Britain: Links with fascists exposed during Conservative Party leadership contest

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As balloting in the Conservative Party leadership contest closes, the jury remains out on which of the two candidates, former Chancellor Kenneth Clarke or Iain Duncan Smith, will be pronounced the winner on September 12.

The degree of uncertainty is remarkable given the fact that the last weeks of the leadership campaign were dominated by revelations concerning links between Duncan Smith supporters and the fascist British National Party (BNP).

Duncan Smith was forced to sack Edgar Griffin, a vice-president of his campaign team, after he was caught out answering telephone inquiries for the BNP. Shortly thereafter Griffin, 79, was expelled from the Conservative Party, after it was revealed he had answered a telephone call at his home with the words "British National Party, good afternoon".

The telephone call was a sting operation by the pro-Labour tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*, aimed at exposing Duncan Smith as the preferred choice of right wing extremists.

Griffin's links to the BNP were hardly secretive. His son, Nick, leads the BNP, whose demands include the "repatriation" of black people from Britain. Griffin junior played a prominent role this summer stirring up racial tensions in several deprived inner-city areas in northern England by organising provocative BNP campaigns in mainly Asian areas. In June, the BNP leader had won 16.4 percent of the vote in Oldham West in the general election.

Griffin senior's wife, Jean, is also a member of the BNP and stood against Duncan Smith in the recent election. Edgar Griffin, who describes himself as a "life-long Conservative activist", protested his expulsion from the campaign team and the party, claiming that he had only answered the call as a favour to his wife, who is the BNP's "inquiries secretary".

Clarke immediately used Griffin's exposure as proof that a victory for Duncan Smith, a supporter of former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and an opponent of Britain joining the European single currency, the euro, would give the green light to the party's "lunatic fringe". In recent weeks, Duncan Smith has spelled out his intention to launch savage inroads against public spending—slashing it from the current 40 percent of GDP (already a historic low) to 35 percent—step up the privatisation of education and health, and clamp down still further on immigration.

Clarke's statement was underlined by further revelations of links between Duncan Smith supporters and fascists. Andrew Hunter MP had to be removed from Duncan Smith's official supporters list after it was revealed that he had been involved in talks with Stuart Millson, a former BNP member and open fascist, during the leadership campaign. Millson had also campaigned for Hunter in his Basingstoke constituency at the general election. According to the *Independent* newspaper Hunter, who is deputy chairman of the Monday Club, which supports the voluntary repatriation of immigrants, said that he had been "delighted" with Millson's support.

The BNP openly boasts of its connections with the Conservative Party on its website. In an appeal to "the limited number of our members" who have dual membership of both parties, a BNP statement called for a vote for Duncan Smith. His election, the statement explained, would stir up Tory divisions still further and provide new recruits from its ranks for the BNP. One such dual member was revealed to be Cresswell Rice, 72, a paid-up Conservative member of 15 years who proudly announced he had joined the BNP last year.

Instead of shaking Duncan Smith's campaign, however, reports indicate that his support amongst some 330,000 Conservative Party members—whose votes will decide the contest—has held up, and, if anything, become firmer. So

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much so that Duncan Smith felt able to go on the offensive against Clarke, mockingly asking the former chancellor why he had only "just discovered" the presence of right wing extremists within his own party. "These people have been in the party under Ken, and under Major", he said. "Why didn't Ken do something about them then?" he asked.

By the weekend, press coverage of Tory-fascist connections had all but disappeared, the *Mirror's* exposé having failed to derail the Duncan Smith campaign, as intended. However, this failure itself is of major political significance in defining the political character of the Tory Party. It points to the fact that a section of the ruling class are consciously working to create a fascist-type party out of the putrefying corpse of British Conservativism.

When the *Daily Mirror* questioned him, Griffin gave his own estimation of the political physiognomy of the modern Tory Party. Asked whether Duncan Smith was "more extreme right wing than [former Tory leader] William Hague?" Griffin replied in the affirmative, adding, "There's nothing wrong with that. It's simply the extreme right wing of the Tory Party... Of this 318,000 [members] most of them are extreme right wing". Griffin went on to assert that the BNP's views were "shared by a large majority of people in the Conservatives".

Just how accurate Griffin's estimation of the balance of political forces within the Conservative Party is, remains to be seen. But Duncan Smith's campaign shows that the Tory Party has become increasingly dependent upon extreme right wing elements, who now form a significant portion of its active base. Its average member is 65 years old—mainly wealthy retirees concentrated in the rural Shires.

The only time that Duncan Smith appeared to conflict with his supporters was not over the BNP, but when he was seen to "wobble" over his attitude towards "Section 28", a local government provision introduced by Thatcher that prohibits any positive depiction of homosexuality within schools. Questioned on the clause, Duncan Smith tried to weigh his words carefully—implying that a possible difficulty with the legislation was that it created the impression that gays alone were being "stigmatised". However, Duncan Smith could hardly be said to have taken a more enlightened stance, given that his answer was to indicate that other types of "deviant" sexual behaviour might be added to the list. But he still aroused Tory anger for allowing himself to be put on the back foot by "bleeding heart liberals". Within hours, Duncan Smith had issued a statement clarifying that he would "never" repeal Section 28.

Throughout the leadership contest, the media have got the Tory Party wrong at every turn. Only a few months ago, they had confidently been predicting a win for Michael Portillo—considered the favourite due to the combination of his origins on the party's right and his more recent liberal stance on certain issues, including homosexuality and soft drugs.

Instead, Portillo's campaign was quickly finished off, as the deep divisions within the party made no compromise possible. The right wing turned against Portillo and adopted Duncan Smith who, whilst a nonentity nationally, has more appealing credentials—he voted against the Major government on Europe, is pro-hanging, pro-corporal punishment, has a military background and wants to privatise everything in sight.

In contrast to Clarke, the Thatcherite right regard the leadership contest not as an occasion to reposition the party to challenge Prime Minister Blair for the so-called "centre ground", but to push the political agenda even further to the right. A win by Duncan Smith would provide the opportunity to refashion the Conservative Party as the voice of populist-style nationalism, along the lines of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's "Forza Italia", which rules in coalition with the neo-fascist National Alliance and the separatist Northern League. (Thatcher herself had publicly campaigned for the right wing bloc during Italy's general election campaign in May.) For these layers, political association with right wing extremists in the BNP is not anathema; it is essential if disillusioned Tories who have gravitated towards the BNP and formations such as the anti-European UK Independence Party and the Countryside Alliance are to be won back to the party.

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