

Britain's Conservatives ditch their leader

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3 November 2003

Britain's Conservative Party faces its fourth leadership contest in 13 years, after Iain Duncan Smith was unseated on October 29 in a confidence vote of Tory MPs.

Duncan Smith was elected in September 2001 in the first membership ballot for leader, after the Conservatives went down to their second defeat by Blair's Labour Party, causing the resignation of William Hague.

Hague had taken the post just four years earlier, after the resignation of John Major following Labour's landslide 1997 election victory. Major had taken over from Margaret Thatcher after she was deposed in a palace coup in 1990.

Duncan Smith's removal has all the hallmarks of a similar operation.

There are many reasons for the dissatisfaction of MPs regarding his performance. He has been ineffectual in parliament and widely ridiculed for his persona as the "quiet man" of politics. But he appears to have been the victim of a conspiracy by the party's right wing, although he still had the support of the membership.

Duncan Smith came from the Tory right and was backed by Thatcher in the 2001 leadership contest. In recent months, however, the right wing had decided he was incapable of delivering the goods and set out to depose him.

His fate was sealed by the recent Tory party conference where he delivered a policy programme tailor-made for the right wing, but at the same time fully displayed his unfortunate personality bypass and inability to sell anything to the electorate. The media was flooded with reports of disquiet and discontent within the parliamentary party, and a scandal burst out over accusations that he had employed his wife Betsy improperly.

The kiss of death was delivered when a number of the Tories' biggest donors said publicly that they would no

longer fund the party until Duncan Smith had been replaced.

Duncan Smith attempted to face down his challengers, giving them 48 hours to gather the letters from 25 MPs needed to force a vote of confidence. It took less time than that.

The contest was held, and Duncan Smith was defeated by 90 votes to 75. Nominations close on November 6, with the first leadership ballot of MPs to be held on November 11. It appears, however, that it will not be so much a contest as a coronation. Potential candidates have queued up to declare that they will not stand in order to endorse Michael Howard MP as their favoured leader.

Howard has been billed as the "unity" candidate and a man capable of finally taking the fight to Labour.

There is something truly extraordinary about the level of self-deception involved in the choice of Howard and the claims being made regarding his leadership. In the first place there is an apparent indifference to the fact that the majority of the party's own members did not want a leadership contest and are said to be up in arms at the damage they believe it will do to the party's chances of election.

More importantly, any attempt to portray Howard as a born-again moderate is destined to fall flat with the general public. If Iain Duncan Smith was seen as the invisible man of politics, then the Tories have chosen to replace him with something akin to Dracula.

Howard is fatally associated with the Tory Party of Margaret Thatcher and its most right-wing excesses—hostile to the European Union, stridently anti-union and anti-workers' rights, an opponent of abortion and equal rights for homosexuals.

As home secretary under John Major, Howard was the promulgator of a "prison works" policy that saw Britain's jail population skyrocket. In this spirit, he led the demands for two 10 year-old boys, Robert

Thompson and Jon Venables, to face public trial in an adult court for the killing of toddler Jamie Bulger. Then, following the guilty verdict, he interceded to raise their sentence to 25 years—an abuse of power as home secretary that was declared illegal by the European Court of Human Rights.

The epithet that will haunt him for the rest of his career came from another right-wing Tory, Ann Widdecombe, who said there was “something of the night” about Howard.

Opinion polls have shown that people are less likely to vote for the Tory Party with Howard as leader, but Conservative MPs still appear to believe they have the right man.

The response from the media has been no less ecstatic. Most worrying of all for Blair is the embrace of Howard by Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper, which dubbed him “Mr Right” and gave him a two-page interview just hours after he had announced his candidacy. Blair considers the *Sun*’s backing to be one of his chief political assets, but the Labour leader is now being put on notice that he may not enjoy Murdoch’s support at the next election.

Two things stand out as central conclusions to be drawn from the internecine wrangling within the Conservative Party and the response to it. Firstly, it demonstrates the continued slide of the entire spectrum of official politics ever rightwards. Secondly, it confirms the yawning gulf that has emerged between the political elite and the broad mass of the population.

The Tories, faced with a haemorrhaging of their public support, have been reduced to a party largely based in the more prosperous areas of the south-east, with a membership whose average age is 65 years-plus. Yet, they have proved incapable of any serious effort to tone down their policies or even make them more palatable to the electorate.

Responding to the possibility that he may soon face Howard across the floor of Parliament, Blair said he was pleased because it would make clear the policy divide between Labour and the Conservatives. It is something of an admission for Blair to acknowledge that at present there is a little to distinguish between the policies of the two parties. But far from opening up a policy divide, any efforts by Howard to attack Labour from the right on issues such as immigration and law and order will inevitably result in Labour closing rather

than widening the gap.

Politics is shaped by a narrow and privileged layer of functionaries who, selected by the media, compete for the endorsement of a financial oligarchy that dominates all aspects of national life. Whether within the Tory Party or the Labour government, every political calculation seems to be taken with almost complete indifference to the views and sentiments of the electorate.

The social concerns of working people for their job security, wage rates, pensions and the rights of their families to decent health care and education are ignored as the parties fall over themselves to offer tax breaks and cuts in social spending to their big business backers. The general population is viewed with outright hostility and as a dangerous force that must be subject to ever more stringent law-and-order measures. The only popular appeal the parties make is to whip up fear and prejudice over crime, immigration and the threat posed by Islamic terrorism in order to encourage the more disorientated elements to seek scapegoats for their growing difficulties.

The absence of any mass social base for what were once the two major parties in Britain creates a highly volatile political situation.

Blair is fond of warning his political opponents that the only alternative to his government is a return of the Conservatives. And he has enjoyed some leeway as a result of the widespread hatred felt towards the Tories. But all things must pass. With both parties coming to be viewed as all but indistinguishable—and the Tories seemingly intent on electoral suicide—fewer and fewer workers will be intimidated by the spectre of a Conservative renaissance and will be more willing to take up a political struggle against New Labour—which has in effect become Britain’s only functioning Conservative Party and the main threat to the social and democratic interests of the working class.



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