

There Must Be No Right Turn for David Cameron

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First published in the Yorkshire Post, 1st March, 2006

The parallels are compelling. Several election defeats. A demoralised and unpopular party. The threat of being overtaken by a confident third force. Senior politicians concerned more with their own ideological agenda than appealing to voters. And a baby-faced leader determined to drag the party, kicking and screaming if necessary, into the modern era; a leader able to detach himself from the fray, take a long, cool look at the strengths of his opponents, and to learn lessons. No wonder David Cameron finds himself stigmatised as 'Blair Lite'.

Cameron won an overwhelming victory in the Tory leadership election. The drawn-out process was widely expected to be a disaster for the party; actually it was a great success, with good debate, a general outbreak of politeness, and no sordid sex in sight. The victory was as decisive as it could have been, and as deserved. None of the other three candidates, or any of those who thought deeply about standing, projected the same urgency to make a fresh start, rhetorically or ideologically. He made it comfortably through the *Big Brother* knockout phase into the run-off, and cruised through the final round on the slogan 'change to win'. How solid can a mandate be?

But now, less than 100 days into the Cameron era, the right is muttering. Politics, for many, is a tribal affair, and learning from the enemy is a betrayal. Even now, many Labour supporters are reluctant to admit that Mrs Thatcher, love her or loathe her, changed the political landscape forever – and they have had 20 years to reflect on it, much of it in opposition. Similarly, it will take a long time for the Tories to realise that Tony Blair has pulled the same trick. Since the 1997 landslide, it has not been possible to prosper as a pre-Blair politician. Which didn't stop the dinosaurs growling when Cameron admitted (what to the rest of us is obvious) that Blair has a 'profound understanding' of middle Britain.

Comparing Cameron to Pol Pot, as Lord Tebbit did recently, outdoes anything that Clare Short has said about Blair. But Tebbit's is not a lone voice. He has been joined by such senior figures as Robin Harris, Ann Widdecombe, Lord Kalms and Stuart Wheeler; these are people who will be listened to. The Parliamentary party isn't acquiescent either; Cameron has been roughed up by the No Turning Back Group, and the Cornerstone Group is none too friendly. Most ominously, former whip Derek Conway, who already has the scalp of Iain Duncan Smith (perhaps that explains IDS's baldness), thinks Cameron is moving too far, too fast.

Why so soon? There are many anti-Blair rebels, but it did take several years before they became effective. Blair got years before his own party made it hot for him; Cameron was given the Christmas holidays.

The big political question, which will exercise us until the next election, is whether he can resist the pull to the right. In the face of recalcitrant polls, William Hague, IDS and Michael Howard all took a right turn – which leads, as I argued in these pages last year, to a political precipice. Meanwhile, across the political divide, Blair has successfully kept to the centre ground, and as a result became the first Labour leader to win three consecutive general elections. Surely Cameron will do the sensible thing.

But the parallels between Cameron and Blair are not perfect. The opinion polls were Blair's allies; John Smith had built up a lead over the Tories by 1994, and the Tories themselves were happily imploding. Blair took a winning hand, and turned it into a grand slam. The landslide of 1997 was followed by another in 2001; Blair's success legitimised him.

But the polls will be Cameron's enemies between now and 2009. The demographics are horrible; the Tories will have to be more than 10 percentage points ahead of Labour to get even a tiny majority. Tory voters are geographically concentrated; many more Tory votes are needed, on average, to get a Tory MP. Cameron is unlikely to be able to say to his party, as Blair could in 1997, "stick with me, because we are going to slaughter the opposition." The best he will be able to manage is "stick with me, because I will get you within striking distance of Labour."

Like Blair, Cameron needs successes. He has already had one; within a month of taking office he destroyed the Liberal Democrats, whose all-things-to-all-men right-left stance became untenable once he started to threaten the centre ground. But it is hard to see where further successes might come from, other than the relatively uninspiring council elections.

Perhaps, though, the right have a point. If Cameron has betrayed all the party's principles, then hasn't he forfeited its support? This is absolutely false. As I argued in my book *After Blair*, the Tories have a wealth of tradition of moderate small-c conservatism to draw upon, eminently suited to contesting the centre ground. They could easily exploit this history to become more acceptable to voters without ever leaving Tory territory. There is nothing un-Tory about being greener, or trying to make poverty history, or opposing government intrusion into our privacy.

As it happens, *After Blair* received a favourable review in a national newspaper by an unknown Tory policy wonk called, er, David Cameron. It would be nice to think that I played a part in helping the Tories back to life, but cold hard logic should have dragged Cameron to the same conclusion anyway. His messages are authentically Tory, if not necessarily authentically Thatcherite. And he is not simply a clone of Blair – he is ending links with the centre right group in the European Parliament and promises to reinstate fox hunting.

At some point, Cameron has to put flesh on the rhetorical bones and come out with serious policy initiatives, but changing the image of the nasty party is the essential task for now. Every time the Tebbits howl, the voters will be reassured – just as Scargill and Benn helped Blair most by complaining. But Cameron, and the people around him, will have to keep their nerve, and maintain support within the party, without the opinion poll ratings that kept Blair buoyant. It will be a long hard struggle, but the rule has to be: NO RIGHT TURN.

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