

Britain: Conservative MPs vote in final ballot for party leadership candidates

Julie Hyland
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The contest for leadership of Britain's Conservative Party is heating up, with just three names on the shortlist for next Tuesday's ballot of Tory MPs. The top two candidates will then go forward to a postal vote of the party membership.

Thursday's second round of voting by the 166 Conservative MPs saw former party chairman Michael Ancram knocked out of the contest after finishing in fifth place, with just 17 votes, down from 21. Michael Portillo held on to first place, but with just 50 votes, only one up on Tuesday's first ballot, he does not even enjoy the backing of a third of his fellow Tory MPs. In the run-up to the contest, after the surprise resignation of William Hague following the party's disastrous showing in the general election, Portillo had sought to establish a more "socially liberal" course for the Conservative Party. Whilst cautioning against Britain adopting the European single currency, the euro, he promised to pursue a more "internationalist" and "forward looking" foreign policy course as leader. The former cabinet minister also indicated he would seek to overturn Clause 28, legislation introduced under Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher which bars the discussion of homosexuality in schools, and that he welcomed a discussion on the legalisation of cannabis.

Portillo had argued that such an "inclusive" approach was necessary if the Tories are to reverse their declining electoral fortunes and reach out to a younger generation of supporters. But his stance brought a backlash from many Conservative activists, who regard his new-found liberalism, and his confession to having had homosexual experiences in his youth, as beyond the pale.

The pro-Thatcherite *Daily Mail* said its poll of 300 local Conservative association activists suggested that

58 percent of them did not want Portillo as leader. In a similar vein, the *Telegraph* warned against backing any candidates, including Portillo, who were associated with John Major's premiership—considered a disaster by right wing Tories.

Writing in the *Telegraph* on July 12, Portillo sought to re-establish his ring wing credentials. Under the headline "I stand by core Tory values", he stressed that it was the "exciting Tory radicalism of Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher" that had attracted him to the party and "the same beliefs drive me forward today". He rejected claims that the Conservatives needed to follow the model of the Labour Party in the 1980s, which had ditched its traditional commitment to social reformism in order to become electable. Whilst the Tories had made some mistakes during their 18 years in office, they had also "made a contribution to forging new policies for the modern age", he wrote.

Nonetheless, change was needed he continued. "Imagine that we were a business which, in the course of six years, had seen its customers decline from 14 million to eight million. We all know what Margaret Thatcher taught such businesses. However comfortable the old ways might be, it is necessary to adapt or die."

His appeal to "traditional values" did not have the desired effect and Portillo has admitted that he will have to encourage people to support him "against their instincts" if he is to win. John Major has thrown his support behind Portillo, and is working to persuade MPs to back him in an effort to stop Iain Duncan-Smith, who finished second in Thursday's vote with 42 votes.

Duncan-Smith is the Thatcherite favourite, and increased his vote by three in Thursday's ballot. His early strong showing led to supporters of Portillo and former chancellor Kenneth Clarke, who finished third

on Thursday, warning the party that a Duncan-Smith victory would spell “death for the party.”

“Re-heated Thatcherism is the last thing we need,” one senior party member was quoted as saying. Whilst Duncan-Smith “looks and sounds like a typical Tory”, one columnist in the *Times* wrote, “This is precisely the problem with his candidacy”.

There seems little mood for compromise within the Tory party, however. On Friday, David Davies, a little-known right-winger who finished fourth in Tuesday’s ballot with 18 votes, suddenly announced he was withdrawing from the race and would be backing Duncan-Smith. The decision was almost certainly made in consultation with the Duncan-Smith camp, and is aimed at ensuring that an unreconstructed Thatcherite ends up on the final shortlist of two, which will then be subject to a secret postal ballot of the party’s more than 300,000 members. Duncan-Smith supporters believe that if their man is able to get through to the last round, he will turn out to be the favourite of the members, whose average age is 65 and are mostly die-hard Thatcher fanatics. The final result will be announced on September 12.

More moderate Tory MPs will have to decide in next Tuesday’s eliminator ballot, which of the so-called “big beasts” to back—Portillo or Clarke—in order to stop Duncan-Smith. Clarke, who is pro-euro, also increased his vote by three on Thursday to 39 votes, but he is thought the least likely to remain in the final round membership vote.

The *Times* even reported that some Tories were speculating that Portillo might not make it to the final round if he attracted adverse publicity over the weekend. Earlier, Portillo had complained that he had been subjected to a “major onslaught” by the Tory right, aimed at undermining his campaign, accusing the pro-Labour *Guardian* newspaper of making “smear” allegations of financial impropriety.



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