



### • A TORY REVOLUTION

Is there a Tory revolution (or at least a palace coup) in the making against Mrs Thatcher and her policies? Or is the unrest in the Tory Party an inevitable consequence of a large Commons majority, with many MPs surprised to find themselves in the House in the first place and therefore not too bothered about party loyalty, and others feeling increasingly frustrated in their political careers?

The Tories' three-figure majority helps explain the frequency of recent backbench rebellions. The whips' demands for unstinting loyalty are simply that much less compelling. And as the lifetime of this parliament ticks by, the minds of younger Tories are filled less with thoughts of gratitude at being swept into Westminster on Mrs Thatcher's coat-tails and more with the horror of trying to hold on at the next election.

But the cause of Tory unease lies deeper. It represents more than a mere coalition of

nervous newcomers and unrepentant wets. On different issues, all vintages of Tory, from very young to very old, and all shades of opinion, from very left to ultra-right, have rebelled or spoken out. Criticism has become less coded and more heavyweight, even establishment, with former prime ministers Lord Stockton and Edward Heath echoing the concern of the bishops at the risk being taken with Britain's social cohesion.

But how serious is the threat to Thatcher? This must depend first on the depth of concern within the party, and secondly on the extent to which her Tory critics can agree on what should be done and how skilfully they play their hand.

On the first count, there is real reason for Thatcher to be worried. Tory confidence has been badly shaken on both economic policy and the Government's competence. Unemployment increased sharply through the summer months - exactly the period when according to Chancellor Lawson's bullish election-time forecast dole queues would start to shrink. Disquiet was voiced amongst the party faithful at the Brighton conference, although that was soon forgotten in the shock of the bombing. Through the autumn the protracted miners' dispute and the Tory

lead in the polls helped ease the pressure on Thatcher, but unemployment is now the main concern of the vast majority of Tory MPs.

At the same time the Government has contrived to appear especially insensitive and to antagonise the party's natural supporters, eg, by announcing cuts in overseas aid when every night the TV screens show the dead and dying in the Ethiopian famine; by proposing a sudden hike in parents' contributions to students' fees and grants; by curbing local Tory grandees' powers and ambitions through rate-capping the shires and scrapping the GLC; and by suggesting that tax relief on pension contributions should end. Rare indeed is the Tory MP who thinks it prudent to assault the consciences and the pockets of the middle-class when the party looks likely to need every scrap of support from its natural supporters in a few years' time.

But what are the chances of a change?

There's no chance at all of a change of leader. Thatcher's most plausible challenger, Francis Pym, goes out of his way to emphasise that this is not what he is about. He knows that at this stage in the parliament he would not stand a cat in hell's chance against



a two-time election winner. Pym is also a Tory to his finger-tips, who knows the mores of his party well enough to realise that if the battle was personalised, he and his fellow critics would instantly be branded as disloyal, the cardinal Tory sin. So the Pym line is to praise Thatcher while urging a change in approach, with the avowed aim of improving Tory (and Thatcher) election prospects.

What are the chances of a change in policy?

On the face of it the critics' lack of organisation is a weakness: the disinclination of the wets to organise is said to have caused their downfall. But there's the risk in the Tory Party of being seen to 'cabal', which again leaves any critics open to the fatal charge of disloyalty. However in the November elections for the officers of the party backbench committees, left challengers came within a few votes of unseating the right-wing chairmen of the key Finance and Trade and Industry committees.

The lack of political coherence is also an apparent problem. Many Tories, despite the Thatcher revolution, are not really interested in political philosophies. But their pragmatic concern with winning means that they are not too encumbered with scruples once they decide something has to be done.

A consensus is now emerging on the backbenches that more should be done to tackle unemployment through spending on education and training and on infrastructure, such as roads and housing. Many would support a modest reflation, up to £3bn of extra borrowing, but well short of the old 'wet' demands.

The Chancellor could defuse much backbench criticism by concentrating his £1.7bn or more of tax cuts on taking low earners out of the tax net altogether. Reductions in the scale of national insurance contributions and more schemes to help the unemployed would also help hold the Thatcher line.

A clever budget might buy Thatcher more time and restore some confidence amongst Tories in ministers' competence. But it cannot reverse the shift in attitude in the centre of the party since the summer, where scepticism has replaced a readiness to take policy on trust. Tories are anxiously looking for the policy to deliver the goods, ie, less unemployment. A change of tack looks more likely later in 1985 rather than sooner, but don't expect Tories to admit that it's happening when it comes. The real crunch will come with the next economic downturn as unemployment accelerates from around its present level.

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