Thatcherite wing of the party. Last Sunday evening, Channel 4 television screened the "video diary" of Amanda Platell, Hague's press secretary, filmed secretly during the general election campaign. Platell claimed that Portillo aides had deliberately tried to undermine Hague's leadership, charging Francis Maude, Tory shadow foreign secretary and Portillo's campaign manager, with briefing the press against Hague. The accusations came as the Portillo camp was accused of falsely claiming to have Thatcher's backing, which was met with a venomous denial the following day by Thatcher. Portillo's supporters refuted that they had been responsible for the original article claiming Thatcher's endorsement, which appeared in the anti-Portillo *Sunday Telegraph*, claiming that Duncan Smith's supporters had planted the story.

Finally, the die was cast for Portillo by Michael Ancram's surprise announcement on Monday, that he would be backing Duncan Smith. Ancram had stood down as Tory Party chairman to run in the leadership contest as a moderate, "unity" candidate. In his statement, Ancram said that Duncan Smith was the candidate best able to unite the party and "reassert our core Conservative principles". Any changes to party line "should not be so radical as to risk undermining the unity of the party both in Parliament and the country at large", he continued.

According to media commentators, Clarke's leading position was also ultimately determined by those MPs determined to stop Portillo at any costs. The *Times* newspaper reported that in addition to his longstanding allies, Clarke picked up the backing of "pragmatic Euro-sceptics", former Portillo supporters who were abandoning ship and "natural Iain Duncan Smith supporters who were passionately opposed to Michael Portillo's socially liberal campaign and voted tactically to defeat the Shadow Chancellor".

Notwithstanding Clarke's own expressed desire for unity, Portillo's defeat leaves the membership to chose between representatives of the two opposing wings of the party. Such a contest has a logic of its own. The *Times*, July 18, spoke despairingly of "crippling divisions" within the party, as the leadership contest was reduced to the "two most polarising of the contenders". Also in the *Times*, Simon Jenkins opined that for Tory MPs to "throw out the one candidate known to frighten the enemy, Mr Portillo, is daft. This is the act not of a great party but of a defeatist, introspective Westminster clique... the party is clearly sick".

The most hardline opponents of euro membership, said to number 30 MPs, have threatened to split if Clarke wins. Two Tory MPs and a peer—Sir Teddy Taylor, Dr Julian Lewis and Lord Pearson of Rannoch—have warned publicly that a Clarke victory poses a threat to the party's future.

Conversely, a victory for the right could force a split by the other side of the party divide. Following the vote, Portillo's chief supporters Francis Maude and Archie Norman told friends that they intended to quit the shadow cabinet. In another ominous sign, Tory vice-chairman Steven Norris threatened to leave the party if Duncan Smith won the leadership. "My democratic right is to look across all the parties and see which of them most reflects the views that I hold," Norris said.

Following Thatcher's fall from power in 1990, the Tory party was placed on a back foot and many, including Portillo, drew back from uncritically regurgitating the Thatcherite gospel that "greed is good".

Now the right wing has had enough of this enforced tactical retreat. Their ever-more bellicose behaviour, manifested most acutely in their willingness to risk destroying their own party, has its roots in the tremendous social polarisation that has developed within Britain. Figures such as Duncan Smith, like his heroine Thatcher, represent a grasping social layer of the *nouveaux riches* who are completely indifferent to the fate of working people and hostile to any restrictions on the accumulation of vast wealth by themselves and their supporters within the business world.

Some of these forces may delude themselves that it is possible to secure a popular vote for their right wing nostrums—if only they were not hamstrung by the liberal do-gooders within the party who balk at the possible impact of more barbaric social policies and overt appeals to racism and xenophobia. But others have a barely disguised contempt for parliamentary niceties. It is this layer, which, under Thatcher's leadership, arrogantly paraded their support for former Chilean dictator and mass murderer Augusto Pinochet last year as he faced extradition on charges of human rights abuses.

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