

Britain's Conservatives riven by factional infighting

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There were at least two occasions during Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith's conference speech last week when it was impossible not to laugh.

The first was when he told the assembled delegates—and more importantly the Tories' friends in the media, “When I say a thing, I mean it. When I set myself a task, I do it. When I settle on a course, I stick to it. Do not underestimate the determination of a quiet man.”

IDS (as he is known) is widely regarded as a political nonentity and his efforts at self-promotion did little to dispel this notion. Never the most forceful speaker, at this point he became barely audible. Far from coming over as quietly determined, he appeared somewhat strange, even psychotic.

There followed his proud boast at the conclusion of his speech, “So go out there and tell the world ... the Conservatives are back.”

The problem for Duncan Smith is that the Conservatives aren't back at all but still teetering on the edge of a political abyss. The delegates in the hall who gave him a dutiful seven-minute standing ovation certainly know this. The conference that culminated with Duncan Smith's speech was an attempt to finally bury the past and effectively re-launch the party after disastrous showings at successive general elections. It was aimed at exorcising the ghost of Margaret Hilda Thatcher, venerated by the Tory Party as the greatest prime minister since Winston Churchill but so hated by most of the British population as to render her political heirs unelectable.

After the Tories were drubbed in the 1997 election, the common view amongst the Conservatives was that Blair's New Labour had successfully stolen their political clothes on most substantive questions of policy, apart that is from his pro-European Union heresy. But there was no agreement on what should be done about it. There was an attempt by some to move towards what now passed for the political centre-ground—led by ex-Thatcher stalwart Michael Portillo on one hand and the leading pro-European Kenneth Clarke. For their part, the Thatcherite hardliners favoured pushing to the right. The task was not to compete on ground already won, but to put “clear blue water” between New Labour and the Tories.

Portillo's career was left in ruins after he was forced to admit to homosexual experiences as a student. In the leadership contest that followed the resignation of the last Tory Prime Minister John Major, Clarke was defeated by Thatcher loyalist William Hague.

Hague's tenure as leader only proved how a direct association with Thatcher's legacy was an albatross around the party's neck. Hague quit after leading the party to its second defeat in May 2001 campaigning on familiar Thatcherite themes: law and order, anti-asylum, anti-Europe and euro currency.

It appeared that the Tories had learned nothing from this latest

debacle, when they chose another Thatcher loyalist Iain Duncan Smith, as Hague's replacement. He has hardly shone during his year at the party helm. In a recent editorial the pro-Labour *Guardian* noted that “only 8.4 million people voted Conservative in 2001, the party's lowest total in modern times, lower even than Labour's vote at its 1983 nadir under Michael Foot. Party membership, about which Central Office is legendarily secretive, is down from 1.2 million 20 years ago to fewer than 330,000 today. Even more devastatingly, the average age of Tories is over 65; the typical Tory today is retired. Not surprisingly, only 18 percent of young voters support the Tories.”

As for Duncan Smith's performance so far, “Almost half of Tory chairmen, according to a survey last week, think Mr Duncan Smith has failed in his first year as leader. Half of the party thinks there is no clear direction. The bulk of Tories seem to have written off their hopes of winning the next election. The mood of dismay teeters on the brink of despair.”

Under these circumstances the Thatcherite wing of the party has suffered a setback while those arguing for change have been strengthened. Even some of the party's old lags such as Michael Howard have been convinced that a makeover was necessary. This provided the background for this year's conference.

The keynote speech was delivered by party chairwoman Theresa May, who was first elected to parliament in 1997 and has no connection with the Thatcher and Major years. Her remarks were cast as a warning to the party to change its ways.

After doffing her hat to the “noble calling” of the “best politicians” such as Churchill and Thatcher, she got into her stride. The Tories had “to face a deeply uncomfortable truth.... The public are losing faith in politics.”

She continued, “the Conservative party, its principles, its people, have been let down in recent years by the failure of some to represent faithfully the best in Conservatism.... Twice we went to the country unchanged, unrepentant, just plain unattractive. And twice we got slaughtered. Soldiering on to the next election without radical, fundamental change is simply not an option.

“Our base is too narrow and so, occasionally, are our sympathies. You know what some people call us—the nasty party.... We need to reach out to all areas of our society.”

One could only imagine the seething anger of the Tory old guard, but worse was to come. The man they had chosen to bear the Thatcherite standard into the new millennium was to close proceedings by mouthing a speech drafted for him by their opponents and which did everything but “name names”.

“Yes, it is right to be proud of the past, but it is wrong to try and live in the past”, Duncan Smith said. “This country has moved on and so

must we.... That is precisely what Theresa May said on Monday. What an excellent speech.... The party that I lead will live in the present and prepare for the future. So to those who want to re-fight the battles of the past, and to those who want to live in the past, I simply say this: you stay in the past; we are moving on.”

