British press attempts to resuscitate the Conservative Party

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Britain's media has launched a search for a new Holy Grail—a viable Conservative Party.

Newspapers across the political spectrum have united in proclaiming the need for a credible opposition to the Labour government. The Conservative Party's leadership contest has therefore become the occasion for friendly advice from all quarters over which candidate might rescue the party from electoral oblivion and provide an alternative to an increasingly unpopular Labour government.

This was reflected in the unprecedented level of attention paid to this year's Tory Party conference at Blackpool and the column inches analyzing the speeches delivered by the five leadership hopefuls.

The elections begin on October 18 and are expected to run until December. In the first stage, MPs will select two candidates from the five to go to a ballot of some 200,000 party members. This will be accompanied by horsetrading for the votes of those who drop out.

The contest has been portrayed as one between die-hard Thatcherite traditionalists and supposed modernizers seeking to make the party more voter-friendly.

Shadow Home Secretary David Davies is so far still the favourite to win the MPs' vote.. An unrepentant Thatcherite, he has made much of his single-parent background on a south London council estate and rehashes his mentor's "popular capitalism" rhetoric—portraying the free market as the answer to all the world's ills. His message to conference was for the party to stop apologizing for its years in office and to get on with changing Britain.

This proved somewhat uninspiring for a party that has languished in the doldrums since 1997 and shows no signs of recovery. Prior to Davies speech, conference heard party chairman Francis Maude warn that the Tories had no "god-given right to survive" and its culture spokesman Theresa May insist that it must shed its image as the "nasty party."

She had a message for the "small minority" in the party who "don't accept women—or black or gay people—as their equals ... don't think you'll find a refuge from the modern world here; there is no place for you in our Conservative Party. Because every day that we are unwilling to embrace a future in which all men and women respect each other as absolute equals is another day we will be out of government."

The most popular candidate with the public, Ken Clarke, has little chance of victory because he will never be forgiven by the party's right-wing for his pro-European views. Even if he does well in the first round, supporters of the most hard-line right-wing candidate, shadow foreign secretary Liam Fox of the Cornerstone tendency, will switch to whatever candidate can defeat him.

The fifth candidate, Malcolm Rifkind, shadow work and pensions secretary, is considered a non-starter.

It is a measure of the media's desire for a revitalized Tory Party that the candidate whose speech was received most favorably was 38-year-old David Cameron. An MP for just four years, Cameron said, "Real change is about changing our culture and identity and making it right for today."

Though his Old Etonian vowels hardly lend themselves to a populist appeal, his supporters are advancing him as the Tory Party's Tony Blair—the man capable of carrying out an image overhaul to win back the so-called "centre ground" of politics.

Despite a fairly unremarkable speech, he was proclaimed as the party's rising star by broad sections of the Conservative press, such as the *Sun* and the *Telegraph*, who berated Davies in equal measure.

If one trusted the media, one would think that Cameron is a daring radical, when in reality his economic and social policies hardly differ from those of Davies—or Liam Fox for that matter.

The same can be said for all the candidates, each of whom offers various proscriptions aimed at cutting taxes for big business and the rich, while slashing public spending. Most revealing is that both the arch "traditionalist" Fox and his modernizing rival Cameron support a flat rate tax. This proposal, which played to such disastrous effect for the Christian Democratic Union in Germany's recent elections, is calculated to benefit just 3 million of the wealthiest taxpayers in Britain at the direct expense of 27 million losers.

The key to understanding why Cameron is being pushed forward is to recognize that everything is about presentation rather than substance, or rather the presentation required to hide the substance.

The media's concern for the Tory Party—especially Murdoch's *Sun* and *Times* newspapers—flows from its mounting anxiety over the growing unpopularity of Prime Minister Tony Blair and the dwindling support for his government.

Blair is Cameron's model because he personifies the refashioning of the Labour Party as a neo-Thatcherite entity. It is he who presided over Labour's final abandonment of its old reformist programme and, under conditions in which there was mass opposition to the Tories, offered a new vehicle through which to carry forward Thatcher's offensive against the welfare state and her privatization of the public sector.

As far as the ruling class is concerned, New Labour's initial success in packaging its right-wing social and economic nostrums in a pseudo-progressive language remains the prime minister's crowning glory. And it looks on with perplexity at the unravelling of Blair's fictions and the mounting hostility towards his premiership.

