



Tebbit, the hardline Thatcherite, is now a little out of favour as a softer image is sought'

Pale Shades Of Blue

Once more the Conservative Party is riding high in the polls while Labour flounders. Again the pundits are placing their fivers on an early election. But a big problem faces the Conservatives. How on earth are they supposed to put an election campaign together when the party is deeply identified with unemployment and when Mrs Thatcher herself is so unpopular? The recent byelections have not encouraged optimism. After Greenwich the Tories were badly rattled: of those in the constituency who voted Conservative in 1983 60% switched to the Alliance, enough to snap the swingometer.

In the aftermath local workers blamed party chairman Norman Tebbit who'd assumed, it would seem, that insults and abuse would do the job. Strange things started to happen. Teddy Taylor, Monday Club veteran and as true a blue Thatcherite as you could find, was issuing a warning of a terrible election tumble ahead and urging the Conservatives to 'work like beavers': Conservatives, he insisted, had to become more 'caring'.

The roots of the current confusion in the party lie in

the collapse of the original Thatcherite economic strategy, its public denouement marked by the abandonment of Sterling M3 in October 1985. Thatcherism as it used to be, boasting a radical overall strategy with coherent (if lunatic) economic objectives, now lies exhausted; privatising driving tests and other such stunts indicate not the onward march of Thatcherism but its loss of direction. This collapse however has also meant that the old divide between wet and dry has attenuated, and consequently the possibilities for patching up a realignment inside the party, spurning dogmatism in favour of electoral pragmatism, are all the stronger.

There are a number of contenders who are now bidding to stitch together a less dogmatic Conservatism. In the hullabaloo following Greenwich erstwhile wet Peter Walker delivered yet another of his 'personal manifestos'. However the full-time self-appointed impresario for this new line is Michael Heseltine, still devoured by ambition to lead his party. In recent weeks he

hasn't been off the airwaves, publicising his new book, *Where There is a Will*, in which he is perfectly happy both to endorse the Thatcher record and advocate substantial public spending to act as a trigger for private investment. There is reason to believe that his judgement about the liking in the party for a pragmatic, election-winning Conservatism is not misconceived.

Moreover it would seem that one of the supporters of a more cautious, pragmatic advance (though not of the figure centrally promoting it) is Thatcher herself. In recent months she has deliberately kept herself back from

public debate, preferring to confine her media appearances to explaining the finer details of syncopated dance music or conducting chemistry experiments in her kitchen. If she lasts in office until the end of the year she will become the longest serving prime minister this century: personal calculation of this kind should not be discounted. But while she may be prepared to go with the prevailing pragmatism, this emphatically does not mark anything like a U-turn.

There is strong evidence, for example, that since 1984 significant Conservative opinion has been favouring the reduction of unemployment, through public investment, as the first priority, even if this were to postpone tax cuts. Yet all the signs indicate that the government will resist this pressure and continue on its present course of systematically redistributing the fruits of 'popular capitalism' to those in work, at the direct expense of the unemployed and dispossessed. While Thatcher remains leader, pragmatic modification of her original programme will never be allowed to transmute into repudiation of the basic anti-collectivist crusade which she has made her own.

But there are those who are less enamoured with even a measure of pre-electoral pragmatism. Norman Tebbit is the most significant of these. He shares with Thatcher an unbending determination to destroy the Labour Party and all it stands for. Yet he has not found it easy to accommodate himself to Thatcherism on the

Which of the politicians on this list would you most like to see replace Mrs Thatcher as the next leader of the Conservative Party?

	All voters %	
	Dec	Feb
Kenneth Baker	3	4
Michael Heseltine	16	24
Sir Geoffrey Howe	13	12
Douglas Hurd	3	4
Norman Tebbit	21	15
Peter Walker	6	5
Other	1	1
None of these	17	18
Don't know	20	18

Source: The Economist/Mori

wane, and he has little sense of how to bring about his ambition by any other means than frontal assault.

The situation is now finely balanced. In the party hierarchy the power of intransigent Thatcherism has lessened. Joseph has dropped out, Tebbit is isolated and there are no bright young



Hurd, a Thatcherite wet

Thatcherites ready to carry the word for a second political generation. At the same time the wets of 1980-81 have for long been beaten. Factionalism no longer exists, and in the pre-election period there is little reason for Thatcher to disturb this equilibrium. Yet to be sure this is achieved she still needs to be saved from Tebbit and possibly also from her own deeper instincts.

And it may be the relative newcomers - Douglas Hurd and Kenneth Baker are the most frequently mentioned - who persuade her to do just that. It is they who are most actively involved in the reorganisation of Thatcherism, giving it an acceptable electoral face. They are the reputed moderates. This is a moderation which derives not from their politics - which in each case are uncompromisingly illiberal - but from the simple fact that they were not identified with the great deflationary drive of 1980-81. On economic issues, hemmed in from shifting too far by the presence of the Alliance, they can sound more pragmatic and receptive. They rather than Thatcher will prevent future Tory election disasters. But in doing so, they will have ensured that Thatcherism remains in place for a long time yet. •

Bill Schwarz