Stirring stuff, even if delivered by a man with all the charm and charisma of a block of wood. But the Tories cannot jump out of their own skin.

Prior to the conference, the party published its 52-page dossier spelling out 25 proposals promised by spokesman during the conference. Amongst the policies announced are measures near to every Thatcherite heart—measures to promote private education, private foundation hospitals, private health insurance, New York-style zero tolerance policing, more school exclusions and extending the “right to buy” to tenants of housing associations.

Apart from a few cosmetic policy shifts, the Tories are incapable of breaking from the free-market agenda set down during the 1980s. And even a tentative shift in emphasis has unleashed a counter-blast from the Thatcherites.

At the start of conference, former leadership contender John Redwood spoke at a fringe meeting calling for the party to renegotiate the terms of Britain’s membership of the European Union and warning that in trying “to win new voters on new issues” the party must not “lose old voters on old issues”. He called Kenneth Clarke part of “a federalist majority that would give away everything”. At the same meeting, the co-chairman of the anti-EU Bruges group Michael Shrimpton described pro-Europeans in the party as “the enemy”.

Writing in response to May’s speech on October 10, the *Sun* newspaper’s political editor Trevor Kavanagh insisted, “Now let’s stop the apologies”.

“Iain Duncan Smith should close this week’s conference with a rousing summary of what the Tories have done for Britain,” he insisted. Which was “to set the economy free,” “taking on union bandits”, axing the “dead hand of state control” through privatisation, cutting taxes and abolishing labour protection and thus turning “Britain into a haven for foreign investors” ... and of course selling off council houses through the “right to buy” legislation.

The depth of factional infighting taking place beneath the united front projected at conference was made clear by Thatcher’s old political bruiser Lord Norman Tebbit in the *Telegraph*. He accused what he called “the Movement” of trying to get him expelled from the Conservative Party and that this in turn was part of a plot to replace Duncan Smith with a pro-European moderniser: “They know that if they could persuade Iain Duncan Smith to expel me from the party that it would be the end of his leadership,” said Tebbit. “He’d lose several members of his Shadow Cabinet, he’d lose a number of frontbench spokesmen in the Lords and I can’t vouch for what would happen in Chingford [Tebbit’s old constituency, which Duncan Smith inherited].”

He added, “The Movement is made up of two groups that have coalesced including people at Central Office, MPs and journalists. They share the view that the Conservative Party needs a confrontation between traditionalists (nasties) and modernisers (nice) akin to Labour’s Clause Four battle.”

Tebbit was quickly branded as “paranoid” by his unnamed opponents, while an ally responded by declaring, “This is just typical of those people. It just builds the civil war.”

There is every likelihood that the latest stage of the civil war will lead not to the reformation of the Tory Party, but rather its

disintegration. And this has major political implications. The Tory Party is the traditional political vehicle of the British bourgeoisie. Yet such was the level of popular hostility towards it after 18 years in office that the dominant sections of the ruling class were persuaded of the necessity to back New Labour. This offered little more than a temporary reprieve, however. Blair ditched Labour’s social reformist programme and adopted Thatcher’s free-market nostrums. He carried on the Tories’ cuts in welfare provisions, privatisation’s and tax cuts for business, but sought to reassure millions of working class and middle class people that there would be a break from the excesses of the 1980s. Labour could not have won power simply by stealing the Tories’ clothes. It had to convince the electorate that there would be an amelioration of the sharp polarisation between rich and poor that had torn British society apart and the rampant speculation that had ended in financial hardship for the vast majority.

Sections of the Tories may now be latter-day converts to a “compassionate Conservatism” that partially mirrors Blair’s own Third Way rhetoric, but they have missed the boat. For Blair was not successful because he was able to blind everyone with his rhetorical brilliance, but because he could exploit a politically inchoate desire for an end to the social nightmare that 18 years of Thatcherism had inflicted on the British people.

His policies did little to fulfil this promise, however. Social inequality has in fact worsened under New Labour. This was offset by a limited economic upturn, a surge in consumer spending and a sharp rise in house prices. Now the fear is of a slump that will see the growth of social hardship far worse than anything experienced in the previous two decades.

Under these conditions, the Blair government is rapidly losing support amongst millions of people, but they are unlikely to be attracted to the political heirs of Thatcher reconstructed or otherwise. The policies of both the Tory Party and New Labour are shaped by the political and economic interests of a narrow strata of the super-rich and are dedicated to the preservation of capitalism, whereas the next great social and political movement in Britain and internationally will be rooted in anti-capitalist sentiment and will take the form of a renewed striving towards a collective solution to societal ills.



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