The general media consensus is that it is the messenger who is unpopular and that a political alternative must be found—either Labour

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led by Chancellor Gordon Brown or, if that fails, a refashioned Tory Party—which can continue to impose a pro-business, free-market agenda.

A second consideration is that no political vehicle exists that can channel social and political discontent along safe avenues. There is a widespread fear that the success of New Labour in marginalizing the Tories has left it as the only game in town. And, once that game has exhausted itself, then who knows what might happen?

It is also striking that no one is more keen on a renewal of the Tories than New Labour's chief backers in the *Guardian* and the *Observer*. This is because their true loyalty rests with New Labour's economic agenda, rather than with Blair or his party.

The *Guardian* editorialized on the Conservative conference under the supportive headline, "The return of self belief."

"A lot of senior Tories, past and present, are in awe of Mr. Blair's speech at Brighton last week. Now, after Labour's three successive wins, the Tories have at last grasped some of the real reasons why Mr. Blair beats them and why, without moderation and modernity on their side, they will simply lose once again.

"If Mr. Blair had addressed this conference he would surely have made a speech rather like Mr. Cameron's."

Andrew Rawnsley in the October 2 *Observer* was even more openly supportive when he proclaimed, "Blairism lives—in the Conservatives." He wrote: "It took three election defeats before Labour realised that it would only be back in contention for power when it had accommodated itself to Thatcherism. It has taken a triple whammy of humiliations at the ballot box for the Conservatives to begin to comprehend that they will only be serious competitors for office again when they come to terms with Blair.

"I left the Labour conference in Brighton unsure how much of Blairism will outlast Blair. Perhaps that was the wrong place to be looking. It may be the Tory conference in Blackpool that will provide the answer."

The media's quest for an alternative Blairite party—to follow up its creation of an alternative Thatcherite one—is doomed to failure. It is not simply the messenger, Blair, but the message itself that faces mounting political opposition.

Even if Cameron could succeed in fashioning himself as a new edition of Blair, this would only earn him the support of the rarefied social circles on which the present government rests and for whom the media speaks. Both parties are in fact competing to win the support of the same privileged strata.

A report commissioned by the Conservatives notes that there are no Tory MPs in the six biggest cities outside London and the party is largely confined to the most prosperous southeast region. It points out in particular that New Labour now has the support of almost two-thirds of professionals and managers that once constituted the Tories natural constituency.

The Tories gamble that the natural sympathy of these layers for its economic policies would be guaranteed if they were able to ditch their misogynist, homophobic and racist image. That is why, when the prominent right-winger Boris Johnson explained that he was backing Cameron, he warned "the trick of the next few years will be to show that you can have compassionate policies that are for the benefit of business and enterprise, and that you can gradually bear down on spending and taxation in a way that is good for everyone."

But he demonstrates the impossibility of such a task when he attacked Labour for failing to slash 84,000 public sector jobs as it had promised. Somewhat disingenuously he admits, "It would of course be wrong to go into the next election promising a huge purge of public sector jobs, and it would be electorally foolish."

Far better to be elected first, and then do it!

That the ruling elite seriously believes that it can provide itself with an alternative to New Labour by simply refashioning the Tories as New Labour Mark Two testifies to its extraordinary disconnect with the aspirations of the vast majority of society.

Who, apart from themselves, would be inspired to support such an alternative? And who but they will be inclined to learn to love the Tories once again?

The aim of the ruling class and its media is to make acceptable policies for which there can be no popular mandate.

What presently takes the form of an inchoate hostility to Blair and New Labour is in reality a manifestation of mounting class antagonisms that have deep objective roots.

For working people, the past quarter-of-a-century has taken the form of a social and political experiment with truly disastrous consequences. A nation that once had an extensive system of welfare provisions and regulations designed to restrain the worst excesses of capitalism has been transformed into a playground for the super-rich. Big business has prospered in direct proportion to the constant erosion of living standards.

And it could only do so by politically disenfranchising the working class and ensuring that there was no possibility of challenging the Thatcherite orthodoxy advocated by both the Tories and New Labour. The present attempts to rescue the Tory party from electoral oblivion are hardly the noble effort to restore political choice and a healthy democracy proclaimed by the press. Rather they are designed to perpetuate the political monopoly that has been enjoyed by big business.

Along this road there is generally no way out. The more completely big business establishes its hegemony; the more official politics becomes an exercise in rebranding and repackaging the hated and the unacceptable, the more discredited the institutions of bourgeois democracy become. And the more that working people will seek an alternative outside of and in opposition to those parties contending for the support of capital.

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