



“CAN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY MAKE ITSELF FIT FOR GOVERNMENT?”

British Council Colloquium, ‘UK election 2001: What sort of Britain, What sort of Europe?’, Renaissance Hotel, Brussels

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I reject the shallow analysis which sees the Party as doomed to irrelevance and collapse. The Conservative Party has a 250 year relationship with power. It has a proven ability to reinvent itself in times of crisis, while staying true to its historic values.

I am particularly interested in the parallels with other Centre-Right parties in Europe. The CDU is struggling with the Kohl legacy, a figure with whom it was as intimately linked as was the Conservative Party with Mrs Thatcher. Several other Centre-Right parties have found themselves excluded from whole regions and all parties find themselves having to cope with the new chameleon-like nature of the Liberal tradition.

I believe that it is absolutely possible for the Conservative Party to return to government in 2005, given the bizarre abstentions of the recent General Election. Any assessment of the future of the Conservative Party must start with a clear eyed analysis of the Blair Government. New Labour took Conservative positions in a post-ideological society where the traditional economic and class issues had been determined in favour of the parties of the Centre Right. It chose as leader a figure from a Conservative background, with an ability to provide essentially Conservative rhetoric to the electorate. No one should under-estimate the sense in the British electorate that the Labour Party had 'made itself fit for government' and deserved a second term. New Labour has also benefited from tactical voting, whose persistence depends on the idea of the unity of progressive forces. The Labour Government however has major problems, of which the most fundamental is 'what to do after Blair?' The government is seen as illiberal and as control freaks too fond of the state for current sensibilities. Having embarked on constitutional reform as a substitute for radical ideological politics, it remains hamstrung by its dependence on Scottish and Welsh votes. It has quite simply no idea where to take the constitution.

Politicians of all parties need to recognise the paradigm shift through which British and indeed European societies are passing. Loyalties to political parties are no longer life-long. Membership of all political parties are declining. Electors have multiple loyalties and multiple interests, many expressed via civil society organisations. Rather than the great ideological clashes of the past, elections are now increasingly a competition of competent teams offering to run the State.

It is possible to draw many conclusions from the disaster on June 8th. One thing however is absolutely clear. The simple Right Wing and Euro-Sceptic agenda failed. The genius of New Labour's reforms was to separate the policy formation process from the wishes and aspirations of Labour Party activists, while at the same time claiming to be democratic. It is a paradox of modern politics that MPs are unrepresentative of activists and activists unrepresentative of voters. It is at least arguable that any reformed leadership election rules should break this vicious circle by reconnecting the Party with its voters in the form of primary elections. The policy positions taken by the Party ahead of the election were dramatically proved to be unattractive to the traditional coalition of Conservative voters in the country. This situation was undoubtedly made worse by the financial problems of the party, forcing it to rely on large donations from euro-sceptic millionaires.

I do not intend to get caught in the trap of speculating about the qualities of the five candidates in the current leadership struggle. However it is clear that Ken Clarke and Michael Portillo are the candidates of change, offering, in different formulations, less emphasis on euro-scepticism and a path back to government and the centre. Dave Davis, Michael Ancram and Ian Duncan Smith are essentially the

candidates of continuity. If a 'continuity' candidate were to be elected on September 12th it would trigger further defections from the Conservative Party, most probably to the Liberal Democrats. Commentary on the relationship between Liberal and Conservative voters in the 20th century has been dominated by a Jenkinsite analysis of history. In fact the Conservative Party governed for long periods in the last century because of its ability to absorb or satisfy substantial portions of the Liberal vote.

In the event that a candidate of 'change', either Ken Clarke or Michael Portillo, is elected there are certain steps that either of them would need to put in place at high speed. The overriding need is for the Party to look both sane and competent and to recapture its traditional share of the AB vote. It is urgently necessary to re-establish that the 18 years of Conservative government were overwhelmingly successful. It is almost always a mistake to apologise in politics, and it was certainly a mistake to seek to staff the shadow cabinet under William Hague with individuals whose main claim to office was their youth or lack of experience. A new Conservative leadership must find a way of insulating itself from the Euro debate. William Hague's gamble of declaring the General Election to be the last chance to save the pound is helpful in this respect. It is now open to any Conservative leader to argue that Britain's membership to the single currency is a national and not a party issue. As the Assistant to the Director of the 1975 Referendum Campaign, I have first hand knowledge of how Harold Wilson used such a formula to avoid splitting his party.

Once established the new Leader of the Conservative Party should do some serious thinking about our relationship with the Liberal Democrats. Just as New Labour intend to use the Euro to try to continue to split the Conservative Party, so they intend to keep the Liberal Democrats in a position of neutered dependence, hoping for a share of office, which the Labour Party, despite its rhetoric, never intends to deliver. The positioning of the Liberal Democrats to the left of Labour is not credible, but the continuing anti-Tory rhetoric of Lib-Lab co-operation is damaging to public perceptions of the Conservative Party.

It would be in line with shifts in the national mood for a Conservative Leader to offer the Liberal Democrats a deal, up to and including participation in a Conservative Government regardless of the electoral arithmetic, based on the two parties mutual dislike of the statism of New Labour. Obvious common ground could be found around a proposal for a House of Lords that was fully elected on a proportional representation system and endowed with blocking powers. I personally would recommend the Popular Election of Existing Lords System (PEELS), with its distinction between voting and non-voting members of the Upper Chamber. This would, amongst other things see the return of the hereditary peerage in a way that would support rather than undermine the monarchy. Both parties should look seriously at proposals for state funding of political parties based on their share of registered voters. If linked to proposals for the election of the leader, such an approach would restore the dynamic of mass popular association with political parties. Similarly it is only agreement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats which holds out any hope of solving the English question which lies at the heart of our current constitutional difficulties.

The willingness of a Conservative Party to capitalise on its Social-Liberal traditions needs to rest on a broader base than the decriminalisation of cannabis. The Conservative Party needs to restore its reputation for pragmatism and tolerance and to be able to offer itself as the party most able to engage with the problems of the 21st century, of globalisation, environment and the Knowledge Society. There is no reason why the Conservative Party should not capitalise on its historic assets and return to government, with or without the Liberal Democrats, in 2005.

